



DICK·LESTER
OF
KURRAJONG

MARY·GRANT
BRUCE

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Lester of Kurrajong, by Mary Grant Bruce

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"The rescue of Dick and Bobby." (Page [74](#).)

**DICK LESTER
OF
KURRAJONG**

BY

MARY GRANT BRUCE

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DICK LESTER OF KURRAJONG

CHAPTER I.

HOW HOLIDAYS CAME SUDDENLY.

"Lester!"

A small boy, red-faced and puffing after a hard run with his message, paused at the wicket gate of the playground of a great school. He wore an anxious look, for he had been bidden to hurry; and to pick out one boy from two or three hundred seems a rather overwhelming task, especially with most of the number vigorously kicking practice footballs. He gave up the idea of plunging into the throng, sighed, drew a long breath, opened his mouth to its fullest extent, and shrilled again:

"Lester! Hi, Lester!"

There was no response, except from two youngsters near, who kindly advised him to call loudly, adding that there was no sense in whispering. The injured messenger turned a shade redder, glared, and renewed his shriek.

"Lester! You're wanted!"

"Why not telephone?" asked one of his tormentors, lazily. "It's much easier."

"Besides you'll hurt yourself if you make awful noises like that," commented the other. "The last chap who did it busted. And nobody wants to gather up your pieces."

"Beasts!" said the small boy; and again, desperately: "Lester!"

"He's somewhere over in that corner," said a senior boy, who was standing against a tree, sheltering from the nipping wind while he knitted his brows over a Virgil—unpleasantly conscious that the Doctor would demand heart-to-heart intercourse concerning it within half an hour. "Clear out, for goodness' sake, and stop behaving like a motor siren."

The small boy trotted away in the direction indicated, dodging the footballing groups as best he could, and keeping a sharp look out for the object of his search. Presently his anxious face lightened, and he hurled himself against a boy who, being just about to kick at a spinning ball, turned upon him, justly indignant.

"Can't you look out where you're going, you silly young ass!"

"Lester, you're wanted!" said the messenger breathlessly.

"Who by?" demanded Dick Lester, ungrammatically.

"The doctor. And he said you were to hurry."

"Now, I wonder what I've been doing." Lester knitted his brows. "Was he in a wax?"

"Oh, much the same as usual," returned the messenger—to whom the doctor, even in his most benevolent moments, was a being of terror and thunderbolts. "You'd better hurry up, or you'll know all about it."

Dick trotted off across the playground, meeting friendly salutations on the way from some who desired to know what had been his latest iniquity, and from others who counselled a pillow beneath the jacket as an aid to the coming interview. He hoped—rather faintly—that his face was clean, knowing for certain that his hands were not. It seemed prudent not to waste time in going to clean up, so he ran on, and presently tapped at the door of the doctor's study, having as yet been unable to guess why he should be sent for. There was a little matter of a highly-unauthorised ride on a pony belonging to a milkman near the school; another item of a sketch on the blackboard, which had proved very diverting to his form, but had not been effaced quite quickly enough to escape the eagle eye of the science master. It had represented the doctor, full-fledged in cap and gown, careering along St. Kilda beach on a donkey. Without any doubt, one might prophesy that the doctor would not find in it the undiluted delight it had given to the form.

"All the same, old Stinks potted me himself for it," Dick pondered, referring to the science master aforesaid. "I don't believe he's beast enough to have me carpeted as well. And nobody knew about the pony except Bottles. At least I hope

not!" He shrugged his shoulders, and renewed his delicate tap at the study door.

"Come in!" said a deep voice, and Dick entered. Dr. Gurdon glanced round from his writing table.

"Oh, you, Lester. Go into the room across the hall."

Wondering greatly, Dick withdrew, closing the door behind him. The opposite door belonged to Mrs. Gurdon's drawing-room; presumably he was merely to wait there until the doctor had time to attend to his case. He went in, still lost in conjecture.

"Dickie!"

Someone little and slight and dainty sprang to meet him, and with an inarticulate cry Dick fled to her.

"Mother! Oh, you blessed old darling!"

"I couldn't resist taking you by surprise," Mrs. Lester said, still holding him closely. "It was only yesterday that I knew that I was coming. Oh, Dick, you've grown ever so!"

"Have I?" he said, laughing. "Yes, I believe I have—my trousers are a mile shorter. Oh, and I thought it meant a licking when the old doc. sent for me; and it was—you!"

"What have you been doing to deserve a licking, you bad boy?" said his mother, smiling.

"Oh, lots. Tell you all about it afterwards." Dick said cheerfully. "Nothing very awful, though, Mother-est, how long are you going to be down?"

"Two days. And you're coming away with me until to-night, because we've got lots to talk about. Run and change your clothes—yes, and you might wash your face, too, my son."

"Right-oh! Back in two jiffs."

He went upstairs three steps at a time, unbuttoning as he went. In the room which he shared with three other boys a very fat youth was laboriously endeavouring to remove sundry stains from an Eton collar.

"My last collar," grumbled he. "I guess the laundry eats 'em. And I've got to go to the dentist, and matron'll eat me if she sees me in this. Wish you had a decent neck, Skinny, and I'd borrow one from you."

"Seventeens, isn't it, that you take?" queried Dick, grinning. "Never mind, Bottles, you're the pride of the school."

"Oh, am I?" rejoined his plump friend sourly. "I don't know about the pride of the school, but I'm a fortune to the man who makes my clothes—I bust out of 'em once a fortnight. Why on earth anyone wanted to be fat beats me."

"Did anyone?" Dick grinned—and dodged a hair-brush, hurled by Bottles with an agility that was surprising,

considering his bulk. "Steady, you playful old elephant—I'm busy."

"You seem a bit rushed," remarked Bottles, observing his friend's movements with some amazement, as Dick flung off his school suit hurriedly, dived at the wash-stand, emerged from the basin, dripping, and after a brief towelling plunged at his locker for his Sunday clothes. "Going to have lunch at Government House, by any chance?"

"No—something better," Dick knotted a blue tie carefully. "Mother's turned up suddenly, and I'm off for the day."

"Some people have all the luck," Bottles said, enviously. "Things don't get sorted out equally at all—some get mothers and some get dentists. Jolly glad, all the same, Lester. You didn't expect her down, did you?"

"No, and when the old doc. sent for me I made sure it was the milkman's pony," Dick said, grinning.

"That's what it is to have a guilty conscience," laughed Bottles, whose name, by the way, happened to be Glass. "Great Scott, you're dressed; and I'm still pounding at this beastly collar, and it only gets worse. What on earth am I going to do?"

"Dodge matron, and buy some new ones at the stores when you get in," counselled Dick, giving his hair a furious brushing. He dived into his locker for a new cap. "So long, old man; hope the dentist won't be very beastly. See you to-

night." He clattered down the corridor, leaving Mr. Glass gazing ruefully at his murky collar.

Mrs. Lester was standing at the window of the drawing-room, looking out upon the rather dismal shrubs of the school garden. She turned to meet Dick, with the delightful smile that made her look only old enough to be his sister.

"Ready? and so spruce!" she said. "Did you bring your overcoat, Dick?"

"It's outside," Dick answered. His eyes dwelt upon her lovingly. "I say, mother, you do look stunning!"

Other people had had the same thought that morning, looking at the dainty figure in the plain suit of dark brown. Her little face, with its wild-rose colouring, looked out from a great collar of brown furs, under a big hat; and pinned in her muff was a knot of violets and boronia that lent their fragrance to her sweetness. Dick could not have told you what she wore, only he knew that everything about her, from the curly hair under her brown hat to the dainty feet in the brown suede shoes, was perfection.

"Not one of the chaps has a mother like you," he told her, stumbling over the eager words. "Some of 'em have awful old squaws of mothers——"

She put a hand over his mouth, smiling into his eyes.

"And if I were the most awful old squaw alive you wouldn't think it, and neither do they," she said. "You'd be just as glad to see me if I were ugly and dowdy, Dickie-boy."

"I would, but I'm jolly glad you're not," returned her son. "I'm just frightfully proud when you come to school, and you should hear what the fellows say about you. So there!" He tucked her hand into his arm—she had blushed like a girl at his words—and half pulled her out of the room. "Come along, or someone'll come and talk to you, and that would waste an awful lot of precious time."

There were a thousand questions to ask as the train whisked them towards Melbourne. Dick's father had been for a year in England; there was a letter from him, Mrs. Lester said, rather vaguely. Dick could read it presently. Apart from father there was home—the big station up north, with its myriad interests; dogs and horses—all old friends—cattle, and the prospects of the season ahead; Dick's pet wallaby and rabbits and pigeons, and all the station people who made up the little circle in which his life had been spent until school claimed him; overseer, stockman, boundary riders; cook, with her big heart and her amazing capacity for sending wonderful hampers; old nurse, who had a somewhat disconcerting way of still regarding him as her baby, but who came very close in his affections for all that. Dick had not found out half that he wanted to know when the short journey came to an end, and they found themselves at the familiar hotel.

"We'll have lunch," said Mrs. Lester. "It must be nearly one o'clock. Then we'll go up to my room and talk before we go out."

Dick shot a quick glance at her. They were very close friends, these two; during all his thirteen years they had

never been apart for more than a few days until he went to school, and he knew every intonation of her voice, every changing shade of expression on her face. Now he suddenly understood that something new was to be manifested in that talk; and therefore he ate his lunch with some impatience, though without anxiety, seeing that his mother was far too cheerful for any trouble to be hovering near. This was as well, since the lunch was something of an event to a small boy at the end of a long term of the "plain and wholesome" food of boarding school; and as his mother was very merry, and the rooms crowded with people all more or less interesting, and a good string band was playing lively music in a palm-fringed gallery at the end of the room, the moment was sufficiently enthralling to keep Dick from much speculation as to the mystery.

"Nothing more, sonnie?"

"No thanks." Dick regarded with affection a dish that had held trifle. "That was a topping lunch, mother. Have you finished?"

His mother nodded, gathering up her furs.

"Come upstairs—I want to consult you about something."

The lift flashed them up several storeys, and presently they found themselves in Mrs. Lester's room, overlooking the calm stateliness of the eastern end of Collins Street. Mrs. Lester took off her hat and tossed it upon the bed.

"Sit down, Dickie. I want to read you father's letter."

Dick gave a sudden little shiver.

"Do you remember last time you said that?" he asked.

She met his eyes. "Before you went to school?"

"Yes. You read me father's letter, saying I ought to go. And it was awful, 'cause he left it to us, and I felt such a sweep, 'cause I couldn't make myself say I would."

"But you did say it, Dick."

"Yes—but it took me a bit to make up my mind."

"Well, it isn't always easy to swallow a nasty dose off-hand," said the little mother philosophically.

"And now you've got another dose. Is it as bad, mother?"

"Ah, you must judge that for yourself," she said. "Listen—and, first of all, remember that we have evidently missed a letter. There is quite a gap between this and the last one we had from him, and he speaks of a letter he posted us from Edinburgh—but it hasn't come. However, I don't know that it matters much."

"Not matter? Why, we may never get it!" cried Dick, wide-eyed. English mail day was the chief day of all to them. To miss one of father's letters was a calamity not lightly to be borne. Yet here was this mother smiling over it.

"No—nothing matters much," she said, and rumped his hair suddenly. "Listen, old son."

"... So it's nearly over, the long, hard separation from you two dear ones, and I needn't worry that this time I've only a moment to send a note. I've booked my berth in the *Ohio*, and have none too much time now to attend to all sorts of odds and ends before I sail——"

"Mother!" exploded Dick. "When?"

"Be quiet!" said his mother, laughing. "There's more yet."

"——and fix up business finally. I can't realise that I'll see you and the boy so soon; it's too good to be true. And I don't mean to wait for it one day longer than I have to. We're due at Fremantle on 27th August. I think you said Dick's term ended about the end of August, and then he'll have three weeks' holiday for me to make his acquaintance. (Snort from Dick.) Well, it would mean cutting into school a bit, but the boy is only a youngster after all, and I don't think it would matter"——here the little mother suddenly began to read very fast, and the words tumbled out of her mouth so quickly that Dick could hardly have caught them if he had not been listening with all his ears and his eyes as well, listening, kneeling at her feet, with his gaze fixed on her face, with its rose-flush, and its dancing eyes and lips that trembled ever so little——"if he missed a few classes; what do you say to hurrying off to town, kidnapping him from Dr. Gurdon, and bringing both my belongings across to Fremantle to meet me?"

"Ow!" said Dick faintly, his mouth and eyes round circles of amazement and delight. "Fremantle! Oh, mother-est, are we going?"

His mother ruffled his hair all over again.

"Going!" said she. "Do you think we could refuse an invitation like that, Dickie?"

She found herself suddenly hugged with a vehemence that left her breathless.

"Oh, isn't he just the very best person ever!" gasped Dick. "Mother—when?"

"To-morrow," said his mother calmly. "And even so, we'll have to go overland to Adelaide. The boat that will get us to Western Australia in time to meet the *Ohio* leaves Melbourne to-day. I knew I couldn't catch it in Melbourne; but it doesn't matter."

Dick sat down on the floor, looking at her with a kind of solemn bewilderment.

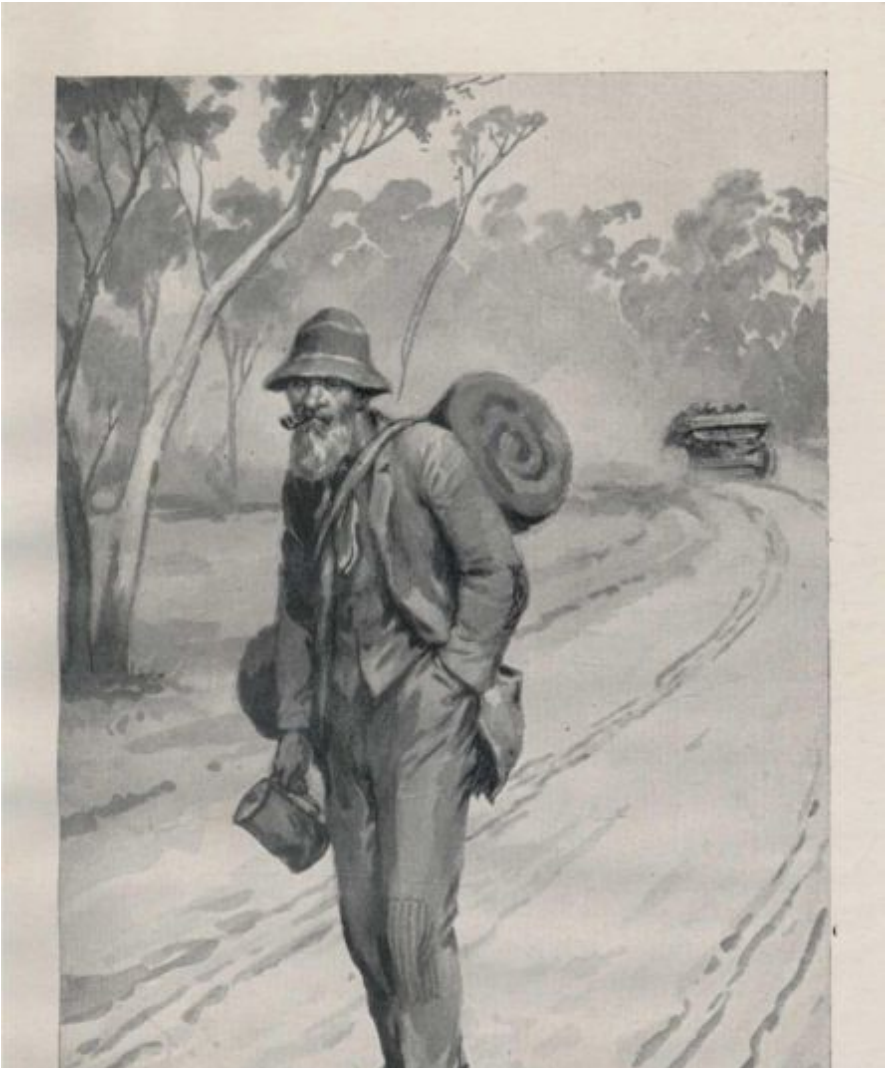
"Do you mean to tell me," he asked, "that to-morrow you and I go to Adelaide and catch a steamer to meet father at Fremantle?"

"To-morrow as ever is," said his mother as solemnly.

"And that in less than a week we'll see father?"

She nodded. Her sweet mouth quivered suddenly and her eyes dimmed. Dick, suddenly flinging his arms round her, felt her trembling.

"Oh, Dickie, it's been so long," she whispered brokenly. "And I've been so lonely." She put her face against his smooth, sunburnt cheek, and he patted her very hard. Presently she sat up and smiled at him again.





"It was almost a relief when they met a 'sundowner' slouching along."

Dick Lester of Kurrajong

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"It was almost a relief when they met a 'sundowner' slouching along."

"Now, isn't that ridiculous, when we're going to get him back so soon! And there's more letter yet, Dick."

"It would be a little change for you—you've been alone on the place so many months now. Dick won't refuse, I know; and as for me—well, the voyage will be long enough, even if I do shorten it by a week. I'll leave the *Ohio* at Fremantle and we'll come back together on an inter-State boat. The *Ohio* is packed, and there might be a difficulty about getting berths for us all. Besides, we shan't be hurried then, and we can show Dick a glimpse of the West. I want to get home badly enough; but, after all, that can wait. I just feel that when I once get you two back I shall never want to hurry again."

The low voice paused and they looked at each other.

"Mother, is it all fixed?" Dick demanded. "Did you square the doc.?"

"I represented the case to Dr. Gurdon," said his mother, with a dignity that was belied by the twinkle in her eyes. "And he kindly agreed to excuse you, in the special circumstances. Anticipating this courtesy on his part, I——"

"Oh, mother," said Dick reproachfully.

"——went to the shipping office and bought tickets before going out to the school," finished his mother, laughing. "If you think, Master Richard Lester, that I'm going to let any head master, or any other old thing, stand in our way when we're going to meet father after he has been away a year, you are sadly mistaken."

She sprang up suddenly and began to dance—a quaint, elfish dance of quick, swaying movements like a brown leaf fluttering before the breeze. Dick watched her, laughing, until presently her steps changed to something more definite, and she swooped and caught him by the hands and pulled him up, and together they pranced up and down the big room like a pair of young horses, too full of joy of living to keep still. Dick's mother had taught him to dance when he was little more than a baby, so that he was not quite as stiff-legged as you might expect from a muscular schoolboy of thirteen. It was not the first time he had suddenly been called upon to take part in what he called "one of his mother's war dances." So they pranced together until a crusty old gentleman in the room below found his chandelier rattling, and was on the point of ringing for the waiter to demand angrily the reason, when Mrs. Lester ceased for lack of breath and fell into an arm-chair.

"Dear me, and I an old married woman," she gasped, fanning herself and looking far more like a flushed child. "Whatever would father say? I must think more of my dignity."

"He'd say you were just a kid, like he always does," said Dick, who had collapsed upon the hearth-rug. "It would be an awful shock to father if he found that you'd got prim and grown up."

"I misdoubt he'll never find that, the poor man," said his mother tragically. "Dickie, I'll never forget how terrible it was when I first found myself married and settled down at Kurrajong, with a house and several servants. You see, I was only seventeen when I married, and though seventeen may seem a lot to you, it isn't so much of an age when you come to it. And I had always been at boarding school and I didn't know a thing about keeping house. I used to like stock very much as a child, but I remember that for a while after I was married I used to look at a bullock or a sheep with horror, as unpleasant beasts that got cut up into a number of joints, of which I never could remember the names."

"Poor old mummie!" said Dick, laughing. "How did you manage to learn things?"

"Cook pulled me through; I found her six months after my marriage. Before that there was a terrible cook who scorned me and my ignorance, and gave me a very bad time, and father very bad meals. Of course, he never grumbled."

"No, he never would," said Dick.

"It was only one day when he found me crying in my room that he discovered that I was really unhappy—and you should have seen how angry he was. He sent away the terrible cook, and we went to Melbourne and hunted for a really nice one—and got her. And dear old cookie taught me all the things I ought to have learned before I got married. But I made up my mind that if ever any daughters came to me I would have them taught very thoroughly at school how to run their houses. But they never did come—only one little ragamuffin of a son!"

She rumbled his hair, and leaning forward, dropped a butterfly kiss on his nose.

"Now you look like a golliwog," she said, "and we have no time to spare, because we must go and buy deck shoes, and cures for sea sickness, and other interesting things. We have got to look our very smartest when we board that big mail-boat to get father. Tidy yourself, beloved, and we'll go out."

Dick brushed his hair with her long-tailed hairbrush, which he despised very much; and after his mother had pulled his coat here and there and settled his tie with deft fingers, she pronounced him fit to accompany her, and they fared forth into the busy streets. Shopping with his mother generally resolved itself, for Dick, into waiting at the doors of big drapery houses, where she was swallowed up into mysterious regions that had no charms for her son. He preferred to stand in the doorway, tucked into a corner out of the way of the hurrying throng of eager women passing in and out—there was fun in watching the crowd, the clanging tram-cars, the beautiful horses—it was before the days of

many motors, and good carriage horses were still to be seen in the city streets. Like most bush-bred boys—and girls, for that matter—Dick thought there was no sight to equal that of a good horse. He was staring at a big, taking chestnut, driven by a man in a light buggy, when a voice said, "Hullo, young Lester!" and he turned to greet Master Glass, resplendent in a new collar, and no longer melancholy in appearance.

"Hullo, Bottles!" Dick rejoined. "How did the dentist treat you?"

"Oh, not too badly," Bottles answered. "Finished me up in pretty quick time, too, so I've got the rest of the afternoon to play in. What are you up to?"

"Mother's shopping," said Dick. "Oh, I say, Bottles, such a lark! I'm off to Western Australia to-morrow!"

"Whew-w!" whistled Bottles. "What for?"

Dick unfolded his news.

"Well, of all the lucky young kids," was Bottles' comment. "So you'll be gone until after the holidays? Anyhow, you'll have your father at home to keep you in order, so it's to be hoped that you'll come back well licked."

"I hope you don't think I have failed in my duty in that respect, Bottles," said a laughing voice; and the abashed Master Glass turned quickly to greet Mrs. Lester, blushing to the roots of his close-cropped hair.

"You don't give him half enough, Mrs. Lester," he mumbled. "I have to attend to him myself, or he'd get too bumptious."

"You!" said Dick, with huge scorn. "I'd like to see you, old fatty!" Which loathed insult caused the irate Bottles to vow to take deep vengeance no later than that very night.

Mrs. Lester restored tranquillity.

"Leave him to me, Bottles; I'll keep him severely in order," she laughed. "Meanwhile, come and have some tea with us; I'm sure you need some."

The boys followed her into a big restaurant, so crowded that they found some difficulty in finding a table. A band was playing softly, and somewhere near them a little fountain plashed gently under a clump of tree-ferns, catching rays of rosy light from some concealed source overhead. A waitress brought them tea and muffins, with a dish of cakes so attractive that the only problem was which to choose; and their satisfaction was heightened presently by the spectacle of three senior boys from their own school wandering helplessly about in a vain attempt to find a resting place. Bottles and Dick nodded kindly to them, and felt intensely superior, selecting cakes with a calm enjoyment that brought murderous feelings to the three prefects, who propped themselves against a pillar and waited dismally for someone to vacate a table, which no one seemed inclined to do. Indeed, they were still standing when Mrs. Lester called for her bill.

"We might as well give those three boys this table," she said. "I suppose you know them, Dick?"

Dick knew them as the cabin boy may be expected to know the captain and chief officer of his ship, as superior and mighty beings, too far above him to dream of more than the curtest recognition. One of them had cuffed him for getting in his way in the playground no later than yesterday. It was therefore somewhat soothing to have the opportunity of sauntering across to these lords of creation and remarking; "Care to have our table, Landon?" And soothing, too, to see how meekly the famished ones accepted the invitation, and how the lordliness of demeanour that seemed part of them at school fell from them when Mrs. Lester spoke to them. Landon, indeed, blushed like any junior, and stammered in his answer, which gave unmitigated joy to Bottles and Dick, and formed the subject of much merry jest in the dormitory that night.

Bottles said good-bye after tea, and took himself back to school, while Dick and his mother, their shopping finished, boarded a tram that landed them near the Fitzroy Gardens, where the flowers were beginning to show promise of their spring blaze of glory, and the splendid stretches of turf under the great trees made a haven of refuge to tired city dwellers. They found a quiet seat in a sheltered corner—there was still something of winter in the breeze—and talked, filling in all the gaps that even the longest letters must leave when the smallest detail is eagerly treasured. Dick heaved a great sigh when at length they rose and strolled slowly across the lawns towards the street.

"I feel almost as if I'd been home again," he said. "My word, mother, won't it be gorgeous to go back to Kurrajong—and to take father!"

CHAPTER II.

DICK GOES WEST.

Spencer Street Station, and the long line of the Adelaide express glittering beside the long grey platform, the great carriages brave with polished and shining glass and nickel. People were hurrying to and fro, looking for seats, hurrying porters with trucks of luggage, raiding the bookstall for bundles of magazines and papers, and the fruit stall for oranges and bananas and baskets of early Queensland strawberries. The express conductors, who are chosen for their good manners, among other qualifications, stood near the entrance to the saloon carriages, good to look on in their blue and silver uniforms; quick to render aid to real passengers, or gently to head off idle folk who merely wished to stroll through the train and look curiously at the travellers. Boys, laden with bundles of evening papers, rent the air with shouts of "'*Erald*—Penny '*Erald*!" snatched at coppers held towards them through the windows, or impatiently sought for change for anxious ladies who insisted on tendering half a crown for a paper, and craned their necks anxiously after the boys as they rushed to the bookstall for

the money. People hurried along outside the carriages, peering in through the wide, nickel-barred windows for friends whom they wished to farewell. A theatrical company occupied several compartments, and occasioned a solid block of people outside their windows, through which their admirers thrust offerings of sweets and flowers. There were snatches of song from this section of the train, shouts of "Good-bye!" "Good luck!" and "Come back again!"—and many of the newly-arrived bouquets were pulled to pieces by their owners in response to the clamorous demand for souvenirs.

Dick Lester and his mother arrived in the wake of a porter laden with hand-baggage, and fought their way through the throng until they reached one of the blue and silver conductors. He glanced at the number of Mrs. Lester's ticket, and then, ushering them into the carriage, led them along a wide corridor until he came to an empty compartment.

"This is yours, madam." He offered any other assistance, while the porter placed their possessions in the rack and departed to see to their heavy baggage.

"All this ours!" Dick queried, looking round the compartment. It was fitted with a seat on one side only—a wide, comfortable seat, upholstered in grey. A folding nickel wash-basin was near the window, with towels overhead. Everything was solid and comfortable and compact.

"Yes, it's ours," smiled his mother.

"But you said it was a sleeper?"

"Yes; the conductor will wave his magic wand and produce your bed out of that wall later on."

"Oh!" said Dick, and fell to examining the wall, to find out its mechanism. Meanwhile the clamour about them redoubled; people hurried along the corridor, peeping in, and withdrawing again impatiently at sight of the occupied compartment. Others peered from the platform through their windows, and a heated lady asked anxiously, "Is that you, Willie dear?" and then fled without waiting for an answer. Bells rang, somewhere afar the engine gave a furious whistle, and slowly the great train slid out of the station, while the theatrical people and their friends sang "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" with immense enthusiasm. Gathering speed, they whisked through the packed streets of North Melbourne and Newmarket, and out beyond to the wide Keilor Plains.

"Off at last, Dickie!" said his mother.

"Yes." They looked at each other, very content.

Daylight held until they had flashed past Bacchus Marsh, with its deep green of fertile farms, where the willows were beginning to wave their long feathery arms; and soon after came dinner, which in itself was an event to Dick. A white-jacketed waiter summoned them, and they followed the long corridor, which seemed to swing under their feet, until they came to a carriage fitted as a dining-room, with little tables for two or four people, sparkling with polished glass and silver-plated fittings on snow-white linen. The theatrical people filled many of the tables; they were very merry, and rather loud-voiced, calling to each other across the car. Dick

privately thought them rather entertaining, but he saw his mother wrinkle her pretty nose two or three times in a way he knew meant disapproval.

One of the actresses came in a few minutes later, and, disregarding shouted invitations to "come and sit here," finally paused by Mrs. Lester's table, where there were two vacant seats. She hesitated. "May I?"

"Of course," Mrs. Lester answered, making room. The woman sat down in a tired way. She was tall and rather pretty, but her face, seen closely, was lined and worn. She gave her order to the waiter listlessly, and when her dinner came she only toyed with it. But she stared at Dick in a way that would have embarrassed that young man had he not been too hungry to pay attention to anything until the meal was half over. Then he met her eyes so many times when he glanced up that he became quite uncomfortable, and wished heartily that she had chosen to sit at any other table.

"I sure do beg your pardon for looking at you," said the actress suddenly. "It's vurry rude of me, I know. But the fact is, I sat at this table just so's I could look at you!" She turned to Mrs. Lester. "I've a boy in the States just about his size, ma'am; I've not seen him for two years."

"Oh, you poor soul," said Mrs. Lester.

"Fact. He's at boarding school, and he writes every mail—never misses. But that don't make up for wanting him. There's times when I've just to get close to a boy and make believe he's my Jimmy."

"Are you going back to him soon?"

"Not for a good piece yet," said Jimmy's mother with a sigh. "We're tourin' round a lot; business is good, and we keep extending our dates. It's a long time—Jimmy's fourteen, and he'll be 'most grown up when I get him again. Boys in Amurrica grow up terrible quick."

"We haven't seen my father for a year, and I thought that was pretty bad," Dick said. "We're going to meet him now."

"That's real nice, isn't it?" The actress's big dark eyes lit with quick interest. "I guess your father's wonderin' what sort of a boy his son's grown into, same's I am."

"And I guess your Jimmy will be as glad to see you as we shall be to see father," said Mrs. Lester, smiling. "What is he going to be?"

"Wa-al, of course he thinks he's going to be a sailor—all boys do, don't they?" said the actress. "But he's got bitten with motors now, so I shouldn't wonder if it's something engineering, after all. Jimmy's got plenty of brains. That's one thing. Not that you care much, when he's your only boy, whether he's got brains or not, do you, ma'am?"

"I hope she doesn't, 'cause I'm her only boy, and goodness knows I've got none!" said Dick, grinning.

Mrs. Lester laughed, rising.

"Brains aren't everything, certainly," she said. "We're slowing down. I think this must be Ballarat. Come on, Dick,

and stretch your legs on the platform—we wait here for awhile." She nodded kindly to the American, and Dick followed her out of the car.

It was Ballarat. They ran into a big, crowded platform, with a domed, lofty roof, that glimmered mysteriously far above them. They went outside and strolled up a quiet street, but were too nervous about their tram to go far, since an Adelaide express waits for no man.

"Some day," Mrs. Lester said, "we'll come here and hear the bands play."

"Have they got many?" asked Dick.

"They collect them from all over Australia once a year, and they play all the time for big prizes. That is, when they are not playing for prizes, they are practising. So it goes on all day; you wake in the morning to band music and you go to sleep at night to the tune of a quickstep; and when you go out during the day you generally find yourself keeping in step with a band marching beside you, playing for dear life. Then each instrument has its own tune. I was once inveigled into a hall where I heard forty-nine euphoniums play 'There's a Flower that Bloometh.'"

"Forty-nine!" said Dick, laughing. "It sounds a bit tall. Did you like it, mother?"

"I think it is necessary to be a specialist to enjoy that sort of thing thoroughly," his mother said. "I fled at the nineteenth, and that weary old tune beat in my brain for a

week. But the other music is lovely. We'll go some day, Dickie."

They came back to the station, and, finding the crowd too dense for comfort, sought their own compartment, where a transformation awaited them. The bare wall opposite the seat had been let down and now a comfortable bed with snowy sheets was ready on each side of the aisle. The conductor hovered near.

"Will you require anything further, madam?"

"No, thank you," Mrs. Lester said. "But we shall want morning tea, conductor."

"The coffee and rolls at Murray Bridge are excellent, madam," murmured the conductor.

"I remember them of old," said Mrs. Lester laughing. "Very well. Good night, conductor."

"Now I'm going to bed, Dick," Mrs. Lester remarked, as the tall, uniformed figure disappeared. "So you can run and get a wash and brush up, and come back in twenty minutes, when I should recommend you to go to bed too."

Dick thought the idea a good one, especially when he returned, to find his mother comfortably tucked up, reading by a shaded electric light. He slipped into bed quickly, and enjoyed a magazine, while the train roared on its way, stopping occasionally with a great grinding of brakes, and then gathering way again slowly as it left a wayside station behind, and went swinging on through the night. The

swinging motion made him sleepy; he put down the magazine and lay drowsily listening to the roar of the train. Once his mother glanced across and smiled at him; later, he had a drowsy fancy, half a dream, that she was bending over him, tucking him in. But he did not see the tired face of the American actress later on. She tapped gently at the door, looking apologetic when Mrs. Lester, in a hastily-donned dressing gown, opened it.

"Were you in bed?" she asked contritely. "Well, now, I'm real sorry—it's early, and I thought you'd be up still." She hesitated, and a dull flush came into her cheeks. "Is the boy asleep?"

"Yes." Something in Mrs. Lester responded to the hunger in the other mother's eyes. "Would you care to look at him?"

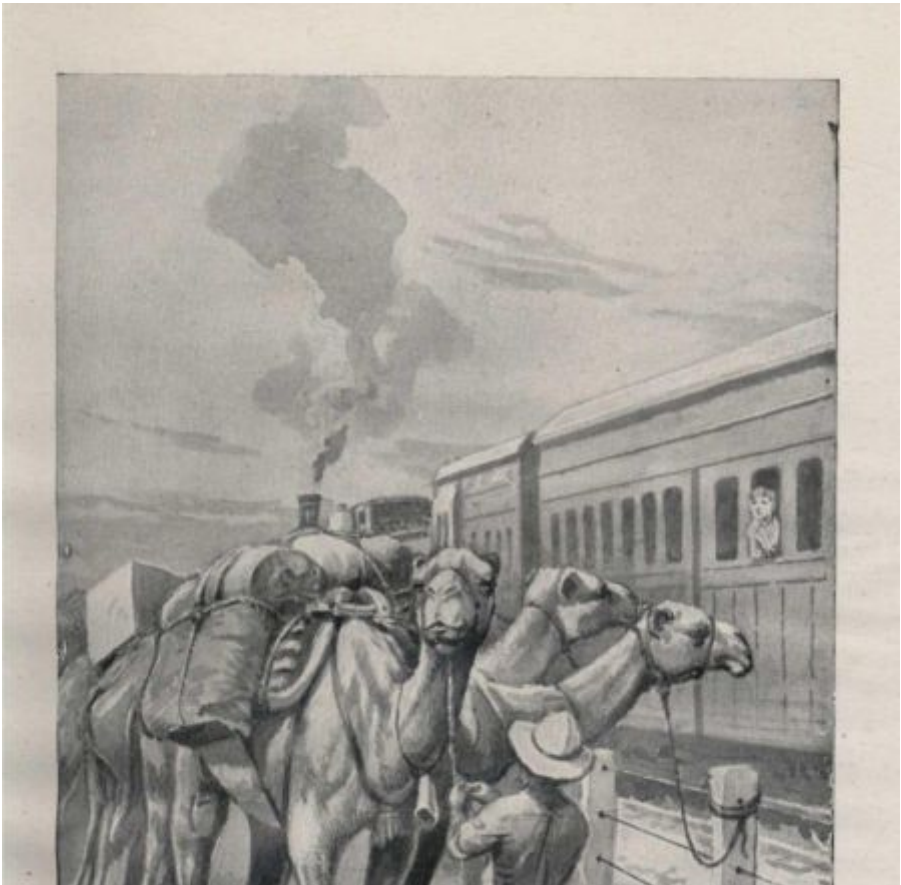
"I came to ask if I could. You see—it's two years since I had the chance of tucking up Jimmy."

She came in noiselessly, and looked down at the sleeping Dick. He lay with one arm flung up above his head; a very ordinary, healthy boy, sunburnt and clear skinned, with just a hint in his close cropped hair of the curls of his boyhood, and only a baby still to the two women who watched him. The American stooped suddenly, and brushed his forehead with her lips. Dick stirred, and said, sleepily, "Mother."

"I sort of had to," said the actress, turning in the corridor to say good night. "You—you get kinder desperate for them after two years. Thanks, ma'am, ever so." She glided away, leaving Mrs. Lester with tears in her eyes.

All night long the train, with its sleeping freight, rushed and roared through the desert country, passing over dreary leagues of sand and sparse scrub. Sometimes the unfamiliarity of his surroundings woke Dick, to lie drowsily for a moment in the dim light that filtered through the fanlight from the corridor; then to float back lazily through the gates of sleep. He woke in earnest about six o'clock and, slipping out of bed, peeped through the window. The train was standing in a wayside station.

"Taillem Bend," read Dick. "What a rummy name. I say, we must be in South Australia. Great Scot! there's a camel!"





“Great Scot! There's a camel!”

Dick Lester of Kurrajong

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“Great Scot! There's a camel!”

There was a string of camels tied to the station fence, all scientifically packed with bales and bundles, their heads drooping sleepily. The unfamiliar sight made the morning more than ever like a dream. A tall, weather-beaten man in moleskins and a red shirt was knotting the halter of the leading camel; his mate was wrangling with the station-master about some parcel that should have been awaiting him, but had failed to turn up. Dick heard the official say angrily, "Well, you'll have to wait till the express goes out, anyhow. I'm busy."

"And ain't I busy?" demanded the man. "Ain't I got the camels waiting, an' high time we was on the track? Blow yer old express."

But the railway man had fled, and the man of camels could only glare after his retreating back and mutter what he felt.

The conductor came past as the train gathered way, and nodded a civil "Good morning" to Dick, who had ventured into the corridor in his pyjamas to see if any other queer sights awaited him on that side of the line.

"Sleep well?"

"Yes, thanks," Dick answered. "Why do they call it Taillem Bend?"

"Lots of people ask me that," remarked the conductor. "Some folks say it's a shot at an old native name, but more believe it's because cattle used to be tailed at the bend in the river here in the overlanding days."

"Pity they don't stick to native names when they go christening places in Australia," remarked a man close by. "Murray Bridge used to be Mobilong, and it would have been more sense if they had left it at that. Murray Bridge, indeed. What's the good of a name like that? Here's the Murray, of course, and there's a bridge; so they stick them together and cut out the pretty native name."

"There's some people," said the conductor, nodding assent, "who'd sooner see their own silly names on a signboard than the best native name you could get. That's why you get names like Harrisville and Smithtown, and Wilkins's View all over the map of Australia. Take Belalie now—that's a pretty-sounding native name for you, and it was the name of a town all right. Then comes along some jolly old Governor or something with swelled head and calls it after himself."

"What's that?" queried the other man.

"Jamestown," said the conductor with deep disgust; "Jamestown. And it might have been Belalie. Right, sir, I'm coming." He fled in answer to a fierce call from a sleeping bunk.

Dick realised that he was a little chilly, and peeped into the compartment. His mother was still asleep, and he slipped into his clothes as noiselessly as possible and then went in search of soap and water. Returning presently, he found her sitting up, with a dressing-jacket round her pretty shoulders.

"What, dressed, old man?" she said.

"Rather." Dick seized his brush and made an onslaught upon his wet hair. "We're getting near Murray Bridge, mother—aren't you going to have a look at the Murray?"

"I've seen the Murray before," said Mrs. Lester severely. "It's a nice, wide river, but I'm very comfy, Dick."

"Lazy old thing!" said her son. "Well, I haven't, so I'm going out to look at it." He dived for a clean collar, and presently hurried back to the corridor.

The train was skirting a wide flat, across which he could see the line of a river. They swung round soon to run over a very long bridge, beneath which the big river ran sluggishly—wide and yellow, with low banks. Below the bridge was moored one of the Murray steamers, a white paddle boat with two decks; he could see no one on her, but a faint curl of blue smoke was lazily rising from the funnel that marked the

cook's galley. There were fishing boats against the banks, and a bare-legged boy of his own size was pulling a heavy rowing boat slowly down stream. Then the train swung round from the bridge, and in a few moments slowed into a station.

Dick hopped out on the platform. Very few people were in sight; a few passengers left the train and hurried towards the refreshment room. The conductor appeared presently, bearing, in a mysterious manner, many trays.

"Coffee and rolls?" he said. "Is your mother awake?"

"Yes. I'll take her tray," Dick said.

"I'll see you to the door," said the conductor grimly. "You don't realise how people dart out and cannon with you in the corridor until you've carried trays round. Nearly turns your hair grey."

This Dick found to be true, for a very stout gentleman dashed from his sleeper without warning, and would certainly have demolished all the trays had not the conductor avoided him with a dexterity born of long practice. Dick left his mother to her coffee, and went off to explore the platform, nibbling his roll as he trotted along.

It was early, and a chill wind blew from the river. There was not much to look at, so Dick found his way along the train to the huge engine, and stood looking at her and admiring her. The engine driver was also eating his breakfast, which consisted of chops, fried scientifically on a red-hot

coal shovel. He nodded in a friendly way to the small boy, and they chatted until Dick's roll was finished, and a craving for coffee took him back to the sleeper.

"I was beginning to wonder where you were," said his mother, who was up and brushing her hair energetically. "Take the tray out, Dickie. I want to get as much dressing done as possible before we start again."

She joined him presently in the corridor, fresh and dainty. They were rushing along again between miles of grey fencing. Ploughs were already busy in the paddocks, where flocks of white cockatoos settled on the newly-turned brown earth in search of grubs. Past trim dairy farms, with the herds slowly stringing away from the sheds after milking; by little townships, where the air was blue with the smoke of a hundred breakfast fires; by creek and gully, towering hill and stretching plain, the express roared. People in the carriages were beginning to wake up; heads, more or less in undress appearance, peeped from the doors of the sleepers, and voices were heard demanding the conductor and hot water. The summons to breakfast came presently, to Dick's great joy, for the keen air had made him hungry, and when they came back from the meal they found that their beds had disappeared, and the sleepers once more bore the air of an ordinary compartment.

"We're in the hills now," Mrs. Lester said, glancing out. "Come to the doorway, Dickie; this is the loveliest bit of any railway journey I know."

They went along the corridor to the big doorway. The door was open, and through it they could see that the train was rushing through hills, steadily mounting all the time. The gum trees that clothed everything with green waved feathery heads quite close to them, and, far as the eye could see, golden wattle blazed through the scrub. Up and up they went. White roads led away through the hill slopes; now and then could be seen an early motorist spinning along in the joy of their perfect surface. Then came the very summit of the climb, and the train ran into a trim little station, gay with flowers, perched on top of the highest hill.

"Mount Lofty," said Mrs. Lester.

"My word, what jolly houses!" was Dick's comment.

They looked from the doorway down into the green heart of the scrub. Here and there, half buried in the trees, were the homes to which happy people of Adelaide fly when the summer heat lies scorching on the plains; red houses, with terraced lawns and gardens ablaze with blossoms; grey houses, with roses climbing over high trellises. They perched on terraces cut out of the sides of the hills, or nestled in nooks in the gullies, their gardens gleaming like jewels in the dull green of the eucalyptus. The curve of a road showed here and there, white level, diving down into some unseen hollow. Dew yet hung on the gum trees, and little wreaths of mist floated upwards from the gullies; the bush scents filled the air. Everywhere birds sang and twittered in the branches; everywhere the gold of the wattle gleamed through the dull green of the scrub. Then the train moved on, slipping quietly down, each moment revealing some new turn of beauty; until

at last the plains opened out below, and they could see Adelaide lying just where the land seemed to end, and the blue rim of the sea widened, with the smoke of the steamer making a long trail across the water.

