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Bush Life
in Tasmania

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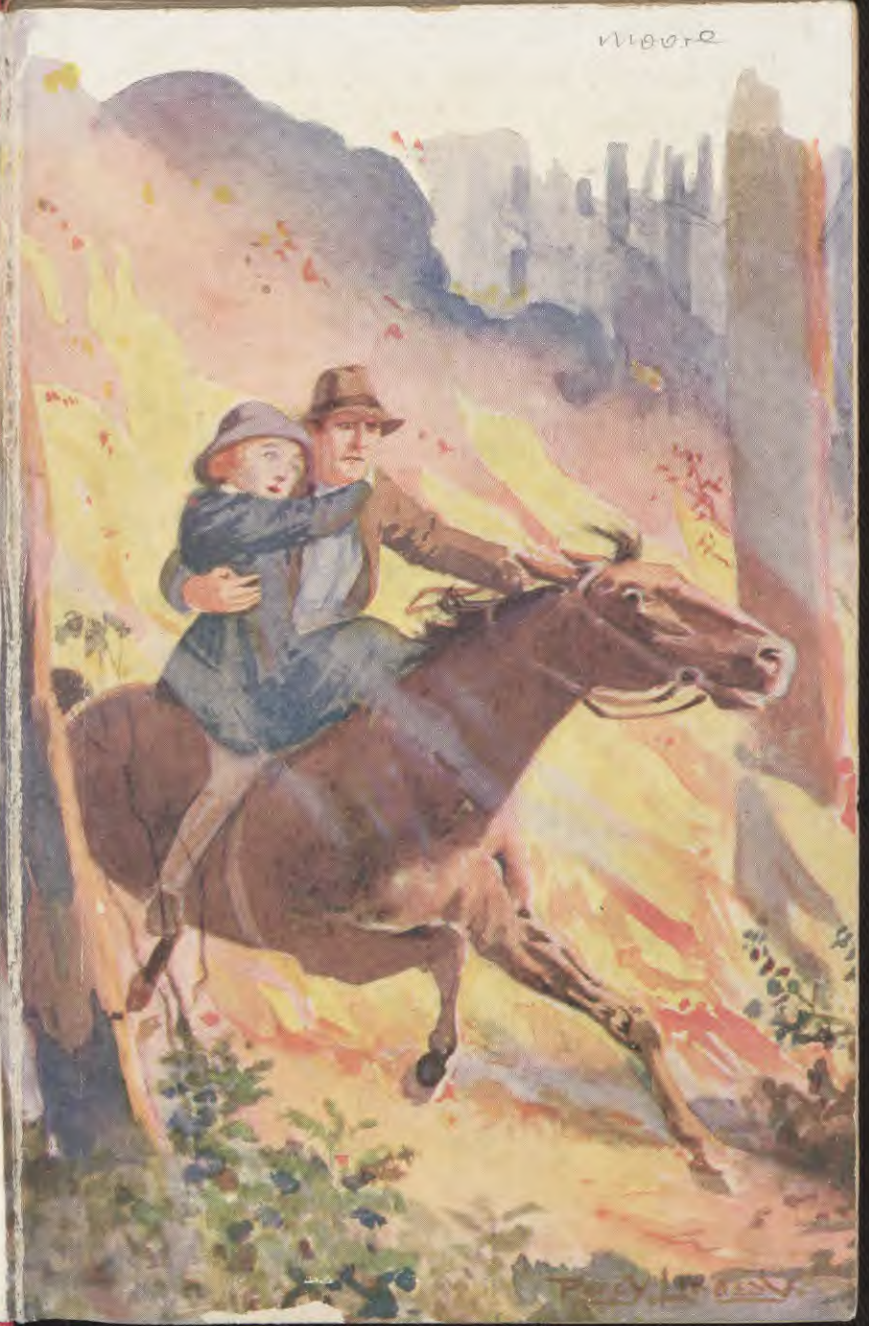

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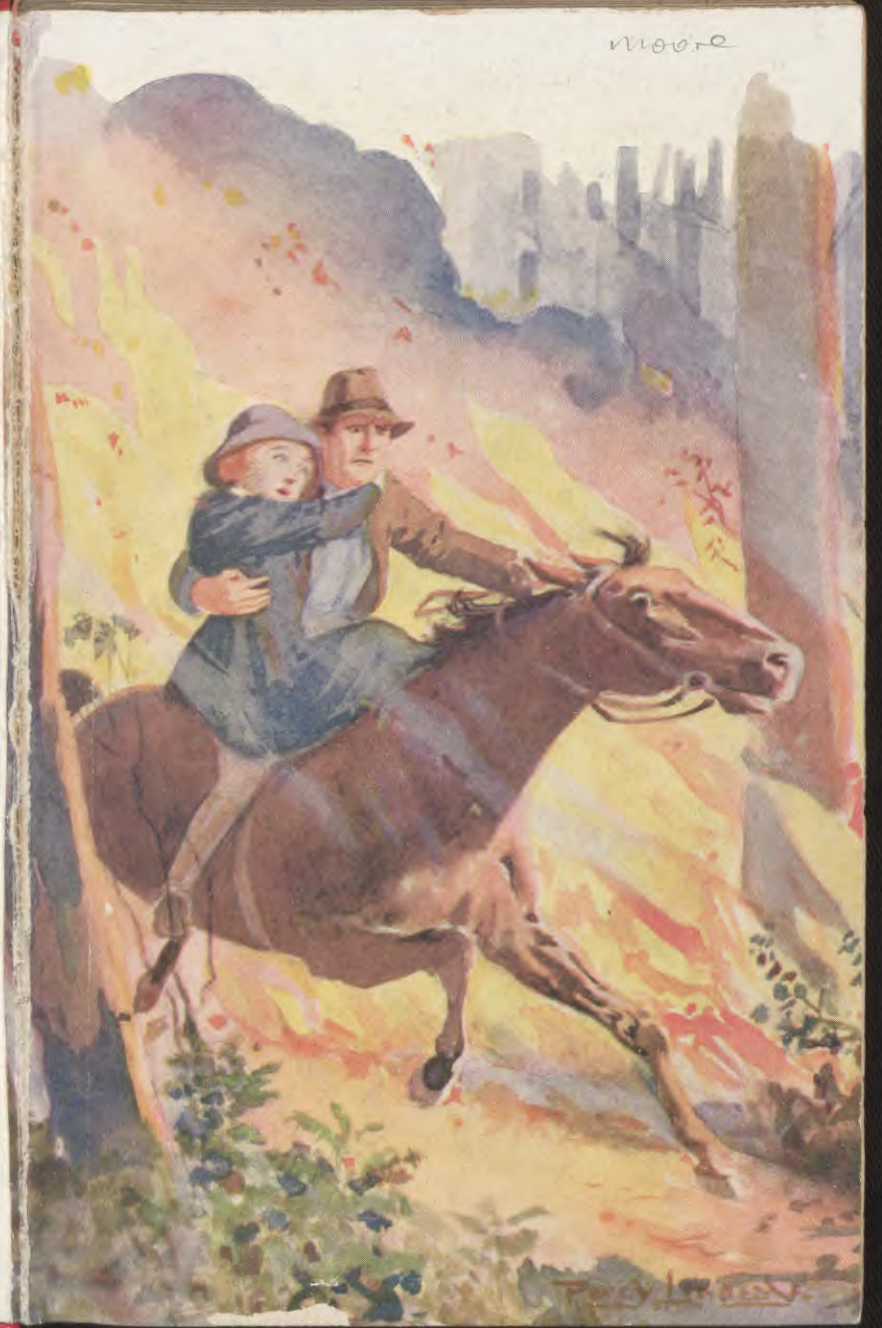

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A STORY OF BUSH LIFE IN TASMANIA

BY

GEORGE M. BARNARD

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CHAPTER I

If you take the map of the world and glance at the continent of Australia, you will notice, suspended like a pendant from its south-eastern corner, the island of Tasmania. This smallest State in the young Commonwealth of the southern seas contains within her boundaries vast stores of mineral wealth and land of exceptional fertility. The richest tract is, perhaps, on the northern coast, fronting the waters of Bass Strait. It is pierced here and there by intruding tongues of poorer land, and stretches back until it loses itself in the frowning ranges that guard its rear.

In the early days of settlement, little less than a century ago, the soil was hidden by dense scrub, and huge eucalypts reared their straight, clean barrels high above the tangle at their butts, and made it a land to be shunned by man and avoided largely by bird and beast. But the swiftly-flowing rivers that had formed snug harbours at their mouths, attracted a few daring pioneers, the advance-guard of the big army that was, later on, to invade this silent wilderness and wage a ceaseless battle that has eventually made it the

most thickly-settled and most prosperous part of the Island State.

It was about the centre of the belt, a mile or more from the sea, that James Langthorne had in the very early days gone into the bush, with small capital but unbounded energy and pluck. He came from a family of pioneers, men who had wrested fortunes from the wilderness in other parts of the world, men who had given their lives to the opening up of unpeopled spaces, and led the march of civilization.

The day on which he landed from the little craft that bore him to the fight was one of quiet beauty—the beginning of the glorious Tasmanian autumn, when all nature is at peace and one is filled with the joy of living. He forced his way through an undergrowth of dogwood, sassafras and giant fern to the little clearing in the centre of four hundred acres which he had purchased from a settler of weaker fibre, whom the huge white-gums, the giant stringy-barks, handsome blackwoods and masses of twisted musk had cowed and beaten.

Then the fight began. The few head of stock he had brought with him were, first of all, made secure in the clearing, where grass and clover, sown by the former occupant, grew rankly. Then with axe, saw, and wedges he attacked a huge stringy-bark, and from the straight barrel split smooth, wide palings, rafters and studs for the little shanty he called home. When this was erected, the forest echoed to the ring of his keen

axe as the silent giants were one after another done to death by clean-cut circles round their massive trunks. The undergrowth was slashed down, to be fired the following summer, so that grass and clover could be seeded.

Gradually the land was cleared. Slowly the timber began to disappear. The area of grass and cultivation steadily extended. Stout fences of post and rail grew round the clearings. Later on, the old paling shanty gave place to a neat modern homestead, and when the pioneer died he left his son, John, a valuable inheritance.

John was a chip hewed from the same block. Where his father left off, he went on, and by the time his daughter Jane was born hardly one of the huge forest giants was to be seen. About him other pioneers had fought bravely, too. The forest had shrunk far back. Bustling towns had spread about the mouths of the swift rivers. The screech of railway whistles sounded along the coast, and dingy tramp steamers crept into the ports, to crawl out again deeply laden with the spoils of the rich hinterland.

For six years no other child was born; then a boy came to them, and was given the name of his grandfather—James. When James was fourteen and Jane close to her majority, an old forest giant—one of the few reminders of the former state—grim, naked, with scarce a limb remaining, took a belated revenge for the ravages of the past. John Langthorne was walking quietly by, when there was a crack, and a rushing swish,

and a stub from high up the rotten trunk struck him fair across the head. His wife survived him only by a few months, leaving the young James to her daughter as a sacred legacy—a legacy she accepted with a simple loyalty that many a sister has given to the members of her family.

Just after Jim's eighteenth birthday war was declared, and he went to serve his country. His stay in the fighting-line was brief, but full of honour; he came home again, a wounded warrior, with a slight limp that would remain for ever as a reminder of the awful past. Those were dreadful days for Jane, who loved her brother as it is given few brothers to be loved, and her closest friends hardly guessed the hell she lived in until the cable message came to say that he was returning to Australia.

When his wounds healed, a great restlessness seized him. His thoughts were with his comrades still at the front—some for ever; others bravely fighting.

"I'm going back," he told his sister one day.

"Yes, dear," she answered, but her heart, for the moment, seemed to stop.

He went to re-enlist, but the authorities shook their sage heads and told him he was crippled. When the more urgent cry for men came, he went again. They praised him for his patriotism, but he cursed them for their folly, and returned home to find forgetfulness in work. For months he laboured as two men, savagely, with a fierce energy that made his sister fear for him at times.

"You've done your share, dear boy," she told him once, "and your wound is the highest honour that can be bestowed on you."

"Rot!" he retorted bitterly. "They think I'm a cripple, but I'm as sound as ever I was!"

Then followed a period of intense spoiling. Every little want, every small demand was unhesitatingly and promptly satisfied. He grew dictatorial and hectoring, lost all consideration for others, and thought only of himself.

Then came the Armistice. His friends came back—some of them—and the soothing hand of time drew the sting from his rejection. He still worked hard, as if toil alone was the one thing on earth to live for. He seldom left home, except to attend the local sales of stock; a holiday was an almost unknown thing. It required all Jane's forceful persuasion to get him to purchase a motor-car, and he rarely drove it except on business. He became so domineering that, at last, she determined to redeem the errors of the past with her usual energetic thoroughness.

"Jim," she told him one evening, "you are getting too dictatorial; too self-centred and selfish. I admit I am largely to blame, for I have spoiled you since you were a baby. You have had your own way too long. You know the old saying 'It is never too late to mend.' I'm going to make something out of you."

"There's nothing wrong with me," he growled.

"Indeed there is! You're conceited; you're selfish, and you're the biggest bear in the district. That's a pretty strong indictment, old boy, but

it's true, unfortunately," with a laugh that slipped into a sigh.

He looked at her with mouth agape. "Have you gone off your head?"

"I've just regained my sanity as far as you're concerned." She smiled; and Jane, when she smiled, was very winning. "I've been a fool, and I've helped to make you one, too. My duty—"

"Bah!" he snorted. "Your duty! Who's been putting that nonsense into your head?"

"Nobody. Our neighbours have the good sense to mind their own business. My dear boy, you're getting worse every day. If you keep on a little longer you'll be worse than the Kaiser!"

"Don't talk nonsense, and please hold your tongue. I want to finish the book I'm reading. I've no time for such humbug."

Jane smiled and lay back in her chair. She fully expected defeat in the opening skirmish. A little later she resumed the attack.

"Jim," she said to him, "I'm going to get somebody to help me with the lighter work of the house, and to be a companion as well. It is rather lonely at times." Her voice became wistful.

"What on earth's the matter with you to-night?" he burst out wrathfully. "You've got Annie, and there are plenty of girls about without getting one to live with you! I object to any such arrangement!" and he shut his mouth with a snap.

"I am afraid your objection will carry no weight," she laughed, "for I have already arranged for a girl to come!"

He swung round with a look of surprised indignation.

"Have you!" sarcastically. "You appear to have forgotten that I'm master of this house!"

"And you appear to have forgotten that I'm its mistress. Your authority extends to the outside only," she laughed again. It was a pleasant laugh, and her dark eyes glowed a deeper colour. "Seeing that I'm your senior by fully six years, I should be competent to manage indoor matters!"

"I object to a flighty young girl in the house! I won't have her, Jane!"

"Too late, my boy, she's coming!"

"And I was never consulted! Whatever were you thinking about?"

"Myself, for once in my life," with a little sigh.

"But what about me?" The tones were charged with indignant remonstrance.

"My dear brother, I've considered you too much. I've spoilt you badly; but never again!" and she smiled at him.

He threw aside the book he was reading, rose, and stood with his back to the fire, facing her.

"Jane, I know you're only joking, but you can carry it too far. Please let me have no more of this nonsense!"

"I'm not joking," she said, "and for goodness sake don't assume that heavy-parent attitude! Sit down, and I'll tell you all about it."

"You've told me enough already," he growled.

"No, Jim." Slipping a plump arm round him, she drew him to his chair, seating herself on the arm. "Now let's sit quiet and comfy, James." She rubbed a soft cheek against his, and her voice was low and caressing. "I'm getting to be an old maid. Rather a lonely one at times."

"Don't be silly!" he expostulated.

"It's true, old boy. You are so engrossed in your work that you can think of nothing else. You are becoming set in your ways, and at twenty-six years of age!" in tones of simulated horror. "Whatever will you be at fifty?"

"When I'm fifty we'll go travelling, Jane."

"Not you, dear!" You'll be a machine long before then, and any little deviation from your rule of life will upset your works. Jim," she ran her fingers through his hair, "you'll let me have that girl?"

He frowned heavily at the fire, but did not answer.

"Jim," she spoke very softly and with caressing sadness, "the poor girl has neither kith nor kin. She has just come from England. Every relation was killed or died during the awful war. Her mother's heart was broken, and Betty is the last of her race. She came out here to forget—if she can. Jim," she bent to his ear, and her voice died to a whisper, "you will not say no to her?"

He was still silent, and moved uneasily in his chair.

"Jim," she again whispered, "please say yes, dear!"

"Only on one condition," he growled.

"And that?"

"If I find her a nuisance, she must pack."

"If I agree to that, I, also, must be allowed to formulate a condition."

"What is it?"

"That you be the one to send her packing."

"Certainly," he agreed readily, and she smiled a wise little smile. "Now let me finish my book, Jane."

"Sorry, old boy, but I must worry you a little more. She arrives to-morrow night, and I want you to meet her at the station with the car."

"All right, I'll do it," he grunted, "And now, for heaven's sake, leave me alone."

With a little sigh she got up and went out of the room to her own sanctum to think. She had gained her point, but, should the experiment fail, her position would be worse than before. It was not for want of asking that she was an old maid. One man still hoped on. Should Jim become human, and fall in love, he had sound grounds for that hope. Jane would never leave her brother, as matters stood; for she considered that it was through her that his regeneration must be worked out. Once she had thought him stirred, and the placid pool of his affections appeared to be gently agitated; but the disturbance was without any force behind it.

This English girl had deeply interested Jane at the first moment of their meeting. The maiden of twenty and woman of thirty-two had, by one

of those strange stirrings that come to some of us at times, suddenly grown to be bosom friends. Jane had met her in Hobart, where she had gone for her all-too-brief holiday, and had been greatly taken with the other's strong sincerity and flower-like beauty; while Betty felt that the dark-eyed, pleasant-faced Jane would partly, if not wholly, fill the place of the dear ones she would see no more.

For a fortnight they had been inseparable. It was only towards the end of the holiday that the great idea came into being, but not until she returned home did Jane put it into execution by means of a carefully-worded and warmly-expressed letter. Betty had replied with gratitude and enthusiasm, and that evening Jane had broken down the barriers of her brother's objection.

"He must fall in love with her!" she told herself almost fiercely.

It is an easy thing to plan, but to carry our plans to fulfilment is often the hardest task we set ourselves. Jim's placid contentment with his present mode of life must be broken, and Jane was well aware that it needed something drastic to stir him from it. She knew him to be capable of intense feeling and staunch loyalty, but these attributes were slowly being smothered by a wretched egoism that threatened to smirch his otherwise noble manhood.