"Wonder if that's our boat?" Dick said. "No, it can't be, because it's coming the wrong way—amn't I stupid! Oh, mother, isn't it all jolly!" He pranced gaily back to the sleeper, to lend a hand in collecting their hand baggage. They were running now through trim, flat suburbs, and presently, with a grinding of the brakes, they stopped in a big station—Adelaide at last.

A helpful porter—brought them, as a kind of offering, by their friend the conductor—collected their luggage and put them on a train bound for Port Adelaide; a place of grimy wharfs and dusty streets, where, after some search, they discovered their boat, the *Moondarra*, spic and span in her dingy surroundings. Dick's heart bounded as he followed his mother up the gangway. He had never before been on anything but a Bay paddle steamer; to him, even the seven-thousand ton inter-State boat seemed a mighty ship, and he longed to explore her from stem to stern. It was with a feeling of disappointment that he learned they were not to sail until the evening.

"It's really hardly worth your while to remain on board," an officer told Mrs. Lester. "We've a rush lot of cargo coming at the last moment, and the ship won't be comfortable before six o'clock—nothing but noise and dust. I should advise you to go up to Adelaide for the day. Why not have a run in the hills? Is your luggage on board?"

"It is on the wharf," Mrs. Lester said, glancing towards a laden truck in charge of a porter.

"Give me the number of your cabin and I'll see that your steward takes charge of it." He took them down the gangway, probably relieved, in his heart, that they were going, since passengers are not beloved of sailor folk when loading cargo is in progress. "Glorious day—too good to spend down in this place," he said, wistfully, looking at the dark masses of the hills.

They found a train about to start, and were soon back in Adelaide itself; little city of wide streets, girdled with a four-square belt of park lands. Wandering, somewhat aimlessly, up King William Street, a tall man suddenly detached himself from a group at a corner and came quickly to meet them.

"Why, Mrs. Lester—what luck?" He shook hands vigorously. "And the kid—he's grown up!"

"Oh, Billy, how nice to see you!" said Mrs. Lester. Billy Cathcart had gained "colonial experience" on the Lesters' station for two years before his father, a rich Englishman, had bought him a property of his own in South Australia. They were very fond of him; he had made himself a kind of big son of the house, and when he went away they missed him sorely.

"But what are you doing here? And is the Boss back?"

Mrs. Lester explained.

"And you never told me you were going through!" said Billy reproachfully.

"My dear boy, I knew you were nearly two hundred miles from Adelaide—and I had about two minutes' warning that I was coming. I never dreamed of any possibility of seeing you. Why aren't you in the wilds, earning your living?"

Billy Cathcart laughed.

"I've been earning it at a great rate lately," he said. "Made a lucky deal in cattle, and cleared quite a lot—so I came down to buy a car. I've been driving one a good bit, and it made me keen to have one of my own. I say—if you've got the day to do nothing in, do let me take you out. She's a beauty, really."

"Why, it would be lovely!" Mrs. Lester said. "But are you doing nothing yourself?"

"Only killing time. It would be ripping to take you; and there are first-rate runs about Adelaide. As for roads—well, they can teach road-making to any other State I've been in. Like to come, Dick?"

"Rather!" Dick was hopping on one foot. "I say, Mr. Cathcart, how's old Danny?"

"Oh, fitter than ever!" Danny, as a pup, son of a noted cattle dog, had been a farewell present to the departing jackeroo on leaving the Lesters' station. "He's an absolute wonder with cattle. I believe if I sat in a buggy and cracked

my whip and told old Danny to go ahead, he'd muster my roughest paddock and not leave a beast behind."

"Father will be jolly glad to hear that," said Dick, solemnly. "He always said Danny would turn out a clinker."

"So you're going to school?" Mr. Cathcart said, glancing at his hat-band and badge. "You'll have to tell me about it presently. Well, Mrs. Lester, may I get the car now?—or, wait a minute, you look a bit tired; how about a cup of tea first? Yes, come along." He led them to a café across the street, and plied them energetically with food.

"Not like the cakes you used to make us at Kurrajong—still, they're better than nothing," he remarked. "Finished already, Dick? Well, shall we go and get the car, and come back here for your mother?"

That seemed a good plan to Dick. He followed the tall figure out into the street, where they dodged precariously round two of Adelaide's flying electric trams, which hurtle down King William Street in fevered haste, and presently found themselves in Rundle Street, a thread-like thoroughfare where the footpath is so narrow that people are forced to walk in large numbers in the roadway.

"Looks as if they'd used all the land for that big street we were in, and found they hadn't left themselves enough over for this," commented Dick.

"It does; and they put all their biggest shops in this tiny lane, so that it's always packed with people. Quaint system,"

Billy Cathcart said. "Rundle Street generally looks like a sheep race to me—and you fight your way out of it into a street like a hundred-acre paddock."

"Rummy," remarked Dick. "I say—what jolly fruit carts!"

"Oh, they're the pride of Adelaide—amongst other things," laughed his companion. "They take some beating, don't they?"

They were drawn up in line along the kerbstone, in the shade of the buildings; carts as spic and span as shining paint and gleaming brass and spotless cleanliness could make them, each in charge of a boy in a white jacket. Their gay little awnings fluttered in the breeze over piles of many-coloured fruit—oranges, red and yellow apples, dark masses of passion fruit, bunches of bananas, strawberries gleaming redly in little baskets lined with leaves. A boy near them was polishing his apples, and the cloth he used was as clean as the apples themselves.

"Well, I'm blessed!" Dick ejaculated. "They don't have carts like that in Melbourne."

"No, you have awful men with barrows that look only fit for pig food, and they tip about fifteen cases of fruit out in a heap, and wheel it about in the sun with the flies sitting on it. Seems a pity," said the Englishman, reflectively. He stopped at a barrow and bought fruit largely, piling up bags in Dick's arms. "Can you manage all those? Come along."

The garage was not far off; a great shed-like building full of odours of petrol and lubricating oil, which are heartsome smells to any boy. Dick poked about among motors big and little while his friend's car was being prepared; and soon they were in it, and worming their way through the crowd in Rundle Street.

"Can you really take a car along here?"

"Oh, it's possible," said Billy. "I'll admit it doesn't look probable. You push people out of the way gently and politely with the bonnet. But it pays to dodge up a side street, if you can, and get into something wider." He slewed round as he spoke, and presently they were running along the broad pavement of North Terrace, and so into King William Street again and to where Mrs. Lester stood awaiting them under a verandah near the café. They slipped away from the city, along well-kept streets, lined with blossoming gardens, until, after a few miles of a dusty road, the hills drew suddenly near, and they turned into a gully where the road ran by the bed of a little creek, following all its windings. The hills towered above them, and they climbed up and up. Here and there came an open stretch, where orchards laden with blossom fell away below them. Now and then the creek made a sudden, sharp bend, enclosing a little flat, gay with tall bulbs. Indeed, all the banks of that little creek were bright with flowers, because when it ran rapidly in the winter it washed down a freight of seeds and roots from the gardens of the houses on the summit. Sometimes tall poplars stood, with their feet in the gurgling water; sometimes a little cottage by the wayside displayed a sign asking wayfarers in for tea, and you could cross the creek by a rustic bridge and sit in a cool

summer-house hung with creepers, and eat strawberries and cream in the midst of a delightful garden. The road was steep, and yet so well graded that the car took it without an effort. Even stray cyclists whom they overtook seemed to be climbing its twists and turns without undue exertions. So they came to the top of a long rise called Montacute, where a lonely little tin church perches among the gum trees; and there they sat in its shade, with a myriad birds twittering about them, looking down over the tree-clad slopes to the plains beyond, where Adelaide lay like a chess-board, a network of regular lines and squares. They ate fruit and talked. Billy Cathcart had to learn of a hundred happenings at Kurrajong, and to tell of more than a thousand that had befallen him in his first attempts at running a station unaided. He was a light-hearted person; it afforded him huge amusement to tell of his own mistakes. "Goodness knows, there would have been plenty more of them," he added, "if it hadn't been for the gruelling Mr. Lester gave me on Kurrajong."

"Was it very bad, Billy?" Mrs. Lester laughed.

"Oh, he never meant it to be bad. But the first six months were pretty awful, because I felt such a perfect fool all the time. The trouble was," he grinned, "that I came out from home with an idea that I knew quite a good bit. After I realised that I was mistaken I got on better. But I never thought I would arrive at being a full-blown squatter myself. It seemed to me I'd never get any higher than keeping goats."

"That also has its difficulties, I believe," said Mrs. Lester smiling.

"I believe it has—a chap near me has a flock of Angoras, and they seem to worry him more than his babies." He got up lazily. "Shall we go on? There are so many places in these hills I want to show you that I mustn't let you stay too long anywhere."

They came down from the hills at the end of a run that had been a long succession of beauties, on such smooth roads, winding among the tree-clad crests, plunging into deep gullies, finding little townships hidden here and there, and coming out upon summits where, below the ridges, the plains swept for miles before them, pink and pearly-white with great stretches of almond orchards. Evening was drawing near as the big car purred smoothly alongside the wharf. Billy Cathcart had insisted on bringing them back to the boat at Port Adelaide.

"Well," he said, "it's been glorious to have you. And you'll let me know when you're coming through?"

"Indeed, yes," said Mrs. Lester. "But you'll be two hundred miles away then, earning your living."

"I'll let the station run itself and come down again," he said. "Do you think I'd miss a chance of seeing you and the Boss again—to say nothing of the nipper?" He gave Dick's ear a friendly tweak. "Just you make your father stay here for a while, and I'll teach you to drive the car, old son"—a promise that left Dick no words but a gasp of delight. They stood watching as the car swung round, threading its way between lorries, laden with beer barrels, and cabs, hurrying down with passengers. Billy turned once to wave his cap to

them, and narrowly escaped collision with a huge coal waggon, the driver of which loudly expressed the lowest possible estimate of his powers as a chauffeur. Then he passed out of sight, and Dick and his mother turned towards their ship.

CHAPTER III.

DICK GOES TO SEA.

All was bustle and hurry aboard the steamer. Cargo was still being loaded; the creak and rattle of the great crane, as it swung back and forth, the crash of cases, dumped into the yawning mouth of the hold, mingled with the confusion of arriving passengers and the shouts of sailors and dock hands. On the decks people were hurrying about, seeking stewards and cabins, and the doorways were blocked with little groups saying good-bye. Overhead a harsh whistle shrilled out—so suddenly that everyone jumped, and horses on the wharf danced nervously. Someone in uniform shouted:

"Everyone for the shore!"

Good-byes filled the air. Women hurried towards the gangway, as if fearful of being carried off to the "wild and woolly West," followed more slowly by those more experienced. Passengers hastened up from the wharf; cab drivers, trotting in leisurely, whipped up their horses in

response to nervous appeals from their anxious fares. The big crane went on, creaking and swinging, dumping in its cases as though there were no such item on the ship's programme as starting.

Dick watched the late arrivals curiously. Men formed the greater number; there were smart and brisk commercial travellers, and others, less prosperous, evidently off to seek their fortune in that West which, to much of the rest of Australia, is still an unknown land. Tearful wives and children hung about the necks of some of these, saying the last hard good-byes; but in some cases the wives and children were coming too, and they trooped on board, shabby little flocks, with the tired mothers trying to keep the stragglers together.

The whistle sounded again, and there was a second summons, a peremptory one this time, for strangers to leave the ship. They hurried down the gangway, and then the great ladder was hauled up the ship's side, the deck-railing swung in across the gap, and in a few moments the *Moondarra* began to back slowly from the wharf. The people below grew smaller, their upturned faces white dots in the evening gloom. From everywhere came shouts of "Good-bye." A young bride, off to the West with a huge, bronzed bushman, leaned over the side, holding the ends of long streamers of ribbon, of which the other ends were held by her friends on shore. Her face was happy and yet tearful; she looked wistfully towards Adelaide. The ribbons lengthened out, gradually tightened as the ship drew further away, and finally, released by the people on the wharf, sprang in the air.

The girl gathered them up to her quickly, a gay, fluttering bundle, and Dick heard her give a little sob.

Just as the ship gathered way, they saw a motor suddenly turn in to the wharf from the street, hooting as it came. Mrs. Lester peered at it through the gloom.

"Isn't that Billy's car?" she said.

"My word, yes!" Dick cried. "He's standing up and trying to see us. I wonder what he wants."

"Oh—he has remembered something he didn't tell us; and of course, it's just like Billy to come racing back," Mrs. Lester said, laughing. "At all events, he is too late." She waved her handkerchief towards the car, though she knew that it would be impossible to distinguish anyone in the long row of passengers crowding to look over the ship's rail. "There—he has given it up as a bad job."

They saw Billy sit down again, after waving his hat in a kind of general salutation towards the ship. Then the car turned slowly, and slipped away. The dusk swallowed it up.

Somewhere near them a bugle blared, so suddenly, that everyone jumped. The bugler, a very fat steward, finished a long trill carefully, and then moved off to repeat the performance elsewhere. Someone hailed him.

"What's that for, steward?"

"Dressing bugle, sir," responded the fat player, stolidly. "Dinner in half an hour, sir."

There was a general move from the deck. Dick and his mother found themselves in a crowd going down the first staircase. Dick was too much of a landsman yet to call it a companion. At the foot they encountered another steward, who directed them to their cabins, along an alley-way; Dick's was opposite his mother's. It was a two-berth cabin, and he found that he was not the only occupant—indeed, so big was his fellow passenger that it seemed unlikely that there would be any room for Dick at all. He paused uncertainly, just inside the doorway.

An enormous man, who was unstrapping a leather suitcase, swung round suddenly.

"Hullo, youngster," he said. "Do you belong in here?"

"Well—the steward said so," Dick answered with some uncertainty.

"Then you probably do," said the big man. "What's your number, sonny? Thirty-seven? Yes, that's your bunk. Got anyone with you?"

"My mother," Dick nodded. "She's in the opposite cabin."

"I see. And I've a wife and small son and daughter somewhere about. Well, there's not a whole heap of room in these cabins, so it's luck for me that I haven't struck a mate of my own size. But I expect you don't look at it in that way."

Dick grinned. He rather liked this big, friendly person, but was much too shy to talk. Indeed, it was rather dreadful to

think of sharing a cabin with him—with any stranger, for that matter.

"We won't worry each other very much," said his companion, as if guessing his thoughts. "You'll be asleep long before I come to bed, and I'm not as early as I might be in the mornings." He was unpacking swiftly, distributing his belongings in shelves and on hooks. "I'll leave space for you—those drawers are handy for your height, so I'll take the upper ones. I see you've got the berth with the porthole—lucky kid."

"I'll change, if you like," Dick said. It seemed the only thing to say, but he didn't feel a cheerful giver. The little round window just over his bed looked very inviting.

The big man laughed.

"Oh, not much!" he said. "Thanks, all the same, sonny, but I wouldn't take it from you. Now, I'm pretty straight, so I'll clear out, for it's quite evident that we can't move about together. So long." Dick squeezed himself against his bunk to leave room for the great form as he moved to the door.

His mother was a little inclined to be sympathetic on the subject a little later.

"Oh, he might be worse," Dick said. "He's really quite a good sort. And we shan't see so much of each other in the cabin, 'cause I'm going to get up awfully early. You see, I don't want to waste a single minute of my time on board ship."

"Well, you could nearly always take refuge in here if you were very crowded," Mrs. Lester said.

"Thanks very much, mummie." Dick glanced round her cabin; it was the same size as his own, but looked, somehow, immeasurably larger. The second bunk was not made up, and looked inviting as a sofa. Already his mother had unpacked, and her dainty belongings made the tiny place homelike. "It is jolly, isn't it?" the small boy said.

"Yes, it's quite comfy. We'll use it together as a sitting-room, Dickie. There's the bugle for dinner—come along."

There were many people in the long alley-way, hurrying towards the dining saloon. Smooth water was certain for the first few hours of the journey while they steamed down the Gulf. What sort of weather might await them when they turned into the Bight—that place of many storms—no one could say. Therefore, there was a general determination to have at least one meal in comfort. People trooped up from their cabins and down from the deck, crowding into the big saloon. The stewards were busy directing all to their places, and delicately shepherding new-comers from seats already reserved.

Mrs. Lester and Dick found themselves at a table presided over by the ship's doctor, who promptly made himself known to all the passengers, found out their names and saw to it that all under his wing felt at home. He was a plump, cheery man, full of anecdotes and chatter. Dick felt that it would be jolly to sit at his table. Opposite the Lesters were four vacant places. Already at the table were a thin and angular lady,

whose name they found out was Miss Simpson; a very pretty girl of eighteen, with her mother, a Mrs. Merritt, and a tall, silent man, Mr. Dunstan, who looked as though he hailed from the bush, and made but the briefest of responses to the doctor's jokes.

Close at hand was the captain's table, where, as the doctor remarked, "Emperors and pontiffs" might be found. There were no emperors aboard this time; the nearest approach to a pontiff was an English bishop, who, with his wife, was touring Australia. He was a pink and pleasant person, who rather gave the impression that he was curate to his wife—a very tall woman, stout, dignified and extremely English. Dick rejoiced inwardly that he did not sit near this dignitary. He went as far as to feel sympathy for the captain himself, who made heavy weather in his efforts to entertain her, and used to look slightly exhausted towards the close of a meal. A famous singer—a tall, handsome woman—was also at his table; and a noted actor, whom the bishop's wife snubbed whenever possible. There was a chief justice from an eastern state, he had a keen, clever face, at which Dick liked to look when he spoke. The other people included a ship's captain going to take command of a vessel at Fremantle; a member of Parliament and his wife, a Riverina squatter, a German wool buyer and one or two others less distinguished. Dick eyed them with awe, and was glad that he sat at another table.

Just as the soup appeared, a quiet-looking young man slipped into one of the vacant seats at the doctor's left; and presently a party of three arrived to complete the table—Dick's enormous cabin mate, with his wife and little girl.

They sat down opposite, and immediately the little girl made a face at Dick.

Now, Dick did not know much of the ways of girls, little or big. He was thirteen, and at thirteen girls are the last things a boy worries about. Therefore, this pleasantry on the part of the new-comer merely puzzled him slightly. He wrinkled his nose a little and went on with his soup.

The doctor was greeting them boisterously.

"Good evening, Mrs. Warner. Had a good run round Adelaide?"

"Oh, delightful," said the lady vaguely. Her husband laughed.

"Much she knows of Adelaide," he said. "She's been to a tea-party at the club, and Merle and I have been running round like good tourists. Haven't we, Merle?"

The little girl muttered something that sounded like "Horrid place!" and again Mr. Warner laughed.

"Merle is in the stage of disliking everything outside her own boundary fence," he said, attacking his dinner. "I've shown her all the beauties of Eastern Australia, and she still says there's no place like the sandy west, so we'll go back for another ten years or so before coming this side again." His eye fell on Dick, and he nodded in a friendly way. "Why, there's my cabin mate," he said. "I say, doctor, don't you think it's a trifle hard on a boy of that size to find he has drawn me in the lucky bag?"

"Distinctly," agreed the doctor, "but great luck for you." He made the Warners and Lesters known to each other, and the elders chatted through dinner. Merle, after another grimace at Dick, did not look his way again, for which he was mildly thankful. He decided that she was a cheeky kid, and thought no more about her—save that whenever he chanced to look across he saw the square little face, surrounded by a shock of dark hair and crowned with an enormous butterfly bow of black ribbon.

The Warners, it seemed, were station owners north of Coolgardie, and they were returning from a trip east.

"Our first for over twelve years," Mrs. Warner said. "We had a run over just after we were married."

"And we've never had any time since," ejaculated Mr. Warner.

"No, what with babies and hard work," Mrs. Warner's face saddened. Later, Mrs. Lester learned that two of the babies had failed to pull through a very bad summer. They had begun with a very little place, but gradually luck had come their way, and now they owned a big run.

"Thanks to our being willing to go out-back," said Mr. Warner. "People nowadays forget what the first settlers did—our grandparents, who went cheerfully out into the wilds and thought themselves lucky if they got a mail and stores twice a year. There's any amount of room yet for men and women with pluck enough to go into the back-country. But most of them nowadays want a place two minutes from a township,

with a post office and a picture theatre round the corner. It makes me tired."

"Are you far out?" Mrs. Lester asked.

"Oh, not so far. Now that we have a car we get a mail once a fortnight, and that has made us feel very civilised. We used to have trouble with the blacks, but they're tame enough now."

"It was lonely enough at times," Mrs. Warner said. "One used to long to see another white woman. But now that the children are bigger things are better."

"Your little girl is old enough to be a companion to you now," Mrs. Lester said, smiling at Merle, who merely scowled.

"More of a companion to me, I'm afraid," said Mr. Warner, laughing. "Merle isn't a domesticated person; she thinks horses and dogs are the only real things that matter."

"So they are," said Merle, suddenly, in a kind of small explosion. Everyone laughed and she flushed to the roots of her black hair.

"Oh, Merle will become domesticated soon enough—she isn't twelve yet," her mother said, comfortably. "She is to have a governess when we get back."

"I pity the poor governess who is to teach Merle all the useful domestic arts," said Mr. Warner. "She will have an uphill game."

The angular lady, Miss Simpson, spoke suddenly.

"Do you not think," she asked, "that the tuition of the useful arts should begin at a very much earlier age?" Her voice, like herself, was angular; she glared at Merle, who returned the glare with interest. "Much more was expected of little girls when I was young."

Mr. Warner gave one of his great laughs.

"Oh, much more, I'm sure," he said. "But surroundings count for something; perhaps you weren't brought up on a lonely run, where your only playmates were horses and dogs."

"Certainly not," said Miss Simpson. "I was brought up in London. And in my day young ladies learned decorum."

"What's decorum?" asked Merle bluntly.

"Something you haven't got, my little savage," said her father.

"Well, what is it, anyhow?"

"Decorum is refined and ladylike behaviour," said Miss Simpson severely.

"Must be beastly," said Merle and went on with her dinner.

"That's enough, Merle," said her father, looking annoyed. He turned back to the thin lady.

"Life in London has not many of the problems that beset small Australians," he said. "Merle found a cow bogged in a swamp once. I was away, so she had to gallop in to the homestead, collect a few rubbishy blacks, the only men about, and get them on to the job of rescue. I believe she had to wade in herself and hold up the poor brute's head while they tugged her out. Of course, it was only a very ordinary thing for a bush-bred child; no particular credit to Merle. But it wouldn't have fitted in with your ideal of decorum, would it?"

"Most certainly not," said the angular lady. "It seems a fearful thing for a little girl to do."

"But it saved the cow."

"Then you place a cow before your daughter's welfare?"

"It never did me any harm," said Merle, fiercely. "And a cow's a cow!"

Mr. Warner's crack of laughter made heads turn in his direction.

"Beyond doubt a cow is a cow," he said. "We rank 'em high out back. Seriously, Miss Simpson, you wouldn't see an animal choke to death rather than upset decorum, would you?"

"I am glad that such incidents have not come my way," said the spinster, vinegarishly. "I cannot but think a little girl would be better at a good boarding school than exposed to

influences of the kind you describe. What, may I ask, will be your daughter's future?"

"Oh, she'll be pretty useful, I hope," said the squatter, cheerfully. "There, Merle, go on with your pudding," for the subject of the discussion showed imminent signs of bursting with wrath. "We'll take you in hand yet and make a young lady of you. All the same, I'll be disgusted if you ever turn your back on a cow in a bog!"

The silent young man spoke.

"I reckon," he said in a slow drawl, "that some of our old hands would have been in a bit of a hole if their womenfolk hadn't been willin' to lend a hand outside. My old grandmother talked half a dozen languages, and played three or four instruments, and sang in Italian and painted on satin, and all that sort of thing, and before she came out from England she'd never so much as made a bed. Then she came to Sydney with her father's regiment, and married and went up into the Never-Never country. After that there wasn't anything she didn't do, from fightin' blacks and bush fires and floods to helpin' clear the land and build the house. Did it all well too. Didn't hurt her, either, she said; she liked it. Great old sort. Lots like her, of course. Reckon they made Australia."

"Yes, and we're proud of 'em," said Mr. Warner. He grinned. "But what about their decorum, Miss Simpson?"

"I think the dear bishop is rising," said the spinster, acidly. "If you will excuse me——" She left the table in the wake of

the "pontiffs."

"All the same," said Mr. Warner, when the laugh had subsided, "it isn't quite the same thing. Those old grandmothers of ours had decorum—stacks of it. They never lost it, even when they did a man's work. I suppose it was because they had so much of it ground into them when they were young. And it never did them any harm. But somehow nowadays it doesn't seem an easy matter to put on the decorum layer first. I don't know how it is." He looked across the table. "Got any little girls, Mrs. Lester?"

"No, only one bad boy," replied Dick's mother.

"Just as well for your peace of mind. Girls are a great responsibility, especially when they persist in thinking they're boys." He tweaked his small daughter's hair. "Finished? Then suppose we go up on deck, and you can make friends with my cabin mate."

But Merle looked across at Dick scornfully.

"I'm going to see the engines," she said, with her nose tilted. "The chief engineer said he'd take me, an' mother said I could."

"Oh, all right," said her father, easily. "You can make friends with Dick to-morrow." To which Dick, smarting under the double injury of her scorn and the fact that she—a scrap of a girl—was about to revel in the engine room, for which his whole soul hankered, registered a vow that he'd

see her farther first. His nose was as tilted as Merle's own as he passed her on his way to the deck.

CHAPTER IV.

ABOARD THE "MOONDARRA."

Dick woke early next morning, and looked about him for a minute in bewilderment before he remembered where he was. He had been dreaming that he was in the dormitory at school, with Bottles snoring as he always snored. It was confusing to awaken in a narrow berth, with white-panelled walls creaking close by. The ship gave a lurch, and a cabin trunk slid half-way out from under the opposite berth, then it went back again, and Dick experienced a peculiar feeling of hollowness and discomfort that he could not classify, coupled with a longing for fresh air.

He hopped up on his bed, and put his head out of the open porthole. The sun had just risen, and stared him in the face across a long stretch of heaving sea—grey, tossing water, broken here and there by a "white horse." A keen breeze swept by; Dick drank in a great draught of it, and from that moment forgot his first and last hint of seasickness. It was too cold to stay, however, he shivered in his thin pyjamas, and returned to the shelter of the blankets.

The snoring that had put Bottles into his dream was still going on, though louder than Bottles had ever snored. It came from the berth where Mr. Warner slumbered peacefully, lying on his back, with his mouth wide open. Dick reflected enviously upon the chance such an attitude on the part of Bottles would have afforded his interested dormitory mates, though Master Glass had grown cunning, even in repose, since his friends, having caught him snoring open-mouthed, had filled up the yawning cavity with soap shavings. The memory of the victim foaming at the mouth returned to Dick and he chuckled—at which, to his great alarm, Mr. Warner half roused and said, "Eh, Merle?" Dick refrained from answering, and in a moment there was audible evidence that the huge man, waked, like the lobster, too soon, was slumbering again.

The ship was beginning to stir. Overhead could be heard trampling feet and the swish of hoses, as the decks were washed down; in the passages the stewards were busy with mops and brooms. Dick decided that bed had lost its charms, and, seizing a towel, went forth in search of a bath. A friendly steward directed him to a bath-room, and gave him a big, rough towel, remarking that the smooth and shiny one he carried was merely for "moppin' yourself up in the cabin," and Dick presently revelled in a huge bath of hot sea-water, followed by an icy shower. He returned glowing, and finished dressing rapidly, while Mr. Warner slumbered and snored in calm majesty. Then he seized his cap and ran out.

In the alleyway he met his own cabin steward, who greeted him cheerfully.

"Morning, you're up early. Like a cup of tea?"

"Rather!" said Dick, who, like all bush boys, could drink tea a dozen times a day if opportunity occurred.

"Right-oh!" said the steward. "Wait half a jiff."

He dived into a passage, and presently reappeared with a cup of tea, the saucer encumbered with two biscuits and a banana.

"Like to take it up on deck?"

"Good idea," said Dick. "Thanks, awfully."

He mounted the stairs with care—the ship was lurching a little, and he was not used to carrying liquids on a floor that rose and fell beneath him. Still, he reached the deck, although with not more than a quarter of the tea in the saucer—he had prudently pocketed the biscuits and fruit—and sat down near the rail to dispose of his load. This over, he took back his cup and saucer and was greeted with astonished thanks by the bewildered steward, who said, "Lor', you could 'a lef' it up on deck—someone or other'd take it down."

Dick ran up again quickly. The wet decks glistened in the morning sunshine. A few of the men passengers were astir; some still in pyjamas; but no women were visible. An officer coming by gave him a pleasant greeting. He went forward until he could look down on the lower deck, where sailors were busy mopping, coiling ropes and generally stowing everything in ship-shape fashion for the uninterrupted run west. Land was still in sight on the starboard, a faint blue line

of hills; ahead and to port there was nothing but the grey waste of heaving sea, brightened to blue wherever the sunlight sparkled on it. The air was full of sea birds, circling round the ship on the alert for any scrap of food that might be thrown over. As he watched a flock of gulls pounced, screaming, on the contents of a refuse tin from the galley, and fought over the spoil. To port, half a mile away, a little steamer wallowed along, her smoke making a black trail in her wake.

It was too cold to stand still, so Dick joined the steady march round the deck, taken by the few passengers who were about. Turning a corner presently he almost ran into someone coming rapidly in the opposite direction—Merle Warner, with her shock of hair flying in the wind, and her hands digging deeply into the pockets of a rough blue serge overcoat.

"Can't you look where you're goin', silly," she demanded.

"Didn't see you," Dick responded cheerfully. He had had ideas of apologising, but they vanished hurriedly. They glared at each other.

"Is my daddy up?" she demanded.

"He wasn't when I left," Dick said. "Don't think he meant to be, either, by the way he was snoring."

She flamed into anger.

"You're cheeky. My daddy never snores!"

"Oh, doesn't he?" returned the bewildered Dick. "Well, you go down to the cabin and listen, that's all, if you don't believe me."

"I don't need to go—I know he doesn't," she said loftily. "I expect you were snoring yourself, and thought it was my daddy. I think he's jolly good to let you sleep in his cabin."

The amazing effrontery of this made Dick gasp.

"Well—you have a nerve!" he said. "His cabin, indeed. I like that. It's mine just as much."

"No it isn't—my daddy had it before you came."

"Well, we've paid for half, anyhow," said Dick, practically. "And even if your father is big, he can't sleep in two bunks."

"I don't care—you're just a horrid little nuisance, getting into a gentleman's cabin," declared Merle, endeavouring to tilt a rather snub nose.

The speech was meant to crush—as Dick remarked, later, to his mother, it might have been employed in describing a cockroach; but it had the wrong effect on Dick. He broke into a shout of laughter.

"I say," he cried, "it's as good as a play to hear you talk. You weren't behind the door when they served out bad tempers, anyhow, were you?"

It was ordinary schoolboy repartee, but it reduced Merle to impotent fury. She glared at him, speechless, her face

flushing from brow to chin; and just then a friendly, boisterous presence swung round the corner.

"Hullo, children." The doctor greeted them cheerily. "Out for an early walk, eh?" Something in their demeanour made him look more keenly. "Why, I believe you're quarrelling! Fie now, for shame."

"Not we!" declared Dick laughing.

"I am," Merle exploded. "He's just a beastly little boy."

She turned, wriggled from the hand the doctor dropped on her shoulder, and fled, leaving the two bewildered males staring after her.

"Now that's a firework in petticoats!" ejaculated the doctor. "What's annoyed her, Dick?"

"Blest if I know," Dick replied, grinning. "You wouldn't have said she was in a good temper from the start, and then she went off like a packet of crackers 'cause I said her father snored. And he does snore, too!"

"Snore—why, man alive, he's like an engine!" said the doctor. "He went to sleep in the smoking-room the other day, and before long he'd cleared the room. Snored 'em clean out. How could a man of his build fail to snore, may I ask?"

"Well, he doesn't fail to," said Dick laughing.

"That is so, certainly. But I suppose that square-faced small daughter of his thought you were insulting him. Never

mind, she'll get over it. Come for a walk. You ought to do a mile round the deck three times a day at least. Passengers who do that never develop livers!"

"I don't think I have one," Dick grinned.

"Continue in that belief, if you can, my son, and then you won't make any doctor's fortune. There's disinterested advice for you!" The doctor set off round the deck with long strides, so that to keep up gave Dick no little exertion. They pounded along, too fast for conversation. The deck was sprinkled with passengers now, and at every moment new heads appeared, coming up the companion ladders. There was no sign of Merle, but presently they encountered Mrs. Warner, with a five-year-old boy, and stopped to greet her.

"Good morning," said the doctor. "And how's my friend Bobby?"

"Vezy well," said Bobby, solemnly. He looked at Dick with interest. "Is you the new boy?"

"I expect so," Dick replied.

"Merle says you is a beast. Is you?"

"Never mind Merle," Mrs. Warner said hastily. "She's just an old stupid. Of course Dick isn't a beast, Bobby."

"I don't fink you looks like one," Bobby pronounced, solemnly, after inspecting him.

Dick grinned, somewhat confused. He was never a person of many words, except with his mother; it was somewhat disconcerting to be dissected in public.

"You come along, and I'll show you the gulls," he said, and Bobby tucked a fat little hand into his hard paw and trotted off ecstatically. They made great friends over the swooping gulls, and Dick learned that there were two little Warners younger than Bobby—"twinses," the small boy said. Being but three, they were considered too young to travel; they stayed in Perth with Grannie. "We's goin' back to find the twinses now," Bobby finished.

"Are you glad?"

"Wather! They's troublesome kids, but they's nice. I've got a pony at home."

"So have I," said Dick. "Is yours a good one?"

"He's lovely," Bobby said solemnly. "His name's Micky. Can yours jump?"

"Can he—what!" said Dick, with a sudden homesick vision of Tinker and the great galloping stretches at home, of the log fences over which they loved to fly. It was believed that Dick would take Tinker across anything over which the pony could lift his nose. "Yes, he can jump a bit." Speech fell upon him with that beloved subject, and he talked of Tinker, with his eyes dancing, while the little boy hung upon his words and spurred him whenever he paused with, "Tell me more about him."

"We lost him once when he was a two-year-old," Dick said. "Some ass of a swagman burned some of our boundary fence—didn't put his camp fire out properly—and a lot of our horses got out through the gap and into the ranges. We got most of 'em back, but Tinker and a little bay mare joined a mob of wild horses, and we never saw them for six months."

"Never any more?" Bobby's eyes were round with horror.

"Yes, we did. Father said he'd get Tinker back if it took him a year, and he took all the men out with him to hunt the mob down. He took me, too, on old Pivot. And we found the wild horses in a big gully in the ranges, and the men managed to get nearly round 'em before they smelt us. Then they went off like smoke. I was on top of a hill and I could see Tinker going with them. The men headed them back towards the plains, but they found a way up another gully, and I don't believe we'd ever have seen them again if it hadn't been for father."

"What did your faver do?"

"He just set sail across country—up the hill between the two gullies—you never saw such a hill to ride up—and down the other side. If it was bad going up, it was simply awful going down—all overgrown with trees and scrub, and great rocks sticking out of the ground. And father went down it at a gallop, as if he was on one of the plains. You never saw anything like it. The men said, 'Well the boss can break his neck if he likes—we're not going!'"

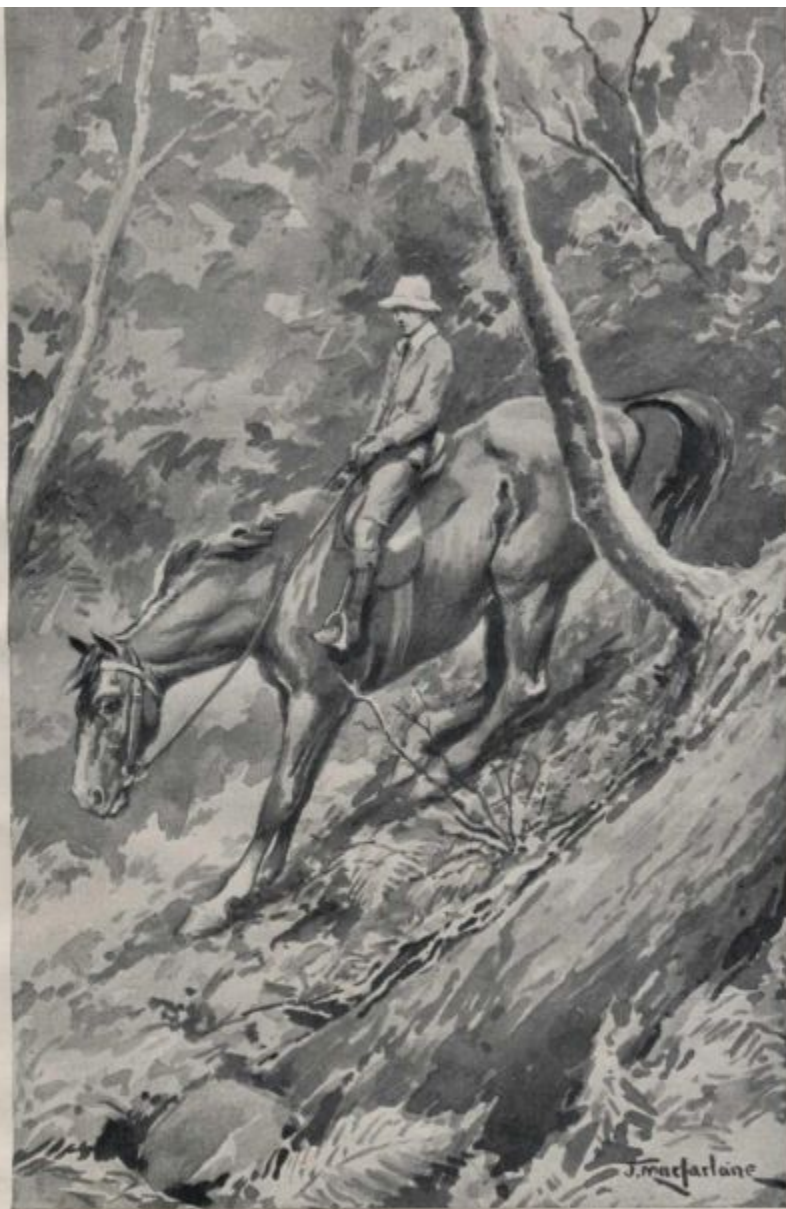
"Oo-oh!" said Bobby.

"The mob came up the gully at an awful bat—it was just a race between them and father. But he got down first, and he swung round down the gully, and, my aunt! you should have heard his stockwhip. It was just like rifle shots. He met the mob coming up in a narrow place, and they wouldn't face him—they pulled up and looked at him for a moment, and then they wheeled and went tearing back, and father after them. And of course the men were ready enough then—they kept 'em going down, never gave 'em a chance to wheel back into the ranges—got em out on the open plain and across through the gap into our run—and we yarded the whole blessed lot!"

"And Tinker, too?"

"Yes, Tinker too, of course. Father never would have come back if we hadn't got Tinker. My word, that was a gallop!" Dick's eyes were dancing. "I don't know how I got down the hill—old Pivot did it—he's the best stock horse you ever saw. He just did what he liked. I hadn't a say in it. You see, the only chance was to keep the mob going, never giving them a second to turn or break. All the men were using their stockwhips and yelling like fury, and father was riding out on the wing, near the big chestnut that was leading the mob—he knew that was the horse to watch. He did try to wheel too, but father was always there with his whip. I guess that chestnut found out who was boss that day!"





" ' I don't know how I got down the hill—old Pivot did it.' "

Dick Lester of Kurrajong

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"I don't know how I got down the hill—old Pivot did it."

"I say—your faver must be splendid."

"Of course he's splendid." Dick brushed away so superfluous an observation. "That chestnut's his best hack now. Father lassoed him in the yards, and broke him in himself, and you should have seen him buck. The men swore he'd always be an outlaw, but father said he wouldn't, and he beat him in the end. He wouldn't let another soul touch him, and though he goes quietly enough with father, no one else can ride him now. I guess father will have to break him in again now, 'cause he's been turned out for a year since father went to England."

"Was Tinker all right?" asked Bobby eagerly.

"Tinker just came up to me in the yards when they cut him out from the mob and put his old head down to my pocket, looking for an apple. He always did that from the time he was a foal."

Someone behind them—they were leaning over the rail, the ship forgotten—put a hand on Dick's shoulder, and the boy jumped round, his face flushing. Mr. Warner stood laughing at him—near him, Merle, her face a curious mixture of interest and sullenness.

"That was pretty exciting," said Mr. Warner.

Dick's colour deepened. He muttered incoherently something about "just telling the kid a yarn."

"You come to breakfast, Bobby," Merle said crossly. "Mother wants you." She seized the unwilling Bobby's hand

and led him away.

CHAPTER V.

HOW DICK PRACTISED HIGH DIVING.

Many people find the run across the Great Australian Bight a dull matter; and, indeed, if you should ever find yourself returning from the other side of the world, it is apt to be the longest part of all the long six weeks at sea. But to little Dick Lester, afloat for the first time, it was a voyage full of marvel and delight.

Dick did not give his masters at school an especially easy time; there was, I fear, nothing of the saintly little boy about him; nor did any of them ever have reason to suspect him of any especial cleverness. He was a very ordinary, healthy youngster, unencumbered by much brain power. But he did respectably at school and more than respectably at sports, because he was quite unable to take things easily. There was in his nature a streak of keenness that made the pursuit of the moment the most interesting thing possible. He flung himself heart and soul and generally with all his alert young body, too, into all he did. Naturally, his very keenness often made him make mistakes; but at least it saved him from dullness. "He's a provoking little animal," a tired form-master once said of him; "but, thank goodness, he's no slug!"

Being so designed, partly by Nature and partly by parents who had themselves that strong quality of keenness, it may readily be imagined that a ship opened up to Dick a storehouse of novelty and opportunity. He made his way into every permitted corner, and since he did not do it bumptiously, he found a welcome where a cheeky youngster would have been promptly ejected. The chief engineer succumbed to the longing face at the entrance to his mysterious domain, and let him spend hours in the engine room, where the roar and beat of the mighty machinery was the purest music in Dick's ears. He penetrated even to the stokehold, where, stripped of his outer garments, he toiled eagerly with a stoker's shovel, flinging great lumps of coal into the yawning mouths of the furnaces, where the flames leaped redly. There was something in feeling that, even for a moment, he was helping the onward rush of the ship that brought him nearer to Fremantle and his father. He stopped only when he could no longer hold the heavy shovel, and the fourth engineer, laughing, hustled him from the stifling stokehold into the not particularly fresh air of the engine room, which seemed to Dick an ozone bath by comparison.

The men made him free of their quarters, and spun him long yarns of the sea, more or less true, while they taught him intricacies of splicing and knotting that are generally hidden from the landsman. They made him highly technical in speech, so that he would have shuddered at calling the companion a staircase, or in misusing such ordinary expressions as "abaft the binnacle." He saw their dim and smellful sleeping accommodation, and came away with his small soul full of wrath that men so admirable should be herded in dens so uninviting. They took care of him in more

ways than one; he saw a sturdy apprentice roundly cuffed on the head for having made some remark in his presence of which the older men did not approve. Dick had not caught the remark—which was as well. It made him rather uncomfortable to see the boy cuffed, but having great respect for the cuffer, a boatswain of wonderful ability where knots were concerned, he took it for granted that everything was all right. He told them stories of station life in return for their sea yarns, and altogether spent some of his happiest hours in the fo'c'sle.

The baggage officer took him into the upper hold and held forth learnedly on the art of handling cargo; the cook showed him the galley, with its rows of shining copper pots and pans, its contrivances for washing and peeling potatoes by the hundred, and other strange devices—which so enthralled Dick that he obtained permission to come again, and to bring his mother, who was no less interested than he. He even penetrated into the mysterious regions where the stewards lurk when off duty, and had no small hand in the fun behind the scenes, when the stewards gave a concert in aid of the funds for seamen—a Christy minstrel entertainment, at which the performers appeared with faces so well and truly blacked that for the remainder of the voyage they had a murky look sadly out of keeping with their otherwise spic and span appearance. But the crowning point of Dick's voyage was when the Captain found him on deck very early one morning—so early that no other passengers were astir, and, first swearing him to secrecy, took him to his state-room under the bridge where they hob-nobbed over an early cup of tea, and afterwards showed him chronometers and sextants, chart-room and navigating room, and the forbidden glory of

the bridge itself; a condescension that left Dick gasping with delight and amazement. He did not know that the Captain had a little son in Perth; another boy with an eager face, for whose sake the great man had a soft corner in his heart for all small boys.

With so many distractions, it was natural that the days should fly quickly. But in addition there was the sea itself, which Dick loved; an Australian sea at its best, with bright sunshine, dancing blue water, and a long, easy swell that barely rocked the *Moondarra* as she steamed westward. They passed but few ships. A great English liner overtook them one morning, passing so close that greetings could be shouted from deck to deck; a P. and O. boat, her black and tan painting and her winking brasswork making her a heartsome sight. Beside her, the *Moondarra*, which had seemed to Dick enormous, became quite a small affair. The liner was outward bound, most of the people on her decks were Australians, off on the long trip to the old countries that every son and daughter of the Southern Cross longs to see some day. Once there passed another inter-state boat, like themselves; now and then a little tramp steamer, red with rust and generally grimy. And one day came the most beautiful sight of the sea, a great four-master, with every sail set, swinging by to Sydney for wheat. She came down towards them, until she was quite close—then, tacking suddenly, she swung away, the sunlight, as she went about, turning every sail to glittering silver. Dick had no breakfast that morning—he remained glued to the rail until the beautiful ship was only a tall shadow on the horizon.

At all odd moments during the day there were games; deck-tennis, bull-board, quoits, cricket. Dick was handicapped in being the only boy of his age on board, so that he found it hard to get a suitable partner, but some of the elder girls took him into their games, and on the whole he had a good time, though, to Dick, girls were curious beings, with mysterious and incomprehensible ways. He told his mother one day that he could not imagine why any fellow ever wanted to get married—"unless it was to you, of course," he added, gallantly. To which Mrs. Lester listened gravely, and did not even make the annoying rejoinder that some day he would think differently—to which species of remark grown-ups are so prone. Merle Warner remained the most incomprehensible female of all. Circumstances conspired to throw the two children together, for the elders quickly made friends; the Warners were pleasant, kindly people, and, as table companions, they were a good deal brought into association with Mrs. Lester. Mr. Warner and Dick had struck up a great friendship; the big man liked his small and unobtrusive cabin-mate and felt for him something of the protective feeling he would have experienced had it been his own little lad who lay asleep in the opposite bunk each night when he came to bed. They used to tramp the deck together in the early mornings and after dinner, and "yarn" of station matters, of the ways of bullocks—and most inexhaustible theme of all—of horses. Dick had been his father's constant companion until Mr. Lester sailed for England; he had learned a good deal of station affairs, and where his knowledge failed his love of the subject was enough to make him a good mate. He used to beg for stories of the Western life, that held so many differences from his own, and Mr. Warner was ready enough to tell of his early

days, with their struggle and adventure. Dick thought him a very wonderful man. He told his stories very simply; they were, indeed, very commonplace happenings to him, and on the rare occasions that he became enthusiastic it was in speaking of the part his wife had played. "You take it from me, son, women are pretty wonderful," he said. "She's plump and placid and comfortable enough now—but I've seen her holding off a crew of yelling blacks with only an old shot gun. She never was afraid—or if she was, she never showed it; and that's the most wonderful of all." Dick agreed, and thereafter looked at Mrs. Warner with eyes of awe, which considerably puzzled the cheery, motherly woman.

Possibly it was her father's friendship for Dick that made Merle so definitely unfriendly. She was devoted to him; her mother and Bobby counted for something to her, but her father ranked before the whole world. It hit her hard to see him make a companion of this new boy. She was a child of a queer, silent nature—her own worst enemy, for she struggled against her better impulses. Something in her made her rude, unfriendly, unforgiving. So much was evident, and led to punishments and unpopularity. What was not so apparent was that the queer streak made her very unhappy as well. "I know jolly well I'm a pig," she had said once to her father, "only I don't seem to be able to be anything but a pig. Why do people get born like that?" To which Mr. Warner, not understanding in the least, had replied, laughing, that the sooner she left off being a pig the better for everyone. Merle knew that very well. But the bad fairy who had dealt her the wrong kind of temper at her christening was as yet too strong for her.

She could not make friends freely; not like Bobby, whom she sometimes almost hated for the ease with which he fell in love with everyone. Everyone liked Bobby, too. He was so merry, so full of quaint chatter, so ready to make the best of the world. Their trip to Sydney had been as complete joy to Bobby as it had meant misery to Merle. They had stayed with a big family of boy cousins; town boys, knowing nothing of the country that Merle loved, and wildly keen on swimming, yachting and school sports—all of them sealed books to Merle. Her shyness and sullenness had meant rare fun to them, and they had teased her with all the thoroughness of public school boys. She hated them all, with an intensity that almost frightened her; for their sake she was ready to hate all boys, and Dick was merely another member of the abhorred species. That her father should take to him instantly was almost more than she could bear.

Dick was civil to her, in his off-hand boy fashion. He was too busy and too happy to worry about a cross-grained little girl. If she had cared to be friendly he would have met her half-way, but as she showed him very definitely that she did not want him, he was quite willing to let her alone. It was sometimes a little awkward to be paired off with her—to have an elder say cheerfully, "Run away, Merle, and play with Dick." A ship, however, is a place of many corners, and after rounding the nearest it was an easy matter to go off in different directions. Merle would say, "I'm not comin' with you!" Dick would reply, "Right oh!" and that would end the matter.

"You know," Mrs. Lester said to Dick—they were talking in her cabin one evening—"I'm really sorry for that little girl.

She gives herself such a bad time. And if she would only let herself be nice, she would be quite nice."

"You always think people are nice, mother-est," said Dick. He was lying on the spare bunk, his hands crossed under his head, glad to keep still after a hard set of tennis. "But why shouldn't she behave decently? No one does anything to annoy the poor thing!"

"N-no." Mrs. Lester hesitated; she did not choose to hint to Dick that Merle might be jealous. "I think she feels herself out in the cold—Bobby is so attractive, and everyone likes him, and of course she is different."

"She's a silly ass, then," said Dick, unexpectedly. "Nothing's wrong with her looks, is there, if only she didn't seem so jolly cross?"

"Why, no—nothing, of course," Mrs. Lester answered. A vision of Merle's face, square and defiant, came to her. "Only, of course, Bobby is such a friendly little man. I wish she would chum up with you, Dick. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Well, a fellow doesn't always want a girl at his heels," Dick said. "She's only a kid, too"—with the condescension that thirteen feels for eleven. "But, of course, she could come along if she liked—if you want her to, mother." He grinned all over his sunburnt face. "But what's the good of talking?—a team of bullocks wouldn't bring her!"

And that seemed so far beyond argument that Mrs. Lester held her peace.

Nevertheless, despite Merle's attitude, the friendship between the Warners and the Lesters flourished. Bobby frankly adored Dick, and as Dick didn't mind admitting that he "liked small kids," Bobby trotted at his heels and, if he could not actually be with him, remained glued to the spot if he could watch him playing games. Mrs. Warner, relieved from a good deal of attendance on her small son, found Mrs. Lester a congenial spirit; the Lester deck-chairs were pitched near the Warner encampment, in a sheltered angle of the deck, and they grew to know each other with the swiftness of board-ship friendships—a week at sea having the curious faculty of making perfect strangers better acquaintances than if they had lived in the same township for a year. Mr. Warner hovered about like a large guardian angel, glad to see his wife enjoying the most restful portion of her trip. Even Merle fell a little under the spell of Mrs. Lester's charm. She was so used to people who found fault with her that it was almost amazing to know someone who never seemed to notice bad temper or black looks. Mrs. Lester's attitude was that no one—not even Merle—could possibly mean to be rude or unpleasant. It somehow made Merle feel that rudeness and unpleasantness were cheap and nasty.

Their fellow passengers were, on the whole, a pleasant set. Miss Simpson and the "dear bishop's" wife were apt to be a little overpowering; the bishop himself made elephantine efforts at being jolly, because of a peculiar belief that only by so doing could he succeed in understanding Australians, and thereby puzzled very much the Australians themselves, who

liked him far better on the rare occasions when he forgot to be playful and was just plain bishop. There was enough musical talent on board to provide excellent concerts each evening, after which energetic people danced on the deck until an unfeeling quarter-master came along relentlessly to extinguish the lights. The captain and his officers made friends with everyone and kept things moving with the quiet tact that seems part of the training of a passenger boat's officers—and answered questions innumerable concerning the ways of the *Moondarra* and the wonders of the deep, such questions being an unailing part of the routine of each voyage. So the quiet days passed swiftly enough, too swiftly for Dick, who, but that Fremantle meant his father, would willingly have had it twice as far away.

He came on deck one afternoon, after an hour spent in the fo'c'sle; it was their last day at sea, and he had been saying good-bye to his friend the boatswain, who had presented him with a marvellous trophy—a full-rigged ship, built in the most astounding fashion, inside a bottle. Dick had inspected this curiosity with bewildered awe, never dreaming that it might actually become his own; and when the boatswain gave it to him as a farewell gift he was speechless with gratitude. He carried it carefully to his cabin, and stowed it away. Then he ran up in search of his mother.

He came out on the starboard side, where a keen wind whistled that had driven nearly everyone away in search of shelter on the port deck. The only people in view were Bobby Warner and Miss Simpson; and it was evident that Bobby was very naughty. He was perched on the top of the rail, holding lightly to a stanchion, his handsome little face

glowing with delighted mischief. Miss Simpson—who had the faculty of arousing all that was worst in him—was lecturing him severely.

"Are you not ashamed, Bobby? Come down at once, you naughty little boy!"

"S'an't," said Bobby calmly.

"Come down, or I shall bring your father to whip you."

"He won't," said Bobby, unmoved. "He never does."

"So I should think," said Miss Simpson, with bitterness. "It is high time he began. Come down immediately."

"You go 'way, ole fing," Bobby said, unmoved. "Don't like you."

"No one likes naughty boys like you," returned the lady, severely, "Will you come down, or must I pull you down?"

"Don't 'oo touch me," said Bobby, meeting her eyes fearlessly, as she stood angry and irresolute. "Dis is my pony—I'm goin' to ride it."

He threw one leg over the rail as he spoke, balancing his slender body easily. Miss Simpson uttered a muffled shriek, and sprang to hold him, gripping at his knee.

"Oo get away!" Bobby threatened. He twisted himself from her grasp, bending outwards, just as Dick came upon the scene. Dick gave a low whistle.

"Come down out of that, Bob, you silly ass!"

Bobby started at the voice. Simultaneously the ship rolled, and then a shriek from Miss Simpson rent the air and she clutched at him unavailingly as he lost his balance and fell. The list of the ship sent him clear of her, down to the lazy green swell, flecked with foam from the bow. He gave one cry—a frightened baby's scream for help. The water choked it almost unheard.

Dick did not hesitate. He reflected afterwards with shame that he did not even shout, "Man overboard!" as do all well-conducted rescuers; instead he gave an incoherent cry of, "Coming, old chap!" as he swung himself up by the stanchion and dived outwards. It did not seem far—he had often dived from the top of the gallery round the swimming baths near his school. What he was not prepared for was the icy coldness of the water. It caught his breath—he came up blinded and gasping, unable for a second to see anything. Then, just as despair seized him, he caught sight of a white jersey a few yards away on the crest of a wave, and flung himself through the water towards it. His fingers closed on it, and the wave swallowed them both.

They came up again after what seemed an eternity. Dick's head was bursting, and his whole body numb. Mechanically his training in life-saving came back to him, and he turned on his back, still gripping Bobby, from whose little body the breath had been knocked so effectually by the fall that he was merely a log in the water, unable to struggle. It was as well for Dick, for there was no fight left in him. The icy water chilled him, body and soul; he could only keep afloat,

with his fingers twisted into Bobby's jersey. His mother's face seemed to float before his tired eyes.

Back on the *Moondarra* Miss Simpson's despairing shrieks had been drowned by the long hoot of the steamer's siren. The officer on duty on the bridge had seen Dick's dive; almost before he had struck the water the steamer's engines were reversed, life-belts had gone skimming overboard, and a boat's crew was working desperately at the davits swinging the boat outboard. Quicker still two others had flung themselves after the boys—Dick's friend, the boatswain, and the thin, silent man who sat at their table. It was he who reached them first; his voice came to Dick as though muffled in wool, like the voice of a person very far away.

"Keep still, old chap; I'll take the kid."

Bobby's weight was lifted, but Dick could not detach his clutching fingers from his jersey. He saw, as in a mist, a face near him in the water, but the cruel cold held him, choked him, gripped his very heart. He moved his free hand feebly, resisting, as he knew he must, an overpowering instinct to grasp at the new-comer. Another voice came, even further away.

"I can manage this one," it said. There was comfort in that, since Dick knew he could not manage anything more. The waves seemed to be swinging him in a great cold bed—up and down, up and down. A hand was under his head, more restful than the softest pillow he had ever known; he let himself sink back with a little sigh, just as the blue sky above him flickered suddenly and turned black. Close, very close,

was the sound of oars working furiously in rowlocks, but he did not hear them.

The *Moondarra* was turning in a great circle, her railing black with people. Women were clustering round the two mothers, who stood silently watching the sea that was fighting out beyond for the little lives; and there were men holding back Mr. Warner, who could swim scarcely at all, but had been in the very act of flinging himself over the rail when an officer caught him. "If Flanagin and the other fellow can't get them, no one can," the crisp voice said. "You'll only complicate matters if you go in." And after that Bobby's father stood still, gripping at the rail, not feeling the hands that held him mechanically.

The long moments dragged themselves away—how long they seemed, first from the time that the two little heads had been a tiny speck together on the sea, and then until the other heads and the long, clean overarm strokes had forged through the water towards them! Then, longest of all came the terse waiting while the boat, lowered with swift dexterity, reached the water—the waiting oars ready to pull the instant she touched—the straining muscles flinging themselves into each stroke that sent her flying across the long green swells. A sudden, broken cheer came from the ship, mingled with a woman's sobbing cry.

"Oh, they have them, they have them!"

The two mothers, silent yet, caught at each other's hands. Beyond, strong arms were lifting the boys together into the boat; then, strain their eyes as they might, they could see

nothing, for two sailors were working over the little figures, wrapping them in rugs; they had to loosen Dick's fingers by force from Bobby's jersey. Others were hauling the rescuers on board, the boat turning even as they were pulled in; and then she came racing back to the ship. On the bridge the captain glanced at his watch, with a flash of professional pride.

"Seven minutes from the time of the alarm—not bad going!" he said.

The cheering broke out again as the boat swung alongside, and then died out uncertainly. Was it a time to cheer? The little muffled figures lay still and stiff, white faces upturned to the towering ship. Mr. Warner's heart seemed to stand still as the doctor suddenly tapped him on the shoulder.

"Bring your wife and Mrs. Lester to the hospital," he said. "I have everything ready."

A hush seemed to fall upon the ship, long after the boat had been hauled slowly upwards, and waiting arms had received the motionless bundles and borne them swiftly to the hospital. The steady beat of the re-awakened engines bore the *Moondarra* westward; but on the decks passengers stood about in little knots, with their eyes ever wandering to the doorway behind which the dripping procession had disappeared. The captain came out once, shaking his head at the eager inquiries.

"Both unconscious," he said. "I'm afraid——" and stopped.

There was a sick hush on the decks as the Bishop—no longer playful—came forward, holding up his hand for silence.

"If you will come with me to the saloon," he said, "we can do our best for the children. They need our prayers."

The people flocked after him—card-playing men and half-grown girls, and women who sobbed as they went. There were sobs round the saloon as the Bishop prayed—simple, manly words that asked for help and mercy. He finished, and there was silence, and then a cheer from the deck and a steward burst in.

"Doctor says they're all right!"

In the sick bay, Mrs. Warner held Bobby to her like a baby—a bundle of hot blankets, in which his sleeping face nestled peacefully. Dick lay in a cot, also a mound of blankets. He opened his eyes and a smile flickered weakly on his lips as he saw his mother's face.

"Mother-est!" he whispered.

She put her head down beside him, trembling—one arm across him, holding him to her. He gave a half sigh of utter contentment, nestling to her, as he fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

WESTRALIA.

It was many hours later that Dick woke up, at an unfamiliar noise, feeling stiff and tired and extremely puzzled as to where he was. Bobby, who had awakened him with a dismal little howl, was sitting up in his cot. The two mothers had been dragged away to dinner by the doctor, who had brutally remarked that the boys would sleep just as well if they didn't sit and stare at them, with other wise observations as to the necessity of over-strained people taking nourishment. The steward, who had been left on guard at the hospital, was gossiping placidly outside on the deck.

Dick regarded Bobby sleepily.

"Hullo, kid," he said. "Don't howl."

"Isn't howlin'," returned Bobby, untruthfully. "Wants my muvver." His lips quivered. "I tumbled into the water," he said, his blue eyes suddenly misty.

"So you did," said Dick, memory coming back to him. "Weren't you an ass? Never mind, you got out all right."

"It wasn't nice," said Bobby, miserably. The eyes brimmed over. "Don't like this funny place. Want to come an' 'nuggle on your bed."

"Come on, then," Dick said.

Bobby made an effort to clamber out, but relapsed into his blankets.

"My legs is all funny and horrid," he said. "They—they won't work." Tears were in his voice. "Wants to 'nuggle wiv you—wants my muvver!"

"Well, you stay there—I'll come," Dick said, hurriedly.

He climbed out, realising fully the moment he moved Bobby's accusation against his legs. His own felt as though they belonged to someone entirely different—Mr. Warner for choice, for they felt enormous. He found himself glad to hold on to the cot after he was on the floor, and his progress across to Bobby was slow and painful.

"What's the matter?" Bobby asked. "Is your legs funny, too?"

"Jolly funny," Dick returned. He climbed in beside the tearful Bobby, who clung to him vehemently—and somehow Dick was not sorry for the warm, comforting touch. He was desperately stiff and weary; he, also, wanted his mother every bit as much as the small boy who snuggled against him. He put his arm round him.

"Just you go to sleep, old chap," he said—and in a moment followed his own advice.

"Ain't never stirred, mum," was the calm assurance of the steward at the door, ten minutes later, when the anxious mothers came hurrying back from dinner. "I been sittin' in there near 'em—they——"

His jaw dropped and the mothers gave a stifled exclamation at sight of the two heads on Bobby's pillow—both boys fast asleep. The steward, when taken outside for purposes of discussion, found difficulty in inventing a suitable explanation, cut short by the arrival of the doctor, who remarked that he would attend to him later, and went to inspect the patients.

"Well, they're all right, anyhow," he said. "But I'd like to know how young Dick felt on his journey across."

It was a journey of which Dick had no recollection when he woke for the second time, four hours later; and he was sufficiently astonished at finding Bobby beside him. The mothers were close by; at Dick's first movement Mrs. Lester came swiftly to the side of the cot. Presently, just as Bobby too awoke, came the doctor; and close on his heels, the repentant steward, bearing hot soup, which seemed to the boys the most heavenly thing they had ever tasted. They ate it, and asked for more, and would have made a gallant effort at that, too, had not sleep overcome them again. Bobby tumbled asleep almost over his bowl, and his father, coming in, carried him off to his mother's cabin; and presently, just as Dick was settling to a dream, the big man was back, and this time it was Dick whom he picked up like a baby and carried down the long alleyways; not to their own cabin, but to the spare bunk in Mrs. Lester's, which had been made ready for Dick. She was waiting for him, ready to tuck him up. It was comforting to think she would be near him. He was very sleepy—too sleepy to do more than wonder when, as he put him down, Bobby's father said, huskily, "God bless you, old

chap," and brushed his forehead with his lips—and then went hurriedly out.

It was all like a dream when Dick woke next day, still a little stiff, but otherwise feeling his usual self. Mrs. Lester was asleep, which was not unnatural, seeing that she had been up at ten-minute intervals throughout the night, to bend over him and make sure that he was still breathing. He got up softly, and slipped out for his bath; somewhat embarrassed, on his return, by the necessity for hunting out fresh clothing in his own cabin—though he had long ceased to have any fear of waking Mr. Warner, which, indeed, was a task beyond the average small boy. He managed to get dressed at last, and went up on deck.

A steward gave him tea, and asked feelingly "how he was keeping?" A quarter-master came over to him and inquired, "All right, this morning, after your swim?" The third officer, very busy with landing preparations, tossed him a greeting across the deck, and asked if he thought the water would be nice for bathing. Dick began to feel rather hot, and moved away to another part of the deck, where there might be people who had failed to notice yesterday's adventure. There, however, he met the captain, who patted him on the head, and said, "Good kid; where did you pick up high diving?" and just after he had escaped from this encounter, who should come along, stately and tall, but the Bishop's wife, who made a kind of run at him, grasped his hands, and said, "My child, how can we express our feelings of gratitude and admiration?" which so terrified Dick that he broke away without ceremony, and, muttering something incoherent, fled as he would never have fled from the most infuriated

bullock. He went round a deck house at a run, and cannoned into Merle Warner, who scowled and said, exactly as she had said on the first morning at sea, "Can't you look where you're going, silly?"

Dick burst out laughing.

"I wish you'd say that again," he said.

"Why?" demanded Merle, blankly.

"Cause it sounded quite decent. Everybody else on this blessed ship is talking such bosh!"

"What sort of bosh?"

Dick turned red.

"Oh, nothing," he said. There was a moment's pause, and then Merle flushed in her turn.

"I say—thanks for goin' in after Bobby," she said awkwardly.

Dick gave a kind of howl of disgust.

"Oh, you, too!" he cried. "I say, do chuck it. If you knew how sick I am of hearing about it!"

"Oh, all right," said Merle, plainly comprehending this point of view, and relieved to find that no more politeness was expected of her. Somewhat to her surprise, however, she found herself making further conversation:

"You glad we're gettin' in to-day?"

"Oh, rather!" Dick's face suddenly lit up. "I like the ship—but I'm awfully keen to see father."

"Whose father?"

"Mine, of course. He's coming out from England—we're going to meet him at Fremantle."

"Oh, I didn't know," Merle said. "Has he been long away?"

"Over a year," Dick said. "Seems about ten."

"A year!" Merle's eyes grew round. Life without a father seemed an impossible thing.

"M," Dick nodded. "It's been jolly nice to be with your father on this ship. A fellow misses his father a bit, I can tell you."

"Spect you do," Merle said. "When's yours coming?"

"To-morrow, some time, his boat gets in," Dick answered. "He's on the *Ohio*." His eyes were dancing; somehow, as Merle met their glance, she smiled in spite of herself. "I guess mother and I will be on the old pier pretty early."

There was a moment's pause, while they looked at each other like two awkward young puppies.

"I better go an' see if mother wants me," Merle said at length.

"Right oh!" Dick answered with alacrity.

They parted with a glance that, at any rate, was semi-friendly. Merle went away with a feeling that she had been, as usual, a pig. She had been grudging her father, for a few days, to a boy who had not seen his own father for over a year—twelve whole months! It was a bit low down. And on top of this, he must go into the sea after Bobby, which made her feel more of a pig than ever, especially as he did not seem inclined to make a fuss about it. Merle was accustomed to put an end to such uncomfortable thoughts by shrugging her shoulders and reflecting that, after all, no one expected her to be anything but a pig, so what did it matter? But this time she found herself unexpectedly troubled about it.

Dick made his way swiftly to the companion, in the vain hope of eluding his fellow-passengers. But the ship was getting up for breakfast—everyone was coming on deck, or going along the alleyways in search of baths, and he met a string of inquiries, congratulations and compliments that reduced him to the lowest pitch of shy discomfort. The Bishop, extraordinarily human in pyjamas and a short dressing-gown, patted him on the back and said, "Feel all right, old man?" which was easier to bear than most of the greetings. But the flappers fairly oozed over him, the men pumped his hand, while he tried vainly to edge past them, and Miss Simpson, holding him tightly by the arm, made him a speech, in which Dick vaguely recognised quotations from the prayer book. He escaped, scarlet cheeked, and ran with his head down, darting round the corner towards his own cabin, and there ran into Mrs. Warner, who said nothing at all, but only looked at him piteously, with her mouth

trembling, just as Bobby's had trembled the night before, and then put out her hands to him suddenly and kissed him. Somehow, to his own astonishment, Dick did not mind it at all. He found himself patting her very hard, and saying, "Never you mind, he's all right." He felt so terribly sorry for her that he forgot all about himself, and they went to breakfast with Mrs. Lester, while Mr. Warner remained with Bobby, whose legs were still refusing duty, though his appetite was unimpaired.

Land was in sight—the coast of Western Australia, and there was much bustle of packing and preparing to leave the ship.

"It isn't a very interesting-looking coast," Mrs. Warner said, looking at the low line of sandy hills. "But I remember what it meant to me when I came back from two years in England when I was nineteen. I had been desperately home sick all those two years, and when at last the homeward voyage was nearly over it almost seemed to kill me with joy. I couldn't sleep the night before, and I got up before dawn to see the land—it was like heaven, as it came slowly out of the mist. West Australia!"

"But you weren't a 'sand groper' yourself?" said the doctor.

"Oh no; I was a Sydneysider. But you don't worry about inter-state differences when you're coming home—Australia is all that matters."

"I wonder if father's thinking that," Dick said.

"Most certainly—as you're going to meet him at Fremantle!" said the doctor, laughing. "Otherwise I fancy he'd be stretching out his neck towards Port Phillip Bay, and regarding anything between as an annoying interlude."

"Well—that may be," admitted Mrs. Lester demurely. "Come on, Dickie, we must finish our packing."

The *Moondarra* slipped quietly into Fremantle Harbour while they were still in their cabins; Dick's first intimation of the fact being a shadow across the port-hole as a yacht's tall masts slipped by, followed by the blackened smoke stack of a collier. He jumped up on his bunk to peer out. The land was very close; a confused jumble of uninteresting red-brick houses met his eyes, and a mass of shipping of all sorts and sizes. The western sea gate of Australia is busy, but unbeautiful. Dick remarked, "H'm—about up to Port Melbourne!" and got down again to finish locking a suitcase.

"Can I help you, Dick? We're nearly in."

"Just finished, mother, thanks. Did the steward strap up your trunks?"

"He's doing them now. Dick, I have been talking to Mr. Warner; they are going to an hotel in Perth, and he suggests that we should go there too; it is the best, he says."

"Right oh, mother. And where's Perth?"

"What do I send you to school for?" demanded Mrs. Lester laughing.

"Oh, I know it's on the Swan," said Dick, grinning in his turn. "But is it far?"

"Only a few miles. Mr. Warner advises us to go up by motor."

"That would be jolly!" Dick exclaimed. "I say, mother—can we go to the Orient office and ask about father's boat?"

"We'll go there at once," said Mrs. Lester. "Dick, are you sure you feel all right?"

"Right as pie," Dick answered, unpoetically. "Don't you worry about me, old mother." He got up, putting his arm into hers. "Come on deck and see new things."

There was not much new, save that anything is a change to eyes that for several days have seen nothing but sea and sky. The *Moondarra* was slowly warping into the wharf, amidst a mass of shipping. A knot of interested people stood watching her come, some of them exchanging signals with her passengers; but the centre of attraction, ashore and afloat, was the big P. and O. liner that had passed them in the Bight. She was on the point of sailing, her gangways already drawn up; and a big crowd was watching her go. Somewhere a band was playing "Auld Lang Syne"; the sweet notes came dreamily across the water. Slowly she drew out from the pier. There were confused sounds—shouts of farewell, cheering, long coo-ees shrilling a last Australian call. Her wash set the *Moondarra* rocking.

"Isn't she splendid!" Dick breathed.

She was very splendid, as she moved slowly out past the breakwater, fronting the wide sweep of western seas that tossed between her and the old world whither she was bound. A German submarine was to send her to the bottom years later—without warning, leaving her freight of helpless souls to the mercy of an angry sea. But the veil of the future was drawn yet: stately and secure, the great ship went out, scarcely rocking to the great ocean swells that rolled in to meet her. The cheering and the long cries of farewell died away.

Simultaneously the gangway of the *Moondarra* went down, and people poured on board, friends meeting passengers, hotel and motor touts, carriers, shipping agents. Mr. Warner's deep voice boomed behind the Lesters.

"Been looking for you," he said. "Not in a hurry, are you? It's pleasanter to wait until the first rush has gone. Then I can get you a good car from an hotel if you like."

Mrs. Lester thanked him, and they stood chatting until Merle arrived to say that Bobby was ready. His father disappeared hastily, presently returning, carrying his small son, whose extremely cheerful face showed only amusement at being unable to walk. Mrs. Warner followed. They deposited Bobby in a deck-chair, and smiled down at him.

"How are the legs now, Bobby?" Mrs. Lester

"They's nearly all right, only they wobbles," said Bobby. "Doctor says they'll stop wobbling to-morrow." He grinned delightedly. "I is just awful funny when I tries to walk!"

"He is too," echoed his father, laughing. "He'd make his fortune in a circus. Bobby, man, do you see we're nearly home?"

"M," nodded Bobby. "Where's the twinses?"

"Oh, we'll get the twinses soon—Grannie has them."

"And when do we go to own-truly home?"

"In a few days. Will you be glad, old son?"

"Wather!" said Bobby. "Micky's there!"

"And when he gets on Micky's back nothing else in the world matters," said his mother, with a half sigh. "I sometimes wonder if either of the twinses will be domesticated—there's no sign of my two eldest being anything but stock riders!"

The crowd on the ship had almost cleared away, swallowed up by motors and cabs, and the business of unloading cargo was beginning, with its rattle of cranes and winches.

"Well there'll soon be too much noise here to be pleasant," said Mr. Warner. "Are you ready, Mrs. Lester? Shall I go after cars?"

"Quite ready—my luggage is all on deck," she told him.

"Then, come on, Dick, and we'll go car hunting."

They went together down the gangway—there was a new stab of the old jealous pain in Merle's heart as she watched them go. Mrs. Lester called her to her side with a question about Fremantle—her keen eyes had noticed the shadow on the little girl's face.

"I am shockingly ignorant of this part of the world," she said, laughing. "You are an old inhabitant, so you must tell me all about it"; and she kept her near, making her talk, until Merle had forgotten her troubles.

Dick followed Mr. Lester along the wharf, and up a wide and dusty street, until they came to one rather wider and a little less dusty, where trams rattled and business seemed brisk. There were big shops and fine buildings, and people moved about as though they had no time to dawdle. There is always a kind of feverish activity about a city that lives by shipping. Other places may doze sleepily between trains, waking now and then to send off or receive mails, but a seaport knows no time-table, and is busy all the time, as the big ships come and go, and the blue-clad sailors hurry along its streets. So Perth lies dreamily on the borders of its wide river, and, but a few miles off, Fremantle, like a busy watchdog, never seems to rest.

They found a garage that readily supplied Mr. Warner with two cars, in one of which they were soon back at the *Moondarra*, where they found the others waiting on the wharf. Carriers had taken their heavier luggage; lighter effects were quickly packed in, and presently they were gliding along a well-kept road, where sparse gum trees fringed bungalow houses set in gardens flaming with many

unfamiliar flowers. The motors made short work of the distance; soon they could see the buildings of Perth, and then a gleam of silver, and a turn in the road brought them out beside the Swan, a wide, shining expanse, dotted with the white sails of many little yachts. Dick uttered a delighted whistle.

"I say! Did you know it was such a big river, mother?"

"No, I didn't," admitted his mother. "Why it is almost a lake! What an ideal place for yachting!"

Perth seemed to think so, for the boats were legion; fairy-like yachts, little rowing skiffs, motor-boats chugging across the rippled surface, and even canoes, their broad paddles flashing in the sunlight as they dipped and fell. Boat-houses were thick along the banks: here and there the big buildings of yachting clubs, with wide verandahs and balconies overhanging the water. All the river was full of the stir of moving boats.

"I think this is a jolly place," Dick pronounced, solemnly.

The car turned from the river and ran along a wide, tree-fringed road, and in a moment they were in the heart of Perth itself, winding in and out of the traffic until they stopped before a big hotel. Mr. Warner was before them. Their rooms were already engaged, and a boy in buttons took them up and brought their luggage. Dick was kneeling on the floor in his mother's room unstrapping her dressing-case, when a knock came to the door. Mrs. Lester opened it.

Mr. Warner stood there, his enormous bulk seeming to fill the corridor.

"I ran out to the Orient office, it's no distance from here," he said, beaming at them. "The *Ohio* comes in at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. And there's a wireless for you!"

He held out a thin brown envelope. Then he was gone, and the door shut, and Mrs. Lester was tearing at the envelope with fingers that shook.

"All well. Love to you both."

"Dickie!" she said, catching at the boy; "Dickie." They clung together for a moment, and the flimsy paper that was like a dear voice speaking after twelve months of silence fluttered to the ground between them.

CHAPTER VII.

THE "OHIO" COMES IN.

Dick Lester and his mother never had any very clear idea of how they passed that day in Perth. Lunch filled up an hour; then they took a hansom and drove to the beautiful public gardens, and wandered about them, and at intervals took out their precious wireless and read it again, as if expecting to find some new remark tucked in among its six

brief words. In the evening Mr. Warner took them to a theatre—Mrs. Warner declining to be again separated from the twins. Presumably it was a good play, for Mr. Warner and Merle seemed to enjoy it, but neither Mrs. Lester nor Dick could have told you what it was about. The wireless also went to the theatre, in Dick's pocket. He had asked his mother if he might keep it.

"Rather a curio, when you've never seen a wireless before, you see," he explained, in an elaborately off-hand manner. Mrs. Lester had nodded comprehendingly, a little sad at heart, for she would certainly have liked to keep it herself. Dick went to bed, declaring that he could not sleep; his eyes so bright that Mrs. Lester was half afraid that his belief was true, but when, half an hour later, she peeped into his room he was lying peacefully with his head on his arm, already far away in the land of dreams. She sat down in a chair near his open window, feeling the need of companionship, if only that of a sleeping little son. It was moonlight; from the high window she could catch a glimpse of the river, a streak of silver. Beyond it her mind flashed out to sea, where a great ship ploughed landwards, and on its deck a man paced up and down, gripping his pipe in his teeth, and striving with his mind to bridge the few miles that yet lay between him and his dear ones. Possibly he succeeded, for thoughts often fly further than we know. After an hour Mrs. Lester's wakefulness left her, and she stole to bed, drowsy and content.

Breakfast in the morning was a scramble, for they woke late, and were both quite unable to think of anything so ordinary as food. Dick put salt into his tea and sugar on his

fish, and would probably have consumed both without noticing anything amiss had not the waiter intervened in horror. Mr. Warner ordered a car for them, and very soon they were flying down the road, that seemed oddly familiar. It was early; but then, as Dick said, the *Ohio* might be early too. Dick was not acquainted with the clock-work methods of mail steamers. He dashed breathlessly on to the wharf at Fremantle to ask if the *Ohio* were in, and was met with bored surprise by a man in a blue jersey, who said, "The *Ohio*? But she don't come in till ten"—much as a railway porter might answer if you demanded the Sydney express an hour too soon. Dick returned ruefully to the car.

"No sign of her, mother. It really will be ten o'clock."

"I was afraid so," said his mother, laughing, while the chauffeur grinned broadly. "Jump in and we'll go for a spin while we wait."

Dick would have preferred to stay on the wharf, straining his eyes to the horizon. But he obeyed, and they went careering over strange roads that neither saw, though the sense of swift motion helped them in a measure. Still, it was a relief when at length the car turned, and again they spun towards the pier. The chauffeur had judged his time well; the wharf was crowded now, and, just beyond the breakwater, a great ship loomed through a little drifting mist.

"That's her," said the chauffeur, half-turning. "Steady—it'll take her a quarter of an hour to get aside yet." This to Dick, who was wrestling with a stiff door-handle before the car could stop.

They edged through the throng on the pier to where a dock-hand told them the mail steamer's gangway would come down. She was close in now, they could see sailors on board getting the great gangway ready. The passengers were crowding along every yard of the deck railing; it was impossible to pick out one face amidst the mass, no matter how hard they might strain their eyes. Everywhere, people were waving to their friends ashore, shouting, coo-eeing; Dick coo-ee'd too, but with a kind of helpless irritation at being unable to see the only face that mattered. The minutes dragged on, while the ship edged her way in, yard by yard; and still they scanned her decks in vain.

"Oh, mother, isn't it awful?" Dick's voice had a quiver in it. "Do you think he's really there?"

"Of course he's there, son." The voice was little more than a whisper.

Suddenly, and together, they saw him. The crowd was densest on the deck near the gangway, but he must have taken up his position very early, for he was in front of everyone, talking to the officer in charge of the landing operations. He towered over the other people; six foot three of lean, muscular activity, with a clean-shaven face, bronzed and keen. Dick heard his mother catch her breath, and he slipped his hand through her arm. Then, as if their upward gaze drew him, John Lester turned and looked down, straight into their eyes. His cap was pulled low on his brow, but they saw the sudden light that sprang into his face—the quick smile that was a caress, singling them out from the crowd. He took off his cap with a swift movement, and stood

bareheaded, his eyes never moving from his wife and son. So they stood, until, with a rattle, the gangway came down—and while it still shook from the impact, John Lester ran down it lightly, the first man to leave the *Ohio*. He put an arm round them both, hustling them gently towards the gangway.

"Come up," he said, a little breathlessly. "I've squared the man on top."

The officer greeted them with a smile as they mounted—it was against rules, but John Lester had a way of getting what he wanted. He edged a way for them through the crowding passengers with courteous little apologies; somehow they found themselves in the clear space behind the throng, hurrying along the deck—and in a moment they were in a single-berth deck-cabin, and the door was shut, and he was holding them as if he could never let them go.

"A year!" he said. "Well, don't let either of you think you're ever going to get rid of me again!" He scanned his wife deliberately.

"A bit thin, I think," he said. "But you haven't let her get any older, Dick. She hasn't grown up yet."

"Not she!" said Dick.

"To read her letters you might almost think she had—sometimes. I used to be a little anxious about it. I wouldn't know her if she grew up!" His arm tightened round her, and the keen eyes turned to Dick, dwelling on the well-knit, active figure.

"It's you who have done the growing up, old son," he said. "I left a little kiddie—but you aren't that now. Is he too big to be hugged, do you think, mother?"

"He's not!" said Dick, and proved that he was not.

"Well, that's all right," said Mr. Lester, with a great sigh. He sat down on the sofa, and drew one down on each side, holding them closely. The time flew by unheeded; they talked, more or less incoherently, occasionally falling into silence that was as satisfying as talk, since they were together again.

A tap came to the door an hour later—a steward, with telegrams. Mr. Lester glanced over them.

"Just greetings," he said. "I must answer them, though. Dick, can you find a telegraph office here?"

"Rather," said Dick. "I can go in the car."

"Good gracious!" said his mother, faintly. "I forgot the car!"

"What—have you one waiting? Well, it's a nice day for it!" said her husband placidly. He was scribbling answers. "Here you are, old chap, and here's the money. Sure you can manage?"

"Of course he can," said Mrs. Lester. "Hasn't he been looking after me ever since you went away?"

"I'll take up my job again," he said, as the door closed behind Dick.

The chauffeur welcomed the boy with some relief.

"Thought you were never comin'," he remarked. "Well, did 'e get here all right?"

"Rather!" Dick answered.

"So I should think, by your face," quoth the chauffeur. "Beamin's no name for it. Well, where to now?"

"Telegraph office," said Dick, getting in beside him. They whirred up through the busy streets, while the chauffeur discoursed learnedly on the ways of motors, in terms which were Greek to Dick though he tried to conceal the fact. He tried once to divert the conversation to horses, but the chauffeur said loftily, "Oh, 'orses is out of date, unless it's on a racecourse!"—which made Dick gasp with disgust.

"I'd sooner have my Tinker than all your jolly old cars!" said he. To which the chauffeur responded, "Oh, you'll grow out of that!" in a manner so intensely superior that Dick writhed beneath it. He was glad when they reached the telegraph office, and he could dash in and write out his telegrams. There were dozens of other people on the same errand, most of them from the mail steamer. Dick had to wait his turn, and, as he was a slow writer, it was some time before he could finish; after which a very fat lady blocked him at the counter until he was almost dancing with

impatience. He got through at last, and hurried the chauffeur back to the wharf.

His father and mother did not seem to notice that he had been long away. They were still sitting together on the sofa. John Lester looked at his son with a glance at once tender and proud.

"Come here, old chap," he said. He put his hand on Dick's shoulder, gripping it tightly.

"Mother has been telling me," he said, and stopped; something seemed to make speech not easy. "About your swim after that small boy. I'm proud of my son, Dick."

Dick reddened furiously.

"Oh, it wasn't anything," he mumbled. "A chap couldn't see the poor kid go in, and not go after him."

"No, of course you couldn't. Still I'm glad you thought quickly—and moved quickly. Was it very cold?"

"Oh, beastly!" said Dick, with a reminiscent shiver. "You couldn't imagine how cold, father! I didn't seem to be able to kick or do anything, after the first minute. I thought I could just swim back to the ship with him, as easy as wink, but my word, I couldn't!"

"A good thing you didn't have to try," said John Lester, his grip on Dick's shoulder tightening. "Well, all's well that ends well, anyhow. Now how about getting up to Perth?"

Dick hesitated.

"Could I have a look round the ship first, father?"

"Why, of course you can. Come along."

They explored the great mail steamer thoroughly—meeting, on their tour, the captain himself, who took them over his quarters and up on the towering bridge. Behind Dick's back he asked Mr. Lester in an undertone:

"Is that the small boy who's been diving off the *Moondarra*?"

"Yes, that's the culprit," Mr. Lester answered in some surprise. "How did you know?"

"Why, there's half a column about him in the Perth morning papers."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Lester. "I trust he won't hear about it."

"Well, you ought to be proud," said the captain severely. "If I had a kid like that——"

"I'm proud enough," said John Lester. "But I don't make a song about it to Dick. He takes it as the most ordinary thing—only beastly cold!" He shuddered. "Good Lord—when I think how nearly I might never have seen him again!"