CHAPTER II

THE morrow brought with it several minor worries inseparable from farm life. When evening fell, Jim was in a decidedly unpleasant frame of mind. Latterly he had become more and more subject to these fits of moroseness, and for hours would hardly speak. He was not naturally bad-tempered, and to animals he was invariably gentle and kind. Men called him a good fellow, but at times he was to the fair sex—to put it plainly—a boor.

"I'll come with you to meet Betty," Jane said to him apprehensively, but he shook his head with decision. "Remember she is an orphan, Jim," she went on quietly, "and has only just recovered from a great trouble. Do be kind to her, dear!"

The night was moonless, but brilliant with glittering stars, when he left the homestead and drove slowly down the road which led to the main coastal thoroughfare. Below he could catch a glimpse of the sea, and hear its sullen murmur as it fretted against the foot of a sheer cliff that stood out, a prominent landmark for miles. The ribbon of road showed clearly in the strong light of the lamps, and when he came to the turn-off the sea's murmur changed to a dull thunder.

"There'll be wind soon," he thought, and pressed the accelerator firmly as he caught the sound of a distant whistle.

"Train'll be in before I get there," he muttered, "but it won't hurt her to wait."

When he reached the station, a porter was putting out the lights preparatory to closing for the night.

"Anyone for me, Bob?" he asked him.

"Yes, Mr. Langthorne; there's a young lady on the platform. I was hanging off a bit to see if you would come. "Here he is, Miss," he called.

A small figure, heavily muffled and veiled, came out of the dark.

"Are you from Miss Langthorne?" Somehow the soft, low voice irritated him.

"I am," he grunted. "Fetch your traps, I want to get back."

"I'll see to 'em, Miss," the porter volunteered, and loaded the luggage into the back of the car. "Four bags and two dress-baskets. Is that the lot?"

"That's all; and thank you for your kindness."

This time the tones were cool and clear, and Jim read in them a rebuke.

"Please start," she ordered him coldly. "Good night, porter."

He let his clutch in with a jerk, and the car jumped forward. Jim prided himself on his driving, and the incident exasperated him. This

young person seemed to have brought all the pin-pricks of the day to a climax.

"Are you used to driving?" she asked.

"Mind your own business!" he retorted sharply, and she gasped.

For several miles they drove in silence, Betty stealing occasional glances at the rude young giant who ignored her completely. She wondered who he was. His clothes were rough and none too clean, for he had worked late and had not troubled to change before he left. She finally decided he must be one of the farm hands, and wondered why Jane had sent such an uncouth creature. Purposely, her friend had said very little about her home life.

"Is it far to the farm?" Betty asked.

He growled out something she did not catch, so she refrained from asking any further questions. Presently they came to the boundary gate, and Jim turned to her.

"Jump out and open it!" he ordered peremptorily.

Even in the gloom he could see the flash of her eyes.

"I shall not!" with unmistakable decision.

For an instant Betty thought he was going to turn her out, and her attitude immediately became defensive. Don't dare to touch me!

"Umph!" and for the first time the grimness of his face relaxed. "Why should I touch you?" he growled.

Jane was standing at the open door, in the

full blaze of the light within, when they reached the house. Betty, with a little cry, jumped out and ran to her.

"I am so glad to see you!" and the elder woman caught the sound of a sob in the other's voice.

"And so am I to see you dear. You must be tired! It's a long journey through from Hobart in one day."

"I am very tired; but—but who is the driver, Jane?" she asked as they went in. "He was dreadfully rude!"

"That was Jim."

"And who is Jim?"

"My brother," and her voice held shame.

"Oh! I'm sorry, dear. I did not know."

"Betty," said Jane, as she drew her visitor into her room and helped to remove her wraps, "he is in one of his bad tempers to-night. I wanted to go with him, but he would not hear of it. I am afraid that he has been rather spoilt and that I am the spoiler!" with a rueful laugh. "He really is a dear fellow. I do hope you will be good friends."

"I hope so, too;" but the note of doubt in Betty's voice made Jane's heart sink, and she blamed herself for not insisting upon going to meet her friend.

The young owner of Seaview was out at his work next morning long before Betty was awake. The tedious journey had tired her, and she slept late. Jane went softly to the room several times, but had not the heart to rouse the sleeping girl.

She stood by the bed, and her eyes were very tender as she watched the soft, flushed face crowned by a mass of wavy brown hair. The firm, red lips were parted slightly as she breathed slowly and evenly. She looked almost fragile until one became aware of the perfect health that glowed in cheeks and lips. Betty was very beautiful, and Jane could not refrain from touching her lips to the smooth, white forehead.

When Betty did come out at last, it was to the glory of a brilliant spring morning. The soft air was fragrant with the perfume of innumerable flowers. She stole to the wide verandah that ran round three sides of the house, and almost cried aloud in her delight at the profusion of splendid blooms revelling in the dark-red soil. Then she caught sight of Jane, who was gathering a huge bunch of blossoms.

"How lovely!" she cried, as she ran to her; and the flushed face and sparkling eyes made the elder woman think that her beloved flowers had a formidable rival.

"Things do wonderfully well here," Jane told her. "We get little frost, and the summer is usually so genial that the most tender plants grow rampantly. I love my garden!" Her enthusiasm awoke a strong sympathetic echo in the new arrival, and made her wonder why Jane Langthorne had remained unmarried so long.

"Now, dear, you must have your breakfast, and afterwards we will take Jim's lunch out to him. He is busy ploughing at the back of the farm."

"Let me take it!" Betty offered eagerly. "It will save you the walk. You said you would be very busy this morning."

Jane looked at her for a moment doubtfully.

"Thank you. I'll get it ready at once."

Carrying a small basket and a crib-can, Betty sauntered out to where she could see the straining teams and the ploughs that cut the dark red soil. The clear, fresh morning, the vigorous crops of grain, and the rank potato-haulms that were beginning to unfold their purple blooms, gave an air of perfect peace and abundant prosperity.

She breathed deeply of the balmy air, and, as her spirits rose, burst into a little song of pure happiness. Betty had an exceedingly sweet voice, and in that clear, calm morning it carried far. It reached the ears of a handsome young giant as he turned his plough at the headland. For an instant he stood perfectly still, then with a grunt and a word to his horses he went on.

"Good morning," said a voice behind her, and she turned quickly with the song dead upon her lips to meet a pair of amused eyes.

"Good morning," she returned soberly. "If you are looking for Mr. Langthorne, he is over there," pointing to the teams.

"I am; but I did not think I'd find a nightingale," he smiled..

She frowned a little, for to her English primness this complete stranger seemed a little too presuming.

"Are you taking him his lunch?"

She nodded and looked critically at him.

"What's the verdict?" and his lips twitched a little.

"It is rather early to say. Do you live about here?"

"I am a neighbour of Jim's. My name is Jack Dunstan. You are, I presume, Miss Langthorne's friend?"

She nodded again.

"And Jim's?" She noticed the quick gleam of mirth in his eyes.

"No! He's a beast!" with uncompromising decision.

"Oh, hang it! Not as bad as that!" he protested a little indignantly, and she liked him for the defence of his friend.

"Perhaps I should not have said that to a perfect stranger."

"I hope I shall not be a perfect stranger for long."

There was something wholesome and open about Dunstan that she liked. Although well on in the thirties, he had a youthful look, and an air of independence and energy that appealed to her strongly.

"Jane is a dear!" she exclaimed impulsively and irrelevantly.

"Jane is the finest woman I know," and she noticed that his face clouded a little. "We are getting extremely personal," he continued with a smile. "Let me carry the lunch for you."

"No, thank you," decidedly. "I'm going to deliver it into Mr. Langthorne's own hands. I want his thanks all to myself."

"If you get them!" he grinned.

"If I don't, he doesn't get his lunch!" firmly.

"Hullo, Jack," Jim cried as he swung his fine team of bays on the headland and got down off the seat of the plough, whose mouldboards gleamed like silver from the polish of the soil. "What's brought you over?"

"Those sheep you want to sell. What about 'em? If you're too busy to knock off, I'll have a look by myself."

"I'll come. Tom," to a lad who was driving the other team, "give an eye to my horses and get your lunch." He turned to go with Dunstan.

"What about your lunch, Mr. Langthorne?" asked Betty with dangerous sweetness.

"Leave it by the plough," he commanded abruptly.

"I beg your pardon?" The tones were sweeter still, but something in them made Dunstan glance quickly at her.

"Do you want your lunch?" with her level eyes on Jim's.

"Of course!" he snapped. "Do as I tell you," and he went away with Dunstan.

Tom, who had been a grinning spectator of this little scene, remarked, "Boss seems a bit woolly, Miss."

"Woolly?" with a puzzled smile.

"Shirty, then."

She shook her head, and her smile grew wider. Tom looked at her with a responsive grin; when that smile was in full play, even the crustiest of old bachelors became quite human. Jim had not seen it yet, nor was he likely to unless his manners mended.

"He's been a bit cranky all the morning. But what are you doing, Miss?"

"I'm going to see if these darling horses like cake," she informed him.

"B-but, Miss," he stammered, "Mr. Jim will roar if you gets messing his lunch!"

Her smile had become quite bewildering, and all he could do was to gape at her with open mouth while she held out a dainty cake to the nearest horse. He smelt it delicately, opened his lips and drew it in. The other two, jealous of the favour shown to their companion, tried to shoulder him away, and during their efforts got tangled in the harness.

"Glory, Miss!" cried the dismayed Tom. "You'll have 'em over the plough in a minute!"

"Sorry. Put them straight, will you, so that I can give them the rest."

"Are you going to feed it all to 'em?" he gasped.

"Every cake. Don't they enjoy it?"

"More'n the Boss will!" and the horrified look on his face brought a merry laugh from her.

"There'll be a h—I—I—" he stammered, then stopped. "There'll be an awful row!" he finished.

"No, there won't! He would never grudge

them his lunch, I'm sure. Now, you naughty old fellow," as one of the horses rubbed his muzzle ingratiatingly against her shoulder, "it's all gone. I'll see if you like tea," and she picked up the can.

Pouring some of the beverage into the cup, she offered it to the animal. He smelt it; pursed up his lips, then held his head high.

"He doesn't," she observed. "Oh, gracious!" as, somehow, the can slipped from her fingers, and, in her half-hearted effort to save it, the cup went too.

"Moses, Miss! There will be a row!"

"Not a bit of it!" cheerfully. "Here they are coming back. You go on with your work. I'll stop and explain matters to Mr. Langthorne."

Tom picked up his ploughlines with alacrity, and hastily started his team. There was little doubt, she thought, that the autocrat's rule was felt beyond the house.

Fondling the sleek heads that were lowered to her confidingly, she awaited the approach of the two men.

"What lovely horses you have, Mr. Langthorne," and, for the first time, she noticed Jim's slight limp. "They're so friendly, too."

A quick smile came to his face, and she was rather startled at the change. Then it clouded, as he looked at her and noticed the tangled condition of the harness.

"That young devil of a Tom has let them

mix things up a bit," he growled. "Move out of the way!" peremptorily.

"Say please!" she entreated, and Dunstan choked.

"Get out of the way before they tread on you!" Jim said angrily.

"You won't tread on me, will you?" She slipped an arm round the nearest head and rubbed her cheek against it. "Oh, you rude horse!" as a jerk on the lines made him throw his head up.

"Steady, Jim!" warned Dunstan. "They'll tread on her!"

"Serve her right!" he retorted viciously, and again jerked the lines.

The near-side horse reared a little, and came down on one of her slim feet. She gave a quick cry of pain, and Dunstan sprang towards her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously as he lifted her away.

"No," she answered, wincing. Freeing herself from his arms, she went deliberately up to Jim.

"You're a cruel brute!" in a low tone that cut like a whiplash. "A man who jerks a horse's head as you did deserves a good thrashing!"

Amazement held him silent. It was the first time in his spoilt young life that he had been condemned and scolded by a woman. The experience was not a pleasant one.

Her flashing eyes were full of bitter scorn as they glared into his, not a foot away; but his own did not waver, and a tiny gleam of admiration crept into them.

"Sorry," he answered curtly.

"Sorry! What good will that do? You've been horribly cruel, and I hate you! I'm glad of what I did!" she flamed, then turned and left them.

"What a little fury!" he remarked to Dunstan, as they watched the slender, limping figure until it disappeared beyond the fence.

"You were pretty rough with her," admonished the other, but Jim only shrugged his shoulders.

CHAPTER III

"WHERE'S my lunch, Tom?" Jim shouted at the lad who was hurriedly turning his team, anxious to be at the other end of the paddock before the storm broke.

"The horses ate it."

"What? Here, stop! What the devil do you mean?"

"That young lady fed it to 'em."

"The young vixen! Anyway, there's the tea, and I'm pretty thirsty. D—n it! The darn thing's empty. Did she give it to the horses, too?" he asked sarcastically.

"No, she dropped it. Said it wouldn't do yer any harm to go without for once."

Dunstan let out a roar of laughter.

"She's served you out, old man!" he gasped. "She's the prettiest girl I've seen, but she seems to be a handful. You were rather rude to her, you know."

"She deserved it," with decision.

"She did not," said the other quietly. "You were entirely in the wrong."

Jim's handsome face flushed a deep red, and he was about to make a very warm rejoinder, when the team, tired of inaction and thinking

possibly of further dainties, backed on the plough. One of them—a dark-bay mare, his especial favourite, got a leg across the beam. In the endeavour to free herself she swung round, dragging the other two horses with her, and breaking the couplings that held them together. In a moment all was confusion. The mare, with a squeal of pain, fell partly across the implement, apparently straining her leg badly. The other horses, alarmed by her frantic kicking, made a dash in the opposite direction, overturning the plough, but, fortunately, freeing their companion, who got to her feet limping badly. It happened so quickly that neither of the men had time to prevent it.

Jim's face went white as he caught the mare and lifted the leg tenderly. He was feeling rather ashamed of himself for having jerked their mouths. Other horses would have accepted the jerks as all in the day's work, but his were unused to harsh treatment of any kind.

"Strained a tendon pretty badly!" he said ruefully to Dunstan. "D—n that girl!"

"Don't you think the blame should be on your shoulders?" the other asked.

Jim lowered the leg gently and faced his friend.

"Why?" and his eyes were hard.

"Because you were exceedingly rude to her. If you had not been, this never would have happened."

"She's an impertinent hussy!" he retorted

angrily, "and I shall see that Jane gets rid of her."

"I think you had better attend to the mare," advised the other coldly. "I doubt if Jane will listen to you."

Jim smiled grimly. He was thinking of Jane's stipulation that he should do the packing.

Jane saw the limping mare as they led her to the stable.

"What has happened?" she asked Jim.

"Hold the mare a moment," he said to Dunstan, and went up to his sister.

"Where is Miss Deene," and his face was black.

"In the dining-room. Whatever is the matter, Jim? She came limping home, but won't tell me what happened. She said it was nothing."

"It's a great deal!" Jim said savagely. "See the mare? She caused that!"

"That's not fair, Jim!" cried Dunstan who happened to catch the words. "Jane, you—" but Jim ignored him completely, and went on.

"I'm going inside to tell her to pack. I've had more than enough of her!"

Jane's eyes widened, and she grasped him by the arm.

"No, Jim! Don't do that!" she implored.

He shook off her hand roughly and went towards the house.

"Jim!" she called after him, but he took not the slightest notice.

He went quickly inside, to the sunny room

that looked out upon the sea and the glorious garden that was the pride of Jane's heart. In spite of his size and the slight limp, he was very light upon his feet. He entered the room almost noiselessly; then stopped dead.

At one end of a deep couch lay Betty, her face upon her slender arm, sobbing pitifully. The lonely, homeless girl had come to Jane in the full confidence that she had found love and shelter at last. After the awful happenings of the war she had been very ill, and, for a time, her life was despaired of. But a strong constitution and determined will had drawn her back from the Valley of Death. As soon as she was able to travel, her doctor urged her to get right away from the scene of the sad memories, to some place where there would be no reminder of the awful past.

An acquaintance was leaving for Tasmania, and she had gone with her. For some months they had wandered about the southern end of the island, then settled down in Hobart. There she had met Jane, and the aching, love-starved heart went out to this woman of abundant sympathy and affection. When she received Jane's letter, the black cloud of sorrow seemed to have lifted, and she saw ahead another life, with the past buried in oblivion.

Jane had never mentioned Jim to her, and it came as a shock to find that the warm-hearted, even-tempered, and cultured woman could have

a brother who appeared to her nothing but a surly, ill-mannered rustic.

"I'll only make Jane's life miserable if I stay," she thought. "She seems very fond of him, but I hate him!"

The last sentence was muttered aloud, and she raised her tear-stained face to gaze out of the window on the glory of the sea beyond.

Jim stood like a man of stone. The only time he had seen a woman's tears was when the great grief had come to him and Jane, and they had been left orphans. He was but a boy then, and had blubbered unashamed with his face buried in his sister's lap, while her tears fell thickly on him. Now he was a man; rather rough and domineering; unused to women—except Jane—and the finer sentiment of the sex; but smothered by his faults was a depth of feeling and sincerity of purpose of which not even his sister was aware. At the moment it was struggling fiercely to free itself from the cloying selfishness of years.

He felt the burning of a great shame for his past conduct, an almost overwhelming desire to go and comfort her; but his limitations chained him to the spot. He could not move.

She was sobbing more softly now, her face half-turned from him, unaware of his proximity. For the first time he noticed the beauty of the hair that crowned the shapely head, and the perfect outline of the partly-averted features. He wanted to go to her; he wanted to flee from her. He could do neither.

Quick footsteps sounded behind him in the passage; the noise of them broke the spell, and he swung round to leave the room. He bumped into Jane as he went out, completely oblivious of her, and unconscious that she was clinging to him and pushing him with gentle insistence towards her room. His shame and bewilderment still gripped him until he saw his sister's face burning into his with an unspoken question on her lips.

"Did you?" she said at last—almost fiercely.

"My God, no!" he muttered. "I couldn't!"

For an instant she looked at him in glad wonder, then crushed her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Jim! Jim! you've made me so happy!" and she swiftly left him.

Jane's words and caress brought him back to the world, and he went out to the stable a gruff, peremptory young man, but still carried with him a touch of shame.

"The sooner you get some hot water and bathe the mare's leg the better," said Dunstan to him coldly.

"Bring her out to the yard while I get it, will you?" he said quietly, and Dunstan looked at him in surprise. There was a subtle change in Jim that he could not account for.