"Yes," said the captain, staring at Dick. "Great kid. Rough on his mother, too—paper said she was looking on." He

opened a cupboard and solemnly presented Dick with a little ebony elephant. "There's an Indian beastie, for luck," he said. "You can teach him to swim——" At which Dick turned scarlet, and fled, cutting short his thanks. He had hoped to leave such annoying reminders on the *Moondarra*.

But there was a more substantial reminder in store for him that night, when he was dressing for dinner in the hotel. A tap on his door heralded Bobby Warner, very pink and important, bearing a little parcel.

"Daddy said I was to give you this myself," he said. "And he and mummy send veir love wiv it, cause you jumped into the water after me. I say, can I open ve parcel for you? I does love opening parcels!"

"Right oh!" said the puzzled Dick, vigorously towelling his face and head.

"It's a tick-tick, but you has to be vewy sp'ried," explained Bobby, kindly, fumbling with the string. "I fink I ought to have one, too, 'cause I was in the water wiv you. Oo-oh, it's tumbled!"

It had, but no further than the hearthrug on which he was sitting. Dick, who had had a vague idea that the small boy was carrying sweets, suddenly made a jump towards a little glittering heap that had slipped from its white tissue paper. A beautiful gold watch and chain—no boy's watch but a man's; inside the hunting case his own name, with a brief inscription:

"To remember the *Moondarra*."

The date followed, and the Warners' initials. Dick stared at it blankly.

"It's a pwetty tick-tick, isn't it?" Bobby remarked, placidly. "Daddy has one like it, only ve twinses gave it to ve goat. I wouldn't let vem have yours, if I was you."

"I say, they oughtn't to," murmured Dick, still blankly looking at the watch. He did not refer to the twinses, but Bobby was satisfied.

"Vat's what daddy said when he got his back from ye goat," he remarked. "She had nearly etted it—it's all funny wiv her toof marks now. Where's you goin', Dick?"

Dick had plunged out into the hall in his shirt-sleeves, his wet hair standing on end, the watch and chain in his hand. There he ran into Mr. Warner, whose memories of the twinses' methods with watches possibly made him a little anxious at having made Bobby a messenger.

"I say, sir, you shouldn't!" blurted Dick miserably.

"Shouldn't what?"

"This." Dick held out the watch, looking very much as if he had received a beating. "I—I didn't do anything."

"Well, you can look at it that way if you like, old man," said Bobby's father. "I look at it another—it seems to me I'd have no Bobby to-night but for you. And I have a value for

Bobby. Don't you worry, anyhow. Just remember that you spoiled a good suit of clothes on his account, and got jolly wet and cold; and that we're goin' to be good friends always." He patted Dick's wet head, reassuringly. "I say, what about this father of yours? Am I going to meet him?"

"Rather!" said Dick. "He's in his room. I ought to be getting ready, I suppose."

"I'll come with you and rescue Bobby," said Mr. Warner.

They found Bobby gloriously happy over the forbidden joy of Dick's pocket knife, and presently, leaving him with the twins and their nurse, went downstairs together. At the foot of the staircase stood John Lester, smoking. Dick's confused introduction was scarcely necessary. The two men gripped hands over his head.

"I owe your boy a heap," Mr. Warner said.

"I'm glad he was handy," Dick's father answered.

Which was all that either said upon the matter. Instead, they talked stock and station, crops and weather, horses and dogs; all the bush talk of Australia, from which John Lester had been exiled. The talk began in the hall before dinner—they sat at adjoining tables, and continued in the lounge afterwards. Dick sat near, blissfully content; it was the talk that he, too, loved to hear, and Mrs. Lester lay back in a great easy-chair, watching her husband's face. It lit up wonderfully when he talked; he leaned forward, asking eager questions,

drinking in the other man's slow speech. After a time he turned to Mrs. Warner, apologetically.

"I shouldn't let you in for so much 'shop,' should I?" His smile was as boyish as Dick's. "But you have no idea what it means to hear Australian talk again. I haven't enjoyed anything so much for ages."

"You are very glad to be back?"

"Glad!" He gave an expressive shrug of his broad shoulders. "Well, I knew I was homesick, but I didn't know how badly until I got here."

"He has lain flat on the grass in the wildest corner of the gardens all the afternoon, looking at the gum trees," Mrs. Lester said, laughing.

"So would you, if you hadn't seen one for a year." His eyes dwelt on her tenderly. "Of course, I did see blue gums now and then; they grow them in big gardens—funny leggy things, that never look quite healthy or quite right, somehow. They let them get too tall and spindly, and then the winter gales break them to pieces. I used to preach the advantages of lopping their tops when young, but the English can't bring themselves to do it. It's good to come back and see the old things growing as they were meant to grow."

"So Australia is still good enough for you?" Mr. Warner asked.

"Quite good enough. I'll go back some day, and take my wife and Dick; I want to show them everything on the other

side—and possibly then I shan't be so homesick. But we'll come back again. And I don't want to think of starting for a very long while!"

He finished with a little smile at his wife.

"You don't know the West?" Mr. Warner said.

"No—not at all. I've only passed through on my way to England."

"Well, look here——" Mr. Warner leaned forward eagerly. "My wife and I were thinking how delightful it would be for us if you three would come up with us to Narrung Downs. We could show you some unfamiliar country—the wild flowers should be at their best now, Mrs. Lester—and I think you'd be interested in the working of a Western place. There are some fairly decent horses that Dick might try. What do you think of our plan?"

John Lester hesitated, looking at his wife.

"It sounds delightful—many thanks," he said. "But I don't know about inflicting such a party upon you."

"Oh—!" Mrs. Warner brushed this aside. "We have such a barrack of a house; and servants of a kind, even if they are mostly blacks. We know you would make allowances for the shortcomings of the bush, wouldn't you, Mrs. Lester?"

"I don't think they would exist for me," Mrs. Lester said. "It's a lovely plan, Mrs. Warner; I don't know how to thank you."

"Would you like to come up into the back country, Dick?" inquired Mr. Warner.

Dick's eyes were round.

"My word, wouldn't I!" he uttered. Everyone laughed.

"Well, think it over," Mr. Warner said. "We don't leave for three days; that would give you time to look round Perth and the country near here. We shall be more than pleased if we can take you back with us." They drifted away, murmuring something about writing letters.

"What do you think, Jean? Shall we go?"

Mrs. Lester smiled up at her husband.

"You must decide," she said. "I'm just like an absolutely contented and placid old cow at the moment——"

"I never saw you look less like anything," he said. "Go on, however."

"But I am, John. I have everything I want in the world; you aren't in England, and Dick isn't drowned, and nothing can possibly matter. Wherever we may be doesn't seem to signify in the least. Would you like to go?"

"Yes; I think so," he said. "They're nice people, and it would be good experience for the boy. You'd like it, Dick?"

"I think it would be ripping, father," said Dick eagerly. "After all, once we get back to Victoria we'll be a long time

there, won't we?"

"That's a highly philosophic remark," said his father, laughing. "All right, old son; we'll go."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE JOURNEY NORTH.

After all, they did not go north with the Warners. Mrs. Lester's housewifely soul realised that a woman who had been away for six weeks from a home principally staffed with black servants would prefer to be without guests for at least a few days after her return, and accordingly it was arranged that they should follow Mr. Warner's party within the week.

The plan suited the Lesters very well. They were, as Dick's mother said, in a state of absolute content at being together again. It was delightful enough to explore Perth, to go yachting on the Swan with a friend of Mr. Warner's who had a beautiful little cutter; to take a motor-boat for the day, exploring up the river, or to go out into the country in a car. Wherever they went they only seemed to want to talk. There was so much to tell and to hear; so many details of the long separation to remember, to discuss, to laugh over. Dick's memory of that first happy week was that they seemed to have laughed all the time.

The Warners left in a huge motor, heaped confusedly with luggage and passengers, the twins occupying precarious positions whenever they could escape from their mother's anxious eye.

"See you next week!" shouted Mr. Warner.

"Be sure you bring some rough clothes!" was Mrs. Warner's farewell, as she clutched at a twin who threatened to dive over the wheel. "Thick boots, mind!"

"Mind you come, old Dick!" This from Bobby.

Only Merle said nothing. She sat beside her father, looking stiffly ahead, as the car slowly slid away from the little group on the hotel steps.

"I don't see why they want to come," she had said to her father.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. I hate visitors."

"I suppose you'll get sense some day," was all Mr. Warner's rejoinder. He did not know that the curt remark hit her more sharply than a whole volume of remonstrance.

Merle was the one fly in the ointment in Dick's cheerful anticipations of his visit to the Warners' station. On the *Moondarra* and in the hotel it had been easy enough to avoid being much with her, since she so clearly showed that she did not desire his company; but in her own home it would be

different. They were too near in age, and too similar in tastes, not to be thrown together. That in itself was painful enough, since girls, to Dick, were rather boring creatures, full of queer whims and notions—not plain, straightforward people like Teddy Raine and Bottles and Nugent. But a girl who would not even take the trouble to be civil—that, in Dick's language, was "over the odds." He hoped that her governess would make regular demands upon her time, and grinned to think what would have been Merle's opinion of him, had she guessed at that particular hope.

However, life was too joyful at the moment to allow him to worry over Merle's whims. He began each day with a walk before breakfast with his father; long, brisk walks outside Perth, and long talks that bridged the year of silence that lay behind them. They swung along together, Dick rejoicing that he could now keep in step with his father—a year ago he had to jog if Mr. Lester lengthened his stride; and the father noting the development of his boy's mind as well as of his body, and meeting his questions and his crudely expressed views with a ready sympathy that knitted them more closely together than anything else could have done.

"He's only a baby yet, of course," John Lester said to his wife. "His mind is clean and open and honest; just a child's mind still. But his body—well, he's going to be something of a man, I believe."

"He is, I think," agreed Dick's mother. "And so good looking, John!"

"Oh, that!" He laughed down at her. "You women only think about handsome faces!"

"Indeed, I don't," Mrs. Lester defended herself. "I've been just as keen about his physical training as you have. I wanted him to be strong first of all. But he might have been strong and ugly—and he isn't. And you're just as proud of it as I am!"

"Well—perhaps." He smiled down at her. "But physique comes first; and he certainly has that. His muscles are extraordinarily good for such a kid."

"Fresh air and cold water," said Mrs. Lester solemnly. "That has been Dick's treatment since he was a baby, and it certainly has paid. He hardly knows what medicine is, and he looks the very picture of strength and fitness."

"Thank God!" said her husband hastily.

"Yes, thank God," she agreed. "Why do you say it in that way, John?"

"Oh, I don't know." He gave a short, half-embarrassed laugh. "They say in Ireland that if you don't add 'Thank God' after you praise anyone it brings bad luck. The peasantry there never omit it; you'll hear, 'Tis a fine child, thank God!' or 'She have lovely eyes, thank God!'—and you'll worry a peasant woman badly if you admire her baby without giving God the credit. I got into the way of it, I suppose."

"Well, it's a pretty good habit to cultivate," said his wife thoughtfully. "Look at Dick now!"

They had motored far out into the country, and had camped in the bush for lunch; after which Dick had stripped to his shirt and knickerbockers, and had begun to climb trees. Nine months of hard training in the gymnasium at school had put a finish on lifelong practice, a steady eye and a cool head. Dick had always loved climbing—before he had discarded frocks for knickerbockers he had been found by his horrified nurse some distance up a pepper tree. Now he was almost like a monkey in the swift agility of his movements. As his father and mother watched him, he swung himself cleanly across a wide gap between two trees; caught a bough with one hand, and came dropping down from branch to branch until he reached one about ten feet from the ground—a smooth, straight limb, that tempted him with its likeness to a horizontal bar. He swung head downwards, hanging by his knees, and then circled round and round with such swiftness that the slender bough bent and quivered. Finally, he turned a quick somersault in the air and came down on the grass, landing lightly on his feet.

"Good man!" said his father approvingly. "It's a pity that the gentleman who derived us all from tree-apes couldn't see you. You'd have been great support to his theory."

Dick grinned.

"Can't climb decently in boots," he said, casting a disparaging glance at his feet. "But it's jolly to get up a tree again."

"No trees at school?"

"Oh, some," admitted Dick. "We're not supposed to climb them, of course, but——" He grinned again. "But, anyhow, they're not like good bush trees, like these. I don't suppose anyone ever climbed here much, but the trees at school—well, they're just polished with climbing!"

"Being a forbidden luxury," said his father, laughing. "Well, I think I was one of the early polishers of those same trees, so I can't say anything to you."

"But you never do jaw a chap, father," said Dick comfortably.

That was one of the points that made their early morning walks so satisfactory—that there was never any "jawing." John Lester encouraged his boy to tell him each little detail of his life at school. He learned all about his friends—Teddy Raine, the captain of the junior eleven, who was easily the leader of the lower school; Bottles, fat and cheery and honest, whom everybody liked; Nugent, the homeless boy, with a father in India and no mother; these were the chief, but there were a host of others. Mr. Lester knew them all fairly well now. He learned about their scrapes and their pranks, their midnight suppers, half-holiday escapades, and—not in such details—their schoolroom life. Dick was a little shy of talking at first; but, finding only ready sympathy and interest, his tongue became loosened, and he chattered away as freely as he would to the irrepressible Teddy Raine. Mr. Lester never preached. His eye generally held a twinkle; his sharpest criticism was, once or twice, "I don't know that that's altogether the thing." There the matter ended, for him;

but Dick made up his mind that the incidents in question should not happen again.

They would come back to breakfast; glowing and hungry, and make a raid on Mrs. Lester in her room, declaring that she was the laziest person alive, and did not know how much she missed; at which Mrs. Lester smiled quietly, and would go down to breakfast arm in arm between them. Not for worlds would she have made a third—even a beloved third—in those walks. Dick had lived in her pocket long enough; it was his turn for his father now, and she rejoiced in each day's new evidence of how completely they were becoming mates.

They visited the great limestone caverns at Yallingup, making a three days' expedition of it, and coming back to Perth full of the weird charm of the glistening underground world. At the hotel they found a two-days' old telegram from Mr. Warner.

"Can you start Thursday obliged to take car Westown with sick governess like meet you same trip don't worry if inconvenient can arrange anything suit you had good trip up."

Mr. Lester glanced at the date.

"H'm; and Thursday is to-morrow. The train starts at five o'clock."

"In the morning?" gasped Mrs. Lester.

"Oh, no—don't be anxious!" He laughed at her. "Five in the afternoon; and we get to Kalgoorlie at ten next morning."

"And after that?"

"After that a little train that wobbles north to Westown at its own sweet will, I suppose," said her husband. "I don't know anything about it; but it's believed to put us off at Westown some time in the afternoon, and Warner will be there with his car. We must go, if possible. I don't want to give him the long journey in from Narrung Downs again."

"Oh, we couldn't do that, of course," said Mrs. Lester hastily. "And there is no reason why we should not get away to-morrow."

"No more shopping?" asked he, smiling down at her.

"Of course, there's always shopping!" returned his wife with dignity. "But not more than we can get through to-morrow. Oh, and the packing I must do! Don't let me think of that to-night, John—take us to the theatre instead!"

"Indeed, I think it would be wiser if you went early to bed and had a good night's sleep," he said. "Was there ever such an irresponsible young person!"

"Don't want to be responsible!" said she. "I'm having a holiday. If you telephoned for seats, now——"

"You know you'll have to, father!" said Dick, capering. "Better give in nicely."

"This is what it is to be meek—you get systematically bullied!" said his father, with mock despair. "All right; I suppose I shan't get any peace if I don't." He departed whistling.

"Mother, it is nice of you not to grow up!" said Dick solemnly.

They followed their last gay night in Perth by a busy day; there was a rushed visit to shops, collecting the last odds and ends of country kit that had seemed so unnecessary when packing in Melbourne—riding gear, chiefly, with thick boots and the cooler clothes that might be found necessary up North. Then came packing, with much sorting out of luggage; most of their baggage was to be left at the hotel until their return. They were glad to get into their train at five o'clock, and its jolting failed to keep them awake during the long night while it rattled into the north-east towards Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie.

They breakfasted on the train, arriving at Kalgoorlie soon afterwards; and after a wait too short to allow them to do more than peep at the busy gold-fields capital they were off again, travelling slowly into the north. Soon the mullock heaps and poppet heads of the mines thinned out and they found themselves running through country covered with sparse scrub, with mulga and saltbush mingling with stunted gum trees and she oaks; a dreary enough land, dry and desolate, where many a gold seeker had perished from thirst in the days when every yard of earth was turned up in the search for nuggets. Now and then the train pulled up at a little township, built of weatherboard and corrugated iron,

where the people crowded the narrow gravelled platform to look at the train and peer curiously in at the passengers. It seemed to Dick that as they travelled farther and farther into the country these bush folk grew more and more lean and bronzed; tall men, in blue shirts and moleskin trousers, wrinkled about the eyes, as men grow early when they live in wild spaces under a hot sun; women, in faded blouses and skimpy skirts, with print sun-bonnets or men's felt half pulled down over their eyes. Such lonely women! They stood in the doorways of little isolated homesteads watching the train wistfully as it roared past them; generally with a baby tucked into one arm, and three or four older children playing near them, or perched on the railway fence, shouting greetings to the train. Indeed, all through that lonely country, as the train sped north, came appealing shouts—from the isolated cottages, from children evidently sent a mile or two to be at the line when the train was due, or rising almost from under the wheels, from navvies working on the line. Just one word—"Papers! Papers!"—and people would jump up, and sleeping travellers rouse themselves, to hurl newspapers and magazines from the windows. Dick used to lean out to watch them flutter down like great white birds, to be pounced on by eager hands before they touched the ground. It did not much matter who got them, for they were sure to be passed round and read by every family and every camp within five miles.

Here and there, as they rattled over stony ridges or wide sandy plains, were mines; the big mullock heaps and towering poppet heads seemed to dot all the country. Some were working still; others derelict; with hardy bushes trying to find a footing in every corner where men had toiled in the feverish hunt for gold. Sometimes they saw long strings of

camels slouching along in their sulky fashion, laden with wood for the mines; there were Afghans in charge of some of the teams, tall, dirty-looking natives, whose dark faces, under grimy turbans, scarcely turned to glance at the train. Donkey teams came into view, hauling waggons along the sandy tracks; it was curious to watch them sneaking in and out of the sparse mulga scrub.

The carriage grew hotter and hotter, and ever more full of dust. There was a halt for a meal at a wayside station, where the food in the refreshment room also seemed to have acquired a liberal coating of dust, and the tea was stewed to an inky blackness. Mrs. Lester fled from the meal, and lunched frugally on bananas, which, she remarked, were at least dust-proof. Then they rattled on into country that became wilder and yet more sandy, until, about the middle of the afternoon, they found themselves standing on a rough gravel platform, surrounded by their luggage, while the train vanished in a belt of kurrajong trees. A motor hooted outside, and in a moment Mr. Warner appeared, looking huger than ever in an enormous wide-awake hat, and very red-faced and hurried.

"It's splendid to see you all—welcome to Out Back!" He shook hands vigorously all round. "Had a good trip? But I needn't ask. I've done it too often myself. I was nearly late for you. A dog insisted on trying to commit suicide under the car as I was coming from the hotel, and I had no end of trouble getting him out. Wasn't hurt, only pretty badly frightened. I don't think he'll choose a motor next time he feels tired of life. Come along—we'll get your stuff loaded

up, and then have a cup of tea at the hotel before we start. I told them to have hot scones ready!"

"Hot scones!" said Mrs. Lester faintly. "It sounds too good to be true!"

"I know that refreshment room on the way up," said Mr. Warner, laughing. "You all look starved; however, we'll have you home in time for dinner. Getting off here saves you two hours in the train. Of course, it's a longer run in the car, but not so wearying."

"And the governess?" asked Mrs. Lester.

"Oh, poor soul, she's pretty bad. The wife of the doctor here is her sister, and nothing would do but she must come to her. I didn't think she was fit for the journey myself. However, she wept until we had to let her go. So Merle's at a loose end again, as far as education is concerned. I've no doubt she'll find occupation enough." He was scientifically fitting luggage on the steps of the car, and lashing it firmly. "You people are wonders; I thought you'd have twice as much baggage as this. Sure you haven't lost a trunk or two?"

"Why, we were afraid you would have heart failure when you saw the amount we were bringing," said Mr. Lester, laughing.

"Bless you, this is nothing; my wife's sister came up last year with three times as much for her lone self," Mr. Warner answered. "We get accustomed to carrying luggage on the car in a way that would horrify a Melbourne or Sydney

motorist. I believe I'll come home some day with a few trunks perched on the bonnet. There, that's all right." He stood back, opening the door. "Now, Mrs. Lester, I'm sure you're needing those hot scones!"

The scones proved all that hungry travellers could wish, and twice they exhausted the hotel's largest teapot. Mr. Warner hurried them over the meal, and soon they were in the car again, and the iron roofs of the little township a grey blur in the distance. The road was good firm sand, with a few softer patches where bullock teams had cut up the surface; but on the whole they made good time over it, slipping through the scented scrub that bordered the track. Wild flowers, unfamiliar and beautiful, gleamed among the trees in every clear patch; wild arums and asters and clumps of dwarf yellow cassia. They passed a wide swamp, where red legs and sand pipers stalked among the sparse rushes on the edge, and further out pelicans swam lazily, with a host of lesser fowl.

"Great shooting here," said Mr. Warner—"or would be if it were not for the blacks. Any amount of teal and musk duck and wild geese. But the blacks fairly live in the swamp when the birds are here."

"Do they shoot them?" Dick asked.

"Oh, no—they're not allowed guns. But they're very useful with spears and throwing sticks; our blacks are fairly uncivilised, you see. Later on I suppose they'll lose all their old darts and become utterly useless; that's what has happened in the eastern states."

"Do you find them faithful?" asked Mr. Lester.

"Well—sometimes. You never can tell. A woman or a boy may have every appearance of being thoroughly settled down, and of responding to training, and then some fine morning you find one 'gone bush'—back to the tribe. Possibly you never see that one again; possibly he or she will turn up six months later, quite prepared to go back to work. On the other hand, we have a few who have been for years with us. Children are their best tie; if they once become attached to your youngsters they're much less likely to go."

He talked on, telling stories of the blacks and of the wild life of the early days, leaning back in his seat with one careless hand on the wheel, while the car seemed to find its own way along the noiseless sandy track. The scattered farms that spread out a few miles from the township gave place to wide plains, partly covered with scrub, where only an occasional house was to be seen; and the road grew more and more lonely. At first they had met buggies, bullock wagons, and one or two other motors, but after a time they seemed to be the only people on the plain, and it was almost a relief when they met a "sun-downer" slouching along under a heavy swag, his felt hat pulled low over his eyes, and a battered quart pot in his hand. The sun sank lower and lower, and a keen breeze made the travellers glad to put on heavier coats. It was almost dusk when they emerged from a dense belt of gum trees and saw ahead of them a fence, stretching apparently for miles east and west, and a gate that stood open, held by a solemn black boy. Mr. Warner nodded to him, and they swept through. The track curved round a plantation of pines, and they saw a homestead so large that it

looked like a village. White-painted roofs gleamed among the trees, and scattered buildings fringed the main block until there seemed no end to them, while the tall, spidery outlines of windmills towered above the green. The deep emerald of a lucerne paddock stretched down to a little creek.

"I didn't know you could grow lucerne here," remarked Mr. Lester. "In fact, I had a vague idea that nothing but sand and mulga really flourished in the West. But your place doesn't suggest that!"

"You can do a heap with irrigation," his host answered. "Between the windmills and a hydraulic ram down at the creek I can get as much water as I want; and with water you can grow anything in this climate. I'll show you all the place to-morrow."

He gave a long coo-ee, bringing the car more slowly round a fence that bordered a great garden. There seemed a dense crowd waiting for them: Mrs. Warner first, her kind face alight with welcome. Merle beside her; close at hand the twines, struggling against control; and then a few white faces amidst a mass of black ones, all striving to have a good look at the new arrivals. The car came to a standstill, and suddenly Bobby hurtled through the throng and flung himself at the step.

"Hallo, Dick! Oh, I's so glad you came!"

Willing hands, black and white, seized upon their luggage. They drifted in through the gate, and found themselves on a very wide verandah, which completely surrounded a long,

one-storied house, almost hidden by creepers. The architecture of that house was simple. It had begun by being two rooms, opening out of each other; than a room had been added at each end; then more, as need arose; until at last there were fourteen rooms, all in a long row, and all opening upon the verandahs. Kitchen, storerooms and other offices had been built across a little space from the main building, and at a later date a wing had been thrown out connecting the two; and now the space was a great sandy courtyard, with shrubs and palms growing in enormous tubs, and seats scattered here and there. The living rooms—dining and drawing rooms, Mrs. Warner's workroom, and a big man's "den" were in this new wing; the long side of the house was principally given up to bedrooms. Mrs. Warner led them inside. Two strapping black girls were putting trunks into a big airy bedroom.

"This is your room, with the dressing-room opening from it. Dick's is next door," she told them. "Bobby, you take Dick to his room."

Bobby tugged at his friend's hand.

The room into which he ushered Dick was long and bright, with two little beds in opposite corners, and windows at each side.

"Muvver said I wasn't to ask you somefing," Bobby began and hesitated.

"How's that?" asked Dick.

The small boy cast an appealing look at the second bed.

"Vat's not your bed," he said. "The uvver one has ve sheets and fings. Nobody sleeps in vat bed. 'Course, I could easy bwing up my sheets from my howwid silly bed in the nursewy, if——"

He stopped, round-eyed. "O-o-oh, I nearly wented and asked you, after all!"

Dick laughed.

"I believe you nearly did," he said. "Better not, or mother might be cross with you. I say, I'll ask you something instead. How'd you like to come and sleep in this spare bed? I'd rather like a mate!"

Bobby was out like a flash.

"Muvver! Muvver! Dick wants me to sleep in his room."

Came Mrs. Warner's voice reproachfully:

"Oh, Bobby, you asked!"

"No, I didn't—I only nearly did. True, mother!"

"He really didn't, Mrs. Warner. I asked him," said Dick, appearing.

"And do you really want him, Dick?"

"Oh, rather!"

But Bobby waited for no more. He fled down the verandah like a rabbit to its burrow, his voice coming faintly as he ran:

"I'm goin' to ask Nanna—for—my—sheets—an'—fings!"

CHAPTER IX.

NARRUNG HOMESTEAD.

"Merle! Where are you?"

"Here," said a sulky voice.

"Make haste, then," said her father. "I want you."

Merle emerged from the shrubbery slowly. The expression on her face was not inviting, but her father was too preoccupied to notice it.

"Look after Dick, will you?" he said. "A man is sick in one of the huts in the far paddocks, and Mr. Lester is going with me to have a look at him. Show Dick round a bit and keep him entertained."

Merle scowled.

"Can't Bobby?" she asked.

Her father stared at her.

"You can't leave a boy of Dick's age to a kid like Bobby," he said. "Whatever is the matter with you? One would think you would be only too glad of the chance of a mate. Behave yourself, and remember the boy is our guest."

A black boy called from the gate.

"Horses ready, boss!"

"All right. Now, mind what I told you, Merle." He strode away across the garden.

Merle stood watching his retreating form, her heart seething with rebellion. She had not wanted Dick; she did not like him. Why should she be saddled with his entertainment? She had kept out of the way the night before, and her absence had not been noticed in the excitement of their arrival. To-day she had planned to climb up a favourite tree with a book and remain there until they were all out—she was sure her father meant to take them on a tour of the place. To have this cheerful plan frustrated, and to find herself responsible for Dick, was a heavy blow. She made her way inside, her scowl darker than ever.

Dick was with his mother, watching Mrs. Warner ordering her household for the day. Her cook was a middle-aged Scotswoman, whose husband was storekeeper to the station; but all her other maids were black gins, and, with a native, nothing can be indefinite—orders have to be repeated daily, supplies doled out as they are needed, and only

constant watchfulness ensures any comfort. She was at the moment interviewing the laundress, a big lubra, whose scanty attire was already soaked from splashing in the tubs.

"But I gave you plenty soap last night, Julia."

Julia rolled her great eyes wildly.

"Not this pfeller, missis. Mine thinkit that very little picaninny soap you bin gib. All bin tumble down (die) in water."

"Havers!" broke in Mrs. Macleay, the housekeeper briskly. "'Twas the usual quantity, and the wash no bigger than usual. Julia, you bin give soap to that feller Ben."

"No, no, missis, Julia no gib Ben good pfeller soap. That Ben no good." Julia's air of virtuous surprise and indignation was perfect.

Mrs. Warner pondered, and then turned to a little girl.

"Mary, you go and bring me Julia's bag."

Julia heard the order unmoved—a circumstance that did not escape Mrs. Macleay's keen eye. She slipped away, as the little girl, returning with the lubra's woven grass bag, tipped the contents out on the floor for Mrs. Warner's inspection. There were a few lumps of sugar, half a stick of coarse tobacco, some string, a half-eaten chop, a cup handle and a strip of bright print. But no soap.

"I bin tell you truth, missis," said Julia smugly. "Now, you gib it more soap?"

Mrs. Warner hesitated. Then came the whisk of Mrs. Macleay's starched skirt, and a large and capable hand deposited part of a bar of yellow soap on the table before her.

"You bin no good, Julia," said Mrs. Macleay severely. "Carefully planted under a tub of clothes, ma'am. I know Julia."

Julia's eyes rolled anew, and her lips parted in a childlike grin.

"I bin put 'em there by mistake," she said airily. "Mine thinkit you very good woman, Missis Mac."

"I don't doubt it," said the Scotswoman dourly. "Suppose you get on with the washing, Julia?"

Julia grasped the soap and disappeared, while Mrs. Warner turned to her guest.

"Julia's husband is very fond of soap."

"Rather unusual in a black fellow, isn't it?" asked Mrs. Lester, laughing.

"Quite. He eats it."

"Oh," said Mrs. Lester blankly.

Mrs. Warner was attending to another case. A tall young black answered to a call of "Jacky," and stood before her, looking sheepish.

"Jacky," said Mrs. Warner sternly, "I bin give you Boss's washing to carry down to Julia, and one fellow pair of trousers gone. You tell me what you do with 'em."

"Mine gibit all that pfeller clothes to Julia, missis," said Jacky stolidly. "Mine thinkit she steal 'em that pfeller t'ouser for Ben."

Julia suddenly reappeared, with the briskness of a pantomime artist.

"Nebber mine see that white pfeller t'ouser," she screamed angrily. "I good lubra—nebber steal!" She paused and added a convincing proof. "Boss's t'ouser no good for Ben—he too big!"

"And that's true," said Mrs. Macleay. "What's more, ma'am, you sent four pairs down by Jacky and I counted them over to Julia, and there was only three."

"What you done with 'em, Jacky?" Mrs. Warner asked severely.

"Mine gibit all them things to Julia," reiterated Jacky. "She no good."

Mrs. Warner knitted her brows.

"You not telling me truth, Jacky," she said. "I send you to boss unless you do."

"Mine thinkit always tell truth," said Jacky. "That pfeller God him kill Jacky if not tell truth. Jacky very good black pfeller." He beamed on his mistress in a childlike fashion.

A tall man strode into the kitchen verandah—a stockman, so bronzed that he might almost have been taken for a native. He carried in his hand a begrimed and crumpled pair of flannel trousers.

"Morning, missus!" he said. "Glad you've got that chap on the carpet." He nodded wrathfully at Jacky, who suddenly assumed the air of a hurt baby. "I seen him last night doin' the grand in these down at the camp—reckon he got lost if he tried to put 'em on, so he was wearin' 'em tied round his dirty neck! I wasn't able to stop just then—I was after a bullock—but I turned out his hut this mornin' and got 'em from his gin. Good pants, too. They'll take a bit of washin' now."

"I go wash 'em, missis," said Julia, in a voice of oil. "I tell you that pfeller Jacky no good." She seized the trousers and departed.

"Jacky!" said Mrs. Warner sternly.

Jacky rolled his eyes and said nothing. Possibly from his point of view, there was nothing to say.

"No baccy for you this week," said his mistress. "I tell boss, too; very like he send you back alonga camp."

"No, missis—I not go back alonga camp!" cried Jacky. "I be good boy!"

"Then you not steal again! I give you one chance," said Mrs. Warner. "Now you go work in garden."

Jacky withdrew, crestfallen, and Mrs. Warner proceeded to deal with each native in turn, giving instructions, seeing, where necessary, to the weighing out of supplies; and, so far as possible, guarding against any chances of household matters going wrong.

"Of course, they do go wrong," she remarked, as the last lubra left the verandah. "No matter how careful one may be there is always to be taken into consideration the airy nature of the black. You can't count on them; however contented and docile they may sometimes seem, they will always yield to the merest impulse—to steal anything that takes their fancy, to drop any job they may be at, generally at the most inconvenient moment, or to clear out altogether to the tribe. I have known my best housemaid leave a room half-scrubbed, bucket and brush in the middle of the floor, and be found up to her armpits in the lagoon looking for lily pods!"

"It must lend great variety to housekeeping," said Mrs. Lester, laughing.

"It does. Of course, it's funny enough—one is always laughing at them—but it can be rather awful as well. I had some bad times before I got Mrs. Macleay as second in command." Her eye fell on her daughter. "Oh, there you are,

Merle. Take Dick round the place—Mrs. Lester and I are having a morning indoors."

"All right," said Merle.

"Thanks," said Dick.

They looked at each other like two distrustful puppies, and moved off together.

"I say," said Dick, "don't come if it bothers you. I can easy poke round by myself."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said his entertainer—with a sudden determination that he should do no such thing.

Conversation flagged after that. They went down a wide path, bordered with flowering shrubs, which opened out into a broad, sanded yard behind the kitchen. Here were a series of small buildings, made fly-proof with wire sides, and kept cool by thick roofs projecting so far that they almost formed verandahs. They stood in the shadow of some huge trees.

"What are all these for?" Dick asked.

"Oh, that's the meat house, and that's the dairy, and that's the bacon-curing house. They make salt beef and corned beef there too. That new place is for a 'frigerator thing daddy's just bought."

Dick peeped in through the wire. Rows of hams and sides of bacon hung from whitewashed beams, and there were great tubs and vats where, presumably, many a good bullock

found a last resting place in brine. At one end was a kind of table with a ledge all round, where the salting of the meat was done. The floor was cemented; so was that of the dairy, where stood a separator, a churn and a complicated apparatus for cooling milk. Cream and milk, in enamelled buckets, stood on big slate slabs, and all the woodwork was scrubbed to a snowy whiteness.

"We can keep water dripping all round the dairy in the summer, and running over the floor," Merle said proudly. "Daddy fixed it. Could your father do that?"

"I don't know—don't suppose he ever tried," answered Dick, much impressed. "How d'you get the water!"

"It's all pumped up from the big dam by a windmill. When it's cooled the dairy, it runs away down that little channel to the vegetable garden."

"That's a jolly good idea," said Dick. "I say, don't the blacks ever try to steal the meat? They could break that light wire as easy as wink."

"They did try once, but daddy was all ready for them—he had some big fireworks, and he let them off just as they were coming on a dark night. You ought to have seen them run!" And for the first time Merle permitted herself to smile. "Now they say, 'Big pfeller debbil-debbil live here,' and none of them would go within a hundred yards of the meat-house after dark."

Dick's eyes danced.

"My word. I wish I'd been here!" he exclaimed.

"Do you?" said Merle coldly—and Dick felt as if he had suddenly received a ducking with icy water. "Oh, well, these old houses aren't up to much—we'll go and see the stables." And Dick followed meekly, not because he felt meek, but because he did not know what else to do. He was conscious of a wholly unchivalrous desire to smack her.

But the stables were a spot so near to the heart of each that it was impossible to keep up coldness. They were large and roomy, with great lofts full of sweet-smelling hay, where the sunlight flickered in dusty shafts from cracks in the walls. There were big loose boxes and comfortable stalls, and a large harness-room, where the saddles and bridles were so beautifully kept that Dick lingered lovingly over them, feeling the supple, glossy leather with all a country boy's delight. Merle pointed out her own saddle proudly—a splendid little English hunting model.

"I s'pose you'll use one of the stock saddles when you go out," she said carelessly. "Can you ride?"

Dick's heart swelled within him, but he kept his temper.

"Oh, a little," he said. He could not remember any time that he had not ridden; but there was no need to say so to this small, scornful person with the tilted nose. Anyway, he reflected, she knew that he lived on a station; she was probably only trying to get a rise out of him. School had taught him not to rise to such easy baits.

"Dad has lots of quiet old horses you could try," went on Merle.

"Thanks," replied her guest. "You don't feel anxious on a quiet horse, do you?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I never ride 'em." And this time the desire to smack her was so strong that Dick was obliged to take down a bridle and examine it to keep his hands out of harm's way.

They found O'Mara, the head groom, busy in a yard behind the stables, helping a black boy to bathe the hock of a fine bay mare that had managed to get entangled with some barbed wire. The mare was young and half-broken, and could understand neither her throbbing leg nor the hands that were dealing with it; and the boy was stupid and rough, with the result that she was plunging and kicking violently, and resisting every attempt to touch the injured part. O'Mara was rapidly losing patience.

"Ye have no more gumption than a cow," he told the boy angrily. "Take her aisy, will ye? Remember her laig is sore, an' don't touch it as if ye were scrubbin' a brick floor." The boy dabbed at the swollen hock, and the mare kicked furiously and danced away on three legs and O'Mara uttered pungent comments. "That you, Miss Merle? Take care, now, an' keep back; that one'd kick the eye out of a mosquito, she's that bothered with this black omadhaun. 'Tis all I wish the boss hadn't gone before he helped me to do her; this boy's no good either to hould her or to bathe her. Whisht now, my beauty—no one's going to hurt you at all."

"Can I hold her?" Dick asked.

"Better keep back, sir. She's gentle enough, only she don't understand why she's hurt."

"Poor old girl!" said Dick gently. He went up to the mare's head, all his horse-loving soul eager to touch her. The wild eyes softened under his quiet hand. He stroked her nose, and then slid his fingers up quietly, rubbing her neck and talking to her under his breath. It was months since he had handled a horse, except the forbidden luxury of the milkman's pony. The very feel of the rippling muscles under the satin skin of her neck was a delight to him. He put his cheek against hers and the mare stopped trembling and muzzled against him. Dick looked up at O'Mara half shyly.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he said. "Seems a shame to hurt her."

"We'll try not to," said O'Mara happily. "Sure, 'tis yourself has the way with you, with a horse. Keep talkin' to her, now, and I'll do her hock that gentle she won't know she's touched."

He took the sponge from the black boy, who stood aside thankfully, and softly bathed the injured leg, keeping away from the hock at first, until she had grown used to his touch. The mare started a little when she felt the sponge, but Dick's caressing voice and fingers steadied her, and presently she stood quietly, only flinching when the sponge finally rested on the worst place.

"There now—'tis nice an' comfortin' against that hot place, isn't it, my beauty?" said O'Mara wheedlingly. "Begob, she'd say 'Thank you,' if she could spake. 'Is it kick?' says she. 'I'll not kick at all if only I'm treated like a lady,' she says. Divil a bit of vice have she in her, only she couldn't see why we'd want to hurt her, an' she havin' done no harm to anny wan of us. Whist then, me jewel, let me hould it on ye just a wee bit now."

The soft Irish voice ran on coaxingly, and Dick's hand never ceased fondling, and finally the mare stood quietly, submitting to the gentle handling of her hock with perfect confidence. It was finished at last, and Dick led her to the gate of a shady little paddock close by.

"This is the hospital paddock," O'Mara told him. "'Tis only invalids goes in here, where we can keep an eye on them. She have not much company, only ould Druid, an' he's nearly well afther stakin' himself." He indicated a big bay Clydesdale grazing in the corner. "But they're the best of friends entirely."

"Where are the other horses?" Dick asked.

"They're all out in the home paddock; there's just a few gets stabled at night since the boss came home. Pretty fresh, most of 'em; nearly the whole mob was turned out for a spell while he was away, barrin' a few needed about the place, and they're all kicking up their heels. And have you many, sir, at your own place?"

Dick told him, and they stood by the gate talking of horses—both forgetting Merle, who stood still in the yard, looking after them sullenly. She had experienced only a new pang of jealousy over Dick's handling of the bay mare. O'Mara need not have called to her to stand back, she reflected angrily; she knew the mare, and she was certain she could have quietened her just as well as any strange boy who had never seen her before. It was just the way in everything, she thought; whenever Dick was about she was not wanted. Now O'Mara and he stood talking as if she did not exist. Well, if she was not wanted, at least she did not mean to stay. She had been told to entertain Dick, but to stand waiting while he talked to the groom was quite a different matter. Her book was still where she had left it in the tree. Thus it was that when Dick suddenly remembered his guide and turned from the entrancing company of O'Mara, who was telling him stories of horses he had managed as head-groom in a big hunting stable in County Cork, there was no Merle to be seen.

"Is it Miss Merle?" asked the Irishman. "I seen her streakin' across to the garden five minutes ago. That's the queer little gerrl entirely. She's that short in her temper you'd hardly hould her at times."

"I suppose she's all right," said Dick uncomfortably.

"You can be very sure Miss Merle's all right," said O'Mara. "She do be getting all she wants, most times—herself is the wan to make sure of that. Well, as I was sayin', Captain Keogh had a big brown horse——" and Merle and everything else faded from Dick's mind.

It was an hour later that Mr. Warner and Mr. Lester, riding home, perceived, in a tree in the front garden, the flutter of a blue print frock.

"That looks like Merle," Mr. Warner said. "I wonder if Dick is with her." He gave a short whistle. It was Merle's signal from him, and she responded to it promptly, running to the fence.

"Where's Dick?" queried her father.

"I don't know."

Mr. Warner's face darkened.

"How's that, Merle? I left you to look after him."

"Well, he doesn't want me—he started talking to O'Mara," Merle said sulkily.

"H'm," said her father, giving her a keen look. They rode on.

"For goodness' sake, don't worry about my urchin," said Mr. Lester, laughing. "He's well able to look after himself."

"I assure you I'm more worried about my own," said his friend. "If I could only inculcate some ordinary good manners into her——"

"Why, she's a nice little soul. I think you worry unduly," said Mr. Lester. "And she's only a baby yet." He gave a short laugh. "Dick is happy enough, at any rate."

They had come into view of Dick and O'Mara—the former perched on the gate-post of the little paddock, while the old man, leaning against the gate, was talking so earnestly that he failed to see his master approaching. Dick's intent face suddenly beamed, and a shout of delighted laughter rang out.

"Oh, that was ripping!" he cried. "My word, I'll tell father that!" Then his eye fell on his father, and he slid from the post and ran to meet the riders.

"I say, what a lovely horse!" His glance dwelt for a moment only on his father's mount—a useful black—and then lingered on Mr. Warner's. Indeed, there was excuse for looking at that horse. He was a great iron grey, all of seventeen hands in height, and built on perfect lines. He carried Mr. Warner's huge bulk as if it were a feather weight, and his beautiful head and mild eye showed both spirit and good temper. As he stood there, arching his powerful neck, he was a picture to delight any horse lover. Mr. Warner laughed.