Jim had just finished fomenting the injured limb, and was massaging it tenderly, when Jane and Betty came out to the stable. Betty had quite recovered, for the tactful Jane had managed to dispel the black cloud that had enveloped her.

Hearing that the mare was injured, she insisted on giving some help.

"You know, Jane dear, that I always helped to foment and bandage father's hunters when they got a strain. In fact, I took a course of study on the subject. Fomentation and massage, when properly applied, will work wonders in a hurt of that kind."

And so it came about that Jim, straightening up from his cramped position, looked suddenly into a pair of beautiful brown eyes that only a short time before were clouded with tears. He coloured slightly in his embarrassment, but Betty's gaze was so coldly impersonal that he knew she was quite unaware he had seen her.

"You are not doing it exactly right," she said to him.

"Wasn't I?" he growled. "What do you know about it?"

"I have studied it and practised it," she returned coldly. "If you would like me to, I will show you where you were wrong."

"All right. Have a go," he grunted, and Betty knelt down beside the mare.

"This is the way," she demonstrated. "Rub the muscles in that direction. Now, you try it."

Jim sank down beside her, and Betty noticed that his strong, shapely hands, although roughened with work, were well-cared for, and his touch was deft and gentle.

For some time they remained in this position,

and neither of them noticed that Jane and Dunstan had drawn a little away.

"What happened?" he asked Jane in a low voice.

"The best thing that could have," she whispered back. "Oh, Jack!" and there was a touch of passion in her voice. "They might—Oh, I do hope they will!"

"What?" he asked, smiling at her.

Jane's eyes dropped before his, and the colour mounted to her cheeks. She looked almost beautiful.

"You know quite well," with a swift glance at him; then she went back to the others.

"How's the pupil getting on, Miss Deene?" asked Dunstan quizzically.

"Very well!" she smiled at him. "A man can do this kind of thing so much better than a woman. Now for the bandages, Mr. Langthorne. Start above the swelling, and—no, not like that!" with imperious impatience. "Here, let me do it! Now, run to the house and get some safety-pins. You'll find a card of them on my dressing-table."

Jane chuckled, and Dunstan nearly betrayed himself by a whistle when Jim got up quietly and went to do her bidding. His surrender was only temporary, for, when he returned, he flung the card at her with the intimation not to make a mess of it.

CHAPTER IV

JIM went about his work that afternoon with very mixed feelings. The even tenor of his life had been disturbed, and mental adjustment is distinctly unpleasant to one who has gone his own sweet way without let or hindrance. This slender girl with the steady brown eyes had, in a few hours, changed his whole outlook. He felt he ought to hate her, but the effort was neither satisfactory nor convincing.

"Confound it!" he muttered unhappily. "I wish to goodness Jane had not got that whim into her head. Why couldn't she be content to let things go on as before?"

But he found it impossible to banish from his mind the picture of the sobbing girl. Her attitude had been one of utter misery, and had moved him as he had never been moved before. Her beauty, too, had touched him. It was something far deeper than mere physical gratification at the sight of a pretty face, for Betty's womanhood had woven into it the supreme attraction of purity of mind.

To his surprise, when he returned from his work, he saw Betty busily bathing the mare's injured leg.

"There's very little swelling now," she informed him, and found it difficult to keep a cold note out of her voice. "Another good fomentation and massage should put it all right. How did it happen?"

It was on the tip of Jim's tongue to tell her that she was responsible for it; but his altered perspective whispered that it would not be just to do so. He wanted to put the whole of the blame upon her shoulders, but he could not.

"Got her leg caught in the plough," he growled. "Glad it's not bad."

"When I've finished the fomentation, could you manage the massage?" she inquired. "Your wrists are so much stronger than mine!"

"All right," he grunted. "Wait until I put the horses in the stable."

Removing the harness, he bathed their work-heated shoulders, carefully fed them, and then went out to her.

"Nearly finished?" he growled.

"In a moment. It must be well dried; and mind you use plenty of strength when you massage. Work the tendons the way I showed you. Get the bandages off the fence, and roll them up ready to use. Not that way, silly! Here; give them to me!" impatiently. "Do them like this!"

One of Betty's faults—and the human creature who is faultless would be quite unhuman—was an impatient imperiousness; and Jim was not used to being spoken to in that manner.

"You seem to think—" he began hotly, then

shut off the words with a snap, for she suddenly looked at him and smiled. When Betty smiled like that, not even Jim Langthorne could sustain his ill-humour, so he finished with a rather sheepish grin and did her bidding.

As he rolled the bandages, he was quite unconscious that a young man had climbed the yard fence and was tip-toeing up behind him; but a quick stab of a thumb in his ribs made him swing round with a grunt and a curse.

"Blow you, Tim!" he exploded.

"Hush!" the other whispered, holding up a warning finger. "What the mischief d'you mean by this? Here are you loafing and that little beauty working her heart out! Who the dickens is she?"

"My new groom," with a sly look at Betty who was intent on her work and quite unaware of the newcomer.

"Jumping Christopher! You, of all men, employing female labour! I'm ashamed of you, Jim! I bet you got her cheap! I'll be hanged if I don't entice her away from you. My housekeeper's done a get and I'm stranded. It's not fair that one man should have all the good things of this world!"

"You'd better offer her the job," Jim grunted. "I know you've got cheek enough!"

"If that's a dare, old man," with a gleam of mischief in his merry eyes, "I'll do it!"

"Good evening, groom," he addressed her.

Betty turned with a start, then looked at Jim.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Timothy Lowe," he replied, "with a perverted sense of humour. He's the funny-man of the district."

"Jim! Jim!" the other admonished severely. "You are not conveying to this young lady a proper impression of myself or of my importance. I live only a short distance from here," addressing Betty, "and am the fortunate owner of a farm. Not like this badly-managed place!" with a grin at Jim, "but one that can show a profuse variety of things that grow on it. I am in trouble, Miss—Miss—Jim!" he broke off in horrified tones, "here am I talking in the most familiar manner to your groom, and I don't even know her name! Be a man and introduce me!"

"My name is Elizabeth Deene," Betty informed him before Jim could answer. She had taken a sudden liking to this ridiculous young man. "My friends—the particular ones—call me Betty."

"Splendid!" he cried. "Put me on the B list!"

"Provided you place a Miss before the B!" laughingly.

"I'd place a certain Miss before anything, and now I'm going to place a proposition before the Miss. I want a housekeeper badly. If I don't get one I'll starve. You've only got to say yes, and the job's yours!"

"Would you like me to take it?" she asked Jim, but he did not see the demure mischief in her eyes.

"I'll be hanged if I would!" he blurted out, and the mischief in her eyes gave way to surprise. She was unaware of the leaven that was working in him, but the abrupt admission gave her a curious little sense of pleasure.

"Well, you needn't be so dashed emphatic about it," said Timothy, with an assumed air of indignation. The merry eyes twinkled more than ever. He was shrewd, and had already sensed an unusual position between these two. "Oh, well," he went on, "I suppose I shall have to face the horrors of starvation unless some kind person takes pity on me. I had little breakfast; hardly any dinner; and as for tea—" he shrugged his shoulders sadly.

"Can't you cook?" asked the amused Betty.

"Cook? You bet I can! But when your housekeeper absconds and takes every eatable in the house with her, it would puzzle the best cook in the world to turn out a feed. I came over here with the full intention of borrowing, and——"

"Tim! Don't tell fibs," said Jane's voice behind them. "You came over with the full intention of staying to tea. If you had been more candid, I might have asked you."

"Jane!" there was poignant tragedy in his voice, "if you don't, I'll starve."

"In order to divert such an awful happening, I will ask you," she laughed.

"You're an angel! As you," turning to Betty, "will find out when you have known her as long as I have."

"I have found it out already."

The following morning Betty was up with the sun, and her first act was to inspect the injured mare. She led her out of the stable to the fresh morning air, and began to remove the bandages.

"Swelling's gone down, and she doesn't seem a bit lame," remarked somebody behind her.

"Good morning, Mr. Langthorne," she said coldly, recognizing Jim's voice. "I think she is quite all right, but it would do no harm to give a little more massage."

"I'll do it as soon as I've fed the horses," he told her, "and—and thank you for your help."

She almost started in her surprise, and did not dare to let him see her face.

"I have always been fond of horses," she remarked, "and rather enjoy this kind of thing. Here comes Mr. Lowe."

Timothy was in a hurry. He vaulted the yard fence and came breathlessly up to them.

"Good morning, Miss Betty; and same to you, Jim. You're fresher even than the dewdrops!" he gushed admiringly. "What about a stroll round my little place when you're finished?"

"You're too late!" she returned. "Breakfast will be ready very soon."

"Just my luck!" mournfully, "but I'll be in time for breakfast!"

"I don't think that Jane has enough for an extra person!" He caught her look of mischief, and grinned.

"Don't you worry! Jane is a great person in an emergency. I'll go and help."

Betty and Jim looked at one another, and his smile found a brilliant response in hers.

"Look here," he exclaimed impulsively, "let's be friends!"

"I'm perfectly willing, and have been all along. It is hardly fair to put the blame on me!"

His brows came together in a quick frown.

"Just like a woman to put all the blame on the man!"

"And just like a man to try and saddle the woman with a part of the blame for which he is alone responsible!" she retorted.

He made no reply, but knelt down beside the mare and began to rub the leg.

Betty watched him. She could not help a feeling of admiration; even in his crouched attitude he was not ungainly. She noticed the ripple of firm muscles under the skin of arms bared almost to the shoulders. His hat had fallen off, exposing fair hair with a distinct curl in it. She studied him silently. Her first impression had been one of strong dislike, but it was slowly yielding to something that she could hardly, as yet, understand. For Jane's sake she had endeavoured to smother the first impression, but only with partial success. Now, it seemed, she might be able to like him, and, perhaps, to aid Jane's efforts in his regeneration. Betty was young.

To Jim, women were practically a sealed book that he had never attempted to open and read.

He regarded them as not quite on the same level with man, and therefore hardly worth bothering about. His attachment to Jane was strong; far stronger and deeper than he had any knowledge of. Up to the present, self-analysis had been something entirely apart from him, but he was beginning to think—and wonder.

"Ought to be enough," he grunted, rising and stretching his cramped limbs.

She examined the leg critically.

"Yes. A few days' spell in the paddock, and she should be fit for work."

He looked at her steadily for a moment, then blurted out, "Thank you, Miss Deene, for your help."

"Please don't say anything about it," she returned quietly.

"Hi, you people!" cried Timothy from the house. "I'm hungry if you're not; and, remember, time, tide and breakfast wait for no man or woman!"

"Jane," said Jim, when the meal was over, "I've got to go up to Looeena in a few days' time. If you and Miss Deene would care to come," offhandedly, "there's room in the car."

"How long will you be there?"

"Three or four days. There are several jobs Anderson can't do until I go up. The last part of the road'll be pretty bad."

"What about it, Betty?"

"I should love to! But where is Looeena?"

"In the backblocks. You will get a glimpse of

real pioneer bush life. Huge trees; lovely ferns, and——"

"Mud up to your necks!" Jim broke in. "It's no place for a softy, Miss Deene!"

"Do you call me one?" with a mischievous look.

"I don't think I should," gazing at her critically.

"Room for another, Jim?" asked Timothy. "I might come in useful, if only to wash the car when we get there."

"What about all that wild turnip and charlock you were complaining of in your crop? In two or three days it will be seeding," said Jim.

"Oh, you're too material. All work and no play makes me a most unhappy boy. However, I can take a hint with the next man. Jane, thank you for a most delightful meal. Miss Betty, farewell. Jim—well, I'll get even with you! Hullo! Here's another breakfaster! Afraid your too late, Nell."

"I've had mine ages ago!" Betty liked the clear full tones. "Good morning, everybody. I —" she hesitated as she caught sight of Betty.

"Nell," said Jane, "let me introduce you to a new friend of mine; and if she isn't yours in the space of five minutes, I shall be greatly mistaken in both of you. Betty Deene has come to live with me."

For a moment the two girls looked at one another. Nell was tall, dark and very graceful; the other slight, brown-eyed and exceedingly pretty. Betty held out her hand, which the other took

firmly, and then, with a sudden impulse, lifted her face to be kissed.

"I've known her since yesterday, and we've not got beyond a handshake!" Timothy whispered to Jane. "Some people have all the luck!"

"Nell," said Jane, "Jim is going to take us to Looeena. We can find room for you. Will you come?"

For a moment the other hesitated, and Betty caught a look in her eyes that she did not understand. Her cheeks had flushed a little.

"I should like to," she answered, "but I will let you know definitely to-morrow."

The following afternoon Nell Osbourne came over and told them she would go to Looeena. Jane was pleased; and the three girls sat on the wide verandah, which commanded an extensive view of the sea. The morning had been cloudy, with a burst of wind and rain, but the afternoon was clear and fresh, and the warmth of the sun very pleasant.

It was one of those soft, dreamy afternoons when one likes to sit and think, and the little worries and troubles of life seem far away. The Tasmanian seasons merge into one another very gradually, lacking the abrupt change of more rigorous climes. Winter grows slowly into spring, spring becomes summer, summer glides into autumn, while the days of winter might often be mistaken for autumn or spring.

The three were silent. In Betty's mind the memories of the awful past were becoming vague

and softened. She loved a country life, and this island, caressed by the southern seas, appealed to her as a delightful haven of rest. She was feeling happier than for a long time past. She was intensely fond of Jane, and even Jim and she would become good friends in time she thought —for such is the innocence of maidenhood.

She studied the faces of her companions, and her eyes grew soft as they rested on Jane who, with half-closed lids, lay back in her chair, a pleasant picture of content. Nell Osbourne's dark eyes held a look of sadness, but the face was perfect, and crowned with the glory of beautiful hair that held little gleams in its dark mass.

"You two are very quiet," Jane murmured, opening her eyes wide. "Repenting of your promise to go to Looeena, Betty?"

"I am not!" decidedly. "I am looking forward to the trip. I have heard such a lot about the backblocks that I want to see them for myself. Will there be adventures?" she asked hopefully.

"Should it blow or rain, there may be. You will be in the big timber, and rainy weather or a gale invariably brings some trees down. As for the roads—Jim usually takes an axe, a spade, and a lot of empty bags. I expect you will have your adventure, Betty. My hope is that we don't have any; and I think I can speak for Nell."

"You can," she smiled. "Here comes Jim," she added, and the colour in her cheeks grew deeper. "He is home early."

"Hullo, Nell," he greeted her, carelessly. "Jane, I find that I shall have to start for Looeena early to-morrow morning. You must be ready not later than half-past six. Hope you're coming, Nell?"

"I am, thank you."

"Good! The car rides much easier with a fair load on that rough road."

The dark girl's flush grew deeper, then died away: Betty felt a strange sympathy for her.

"Short notice, Jim!" remonstrated his sister, "and a most unearthly hour. Betty will have to sit up all night!"

"Do her good!" he retorted callously.

"You are very rude!" Jane informed him indignantly. She got up and stood in the doorway. "You're not going until you apologize!" She blocked it with her small figure.

Jim smiled, carelessly picked her up by both plump elbows, put her quickly but carefully to one side, and went through without a word.

CHAPTER V

THE three girls were ready at half-past six punctually, Nell having stayed the night; and the sun was well up when they left the homestead. It was Betty's first introduction to the luxuriant bush.

They mounted steadily along a beautifully graded road that wound among fertile farms, showing in the cuttings a wealth of deep, rich soil and a profusion of grass and clover. Growing crops were shooting skywards, soon to hide the fences and the huge, unsightly stumps and giant logs that lay about. Presently they crossed a wide saddle, and started to drop down the winding road. Betty looked back to catch a last glimpse of Bass Strait in the glory of a clear, fresh morning; when she turned again, a little cry was forced from her lips, for right ahead, in the far distance, gleamed a fleecy blanket of snow that crowned an almost ink-black bluff.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed to Jim, beside whom she was seated.

"Not bad," he grunted without looking at her, for the abrupt curves of the road claimed his full attention.

"Isn't it glorious!" She turned her radiant face to the others behind.

Jane smiled in sympathy, but Nell felt a strange sinking of the heart.

They ran down to a level road along a singing river, and the rushing water played strange music among the rocks. Then they rose again. The road crept between huge gums of sombre green; immense myrtles almost hid the sun; giant ferns, whose delicate fronds dipped gracefully towards them, hid a tangle of dead and decaying matter. It was beautiful, but with a savage beauty, and its silence rather cowed the young girl from the land of open fields, neat hedges and noisy creature life.

They were swinging round a sharp bend cut into the hillside, when a sudden disturbance in the leafage ahead startled Betty. She heard an exclamation from Jim, as he jammed on his brakes; then came a rending crash, as a huge log leapt from the hillside and fell across the track. Unconsciously, she gripped Jim's arm, and he looked at her in surprise. His nerves were of steel; he could not understand fear in another.

"Scared?" he grinned at her.

"It did frighten me a bit!" a little breathlessly. "What—what if it had fallen on us?"

"But it didn't," he retorted. "I wish to goodness we had got past before it came down. Anyway, it's a dead trunk, and pretty rotten by the look of it. I'll cut a few levers, and we may be able to roll it aside."

"Your first adventure, Betty!" Jane observed

mischievously, as Jim went off with the axe to cut some spars.

"And the last, I hope. I never considered the possibility of a tree falling on us."

"Now, girls," called Jim, "a good heave together, and it's off the road. One—two—three—My God!"

Broken clean in half by its fall, the great log lay balanced on the edge of the road. The soil, loosened by the heavy weight, suddenly slipped, and the log rolled back towards them. With a sweep of his arm Jim threw his sister and Betty clear, but Nell's skirt caught in a projecting stump. Jim jumped to her and seized her just as it was about to crush her foot. By a huge effort he drew her clear, leaving a shoe behind, and then himself fell flat in front of it.

Betty gave a cry of horror as the log passed above him with rapidly increasing momentum; then, one end striking a stump, it swung round and crashed into the scrub below. Jane sprang towards her brother.. Quick as she was, Nell was before her, and lifted him tenderly.

"Jim!" she cried, and in that word was a terrible anguish.

"What the devil are you doing?" he growled, struggling to free himself from her encircling arms. "I'm not hurt! Noticed that bit of a hollow and had no time to get away. Besides, the ground is soft. Here, Nell, let go of a fellow!"

"I thought you were killed!" She swayed, and fainted.

"What a fuss about nothing!" he grumbled. "Jane, there's a billy in the car. Get some water from the creek. Miss Deene—that's right!" for Betty had flown for a rug to lay her on.

"I wonder what made her faint?" he went on. "She's as strong as a horse."

"Do you?" said Betty, and she loosened the wraps from the soft, rounded throat very tenderly. By the time Jane had returned with the water, Nell had opened her eyes and was struggling to sit up. Jim slipped his arm round the slender waist to help her.

"That's right, old woman!" he said encouragingly.

He was very human, even tender at the moment, and a tiny pang of jealousy touched Betty's heart. He had never spoken to her like that!

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Hurt?"

"I'm all right," she answered, and coloured vividly as she noticed where his arm was. "Sorry I made a fool of myself."

"You gave me a bit of a fright," he confessed. "It's so unlike you to do that sort of thing. Feeling better?"

"Quite all right. It was you who gave us the fright!"

"Pouf! I was safe enough. Come on, girls, let's get on. It's later than I thought, and we've got to get through the Gluepot yet. Look alive, Jane; pitch the things into the car!" He was once more the domineering, hectoring brother.

They had mastered one trouble only to meet

another; for about half a mile farther on they came upon a huge green tree that the rain and wind of a few days ago had brought out clean by the roots. It blocked the road completely, the trunk being over seven feet through.

"Confound it!" Jim muttered. "This looks like a walk for us. Are you game for three miles through the mud, Miss Deene?"

"I'm game for anything to-day!" she laughed. "With such a lovely blue sky and such glorious air, I could walk leagues!"

"Ever walk through mud?"

"Many a time!" she laughed.

"Up to your knees?"

"Hardly as deep as that, but I've been over my shoes!"

Jim grunted, then grinned at Nell, who was watching them.

"Somebody's there, Jim," cried Jane, who had gone towards the fallen tree.

"It's Anderson!" he exclaimed. "Good man!"

"Heered yesterday it were down, Mr. Langthorne." A man of about forty-five—a giant, with the voice of a bull—vaulted the great trunk as lightly as a boy. His shirt was open at the front, partly showing the massive, sunburnt chest. "Morning, Miss Langthorne and ladies," he greeted them.

"Good morning, Anderson," Jane answered, "and how is your wife?"

"Fine, Miss," he bellowed, and Betty felt like a midget, he was so immense. "She's bin lookin'

forward to yer comin' for the last two weeks. Bin pretty lonely since the lads went." The great, honest face clouded.

"They were killed in France," Jane whispered to Betty. "Two splendid boys."

"Well, we must shift this 'ere log," he went on. "I fetched Skeeter and the bullocks."

Skeeter—so called because of his resemblance to a mosquito, for he was exceedingly thin and always hungry—lifted his cap bashfully as the girls climbed upon the tree. He was backing twelve splendid bullocks into position to haul away a length of some sixteen feet that he and Anderson had sawn through.

"Whoa back, Spot! Back, Bluey! Whoa back!" he shouted, wielding a huge whip with a long handle, that he cracked with the noise of a rifle-shot. His voice was shrill and piercing. "Back, you—" He spluttered, and became inarticulate as he remembered the presence of ladies. Jim laughed, and glanced at Betty, who was looking rather horrified.

"I think you girls had better go down the road a bit," he advised. "Skeeter won't be able to get those bullocks to pull if you stay here. Now get off the log," as Anderson clambered upon it, dragging a heavy chain at the end of which was fixed a stout iron "dog."

"We're going to stop and watch," said Betty determinedly as they climbed down.

"Let 'em into it, Skeeter!" bellowed Anderson, as he finished hammering the iron "dog" in.

Obeying Skeeter's shrill commands, the team moved forward. The "dog" crunched as it bit deeper in; the cut ends screeched as they ground against those opposite. The log gave a half-roll, then jammed. Skeeter redoubled his commands and entreaties, but in vain. Grounding his whip-handle, he looked appealingly at Jim, who said peremptorily,

"You girls, clear! We'll be stuck here all day unless Skeeter can get the wind up. No, farther away! Go round the corner."

Then there was borne to them a most extraordinary medley of sounds, shrieks, and entreaties. Betty shivered, it sounded so awful. There was a screeching grind; a dull thud; a swishing crash of scrub and timber; then utter silence.

"It's clear!" cried Jane. "Let's go back."

"What an awful man!" said Betty, and her face was pale.

Jane laughed.

"He does not use a single oath," she said. "It's the expression he puts into the words. He's been calling them dears and lambs, and I don't know what."

Betty looked utterly incredulous.

"It's quite true," smiled Nell. "They say he is the best bullock-driver on the coast, and he loves his bullocks."

When they got back, the road was open. Skeeter and his team had drawn aside, and Anderson was putting the tools together.

The Gluepot, or at least the first part of it,

was in a complaisant mood. The second appeared to be so, until they had almost reached the end; then suddenly it changed its mind, and gripped the slowly revolving wheels with all the tenacity of which it was capable.

"We're stuck!" said Jim definitely, and sat back in his seat to wait for the team.

"Let us get out," suggested Betty.

"Right!" he grinned at her. "You go first, Miss Deene."

"Stop where you are!" ordered Jane sharply, as the girl rose to go. "You'd be stuck too. Jim, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"She wanted to," he growled, "so why not let her try it? I'd like to see her in it," he muttered to himself.

Betty's ears were sharp, and they caught the words.

"You're horrid!" she exclaimed with a flushed face.

"You're like a packet of crackers the way you go off," he told her coolly.

"You're the most ill-mannered man I ever met!"

Nell looked from one to the other in astonishment, but it was Jane who calmed their tempers.

"For goodness' sake don't spoil our happy day. You quarrelsome young creatures are doing your best to make me miserable!"

"Sorry, dear; and so is he."

"You're right, I am sorry," he said, then looked at the gluey mud.

Skeeter, guessing that there would be trouble, had hurried the bullocks on. The leaders were unhooked from the team, a stout rope that Jim always carried on these trips was tied to the yoke, and the other end made fast to the car. The clever beasts drew it out easily.

"You'll be right now to the homestead, Boss," Skeeter remarked.

"Our adventures are over," sighed Betty thankfully. Then, leaning towards Jim, she whispered, "I'm sorry I was so cross after what you did."

He flushed, but said nothing. His effort to hate this girl was distinctly unsatisfactory. Betty, on the other hand, was finding that it would be a comparatively easy matter to like him. For Jane's sake she had made up her mind to do so, blissfully ignorant of the deep waters into which she was wading. Nell, who had noticed both the whisper and the flush, felt a quick sinking of the heart, but without the slightest tinge of jealousy.

Mrs. Anderson welcomed them warmly when they reached the homestead. The overseer's wife led a rather lonely life, for there were few settlers near this outpost where the battle with luxuriant nature was being fought.

"It's a treat to see you, Miss Jane!" said the little woman, and her eyes gave full emphasis to the words, "and you, too, Miss Osbourne." Then she looked at Betty.

"This is a new friend of mine," Jane told her,

smiling, and felt curious to see how this bush-woman, noted for her outspokeness and sound judgment, would accept the newcomer. For a moment she gazed keenly at Betty, then held out a small, work-hardened hand.

"Any friend o' Miss Jane's a friend o' mine," she said simply, "but I'd take to yer without her word for it. Glad to see yer up here, and hope you all have a good time."

CHAPTER VI

THE buildings were mostly of split paling, roughly planed and coloured. For a bush holding they were ample, and rather more commodious than the houses usual on these out-back properties. When Jim did a thing, he did it well.

The homestead, built on a rise, had a commanding view of the greater part of the property. Unlike most of the country round, it was fairly level, and the gigantic timber proved its richness.

"What awful trees!" Betty said in a very small voice to Nell, as the two girls went out on the verandah, "and don't they look dreary!"

"Wait till you get among them, and see the grass and clover," smiled Nell. "It is in the transition stage just now."

"I shall be afraid to go among them for fear one might fall on me," said the little awe-stricken voice; "I can't forget that log!"

Nell put a slender arm about her shoulders. Jane was helping Mrs. Anderson, and the two girls were alone.

"Neither can I," she whispered. "I owe my life to Jim."

Something in her voice made Betty turn to her

quickly, and she caught a look that was almost pleading. She felt vaguely disturbed. She guessed Nell's sentiments towards the spoilt young giant who showed such a complete indifference to women, and suddenly determined to assume the roll of matchmaker; but, just as suddenly, she felt a strong distaste for it that she could not understand.

"You dear little girl!" and Nell's arm drew her tight. "Betty——"

"Come along, you two," Jane's voice came suddenly to them. "We're going to have an early dinner, and an exploring trip afterwards." She looked keenly at the girls, but she was a shrewd observer, and kept her observations to herself.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" asked Mrs. Anderson when the meal was finished. "I heerd Mr. Jim tell Anderson he'd inspect the scrubbing. There's a dozen men on the job."

"Scrubbing?" asked the puzzled Betty.

"She means felling the scrub—the second step towards clearing," explained Jane.

"Oh, I *would* like to see it!"

"Miss Jane, I think I oughter tell yer Charlie Price is in charge of the gang. He's been pretty steady lately. I know you don't care about him, but it's a job to get a man for that kind o' thing. If he's bad in other ways, he's good at that."

Betty, who happened to glance at Nell, saw that her face had clouded.

"I think I'll stay and help Mrs. Anderson," Nell volunteered.

"You won't!" the other expostulated. "You're going with 'em. I wants nobody but meself messing round this afternoon!" She wondered why Jane and Betty laughed.

About the buildings all the timber had been cleared off, and only the great stumps remained. When Betty found herself among the standing trees, she felt awed. The gaunt, dead trunks, from which the twigs and smaller branches had long since been stripped by decay and the gales that roared through them, made her feel utterly insignificant. In ironic contrast, the ground about them was hidden in a dense mass of grass and of clover just coming into bloom, that filled the fresh spring air with a pleasant perfume.

Some six hundred acres out of a thousand had been scrubbed and grassed; a portion was partially clear, the remainder still covered with scrub or in process of transformation. From where they stood they could see dead and dying trees, and trees that had just begun to wither, around whose butts lay a heavy blanket of scrub that the labouring axemen had felled. In the coming heat of summer the leaves and smaller branches would be completely dry, and the greedy fire would convert them into rich ash, that formed an excellent seedbed for the grass and clover.

"There's Jim!" cried Jane suddenly, "we'll get him to escort us."

"Hullo," he said, and his eyes rested for a moment upon Betty. "Exploring?"

"We want to see the scrubbing, Mr. Langthorne."

"Sorry," he answered curtly. "There's been a row among the gang. I had to straighten it out and sack Price. Some of 'em are not too presentable."

"Was sacking all you did?" asked Jane quietly. There were signs on Jim's hands and clothing that he had either been through very thick scrub or——

"Never you mind," still more curtly. "He's gone, and I hope that'll be the last I'll see of him. What about going up the Dromedary? It's not far, but a stiff climb."

"We should like to, old boy," Jane answered.

"Who is Charlie Price?" Betty whispered to Jane, for Jim and Nell had gone on in front.

"A well-educated young man who has gone to the dogs," was Jane's concise reply. "He was engaged to Nell's sister, and treated her very badly. But I wish Jim hadn't—" She checked herself abruptly.

"What?" asked Betty.

"Didn't you notice his knuckles, and the scratch on his face? Price is a coward in some ways, but revengeful. I hope he will leave the coast for good; otherwise I shall not feel easy in my mind."

"I should think Mr. Langthorne could take care of himself," Betty rejoined quietly.

"Yes; but cowards, like snakes, strike unawares!"

"Come on, Miss Deene," called Jim. "We must reach the top of the Dromedary before the sun gets too low."

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can!" a little breathlessly, for he had quickened his pace. "You are not a very good cavalier."

"Never professed to be," he growled, coming back to her. "It's pretty steep. Come on."

"But we are leaving Jane and Nell behind. Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I want you to have first look."

She laughed delightedly.

"I really think I shall get to like you—in time," she finished hurriedly, for she had caught a quick flash of admiration in his eyes, and something she had never seen there before. Then she remembered Nell.

The Dromedary was a steep hill that rose high above the surrounding country in the form of a hump—whence it got its name. Originally it had been swathed in dense dogwood and huge stringybark. The scrub had gone completely, but the skeletons of the stringybarks stood out gaunt and fire-blackened, contrasting sharply with the thick carpet of grass that covered it. The growth was much earlier here than on the lower country, and Jim pointed out mobs of contented cattle that were fast fattening on the lush feed. Its summit gave a wide view of a vast stretch of hill and scrub, and enchanting peeps of the distant sea.

"The others are taking their time!" he growled,

once more the domineering egoist. "Come on, Miss Deene."

"But I'm so out of breath!"

"Just like a girl!" he grunted. "Soft as pap!"

"You're horrid!" she flamed at him. Then her smile met his grin.

"You little packet of crackers! Take my hand," he commanded.

Betty looked quickly at him, then surrendered her small, soft hand into the keeping of his large, firm one. It felt strong and big as it closed over hers, and a little thrill, touched with something she could not define, went through her.

"Oh!" she cried, as they reached the summit, and the evening breeze kissed wavy tendrils of her hair that had escaped in the climb, "Isn't it lovely!"

"It is," he grunted.

"But you are looking at me, not at it!" she protested. "It is lovely, but what a wilderness!" Her eyes took in the miles and miles of virgin scrub, innumerable hills and giant timber. "A beautiful wilderness; and there's the sea, the dear old sea! What are those dead-looking patches?"

"Clearings. There are a good many cockies yonder."

"Cockies?" with a puzzled frown.

"Cockatoo farmers. Men who are fighting the bush to make homes and a living. Men who are doing the real work in this new land, and make it possible for those in the cities to live. The self-satisfied, complacent city man hardly ever

gives a thought to their existence! If you only knew of the struggles, the hardships they have to put up with, they would get your full sympathy, Miss Deene!"

She looked at him in surprise. His usual note of dominance and careless superiority had become almost vehement with intense feeling. She was seeing a new side of him, the side he seldom showed unless deeply stirred. In that moment, the last shreds of doubt fluttered from her mind. His superficial roughness and boorishness at their first meeting were quite forgotten. She knew now that she respected, admired, and—was it merely liking? Jim's voice broke in again upon her thoughts.

"I know men, Miss Deene, who have lived twenty years in the bush without roads or bridges —just the merest track to their holdings that they had carved out themselves. For those twenty years, every bit of produce they grew had to be carried out on their backs, and every particle of food had to be packed in in the same manner. Even the cattle got bogged as they were driven out. I've seen their children going to school in the depth of winter bare-footed, and many miles they had to walk! Their little legs were mud to the knees. Fires came and swept away almost everything. They still clung there uncomplaining, gradually improving their properties, unheeded and uncared-for by the rest of the world, until some politician, keen for votes, unearthed them.

Then, for a time, they were heroes! Men to whom the country owed everything! Stalwart sons of the soil we could not do without! It was scandalous that such things were allowed to be! Bah! as soon as the elections were over they were completely forgotten. Years afterwards some of them did get their roads. Others are still waiting."

Betty could hardly recognize the man she had tried so hard to like. The note of feeling in his voice had grown to passion. He stood erect, his hands clenched, his eyes fixed burningly upon the patches of dead and dying timber. To her presence he was almost oblivious.

Suddenly her respect and admiration merged into another feeling, a feeling that she had given him something she could hardly yet define; something far more binding than the ties of mere acquaintance. From neck to brow spread the crimson blush. It seemed to her absurd that the man she had known and hated but a few short days ago should arouse such a turmoil in her.

"Those men, Miss Betty, are despised by the dwellers in the towns because they have no airs and graces; because they are rough, ignorant creatures upon whom the others prey! But it is the way of the world, and I don't suppose any amount of talk will alter matters."

"Mr. Jim—" she, too, used the more familiar name, and it thrilled her slightly as she said it —"I am revising first impressions," she answered

softly. "They are supposed to be the most lasting, but there are exceptions to every rule."

"Are you?" He felt somewhat ashamed at having allowed his true self to burst through the outer shell of indifference and boorishness. "You've hardly had time to absorb many yet. Wait until you see a bit more of the country."

"I don't mean the country." She was regaining her self-possession. "I want to be friends for —for Jane's sake," and she held out both hands. For a moment he hesitated, dumb with surprise, then took them firmly in his.

"All right. I'm on, Miss—Miss Betty," was all he said.

When the others joined them, the sun was sinking towards a range of distant hills, whose tops appeared like a huge saw with the teeth pointing upwards.

"The Sawback looks misty this evening," Jim remarked. To the southward they could see the head of a snow-tipped peak; a film of cloud rested on its summit like a feather, and as they watched seemed to swell and flow down the sides.

"Rain," Jim said definitely, "and we'll have it before morning. Unless I'm very much mistaken, there's wind behind it. If we get one of our spring gales, you may be a prisoner here for weeks, Miss Betty!"

"It will be a most delightful prison!" she laughed. "Don't worry about us, Mr. Jim."

Nell looked quickly at them. The relationship

between the two seemed to have changed suddenly, and in place of a vague antagonism a subtle intimacy had developed. It moved her strangely, and made the one desire of her life seem more hopeless than ever. In the few days she had known Betty she had been strangely drawn to her; and the rough, arrogant Jim, she felt, was being caught by the girl's charm.

"I'm not likely to," Jim growled at Betty. He was drawing about him once more the mantle of gruff taciturnity.

CHAPTER VII

JIM'S prophecy of rain was true. Early in the night great masses of vapour crowded down on the hill-tops and began to pour a soft drizzle on the earth. From a drizzle it grew to a steady rain; later it swelled to a torrent. For hours it fell with a solid rush, drumming on the shingled roof and making sleep impossible. Then, above the din, the wakeful ones heard a moaning sound that increased to a deafening roar.

"Wind!" muttered Jane, sitting up in bed and turning to where Betty was. "Awake, dear?"

"Yes," answered a sleepy voice. "What an awful noise!"

"That's Jim's spring gale. Gracious! There goes a tree. And another! I am afraid this will bring a lot of timber down, for Anderson told me last night that there had not been a really heavy blow for months. The timber is—as he expresses it—pretty ripe!"

The wind was shrieking and howling like a myriad demons being driven out of hell. It flung great sheets of water fiercely against the quivering house, that rocked to the intensity of its onslaught.

Suddenly above the clamour of the gale there

was a rending tear, an awful crash and a grinding jar that made Betty call aloud in fear.

"Only a big tree gone, close to the house," Jane called to her. She had almost to shout to make herself heard. "There goes another—and another!" as the crashes were repeated. "Poor old Jim will have some work after this!"

"Isn't it awful!" Betty whispered as she crept out of bed and sat on the other's. "Listen to the trees. How dreadful to be among them!"