"Not bad, is he?" he said. "I bred him myself, and he's carried me through many a long day and never seemed tired—and I've never been able to say that of any other horse. Good old Conqueror!" He swung to the ground and patted the grey's neck, and Conqueror put his head against him. "Well, young man, and how have you been getting on? Did Merle desert you?"

"I'm afraid she may have thought I deserted her, Mr. Warner," Dick said, reddening a little. "I got talking here, and

I clean forgot she had stayed behind. I hope she isn't offended."

"He was helping me with the mare beyant, sir," said O'Mara. "An' 'tis the fine help he was—that black imp Jimmy had me an' the mare desthroyed with his clumsiness."

"Good man!" said Mr. Warner, nodding at Dick approvingly. "I'm glad Merle didn't leave you alone. We'll soon make it all square with her. Did she show you all round?"

Dick grinned.

"We didn't get very far," he said. "We just came by the meat houses here, and then we stopped. You see, the bay mare was very interesting."

"I see," said Mr. Warner, inwardly wondering why the mare seemed to have failed to interest his daughter. "Well, shall we have a look round now?"

They left the horses to O'Mara, and went down the hill to the creek, where an hydraulic ram conserved the flow of the water and ensured an ample supply for the household. There was a great storage dam—a miniature lake, indeed, whereon swam many strange waterfowl. A dinghy was moored to a tiny landing stage, and there was a bathing box, with a good spring-board projecting over the deepest part. The lake was fringed with trees. Beyond them was the vegetable garden, where a stolid Chinaman gave them a friendly greeting, as he worked among his well-tended beds; and then came a high

green hedge, through a gateway in which they passed to the wide lawns and gay flower beds surrounding the house itself. Everywhere there were great trees, and the whole impression was of space and shade and beauty. A tennis court, where the twins and Bobby were playing a tennis of their own, with forgotten balls, lay to the east; the players uttered loud shrieks of joy at the sight of the new-comers, and fled to meet them, pursued by their protesting black nurse.

Thereafter the tour continued, with Bobby clinging to Dick's hand, and with Mr. Warner and Mr. Lester each in undisputed possession of a twin, while nanna followed disconsolately in the rear.

"It's a rambling old place," Mr. Warner said. "We began with two rooms, and every drop of water had to be carried up from the creek in buckets. The windmills do it all now, and I've an oil engine that pumps our supply if the wind fails us."

"You added a good bit to your two rooms," said Mr. Lester, laughing.

"Well—rather. Of course, there's no architecture about it; we just planted rooms wherever we needed them. That big shed is for the black girls; the men have a camp on the other side of the creek. That"—he pointed with his pipe stem—"is Macleay's cottage; the store is close by. The building connecting with the house by that covered gallery is the children's special preserve—school-room, play-room and den. They can make as much noise there as they like—and they generally do! That's the barracks—the bachelors' quarters—beyond the tennis court. I've generally two or three jackeroos on the place, and there are beds there for any stray

man who happens along. The stock yards are on the far side of the stables; I'm a bit proud of my yards. The forge and blacksmith's store are near them. The new-looking building is, of course, the garage; the car is a recent toy."

"Do you like it better than horses, Mr. Warner?" queried Dick.

"No," said his host, explosively. "I wouldn't give my old Conqueror for a dozen cars! Still, it makes a tremendous difference; we really were pretty well cut off from civilisation before we had it. As it is we seldom get a mail more than once a fortnight, and our stores come up twice a year, by bullock wagons or donkey teams. But we can get down to the railway fairly easily now, if we want to, and we can get a doctor in eight or ten hours. That feeling makes life much easier to a woman."

Mr. Lester pulled at his pipe.

"Do you reflect, Dick," he said, "that we've been accustomed to think ourselves quite in the country at Kurrajong?"

"My word, yes!" said Dick. "Three miles out—and we reckon we're bush whackers! Makes you feel small, doesn't it, father?"

"It makes me feel suburban," said his father, laughing. "And that's a thing I never expected to feel."

Mr. Warner gave his big, comfortable laugh.

"Come and see old Macleay's domain," he said.

They found the storekeeper busy supplying the wants of the two stockmen; men camped in huts five miles from the homestead. A red blanket—"burned the best one, goin' to sleep with the pipe alight," explained one—shirts, boots, a dog-collar, tobacco, tinned fish and fruit, cartridges, boiled sweets, writing-paper, for the younger—"Engaged, 'e is!" was the explanation from his mate—a comb, a jack-knife, a box of pills, and some hair-oil. The pile on the counter grew, and the brown, silent men gazed at it with the satisfaction of children; finally wandering round the store and selecting various articles that they did not want at all, for the mere pleasure of buying. Finally they sauntered off, asking Mr. Macleay to send out their purchases by the ration-cart.

"First time those laddies have been in for three months," said the storekeeper, after greeting the new-comers. "They canna get whisky, and they must knock down their cheque somehow. 'Tis a harmless enough dissipation—bullseyes and hair-oil! But these mouth-organs were their greatest finds. There'll be great serenading of the dingoes and 'possums wi' those!"

"There'll be a split in the camp, I should think," said Mr. Warner, laughing. "One will want to play 'Swanee River,' and the other 'Camptown Races,' and it will end in a fight!"

"Aweel, there's country enough where they are for them to get out o' hearin' of each ither," Macleay said. "Happen they'll agree to play duets. What do you think of our store, Maister Lester?"

"I think it's ripping," said Dick, with enthusiasm.

"I had no idea you had such a stock as this," Mr. Lester remarked, looking round the big building.

"Oh, it's necessary," Mr. Warner said. "We're a kind of outpost of civilisation—even for the station wants, and for the blacks we need to stock a lot of goods, and the men are far more contented if they can get the oddments they need—and some that they don't need! There are lots of things here that ordinarily we wouldn't dream of keeping, but that some of the men ask for them—mouth organs, for example. They get the things almost at cost price, and they can pick up some dainties that aren't included in the station rations."

"Why, you've a regular chemist's shop in this corner," said Mr. Lester.

"That's the maist popular corner of the store," said Macleay. "Pills—ye've no idea how the bushman loves pills; any new brand tempts them. I think they eat them for dessert! Patent medicines of every kind—hair oil—soap; 'tis as much as my life is worth not to have everything on hand. There's a few likes books—I keep a lot of cheap novels; and they're fair terrors for a Bulletin, or any ither weekly paper. Sweets are low at the moment, but the stores wagons will be up soon and then there'll be a rush in from the out stations! If you're here then, Maister Lester, I'll tak' ye on as junior clerk and salesman!"

"If it's sweets, I'd like that!" grinned Dick.

"Do you let the blacks in here?" asked Mr. Lester.

"No; they have their own store for baccy, cheap cloth and a few other things. You see, they don't deal in money at all; they get goods as wages. And it's no good dangling temptation before their thieving eyes. Also, even with an honest and quiet tribe like this, there's risk of information leaking to tribes that are not so quiet."

"Do you ever have any trouble?"

"Hardly ever. Sometimes a raiding party comes down to the out station from the north, and we get a few cattle speared. But they've a wholesome fear of us; every stockman is armed in that part of the run, and cartridges are part of the regular ration issue. I don't let any man work alone in a lonely place, and indeed I like three to camp together if possible. But it's two years since we had any bother," finished Mr. Warner, "and I think the blacks have come to regard us as too far south to be good hunting ground."

A bell rang loudly from the house—so suddenly that Dick jumped.

"Did you think that was a raiding party?" queried his host. "Well, it used to be the signal for that; only then you wouldn't forget hearing its ring. It can make a very tolerable din in the hands of an active person. Now it's reduced to a polite tinkle, and it means lunch. Come along, or we shall have Mrs. Warner sending a search party for us; so long, Macleay!" He hurried them hospitably towards the house.

CHAPTER X.

THE NARRUNG TRIBE.

"Coming down to see the blacks' camp, mother?" Dick put a head in at the open window of the room where his mother sat talking to Mrs. Warner.

"Do," said the latter, putting down her sewing. "Are the others going, Dick?"

"Mr. Warner and father are waiting. They sent me in."

"Well, we'll all go, if you are not too tired, Mrs. Lester," Mrs. Warner said. "It isn't a long walk."

"I should like it of all things," said Mrs. Lester. "Run for my hat, Dick, please. May we take that nice fat Bobby?—and Merle?"

"Bobby, certainly—he adores the camp. But Merle had better stay—she's in an unfortunate kind of mood," said her mother, with a little sigh. "I tried to get her to go out for a ride with Dick, but she wouldn't. She's very difficult at times."

"Oh, she will grow out of it," Mrs. Lester said, comfortably. "Some children don't like strangers—and I

honestly think that a good deal of Merle's trouble is shyness. Don't worry about her, Mrs. Warner."

"I try not to, but she's rather a problem"; and Mrs. Warner's kind face was clouded. "Dick is so nice with her that it is a shame for her to treat him badly."

"Oh, Dick is all right——" Mrs. Lester broke off as her son came running back with her hat, and with Bobby in close attendance. He swung the little fellow upon his back and galloped off with him, Bobby drumming his heels delightedly on his sides, and the two mothers following.

The well-worn footpath they took led them away from the homestead, on the far side from the lake. It snaked through the grass of the home paddock—no black fellow ever makes a straight track—and then turned down a hill towards a bend of the creek, where, half a mile below the house, the camp was situated. The place looked sleepy enough as the visitors came down to it in the afternoon sunshine. Most of the men were away hunting, and a good many of the lubras were in the scrub looking for yams and berries, or gathering lily pods in the lagoon, a wide swamp with stretches of deeper water, that gleamed a mile down the creek. The miserable-looking dogs that always hang about a blacks' camp woke the echoes with sharp barking as the visitors approached; and from the tumble-down wurleys of bark and interlaced boughs came the blacks, men and women, while children of every age suddenly swarmed into view.

"There's old Tarwan—he's the Chief," remarked Mr. Warner.

A tall old fellow came to meet them, giving them a courteous enough greeting in his own language, which the Warners spoke as well as they did their own. They shook hands with him, and the Lesters followed suit.

"He says you are welcome," translated Mr. Warner.

Mr. Lester smiled and said, "Thank you," and produced a large parcel of coarse tobacco which he had brought from the store. It made a great impression upon the tribe, who uttered guttural ejaculations of pleasure, and expressed the opinion that he was a great chief. From his pockets came a few handfuls of sweets for a scramble for the children—but it was a scramble in which the entire camp joined, even old Tarwan finding it impossible to refrain from diving for a brandy-ball that rolled to his very feet; while the other men pursued the sweets as whole-heartedly as any picaninny. When the hunt was over the camp was on very good terms with the new-comers.

The wurleys were pitched here and there, with no attempt at order, Tarwan's standing a little apart from the others. There was no attempt at architecture either—most of them were lean-tos, affording scarcely any protection and looking as though a gust of wind would blow them away. Here and there smouldered the embers of a fire, over which crouched a few very old men and women. Mr. Warner had brought a little tobacco for them, and their bleared old eyes lit with something like delight as they grasped at the gifts. Some concealed the tobacco hurriedly in their bags. A few brought out short black pipes and prepared happily to smoke.

"You can't do much for an old black fellow," Mr. Warner said. "They have only three wants—warmth, food and baccy. The Government grant of blankets supplies most of the warmth, and this tribe lives well enough not to let its old folk be hungry. Baccy is the one real luxury, and there's no doubt it eases old age enormously. I generally carry a few bits for the old folk."

"Money is no good to them, I suppose?" asked Mrs. Lester.

"No, thank goodness, so you don't get the perpetual whine of 'Gib it tickpen,' that is always on the lips of more civilised blacks. If they get an occasional coin it's only valued as an ornament," and he pointed to a young lubra who proudly wore a penny as a locket.

"And do they stay here always?"

"Oh, no. They go off, perhaps in the summer, or if game gets scarce. You don't get any warning. One day they'll be here as usual, the next the camp will be deserted and the tribe 'gone bush.' But they always come back, especially when it's near 'blanket time.' Then the women go fairly far afield for the rushes and grasses they want for their weaving. These women are quite industrious—we can get you anything you'd like in the way of woven mats or baskets or bags."

"They won't do much of that work in the eastern states," said Mr. Lester. "It is becoming a lost art."

"Yes—a pity; for much of it is beautiful work. But the civilisation of cities kills every decent impulse in them. To like the aboriginal you want him as we have him here—neither civilised nor wild. Once he gets to know the meaning of either money or drink he's done for."

There was a cluster of picaninnies round Bobby, staring at him with great, wondering eyes. The little fellow, rosy cheeked and fair haired, in his white linen suit, was a curious contrast to the black babies, most of them innocent of a rag of clothing. Bobby was enjoying himself hugely—making occasional dashes at them, at which they would scatter in every direction, shrieking with laughter.

"The twins were a particular source of interest to them," Mrs. Warner said. "They used to come to the house in flocks, begging to be allowed to see the 'two-pfeller picaninny'—and so many wanted to touch them that we had to make an absolute rule against it for fear the poor babies would be poked to death. Even now I hardly dare to bring them near the camp—not that they will touch them without leave, but they make a ring round them, everyone trying to see them, and blackfellow in the mass is rather overpowering."

"That's so," said Mr. Warner, with feeling. "'Possum fat is one of the chief toilet articles of the camp."

"Ugh," said Mrs. Lester, and shuddered.

"What do the men do?" asked Dick.

"Mighty little. They hunt, of course, whenever necessary, but they're lazy even over hunting. If a gin will keep one supplied with any other food he won't go hunting until he actually craves for meat. They make their weapons—spears, throwing sticks and boomerangs—but they are by no means as skilful with them as they used to be. They like to get a job on the station, but only a few manage to keep their jobs. They can't stand the regular employment. Still, even if they go back to the tribe, they don't forget all their teaching, and we can always count on them for odd help in a time of stress—a big muster, a bush fire, or any other emergency."

"I have one as a stockman," said Mr. Lester. "Very good boy, too."

"Yes. When you get a good boy with stock he's a treasure. It's the work they like best, and they are born riders—but apt to be cruel with horses. We have to keep a sharp eye on them in that respect." He turned to the old chief, and spoke to him in his own language. "Can any of your young men show us how they throw their weapons, Tarwan?"

Tarwan hesitated.

"Nearly all my young men are away," he answered. "But there's one who can throw the boomerang."

"All right; let's see him."

There was a little delay before a tall young fellow appeared from one of the wurleys, with three or four boomerangs in his hand. He walked to the edge of the camp,

where the green of the creek bank gave place to tussocky plain, and then, poising himself suddenly, flung one of his weapons, apparently with little effort. The boomerang seemed to move slowly at first—then it appeared to gather way in mid air, whirling round and round until it turned and came back with a low, dropping flight, falling almost at its thrower's feet. Before it had returned he flung the remaining weapons, one after another, so that they seemed to be leaping and pursuing each other in the air, making amazing circles and dives. Two came back to the black fellow so truly that he caught them in his hand. A crow flew slowly across to a tree; he watched it for a moment, and then flung a boomerang that caught it just as it alighted, and brought it like a stone to the ground. A chorus of delight arose from the camp, and half a dozen small boys dashed to pick up the bird. The visitors applauded energetically, and complimented Tarwan.

"Well, I've seen a lot of boomerang throwing, but it always beats me," said Mr. Warner. "Some of these fellows seem to be able to make the blessed thing do anything they like after it leaves the hand. Kind of wireless, I believe! Well, Mrs. Lester, have you seen enough of the gentle aborigine for today?"

They bade good-bye to old Tarwan, whose extremely hideous face relaxed into a toothless smile as they shook hands with him. An escort of small boys accompanied them half-way up the hill, until sent back by Mr. Warner, who evidently was a great and terrible being in their eyes, for they scuttled like rabbits when he spoke to them.

Tea awaited them on the wide verandah, with Mrs. Macleay anxiously watching for their arrival, lest her hot cakes should be toughened by waiting. Presently three jackeroos drifted in, tall and brown and silent—two of them young Englishmen gaining colonial experience, and the third a Perth boy, not long emancipated from school. They had been camping at an out station, helping to muster some young stock.

"The black boys out there are keeping pretty close to camp," drawled one of the English lads. "They won't talk, but old Bill Summers says he believes some of the Northern blacks aren't far off."

"Is he taking any extra precautions?" Mr. Warner asked. Summers was an old hand, and could be trusted to deal with any emergency.

"Well, he can't hear anything definite, so he isn't really bothering. But you can be sure he's keeping a wary eye on the cattle."

"Yes. I'm very sure Bill is," said Mr. Warner laughing. "Bill's jumpiness is a family joke where anything black is concerned; the men have a story that he found a black beetle once among some stores and fired his gun at it before they could stop him! These rumours of blacks are always cropping up, but, as I told you, it's two years since we had any trouble."

"All the same, it's a good thing to have a man constantly on the jump," commented Mr. Lester.

"Oh, the best thing possible. Bill's so jumpy that I never have to be jumpy at all!" Mr. Warner answered. "He saves me any amount of worry. How are the cattle looking, Downes?"

"First rate, Bill says. I thought you'd rather have his evidence than mine!" answered the jackeroo, who had a lively sense of his own limitations. "He's awfully pleased with them. The feed out there is better than usual; even the men's horses are in great form. We had some good shooting, too; Bill was anxious that we should fire as many cartridges as possible, as a warning to possible trespassers."

"Very sound," commented his employer. "No," he added hastily. "I don't mean that for a pun! You needn't look as though you suspected me, Dick. Have some more cake?"

"No, thank you," said Dick, laughing.

"When I was a boy I wanted more cake all the time," Mr. Warner said. "Well, if you won't, how about some tennis? You three boys ought to be ready for a game after a week in the wilds."

The jackeroos were very ready, and said so as one man. They trooped off to the court, taking Dick with them.

"You're not really worried about the blacks, Robert?" his wife asked.

"My dear, no! Old Bill will send a boy in to me long before there's any need to worry. Of course I'll keep in touch with him, but my own impression is that the northern tribes

have long ago given us up as too hot to handle." He rose, stretching his great form; like many very big men he was constitutionally restless. "Come on, Lester, and we'll go and see if these youngsters have learned as much tennis as you and I have forgotten!"

CHAPTER XI.

SOMETHING OLD AND QUIET.

The horses were mustered in the homestead yard—twenty or thirty, ranging from Conqueror, towering over the mob, to the children's ponies—Merle's fiery little black, Bobby's quieter bay, and a diminutive Sheltie of ten hands, whose mission in life at present was to draw a tiny carriage sacred to the twins. It was not yet seven o'clock, and the sun was slowly mounting into a sky of cloudless blue. Mr. Warner stood by the rail, looking over the restless horses. He glanced round, hearing a step.

"Hullo, my daughter!" he said cheerfully. "Coming out with the crowd?"

"Oh, yes, I s'pose so," Merle answered. "Where are we going, Daddy?"

"Oh, just for a ride round, to show the Lesters something of the place," he said. "We might send the cart out to meet us

at Gaffney's Lagoon, and have lunch there—it's as good a place as any, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think so," Merle answered. "Will you ride Conqueror, daddy?"

"No, I'll give Bayard a turn. He's pretty fresh, and needs riding. So does Agility, by the way. I think I'll let young Downes go to give the horse exercise; he bucked with one of the black boys on Monday, but Downes can handle him. You'll ride Olaf, of course, and we'll put Mr. Lester on the horse he had yesterday—he liked him; and Mrs. Lester on Delight. What shall we give Dick?"

Merle hesitated.

"Well, he said yesterday he couldn't ride much," she said.

Mr. Warner looked surprised.

"Really?" he said. "I should have thought he'd be pretty useful on a horse—he must have had plenty of riding. Are you sure?"

"Well, I asked him, and he said, 'A little,' and afterwards he was saying he didn't feel anxious if he was on anything old and quiet." Merle's eyes did not meet her father's. She affected to be very interested in a black mare near her.

"Oh, if that's the case, he'd better have something of that kind," said her father, looking disappointed. "I wouldn't have thought he was like that. Let's see—he'd better have old Sergeant; he won't play any tricks with him, unless indeed he

goes to sleep." He whistled to a man in the stable yard, who came across to them, and gave him the orders for O'Mara. "Nine o'clock sharp, mind," the squatter finished. "Come on, Merle. I want to go round the new Ayrshires before breakfast."

Merle trotted off beside her father, completely happy for the first time since they had left the station on their eastern trip. This was like old times, when he had always wanted her for his mate; before other places and other people—especially Dick Lester—had come between him and his well-worn routine. He talked away to her cheerily, pointing out the various beauties of the new Ayrshire heifers, and discussing station matters generally, just as he had been always wont to do. Merle's face lost its scowl, and became almost merry. As they turned back to breakfast she felt even charitable to Dick. After all, he would soon be gone back to Victoria, and then she and her father would settle down to the good old ways again.

It did not worry her at all that she had arranged a dull ride for Dick. Sergeant did not shine as a hack, she knew; he had been "general utility" horse so long, ridden by all sorts and conditions of people, black and white, that his paces had become curiously jumbled, and his one ardent desire was to pause and sleep. In her own heart Merle knew quite well that Dick could ride; he had talked to her of Tinker, his own beloved pony, and no one who had seen him handling the maddened bay mare the day before could have imagined that his preference was really for "something old and quiet." Partly she meant to "pay him out" for openly preferring O'Mara's company to hers; partly she wanted to keep him

from mounting any further in her father's regard. "Daddy's quite silly enough about him as it is," was her mental comment. "He won't think half as much about him if he thinks he can't ride." Therefore she went cheerfully to breakfast, certain that Dick was not likely to shine on a horse on which Merle herself would have remarked that she would not be seen dead at a pig fair.

O'Mara meanwhile was puzzled. Certain questions put to Dick the day before had satisfied him that the boy could ride! He whistled in astonishment when the message came to him that Dick's mount was to be the ancient Sergeant. He rubbed the horse down himself, and saddled him, still pondering the matter. There was something he did not understand.

The horses stood ready saddled, tied to a fence in the shade of a row of grevillea trees, when Dick came out after breakfast. He was aching to be in the saddle; the milkman's pony had been his one means of a ride during the long winter term at school, and he longed to feel the creak of the leather and the movement of a good horse under him again. Meeting a stable-boy, he stopped him.

"Do you know which I'm to ride?"

The boy jerked his head towards the horses.

"Bay 'orse there, under the tree," he said casually; and added with a grin, "Look out 'e don't sling yer orf, mind."

"Right-oh," said Dick, grinning. He walked towards the horses; and it never occurred to him that the "bay 'orse under

the tree" meant old Sergeant. That ornament to his species, with drooping head and slumbrous eye, was probably waiting to go on a station errand; he looked like it. But the boy's description equally applied to Agility, and Dick went over to him without hesitation.

The stirrups were too long, and he shortened them while Agility tried to walk round himself in a way that made it sufficiently clear that he was very fresh. He was a light bay, half thorough-bred; not more than fifteen hands in height and very compact. At the moment he was like a restless mass of steel springs enclosed in a satin skin. Dick slipped off his halter and talked to him for a moment, patting his neck. Then he put the reins gently over his head and was in the saddle with a movement so quick that the horse had not time to realise it.

It was just at that moment that Mr. Warner and Mr. Lester, with Merle beside them, came strolling across from the house. The big man was in the midst of a sentence when his eye fell on the line of horses, and he broke off with a startled exclamation.

"Good God—is O'Mara mad! That horse will throw the boy!"

"Where?—throw Dick?" Mr. Lester gave a little laugh. "Oh, I don't think so."

Mr. Warner did not hear him. He broke into a run, calling agitatedly:

"Steady, Dick—hold him! Let me get to his head!"

The words were lost on Dick. Agility, feeling the light weight on his back, was dancing sideways, giving playful little kicks and trying to get his head down. Dick's hands gave to the strain on the bit to a certain point; then they were steel, and the horse knew it. He reared suddenly, striking out with his forefeet, so nearly upright that even Mr. Lester, who had no nerves where his son's horsemanship was concerned, caught his breath. Agility came down, with all his hoofs firmly planted; stood motionless for a moment, and then began to buck.

Dick sat him lightly, giving to the furious plunges just enough to save himself from jar. He knew quite well how the horse felt—he felt rather like it himself, on this beautiful spring morning, when the very air was like a draught of wine. It was not the first time he had sat on a buck; it would not be the last, if Dick knew anything about it. So he sat quietly, his hands well down and his shoulders back. Mr. Warner broke into a sudden shout of laughter.

"Oh, Merle, you duffer! So you thought he couldn't ride!"

"Who? Dick?" asked Mr. Lester, in a voice of utter amazement.

Merle said nothing. She stood with her black brows drawn together, watching the slight, erect figure on the plunging bay. Agility had nearly bucked himself out; it was evident to him that Dick did not mean to leave the saddle, so he came gradually to a standstill, while the boy patted his neck and

spoke to him soothingly. Dick glanced over and caught Mr. Warner's eye.

"May I take him round the paddock? He's just spoiling for a gallop!"

"Anywhere you like," said Mr. Warner, resignedly, still laughing.

Dick gave Agility his head, and the horse went off with a flying bound. The gentle slope of the hill ended in a long stretch of flat—good galloping ground, firm and sound, with the spring grass like a carpet underfoot. They swept round it at a hard gallop, keeping near the fence. Then a fallen tree tempted Dick, and he put the bay at it. Agility asked for nothing better. His ears pricked daintily; he shortened his stride, and flew the log like a bird. O'Mara, watching from the stable yard, gave a hoarse cackle of laughter.





"His ears pricked daintily; he shortened his stride, and flew the log like a bird."

Dick Lester of Kurrajong

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"His ears pricked daintily; he shortened his stride, and flew the log like a bird."

"Is it that one you'd be putting on old Sergeant, now?" he demanded. "Yerra, ye might do worse than take him on as horsebreaker!"

"I might, indeed," laughed Mr. Warner. "Oh, Merle, aren't you easily taken in!"

But Merle had disappeared. Endurance, for her, ended when Dick put Agility at the big log; she turned and scurried indoors, her heart hot with shame and disgust. She had been

made to look and feel a fool—and it was Dick Lester's fault! Dick, who was always in her way. She hid her burning face in her room, and did not reappear until all the party had mounted, and her father was shouting for her with angry impatience. It was the final touch that she passed old Sergeant, hastily let go, and slumberously cropping the grass; while Mr. Downes, on a fresh horse, capered airily in the distance beside Agility, to whose back Dick was still glued.

Nobody bothered about Merle. Bobby was as close as he could get to Dick, while Mr. Warner and Mr. Lester were riding beside Mrs. Lester. There was nothing for Merle to do but fall in behind them, where she had the doubtful pleasure of hearing her father tell the story of the morning, and of his careful plans for Dick. It was Mrs. Lester who looked round after a time and took pity on the unhappy face, checking her mare that she might ride beside her. The charm of her voice chased away some of Merle's ill-humour; but the sting of the morning remained.

They passed a number of young blacks from the tribe, coming in after a night's hunting, laden with game—wallaby, 'possum, bandicoot and gerboa, all speared or killed with the throwing stick. One man had got three or four bright-coloured parrots with his boomerang, as well as a beautiful black cockatoo. Mr. Warner stopped to talk to them, complimenting them on their good luck, and one opened a skin bag and showed him other prizes in the shape of a fat, stumpy-tailed lizard, a young iguana, and—greatest delicacy of all—half a dozen of the big tree grubs that the black will go far out of his way to secure.

"People say they're quite good—but I don't feel like experimenting on them," remarked Mrs. Lester, wrinkling her pretty nose as she looked at the plump insects.

"I've been very glad to eat them when I ran short of tucker in the bush," Mr. Warner said. "They're really good, too—if you grill them they're very like chicken. But I'll admit that their appearance is against them."

The blacks were in a hurry to get back to camp; it was long since they had brought with them such promise of solid feasting. They said good-bye, and set off with their long, noiseless stride—ball of the foot down first and then the heel, as is the way of natives nearly all the world over.

"Those fellows could go through the bush, with dead leaves and bark and dry sticks lying all over the place, and you'd never hear them," Mr. Warner said. "I've watched 'em sometimes stalking musk duck in the lagoons. They tie a bundle of rushes over their heads and faces, and wade neck-deep in the water, zig-zagging here and there, perhaps taking half an hour to cover fifty yards. Sometimes they get near enough to grab the ducks under water. Sometimes they have to straighten up in a hurry and get them with the throwing stick. But it's mighty seldom they fail to get them."

"Do they supply you with game?" Mr. Lester asked.

"Yes, to a great extent. We can nearly always depend on them for certain things—fish, wild geese, and duck and teal and quail. Of course there are a good many of their delicacies that we don't touch—and we had some difficulty in

persuading them that we really prefer game fresh! Payment is in goods or baccy, and they soon become pretty shrewd at driving a bargain. We've had to adopt a regular tariff for ordinary things."

"They are good-looking fellows, as aborigines go," remarked Mr. Lester.

"Yes, far before the eastern tribes. They're taller and stronger, and their standard of intelligence is higher. Many of the piccaninnies are quite pretty little chaps—you saw them yesterday. Of course they all become abominably ugly as they grow old. Their features spread and thicken until they are positively repulsive. I don't believe there's any human being less attractive than an ancient Australian black gin!"

Ahead, Dick and young Downes were galloping, picking out a natural steeplechase course over fallen tree trunks, while Bobby followed as best he could on his pony, delighted when he could make him hop over smaller obstacles. Merle looked at them enviously. She knew her pony, Olaf, could jump anything in the paddock, and yet she was out of it, condemned by her own ill-temper to ride sedately with the elders. Her father glanced down at her curiously.

"What's up, Merle? Why don't you join in?"

"Don't want to, thanks," Merle muttered.

"Well, you are turning into an old woman," he said contemptuously.

Merle flushed and said nothing.

"I believe I'm not too old to jump," said Mrs. Lester. "Those logs are very tempting. Can Delight manage them, Mr. Warner?"

"She'll jump whatever you ask her to," he said. "If you'd really like a few jumps, Mrs. Lester, we'll give you a lead."

"Then come on, Merle, and we'll show them we're not the inferior sex," laughed Mrs. Lester. "I can't let Dick get superior!"

The two big horses thundered off ahead, and close behind them came Olaf and Delight, each capering with joy at the sudden gallop. In and out they went among the trees, finding natural jumps everywhere and an occasional clear space where they could put on speed. The noise of the hoofs came to Dick and the other boys as they circled round the great paddock, so wide that the fences were out of sight. Dick shouted with joy, and bore across until he was riding abreast of his mother, yelling encouragement at each big log. He was more than ever sure that nobody had ever had a mother like her!

Merle shot ahead of them suddenly, and set to work to overhaul her father and Mr. Lester. Her pony was a beautiful black, full of fire and breeding; he jumped like a deer, and took his logs almost at racing pace. Merle sat him as though she were part of him—leaning forward a little at each leap, and lifting him at the log with little inarticulate words of encouragement. Gradually he lessened the distance between him and the great horses in front, making up by quickness in jumping more than the handicap of his shorter stride. He

forged ahead at last, so stealthily that they did not realise they were being left behind, and then Merle sat down to ride him in earnest, and soon was far in the lead.

Agility put an end to the steeplechase by bolting. His feelings became too much for him altogether, and he suddenly swerved from a log, and dashed through the timber at such a pace that Dick was only saved from overhanging boughs by lying flat on his neck—in which position he could do little to check him. The others pulled up, in some anxiety, to watch him. He emerged from the trees safely, and shot across the tussocky plain beyond, where Dick at length got him in hand, and he returned more sedately, except for an occasional irrepressible caper. On the way they overtook Merle, walking Olaf back to the other horses.

"My word, that pony's a beauty!" said Dick, looking at Olaf with open respect. "And I say, you can ride!"

The black dog that had sat so long on Merle's shoulders was gone for the moment—routed by the joy of the gallop. She gave the boy something like a smile.

"He's a darling, isn't he?" she said, patting Olaf's arching neck. "He can beat any horse on the place at jumping—you ask dad if he can't."

"Well, I guess I've seen for myself this morning," Dick answered. "This chap's not too bad, either, is he? He can't beat your pony, though." He grinned. "Didn't we have a ripping go! I'm jolly glad I wasn't on old Sergeant."

The brightness suddenly faded from Merle's face. Her eyes dropped before Dick's merry ones. To her own amazement, a lump came in her throat.

"I say, what's up?" blurted Dick.

She managed to meet his eyes with a great effort.

"It was my fault," she said, speaking very low. "I mean, I worked to get you put on Sergeant. I told dad you couldn't ride."

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Dick, in utter astonishment—too amazed to be indignant. "But why?"

"I don't know." She flushed hotly. "Oh, because I'm a pig, I suppose. I'm sorry."

It would have taken more than Dick's easy-going nature could assume to be stern.

"Well, it doesn't matter, anyhow," he said. "You only made a mistake."

"No. I didn't make a mistake," Merle said shrilly. "I knew you could ride all right. I—I told you I was a pig!" A large tear rolled down her cheek, to her intense shame. She felt for a handkerchief, and, finding none, rubbed her cheek on Olaf's mane.

Dick pondered the situation gravely.

"I guess, if you're a pig, it hurts yourself more than anyone else," he said at length. "I say, why don't you knock off being one and be pals? I'll help."

At the moment he forgot altogether that he had no real desire to be "pals" with her at all. But no boy could help being rather sorry for this small, incomprehensible person, with the miserable face. And there was no doubt she could ride!

Merle swallowed twice before she could command her voice. Then she merely managed to mumble "All right"—and immediately found her hand shaken in a manly fashion.

"Well, I guess we'd better canter," said Dick, thankfully putting an end to the situation. "Those other people are getting too far ahead." They cemented their bargain in the way most acceptable to both of them, by a quick sprint across the plain, to join the main body of the expedition.

The paddocks immediately surrounding the homestead were comparatively clear, except for belts of timber left standing for shelter for the cattle. The soil was good, and long ago, when the ground had been cleared and burnt off, English grasses had been sown, making a firm sward. But as the riders went further, the country gradually assumed more and more of a bush aspect, and the good soil changed. They passed over stony ridges, with red rock outcropping from the short, sparse grass and ironstone rubble that necessitated careful riding. The trees grew smaller in character; there were patches of mulga, tall whip-trees with slender tops curving beneath their load of little green flowers like berries;

banksias covered with honey-laden blossoms and all a-flutter with the wings of honey-eaters, whose long, curved beaks plunged deep into the sticky flowers. Everywhere there were flowers. They passed swampy patches, full of the fragrance of wild boronia, and murmurous with the hum of innumerable wild bees; near at hand, ti-tree, with flowers of many colours—some scarlet, some pink, and some of tender green and white. There were curious plants with leaves apparently made of flannel, and others bearing blossoms like balls of red and blue down. Later, Mr. Warner said, the plains would blaze with a dozen kinds of everlastings, the crimson seeds of the native hop would vie with the trailing black and scarlet of Sturt's desert pea, and the cottonwool berries, with their white eye would be everywhere. Rose-coloured mesembryanthemums would trail a gorgeous blanket over the loose granite on the stony ridges—"beastly stuff it is to slip on when you're galloping after kangaroo," added the squatter, with a callous disregard of beauty.

There were birds in every belt of timber; parrakeets, their brilliant colours flashing in the sun as they went screaming overhead; parrots, more brilliant still; cockatoos, black and white, and a host of tiny feathered people, twittering among the blossoms that garlanded the bare earth. Now and then a curlew stepped daintily away, out of sight like a grey shadow, but sure to be ceaselessly watching the intruders from its hiding place. Wild turkeys passed overhead, in swift flight, or black swans, spread fan-like in the sky, the leader ahead, winging their way to some distant lagoon. They saw a group of emu out on a plain—the great birds made off at their approach, their heavy feet sounding almost like a horse's hoofs on the hard ground.

It was after midday when they came in sight of Gaffney's Lagoon, a broad stretch of water named after a stockman who had been attacked by blacks while camping near the shore.

"A good man, Gaffney," said Mr. Warner; "one of the best hands I ever had. He was looking for some lost cattle, and the blacks got round him quietly one night. Poor old Gaffney—he must have put up a good fight, for they didn't get him until he had used up all his ammunition. He had been in Canada, in the North-West Mounted Police, and he could shoot quicker than any man I ever saw."

"They killed him?" asked Dick, wide-eyed.

"Oh, yes, poor old chap. There were nearly twenty spears in him. But there were dead blacks all round him—he had a good escort to the next world. I don't think he'd missed a single shot."

"A pity to lose a man like that," said Mr. Lester.

"Yes, it was bad luck, though it was the sort of finish he had always hoped to get. I used to have great yarns with Gaffney, and the one end he didn't want was to die in his bed. That fellow Stevenson would have appealed to him, with his 'Under the wide and starry sky.' And he did good, even in his death, for his last fight gave the blacks such a wholesome dread of the white man's capabilities that they sheered off for a long time. That was fifteen years ago, and I don't think they ever came so close in again." Mr. Warner pointed ahead with his whip. "Do you see our camp fire, Mr. Lester?"

A trail of blue smoke was lazily rising under some trees near the head of the lagoon. Near it was a cart, with a couple of donkeys hobbled close by, and across the rough grass came a light buggy, drawn by a fine pair of browns.

"The missus is just on time," said Mr. Warner. "Let's get there to welcome her."

They put their horses to a canter, and arrived at the camp fire just before the buggy came up, Mrs. Warner driving herself, while the twinses, spotless in white, were with difficulty restrained by nanna, whose smile was like a streak of ivory across an ebony surface, as she clung to each wriggling small body.

"The sight of you has a most demoralising effect on them," said Mrs. Warner to her husband, laughing. "They have been quite good until they saw you, and since then nanna has her hands full. Be quiet, twinses, and sit still!" It was noticeable that nobody ever thought or spoke of the Warner babies either singly or by name; being inseparable both in companionship and wickedness, it was not necessary to allude to them as anything but "the twinses." Dick had an idea that they were boy and girl, but as they were always dressed alike, and resembled each other so closely that he was quite unable to tell one from the other, even that was uncertain.

Mr. Warner lifted his restless infants out of the buggy, holding them tightly until nanna was on the ground, and able to resume at least partial control.

"There—keep away from the horses' heels," he said. "Go over and see what old Harry is cooking." The twinses fled tumultuously.

"Harry's an old soldier," Mr. Warner told Mrs. Lester, "and, like most old soldiers, the handiest man on the place. He has a wooden leg, which was interfering very badly with his career as a swagman, when I found him ten years ago; but it never affects his usefulness now. There's nothing he can't or won't tackle, but his particular accomplishment is camp cooking, so I sent him out to fix up lunch for us to-day."

They gave the old man full credit as a cook presently, when they ate the wild turkey, roasted in the ashes, in a jacket of clay, which he had prepared. There were potatoes, also roasted in their jackets, to be followed by flapjacks of surpassing lightness.

"Do you always have banquets like this when you come out on the run?" demanded Mr. Lester. "I'm accustomed to a packet of sandwiches and creek water!"

"My lunches vary," said Mr. Warner, laughing. "They range from turkey, like to-day—but you'll admit this is a special occasion—to yams and grubs, and I've been more thankful for the yams than for the turkey! You see, you're exceedingly hungry before you take to black fellows' tucker, and when you're really hungry you're glad to get anything."

After lunch they went to compliment old Harry, a courtesy he received unmoved, standing stiffly to attention, but inwardly very proud. Then they explored the shores of the

lagoon, when the twinses created a diversion by falling into a pool, in an effort to catch fish which were not there. Mrs. Lester marvelled at the calmness with which Mrs. Warner received her soaked offsprings from the rescuers.

"You might as well wash the mud off them while they're wet, nanna," she told the black nurse, who was agitatedly proclaiming her opinion that "that two-pfeller Mas' Twinses bad babies."

"But, good gracious! how will you manage?" ejaculated Mrs. Lester. "They'll catch their deaths of cold! You must be five miles from home."

Mrs. Warner had risen leisurely.

"Oh, but we know the twinses," she said, laughing. "Their amazing capacity for getting into trouble developed before they could crawl; we never come out without a complete change of clothing for each. If there is fire, or water, or mud—preferably mud—the twinses will get into it. I'll go over to the buggy and help nanna."

"Let me come, too," said Mrs. Lester, jumping up.

That refitting the twinses was no new thing was amply demonstrated by their mother. A clump of bushes, reinforced by the buggy rug as an additional windbreak, formed a dressing-room; from under the seat of the buggy appeared a flat basket with fresh raiment. Nanna appeared presently with her charges, and they were stripped and rubbed down—creating a diversion by contriving to elude even the vigilance

of their mother, and, all unclad, making a dash for liberty. The mothers pursued the gleaming little white bodies and brought them back, wriggling and protesting, to be clothed anew.

"You can't have many dull moments," said Mrs. Lester, hugging a twin.

"I haven't," said Mrs. Warner, dryly. "But then, I never had before they came, so really it doesn't matter much. When you have fifteen or twenty grown-up black babies under you, a couple of small white ones really don't signify!"

The twineses, restored to dry clothes, proved unexpectedly docile, and consented to be taken by nanna to visit an enormous anthill, towering in the distance, a column of dried mud. The elders explored the lagoon and gathered wild flowers, until there seemed some doubt as to whether there would be any room in the buggy for its passengers. Old Harry presently produced tea, with old-time damper, perfectly baked. They gathered near the camp fire again, and back across the paddock, scenting the banquet, came nanna and the twineses.

Merle came up to Dick just as they were preparing to go home.

"I say," she said, speaking with an effort, "you can ride Olaf home if you like."

"Thanks awfully," Dick returned in astonishment. "But I'm all right on Agility—and I know you like Olaf better than

anything."

She hesitated, flushing.

"I'd like you to try him." Suddenly it came to Dick that it would hurt her to be refused.

"All right, it's jolly good of you," he said awkwardly. "Come on, and I'll change the saddles."

Merle helped at that, slipping her saddle off her own pony, and bestowing upon him a surreptitious little pat. No one but herself ever rode him; she knew every inch of him, even, she herself believed, to his thoughts. Nothing would have made Merle agree that horses did not think. She wondered, rather miserably now, what his views were on being handed over to a stranger.

"I've got to," she whispered to him, "for being a pig!"

Dick did not understand anything of this; boy-like, he rather fancied that Merle was offering him her pony to show off his perfections. It would have interested him more to ride Agility; but, being as good-natured as he was dense in these fine matters, he got up on Olaf good temperedly, and had to admit that he was a far more finished hack than his previous mount. Merle looked pleased at his praise.

"He is lovely, isn't he?" she asked. "Daddy bought him at the Perth show; he's won lots of prizes. He and I are awful good mates."

"I'm sure you are," Dick said. "Jolly good of you to let me ride him."

Across the grass Mr. Warner had suddenly gaped in astonishment.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he ejaculated to his wife. "I believe Merle is repenting in style; she's actually put Dick on Olaf. That's in amends for the ride he might have had on old Sergeant, I suppose!"

"Making amends isn't much in Merle's line," said Merle's mother.

"No, so I suppose we should be thankful for any sign of grace. At least, they seem happy enough now—look at them!"

Two small figures on galloping horses dipped down into a grassy hollow, flashed up again on the further side, made for a big log ahead, flew it together, and fled on again across the plain at full speed.

"That's all right," said Mrs. Warner, comfortably. "They can't possibly be bad friends now."

"No. But isn't it characteristic of Merle that although even the fact that he'd saved Bobby's life didn't make her treat him decently, she's reduced to penitence and friendliness by nearly giving him a ride on a bad horse!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE TEN-MILE HUT.

A week went by, and the Lesters found themselves dropping so completely into the life of the western station that it might almost have seemed to be their own home. They applied insistently for work, and got it; Dick and his father were constantly out on the run with Mr. Warner and his men, while Mrs. Lester lent a willing hand within the house, plying a busy needle at Mrs. Warner's perennially overflowing mending basket, and, by way of recreation, embroidering linen smocks for the twineses.

"They'd be happier in sugar bags!" said their father, looking at the dainty garments.

"But I wouldn't get any fun out of sugar bags," protested Mrs. Lester. "It's mere selfishness!"

The twineses adored her, and constantly impeded her work by climbing over her and piling themselves upon her; at which times the matter would generally end by the disappearance of all three into the garden, where, under a big tree, she would tell them stories of fairies and leprechauns until their big eyes grew round with delight. Merle often formed a third listener. She and Mrs. Lester had become great friends, albeit the friendship on Merle's side was a silent one. Speech was never easy to her; her father was the one person to whom she could talk without constraint; and

yet he knew less of her heart than did this woman who had known her but a few weeks.

"I'm really sorry for her," Mrs. Lester said to her husband. "She's just like a chestnut burr; quite sound inside that hard, prickly exterior. It's very bad luck to be born with a shell like that!" So she was unceasing in her efforts to be friends with Merle, and had the satisfaction of seeing the prickles visibly decrease.

As for Dick, nothing troubled him. He bathed at daybreak each morning in the lake with the jackeroos, and added to his learning in the matter of fancy diving, for the Perth boy was a swimmer of note. With them, too, he rode and shot and fished and played tennis, since Mr. Warner gave them a few slack days after their time in camp—"to put on condition," said he. In the long blue days there were expeditions to the out stations, mustering of the cattle, marking and branding clean skins, picnics in the scrub and by the lagoons, and motor runs wherever the roads would allow the big car to go. Dick took lessons in driving from Mr. Warner, and, though his allegiance to horses never wavered, was obliged to admit that there was more in motoring when you happened to be the man at the wheel. There were no dull moments, largely because there were no empty ones; no day was half long enough for all that he wanted to pack into it.

The jackeroos took kindly to the new-comer; he was "only a kid, but a decent kid," Downes said; and he brought a breath of the outer world, with his cheery stories of life at school. He was keen to learn, too, and enjoyed everything so intensely that it was rather fun to have him with them. So

they made him one of them, both in the work and play of the long clear days, and in the star-lit nights when they fished in the lagoon, or went 'possum hunting in the belt of scrub that fringed the creek, or came back from a visit to another station, racing through the long grass with all the nameless thrill and leap of the blood that catches alike horses and riders in a night gallop. Afterwards, when galloping days are over, it is the night rides that come back to us most clearly; memories of scented darkness, with only the clear stars overhead; memories of the moonlight, when the ring-barked gums stood ghost-like, throwing long shadows across the track—shadows over which the racing horses plunged, half-shying, too excited to be more than half afraid. They come back to us, and with them come the sounds of the night: the long howl of a dingo in the ranges, a mopoke's weird cry, or a fox's bark; mingled with the tinkle of a bell on a working bullock, grazing fitfully, the creak of saddle leather and the jingle of bit and stirrup-iron; and over all the hot scents of the dew-wet bush. Dick Lester, being a very ordinary boy, did not talk of these things; did not even frame them into thoughts. But a night ride left him glowing, in mind and body; so that his mother, seeing his shining eyes, understood. The child in Dick was fast giving way to the manhood stirring in him; and Mrs. Lester—bring an ordinary mother—found herself looking ahead, proud and yet regretful, clinging to her baby, and yet eager for all that she hoped for him.

Dick came in one night with the jackeroos to find the elders discussing plans.

"We're going to be civilised to-morrow," Mr. Warner told him. "That is, we're going to put on our best clothes and take the car and go calling—the Harrisons at Mernda have asked us all over. Means starting at eleven and not home until dark."

"Oh," said Dick, his face falling involuntarily. Calls—in best clothes—did not appeal to him; always they seemed to him waste of time, and here in the free western life, with so many new things to do daily, to go calling was little short of sacrilege. Moreover, the ration cart, escorted by the jackeroos, was to go to the out-stations next day, and he had hoped to accompany it. Good manners came to his aid—but his "That will be jolly!" was like flat sodawater.

Mr. Warner laughed.

"Yes, you look as if you thought so!" he said, at which Dick reddened, grinning. "Well, we meant to give you your choice, old man; there's room for you in the car, if you're hankering after society, but if you have such queer taste as to want to stay and take rations out to old Bill Summers, I've no doubt Downes and Stephens and M'Leod will be glad of your company."

"Oh truly?" Dick brightened visibly. "I'd rather stay, if you don't mind."

"I suspected as much," Mr. Warner said, turning to Mrs. Lester. "No use to offer him flesh-pots; old Agility and a job on the run have them beaten every time! All right, then, Dick; you four can get away early. Send your tucker by the

cart, Downes, and you can pick it up in time to lunch at the Ten-Mile."

"I don't fancy we need take any, sir," Downes said, smiling. "Last time we were out with Dick, old Bill made us promise we'd have dinner with him next visit; and Billy Fox was in from his camp three days ago, so we sent him word we'd be there on Thursday."

"Oh, that's all right," said the squatter. "You won't miss the flesh-pots so much after all, Dick, for Bill is safe to have got a wild turkey."

Dick laughed. Damper and corned beef were to him better than any feast which had to be eaten in "best clothes," and inside four walls; it puzzled him to imagine why people should drive south in a cushioned motor-car when they could mount good horses and ride north over the saltbush plains and into the forests of whispering gums. However, it was merciful that no such sacrifice was expected of him. He had been once to the Ten-Mile, and had instantly made friends with old Bill Summers, who, having watched him helping to bring in an unruly bullock, had decided that there was something useful in "the Melbourne kid," and had shown his favour by spinning him long yarns of the bush. It would have troubled Dick to be unable to fulfil his promise to go to see him again.

Later, Mr. Warner talked to the jackeroos in the office.

"Fox reported that the scare had died away; I don't think it ever existed, except in old Bill's imagination," he said. "Still,

there's never any harm in being on the safe side, and, though a revolver is a nuisance to carry, it's better to be sorry you have one than sorry you haven't. So you'll each take one; you needn't say anything about it to Dick. Not that he's at all likely to be scared, but he'd probably want to carry one himself, and then the scare would be on my side!"

"I don't think he'd do any harm with it," Macleod said. "We've been teaching him to use one."

"I daresay not—still, he's only a kid, and kids and guns are best apart, especially on a horse that may buck. Tell Bill he can come in with the cart for a couple of days if he likes; a spell at the homestead won't hurt him, and I want to talk to him about his cattle." He went on with other directions, concise and curt, and the lads nodded comprehendingly.

Dawn found them in the lagoon; an alarum clock near Macleod's bed had shrilled its clamorous summons ten minutes before, and he had dragged the others out, awakening them by the simple process of first hauling them, bed clothes and all, to the floor, and then dividing the contents of the water jug impartially between them. He fled, pausing on his way to collect Dick; and the drenched and injured Downes and Stephens pursued them, and took their revenge by ducking Macleod very thoroughly in a muddy corner near the bank, so that it took him some time to get clean. They dived and swam, and skylarked like four healthy young porpoises, getting back to the homestead with gigantic appetites for the gigantic breakfast which Mrs. Macleay had ready for them. It was quickly disposed of, and they clattered

down the verandah and out to the stable yard. As they passed Mrs. Lester's window she called Dick softly.

He went in to her room. She was in a dressing-gown, looking very little and sweet.

"I just wanted to say good morning to you, Dickie," she said. Her eyes dwelt on him restfully—tall and bronzed and eager-eyed, in his soft shirt, breeches and leggings. "Take care of yourself, old man."

"Rather," Dick answered. "You, too, mummie. Have a good day."

"Oh, yes." She kissed him, her hand lingering wistfully on his arm—she could feel the hard muscles under the shirt sleeve. "I'd rather be going with you, Dick."

"Then why ever don't you come?" Dick ejaculated.

"Because it wouldn't be manners," she said, and laughed. "Never mind, I'll hear all about your adventures to-night." She kissed him again suddenly. "Now go on; you mustn't keep the others waiting." From her window she watched him racing across to the stables. Presently they all came out, and went down the paddock helter-skelter, Agility reefing and plunging in the lead. She watched them until the trees swallowed them up.

Early as they were the ration cart had been earlier still. Drawn by two stout mules, and driven by old Harry, it had set out more than an hour before, for it had to visit a number of camps and huts, and the tracks between them were rough

and sandy. And, whatever may happen, the ration cart must not fail. To the men in the lonely huts on the out stations it is the one link with civilisation, and the food it brings does not count so much in their longing for its monthly visit as its cargo of mental "tucker"—news, letters, papers, the sound of a fresh voice, the chance of a little new companionship for men who have lived together so long that there is often little between them but silence.

"I don't know how these fellows stick it," said Downes, as they rode along. "Most of 'em come in to the homestead about once in three months; between those times all they see is the ration cart once a month, and an occasional visit from the boss or some of us. You'd want to be awfully keen on your mate to be able to live with another fellow like that."

"Do they ever fight?" queried Dick.

"Oh, sometimes. Not often, though. Of course there are plenty of stories of fellows who have gone off their heads and murdered their mate, but we haven't had them going in for those capers on this station. Now and then a man comes in and asks for his cheque—says he can't stand Bill or Jim, or whoever he is, any more. Then the boss has to hustle to get Bill or Jim another mate."

"Like the old story of two mates who couldn't agree about the bird," said Stephen.

"What's that?" asked Dick.

"Oh, it's a chestnut. They were going back to their hut one night and one man said, 'There's a magpie up in that tree.' The other chap said nothing till a long while after, and then he said, 'That wasn't a magpie—it was a crow.' The first man didn't answer; but next morning his mate saw him rolling up his swag. He said, 'Where y' goin' Bill?' The other fellow slung his swag up on his shoulder. 'Too much bloomin' argument about this camp,' he said—and went."

The boys laughed.

"Well, if you once began to argue, I guess you'd go mad," observed Downes. "Most of 'em know that, and they hold their tongues rather than start any subject that may lead to a quarrel."

"There's one old man at the Three Crows. Well, who prefers to live alone—won't have a mate," Stephens told Dick. "He says it's better to be a hatter than to have the wrong man with him and that he doesn't believe the right one exists. So he goes on being a hatter, and he seems to like it all right."

"He writes poetry in his spare time," said Macleod with a grin. "I camped in his hut one night and he showed me stacks of it. Awful rum stuff. There was one poem that I thought was to his girl. It began:

"Ader, she can't be licked by much,
And I have often told her such,
She has the neatest little head,
From horns to hoofs she is clean bred!"

at which point I recognised that Ada was a cow!"

There was a howl from the boys.

"I believe you made it up yourself," Downes accused him. "It sounds like the drivel you'd write!" Which led to retaliation on the part of the injured Macleod, and they wrestled until their horses ended the matter by going off in opposite directions—the combatants, refusing to separate, being left on the ground still wrestling. The horses were restored by Dick and Stephens, weak with laughter, and they resumed progress.

They crossed a belt of timber fringing a creek that in summer dwindled to a few muddy waterholes, and struck across a sandy plain, where saltbush and spinifex grew among outcrops of ironstone. The grass was harsh and scanty, and the breeze brought with it loose particles of sand.

"Glad we haven't much of this country," Macleod said. "And it gets worse the further you go in this direction—no water, except native wells, and you can't always rely on them; and no grass except dry sticks."

"Can stock live on it at all?" Dick asked.

"They'll eat the salt bush sometimes—in a bad year. But it isn't a white man's country, this sort of stuff, unless you can get gold out of it. I think it must have been intended for that," Macleod said. "Further out in the desert they used to say that at the Creation that part must have been meant for the bottom of the sea, only the sea wouldn't lob there!"

"My father used to prospect in that country," said Stephens, the Perth boy. "He never found any gold worth picking up, and then he struck two dry wells and 'did a perish,' and he wouldn't have got back alive if some other prospectors hadn't found him. He says that where the early miners used to camp for any time they used to cut a spiral ringbark in the big trees, from as high as they could reach to the ground. Then, if it rained—not that it often did—the water running down the tree would get caught in this spiral cut, and flow down the tree to the ground. They nailed a bit of tin there to lead it into a bucket."

"Seems a complicated way of getting a drink," remarked Downes.

"The only other way was to condense—and condensed water wasn't up to much," Stephens answered. "I guess those old prospectors earned all the gold they got."

"Any gold on this place?" asked Dick.

Stephens shook his head.

"They've hunted for it, of course," he said. "Where haven't they hunted for it in Western Australia? This little old State is dotted all over with poppet-heads and mullock-heaps like plums in a pudding. Mr. Warner reckons if you could go down deep enough you'd get gold; but there'll never be the water available for deep mining."

Near the boundary of Narrung they came upon a frowsy camp, where half a dozen Afghans were cutting timber for

the mines. They were eating as the boys rode up, and their greeting was not over-cordial; swarthy, hook-nosed fellows in dirty clothes that were a mixture of East and West. Two or three half-starved dogs flew out to yelp at the horses.

"Wouldn't have them on the place, if it was my say," remarked Stephens. "Dirty, lazy brutes, and look at their poor wretches of starved camels. They haven't had a decent feed for a month. I told the boss they'd start a lively fire on the run some day, but he reckons they can't do any harm in this sandy corner. Well, I wouldn't trust 'em." He rode on, muttering, and shaking an anxious young head.

They had reached the eastern boundary line; a fence had to be mended half a mile beyond the Afghan camp, and when it was finished, they turned north, riding fast until they came to more fertile country. They passed the hut where lived Macleod's poetical "hatter," pausing for five minutes' chat with the old man, who was seated on a stump outside his door under a big belar, devouring papers left him by the ration cart; and then on, across a wide, grassy plain, until they came into the belt of timber that extended beyond the out-station, where Bill Summers and his mate spent their lonely existence. The wheels of the ration cart had left a recent mark upon the grass.

"Harry must have hurried a bit," said Downes. "Of course he goes straight from point to point, and we go round all the corners—still, he must have made his mules travel. He's going to have dinner with old Bill, too; it's a great day for Bill. He'll be awfully sick if he hasn't managed to get a turkey and has to give us salt horse."

"Much we care!" said Stephens.

"No, but he does. Bill's what my mother calls 'house-proud,' and he's also jealous of Harry's cooking. He's a great old chap!" said Downes, enthusiastically.

They came into sight of the hut. The cart was standing near it, the mules contentedly cropping the grass; but there was no sign of any of the men.

"Harry's inside advising Bill as to the last stages of the turkey," laughed Stephens.

"Helping him light up his fire, I should think," said Downes, glancing keenly at the hut. "There's no smoke." He looked puzzled. "Wonder if the old chap is out after cattle—let's give him a coo-ee."

They shouted, and as there was no response they shook their horses into a canter. The mules looked up at them uninterestedly as they dashed up; then they resumed feeding. Something in the utter stillness of the place caught at the boys' hearts and stilled their merry voices.

"Hold my horse a minute, Dick." Downes flung his bridle across. "I'm going in."

He ran up to the hut. As he did so old Harry limped out, with a face so ashen that the boy cried out in alarm.

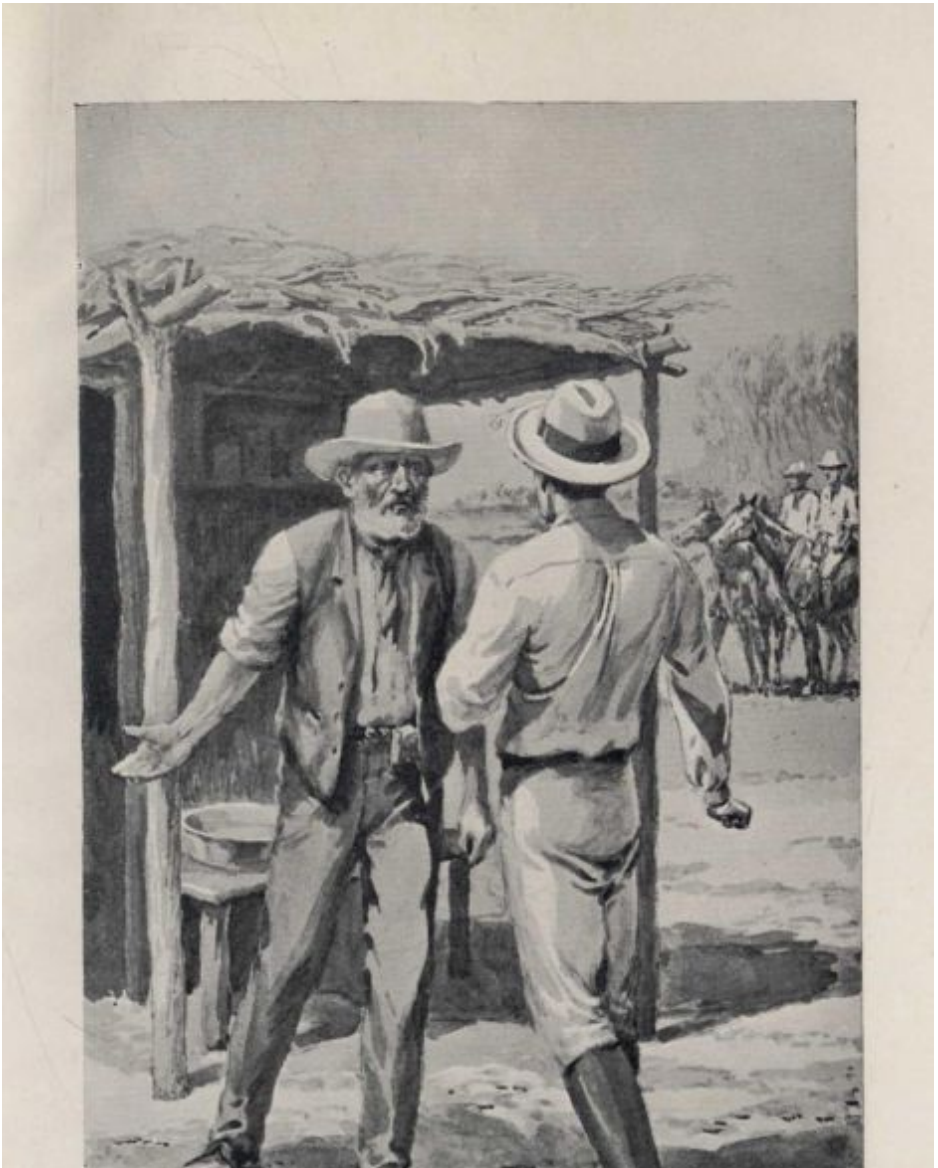
"Harry! What's wrong?"

The old man was looking at Dick.

"Don't let that kid come," he said. "Get him home—quick. They've got Bill and Fox."

"Got them? Who? What do you mean?"

"The blacks. They're there—in their bunks—speared."





“ ‘ They're there—in their bunks—speared.’ ”

Dick Lester of Kurrajong

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“They're there in their bunks—speared.”

Downes reeled back.

"Dead?"

"Yes; both dead." The old man's voice broke in a quavering sob. "They couldn't've known, that's the only thing—both of 'em must have bin asleep. The brutes! the brutes! the brutes! Poor old Bill Summers, that never hurt man, woman or child in his life! My God, if I could get my hands on them!"

The other boys were round them now, leaving Dick with the four horses. They stared at each other, white-faced; and Stephens looked into the hut, to stagger back, hiding his eyes.

"They couldn't've suffered," Harry repeated. "That's the only thing. But it's hard on old Bill, to go out without a chance to hit back. And Fox, too—a decent young chap as ever stepped. Got an old mother, and a girl in Geraldton."

"What are we to do?" Downes gasped.

"Get the kid there home, and warn the other out stations. For all we know they're in the timber here now; not that they're likely to attack five or six men together and in daylight. I must take the—the bodies in in the cart. One of you must help me—you're the eldest, Mr. Downes, you'd better stay—and then you'll have to ride with me; 'cause I can't keep a lookout from the cart, and we must go round by the Five Mile and warn 'em there. Mr. Stephens can go to the eastern stations—not likely to be trouble there, but they must get in their cattle. Mr. Macleod can take the little chap home and warn the other huts on his way. Mr. Warner must hear as quick as you can get home to tell him, Mr. Macleod."

"He's over at Mernda," Macleod said, his voice husky. "Won't be home until after dark."

The old soldier's keen face darkened.

"You'll have to go after him, then. The news has got to get to Westown, and he'll do it quickest in the car. Get a fresh horse when you go in. The police and the black trackers'll have to come out from Westown. Ride as hard as you can, every one of you. And keep your eyes skinned all the time—you don't know where the black fiends may be."

"We'd better wait on guard until you—until you start," Macleod said. "You can't keep a watch while you get them——" The words stuck in the boy's throat. "They could rush you from the trees if we left you alone."

"Yes, that's right," Harry said. "Well, take the little chap off for a minute, Mr. Macleod—poor lad, he doesn't know

what's up, and he's looking like a ghost—and we'll get a start."

Macleod went over and took two of the horses from Dick, leading him off behind the hut while he told him of the tragedy. Dick stared at him blankly; evident as it had been to him that something was terribly wrong it was impossible to realise that the old man who had been kind to him lay dead in his hut, foully murdered with his sleeping mate.

"I don't think we've anything to be scared about," Macleod said. "I've a revolver, and, besides, I don't think the brutes would attack any of us in broad daylight."

"I'm not scared," Dick said dully. "I say, do you—do you think it—hurt them much?"

"Harry says not," said Macleod, with a gulp—he was only a boy himself. "He says they couldn't have known. Bill must have been very sound asleep or they would never have got in—I don't expect he ever woke, poor old chap."

"That's something," Dick said. His eyes blazed suddenly. "Can't we do anything? Can't we fight?"

"We'll raise the whole country when we get home," Macleod answered savagely. "I only hope the boss will let us go out with our guns, and not wait for the police. But our job is to warn the out stations, and then to get the news to the boss." He wheeled round, and suddenly took off his hat. "Here they are."

The cart came by, its pitiful burden covered with the dead men's blankets; old Harry, tight-lipped, driving, and the white-faced boys following. Downes made two efforts to speak before his voice would come.

"That's all right, Mac," he said. "Get to the huts and home as quick as ever you can. Keep close together, mind, while you're in the timber, and go like smoke!"

Stephens had gone off at a hand gallop already. Macleod nodded, and he and Dick gave their horses their heads, taking the track through the trees where the cart wheels had left their print on the soft grass. They were out of sight in a moment, galloping side by side, with keen eyes searching through the timber on either hand. Once Dick fancied that he saw a shadowy black form, and it was easy enough to think he heard, above the pounding hoofs, the whistle of a spear; but the moment passed and they were racing onward, only checking their speed when they came to another lonely hut. A few words, and they were off again, leaving the amazed and infuriated men to look to their guns and muster their cattle out of harm's way. Another hut, and another; and then, their work half done, they turned their horses towards home. The trees were left behind them now, and they came out upon the wide plain where scattered clumps of timber, easy to dodge in their gallop, gave shade to the lazy bullocks.

"We can get a move on now!" Macleod said, between his teeth. "And every minute we save means more chance of catching those fiends!"

They leaned forward in their saddles to ease the horses, and urged them to racing speed. Mile after mile, trees flashing by them, cattle lumbering, affrighted, out of their way, with no word between them, and only the dull thud of the hoofs to break the silence. Not until they reached the gate of the paddock near the homestead did they draw rein. Macleod, leaning across his horse's dripping neck to open it, glanced at Dick.

"Tired?" he asked. "You've had nothing to eat, poor kid."

"I'm not tired," Dick said; "and I feel as if I never wanted to eat again."

"Same here!" Macleod nodded. "But it isn't sense. We'll have to get something at the house. No use in cracking up just when we're wanted."

They were galloping again, across the last stretch of grass. Suddenly Agility faltered in his stride and half pulled up, limping heavily. Dick was off in a flash.

"He's picked up something," he cried. "Don't wait; I'll lead him in."

Macleod had checked his horse, but at the words he shook his bridle and shot forward. Dick patted Agility's neck, and lifted his forefoot. He whistled softly.

"You poor old beggar!" he said. A scrap of barbed wire was embedded in the frog by two cruel teeth. The horse flinched from the touch. Dick soothed him a moment, and

then, with a quick movement, drew out the torturing steel, dodging back as Agility plunged wildly.

"There!" he said. "All over, old chap. Now come and get doctored."

He led him slowly across the grass, Agility on three legs. Near the gate O'Mara, wide-eyed with horror from Macleod's story, met him.

"Barbed wire, is it? I dunno why they have the misfortunate stuff on anny decent place," he said, taking the horse's foot up to examine it. "H'm—'twill be a while before he gets that to the ground. Could ye bathe him now, Master Dick? I'd do it meself, only I must drive Mr. Macleod to Mernda; the browns are ready in the stable, an' 'twill be quicker than riding. And there's not another man about the place; they're all out at some job or other. Sure I'm only in meself ten minutes, and that's why the browns are handy; I drove Mr. Macleay over to Andrews's for the day."

"I'll bathe him, of course," Dick said, taking Agility's bridle. "Don't you worry about him."

"I'd have worried ten minutes ago, but it don't seem to matter much now," the old groom said. "Poor old Bill Summers! Well, I hope them murdherin' fiends will find it the worst day's work ever they did. Masther Dick, will ye keep a lookout, an' the first man that comes in, send him over to Andrews's for Mr. Macleay—he'd betther be home. There'll be guns and cartridges wanting out of the store."

"All right," Dick nodded. "Better let me help you put the browns in."

The light buggy was still in the yard, and the horses harnessed. They put them back, and O'Mara drove out just as Macleod came running over.

"Good man!" he said, swinging himself up. "You all right, Dick? Mind you get something to eat. Let 'em go, O'Mara!" The buggy dashed away down the hill, the browns resenting the unaccustomed touch of the whip.

Dick bathed Agility and rubbed him down, finally putting him into loose box and giving him a feed. He glanced into the other boxes; they were empty, until he came to the last one, where Conqueror's iron-grey head poked over the half-door. Dick patted the long nose as he passed.

"You'd better take a rest while you can," he said. "I guess you'll be wanted pretty soon." But just how soon he did not dream.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW CONQUEROR BOLTED.

The day had gone slowly for Merle Warner.

From her room she had watched the boys ride off in the early morning, sore and resentful that she was not one of the party. It was her favourite ride: of all the station jobs there was none Merle loved like going out to the Ten-Mile. Bill Summers and she were great friends; he always expected to see her when the ration cart went out. And just because her father was not going, she also must remain at home, since long rides were only permitted her under his wing.

She had begged that the rule might, for this once, be relaxed, but her father had been adamant.

"Don't be stupid, Merle," he had said sharply, at last. "Apart from the fact that I wouldn't let you go without me, you might have the sense to realise that the boys really wouldn't want you. Boys don't want a little girl always hanging round." Then—a little sorry for her quick flush, "You can come with us to Mernda in the car, if you like."

"I wouldn't go a yard to Mernda!" Merle had flashed.

"Very well, then, stay at home," Mr. Warner had responded cheerfully. "After all, it's the best place for you. Run off to bed, I'm busy." He had turned to his writing-table and forgotten all about her.

The memory did not tend to make Merle amiable at the breakfast-table, which seemed curiously empty without the cheery presence of the four boys. She hurried through her breakfast, and then retreated with a book to her nest in the big pine tree in the garden, turning a deaf ear to occasional calling of her name. From her hiding-place she watched the

car drive off after a while, her father at the wheel. She did not descend until the luncheon gong boomed out its summons; and then strolled in, rather hoping that her absence had caused anxiety. It was rather crushing to learn from Mrs. Macleay that Yet On, the Chinese gardener, had seen her climb the tree and had mentioned the fact to the first person he had heard calling her.

Lunch, with Bobby and the twinses, had been both dull and irritating; Bobby, who was mourning Dick's absence, was in a provoking mood, and the twinses insisted on emptying their soup into a vase, and howled dismally when nanna, returning after a short absence, checked this interesting diversion. The pudding, too, was one Merle did not happen to like; she refused to eat any, and, pushing her chair impatiently away, left the table. Bobby pursued her, presently demanding that she should play with him; she locked herself in her room to avoid him, declining to come out until the sound of little voices, dying away in the distance, told her that nanna had taken the children for their afternoon walk.

She opened her door and strolled out upon the verandah. It was a glorious afternoon; the sun, shining through the trailing masses of tecoma on the posts, was enough to charm away even bad temper. A sudden thought came to her, and she turned back into her room, to emerge presently dressed for riding. Olaf was in the stable, she knew. Why should she not take him out? Mrs. Macleay was the only person likely to interfere with her, and she was safely in the kitchen. Merle ran across to the stable yard, almost cheerfully.

She called O'Mara, but received no answer; and then remembered that she had seen him go out, driving Mr. Macleay. Well, it did not matter. It was easy enough to saddle Olaf without help. She mounted and rode down towards the lake, looking out for the children. They were playing with nanna near the bank, and she trotted along to them.

"Where's you goin', Merle?" demanded Bobby.

"I'm going to meet the boys," Merle said. "You can tell Mrs. Macleay, nanna, if she asks for me."

The black nurse looked uneasy.

"Boss, him be cross this pfeller if you go far," she protested. "Mine thinkit baal you go all by you'se'f, Missy Merle."

"Oh, rubbish, nanna," Merle said.

"Dad'll be jolly wild wiv you—an' so'll mummy," said Bobby warningly.

"I don't care. I'm not going far, anyhow. The boys'll be home soon. I'm sure to meet them in the Middle Plain."

"Boss him say baal you go out on yarraman (horse) 'less he go longa you," said nanna. "Mine thinkit better you get off."

She put out a hand to the bridle. But Merle was too quick for her; a touch of her heel, and Olaf sprang aside. She

cantered off along the track, turning to laugh at them. Bobby's woeful little face touched her a little.

"Never mind, old chap," she called to him. "I'll bring Dick home, and we'll have a game."

She cantered across the first two paddocks. The boys should be home soon now, she thought; better fun not to meet them too near the home stead, in the smaller paddocks, where they could not have a good gallop. Out on the plain they might put up a hare, and a racing spin over the grass would be some compensation for the disappointment of her day. Olaf was very fresh; she gave him his head when she had shut the last gate, and soon was far out in the open. Once she thought she caught sight of the boys in a clump of trees, and rode away from the track to see; but, though she beat through the trees, thinking they were hiding from her, she found only a big shorthorn bullock, which lumbered off at her approach. There was still no sign of the boys as she emerged again upon the plain; she stared ahead fruitlessly. Had she glanced back she might have seen two racing figures making for the homestead: Dick and Macleod, getting the last ounce they could out of their horses. But it did not occur to Merle to look back. She touched Olaf impatiently, and again cantered forward.

The green line of the timber ahead beckoned her. She knew well that she would never have been allowed to enter it alone; but she was in the reckless, defiant mood that considers it as well to be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. After all, she thought, she must certainly meet the boys very soon; every moment she paused, thinking she heard their

voices. It would be cooler to wait in the shade, even if she only went just within the edge of the belt of trees. But once there, she strayed further and further in, tempted by the leafy green alleys that she loved. Olaf loved them as much as she; he paced along, daintily arching his beautiful neck. The sunlight, filtering through the gum leaves, made dappled patterns on the black satin of his skin. Once or twice he pricked his ears questioningly, as though listening to some sound Merle could not hear—surely, she thought, the boys' horses coming through the trees from the Ten-Mile. So she went slowly on.

* * * * *

Dick came across to the homestead from the stables, feeling suddenly very tired. He had not eaten since breakfast; and morning, with its early start and the fun and laughter of the ride out, seemed to belong to another age altogether. Then, cruelty and murder had been things that people talked about, without realising their existence; now they had suddenly come close enough to be touched, and the whole world was altered. His heart was heavy for the old man who had been kind to him; dead now, and without the chance of striking a blow in his own defence. Dick's fists clenched in helpless anger.

The great bell of the station crashed out suddenly, in such thunderous clamour that he jumped and then stood still. What Mr. Warner called its "tinkle"—the daily summons to dinner—had seemed to Dick violent enough; but this was a new sound altogether, a resonant, brazen din that clanged furiously, sending its strident clashing far out across the

paddocks. The squatter's words came back to him—"It can make a very tolerable din in the hands of an active person." Well, that was no exaggeration—surely its wild clamour must reach every man working out on the run.

He went across to the high stand from which the bell hung. It was swaying back and forth in a kind of mad dance, and below stood Mrs. Macleay, her muscles swelling under her thin blouse as she tugged at the rope.

"I'd nearly forgot the bell," she panted. "'Tis two years since we had to ring it—and then 'twas for a bush fire. Go in, laddie—there's food waiting for ye in the dining-room, and Mr. Macleod said ye were to eat."

Dick turned away heavily. The black girls were gathered round, staring and chattering. At the moment even their friendly ebony faces were horrible to him, and he brushed past them as quickly as he could. The food in the dining-room seemed to choke him at first; he gulped down a cup of strong tea, and then found it easier to swallow. The clanging of the bell never ceased; he felt as though it were beating inside his head, paralysing him. And he was suddenly terribly lonely. A great longing for companionship came over him, and he went out again.

Mrs. Macleay had given the bell rope to a black girl, and was speaking hurriedly to nanna, who had run to the house with the children when the bell began to ring. Her kind face was white.

"Think what you're saying, nanna! Miss Merle gone out on her pony! Where?"

Bobby piped up.

"Merle's gone to meet Dick and the boys," he said. "Out over the Miggle Plain towards the Ten-Mile. We tole her dad would be jolly angwy, but she would go."

"That Missy Merle bad pfeller, mine thinkit," said the black gin, stolidly. "Ball she let me stop her—she kicking yarraman, all same jump away quick."

"Bobby!" Mrs. Macleay's voice was a wail. "Are you sure she went towards the Ten-Mile?"

Bobby nodded decidedly.

"Dead certain. She was awful cwoss 'cause dad wouldn't let her go wiv 'em this morning. She said she'd meet 'em comin' home." His eye fell on Dick, and he sprang to meet him with a gay little shout. "Oh, Dick! Didn't you meet Merle?"

Over the fair head Dick's eyes met the Scotchwoman's, and there was dread in both.

"How long ago, Bobby?"

"Since Merle went? Oh, ages!" said Bobby airily. "Didn't you see her?"

Dick shook his head.

Mrs. Macleay gripped his shoulder suddenly, pulling him aside.

"Can you go after her?" Her voice was thick. "I can't ride, and there's not a man on the place. Is there a horse in? Mr. Macleod said yours was lame."

"Conqueror's in the stable," Dick said. "Of course I'll go; most likely I'll catch her up before she gets to the timber. Anyhow, she'll never go into the timber by herself, and no black fellow would go near her in the open on Olaf."

"Are you fit to go, child?" The woman wrung her hands. "You look dead beat now. But what am I to do?"

Dick forced a laugh.

"Don't you worry; I'm all right," he said. "Ten to one she'll have turned back and I'll meet her coming home. I'd better scoot, hadn't I?" Turning, he ran, pursued by an indignant wail from Bobby.

Conqueror was fresh and impatient, and to saddle a horse of seventeen hands is not an easy task for a boy of thirteen, even if that horse be inclined to stand still. Dick was struggling with him when Mrs. Macleay appeared.

"I'll hold him," she said, briefly. She helped to saddle the great horse, and then gave Dick an awkward leg-up. Still holding the bridle she took something from her pocket.

"Is this any good to you?"

It was a small automatic pistol, and Dick's heart leaped at the sight of it.

"I can't hit a haystack," he admitted. "But I know how to use it—we've been practising every evening—and at least I can fire it off. Is it loaded?"

She nodded.

"Yes—but I can't find any more cartridges."

"Well, I mightn't need even these, but I'd better take it," Dick said. He slipped it into his pocket. "Can you open the gate, Mrs. Macleay?"

"Ay," she said. "And there's black girls ahead at the next two gates for ye. Ride fast, laddie, and God keep ye!"

Dick needed no telling. Conqueror was already reefing and dancing with impatience. He went through the gate in a flash and settled into his stride across the next two paddocks, in a way that would have been impossible but for Mrs. Macleay's forethought in sending the gins ahead to open the gates. The wide Middle Plain spread before him, and he gave his head a little shake, taking the bit in his teeth. This featherweight on his back was as nothing; and the stretching plain, with its soft grass, was a galloping ground that he loved.

Dick had never ridden such a horse. On his father's station, while at odd times he might ride anything, as occasion demanded, his favourite mount was his pony, Tinker; here, he had ridden Agility, a horse full of fire and speed, but not big. Conqueror's huge bulk beneath him made him feel like

an insect on an elephant. There seemed miles of great neck before him—iron-grey in colour, and hard as iron; and to pull at the huge head was like pulling at the side of a mountain. The massive hoofs seemed to fling themselves out, pounding the grass with earth-shaking thuds. Dick tried to get the horse in hand once, but realised that he had no chance whatever, Conqueror merely shook his head and galloped on.

Well, after all, to gallop was all Dick wanted. Luckily, the great horse kept to the faint wheel track, and that, presumably, was the line that Merle had taken. He ceased to try to steady Conqueror or to guide him, realising that all his energies would be needed for sitting still on the mighty, plunging bulk beneath him. Leaning forward, he scanned the plain eagerly for a glimpse of a little figure on a black pony; but there was nothing save open grass and blue sky, except for the scattered clumps of trees to right and left. She would not be in one of those, he thought, or if she were, the noise of thundering hoofs would make her show herself. He could do nothing but gallop ahead towards the long-blurred line of timber.

But he was cruelly tired. Each great bound under him seemed to shake him from head to foot. The spring had gone out of him; between hard riding and shock, his nerves had tightened almost to breaking point. Yesterday, riding out to revolver practice with the jackeroos, he had fancied himself almost a man; to-day he knew himself for a little boy, and a tired one at that. The thought of his mother came to him, and a sob rose in his throat.

Yet, when the line of timber grew near, and he knew that he must enter it, with all its stealthy peril, something of the clean pluck that was his inheritance came back to him. He sat erect, and tried to steady Conqueror; and to his surprise the mighty horse gave to the light fingers on his bit, and the stretching gallop steadied to the slow canter that his master declared was the easiest pace in the world. With the slackening of the pounding gallop relief came to Dick's overtaxed senses. Had it gone on, he had known that he must fall; now, that fear left him, and with it some of his weariness. He reined Conqueror to a walk as they reached the trees, peering into their dark recesses.

Nothing seemed stirring there. The wheel tracks lay before him, faint, yet clear enough; he was not bushman enough to say if other hoof-prints had stirred the soft grass. With a sudden impulse he coo'ee'd loudly, wondering immediately if he had done the wrong thing. There was no answer. He took his courage in both hands and rode into the forest.

Everything there was very quiet. Not even a bird seemed awake among the trees. So still was it that when a long trail of bark came fluttering down Conqueror jumped, and Dick felt himself turn cold. He realised that he was very badly afraid, and the knowledge brought with it an angry disgust of himself that did more to steady him than anything else could have done. He tried to keep himself from thinking of the hut ... of what had lain in it that the men had not let him see; but the thought came over him like a wave. The utter stillness of the bush was like a cold hand upon his heart. He rode on, deeper and deeper into the green silence.

Then, ahead, something crashed over some dry sticks; and Conqueror flung up his head and whinnied loudly. He thought he heard a cry. Then came galloping hoofs, and suddenly, down a long aisle of the trees, Olaf came into view, riderless and mad with fear. Conqueror plunged aside shivering with some sense more keen than Dick's; and the black pony flashed past them, his head low, his eyes glazed with terror, and right through his neck a long spear that hit the trees as he galloped. A moment and he was gone, and the silence of the bush was more profound than ever.

"Merle! Merle!"

Dick's cry shrilled through the forest. He took Conqueror by the head, and sent him at a sharp trot down the open space whence Olaf had come, glancing keenly from side to side, peering into the scrub. Again and again he shouted, as much in the hope that the blacks, hearing, might imagine that he was not the only new-comer as to warn Merle herself. But indeed, though he rode on desperately, he had but little hope. Surely, when the black pony lost his rider it was because the spears had found her first.

The glade ended in a dense thicket so overgrown with creepers that to force a way through would have been difficult. Dick pulled up, thinking hard. Someone was near, he felt—and there came a queer, pricking sensation in his skin as he wondered what it felt like to be speared. Then he saw an opening on his right hand, and pushing through, found himself on the edge of a long gully, fringed with ferns and thick with sarsaparilla and clematis. Here was where Olaf had come; the pony's hoof marks were clearly visible

among crushed flowers and leaves in the rich soil. And then his heart gave a great bound, and stood still.

Merle was running desperately towards him, dodging in and out of the trees that grew on the bank of the gully. She was hatless, and there was a long smear of mud on her face that looked like blood. And behind her, running swiftly and silently, were half a dozen men—slender black figures with horrible patterns on their bodies in black and red, and in their hands bundles of spears. Dick saw one flash in the air past Merle, burying its point in a tree.

He shouted, sending Conqueror forward. Something hard knocked against his side with the sudden movement, and he gasped with relief as he remembered Mrs. Macleay's pistol. There was no aiming, with Merle between him and the racing black figures; he fired twice in the air, shouting with mingled joy and excitement when he saw them pause and dodge behind cover. Then he was beside Merle, and she was clinging to his stirrup. He found himself praying desperately.

"Oh, God! keep Conqueror steady!"

The great horse stood like a rock. Dick kicked his feet out of the stirrup and slid to his back behind the saddle.

"Jump up!" he said sharply. "You've got to be in front."

Somehow, with his help, she managed it. Her boot caught him in the face as she gained the saddle and almost knocked him off. She gathered up the reins, and Dick caught her belt with one hand. The blacks showed again on both sides of the

gully. He fired wildly among them, and thought he saw one man drop. But there was no time to see anything. Conqueror was off, and they were tearing up the long glade. A spear whistled by them, and Dick flung his arms around Merle, sheltering her as best he could.

"Lie down on his neck," he gasped. "He'll take us home if they don't hit him."

Right ahead a knot of blacks showed, fiercely barring the way, and a flight of spears came whirring through the air. Dick fired his last shot, with a feeling of numb despair. Conqueror would never face them, and once he turned, wheeling back among the trees, what chance had they? For the bush was alive with blacks. He could see their fierce forms slipping in and out among the timber; could hear their guttural shouts. He forced Merle down yet further, vainly trying to shield her with his body.

A spear caught the tip of Conqueror's ear, and another grazed his flank. He plunged so violently that his riders were almost unseated; and then, mad with pain and terror, the great horse charged forward, pounding the glade with outstretched neck and nostrils flecked with foam. The blacks stood for an instant, and then wavered and fled, and Conqueror swept by them, shaking the earth in the might of his stride. A few spears flew harmlessly past, and then Dick felt a sudden red-hot pain in his shoulder; but it did not seem to matter—nothing mattered save the wild exultation of that race with Death. He shouted triumphantly, "Good old Conqueror!" and heard a sound from Merle that was half laugh, half sob.



“ Then, mad with pain and terror, the great horse charged forward.”