"It would mean death or terrible disablement," Jane whispered back; but, close as they were to one another, Betty scarcely heard her. "I am glad that Jim told Anderson to move the cattle out of the timber on to the clearer parts."

The rain had lessened, but the gale still shrieked. The sound of falling trees came at longer intervals, for the wind had conquered the more rotten ones in its first fury; but, should the rain continue, their hold upon the sodden soil would grow less firm, and many more of the giant skeletons that stood defiantly erect would be flung down.

Dawn was showing faintly through the drawn blinds when Betty raised them. She gazed upon a scene of desolation and destruction. As the light grew stronger, she could see a chaotic mass of fallen timber. The fences showed huge gaps where limbs and trees had struck them. She realized the savagery of nature. It is one of the penalties that the pioneer has to pay; and he pays

it uncomplainingly, for once the timber is gone, it is gone for ever.

"It's a good thing that Jim put up strong buildings," said Jane, as Betty crept back to bed. Anderson and Skeeter will have their hands full for months."

"Won't they grumble!"

"They'll delight in it. Those two men are—as Jim describes them—whales on clearing up. Anderson just glories in getting rid of the timber, and Skeeter would pine away and die if he could not drive his bullocks. But it will mean a lot of expense to get rid of the butts and fill in the holes. I wonder if Nell is awake?"

"Jane," said Betty in a low voice that, to the other's sharp ears, held a curious little quiver in spite of the howling gale, "I—I'm sure that Mr. Jim cares for Nell."

"Nell?" cried the elder woman in startled tones. "I don't think so, dear."

"I am certain he does. She would make him a splendid wife!" with a forced enthusiasm that the clever Jane saw through; then, almost inaudibly, "I—I know she loves him."

Jane was, for the moment, speechless. She had guessed at Nell's feelings long ago, but considered Jim adamant against them. In her plan to bring this charming child into his life, she had never considered any possible complications. She was beginning to see that Betty, in spite of her brother's superficial roughness, was strongly attracted to him.

"You're imagining it," she said at length.

"I'm not. I'm sure of it." Her voice held a note of forlornness.

"I hear you're awake," said Nell, entering the room. "Hasn't it been an awful night!"

Jane watched her intently, for Betty's words had started a train of thought that was, at the least, disturbing. With a mass of glorious hair falling about her shoulders, her graceful form draped in a clinging kimono, her dark eyes alight with glowing fire, she looked very beautiful.

She and Jim had been friends since childhood; but he was always so carelessly indifferent to her that the present situation came as a shock to Jane. She was intensely fond of Nell, and, for a time, had hoped that they would marry; when those hopes seemed impossible of fruition, she had made arrangements for Betty. Now she sighed a little sadly as Nell sat on Betty's bed. The two were evidently becoming very fond of one another, and she could see unhappiness on the horizon for one or both.

"I've been a silly fool!" she muttered.

"Did you speak, Jane?" asked Nell, who was in radiant spirits in spite of the depressing morning.

"No, dear. I was anathematizing the weather."

By breakfast-time the rain had ceased, but the gale drove the torn and ragged clouds as relentlessly as ever over the land, making Anderson shake his head and become gloomily prophetic.

"She ain't done yet. We'll ketch it again about midday. Some mess to clear up, Boss!" he finished cheerily.

"It can't come down twice, thank goodness!" Jim grunted. "When it's cleared up, it's done with. I'd sooner have timber than onion-weed and blackberries."

"So'd I, Boss, a darn sight sooner. The missus has a roaring fire and a good breakfast for you young ladies. Skeeter bolted his quick. He were afraid you might ketch him. We're late because of this 'ere gale," apologetically. "Me and Skeeter's out by seven generally."

The fire was cheerful, the breakfast more than good. In spite of the gale and the damage it had done they were a happy party, and the big kitchen rang to their chatter. Jim sat smoking before the fire, watching them; Anderson wandered about restlessly, for he was itching to be out and among the fallen giants.

"She's coming on to rain again," he remarked dolefully, after an inspection of the weather, "and blowing like h—heaven," he amended hastily, remembering the ladies present.

"Got the wrong shop that time, Anderson!" grinned Jim. "Heaven's calm and peaceful, with no big timber."

"What'll a chap do there, Boss, if there ain't none to log up? It'll be pretty slow fur me!" chuckled Anderson.

"Wind's busted the lower forty-acre fence!" cried Skeeter excitedly, as he rushed into the kit-

chen. "All them three-year-old steers is on the Dromedary. If it freshens up a bit more that 'ere timber'll be down like ninepins. Can I take Laddie and rouse 'em out, Boss?"

Jim jumped from his chair with an exclamation of dismay.

"Are you positive?"

"Seen the whole blooming mob going in. Can I have Laddie?"

"You'll stay at home, Skeeter." A screaming blast struck the house and made it shake again. "Wind is getting worse with the rain. Wouldn't give much for your chance of getting back. Where is my oilskin, Jane?" reverting to his tone of peremptory command.

"Oh, Jim! You must not go!" she cried. "What are a few head of cattle?"

"You forget what a few head of cattle may have to suffer!" he returned, almost fiercely. "Killed, maimed, perhaps pinned under limbs until they die! Of course I must go!"

"This is my job, Boss," observed the big overseer quietly, and Betty heard his wife give a little gasp. "You're more valuable than me. Thanks, old woman," as Mrs. Anderson, white-faced and with set lips, handed him his coat.

Jim went up to Anderson, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I won't forget that offer, old chap, but you're married and I'm not. It's no use, Mrs. Anderson," he smiled as she opened her mouth to protest. "If Anderson got knocked out, who's going to run this place?"

"And who's going to run Seaview if you gets knocked out, Mr. Langthorne?" she retorted. "My man's as much to me as anyone's, but it's his job."

Jim looked whimsically at Jane, who was very pale.

"I think my sister is as good a manager as I am."

"It's no go, Boss," Anderson persisted stoutly. "We owes you that matter o' pulling our boy out from among them blooming Germans. This 'ere won't pay it in full, but it'll be something to it."

"It's the two of us, then," said Jim with decision. Jane helped him on with his oilskin; he kissed her carelessly, nodded quickly to the others, and went out with Anderson into the storm.

"God keep them!" murmured Jane, and was leaving the room when a commotion in the passage made her stop.

"You're *not* going, Skeeter!" she heard Mrs. Anderson protest. "Two's enough. You'll be only a nuisance. I won't let yer have yer coat. You stops here!"

"What's the matter, Mrs. Anderson?" Jane asked, and her pale face grew paler still as a violent rush of wind seemed to lift the building from its foundations.

"This 'ere Skeeter says he's going; and I says he ain't, Miss Jane. He's powerful obstinate!"

"You'll stop with us, Skeeter?" requested Jane gently. "We want a man with us. You won't go, will you?" she entreated.

"Very well, Miss," reluctantly. "I only hopes as none of me bullocks is through. I reckon all them fences is smashed."

Jane joined the other girls, and they went fearfully out on the verandah, where a sheltered corner gave them a partial view of the holding. They could see two drenched figures bending to the storm as they made their way towards the cattle. The Dromedary was sheeted in driving rain. The wind still screamed and whistled, smashing the seething downpour with vicious force against the buildings. Then a low-hung cloud drove quickly up, and poured an almost solid mass of water on the earth, blotting out the vague Dromedary completely. The roar of its rush made speech inaudible. For a moment it seemed to drown even the frantic wind. Then it steadied, and the gale, as if furious at its brief suppression, arose in mighty wrath to the accompaniment of thuds and crashes as the veterans of the forest came to earth.

"God keep them!" Jane prayed again, and became conscious of a slender arm that clutched her waist convulsively.

"Is—is it so dreadfully dangerous?" Betty asked fearfully.

The other did not answer, but drew the slim form close to her.

"Is it, dear?" Betty repeated.

Jane nodded. She did not care to voice her thoughts.

Betty looked at Nell. Her face was drawn and tense, her eyes held unspoken agony. In that moment Betty read her deep devotion to the taciturn young giant. Betty realized another thing, too. The newborn intimacy between herself and Jim, that had become fully-fledged with such wonderful rapidity, was no mere friendship. It was something far deeper and stronger, something that would last as long as life itself.

Then once again the crimson tide of shame flowed from neck to brow. "You fool! You silly little fool!" she muttered to herself. "He belongs to Nell. She is a fit mate for him. Oh, you fool!"

There are moments when unacknowledged, unrealized desires creep out from the shadowy dimness of our subconscious minds into the fierce glare of realization, sometimes filling us with shame and bitter self-reproach, sometimes creating a turmoil of thought and feeling. Betty's thoughts were in a chaotic tumult. No man had ever moved her before; yet in a few short days this boorish giant—whom she hated at their first meeting—had drawn from her the most sacred and the most beautiful thing it is in the power of a good woman to give. Then her thoughts seemed to clear. He was for Nell, and she was a friend of both. Almost fiercely she determined to bring about the union of the two. Jim only needed stirring from his present mood of com-

plaisant ignorance, and she would do the stirring with all the power that lay in her. So, with the innocence and confidence of youthful inexperience, Betty planned, as with the others she waited, watched, and prayed.

As if in answer to their prayers, the scream of the gale grew fainter, and the crash of timber came at longer intervals, until it ceased altogether. It was the dying flurry of the storm. As they watched, the moving film of cloud split apart, and the glorious sun burst through, throwing its grateful warmth upon a sodden land. But no figures came from the Dromedary, and they saw Mrs. Anderson, apron over head, hurrying towards it. Promptly the three girls followed, Jane with a flask of brandy.

They had almost reached the hill when they heard a cry, and saw the overseer's wife break into a quick run. Some hundred yards ahead her husband was standing with bared head, watching something at his feet.

Betty heard Jane give a sudden, choking gasp. The three sprang quickly forward, but Nell reached the spot first. She knelt for an instant, then rose to her feet reeling with wild, hysterical laughter. Crushed and battered almost beyond recognition lay the body of a well-grown yearling. A huge limb beside it was smeared with the blood and hair of its victim.

"Where's Jim?" panted Jane.

"Here he comes, Miss. Just been taking a look at the bullocks. We've had h—dickens own luck!

Not a single beast hurt! Got 'em out jest in time. But what I wants to know is, how this 'ere yearling, that don't belong to us, got here. It looks like one of Ingram's over in the Gulf, and he's miles away! Hullo! What's the matter with Miss Osbourne?"

Nell was sitting on a sodden log, sobbing violently. It was the reaction from the hysterical laughter of a few moments ago. She had fully believed it was Jim's dead body that lay there, and the suppressed passion of years had, for the instant, overflowed. Jim, who happened to come up at that moment, stared at her.

"What the mischief is the matter with you, Nell?" he asked in amazement.

Then Betty's new-born plan burst into action.

"She thought the animal was you," she whispered, and, as Jim's bewildered eyes met hers, went on, "Can't you understand? Oh, you men are blind!" in a fierce undertone. "Don't stand staring at her like a fool! Go away, if you can't do anything!"

"What the devil is the matter?" Jim was more confused than ever.

"Let us follow Anderson's example and go home," Jane said to him quietly. The structure she had started to build with such confidence seemed to be toppling already.

Betty slipped her arm round Nell's waist.

"Better, dear?" she asked gently.

"I'm all right. I thought he was dead!" she whispered.

Anderson was waiting for Jim by one of the broken panels.

"I've been thinking about that yearling, boss. It's a funny thing its being there. Things hasn't been altogether right in the district lately. Lots of the cockies has lost a beast or two, and one or two of the bigger runs is some hundreds short. Lately, I've had me doubts about Charlie Price; he's been a bit mysterious, but I don't think he's got guts enough to plan much on his own. One or two chaps has hinted to me there's a big man behind it. He's a bit of a mystery; but there's no doubt the cattle are going all right."

"You aren't short?" Jim asked him abruptly.

"Not a hoof; but one never knows when our turn'll come."

"Better, Nell?" asked Jim, with the obtuseness of the male, when the two girls reached the house.

"I'm all right!" she spoke a little hurriedly, and the colour crept into her pale cheeks. Jim looked at her in a puzzled way, and the colour mounted higher. Betty drew her to her room, and, as the door closed behind the embarrassed girl, turned and faced Jim. She was desperately trying to carry out her new-born idea.

"You are blind! Oh, can't you—I—" Before the bewildered, but steady eyes of the young giant, her tongue seemed to have lost its power of formulating speech. With burning cheeks, she fled to her room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE following morning dawned, a glorious Tasmanian spring day. It was brilliant, calm and beautiful. A few tiny clouds, like snowy fleeces, hung motionless in the blue vault of the sky; and the nesting birds that always flock to these clearings sent up their happy song.

Betty was alone on the verandah, viewing the devastation of the day before. She thought how lovely Nature was in her present mood. Even the chaos before her fitted into the picture of her thoughts. A thrill of admiration for these pioneer fighters of the bush went through her. She thought of Anderson—giant in frame and strength, with the heart of a lion—undaunted at the vast labour before him, and of Skeeter, whose attenuated frame carried muscles of steel. Involuntarily there came into her mind the picture of the man whom Nell undoubtedly loved. She had told Jane, too, that he loved Nell—but did he?"

"He must do it!" she muttered to herself, still firm in her renunciation, and her small hands clenched.

"What must he do?" asked an amused voice behind her.

She flung round, and the blood flowed to her face. With a cry like a trapped animal she tried to escape.

"What on earth's the matter?" asked Jim in amazement, as he blocked her way.

"Please—please let me pass, Mr. Jim!" she entreated. "I—I want to go inside."

"What's the matter with you and Nell?"

"I'm all right!" She flashed a smile at him, but it had lost some of its brilliance.

"You're not!" positively. "There's something wrong. What is it?"

"You are getting very observant!" Her effort at raillery was almost successful. "I thought you never took any notice of girls."

"I've taken notice of you, for you are different, somehow, to the others I've met."

"You were very rude to me at first!" she retorted, hoping to divert him from this most embarrassing cross-questioning.

His healthy tan went a dark red, for her words brought to him the memory of her in tears. The shame of it still clung to him.

"Sorry," he growled. "Didn't mean it. But what's up?" he insisted. She had a sudden inspiration.

"Mr. Jim, do take me to the Dromedary. I want to see what it looks like from there after this storm."

"If you tell me what's the matter."

"When we get there." She disappeared inside for her hat, thankful for this breathing-space.

Jim looked after her with a puzzled frown. He knew little about women. His attitude, thanks to Jane's spoiling, had always been contemptuously protective. At times he was exceedingly outspoken when the mantle of his taciturnity was lifted, and, if a thing puzzled him, his impulse was to find out the reason at once.

The manner of the two girls puzzled him. Nell he had known from childhood, and had always liked, but nothing more. He found himself thinking a great deal about this little stranger. She had touched strange strings, and stirred new feelings within him. And so, in his blundering man-way, he determined to know the reason of Nell's tears and why Betty seemed so angry with him.

He was getting into deep waters whose currents sweep the unsuspecting paddler into a fierce maelstrom. So he went out to the Dromedary with Betty, calm and self-satisfied, to return—but that will come later.

On the Dromedary the chaos of stricken trees was worse than it looked in the distance. Many of the giants had fallen across one another, splintering into matchwood. Already Anderson and Skeeter had started fires to burn up as much as possible of the broken timber before the heavier work of logging began, and their smoke floated gently upwards. A few trees had snapped off clean, but most had come up by the roots, which dangled helplessly in the air.

"Poor Mr. Jim!" Betty said to him pityingly.

"What an awful lot of work! I do feel sorry for you!"

"Reserve it for Anderson and Skeeter," he grunted; "they'll have to do most of it."

"But you'll have to do the paying!" she retorted practically.

"It's got to be done some time or other. Might as well be done now. Get the benefit sooner. But you haven't answered my question yet."

"O, look at that lovely robin-redbreast, Mr. Jim! I really believe he is prettier than our English robins; and isn't he tame! Mr. Jim——"

"Look here, young lady!" he broke in with determination. "I want that question answered. It's no use your running away," as she darted up the hill.

"I—I w—wanted to g—get to the top first!" she panted, sparring for time.

"When you get to the top, will you tell me?" His blind persistent obstinacy made her almost hate him.

"Yes," she agreed at last, in a very small voice, seeing that escape was hopeless.

"Well?" he inquired as they reached the summit. For the moment her woman's wit deserted her.

"Nell is in love with you!" she stated abruptly, and then could have bitten her tongue off.

Jim stared at her in amazement and consternation.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. Then, after a

pause, "You're only pulling my leg, you little mischief!"

"I'm not," drearily, thinking what a mess she had made of things by her abrupt statement. Where was all the elaborate finesse she had so firmly determined on?

"Well, what's wrong with you?" he asked almost fiercely.

"N—nothing!" she stammered, and hated herself for the flame that swept over neck and face.

"Nothing!" he echoed.

A thought, strange, incongruous, even presumptive, entered his mind, but he flung it savagely out. Then came another, insistent, impelling. He gasped, and sank on a near-by log, not daring to meet her eyes. For several minutes he sat there, seeing nothing, confused by the medley of thoughts that rioted through his brain. This pretty, slender girl had roused him most thoroughly with a bald statement that a woman he sincerely respected and admired, but to whom he had never shown his admiration, loved him. He was gruff, even a little arrogant, to all women, and the thought had never entered his head that one of them might some day care for him. He never doubted Betty's statement for a moment; there was an abrupt sincerity about it that forbade denial; but did he, he asked himself, care for her?

"I'm d—d if I do!" he muttered as he stood up. "Coming home?" he growled at Betty.

"Presently," she murmured, hardly daring to

look at him, and hoping most fervently he would go. "I'm tired after running up the hill."

"I'll wait, then," with a firmness that carried a conviction of his intention.

"I'll come," she returned hurriedly. "Race you to the bottom of the hill." This was a faint attempt to divert his thoughts, for heaven alone knew what uncomfortable questions he might ask. Jim was entirely different from the type of young man she had been accustomed to. He was so horribly literal and determined.

"I want to talk to you, not race," he answered with decision. "You have told me a most extraordinary thing."

"Why extraordinary?" she mocked, hardly knowing what she said, but fighting to block the stream of his questions.

"Why did you tell me this?" ignoring her question.

"What—what did I tell you?" she countered, vainly hoping to turn his persistence.

"You know well enough. Miss Betty—" he hesitated for a moment and his eyes were troubled; "this puts me in a devil of a hole! How am I to get out of it?" appealingly.

"There is only one way." She lifted her eyes to his and met them fully. For several minutes they remained so. Then something she saw in the steady grey eyes that looked into hers, made her drop them suddenly.

"Let me—oh, let me go!" she pleaded in a whisper; for Jim, in his agitation, had unwittingly placed his hand on her shoulder. As it fell from her, she fled down the hill.

"Bother the women!" he muttered, as he went to help Anderson and Skeeter.

When Betty reached the house, she had hardly got rid of all traces of her agitation, and Jane's shrewd eyes noticed it. For several minutes she said nothing, but, when Betty went to her room, she followed.

"Had a pleasant walk?" she asked casually, and lowered the blind until it dimmed the light in the room.

Betty did not answer, so Jane sat on the bed beside her and whispered, "What is the matter, dear?"

"N—nothing," she stammered. The other waited quietly. Then she burst out, "Oh, Jane, I've been such a fool!"

"I'm sure you haven't!"

"I have! Oh, Jane!—" She paused, and nestled close to the elder woman.

"Yes, dear?"

"Mr. Jim would persist in asking me what was the matter with Nell."

"Yes?"

"I—I told him that she was in love with him."

A smile flickered for a moment across the other's face; then she became grave again.

"And what did he say?"

"That—that it put him in a devil of a hole!" The brown eyes twinkled, but Jane laughed out loud.

"That's just like him! But, Betty, dear, I—I don't quite understand. What led up to it?"

"What—what I told you. He was so inquisitive."

"You poor darling!" drawing the other to her. "Did he say anything else?"

"That he didn't know how he'd get out of the hole!"

"And what did you say?"

"That there was only one way!" she whispered, burying her face in Jane's shoulder.

For a moment there was silence. Then Jane's full, pleasant laugh rang out.

"It's nothing to laugh at!" remonstrated Betty. "I've made such a fool of myself!"

"No, you haven't!" defended Jane stoutly. "I believe you have done the very thing I've been puzzling my head over for some time—roused Jim from his present state of mind."

"But it was such a silly thing to do!"

"Nothing of the sort! Jim has got a jolt that will do him good. Don't worry any more about it. Go on as if it had never happened."

Betty's endeavour to go on as if nothing had happened was so successful that Jim could not quite understand it. Her bright chatter completely puzzled him. Jane backed her up wholeheartedly, and the unsuspecting Nell joined them. The evening meal was the gayest they had had since Betty came to them.

Jim, after a vain effort to understand, gave it up and sat watching them. He could not prevent

his eyes from straying to Nell, whose beauty shone more vividly than ever before.

But Betty lay awake for hours that night, and the picture of the radiant Nell and the steady grey eyes of the young giant was with her continuously.

The morning dawned bright and beautiful. The clearing of the fallen timber was in full swing, and Anderson was as jolly as a schoolboy on a holiday. Jim had informed them that it would be a full week before they could leave, as the road was blocked by trees and bad washouts.

Clearing the heavy timber was a source of intense interest to Betty. A gang of sawyers cut the huge trunks into lengths, which Anderson and Skeeter built into great fires. Some of the larger logs they were compelled to burst with powder, as they were too big to handle. All day long sounded the steady swish of saws, the pistol-like crack of Skeeter's whip, and his appeals to his beloved bullocks to pull, varied by the dull boom and thud of the logs as they shot off the skids on to the fires.

Betty wandered down and watched the work. It fascinated her. For the first time the meaning of the phrase, "Nobility of Labour," became clear to her. She could think of nothing more noble than the steady fight to bring this land to active production. It required skill, brains, and muscle. The fruits of their efforts would help to feed the teeming population of the world and

find an atom more of elbow room for its congested centres.

She approached an active man of thirty, who was preparing to cut into lengths a veritable giant amongst giants. As she approached she noticed a gleaming saw standing beside the trunk, which topped it by fully two feet.

"Morning, Miss!" the man greeted her cheerily; for Betty was by now well-known to every worker on the place, and, although they might smile at her, her interest in their work pleased them. "It's a rum 'un, isn't it?"

"But you can't cut it with that saw, Daniels!"

"Go through it like soap, Miss. You watch."

"But the log is much wider than the saw is long!" she objected.

With a chuckle, he climbed on a little stage he had built from sundry pieces of timber, and began to saw. Betty watched the thin steel blade sink slowly into the log, as Daniels drew it backwards and forwards with long, steady sweeps. She walked round to the other side, but the saw was not visible. With a little laugh, she went back.

"Too wide for you!" she smiled.

The man drew the saw out with a grin, carried it to the opposite side, and built a new stage like the first. When it was completed, he climbed on to the trunk, notched it with an axe, and took up the saw. In a few minutes it had eaten its way down level with the other, watched with breathless interest by Betty. She had gone to

the head of the tree, climbed on it, and walked along it to where the man who working.

"Well done, Daniels!" she cried, as the saw sank exactly into the opposite cut.

"Only practice, Miss. If they meets right it's as easy as fallin' off that log—which you'll do if you ain't careful!" he ended with a grin.

For some time she sat there deeply interested, watching Daniels, who worked first from one side, then the other. "You've got a big one there!" she heard a voice say below her, and looked down quickly to see Jim, who did not notice her, for she was partly hidden by a small, leafy branch that had been torn from a green tree. She felt slightly embarrassed. Then he caught sight of her.

"What are you doing there?" he growled.

"I was watching Daniels cut this huge trunk through with that little saw."

"You'll lose your dinner if you wait until he's finished. It's close to it now. Better come home with me."

She hesitated for a moment, then started to walk back to where she had climbed up, but did not see a short stub that caught her skirt and tripped her. She wavered for an instant, then fell. Jim, who had moved along with the intention of helping her down, sprang quickly forward, catching her just in time. For a second she lay in his arms motionless; then he put her gently down.

"You were smart, Boss," said Daniels, approv-

ingly, thinking that the flame in her face was due to the fall. He did not notice how the young man's whitened; but he did wonder why the young lady forgot to bid him her usual cheery good-bye.

They walked on for some distance without exchanging a word. Then Betty said, "Thank you, Mr. Jim!" very softly.

"That's nothing!" he growled.

"Well, you saved me from a very nasty fall."

"You are such a little scrap!" he retorted. "Look here, Miss Betty"—he stopped short and faced her—"I'm in a devil of a hole over this matter!"

"So you said yesterday," she murmured.

"Well, I am. Can't you help a fellow out?"

"How can I?" a little drearily.

She hated herself for that slip of the tongue yesterday. She certainly had roused Jim, but the outcome might be rather tragic. Fortunately, Betty possessed a saving sense of humour, and the incongruity of their position stirred it to wakefulness.

"You won't help a fellow, then?"

"Ask her to marry you." Her brief burst of laughter had a hysterical flavour to it.

He looked at her in horrified consternation.

"Good—good God!" he stammered. "I—I don't care for her enough!"

"You can learn to."

"Never!" with unmistakable emphasis.

"Why?"

"I—" he began, and stopped. He was mouthing words that would not form; phrases that were bursting for expression, but the numbed tongue smothered them.

"Boss!" came Anderson's booming shout, "can you come over here a moment?"

She fled to the house.

CHAPTER IX

A FEW days later Betty, who was down near the entrance gate, noticed a horseman coming towards her. When he saw her, he broke into a canter and pulled up beside her.

"Miss Betty! This is good of you! Fancy coming to meet me!"

"I didn't, Mr. Lowe!" she protested laughingly. "What has brought you up here?"

His merry eyes twinkled.

"Business. Sordid, sober business."

"Nothing else?"

His clear tan grew deeper.

"My dear young lady, because I doubted your statement, that is no reason why you should doubt mine. I want to find the gallant Jim. By the way, I hope he's been behaving himself?"

"He's been very busy."

"He's always busy, but he is going to take this afternoon off. There he is! Jim, you loafer, how are you?"

"Tim! What the deuce has brought you up? Got those weeds out of your crops?"

"I have, and spoilt the look of the farm. Green and gold together are glorious, but all green! Miss Betty won't think anything of it when she

sees it. But to get to business; I am offered Watson's place next to yours, and I want a run badly for my surplus stock, and your advice still more badly."

"Dinner first!" said the other firmly, "but I don't believe that was the only thing you came up for."

Timothy's eyes held the other's steadily. "You and this young lady appear to be of one mind." A look of mischief came into his eyes. "What the dickens have you been doing to him, Miss Betty?"

"Dinner's ready," growled Jim, and strode away without a glance at either of them.

"Overwork," remarked Timothy, gazing speculatively after him.

In the afternoon they inspected Watson's property, and Jim strongly advised the other to buy. He was in one of his morose moods that day, and banter seemed to irritate him.

"Our friend is not happy," Timothy told Betty. "Go and cheer him up."

"Why don't you?"

"I've done my best, and the reward for my pains was an exceedingly inaccurate and libellous statement about myself. Nell and I are going for a stroll. You and Jane ought to go too. It's a lovely evening."

She knew now why Timothy had come. This was a fresh complication in her plan. Could she go on with it? Could she—then she heard Anderson calling for Jim. The overseer was

excited, and his words held an angry ring. She caught Jim's quick, sharp answer.

"Where's Jane?" he asked abruptly, as he hurried in. "Oh, there you are!" as his sister hurried in. "Help Mrs. Anderson get some tucker ready!" he shot at her. "Forty head of cattle stolen. Got to get away at once after 'em! Where's Tim?"

"Gone for a walk with Nell," answered Betty.

"We can do without him," he grunted. "Look alive, Jane!"

"Do you know who took them?" Jane asked him as she helped to get the food ready.

"I can give a pretty close guess. When we get 'em, he's going to taste something he won't like!" savagely.

"Jim," Jane said quietly, "don't take the law into your own hands. "You know how vindictive he is, and already——"

"Rot!" he broke in roughly. "I know what to do."

Jane slept little that night. She rather hoped that her headstrong brother would not catch the thieves, for she feared the consequences.

The night passed and the day came, but neither Jim nor Anderson had returned. Jane was getting very anxious. Just at dusk she caught the sound of moving stock, and heard Anderson's big shout.

"Got 'em all, Miss Jane," he boomed at her. "The boss'll be along directly. He's bringing two of the duffers with him."

"Duffers?"

"Cattle-duffers—thieves, Miss Jane. Price were one of 'em, but he's away back in the bush with the sorest hide a man ever had! He—he tried to shoot the boss!"

"Shoot Jim?" she faltered.

The big man nodded. His anger still burned fiercely.

"He can thank his Gord he missed!"

Jim was cool and casual.

"Mrs. Anderson," he said, "we've brought two more mouths for you to feed. Now, Ikey," addressing a lad of not more than seventeen, "I want another bullock-driver, and the job's yours as long as you keep straight, and Bluey can stay too." Jane saw a rather quiet-looking dog of a peculiar bluish colour that was evidently devoted to the lad, for he licked his hand softly.

"You ain't going to gaol me, then?"

"Of course not!" abruptly. "Do a kid like you more harm than good. Come on, wire in to that bit of beef. I know you're half-starved."

For a moment the lad looked at Jim; then, collapsing on the table, he buried his face in his arms and sobbed.

"Clear out!" said Jim harshly to the others. "He'll be all right directly."

A few days later they left for the coast. The trees that had blocked the road were removed, and the Gluepot had dried to a hard crust that carried the motor easily. Betty was sorry to leave, for the work of bringing the wilderness

into subjection interested her greatly. Mrs. Anderson was unfeignedly grieved to lose them, and watched their preparations for departure unhappily.

"I hope it won't be long before you're up again," she said to Jane a little wistfully. "Young people does brighten up the place so."

"My brother tells me we may go to the Lakes after Christmas," she replied. "If we do, we shall stay here for some days both going and coming back. Good-bye, Anderson. Miss Deene will be in tears if farewells are too prolonged!" with a mischievous look at Betty.

Timothy returned with them in the car. He had decided to purchase the adjoining property, and left his horse behind for future use.

"Got plenty more at home," he informed Jim, "and the beggar might as well get fat on your grass, old chap. That's one of the advantages of friendship!" He grinned at Betty.

"It's one of the advantages of having plenty of cheek!" Jim retorted. "If you want a spare horse to ride," he told Anderson who had come up to see them off, "take Mr. Lowe's!"

"If you do, Anderson," said Timothy firmly, "I'll prosecute you for overloading!" and back on the soft spring air came the sound of his booming laugh.

The run back was quite uneventful. The morning was beautifully clear, and as they crossed the range above the river, the sea lay before them in all its placid glory. The patches of uncleared

scrub, and the gaunt skeletons of forest giants, became fewer and fewer, until around them lay smiling farms studded with comfortable homesteads.

"Was this land like Looeena, years ago?" Betty asked Jim.

"Just the same, the old hands tell me. There's some of the richest land in the world here, and the climate is much milder than farther back. Did you enjoy your trip?"

"Very much!" Her emphasis deepened his smile. "There is Seaview!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Haven't the crops grown since we've been away! They seem to have swallowed up the fences!"

"What did I tell you, Jim!" spoke Timothy, who had overheard her. "I knew you would overdo it! On my place, Miss Betty, the fences are always visible. It's nothing but swank, this growing of great, rank crops that take no end of twine to tie, and makes the poor brutes of horses perspire like aldermen as they drag the binders through them!"

"You're jealous, Mr. Lowe!"

"Jealous! Great heavens! Jealous of those crops! I'm ashamed of 'em! Wait until harvest begins; then you'll know all about it! I can sit on my binder, smoke my pipe, and cut away placidly all day long. He will be swearing and fuming because he's run out of twine, broken his machine, knocked up his horses and half-killed his men! He's overdone it, and he can't

see it! In some ways, Miss Betty, he's as blind as a bat!" He turned, and deliberately winked at Jane.

"But what's the matter with your farm?" asked the amused Betty. "All that lovely golden glory has disappeared." She pointed to the gently sloping hill where his holding lay. Timothy threw himself back with a sigh and a groan, and his eyes were fixed on Jim in intense reproach.

"Now, what have you to say for yourself? You refused my humbly-proffered request to come with you, and suggested—no, ordered, that I should pull out all those beautiful blossoms. So I worked morning, noon and on moonlight nights pulling out that golden glory to pacify you and please my new friend. The result is, that she reproaches me! Jim, old friend, if you are amused, you should have the decency to hide it better. Please put me down here, so that I can walk across to my discredited farm and indulge my grief in solitude. No thanks, Jane; I shall not be able to accept your hospitable offer to dinner."

"You should wait until you're asked, Tim. I *was* thinking about inviting you, so that you could see Nell home later."

"It was your kind thought I anticipated. Hi, Jim!" raising his voice, "are you going to pull up, or shall I be forced to jump out and break my precious neck?"

"You are coming home with us," said the other firmly.

"Needs must when Jim won't!" he murmured sadly. "Jane, you'll have to put up with me after all."

Timothy took Nell home that evening, and afterwards returned to his empty house in a distinctly happy frame of mind.

"Phew!" he whistled as he flung the doors and windows wide open, "How stuffy it gets when it's shut up. This batching business is no good to a man, but everything, they say, comes to him who waits, and I've put in a fair amount of it! God bless that little girl; she'll be the making of old Jim!"

The days passed pleasantly. The delightful summer, with its soft sea-breezes and cool, restful nights, drew on. Betty became more and more enchanted with the climate, and the well-cared-for garden was a riot of glorious bloom. Harvest-time had started, and the work of gathering in the crops was very heavy.

Christmas came and went. To Betty it seemed strange that the great feast-day of the year should be at the height of summer, not of winter. When all the crops had been cut and carted into stacks, and their roofs neatly thatched, Jim intimated that they could prepare for the long-talked-of trip to the Lakes.

In the last few months he had altered. He was less abrupt in his manner, and often showed an unobtrusive consideration that made Jane quite happy. The leaven was working slowly, but with a positive certainty. Betty's determina-

tion to bring him and Nell together was weakened. She had become intensely fond of the graceful, dark-eyed girl, and would be absolutely loyal to her, but——

"I can't do it!" she moaned one night as she lay awake. "I doubt if Mr. Jim will ever care for her. Oh, you silly little fool!"—Something she had resolutely smothered rose before her in appalling vividness—"he'd never give you another thought!"

During harvest she had seen little of Jim. From daylight to dark he was intensely busy, often giving himself scant time to snatch a hasty meal, for the heat of summer was ripening the crops rapidly. Occasionally, of an evening, he sought her out during the brief interval between tea and bed, and rested his tired body on a verandah lounge, watching her nimble fingers busy with some fancy-work. At such times Jane unobtrusively withdrew, and the two would sit with scarce a word.

It was a warm morning in late summer when they left for Looeena. The air had become fouled by the smoke of bush fires that hung round in a thin haze, making the distant hills vague. As they journeyed on, Betty noticed that the rank grass had thrown up innumerable seed-heads, which moved languidly in the light air. Cattle, fat and placidly contented, lay in the shade lazily chewing their cud, too indifferent to do more than stare at the humming motor. A mob of colts, imbued with the restless energy of youth,

galloped away with noisy snorts and uplifted heads, then wheeled to stare after them. Dunstan and Timothy had started several days before, taking with them the horses for the trip.

They had almost reached Looeena, and were crossing a low hill, when a horseman suddenly appeared on the summit, saw them, and pulled his mount to a standstill. As they neared him, Jim brought the car to a stop.

"Good-morning, Mr. Langthorne," said the newcomer. "Can I have a word with you?"

Betty looked curiously at him. There was something about the man that arrested instant attention. He sat his horse in an easy, careless manner, yet with a grace that was unmistakable. He was below middle height, and his slight figure would be called almost spare. The most striking features were the eyes—grey, curiously steady and penetrating.

"I feel as if I were being X-rayed," she whispered to Jane. "Who is he?"

"Sergeant Ellis," Jane whispered back. "When he's about, there's always something in the wind. I wonder what it is!"

Jim got out of the car, and the sergeant dismounted quickly, and walked a few paces away. The horse, with reins trailing, went to the roadside and started to crop the rank grass.

"I hear you lost a few cattle last spring," remarked the sergeant quietly.

"I did; but I was lucky enough to get them back."

"Or determined enough, from what I hear."

The penetrating eyes flickered in brief amusement. "But, Mr. Langthorne, if you expect the police to protect you against these thefts, it is hardly fair to them to let the culprit go."

"I got my cattle. He got his punishment. We're quits!"

"I doubt it," said the other quietly. "I'm not an alarmist, and you're not the man to be alarmed; but be careful, or there may be worse than cattle-stealing charges!"

"That doesn't worry me!" Jim smiled confidently.

"Don't be too sure. The man you thrashed is one of the most vindictive creatures I ever came across—and my experience is pretty wide. He is utterly unscrupulous as well. I was sorry to hear he was working for you, but it suited my purpose to have him there. In fact, your dismissal of him rather upset my plans."