Dick Lester of Kurrajong

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**"Then, mad with pain and terror,
the great horse charged forward."**

The plain danced before their tired eyes. They were out of the timber, and galloping towards home, with no hideous lurking dangers ahead—only the long stretch of thick grass over which the wheel-tracks made a pathway. Conqueror was settling down to a steady gallop—the reins were loose on his neck, for Merle had no strength left to guide him; she could only cling to the pommel, her breath coming in short gasps. The pain in Dick's shoulder suddenly flashed into burning life; he put up one hand, and could feel the haft of a spear. There was blood on his hand when he took it away; he looked at it curiously, as if wondering if it could be really his own. Then a sick faintness came over him, and he could only cling to Merle's belt and struggle for self-command.

Ahead, a blur showed on the grass—the ration cart, which had come out of the trees at a different angle, and was now jogging slowly homeward, with Downes riding beside it. He turned at the sound of the galloping hoofs; and then shouted in horror, as Conqueror came up, drew level, and then thudded past. It was as though neither horse nor riders saw them.

"Harry—it's the kids! And did you see Dick's shoulder? There's a spear in it!"

"Keep as close as you can without racing them," the old man cried. "The boy may fall off any minute."

Downes set off in pursuit. Conqueror was still galloping hard, but without his first terror—only with his smarting ear and flank, and the memory of the yelling black figures to spur him on. The reins flapped on his neck; he missed the light touch of a hand on his bit, the sensitive pressure of the knees—all that makes horse and rider seem as one. This dead weight on his back, that neither spoke, nor moved, nor guided him—what was it? Something was all wrong; there was nothing to do but gallop forward, since ahead lay home and his stable, and behind was the yelling, hideous terror of the scrub.

A clump of trees was before him. He rounded them in his gallop, and then shied violently at a new horror—the black pony, lying dead across the track, with the cruel spear still sticking in his neck. The sudden movement was too much for Dick. The sick faintness had been creeping steadily over him, and the quick wrench, twisting the spear in his wound, brought an agony beyond endurance. Consciousness slipped from him as his fingers loosed their hold. He had a sudden vision of the earth rushing up to meet him. Then he was falling—falling—through an eternity of space, and the world was blotted out in blackness.

CHAPTER XIV.

"BUCK UP, SCHOOL!"

It was night, and everything was very dark. Somewhere, a million miles away, was a pinpoint of light. He kept his eyes fixed upon it, because it seemed the one thing in the world where there was any hope. Someone was swinging him backwards and forwards through space, sometimes bringing him near the light and then drawing him steadily back until it seemed that he would never reach it. He could not put out a hand to touch it, even when it drew near, and he knew that the pain that wrapped him round would be gone if he could but grasp it. There were sharp cords holding him tightly, cutting into him; and all the time the ceaseless swinging, swinging. He tried to cry out, but no sound would come.

Then a hand came on his brow, so cool, so gentle, that the formless blackness wavered and melted, and the light grew stronger. The utter helplessness was still there; but the sense of being gripped by something mercilessly cruel faded, and it was as though something infinitely pitiful was holding him quietly. He gasped, "Don't let me swing!" and the soft touch held him closer until he was still and quiet. The light came nearer. Pain was there yet, but pain was as nothing compared to the relief of stillness. Nothing mattered, if only those soft hands would hold him—would keep him from swinging into space again.

Gradually the darkness melted. Things took shape in a kind of dim twilight; he looked long at a strange silver ball, floating in space, before he knew that it was but the knob on his bed-post. The window of his room came out of the dimness; through it he could see gum leaves on boughs that fluttered softly in the breeze. These things he saw because they were in front of him; to turn his head was a task much

too hard to be thought of, no matter what might be there. It troubled him that he could not, because he felt something beside him that he wanted desperately to see—something soft that nestled close to his cheek. If it moved, he grew afraid, and cried to it to come back, and it always came quickly and gently, so that he was not afraid any more. Still nestling to it, he drifted into sleep.

"You can get up." The doctor was bending over Mrs. Lester, whispering, "He's asleep."

"He might wake if I moved." Her lips formed the words almost without sound. She could not bear him to cry to her again, in his agony, for the help that only the touch of her lips against his cheek had seemed able to give.

"He won't—yet. The medicine has taken effect." The doctor's face was almost as ghastly as her own; together they had fought death in the little room for thirty-six hours.

He helped her to her feet gently. John Lester slipped an arm about her, putting her into a chair. Her eyes asked the question that her lips could not frame.

"Good, as far as it goes," the doctor answered. "That the sleep has come at all is a big thing; now, we can only hope that it will last long enough to rest him. He wants it, poor little chap."

"You want it, too," her husband said gently. "Come and lie down while he sleeps."

"I won't leave him." She shrank back pitifully.

"You needn't, dear. Lie down on the sofa. I'll call you if he stirs. I promise, Jean."

She let him put her on the sofa, wrapping a rug about her, and taking off her slippers. The doctor went out, after whispering a few directions, and John Lester sat down beside his son.

He did not know much about the outside world since they had come racing home in the car on Thursday evening, to find Dick's broken body, mercifully unconscious, awaiting them. The car had turned back within five minutes, breaking speed records to bring a doctor from the nearest town, sixty miles away; and since that they had never left the boy's side. To the stupor of unconsciousness had succeeded delirium, when he had struggled with unseen enemies and urged on unseen horses, fighting blindly with pain that robbed him of all sense. The doctor, a young country practitioner, acknowledged his helplessness; the thing was beyond him, and until a surgeon and nurses could arrive from Perth he could only administer narcotics and opiates, that had until now been of little effect. There was injury to the head, that was certain; beyond that he feared that the spine was affected. The spear wound, once relieved of the terror that the barb might have been poisoned, was comparatively simple. But John Lester's face was old and haggard as he stared at his son.

Out in the bush, north of the run, infuriated men were scouring the ranges for the flying blacks, dealing out swift justice without waiting for black trackers and police, whose slower methods were little satisfaction to a district that

clamoured for revenge. From fifty miles around men had come to help to hunt down the slayers, until Narrung resembled a huge camp when night brought the hunters home to the head station. In another room lay Merle, ill from shock and exhaustion. She had clung to Conqueror's mane until the grey horse came to a standstill at the gate of the home paddock. Downes and old Harry had found them there, and had had to use force to unclasp her fingers. But the Lesters knew nothing of these things. The world, for them, began and ended round Dick's bed.

The slow hours passed, and still Dick and his mother slept. Now and then Mrs. Warner, as haggard as they, tiptoed to the door, bringing food or offering help; but John Lester would not leave the room. He ate mechanically, knowing that he must eat; but his eyes scarcely wandered from the dark head on the pillow, half hidden in its ice-pack. He prayed, desperately, muttering thanks for every moment of the blessed sleep that meant freedom from pain—that might bring healing in its wings. All the while he watched for any change—for any shade of colour to creep into the still, white face. But no change came; and the day dragged on to evening.

Mrs. Lester woke with a start, trembling. Her husband was beside her in a flash, holding her, whispering.

"No change—and he has slept all this time! Oh, thank God!" Her pale lips quivered—and then she clung to him, starting up. "John—you are sure it is really sleep?"

"It's really sleep," he told her. "Now you go—get a bath and some food. No, you must do it, Jean—remember, this isn't going to be a short business, and you will need all your strength. I'll call you if he moves." Mrs. Warner came in answer to his finger on the electric bell, and took her away.

It was an hour later that Dick's eyes opened, and he looked at his mother wearily.

"Mother," he said. The voice was weak, but his eyes were clear.

She kissed him gently.

"Don't worry, old son." The doctor was beside him, raising his head ever so little.

"Take this, lad."

Dick drank obediently and lay without speaking while they busied themselves over him. When he spoke again his voice was steady, but his lips were grey with pain.

"What's up, father? Am I going to die?"

"Not you!" said the doctor hastily. The boy's glance went past him, to his father.

"Am I, father?"

"No, my son, I think not. But you're badly hurt. You have got to help us to get you better, Dick."

Dick pondered that, his fingers closed round his mother's. Then memory came back to him with a flash.

"Did we get in all right? Is Merle hurt?"

"No; only knocked up. You brought her in."

"I?" said Dick. There was a sorry little ghost of his old smile. "I didn't have any say in it. Conqueror bolted."

"Well, you went out for her, and you brought her back," the doctor said. "And now you mustn't talk any more. Go to sleep, if you can."

But sleep was gone for Dick. He lay in silence, with his eyes closed; so quietly that after a while his father gave way to entreaties and went off to find the rest he so badly needed. Twilight gave place to darkness, and only a shaded lamp lit the little room. The doctor moved in and out, presently coming to whisper that he was going for a walk. Mrs. Lester nodded, glad that he should have the opportunity. Silence brooded everywhere.

It was a little later that she saw that Dick's eyes were open. His fingers moved towards her, on the counterpane. She bent over him swiftly.

"What is it, my son? A drink?"

"No." The word came with difficulty. "If I—if I could hold your hand."

She put her hand in his, and felt hot fingers close round it tightly. So he lay, and then a stifled moan broke from him.

"Is the pain bad, Dick?"

"Pretty stiff," he said. "I'm—I'm sorry, mother." She saw his lips tighten, and he clutched at her fingers desperately. "My aunt!" he gasped presently; and then she heard a whisper, as if to himself—"Buck up, School!"

She bent over him, murmuring broken words of love and pity. It was almost more than she could bear to see the motionless struggle. He lay, unable to stir; and agony gripped him until his hair lay dark on his wet forehead, and great drops of sweat ran down his grey face. And no cry came. He clung to her hand as if it were the one thing left him in the world, and his lips moved in the school call that surely went straight to God as a prayer for courage and endurance—"Buck up, School!"

She slipped her hand away presently.

"Just a second, Dick—I want to send a message."

She pressed the bell until she heard someone running to answer it, and then sprang to the door.

"The doctor, quick! Find him—he's in the paddock."

Dick's eyes were looking for her desperately as she ran back to him. He clutched at her hand.

"I thought you'd gone," he gasped, "Don't let me go, mother—mother!"

"I won't, my darling," she said. "Hold tight to me. Oh, Dick, cry out—it may help you."

She saw his head move in the ghost of what had been his old, decided shake.

"Can't do that," he muttered. His voice died away to an anguished whisper. "Buck up!" was all she could hear; and once he carried her hand to his mouth, holding it against his lips as though with it he might hold back the cries to utter which would have been crueller to him than pain itself.

It seemed an eternity before she heard the gate of the yard bang, and quick strides across the verandah. The doctor came in, switching on another light. His eyes dwelt pityingly for a moment on the boy's ravaged face.

"Having a bad time, old man?" he said quietly. "Let's see if we can help you."

He asked a few questions, his hands busy with Dick's arm. There was a prick with a hypodermic needle, and presently it was as though a merciful hand had sponged the lines of agony from Dick's face. His lips relaxed their grim line, and the torment died out of his eyes. Mrs. Lester felt his clutching fingers curl themselves loosely in her palm.

"That's ripping!" he murmured sleepily. "Thanks, ever so!" His eyelids drooped and closed.

Mrs. Lester's head went down on the bed-side. She was shaking with suppressed sobs.

"The trouble is, I haven't enough of the stuff," the doctor told Mr. Warner presently on the verandah. "I'd had a sudden run on my stock—unusual series of cases, and a fool of a maid smashed a bottle in dusting the surgery. I wired Perth for more just before your car came, but I hadn't much to bring up here with me. Brereton will bring some with him, of course, but he can't get here before morning."

"And you haven't enough to keep the boy out of pain?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Not nearly. I've been using it most cautiously all the time; there'd be none left now but for that splendid sleep he had during the day. Now—well, we can only hope that he may sleep again."

In the early dawn John Lester came out on the verandah, staggering as he walked. Mr. Warner, who had sat there throughout the night, jumped up, catching him by the arm, but the father shook him off blindly, dropping into a chair a little way off, his whole frame shaking with tearless, rending sobs. Mr. Warner watched him for a moment, and then hurried away noiselessly. He was back almost instantly, a glass of brandy in his hand.

"Drink this," he said authoritatively

John Lester took the draught at a gulp.

"He's asleep," he said. "It will only be for a moment, of course—the pain will wake him. My God, Warner, it would be easier to see him dead!"

"I know," Robert Warner said.

"If he'd cry out!" the father groaned. "He lies there and holds on to us—I tell you my hand is sore from his poor fingers; and his eyes ask us for help, and we can't do a thing. And he will not give in. Just 'Buck up, School!' when the pain is almost beyond endurance. It's too much strain for him—it would ease him, I believe, if he would scream. We've begged him to let himself go, but he won't."

"And his mother?"

"She just kneels there and holds his hand, and tries to help him through. I don't know how she stands it. It's been ghastly for the last half-hour—poor little son, he asked for pity at last. 'Can't you put me to sleep, doctor?' he said. And there's not a drop of stuff left. It cut the doctor to the heart to tell him."

"And then?"

"He didn't say anything—only tried to smile. And then I suppose God had pity, for he fell asleep suddenly." He stopped, sitting erect to listen. "There's his mother's voice—he's awake again." He stumbled back into Dick's room, and Mr. Warner heard him speaking, his deep tones wrung with pity and love: "Hold on to me, old son."

The big man went out with hasty strides across the yard, with tears running unheeded down his cheeks. To and fro he paced; and then, as though the yard were not big enough, he opened the gate with a gesture of helpless impatience, and went down the track. Dawn was breaking after the endless night; the trees were black against a sky that began to turn to palest primrose. Half way down the paddock Mr. Warner stopped suddenly, listening to a sound from very far away—only a bushman's ear could have heard the dull whirr. Then, as he looked, far across the dim plain came a flash—the twin lamps of a motor.

He began to run, uttering a great gasp of relief, thankful to be able to help by even so little as opening a gate. The lights grew in size, speeding across the plain to meet him as he ran down the track, until they were great eyes of fire. He swung the gate open as the car came up, slowing down. A keen-eyed man looked out at him from beside the driver. In the tonneau he could see two nurses in uniform.

"This is Narrung Downs? Hullo, is that you, Warner?"

"Don't stop!" Robert Warner uttered, panting. "Room with the light, off the verandah. And for God's sake, Brereton, have something ready to put him to sleep."

Dr. Brereton spoke to the chauffeur, and the car whizzed on. They heard it in the sick room; and the Westown doctor, with a gesture of relief, went out hurriedly. Presently Dick, in the grip of pain, almost beyond endurance, saw a new face by his side—dark eyes that looked into his weary ones with compassion, and a voice with a ring of quiet strength. He felt

again the divinely merciful prick on his arm. Agony and fear slowly slipped away from him. His fingers grew limp in his mother's clasp. She put her cheek against his, and, with a little contented sigh, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XV.

UNDER SENTENCE.

"I wish I could give you better hope, Mr. Lester."

"Is there any loophole?"

John Lester's face was white and drawn as he leaned against the fence, staring at Dr. Brereton. There were streaks of grey in his hair that had not been there before the night of Dick's agony.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"There is always a loophole where the patient has youth and strength on his side. But I would not be justified in telling you to hope. I have known no case of the kind that recovered more than a measure of power. These spinal cases are terribly difficult; I suppose in the future we may find out more about them."

"But the operation was successful?" Mr. Warner put in.

"The operation was entirely successful—so far as it could go. If it had not been the boy could only have lived a few hours—I was only just in time. Indeed, how he lived through what he must have borne is rather a mystery."

"And now—tell me again what the sentence is. I want to get it clearly," said the father.

"He may outlive you both—though these cases sometimes don't last more than a few years. Your boy is so strong that I should not anticipate any change for the worse, however. He should have a fair measure of health and strength—given every possible chance, as he will be, with skilled nursing. But—it would only be false kindness to mince matters, Mr. Lester—he will never walk again."

The world was going black about John Lester. Mr. Warner caught at his arm.

"You can do a great deal for him," the doctor's steady voice went on. "Fill his life with all the interests you can; get hold of nurses who know how much incurable cases can be trained to do. Keep an atmosphere of happiness about him—remember, always, how strongly the mind acts upon the body. He has more pluck than anyone I ever saw, and he will respond." The deep voice was wrung with pity. "I'm sorry for you, Lester, from my heart—I've sons myself."

"I had only one," said John Lester, with dry lips, "and I was too proud of him, I suppose. I was proud of every inch of him, mind and body—his pluck, his strength, his manliness and his clean, straight mind. Even as a baby he

was always such a plucky kid. I used to say he was ordinary enough, even to his mother, but in my heart I thought no one ever had a son like him. And now—well, I suppose I've got my punishment for being too proud."

"You have his pluck still," the doctor said. "He'll need it, as he never needed it before; and your pride in him, too. You can't let yourself get down, mind; Dick will need every ounce of help you can give him. Don't let him ever feel he is less your son because he can't be the son you've hoped for. You've got to put every personal feeling aside for him and his mother."

"His mother! Oh, my God!" said John Lester desperately. He turned from them and went across the paddock with his head down.

"No—don't go after him. He's got to work it out alone, poor chap!" said the surgeon, pityingly.

"You haven't told the mother yet?"

"No. He wants to tell her himself. But she won't feel it as much."

"She! Why, she adores the boy!"

"Yes, but women are different, which is something to be thankful for," said the doctor. "She has the boy still, and the relief of his being alive is so intense that the other part will be secondary. He'll be her baby again; she'll be able to attend him ceaselessly; to spend her whole life on him. That's always going to help a mother. Lester won't have as much

comfort that way, and he has all a father's broken pride and thwarted ambitions. It's a hard sentence for a man with an only son."

From the shadow of a great clump of desert pea a little figure crept—Merle, her lank black hair hanging about her tear-stained face. She caught at her father's coat with shaking fingers.

"Daddy! It isn't true—Dick won't be a cripple! Say it, daddy!"

Robert Warner looked down at her gloomily.

"I wish to God I could," he said. "And I wish I'd never asked them on this unlucky visit." His face hardened as he looked at his daughter. "You'd better go inside, Merle—and remember you're not to talk about it."

She went obediently, not crying, but with her childish face set in a look of horror that was not good to see. The doctor looked after her.

"Poor child!" he said. "She came to me last night, and knelt down in front of me and begged me to make Dick well. Someone has told her it's all her fault."

"And so it is," Robert Warner said heavily.

"No good telling a baby that—and she's little more." The doctor lit a cigarette. "And it was only a bit of childish disobedience."

"Well, its consequences will darken my house as long as I live," Mr. Warner said.

Out in the paddocks Dick Lester's father tramped up and down, trying to realise the thing that had befallen them, and praying for courage to tell his wife. How could he tell her? How to find words to shatter the hopes and the joy that thirteen years had built up so happily? She had always known his love of physical perfection, and from the very first days of Dick's dimpled babyhood she had seconded his efforts to make the boy's body splendidly fit. Together they had trained him, proud of every fresh step of physical achievement and muscular development. And now—the body they had gloried in lay a helpless log for ever. Never to walk, never to ride through the bush and the paddocks that he loved; never to spring to meet them with all his happy soul in his eyes. He groaned aloud in his misery.

"I won't tell her to-day," he said. "To-morrow will do."

Then he saw her coming towards him across the grass, fresh and dainty in her white gown. He went to meet her.

"Mrs. Warner saw you going over here," she said, slipping her hand into his arm. "Dick's asleep, and the nurse bullied me into coming out for some fresh air. He's so well this afternoon, the darling! No pain to speak of, and he's quite merry. The nurse says he's doing splendidly."

"That's something to be thankful for," her husband said. "Are you rested, dear?"

"I? Oh, it's rest just to see Dick out of pain, and to know that he'll be all right soon," she said happily.

He tried to answer, and could not. Suddenly she turned, looking keenly at his face.

"John, there is something wrong!" She went white. "Is it Dick? Tell me quickly!"

"Dick is doing well," he said hastily. For she trembled so that he was afraid she would faint. "But there is something. Sit down on this log." He put her down gently, and stood looking at her, and then in broken words he told her of the doctor's sentence.

She heard him almost in silence, uttering now and then a quick question. The colour died even from her lips, but she took the blow without flinching.

"Are we to tell him?"

"No—not until we must."

"He was asking the nurse this afternoon when he could get up," she said with a pitiful little smile. "I—I do not know how one could ever tell him. Dick—my Dick—a cripple! It doesn't seem the sort of thing that could possibly happen."

Suddenly she stood erect, facing him.

"I don't believe it," she said fiercely. "It may seem so now, and I suppose Dr. Brereton knows as much as most men; but, beloved, we'll never give up hope. He's so young, so strong,

so perfect! I don't believe that science won't find the way to cure him. We'll make him as well and strong as we can, and take him to Melbourne—to England, to America, to Germany, if necessary. Thank God, there's money enough! You mustn't believe it, either. We've got to keep happy thoughts all round him; to be certain in our own minds that he'll get well. If we let ourselves despair we make ourselves less able to help him."

"You haven't talked to Brereton," he said sadly.

"No, and, if necessary, I won't talk to him!" she flashed back. "I won't do anything to lessen my faith that Dick will get well. Doctors have made mistakes before; and you know he said himself that they don't understand spinal trouble yet, John!"—she caught at him fiercely—"don't believe it! God never meant our boy to be a cripple all his life!"

"I haven't your pluck," he said. "Warner tells me Brereton's about the best man in Perth; he should know. But there's nothing to be gained, at any rate, by giving way to despair. We'll do all we can to fight the verdict. Brereton did say there was always a loophole where there was youth and strength."

He took her hands, looking at her.

"Well, thank God for you, anyhow," he said. "I wonder if there are any depths you wouldn't draw a man from. I came out wondering how I could ever tell you; picturing your despair as black as my own; and instead, you've given me—well, if not hope, at least something to fight for. And that is

always something. Come home, and we'll see if Dick's awake."

He wondered often, in the long, hard days that followed, if there were secret moments when her splendid faith and courage did indeed waver. If there were, she did not show them. To Dr. Brereton she listened calmly, taking in all he said, trying in vain to gather from him a shred of encouragement. At the end she thanked him for saving the boy's life.

"I wish I could have given him health as well as life," the doctor said pityingly.

"That will come—some day," she told him. "Please don't try to make me believe anything else."

He shook his head.

"It would not be fair to let you hope."

"It would not be fair to take hope from me," she said. "That's not going to help Dick. Perhaps, in ten years, if everything fails, I might believe you. But we're never going to cease believing and trying."

"You are a brave woman," he said.

"Brave! Why, I am not brave enough to do without hope," she answered. "If I once believed that Dick would never walk again, I would not know how to face life. But he will walk—I know it!"

The doctor went back to Perth when it was safe to leave Dick to the care of the two nurses—experienced, matter-of-fact women, who settled down to the care of an incurable case with a calm professional certainty as to the future that often goaded their patient's mother to the limit of endurance; a fact which they never suspected. Dick himself gave little trouble. He was very weak; so tired that it was happiness to lie still, now that there was no longer pain to dread. "I'm jolly lazy," he said—"but if I move I know the pain will come back, so I don't try." He did not dream that movement was impossible.

Gradually his clean youth triumphed over the minor injuries, and his wounds healed quickly. The Westown doctor, who came out twice weekly, professed himself delighted with him; the nurses allowed themselves a touch of pride over his fast-disappearing scars. A faint tinge of colour crept back into his white face. He had no inclination but to lie still; but interest in the outer world awoke once more, and he liked to hear the station talk; the daily stories of work among the cattle—to hear what horses were in use, and how the young ones were shaping in their work. His room, as he grew stronger, became a kind of centre for the household, and everybody drifted there throughout the day—Bobby and the twinses, with queer offerings of flowers and such curiosities as stick insects and blue-tongued lizards; Mr. Warner solemnly asking advice on station matters; Macleay, the storekeeper, with dry Scots stories. Each evening the three jackeroos came to him with the history of the day; tip-toeing at first, with exaggerated caution, and gradually forgetting it, at Dick's quick questions, so that the sickroom would become a Babel of cheery voices, until the nurse on

duty would plead over-excitement for her patient, and turn them all out. Dick hated to see them go, although he would be too tired to want them to stay. "Makes you nearly forget you're lying on your back," he would say.

But there were long hours when he did not seem to want to talk; lying quietly, his eyes always on the patch of sky outside his window, where the gum leaves made a wavering pattern against the blue. Hours when he wanted nothing, he said; neither reading nor stories, nor any of the hundred devices with which they sought to make his day less long. What did he think of? his mother wondered wretchedly, watching the still face against the white pillows. Were there fears in his brave heart? Unknown terrors of the future, that he would not tell even to her? She would ask him if he were in pain, and he would shake his head with a little smile—the smile that never failed for her. But if there were times when Mrs. Lester's own courage wavered, it was in those quiet hours when something beyond her knowledge seemed to be drawing Dick away from her into a silence where she might not enter.

One shadow haunted the verandah outside the room—Merle, white-faced and wretched, haunted by self-reproach too agonising for a child's mind. Whatever bitterness might have been in Dick's mother vanished at the dumb misery in her eyes. She put her arm about the little girl, holding her tightly, while Merle clung to her, shaken with dry sobs.

"I wish I was dead!" she had gasped.

"You mustn't say that," Mrs. Lester said. "Dick would hate to hear you. And you must help us to get him well!"

"But they say he'll never be well!"

"Hush!" The mother's hand was across her mouth. "I don't believe that. You must come to see him when he is stronger, and help to cheer him up."

Curiously, it became apparent after a time that Dick liked to have Merle in the room. She never talked much, and it did not seem that she knew how to smile; but a queer sympathy sprang up between them, for which words were not necessary. She developed an instinct, almost uncanny, for knowing what he wanted. At all times he was slow to voice any need—his sturdy independence was one of the hardest sacrifices he had to make on the altar of his helplessness, and it died hard. Merle divined needs almost before they shaped themselves in his mind. He would find a book, a fresh handkerchief, a piece of fruit, within reach of his hand, put there with a silence that wished to avoid thanks. She saw him feeling awkwardly for his watch, and presently a little clock from her own room was placed at an angle where he could always see it. If the blind flapped, or the door creaked, or the light fell too strongly on his eyes, it was Merle who saw it first, and went quietly to mend matters. "I think she sits there just trying to imagine what Dick may want, so that she may do it for him," Mrs. Lester said to her husband.

"That child's a born nurse, if only she had a decent bedside manner," said one nurse to the other.

But Dick liked her manner. It was "not fussy," he said. She did things quietly, and he soon learned that she hated to be thanked by anything but a glance and a nod. A silent comprehension drew them together, until, after his mother and father, he preferred Merle to any other attendant.

So the weeks went by; and at last one day the Westown doctor declared his part of the work done.

"I can't do any more for him," he said to Mr. Lester. "He has a clean bill of health now, except for the one big thing."

"And that is no better?"

The other man shook his head.

"It can't be any better, Mr. Lester. I wish I could think otherwise."

"What about moving him?" the father asked. "We can't quarter ourselves at Narrung for ever—even if we wished. And I want to get the boy to Melbourne."

"It's a brute of a journey," the doctor said. "Still, it must be faced some time, and the hot weather will make it worse, the longer you wait." He thought deeply. "The train is vile; and the drive to it, even in the Warners' big car, would be a strain."

"My own idea," John Lester said, "was to get a motor ambulance from Perth, and do the whole journey by road. Do you think it's workable?"

"It's your best plan, I believe," the doctor said, with relief. "Brereton would fix it up for you."

"We can make the stages what we choose, according to Dick's strength," said Mr. Lester. "I should take tents, and, if necessary, we could camp on the road. Dick would be better off in the ambulance than in some of the wayside hotels. If it took us a fortnight or more it would be easier for him than that jolting, grinding train."

"There's no risk to the boy," the doctor said. "Only weariness, and you want to spare him as much of that as you can."

A week later Mrs. Lester sat on the verandah outside Dick's room. Her husband had been reading to Dick; the boy had fallen asleep under the spell of the low, deep voice, and now the father sat watching him. She looked wearily across the garden to the wide paddocks beyond. Two months ago they had driven over them for the first time, radiant in the happiness, still a new thing, of being all together; to-night she looked at them for the last time, and there was bitterness in her soul. They were to take Dick away in the morning, the wreck of what he had been; that had been Fate's gift to them at Narrung, the sorry end of the visit that had promised such brightness. Before them lay new happiness or despair— which?

A soft step roused her. Merle stood there, with a kind of trembling determination in her face.

"Mrs. Lester," she said, "will you take me with you?"

"Take you, Merle? My dear child, how could we?"

Merle suddenly slipped to the floor beside her, catching at her skirt.

"I'll slave for you," she said wildly. "I'll do any mortal thing I can. If you leave me here I'll go mad. I 'spect you must hate me, but Dick doesn't, though I don't know why he doesn't. Nobody can hate me like I do myself."

"Nobody hates you at all, Merle."

"People must. D'you think I don't know what I've done?" the child stammered. "Wouldn't you let me come, just for a bit, to work for you—to help you to look after Dick? I'd never be any trouble. I can do my own hair and everything. I'd just be legs for Dick!"

"Legs?" queried Mrs. Lester, puzzled.

"Yes. It's all my fault he can't use his. If I came I could just be there to hand him things and run his errands. He doesn't mind telling me to do things, but he won't ask you, 'cause he hates you to get tired. Oh, couldn't I come, just as Dick's legs?"

Mr. Lester appeared in the doorway.

"Take care—Dick is awake."

They heard Dick's voice, "Mother."

"Yes, sonnie." Mrs. Lester put Merle aside and went in.

"Don't let that poor kiddie cry," he said. "I say, couldn't we take her?"

"You want her, Dick?" said his mother, amazed.

"Oh, she's not a bad kid," Dick said. "I give you an awful lot of work now, and she'd save you a bit. And she wants to come ever so. Might as well let her, don't you think?"

Mrs. Lester looked at her husband uncertainly.

"If you want her I expect you can have her, old son," he said. "I'll see what her father and mother say."

He went out, leaving Dick and his wife alone. A small, sobbing figure crept after him.

Dick looked at his mother steadily.

"I say, mother—am I getting better?"

"Why, of course you are, old man," she said brightly.

"When am I going to sit up?" It was the question she had long dreaded, and she was ready for it.

"When your back strengthens sufficiently. You must give it time, beloved."

"It's not the spear wound? Nurse says that's all right."

"Oh, the spear wound was nothing—beyond being painful at first. You see, when Conqueror threw you, you fell on an

outcrop of ironstone, and that is what has given you the real trouble." She forced a smile. "You know, you can't bounce about on ledges of rock as if you were india-rubber!"

He was silent a moment, and then spoke suddenly; and there was terror in his eyes.

"Mother—my back isn't broken?"

"No!" she said quickly.

"You'd tell me—straight?"

"On my honour, Dick."

He heaved a big sigh.

"I've been wondering ... lying here," he said, "I'd heard about fellows with broken backs, and I do feel so queer and helpless. Of course I knew I couldn't get well all in a hurry; but I thought it was about time I could move my legs."

He looked at her with the absolute trust that all his life she had seen in his eyes. Twice she tried to speak before words would come.

"Will you just go on being patient, Dick?" she said at last. "I know it is hard—and you have been wonderfully good. Try not to get impatient yet."

"I can stick it all right if I know I'm going to get better," Dick said. "And you say I am, mother."

She met his eyes.

"I believe you are, Dick—with God's help."

"Well, that's all right—mother-est," he said; and he took her hand and carried it to his cheek. So they stayed together while darkness crept into the room. She would have stirred once to switch on the light, but he said, "Ah, don't go away," and she drew closer to him. Through the open windows the kind stars looked down in pity as her lips moved, praying.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LONG TRAIL.

It was a queer procession that moved away from Narrung homestead in the early morning. A great motor ambulance, with a bed for Dick that was a marvel of cushions and springs, went first, his mother and a nurse with him. Mr. Lester and the second nurse followed in another car that had come up from Perth; and, last of all, Mr. Warner, in his own motor, with Merle's little white face beside him. For Merle had got her wish—not because it was hers, but because of Dick's few words. "If Dick wants Merle, or my house, or every penny I have in the world, he has only got to say so," Mr. Warner had said. "If she's in the way, or whenever Dick is tired of her, you can consign her to her grandmother in

Perth." He looked at Merle as if she were a bale of goods. If the words stung her she made no sign.

Both the cars were piled high with baggage. Where possible they would stay in towns on the way, but since Dick's fatigue might demand that they should stop at any moment, there were tents to be carried, food, cooking utensils—all that was necessary for his comfort. The driver of the ambulance was a skilled man, trained to steer his great car so gently as to avoid the slightest jolt, if the roads were reasonably good—and there were favourable reports of the condition of the tracks. The Westown doctor had arrived the night before on his motor cycle to see his patient start; he helped to carry him out, with the nurses, when it was time to go.

Dick was a little flushed with excitement, and his eyes very bright. He smiled at the people who thronged round to say good-bye to him, and his weak hand had a special pat for Bobby—Bobby, who wailed because he was going, and refused to be comforted. The doctor and nurses hurried the farewells; their patient must not have any more fatigue than was necessary. Indeed, the doctor heaved a sigh of relief when he was safely in the ambulance, and it moved slowly away down the paddock.

The two mothers clung together for a moment at the last.

"I would give up my own son if I could give yours back to you," Mrs. Warner murmured. Tears were running down her kind face.

"I will have him back," Mrs. Lester said steadily. "Some day you must come to see him—straight and well again." But Mrs. Warner had no words.

The day passed more easily than they had dared to hope. If the tracks were sandy, at least they were in good order; the ambulance passed over them gently, and the fresh air acted as a sedative to Dick, who slept calmly during the warmest hours of the morning. They pitched a camp early in the afternoon, afraid to make the first stage a long one. It was an ideal spot—a grassy clearing, ringed round with tall trees and low bushes, full of birds that had never learned to be afraid of humans. Dick begged to be taken out, and they lifted his stretcher into the shade, where he could lie watching the business of camping. Mr. Warner and Mr. Lester were old hands at the business; the tents went up, firewood was brought in, and the camp-fire lit, and their evening meal prepared, long before it was time to put Dick back to bed and make him comfortable for the night. He put off the moving as long as he could. "I've been in bed so jolly long—I'm sick of four walls," he pleaded. So they let him wait until their meal was over and dusk came down; and the nurses, fearing the chill of the evening air, became adamant, and carried him off.





"They pitched a camp early in the afternoon."

Dick Lester of Kurrajong

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"They pitched a camp early in the afternoon."

Mrs. Lester woke when the first rays of the sun came into her tent. She slipped on a coat and hurried across to the ambulance, peeping in. Already the nurse was busying herself about nourishment, and Dick's eyes, clear and merry, peeped at her over the edge of his blankets.

"Isn't it jolly, mother! Did you sleep well?"

"Ever so well," she told him. "And you?"

"Oh, we've had a beautiful night!" the nurse said, cheerfully. "My patient snored serenely, while the 'possums and wombats and things kept me awake. This boy of yours thrives on the bush, Mrs. Lester!"

"But, of course; isn't he a bush baby?" She laughed. Not since his illness had there been such a ring of health in Dick's voice. Looking at his face, with its touch of colour, it seemed impossible that presently he would not leap up to join her in the old way, to ramble through the trees, exploring the new world. Her thoughts flew back to their last day near Perth, when he had gone climbing, swinging from bough to bough with all his lithe young body like a steel spring, supple and strong. Now—she choked back the sigh that came to her lips.

"Can he get up to breakfast, do you think, nurse?"

"Oh, I think so, as he's so good!"

"Well, rather!" Dick stated. "Wash me quick, nurse, dear, and take me out. I want to see trees and scrub, and bacon frying, and everything. Oh—cocoa? Well, all right!" He submitted to be fed, more or less meekly.

So the days passed, one like the other. They left the main roads as they came near civilisation, finding good camping places, since Dick showed that he had a dread of being taken to hotels. "I don't want to be carted in and out, with people staring at me," he pleaded. "And the bush is so lovely. You

don't mind camping, mother?" She would have lain on the bare earth to keep the ring of happiness in his voice. They made each day's journey short, so that the vibration, however softened, should not affect him. It never tired him to be in the open, watching them move about the camp. His old keen interest awoke again. They made a point of consulting him about everything, so that he should feel himself an active part of each day's life, his father desiring his opinion about the set of a tent rope with earnestness equal to that of Mr. Warner when he carried a pan of bacon to his side to find out if it were properly cooked. The motor driver entered into the spirit of it, and discoursed to him learnedly on the finer parts of his car's anatomy; and no one thought of watching the billy, since it was Dick's job to attend to it, and to call out when the steam poured from the lid. Merle had a task all her own. From the moment they halted each day she sought through the bush tirelessly bringing to his bedside whatever treasures she could gather—flowers, deserted nests, curiously marked stones, gorgeous beetles; all that keen eyes could find. Dick grew to look for her collections with delighted interest. "My word, you are a brick, the way you find things!" he told her.

As she had begged Mrs. Lester, so her desire came to her—she was indeed "legs" to him. He could not shake off his innate distaste for asking older people to run about for him. Even with the nurses he would go without something he wanted rather than send one on an errand. Somehow, Merle was different. He began to look on her rather as a younger brother; to find it easy to employ one whose eagerness to be employed was evident in every look. He never omitted

thanks, but she did not want them. Her gratitude was for being used—thanks did not matter.

With everyone else she was as silent as ever. Sometimes Mrs. Lester would manage to make her talk a little; but for the most part she rarely spoke, and when she was not watching Dick her eyes followed her father about like a hungry dog's. She knew that he no longer wanted her. In his way he was sorry for her; but his overmastering feeling was angry disgust and impatience that through one of his children so bitter a calamity had befallen his friends. He had said to his wife, "When I look at that boy, remembering what he was, and then think it is Merle's fault that he lies there, I feel as if I never wanted to see her again."

The journey might have been accomplished much more quickly than it was. There was no need to hurry, for there was no doubt that the open-air life was doing Dick good. He was as helpless as ever, but his appetite was keener; he slept better and he had fewer attacks of pain. They watched him hungrily, snatching at each hopeful sign. Supplies ran out, but it was easy for one of the cars to run ahead into a town and lay in a store of all that they needed. The weather held good, with calm, starry nights, that made sleeping in the open delightful. They were all better for the trip when at last they rolled into Perth late one afternoon. Dr. Brereton had made all arrangements for them. His big private hospital was on the outskirts of the city, and there Dick was installed with his nurses in a room with a balcony overlooking the Swan, where he might be wheeled to pass the day. They found a corner also for Mrs. Lester, since she flatly refused to be parted from Dick; and there was a hotel not far off for the

others. Dr. Brereton whistled with delight when he came in to see his former patient.

"Well, young man! Why, you look as fit as a fiddle!" he ejaculated. "What have you been doing with him, Mrs. Lester? He's brown as a berry."

"Camping suits him, and we have been over a fortnight on the road," she said, smiling. "I don't know how he is going to stand being inside walls again."

"We'll keep him on the balcony, then," responded the doctor. "Feel strong, old man?"

"Pretty good," Dick nodded. "I'll be all right once I can sit up. When will that be, doctor?"

"Oh, some day. We've got to get you thoroughly fit first," the doctor evaded.

Dick's face fell. What he had hoped from his meeting with Dr. Brereton only he knew.

"Don't you think I'm well enough to try now?" he pleaded. "You don't know how jolly well I feel."

"I'm going to bring another man to see you to-morrow," the doctor said. "Too late to-night to overhaul you; but I want to see how my job looks."

"Oh, your job was all right long ago—you did it awfully well," Dick assured him kindly. "Dr. Carter took the stitches out at Narrung."

"Hurt you?"

"Well—everything hurts a bit," Dick admitted. "It didn't hurt more than other things. I'd be lonely now if I didn't have an ache or two!"

"Poor old chap!"

"Oh I'm all right. At least, I would be, I know, if you'd let me sit up. No one could get well, always lying flat. Why you couldn't keep me flatter if my silly back was broken!—and you said it wasn't, didn't you, mother?"

His eyes were like a pleading animals. Mrs. Lester smiled at him with stiff lips.

"And it isn't, old son. But you must be patient—give us time."

Dick saw her mouth quiver, and was seized with swift penitence.

"I didn't mean to be a brute, mother. I won't worry you." He gave a little laugh. "You see, Dr. Brereton was someone new for me to worry, so I had to."

"H'm!" said the doctor. "We poor wretches are supposed to be able to stand anything. Never mind—just wait until you're up, and able to fight——"

He was interrupted by a quick cry from Dick. The boy's eyes were shining, his voice shaking with excitement.

"Doctor! You mean that! You mean I'll t-truly be up—able to f-fight—I won't lie here always! You did m-mean it——!"

Mrs. Lester turned to the window, unable for a moment to command her face. The doctor patted the boy's head with swift remorse.

"Of course I meant it, old man," he spoke soothingly. "Only you must give us time."

"I'll wait any time, if I know it's all right," Dick muttered. A shade of weariness passed over his face. Then he looked at his mother, and put out a hand to her.

"Been a beast again," he said apologetically. "Didn't mean to, mummie—only he sort of surprised me."

She dropped a butterfly kiss on his brow.

"Here's nurse with your tea," she said, thankful for the diversion. "I wonder how you will like food cooked in a respectable oven again?"

"There's no food anywhere like the food you cook over a camp fire," Dick declared.

"You can't have lost the camp appetite yet," said the nurse warmly. "So don't tell me." She tucked a napkin under his chin with a deft movement. "Please, we would like people to run away—my lion doesn't like to be watched while he's fed!"

"I'm sorry I said it," Dr. Brereton confessed out in the corridor. "One says things hurriedly—anything to soothe a patient. And you know I strongly advised that he should not be told his case was hopeless."

"No, and of course we have not told him so. But I think he looked on any statement from you as coming with special authority. I'm sorry, too; he has never been so excited."

"Poor little chap! I wouldn't have given him false hope for anything."

"And you are sure it is false?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't any hope, Mrs. Lester. It wouldn't be fair to you to tell you otherwise. Mind, I would leave no stone unturned; I want another surgeon, the best man in Perth, to examine him with me to-morrow. But I think his verdict will be the same as my own."

They told it to the parents gently next morning trying to soften the cruel words. No hope, so far as they could see, that Dick would ever walk again. In time, with special treatment and massage he might sit up; but further than that they could promise nothing.

"He's wonderfully strong," Dr. Brereton said. "Everything is in his favour, to a limited extent; there's no reason why he should not have a long and happy life, because he has pluck enough to face the future when once it becomes necessary to tell him."

"You would not tell him yet?" Mr. Lester said.

The doctor shook his head.

"He's too young—too full of hope. Later on, when lying still has become second nature"—Mrs. Lester shivered suddenly—"it will be easier for him to bear the telling. Now, if you take hope from him, he might slip back."

"What did you say to him this morning? He asked you, of course?"

"Oh, yes, he asked, poor laddie. We put him off; told him—it's the truth, too—that he was getting on well, but that he must be patient and put up with the massage. It will be painful, you know, Mrs. Lester. He was very good—extraordinarily patient under our handling this morning. After it all he was dog-tired, so we have put him to sleep. The nurse is with him."

"When do you think we can move him to Melbourne?" Mr. Lester asked.

"Oh—almost any time. Let him have a few days' rest. I should advise you to get passages on one of the big mail steamers; the inter-state boats are more apt to kick about if there's bad weather in the Bight. Not that you should have bad weather now."

"The *Occident* is due next week," the second doctor put in. "She's one of their newest boats—you should be able to get a deck cabin on her for the boy. I know the manager here, Mr.

Lester; would you care to go round with me and arrange matters?"

So Dick, lying wearily on his balcony that afternoon, still stiff and sore from the morning's handling, heard with relief that they were to be homeward bound.

"That's jolly," he said. "I'd like to see Melbourne again—and the fellows at school. Will the old doc. let Bottles and Nuge and Teddy come to see me, do you think, mother?"

"Of course he will," Mrs. Lester said. "They will be wild to hear about your adventures—think of the untold sums they have spent on wiring to you!" The story of the Northern blacks' raid upon Narrung had been sent to the papers in the Eastern States, and Dick had been inundated with telegrams from his school.

"Well, it will be great to see them," he said. "Perhaps one of them would come up to Kurrajong next holidays, mother; I expect I'll be sitting up by then, so it wouldn't be so very dull for them." He grinned. "Old Bottles is going to be a doctor—it would be handy for him to practise on me!"

"Thank you," said the nurse hurriedly; "I'd rather not!"

"So would I," agreed Dick. "Just you keep your eye on him, though, nurse; he's safe to have some patent pill of his own that he'll be mad keen to give me!"

"I will be there," said the nurse, with a grim determination not to quit her patient's side during any invasion by Bottles.

"Mother," Dick said, "will there be more doctors in Melbourne?—more overhauling like to-day?"

"There may be, my son. You won't mind, Dick, if it's to make you better?"

"Oh, no," he said. "Anything's better than lying still. I didn't seem to mind it so much at Narrung, but since we began to move about, and I feel stronger, I just feel that I'd be all right if I could only get up. But these silly asses of doctors won't let me try."

"Never mind," said his father hastily. "We'll see what the Melbourne men say. Meanwhile, I've got you such a jolly deck cabin on the *Occident*, Dick, with one for mother and me next door. You'll be able to be out on deck every day. It's her first trip out, and she's one of the finest boats that ever came to Australia. It will be something to tell the boys that you came in her."

"Yes, that'll be ripping," said Dick, with interest. "I say, father, what about Merle?"

"Well, I don't know," Mr. Lester said, pondering. "I know she wants to come with us; and if you would like to have her, of course she can come."

"Oh, I don't think I could do without my old 'Legs,' could I?" said Dick, laughing. "Do let her come—she just hates the idea of going back to Narrung. And let me tell her, father, will you—she'll be no end bucked!"

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW MERLE JUMPED FROM A TRAM.

Merle was waiting at the street corner for a tram. It was the day before they were to sail for Melbourne, and she had been to say good-bye to her grandmother; the distance was not great, and she was allowed to make the little trip to and from the hotel by herself. She was impatient, for she was to go on to the hospital to see Dick; and the only part of Merle's day worth consideration to her was the part she spent in being "legs" to the boy. She looked up the long road, fidgeting and frowning to see no tram in sight.

Two men came strolling along and stopped near her, also glancing up the tram track. They went on chatting, without noticing the small figure by the lamp post.

"——won't be out here long," one said, completing a sentence. "No, he's not coming out to practise; just on a visit to Melbourne to see his mother. He's been away four years, and she is getting old."

"He was always a very devoted son, wasn't he?" the other said.

"Yes, very. My brother died when the boy was at school, and he's been everything to his mother. Of course he would

have done remarkably well in the ordinary course of things; he had a big practice before he went to Germany. But his mother was as keen as he was about his becoming a specialist, and he has always been determined to keep himself abreast of the latest discoveries in spinal treatment."

"The spine was always Neil's pet subject."

"Yes—he used to say there ought to be another big war, because then surgeons had a chance of finding out things they would never find in ordinary practice. True enough, too. Anyhow, he has been at extended research work in America and Germany these four years, and when he finally comes out he will practise only as a spine specialist. That won't be for another two years, however; this is only a flying visit, as I said."

The word "spine" had caught Merle's idle ears, and she was listening, with parted lips, her breath coming quickly.

"There's the tram," the first man said. "Lunch with us at the club to-morrow, won't you, Onslow? I'd like you to meet my nephew again. The *Occident* gets in in the morning, and I'm going to run down in the car to meet him, and bring him up for the day."

"Thanks, I'll be delighted," his friend said. He nodded good-bye as the tram rattled up. The first man stood aside courteously to let Merle in, and then sat down in a seat across the aisle. The tram banged its way down the hill.

The conductor said, "Fares, please!" three times, each with mounting impatience, before Merle realised that he was speaking to her. Then she took out her purse and paid him mechanically, with an air so distracted that the conductor reported later to the motorman that there was a kid back there quite cracked.

Her heart was thumping furiously. Someone was on the *Occident*—someone who knew all about spines—who might cure Dick! Someone who would not practise; but if he only saw Dick, he might relent. She did not think anyone could possibly see Dick and not relent. Anyway, if he were asked. And then she realised with a kind of horror that she did not know his name.

She looked across the aisle at the man who had talked about his nephew. He was kind-looking, she thought; short and plump, with a grey beard and nice eyes. He surely would not mind being asked. But to speak to a stranger was a stupendous task to Merle, who found it difficult enough to speak to anyone she knew quite well. The very thought was enough to make her trembling and tongue-tied. Perhaps, if he got off when she did. And just then she looked again, and almost cried aloud in her dismay. The tram had stopped, unnoticed by her, and the man had got off and was walking briskly up a side street.

The conductor's bell had rung, and the tram was already under way as she started up, springing to the side. A woman caught at her dress with an alarmed exclamation; from his end of the car the conductor uttered an angry shout of warning; but Merle did not heed them. She swung herself to

the roadway, spinning round as she alighted, and finally falling heavily. The tram was stopped, people were shouting. Her one thought was to get away. She scrambled to her feet, brushing the dust from her dress, and, bruised but determined, raced up the side street.

"It's the cracked kid," reported the conductor gloomily, ringing his car on again. "Wonder why they let her out without a keeper. That's the sort as makes us chaps get bad marks on our tickets!" He stared wrathfully after Merle as long as she was in sight.

The stout gentleman heard running feet behind him, but he was in a hurry, and did not turn until a breathless voice addressed him.

"Oh, please!" Merle panted.

"Bless my soul!" said the man, looking at the dishevelled figure. "Are you hurt? What's the matter?"

"You were talking," Merle choked—and then took a long breath—"about a man on the *Occident*—somebody who knows all about the spine."

"Well—if I was?" said the amazed Westralian.

"Oh, please, would you tell me his name?"

"Why on earth——?"

Merle cut him short.

"Oh, tell me! There's a boy going on the *Occident* with a hurt spine—he might look at him! It wouldn't hurt you."

"Well——" began the man, staring at her. "My nephew won't practise, if that's what you mean. But his name is Neil Fraser, if you must know. Better not tell him I told you, for he's on a holiday, and doesn't want to think about spines!"

"He couldn't help it if he knew Dick!" said Merle solemnly. "Thanks, very much." She turned. "I must go and catch another tram."

"I think you had better let me brush you down a bit first," said the Westralian, suiting the action to the word. "I've got daughters myself, and if your mother sees the state your frock is in——!"

Merle submitted to his ministrations more or less gratefully. At the moment it would not have mattered to her if she had no frock at all. She was seething with excited hope. Each night she prayed blindly, desperately, to some God she did not in the least realise that He would make Dick well—that He would let her work out her wickedness by taking Dick's pain, if He only could. Perhaps God was really there, after all—perhaps He really meant to help! She said good-bye to the fatherly Westerner, and managed to get back to the hotel—how, she never knew. A great thought had come to her. She had heard of cases of skin-graft—taking skin from a sound person to heal another's wound. Perhaps this wonderful new man could take a piece of her spine and put it into Dick's. She knelt down by her bed, and prayed wildly to God that He would arrange it.

"It doesn't matter what becomes of me," she said. "Daddy has two sons, and I'm only a girl—and they've only Dick. And it's all my fault. If you can fix it so's he'll be able to walk soon, before he gets any discourager, I don't care what you do to me. Oh, God, won't you let this Fraser man know all about spines like Dick's!" It was a queer prayer; but who shall say that it did not go straight upwards?

The burden of Merle's secret was heavy upon her as she climbed the gangway of the *Occident* next day. She had not dared to speak to anyone, in a childish fear of being ridiculed; and the temptation to speak to Dick was so strong that in resisting it she became entirely silent, until Dick grew worried, and said finally, "Look here, Legs, old girl, are you really sure you want to come?"

"Want to come?" She looked at him in a dazed way. "Oh, I never wanted anything so much in my life! You don't want to leave me behind, do you?"

"Rather not!" Dick said, relieved. "You're jolly good to me, you know, old Legs! Only I thought you were a bit down in the mouth at leaving your father. Sure you're not?"

She shook her head emphatically.

"No. He wants me to go with you. You can send me back any time, you know, to Grannie. But even if you send me back at once, I want to go on the *Occident*."

Dick, being a gentleman, was indignant.

"You make me feel like a perfect beast!" he said warmly. "I don't want to send you back at all—and I wish you wouldn't talk as if you were a beastly parcel! You're coming up to Kurrajong with us, and you'll have to ride Tinker for me until I can ride him myself."

Until he could ride himself! The words were in her ears as she climbed the gangway, up which two sailors had carried Dick's stretcher carefully a moment before. She went to the side of the ship, scanning the faces of the passengers as they came along the pier, wondering which could be "Neil Fraser," and hoping that any man with a specially kind face would be he. The time passed, and the cry of "Visitors ashore!" startled her. Then she heard her father's voice behind her.

"That you, Merle? I'm going." His big face was sadder than she had ever seen it, and he kissed her gently. She flushed; he had not often kissed her since Dick's accident. "Be a good girl, and do all you possibly can for that poor boy. Remember, none of us can ever make up what we have cost him. If—if you see anything he would like, buy it for him—you can have all the money you want." He half turned, and she heard him say miserably under his breath, "If one were not so helpless!" Then he put his hand on her shoulder. "It's something—just a little—if you can be legs for him. Don't spare yourself."

"I won't," she said. "Oh, I won't, daddy!"

He kissed her again, and went down the gangway. She watched his huge form threading its way along the pier. His

head was bent down, and he did not look back again.

Dick did not leave his cabin that evening. He was tired with the excitement of starting, and was, moreover, developing an invalid's dread of being stared at. The nurses kept him very quiet; even Merle was not allowed inside the cabin, and she wandered about miserably, handicapped by her shyness, and wondering how, in the crowded mail steamer, she was ever going to find a man she did not know. She went to bed with the problem still unsolved, slept badly, and got up early in the morning, dressing as noiselessly as possible in order not to disturb the nurse whose cabin she shared. In the alleyway she met a steward, and a sudden thought came to her.

"Steward," she said, "do you know which is Mr. Fraser's cabin?"

"Not in my lot," said the steward carelessly. "You don't know 'is number, by any chance?"

"No."

"Well, I dunno. Ask some of the other stewards—or the purser'd tell you, of course."

Merle's courage was fast oozing away; to tackle the purser, a mysterious and terrible individual of great power, was a task beyond her. She dived into her pocket and produced a bright half-crown.

"You find out for me," she said, proffering the coin, which the steward pocketed with an adroitness born of long habit.

"It's very important; I've got to know soon. I'll come down after breakfast, and you tell me and I'll give you another."

"Right-oh!" said the steward, with a new respect for a small girl who could distribute half-crowns with such large ease. "I'll 'ave 'is number ready for you, miss."

Dick was better; a good night had made him inclined for breakfast, and he was longing to get out into the fresh air, even if people did look at him. He kept Merle busy, running errands and telling him all about the passengers; and it was not until the nurses were ready to prepare him for going out that she was able to slip away and hurry down to her own cabin.

The steward met her, rather aggrieved.

"Nice little jig-saw puzzle you set me, miss!" he said. "Mr. Fraser, you says; well, there's seven Frasers on board! Now which is it?"

Merle's face fell.

"Seven!" she exclaimed. "How will I ever—oh, but, of course, his name's Neil!"

"Ah, that's something like," said the steward, cheering up. He consulted a paper in his hand. "Neil—that's N. Well, there's two N. Frasers, apparently, miss; N. F. Fraser in 352, and N. H. Fraser in 279. Now, which is your mark, I wonder?"

"I don't know," Merle said hopelessly. "Couldn't you find out for me?"

A sudden cry of "Smithers!" smote upon the ear of the steward.

"That's me," he said hurriedly. "'Fraid I'll 'ave to go, miss—that's my chief 'owlin'. You won't 'ave any difficulty in findin' your man—just try each in turn." He put the paper into her hand, and almost mechanically Merle parted with her second half-crown, and watched him rush off in response to another call.

Merle stood looking at the paper for a helpless moment. To track these mysterious Frasers to their lairs seemed a task beyond her courage. Still, there was nothing to be gained by putting it off—and the sooner she set about finding her man, the sooner would her suspense about Dick be relieved. So she set her lips firmly and went off along the alleyways, hunting for one of the numbers she wanted.

She found one presently—279. No one was about, and she knocked at the door timidly. There was no response at first; but presently awful sounds arose, and Merle realised with a shudder of horror that the inmate of 279 was extremely seasick!

She took to her heels, rushing wildly along the corridor until she considered herself at a safe distance—scarcely realising that nothing was further than pursuit from the mind of the unfortunate 279. Then she stopped to consider the position; what she should do if the terrible man she had heard

was indeed the object of her quest; what, if, as might well be, 352 was in no better case. There seemed nothing to be gained by standing still, however, so she wandered up companions and along alleyways until she found herself confronting the second cabin on her list.

The door was shut, and she stood trying to summon up her courage to knock; and feeling the said courage rapidly oozing from her. But before she had time to make up her mind, the door opened suddenly, and a man came out, so quickly that he nearly knocked her over.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, stepping back. "I didn't know anyone was there." He looked mildly surprised; but his voice was pleasant and his clean-shaven face was so keen and alert, and his eyes were so kindly, that Merle was suddenly no longer afraid. "Did you knock?" he went on. "Were you looking for anyone?"

"I'm looking for someone called Neil Fraser," Merle stammered. "I do hope you're him!"

"Well—I am!" he said, and laughed. "Why did you want me?"

Twice she tried to speak, and could not. He saw the struggle in her face and patted her shoulder. "Is anything wrong?" he asked. "I am a doctor—can I help you? Come in and tell me."

He drew her into the cabin. Merle made a tremendous effort, and her words came with a rush.

"I know all about you," she said. "You've been all over the world finding out all about spines, and now you've got to cure Dick's!"

"Dick's?" he said. "What's wrong with Dick's?"

"It's all wrong—broken or something. I don't know what. It's all my fault, anyhow; cause I went out and the blacks nearly got me, only Dick came after me—and they speared him, and he fell off Conqueror when he was galloping, and lobbed on some rocks, and now they say he'll never walk again. And he must walk—you don't know how splendid he is! He's only thirteen, and you couldn't let a boy like that be a cripple all his life if you could cure him!"

Suddenly she went down on her knees before him, catching at his hand.

"Can't you do what they do with skin when they graft it?" she prayed. "Can't you take a bit of my spine? You can have every bit of it, if it'll make Dick's all right. I know it's quite a good spine, if you'll only use it!"

If he wanted to laugh he did not show it. He pulled her to her feet gently.

"I can't do that," he said; "we're not clever enough yet. But I'll do what I can, though, of course, I can't promise to cure him. Tell me more about Dick. Where is he?"

"He's on the ship. We came on yesterday. His father and mother—and two nurses, and me. He's in a deck cabin; I'll take you to see him if you'll come; he'll be out on deck now."

"How long is it since he was hurt?"

"Over two months. It was up on our station. They got Dr. Brereton from Perth up to him first, and then they took him to Perth in an ambulance. Now they're taking him to Melbourne, and they'll take him all over the world to try and get him cured. And—" her voice broke into sobs, and tears ran down her face—"he doesn't know they say he'll always be a cripple. He lies so still, but he's always planning for when he's going to get up and ride again."

"Poor lad!" said Dr. Fraser. "And are you his sister?"

"Me?" said Merle. "No; I'm just his legs!"

"Are you?" he said, and laughed for the first time. "Well, you're a plucky little girl, anyhow. Shall we come up and see Dick?"

They went up together. Dick was lying in the shade of a deck house, a nurse beside him. He opened his eyes as Merle came up, and grinned at her.

"Hullo, old Legs!" he said. "Where have you been? I've been out ever so long."

"Oh, just about," said Merle vaguely. "Dick this is—er—Neil Fraser." She flushed scarlet, conscious of the peculiar nature of the introduction.

Dr. Fraser sat down near the stretcher, apparently unconscious of anything unusual. Dick had shrunk into his shell at the idea of speaking to a stranger, but this man

proved to be a very decent sort of person, with no tactless ways of looking at a fellow's stretcher, or of making silly inquiries as to how long a fellow had been ill. He chatted away, in a low pleasant voice, and actually of horses! He had been, it seemed, in the western states of America, and had the queerest stories of cowboys and their ways and their horses, told in a quaint American drawl that made them irresistibly funny.

The nurse slipped away. A little way off Mr. and Mrs. Lester were talking to the captain; they glanced round once or twice, hearing Dick laugh as he had not laughed since his accident. The poor mother flushed with pleasure.

"Listen to my boy," she said. "Who is his new friend, captain?"

The captain looked round.

"A nice fellow, and a clever one," he said. "Dr. Neil Fraser, of Melbourne. I believe he's a spine specialist, but I don't know for certain. Wonder if he could do your boy any good, Mrs. Lester? He can make him laugh, that's certain."

The father and mother stared at each other.

"A spine specialist!" Mrs. Lester murmured.

"So our doctor says. He's a quiet fellow, with I don't know how many letters after his name; but he's out for a holiday, and doesn't mix much with the other passengers. I should say someone must have told him about your boy."

"One of the nurses, perhaps," Mr. Lester said. "I wonder——" He paused, and looked long at Neil Fraser's face, and came to Dick's conclusion that it was a face to invite confidence. The captain strolled off to talk to other passengers. John Lester put his hand on his wife's arm.

"Shall we go and speak to him?"

"No, don't go," she said. "He and Dick are getting on famously—let us leave them to make friends. John, do you think——"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Somehow when I saw him beside Dick a queer wave of hope came over me. I'd almost forgotten what hope was like. He looks clever, Jean."

"And kind," she said. "Let us go and find the ship's doctor, and ask him about him."

The ship's doctor, a grizzled old Scot, had only good words to say of Neil Fraser.

"He's going to be a great man," he said. "I heard of him in London from my brother—a doctor in Harley Street. He did some great work at Munich, did Fraser, and I knew of a case he tackled in London with extraordinary results. Oh, I'd certainly advise you to talk to him, Mr. Lester. He's not practising, of course, but I'm certain he wouldn't refuse to give you an opinion, at least."

"Does he only doctor spines?" asked Mrs. Lester.

"From all I hear," said the Scot drily, "he's disinclined to recognise any part of the body but the spine! He's spine mad." He hesitated. "I tell you this, Mrs. Lester; whatever opinion he gives you I don't think you need go past it. If Neil Fraser can't cure your boy there is no one, in Australia at any rate, who can."

Outside the surgery the Lesters looked in each other's eyes.

"Jean!" he said. "Take care, dearest; don't let yourself hope too much."

"I shouldn't, I suppose," she said, trembling. "But—we've prayed, John; who knows if God has not sent us on this ship to answer us!"

"Come and we'll find him," her husband said.

Neil Fraser was still talking to Dick. The boy called them eagerly as they came up.

"That's father and mother!" he said. "Do come here; this is Mr. Fraser, and he has been telling me most gorgeous yarns. Tell them about the pony and the rattlesnake, Mr. Fraser—I'd love to hear it again."

Neil Fraser told the story, and they were all laughing when the nurse came up with a steaming cup in her hand.

"More nourishment!" said Dick, disgustedly. "My word, I'll be glad when I'm well and can have just food to eat and

not nourishment! Why do you have to be nourished when you're ill, and not fed?"

"That's one of the great problems we've never solved," said Fraser, laughing. "Never mind, Dick—it looks good."

"Oh, it's always good," said Dick, grinning up at the nurse. "It's only its name I'm grumbling at."

"Indeed, I'd call it anything you like, so long as you leave me an empty cup," she said with spirit, pulling his hair.

"We'll leave him; he doesn't like an audience," said Mr. Lester, as the second nurse appeared. They strolled out of sight, and then he turned to Fraser suddenly.

"Will you come to our cabin for a little?" he said.

In the cabin they looked at each other.

"They tell us you are a specialist in such cases as our boy's," John Lester said. "Will you undertake Dick?"

Fraser hesitated.

"I'll examine him, and give you an opinion, if you wish," he said. "I can't say more until we see the result of the examination."

"Will you do it on the ship?"

The doctor shook his head.

"I'd rather not. The slightest roll, or vibration of the screw might make a difference."

"I'm glad," said Mrs. Lester. "Dick is happy—let him have his time on board in peace."

"Yes, that's so," Fraser agreed. He looked at her eager face pityingly.

"Don't build up false hopes," he said. "These cases are very difficult; there are a hundred reasons why I should not succeed where other men fail. The little girl told me the Perth men had pronounced against your boy's recovery."

"The little girl!" John Lester echoed.

"Yes; the one Dick calls 'Legs.' She came to my cabin and dragged me up to see Dick. I don't know how she knew anything about me, but she begged me, on her knees, to take out her spine and use it for Dick."

"Poor little soul!" said John Lester huskily. He put his arm around his wife. She had broken down as, even in those hard days, she had not done before. Over her bent shoulders he looked at the doctor.

"I don't want to build up hopes," he said, "and the Perth men certainly did give us none. But they admitted there was a loophole; that no one understood everything about the spine. They tell us you know more than most men."

"Well, I have studied nothing else for four years," Fraser said. "And fresh discoveries are bound to take place. We cure

things now that ten years ago would certainly have been hopeless. But I'm only a learner, as any honest doctor must admit himself. I shall be a learner all my life. It may be—it is possible—that I may find some solution of your son's trouble. I'll do my best. Only don't be too hopeful."

He got up, clenching his hand.

"And still, never give up hope," he said. "More cases are lost through hopelessness than you would dream of. We're only beginning to know the power of thought; but this I can assure you, that if you surround your boy with an atmosphere of hope and courage you go far towards helping him, just as you help to drag him down if your heart is full of despair. He's a boy to fight for, too. Well—I don't even know your name yet—but I'll do my best to help you fight!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW DICK LESTER TOOK HIS CHANCE.

There is a quiet street in a Melbourne suburb—a street lined with big trees, where in the long, hot days you can hear the soft cooing of wood pigeons; and yet so near the great highway of St. Kilda Road that the clang of the tram bells comes clearly. There are queer wild creatures there yet; the mopokes call at night in Fawkner Park, undisturbed by the racing motors along Toorak Road, and some quick-eyed

people declare that they have seen 'possums dart across the tram lines. If you sleep out on a balcony, as wise folk do, you may see owls flit by, even while in the small hours the string of market carts from the country creeps into Melbourne, the horses plodding along steadily, while the tired drivers curl up on the seats asleep. But the carts do not come up the quiet street. It lies dreaming until the magpies in the Grammar School trees carol their morning song.

Back from the road in the quiet street stands a big house, girdled with wide verandahs. It is the quietest place of all, though at all hours of the day and night there are motors before its gate. Its wide lawns and gardens shelter behind tall pittosporum hedges; climbing roses and tecoma have clambered up the posts, making a screen to shield the balconies. It never sleeps, although it is so quiet; white-uniformed nurses flit here and there about it by night and day, and often the big glass dome of a room at the back blazes with light throughout the night, as busy surgeons fight Death over an unconscious form. In the daytime there are beds and stretchers under the trees on the lawns, or sheltered by gaily-striped tents; and people pass in and out, taking sheaves of flowers to the people within, or leading pale-faced convalescents home, to take up life anew. But it is a cheery place, as a house of healing should be; it had seemed to smile to Dick Lester when they brought him there from the ship, so brown and merry, after a week on deck, that it was hard to understand why he should lie so still.

Neil Fraser gave his verdict next day.

"It's for you to decide," he told Dick's parents. "There is a chance; I'll admit it's a slender one. If you decide to have no operation he will probably live a long time, as they told you before—always a cripple. Will he suffer? Yes, probably, at intervals—a good deal; and there is always a chance of worse trouble developing."

"And the operation?" John Lester said.

"It is a risk. I've done it successfully; I've seen as good a man as I am fail. Should it fail, it means a worse condition; possibly hastening the end. If it should succeed—well, Dick will walk out of the hospital."

Mrs. Lester drew a long breath.

"Will you tell me," she begged, "if you would advise us to have it done?"

"Ah, that's too much to ask me," he said gently. "That is surely only for you and his father to say. I can only tell you the chances."

There was silence for several minutes. Then the mother spoke, quickly.

"Then I say—do it!" she said. "I can't look Dick in the face if we do not give him every possible chance. I can't tell him he's a cripple for life without having a fight to save him. It isn't fair—it's like caging some wild, free thing. I know what Dick would say, if we gave him his choice."

Her husband took her hand and held it tightly.

"Yes, Dick would always choose the fight—he never yet lay down to anything," he said. "We'll give him his chance, dear. Can you get it over quickly, Fraser?"

"In two days," Neil Fraser said. He looked at them pityingly. "And you know I'll do my best."

They knew it on this sunny November morning as they wandered blindly up and down the quiet street; over to the roaring traffic of St. Kilda Road and back again; ever back to the big house where, with two surgeons to aid Neil Fraser, Dick was taking his last chance. They could hear nothing yet, they knew; it was too soon to look for any word from the glass-domed theatre at the back. Of that John Lester tried to keep his wife from thinking. They talked of Dick—of his merry baby days; of his first pony, of the happy years when life at Kurrajong had centred about him while he slipped from childhood into boyhood. He had looked only a little child when they kissed him that morning.

"We're going out for a little while," they had said. "You won't mind?"

"Oh, no!" Dick had answered, faintly surprised. There were several surprising things that morning, the worst being that no one had seemed to have time to bring him any breakfast. The nurse had laughed when he said he was hungry, telling him the cook had gone on strike; but he was nearly sure he saw one of them put her handkerchief to her eyes as she left the room. Perhaps she was worried over something, he had thought; he would not bother her any more about breakfast, anyway. Then his father and mother

had come for that queer early visit, leaving again very soon. They had gone out quickly—but his mother had turned back from the door and kissed him again.

"God bless you, my darling!" she had whispered—and was gone.

He was thinking over it when Dr. Fraser had appeared beside him. They were great friends, and he grinned up at him.

"I say, is mother all right?"

"Quite all right," the doctor had said. "We've got to poke round you again a bit, Dick, old man, but we're not going to hurt you like we did last time—we'll put you to sleep instead. Just smell this—deep breaths, now." Something light had been slipped over his face; he had felt the doctor's hand over his, holding it in a firm, comforting clasp, while a sudden roaring filled his ears, and the world slipped away.

That was an hour ago—an hour since a nurse had run hastily to Mrs. Lester to whisper, "He's taken the anæsthetic beautifully, and the doctor says you're not to worry." And since then minutes had been ages to the man and woman who waited for another messenger. They set themselves walks, at first, round a block of streets, once, twice; all the time with a listening ear for hurrying feet that might be sent to fetch them; and when they came back to the end of the quiet street they found themselves walking more and more quickly, straining to catch the first glimpse of the gate where, perhaps, someone might be standing, ready to beckon them

to hasten. And at last they could keep away no longer. They came to the hospital and walked up and down a quiet path, that had seen many other people tramp in just such suspense as theirs.

Mrs. Lester gave in at last. There was a garden seat under a flaming mass of bougainvillea; she sank upon it suddenly, and hid her face in her hands, not weeping, but shuddering from head to foot with convulsive tremors. Her husband put his arm round her, holding her closely, almost welcoming any sign of emotion after long weeks of unnatural calm. She pulled herself together after a while.

"It won't do—he may need us at any moment," she said. "John, how long is it?"

"Nearly two hours. They can't be much longer, dear heart."

"I can't walk any more—my knees have turned stupid," she said. "If I had something to do—anything——"

A woman turned in at the gate near them pushing a perambulator, in which the baby cried angrily. They had seen her before; a young mother whose little girl was in the hospital recovering from pneumonia. She came to see her each morning, leaving the baby boy asleep in the garden. But this morning the boy was considering a tooth that would not come through; he declined to sleep, and woke the echoes with his protests at being left. The poor young mother stood rocking him, her face furrowed with perplexity.

"Ah, you naughty boy!" they heard her murmur. "How am I going to see Winnie?"

John Lester took a quick stride forward.

"Lend my wife your baby," he said. "We'll look after him."

He picked up the child with a deft movement that made it clear that Dick's thirteen years had not been long enough to make him forget how to handle a baby. Mrs. Lester held out her hands for the crying bundle and held it to her, rocking it backwards and forwards and crooning brokenly. The baby struggled for a moment, and then gave in, putting out a dimpled hand to catch the lace at her breast; and she leaned down to him, holding him until she could touch the velvet-soft cheek. Her husband stood looking at them, a lump in his throat; the years slipped away, and she was a child-mother again, holding Dick to her, singing the little sleepy song he loved. He had been so proud of them both—his two babies, he had called them; and he had boasted that she had never grown up. There were lines in her face now, graven in the last three months; and in the glass-domed room his other baby lay, taking his last fighting chance; and he could help neither. He shut his lips on a groan, turning away.

Neil Fraser was coming across the grass, taking the flower-beds in his stride. He was pale and tired, but his eyes blazed with triumph. John Lester stared at him, and no words would come.

"It's all right!" Fraser said. He put out a hand to each, and suddenly grabbed the borrowed baby, for Mrs. Lester

trembled so violently that he feared she would faint. "It's all right, I tell you! He's splendid—sleeping peacefully."

"And the operation?" John Lester uttered.

"Don't I tell you it's all right?" He threw back his head, with a laugh like a boy's. "There were complications, as well as what I thought, and I had to take chances—but Dick will be as fit as ever he was. He'll walk out of the hospital, Mrs. Lester—ah, poor soul!"

They caught her between them as she swayed forward. The baby was dumped unceremoniously on the grass, where, in sheer perversity, he lay kicking fat legs and chewing a clover blossom contentedly. Mrs. Lester came back to consciousness to find herself on the garden seat, the silver cup of a flask at her lips.

"Tell me again!" she whispered.

"I could tell you all day, for I don't mind admitting I'm a proud man!" Fraser said. "I don't think it's been done before. I had a case much the same in Munich, but there were, as I said, complications in Dick's case; but it worked out splendidly. He stood it well—not that I ever had any doubt about that; he's so tremendously fit, physically. And next year, unless you go hunting for scars on him, you won't need to remember that he was ever hurt!"

"When can we see him?" the father uttered.

"You can look at him whenever you like; he's back in bed, fast asleep, with a nurse watching him. And you can see him

for five minutes this evening. I'll ring up to see how he is after lunch, and if you like I'll meet you here at five o'clock. Now I'm going to tell my old mother—you've no idea how keen she has been about Dick. She's coming to see him as soon as I'll let her!"

He wrung their hands in turn.

"We can't thank you," John Lester said huskily.

"There's no need; I've had the most entirely successful case I've ever handled. I ought to thank you for giving me such a chance. And I'm more glad than I can say—he's no end of a boy!"

His steps died away on the gravel. Mrs. Lester looked up at her husband.

"Will you go and just look at him?" she said. "I can't—my silly knees won't do as they're told, and I can't risk making a fuss. Just look at him for me, and come and tell me every little thing about him!"

"Sure you're all right if I leave you?"

"Quite sure."

There was only the baby in sight. He stooped suddenly and kissed her; they clung together for a moment, without speaking. Then he went away across the lawn. Mrs. Lester sat still for a moment; then she stooped, still trembling, and picked up the baby. She was holding him silently, her face

against his, when the other mother came back. Across the little face they looked at each other.

"They told me your boy has come through all right," the baby's mother said. "Oh, I'm so glad! And my little girl is better."

"I'm so glad, too, for you," Mrs. Lester said. Suddenly the tears she had not shed for three months began to rain down her face, but she did not hide them. She looked through the mist of them at the other mother—who, being a mother, was crying too.

A big tear fell, presently, on the nose of the baby, who roared disapproval; whereupon they both fell to consoling him apologetically.

"I must take him away—he's so big, he'll make you tired," his mother said, gathering her son up proudly.

"Thank you for lending him to me," Mrs. Lester said. "I think he kept me from going mad. He's such a dear, comfortable baby—just what Dick was. How many teeth has he?"

The baby's mother told her, with other thrilling details—so engrossing that they did not hear Mr. Lester's step until he was beside them.

"He's just as peaceful as that baby is going to be in two minutes," he said, smiling at the little sleepy face. "And you're going to lie down as peacefully, too, the moment I can

get you home. Come on, we must go and tell Merle that she need be 'Legs' no longer!"

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN THE WORLD CAME RIGHT AGAIN

"Good man!" said Teddy Raine.

"Great action!" said Bottles.

"Do you think," queried Nugent thoughtfully, "that there's any tendency to string-halt? Bit of a kick about that off leg."

"Do you realise, young man, that you're jesting with my professional reputation!" said Neil Fraser severely.

"Not to mention with my best leg!" put in Dick. He flung a cushion with a quick movement that found Nugent unprepared. It took him in the face, and he subsided on top of Teddy, who received him without any gratification.

"Get off, young Nuge!" he said, hurling him away. "Trot up and down again, Lester; I want to see."

"Not if I know it," said Dick, lowering himself gently on a couch. "When you haven't used your legs for about seven

ages they don't make exercise exactly a joke. And that's my third walk to-day. Trot Bottles up and down; he needs it."

"Don't you; the balcony won't stand it," grinned Nugent. "There's a notice somewhere that nothing over ten tons is allowed to trot on this floor!"

"Don't listen to them, Bottles," said Mrs. Lester, laughing. "These skinny people are always jealous of good, honest weight!"

"Bless 'em, I don't mind," Bottles answered cheerfully. "Keeps 'em happy and good, and then they're no trouble, the pretty dears!" He grinned in a fatherly way at Dick and Nugent.

"When I can put on the pace a bit," said Dick with emphasis, "I'll teach you to call me a pretty dear! Pound him to-night in the dormer for me, Nuge, will you? He's got horribly above himself since I've been away."

They were all on the hospital balcony, where, on a table, were the remains of afternoon tea. Mrs. Lester sat near Dick's couch—he still liked to feel that she was within reach of his hand. On a cushion beside her chair Merle was curled up; she held jealously to her position as "Legs," and looked forward with some dismay to the day when Dick would need her no longer. The three boys had come racing across from school directly the unfeeling claims of education ceased to hold them. Afternoon tea with Dick had become an institution that was seriously threatening the claims of cricket, insomuch that Melville, the school captain, was endeavouring to screw

himself to the point of exercising his authority in the matter. He found it difficult to be authoritative. It was not so very long since the day when Mr. and Mrs. Lester had kept their vigil in the Quiet Street, when, in the school chapel, the boys had gathered while the chaplain prayed for Dick Lester, whose feet were in the Valley of the Shadow.

Melville himself had been to tea on the balcony since then, and it is safe to say that at no time had Dick been so near pride as when the great man, rather shy and tongue-tied at first in the presence of Mrs. Lester, had sat on his couch and talked to him, a scrubby junior, as an equal!

"You've got to look sharp and well, you know, Lester," he had said, at parting. "We want all our men badly; the Wesley and Scotch juniors are going to take a heap of beating next term!" Which had left Dick speechless, yet glowing. He astonished the nurse that evening by demanding two eggs for tea!

Neil Fraser had brought his mother this afternoon—a sweet-faced old lady, who sat beaming alternately on her tall son, and on the "case" that had already made his name a household word among surgeons. And John Lester leaned against the balcony rail, smoking, and looking contentedly at his son.

Dick's feet were very uncertain still. He had discarded crutches after a few days' use, declaring that they hurt him more than they helped him. Then he had hobbled, with a stick or between two helpers; only the day before had he suddenly declared that he would walk alone—and had

walked! A few steps, at first, from his couch to his mother; subsiding on her, flushed and laughing, while she caught him to her and held him, as she had done when, twelve years before, his baby feet had first carried him to her across the nursery floor. She remembered yet the pride of that long ago day. It was a small thing beside the utter thankfulness of this.

The hospital was keenly interested in Dick's convalescence. It was not often that they had a patient so doggedly determined to get well. He demanded instructions as to working his muscles, and struggled with them as soon as he was permitted, rubbing himself, moving limbs that no longer seemed to belong to him, and performing the limited amount of "physical jerks" possible to one who lies flat in bed. The scope of his energies widened as he was allowed to sit up; he learned from Neil Fraser and from the masseur who visited him daily how to second their efforts, and the nurses found him, at regular intervals, exercising solemnly, grimacing with pain at the creaking of his unused muscles, and working the harder the more he grimaced. The pretty girl in room five, who had just lost her appendix, and the stout old gentleman in three, very bad-tempered with the gout, used to ask their nurses each morning how many inches young Lester had moved since breakfast, and send him messages of congratulation; the matron, tall and beautiful in snowy white, would stand at the end of his bed, cheering him on, with an eye wary for signs of fatigue. And when he sat up—and when he first hobbled on his crutches—the word ran from room to room, and the nurses left their work to peep in at him and applaud. Even the bad-tempered old gentleman, who was wont to drive his nurse almost to tears if a stray sound penetrated his room, was found only smiling on the

morning that Dick, forgetting his surroundings in the triumph of his first steps, sat on the end of his bed and woke the echoes with a shout of "Buck up, School!"

In the intervals of exercising there came over him a great peace; something altogether different from the weary patience of the months when he had lain helpless. He seemed to want nothing if his mother were near; looking at her, he would lie quietly, his happy face so peaceful that a tired night nurse, peeping in, declared to a comrade that only to look at that Lester boy made you feel as if you'd had a night's sleep and a cold swim! Not until long after did he confide to his mother what the dread and terror of those first months had been. "It was only you who kept me going," he said. "I knew the others thought I was always going to lie there; only you told me my back wasn't broken—that I'd be better some day. I just hung on to that, when everything else in the world was black, 'cause I knew you'd never tell me a lie!"

Peace too, had come to Merle. Something of her burden lifted upon the ship—when Dick's father and mother had heard from her stumbling lips the story of how she had found Neil Fraser, and had thanked her as best they might. The rest had rolled away on the day of the operation. She had known nothing of it until it was over; they had agreed that she had already borne sufficient strain. She only knew that heaven had suddenly come out of darkness when Mrs. Lester, her worn face smiling through tears, had taken her in her arms and told her that Dick would walk again.

They did not want her to go back to Narrung for a year. So much of shock and horror and bitter self-reproach hung over

the vision of her home that they dreaded what might be the effect of returning too soon; besides which, Dick declared that he wanted old "Legs" at Kurrajong—and nobody just then denied Dick anything, which made it fortunate that he was a sweet-natured and unexacting person. So Mrs. Lester had written to ask if Merle might be her daughter for a year—to go to a good boarding-school, returning to Kurrajong, with Dick and his mates, for the holidays. Already Bottles and Teddy and Nugent had unknowingly done much to convince Merle that she might have been wrong in believing that all boys were beasts! She was beginning to laugh naturally; to make, occasionally, remarks that were more than curt monosyllables. "She's getting quite human!" Dick's nurses said.

They were planning the return to Kurrajong that afternoon on the hospital balcony. In a few days they were to go down to a hotel by the sea, where Dick could lie in the sand and let sun and ozone have a share in completing his cure. Mr. and Mrs. Lester would leave him there with a nurse in charge, while they paid a flying visit to their home, to make sure that everything was in readiness for the real return. They would come back for Dick and Merle.

"And that will make it just about breaking-up time," Dick said. "So you three chaps can join up, and we'll all go home in a bunch. Glory, won't it be a day!"

"And Mrs. Fraser and the doctor will come for Christmas," Mrs. Lester said, smiling at them over Dick's head.

"I think you had better arrange to travel with us, Fraser," Mr. Lester said. "I'll need some support if I have to take all these young people home. Four—five of them; and a wife who always forgot to grow up! You can't expect a man to handle an unbroken team like that single-handed!"

"Don't you worry, sir," said Bottles ponderously. "I can sit on any two of 'em at once—except Mrs. Lester!" he added hastily, with a furious blush.

The others roared unkindly.

"I'd hate you to try, Bottles dear!" said Mrs. Lester—whereat the unfortunate Master Glass reddened yet more painfully.

"It'll be jolly dull for you chaps, I'm afraid," Dick said. "They won't let me ride or play tennis, or do anything, for a bit. You'll just have to find your way about, and get busy on the station. There'll be plenty of work for them, won't there, father?"

"Any amount," said his father. "I'll start a bush fire, if necessary, to prevent their feeling bored. Merle, how are you at fire fighting?"

"Had too much, thanks," said Merle.

"Then I can't entertain you that way. How is your tennis?"

"Rotten," said Merle, with emphasis.

"So's mine, Merle," said Bottles. "Never mind—you and I'll go out together and kill snakes!"

"Right," said Merle, unusually cheerful. "I'd like that!"

"There's something unexpected about you; but give me guests who are willing to entertain themselves," said Mr. Lester, laughing. "We had a man out from Scotland once who turned down all our schemes for his amusement. But he never gave us any trouble; whenever we missed him he was sure to be down in the pig paddock looking at my Berkshires! Queer taste, but it kept him happy."

"When you begin to tell calumnious stories about my nation, it's time we went, isn't it, mother?" said Neil Fraser. "Pigs, indeed! Are you sure your Scot wasn't an Irishman, Lester?"

"He was not—and I never saw an Irishman who would look at a pig when a horse was about," Mr. Lester remarked. "Not that I think there was any love of my pigs, as pigs, on M'Glashan's part; he was a confirmed mathematician, and he was merely calculating the amount of bacon those Berkshires would cut into! Must you really go?"

"I must—apart from the painful nature of your conversation," Fraser said, laughing. "I'm taking this young mother of mine to the theatre to-night, and she must have a rest first."

They said good-bye, and disappeared through the long window. Teddy Raine rose.

"Come on, you fellows," he said. "I must take 'em back, Mrs. Lester, or poor old Melville'll be throwing fits. Cricket practice has slumped since you people came here." He patted Dick's head, his merry face gentle. "Going to have a mighty supper in the dormer to-night, old thing!" he said. "Wish you were going to be there."

"I wish I was!" said Dick ruefully. "Never mind, there'll be lots next term!"

"And we'll drink more power to your old back," said Teddy, "in raspberry vinegar!"

"Out of a soap-dish lid?" queried Mrs. Lester demurely.

"Now, you know too much, Mrs. Lester," Teddy reproached her. "'Spose this fellow revealed all our black secrets when he was delirious. You ought to be ashamed, anyhow, Lester. No chap in our form was ever delirious before!"

"Why, I thought it was your normal condition!" said Mr. Lester.

"That's one below the belt!" murmured Bottles, amidst the laughter. "Come on, chaps, we're not appreciated here—or anywhere else! It doesn't matter!" They clattered downstairs, to the profound wrath of the bad-tempered old gentleman. Dick propped himself on one elbow to wave to them as they raced down to the gate.

"Want to be going with them, old son?" his father asked.

Dick shook his head contentedly.

"No," he said. "Next term I will, I s'pose—when my silly old back is in going order again. But just now"—his eyes lingered on his father and mother—"between you two and old 'Legs,' and learning to walk—well, I've just got jolly well all I want."

THE END.

* * * * *

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[The end of Dick Lester of Kurrajong, by Mary Grant
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