"Sorry," Jim grinned at him.

"You are extremely fortunate," Ellis went on, "in having such faithful men to serve you. I suppose you know they keep watch night and day?"

Jim nodded.

"One of the most zealous is your second bullock-driver. Young Sheldon is even more concerned than Skeeter." Again his eyes flickered. "That was not a bad move of yours."

"Better than making a criminal out of him. But I don't suppose it was in accordance with your idea of things?"

"You did quite right," said the other unexpectedly. "And now, Mr. Langthorne, what I tell you is in the strictest confidence, and if I did not know that you were a man to be absolutely relied upon, I should not tell it you. Price and the other thieves with him are only puppets in the hands of one of the cleverest men I was ever up against. Who he is or where he came from, no one knows.. He's a mystery. We've watched. We've even bribed. We've done everything possible that men could do, and still we are utterly in the dark. The others—I could put my hand on the lot of them anytime. But he!—a shadow would be easier to grasp."

"I heard a rumour of him. Anderson said something once, but it was very vague. Surely you'll get him sooner or later?"

"I'll get him!" The other's eyes burnt into Jim's, two vivid points of flame. "I'll get him, even if it means death to both of us! He has had the cheek to send taunting messages challenging headquarters to send their best men, and, so far, we're no wiser than when we began! Our armchair superiors are not very nice in their remarks, Mr. Langthorne, and it hurts! Keep this entirely to yourself. Good-bye."

"That's a man with a personality," remarked Betty as they started on. "What did he want, Mr. Jim?"

"You're inquisitive," he growled with a smile in his eyes. They often held a smile for her now.

"Isn't that a woman's prerogative!" she retorted. "Do tell me!" But he shook his head firmly.

CHAPTER X

THE setting sun that evening was like a disk of blood. The smoke-haze had grown steadily thicker, and the air was most unusually oppressive for that elevation. All through the warm night the sleepers tossed restlessly, and the new day was born to a world smothered in an acrid, choking mist.

"By jove, it's thick!" growled Jim to Dunstan. The two men had gone out shortly before dawn for a breath of fresh morning air. But the smoke hung round sullenly, completely destroying the charm of the waking day, and foreboding a time of suffering.

The air was perfectly still. The light breeze, that usually blew from the mountains to the coast in the early hours, seemed to have been killed by the suffocating blanket above. As the flush of dawn rose higher, the pall of smoke crept lower and lower, until it blotted out the Dromedary. Charred fragments of fern and leaves fell about them as softly as snowflakes, and the acrid flavour of the smoke made Dunstan choke.

"The w-whole country m-must be alight!" he spluttered. "Much felled scrub about, Jim?"

"More than Anderson can ever remember. Here he comes.

Anderson, where's the fire? Seems a pretty big one!"

"Boss," answered the big man gravely, "there's going to be hell to pay! Cullen was along late last night, and he says some devil's lit every bit o' fallen scrub along the back o' the Gulf. Them poor devils o' cockies 'll lose pretty well every bit 'o grass seed they reaped, for it ain't threshed yet; and they never wanted it worse than this year. If the wind rises, it'll sweep everything—green and dry. We're pretty safe, thanks to the cleared land and that gale last spring. It brought down all the dead trees that would carry a fire. I wonder if them cattle-duffers has a hand in this."

"What good would that do them?" Dunstan asked.

"Spread the stock all over the place, and there's a fine lot in the Gulf now. It'd puzzle old Nick whether they was burnt, strayed or driven off. With the fences all gone—and most of 'em is brush or logs—the cattle 'd make into the Tiers after feed. God! Look at that!" He pointed southward, where the smoke had thinned somewhat, and a great glare of light filtered through. "The wind's coming from the south. D—n those brutes who lit it! The only thing that'll save the country 'll be a good fall o' rain. It don't look much like it just now!"

"Anderson," said Jim abruptly, "we'll get

breakfast at once. Tell Skeeter to run the horses into the yard. You must stop here and watch the fire in case it does break into our scrub. We can't let those poor devils fight it out alone!"

"I don't see as you can do much good," the other answered doubtfully. "How're you going to get through the fire?"

"We'll settle that when we get there."

The three girls had passed an uncomfortable night, and came out just as the men were starting breakfast.

"Where are you going, Jim?" Jane asked in surprise, for the night before he had suggested a late breakfast.

"Bad fire at the back," he informed her briefly. "Going to see if we can help."

"Can we come too?" Betty asked eagerly, completely ignorant of the perils that might be in front of them.

"You can't."

"We might come part of the way," suggested Jane, whose sympathy for the unfortunate settlers equalled her brother's.

"There's Ringtail Flat, boss," observed Anderson, before his employer could voice a still more decisive negative. "It's a sheer wall o' rock on the side the fire's coming from, and they'd be as safe there as here. There's a good crick, and the flat's always green."

Jim looked at them meditatively. The leaven was still working in him, slowly ousting his rough abruptness of manner. He wanted them

to come, but would not subject them to any danger.

"Certain it's safe, Anderson?"

"As I said afore, as safe as here. A bit smoky, maybe, but no worse than here. The cockies might come out that way, but I guess they'll take the lower gorge. Still, it they did, the ladies 'll be a big help to 'em with the kiddies."

"All right. You can come. Get your breakfast as soon as possible. We'll have the horses ready."

The early breakfast and the ride that followed never faded from Betty's memory. As they mounted and rode away, the wind was beginning to whistle shrilly past the buildings, and the brightening east was hidden by dense smoke, acrid and stinging to the eyes. Burnt leaves and pieces of charred bark fell thickly round them, soiling their clothes and faces, and the rising sun was blotted out completely. The track led through dense bush that was vague and ghost-like, and even here the breath of the raging fire ahead parched their tongues and bit down to the labouring lungs. Jim led the way, with Betty close beside him. He was beginning to repent taking the women, and was doubtful of their efforts to help, for the whole country was one raging inferno. Hearing Betty's choking cough, he swung his horse round and rode beside her.

"I-it w-will be b-better d-directly," he gasped. "S-soon as we start to go down the hill."

She looked at him with eyes that streamed, but

in them was a smile that triumphed over fear. Then her body shook to a paroxysm of coughing. Behind they could hear the others gasping, and Timothy's voice came waveringly, "H-how far to t-that f-flat, Jim?"

At that moment the wind changed. A shrieking gust swept the blanket of acrid smoke aside, revealing an emerald flat backed by a sheer wall of rock.

"Thank goodness!" panted Jane, whose face was crimson from excessive coughing. "Is that the flat, Jim?"

"That's it, and I guess you're glad to see it. The wind chopping about like this means a change in the weather. I hope to Heaven it'll come soon! No hope of getting through to the Gulf," he growled. "One of us might—"then he stopped.

"Good heavens! Look at that!" cried Dunstan suddenly.

From behind the wall of rock, about a mile away, leaped a column of pitch-black smoke whose base showed a glare of crimson. As they watched, the sportive wind caught the billowing top, and it bent towards them with a growling moan that grew to a roar of fury. It poured over the cliff in inky masses that devoured the gleaming rock and ate up the light of the Heavens, until it became as dark as the blackest night. Even the crimson of the flame was obscured, and through the darkness hurtled flaming bits of bark and limbs.

"Look to the girls!" roared Jim, and his arm went round Betty, sweeping her from her horse to his, he knew well that the frightened animal would follow. "Ride for the flat like hell!"

Of that frantic gallop Betty had but a vague consciousness. There was a faint remembrance of being crushed against Jim's broad chest; of the firm grip of his arm as she struggled, gasped, and fought against him for air. With her little fists she thumped him savagely as the feeling of suffocation became almost unbearable, not realizing that under the cover of his coat breathing was far easier than if she had to take unfiltered gulps of raw smoke. With grim strength he kept her close against him, crushing the choking mouth into his shoulder, heedless of the pain of her blows.

Then came sudden, delicious relief. The splash of sweet, cool water was on her burning face and stinging eyes. She expelled the smoke from her tortured lungs in great gasps, and drew in the pure air in gulps of ecstasy. She found herself lying with her face close to a cool stream that babbled along its rocky bed.

"Keep down!" she heard Jim say with firm insistence. "As long as you're close to the water, the smoke won't trouble you much."

After a few minutes he allowed her to rise, and they looked at one another, tears streaming from their bloodshot eyes. Again the wind veered, and for a few moments the flat was almost clear of smoke. They saw the valley below

burst into vivid flame, as the dry timber caught from flaring pieces driven by the wind. They saw that fire leap to the fire behind, drawn up the hill by the back-draught of air, until the two met on the summit in one great crackling roar that drowned their shouts. Ahead of the fire was a clearing of some twenty acres, the gaunt, dead trees still standing. Of a sudden they became great torches of flame that the wind whipped into furious vigour. Then the wind veered back to them again, forcing them close to the stream as the black cloud whirled and eddied above them.

"It'll clean up the Gulf," Jim growled hoarsely to Dunstan. "I hope those poor devils manage to get away. God! I'd like to have some of those city chaps here now! We must do something!" He stood up. "You girls keep close to the creek," he commanded, "you'll be perfectly safe."

"You surely are not thinking of trying to get through that?" cried Jane in dismay, pointing to the inferno at their right. "You can never reach the Gulf!"

"We can try," he grunted, and turned to his horse, which was trembling with fear. It whinnied piteously as he picked up the reins, and pressed its head against him in dumb appeal.

"The horses will never stand it!" Jane appealed again despairingly. "It will kill them!"

For a brief moment Jim hesitated. His love for his animals had been smothered by anxiety for the settlers. He was essentially a man of

action, and to remain passive when help might be urgently needed was impossible to one of his nature. Timothy was quietly tightening up his girths. Where Jim led, he would unhesitatingly follow. Dunstan had already mounted.

"We must go," he answered firmly, and turned to mount his horse. "Hullo!" hesitating. "Who the deuce is that?"

A blackened, and smoke-stained figure staggered towards them, with hands held out as if blind, mouthing inarticulately.

"Good heavens! It's Cullen! Poor devil, he's had a bad time!" Dropping the reins, he ran to him.

"You, Mr. Langthorne!" the man mumbled. "Water! My God, give me water!"

Jim led him to the creek. With a croak of joy the man dropped to his knees and buried his face in the cool stream.

"Lord, that's good!" He dropped back on his haunches, but fell weakly over. First drink since daybreak, and I've been through hell! We saved 'em though!" with a note of triumph. "Every woman and kid, and pretty near all the cattle. Rushed 'em into the green scrub beyond Devil's Gully. I must have another go at that water." He dipped his head in again. Jane had been quietly getting ready the bandages and soothing remedies she had brought with her. When Cullen lifted his head from the water, she came forward.

"Let me see your burns," she insisted gently. "Oh, you poor man! You *are* in a state!"

"I'm all right, Miss;" but a quick twinge of pain gave the lie to his words. "Least," he amended, "I will be in a couple o' days. The Missus and the kids is safe, and those young cows I bought off you, Mr. Langthorne. It were touch and go once or twice. If it wasn't for losing nearly all me grass-seed I'd feel real pleased. It's the cleanest burn I've ever seen; and it makes a chap wild to know he can't sow more'n a quarter of it! Still it might 'a been worse!" He rose to his feet unsteadily..

"What brought you this way?" Jim asked him curiously.

"Couple of me best cows was missing, and I was trying to find 'em when that big fire came. Cows is cows these days, and I ain't too flush. Wish I could seed all the burn. It would about put me on me feet. Thanks Miss," as Jane completed her bandaging. "It do make a man feel better. S'pose I must get back, or the Missus 'll be getting in a fright about me."

"You're not fit to go!" Jane expostulated.

"Fit as anything after that spell. I'll have to wait a bit yet. I'm still full o' smoke." He coughed violently.

"Think you can scrape along now you're burnt out, Cullen?" Jim asked him speculatively, and it struck Betty that his tone was entirely lacking in sympathy.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Have to, best I can. It'll put me back several years. Wouldn't mind if that blamed grass-seed hadn't been near all burnt. I reckon if I could seed it all, I'd be just as far ahead as I'm now back. But it's all in the game. We're pretty used to this sort of thing. Some of us had an offer from a big chap a bit ago for our places; we may have to take it at any price he likes to give us now. It'll settle the Gulf."

"Don't sell to him," said Jim abruptly. "I'll see you all in a day or two. Here comes the rain. That'll soon clear the smoke away."

A fine mist was creeping overhead, and from it fell a light drizzle. Now that the scream of the gale had ceased and the roar of the flames passed on, there was a muffled stillness, broken now and again by the crash of limb or tree. Nearly every dead trunk within their view was burning fiercely, and a little later the intermittent crashes became continuous. The misty drizzle swelled to a steady rush of rain that spat and spluttered on the heated ground. The smoke was clearing steadily, and breathing became much easier.

"What a relief!" cried Betty. "But those poor people," she whispered to Jim. "I do feel sorry for them!"

"Oh, they'll be all right!" he grunted, and she thought him rather callous.

"See you in a couple of days, Cullen," Jim called after the man as he left. "Expect to be along your way."

They rode home to the accompaniment of a steady downpour that soaked their thin clothing through and through.

"And we were unable to help after all," sighed Jane. "I do feel sorry for those poor people!"

"What will they do?" asked Betty. "I suppose they will have to leave the bush now?"

"What for?" demanded Jim, who happened to overhear her..

"They must do something!"

"Plenty to do here," he growled.

"But how are they going to live?"

"They'll get along all right!" he grunted.

"Without homes! Without food! Jane tells me that most of them have big families! How can they get along all right? I do feel sorry for them!"

"That won't do them much good!" he growled, and Betty turned from him in exasperation.

Jim was exceedingly taciturn during the ride. Betty kept glancing at him, and the feeling of disappointment grew. She had begun to place him on a rather lofty pedestal, and he was in grave danger of toppling from it. She thought of his declamation from the summit of the Dromedary some months ago, when he had expressed such sincere sympathy for the struggling settler. Could it be a pose, she wondered, and the thought hurt.

For the remainder of the ride she was silent. A black cloud of oppression enveloped her, and it was a rather lonely, heart-sick girl that went to rest that night.

CHAPTER XI

It rained heavily most of the night, but the morning dawned cloudy, with a hint of finer weather later. The girls' smoke-inflamed eyes still smarted, and Nell's were so swollen she could hardly see. Jim, who appeared to be in high good-humour, grinned broadly at Timothy's solicitude for her.

"What's the joke, old chap?" asked Tim innocently.

"Nothing," he grunted, then turned to Betty; "Like to have a ride to-morrow?"

"Where to?" She was cold to him, for the memory of yesterday was still with her.

"Through the Gulf. Want to see what damage has been done. It's no good asking Tim, for his patient won't be well enough by then."

"I was always a good hand at taking a hint, old man, but you needn't be quite so offensive about it. If I was in your place, Miss Betty, I'd let him go alone. He's not to be trusted with a charming young lady who's miles too good for him. If he starts making love to you——"

"Tim!" admonished Jane, "don't be silly."

"Mr. Lowe," flamed Betty, "I think you're detestable!"

"You're a silly ass, Tim!" growled Jim, who had flushed in embarrassment. "Do you want to come?" he said gruffly to Betty.

"I would sooner stay at home, thank you." She left the room.

Shortly afterwards Jim went too, and Jane turned to Timothy.

"I'm ashamed of you!" she said severely.

"You'll thank me," he returned. "I'll bet you a bob she'll go, and before they get back he'll have kissed her!"

"If you don't hold your foolish tongue, I shall positively refuse to let you see Nell to-day."

"Well, I like that! The nurse dictating to the medical attendant! Jane, you are forgetting yourself!"

"I think *you* are! Everything was going so nicely, and now you are doing your best to spoil it!"

"Everything was going too nicely, too smoothly and complacently. Those young people need a jolt. Jim is the finest fellow in the world, but he knows absolutely nothing about women. He'll go on and on till the cows come home, are fed, milked, and put to bed—and then he won't pop! He wants working up to it, and when he does pop, it'll be the biggest bang you ever heard! Miss Betty'll be high and mighty for a bit, but she'll thaw. Put your trust in Timothy, and all will come right!"

"I hope it will!" Jane sighed. "But you must promise not to say any more silly things. If you

give that promise, you can bathe Nell's eyes. And, Tim," she went on softly, "I think Nell would like you to."

Betty passed a rather unhappy day. She had been so sure of Jim, so certain of his sterling character that his apparent callousness towards the settlers had come as a shock to her. Their position appalled her, because she did not realize that they felt it far less than her imagination pictured.

Then she began to wonder why Jim wished to visit them, and a sudden thought, illuminating and disturbing, flashed into her mind.

"I shall go with him!" she told herself. "And if he does—" she caught sight of Jim coming towards the house.

"I should like to go with you to-morrow," she said, controlling the note of coldness in her voice.

His first look of surprise gave way to one of pleasure.

"Right you are. We'll get away first thing after breakfast. Busy as anything to-day. Want to see how much grass-seed I've got on hand. Eyes all right?"

"Yes, thank you," and she went to her room, absolutely confirmed in her idea.

Next morning Jim and Betty rode away in silence. Jim was very quiet; he appeared to be thinking hard. The day was clear and still. A few languid plumes of smoke floated from smouldering trees and stumps that the rain had

failed to extinguish. Presently they crossed the hill above the Gulf, and below them lay a valley of desolation. From one end to the other the fire had swept it clean.

"Cleaned it up all right," grunted Jim, for the first time breaking the silence. "Pity the fences are burnt, though most of 'em were logs, and better out of the way. In spite of the loss of the homesteads and fences, I reckon the Gulf is worth twice as much as before the fire. When it's seeded down, it'll be one of the finest pieces of grazing-land in the island. That fire was a Godsend. Those cattle-duffers have done a real good job!"

"I suppose you could buy it for next to nothing, as these poor creatures have lost everything?" She controlled her indignation with a huge effort. Later on she would speak. She would let him have all the rope he wanted, and then——

"Easily!" He grinned at her. Betty turned her face away to hide what she knew must be showing so plainly. She had come to the end of her patience.

Presently they came to the charred remains of a homestead. Around lay bent and twisted bedsteads, remnants of pots and pans, even the battered remains of a child's toy engine. It was pitiful, and tears of sympathy came to her eyes.

Jim, who had been watching her curiously, turned away, and rode over to a patch of green scrub that had been only partly scorched. Above

it towered a great white gum whose clean, straight barrel rose skywards like a monument. From the butt came the sharp thud of an axe.

"You there, Cullen?" Jim shouted, as he reined up at the edge.

"Yes," came the answer, and presently the man emerged, his arms and face still swathed in bandages.

"Here!" expostulated Jim, "you shouldn't be at that game yet! You ought to be spelling until you're fit. Found those cows?"

"I did. But I'm as fit as ever I was," he grinned. "It's cleaned the old place up, hasn't it? If I only had the grass-seed, what a sight she'd 'a' been next spring!"

"Good morning, Mr. Cullen." Betty had followed Jim, firmer than ever in her determination. "I hope you are better?"

"As well as ever I was, Miss. We cockies can't spare the time to be sick. I got to fall that tree and split palings for another shanty. The Missus is grieved over things a bit, but I'll put her up a better one this time. Still, it's fair tough to have to start all over again."

"How much land can you seed?" Jim asked, looking at him speculatively.

"Not more'n twenty acres. That'll leave over a hundred unsown. I s'pose it will have to wait till it grows again. What a chance missed, Mr. Langthorne!"

Jim grunted, and made a note in the pocket-book he was carrying.

"Mr. Cullen, whatever you do, don't sell your place," said Betty suddenly.

"I won't unless I have to!" He was surprised. "If I had the seed, no price 'd tempt me. It's one o' the best bits o' land on God's earth, as Mr. Langthorne knows. All me kids was born here, and every penny I've scraped together has gone inter it."

"Promise me not to sell," she said again.

"Right, I will."

"I'm so glad!" with a look of triumph at Jim.

"Whatever did you say that for?" he growled, as they rode away. Betty's behaviour during the last two days puzzled him.

"You ought to know,"

Jim rode on more puzzled than ever. They called on every family in the Gulf, and at each place Jim made casual inquiries, carefully noting the replies in his book. Some of them, like Cullen, were preparing to build at once. Others were busy sowing their scanty store of seed, for the rain had cooled the ashes, and an early sowing meant plenty of feed next spring. The outback settler with a profusion of grass, cows to milk, and cattle to mature and fatten, is usually content with his lot.

Even the women and children were helping with the work. In the early stages of transformation every member of the family has to toil to scratch a living from the land. Afterwards the industrious worker reaps greater comfort and moderate affluence, but few of the original

pioneers get the full benefit of that "afterwards." It is generally their sons, or their sons' sons, who reap heavily where they sowed so surely.

One woman, with a family of six, was busily employed in erecting a shelter of boughs, assisted, to a limited degree, by her offspring. Of the house, not even the wooden blocks upon which it rested remained.

"What d'yer think of our new dwelling, Mr. Langthorne?" she smiled. "Bill's busy getting the seed sown, and these kids is too young to help much yet."

"Got enough?" he asked carelessly.

"Just about. We're the only ones in the Gulf who has. We'll be all right in a few weeks if it don't rain. As soon as Bill's finished, he'll make a start on the house."

"Fences gone?"

"Every one. They was mostly logs, so it don't matter much. Bill reckons to put up post and rails. He'd sooner have wire, but we can't afford it; and posts and rails is to be had for the splitting."

"Take a long time to erect," he grunted, making a note in his book.

Betty looked at him scornfully, and, slipping off her horse, distributed among the children a packet of sweets that Mrs. Anderson had pressed on her before they left.

"That's a great treat, Miss!" said the mother gratefully. "They've never tasted a lolly for six months."

"See you as I come back," said Jim carelessly, as he mounted. "Come on, Miss Betty."

Betty rode behind him in cold silence. The man she believed to be above petty meannesses was deliberately planning to benefit by the misfortunes of the struggling settlers. What did his preoccupation and intervals of great good-humour mean? Why did he scan everything so keenly, and ask questions that, to her, seemed to border on impertinence? What prompted the occasional little gleams of satisfaction she saw in his eyes? Nothing but greed in its most despicable form!

She had to bite her lips to keep her impetuous tongue from giving expression to the indignation that flamed within her. This was the man whom Jane adored, and Nell loved. A tiny feeling of satisfaction grew, as she thought of Timothy's unobtrusive devotion, and the look she had surprised once or twice in Nell's eyes.

At another blackened holding the whole family was busy sowing. Tiny tots of six and seven filled their little hands with seed, scattering it about the charred logs and battered stumps, while their parents, with the steady swing of the sower, cast the light grains evenly over the more open spaces. White teeth gleamed at them out of sooty faces, and the work hardly paused as Jim pulled up to make a few inquiries of the father, noting down the answers in his pocketbook. From daylight to dark this work must go on,

until the last grain was sown, and a roof was built to shelter them.

They rode on, Jim so engrossed with the notes he had made that he hardly realized Betty was there; only when they reached the end of the Gulf, where it narrowed to a rocky gully, did he slip the book into his pocket with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Can manage it easily!" Betty heard him mutter.

Then her pent-up indignation blazed out.

"Oh, how can you? You, who have so much, to take advantage of these people's misfortunes! You will strip from them what little they have left! Do you call yourself a man? I hate and despise you! You who pretend to be their friend! I—I—Oh, I do feel ashamed!"

"What the dickens is the matter with you?" asked Jim, amazement, bewilderment, and incredulity chasing each other swiftly across his face.

"Aren't you planning to take these poor creatures' land away from them at any price you like to give?" she retorted fiercely.

"Good God, no!" in amazed horror. "Take their land! What the devil do I want with their land?" His tones were even fiercer than hers, and intensely resentful. She had roused him completely now. "Have you gone crazy?" he continued. "Take their land! Great heavens, girl, what do you mean?"

Like a bolt from the blue came to Betty the

realization of her awful blunder. His hot anger and, more than any thing else, the look of horror in his face, forced on her conviction as mere words never could have done. Her face went scarlet with shame, then white as the fleecy clouds that hung above them.

Jim looked at her strangely. His hot anger had left him, and in its place was a dull, gnawing misery. Deep in his heart he had treasured something that he dared not bring to open life. It was too sacred, too precious as yet to be more than a vague, delicious fantasy.

Without a word he turned his horse and rode back. At each blackened holding he stayed a few minutes, and, as he went on, grateful eyes followed him. But Betty rode with hanging head and heavy heart. She could not force herself to stop as Jim made his brief calls, so rode ahead, and was passing Cullen's block when she heard him calling to her.

"Will Mr. Langthorne be along, Miss?" he asked as he came to meet her.

"In a few minutes," she answered.

"Good! I don't feel too safe about them cattle we rushed into the Tiers, and I'd like to have a talk with him. Come and look at the grand paling-tree I got. Best splitter I ever knocked a wedge into!"

Betty followed listlessly to where the tree lay in a tangle of half-burnt scrub. One huge block was already sawn off, and split into billets for the paling-knife.

"Ever see a paling split, Miss?"

She shook her head and smiled faintly

"Well, I'll show yer."

Picking up the knife—a keen-edged blade a foot or less in length with the handle set at right-angles—he went to where a billet rested across a small log, its lower end partly under another to keep it up. Into the upper end he tapped the knife to its full depth with a roughly-made mallet, then with a quick turn of the wrist gave a wrench to the knife and, as the straight-grained timber opened with a tearing sound, slipped the knife deftly along until a wide, smooth paling flew from it.

"That's how we do it, Miss! Them palings ud be worth a big price on the coast, but they're going to help make the Missus a pretty comfortable shanty. Bit o' luck having a tree like that so close."

"Hullo, Cullen! Showing Miss Deene how to split?" Jim's voice sounded normal, but, as Betty looked hurriedly at him, he did not meet her eyes.

Showing her what a fine paling-tree it is," he grinned.

"By the way, Cullen,"—his tone was one of casual indifference—"you're about a hundred bushels of cocksfoot short?" The other nodded dolefully. "I'll send it along to-morrow. The two waggons will just carry what you fellows want. How are you off for stores?"

"B—but I can't pay for it!" the man stam-

mered. "Seed is pretty dear, and a hundred bushels o' cocksfoot 'd run into a tidy sum!"

"Hang the paying! I don't want the money now. Give you ten years if you wish. I've arranged at the store for anyone who is hard-up to get supplies. And about fencing. There are a few tons of wire I shan't want for a good while. Anderson can bring that along later. Just let me know how much you want."

Cullen dropped the paling-knife, stood up, and held out his hard, work-worn hand to Jim. His voice was husky.

"You're a white man, all right!"

CHAPTER XII

THIS last incident crowned Betty's misery. As Jim made his careless offer to Cullen, she was unable to endure it any longer. She whipped her horse sharply and rode away, heedless where she went, thinking only to escape the settler's grateful thanks to Jim. They stung like salt on an open wound.

"Oh, what a fool I've been!" she moaned, "A silly, crazy little fool!"

She felt she had destroyed something that never could be restored. Hot tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks; her slender body shook to a burst of uncontrollable weeping. She leaned forward in the saddle, her face almost touching the horse's mane, a prey to the blackest misery it had ever been her lot to bear.

She did not hear the thudding of horse's hoofs, or Jim's calls as he rode after her. She was deaf to his demands to stop, and it was only when her horse gave a bound ahead, startled by the rush of the other, that she realized she was not alone.

"Miss Betty!" Jim was breathless. "You're taking the wrong track. In another few minutes

you'd have been lost in—W—what's the matter?" he stammered.

He had a full look at her face as she turned to him. It held the look of utter misery he had surprised months ago, when the shame of his intrusion had been forced on him so convincingly. Since that day Jim had learned something. He was not an apt pupil where women were concerned; still, he was beginning to have glimmerings of light.

"Miss Betty." He reached out a hand and pulled her horse to a stop. "Miss Betty," he said again. The tone was gentle, but strangely diffident. "Don't. Please don't!" Her weeping took on fresh intensity, and her head dropped lower and lower until it was buried in the horse's mane. "Miss Betty, don't! Don't cry like that! It was nothing! My fault for not saying anything—What the h—l can I do?" helplessly to himself. "This is a devil of a hole!"

Gradually her choking sobs grew less, and presently she lifted her face to his. It was blotched with tears; the eyes were red and swollen, but even so she was beautiful, and the touch of pathos struck Jim like a blow.

"I'm very, very sorry for what I said." She choked a little again.. "I know you can never forgive me; and—and I don't expect it. I'm—I'm afraid it will hurt Jane, but I must go away, and——"

"What!" the word came out with a shout. "You're not going!" with savage determination,

for now the primitive Jim was uppermost. "You're going to stay with us! You're not going to let any d—n nonsense like that send you away! Of course you must stay! Jane can't do without you, and I'll be d—d if I can either!"

"Mr. Jim." She hesitated for a moment, then went on. "I want you to forgive me for what I said and for what I thought about you. You have a perfect right not to. I shall never cease to feel ashamed of myself; but—but for Jane's sake, will you?"

"Of course!" he growled, drawing round him again the mantle of gruff taciturnity. "That was nothing. Got me wild for the moment. Sorry for what I said."

"Mr. Jim," she held out both pretty hands, and her smile was tremulous. "I've had a lesson that won't be forgotten. Will—will you shake hands as—as a friend?"

For a moment he stared at her uncertainly, then gripped them in his so that Betty cried aloud in pain.

"Sorry!" he said; then gruffly, "we must hurry back. We'll be late for dinner as it is."

Timothy noticed the remnants of Betty's agitation and Jim's gruff indifference. He grinned happily to himself, and in the evening sought out Jane.

"He's done it!" he informed her.

"Done what?"

"Made love to her. I don't know if he went farther, but it looks like it!"

"Tim!" She warned severely, "hold your tongue!"

"This is in confidence, Jane! Don't go and repeat it!"

. . . . .

The day of their departure for the lakes was ushered in with brilliant sunshine. The pleasant summer was slowly merging into glorious autumn with its calm and azure skies—the season when nature seems to be at her devotions, and the glory of a perfect peace lies upon the land. Several brief showers and a murmuring westerly wind had washed the sun-drenched air to a clarity that enlarged vision to the farthest limit.

"How lovely!" sighed Betty, who was riding beside Nell. "Mr Jim does not appear very sociable this morning. He is ever so far ahead, and has hardly spoken a word except to call Mr. Lowe a fool. Mr. Lowe's a dear, isn't he?"

The other's dark eyes wandered to Jim, then to Timothy, who had turned back to them.

"A great day! A great expedition! And a great leader!" he greeted them with a grin. "Jim's setting the pace all right. Anderson and Ikey will be yelling for him to stop. Those packhorses don't lead too well, and they're nearly out of sight. What cruel things have you been saying to him, Miss Betty?"

"I've hardly spoken to him since we started!"

"Ah! That explains it! Your icy *hauteur* has frozen the poor beggar's feelings. He's gone ahead to thaw, oblivious of time, place and the

packhorses. Ride after him, and assist the thaw with that warm heart of yours!"

Betty coloured slightly. The memory of her awful blunder was still fresh. Although she felt that Jim had unreservedly and completely forgiven her, she had a sensation of shyness in his presence, most unusual to one of her self-confidence. Ever since that hateful day Jim had been more abrupt and taciturn than ever.

"Send Nell; she's known him longer than I have."

"Shirking your evident duty, Miss Betty! I always considered you a girl of courage and determination. Nell candidly funks it. She feels that she could not do justice to the situation as you could!"

"As you are so evidently anxious to get rid of me, there is only one thing for it, I suppose." She cantered after the leader. Her mount was rather fresh, and, rejoicing in the freedom of something more than a walk, he fought the bit, breaking into a gallop. Jim heard the clatter of hoofs behind him, but did not look round. He was absorbed in the chaos of his thoughts.

The galloping horse annoyed him. He was in no mood for companionship, and particularly did not want Timothy's banter. As Betty got nearer she endeavoured to pull her mount up, but he shook his head in vigorous protest, causing the reins to slip through her fingers; they banged into the hindquarters of Jim's horse, and made it jump forward, almost unseating him.

"Confound you!" he burst out wrathfully, and swung round—to meet Betty's apologetic eyes.

"Sorry, Mr. Jim!" she panted. "This wretch would not stop when I tried to pull him up. I hope I did not hurt you?"

He looked into the flushed face and the chaos of his thoughts crystallized. He knew he wanted her very, very badly; and he meant to have her.

"You are not cross with me?" She had mistaken his silence and his look.

"Good heavens, no!" Then, forcing his self-control, he went on unconcernedly, but with a slight shake in his voice, "The others are a long way behind."

"You are a long way ahead!" she retorted with a smile. "Mr. Lowe says Anderson will be calling a halt if you keep this pace up. He told me they can't get the packhorses along."

"Didn't know I was going so fast," he growled. "Was thinking."

Betty looked at him quickly. His tone seemed to hold a gruff condemnation; for the memory of her blunder still sat persistently on her shoulders.

"Nell and Mr. Lowe are very friendly now," she observed, for Jim was looking at her rather fixedly, and she wished to divert his attention.

"Eh?" absently. "Yes. Good old chap, Tim! And Nell—I say, Miss Betty, you remember what you told me some months ago on the Dromedary, and it gave me a bit of a turn? You were mistaken."

"Perhaps I was." It was an incident she was ashamed of, and would have willingly forgotten.

"It was Tim all the time. Best thing for the old fellow. And I say," he went on confidentially, "notice anything about Jane and Dunstan?"

"What about them?" innocently.

"Same thing." He grinned suddenly. "Seems to be catching!"

"Mind you don't catch it!"

"Me! I—I—" he stammered, stopped, and began again, but his tongue, trained to years of truthfulness, refused to frame the denial. "What d'you mean?" he ended gruffly.

"Nothing."

"But you did!" he growled. "Miss Betty!" The something he had kept so closely imprisoned was fighting for its freedom; fighting with a fierceness and persistence that was bending the iron bars of his will. "Do—do you think you could ever care for a fellow?"

"Some day, perhaps"—she was not yet ready for surrender—"but I've got to find him first!"

Jim's mouth shut with a snap, and he rode on faster than ever, while Betty looked after him, hating herself for her flippant observation. Jim was so open and direct himself that he accorded full belief to her most untruthful statement.

"What the dickens have you been saying to Jim?" inquired Timothy, as he and Nell rode up. "Instead of making him slow down, you appear to have stepped on his accelerator!"

CHAPTER XIII

ABOUT midday they came to a creek that rushed crystal-clear over its rocky bed. Bushy blackwoods and great white-gums overshadowed it and a tiny flat that was carpeted in dense green grass, which the hungry horses cropped eagerly.

"Camp here for lunch," ordered Jim shortly. "We're about a mile from the foot of the Tier, and the climb 'll be pretty stiff. Take the packs off, Anderson, and let the horses feed as much as they can. They won't care about the grass on top of the Tiers at first."

They had almost finished their lunch when Jim's sharp eyes caught a slight movement on the opposite side of the creek. A bush was parted for a moment, and a hand appeared to beckon him. For a minute or so he stared, then behind the hand a face showed. With a muttered excuse Jim got slowly to his feet, crossed the creek, and behind the trunk of a huge gum came face to face with Sergeant Ellis.

"Hush! Don't speak until we get back a bit. I don't want any of your party to know I'm here, Mr. Langthorne. I would sooner even you didn't know, but I feel I must give you another warning. Watch for Price! Be very careful you don't give him the least chance. I'm risking a good

deal to tell you this, but you are in grave danger. Good-bye." He slipped like a shadow behind the trunk of a giant fern.

Lunch over, they went on to a place where the track shot up abruptly, and Jim called a halt.

"We'll have to walk and lead the horses," he commanded. "See to the pack girths, Anderson, and keep those two horses last. We don't want them rolling down on top of us! I'll go first, and you girls can follow. It's about three quarters of a mile straight up, and plenty of loose stones."

"Do you expect us to climb that hill?" Betty asked in consternation.

"I do," he growled. "It's not as bad as it looks. You can catch hold of the end of my horse's tail. Nell will hold on to yours, Jane on to hers, and you'll go up like a house afire!"

The first hundred yards or so seemed almost perpendicular. The sure-footed horses scrambled and struggled up. Betty held firmly to the tail of Jim's horse. It was a wonderful help in that climb, where the loosened surface rolled back beneath them, and a cascade of earth and small stones showered upon those behind.

"I'm certain I'd make a better leader than Jim!" panted Timothy, who had received more than his share of debris. "James!" he shouted, "if you don't stop loading me with ballast, I'll climb a tree and quit. I've already swallowed half a hundredweight of rocks and a fine assortment of dirt and pebbles. Hi!" he yelled, as a

larger stone than usual bounded down. "You scoundrel! Stop him heaving boulders, Miss Betty!"

"What about me?" came Anderson's booming laugh below him. "I gets yours and Ikey's as well. Easy there, Mr. Lowe; don't push the mountain down on us!"

Scrambling, panting, struggling, they reached the top at last, and threw themselves upon the ground to rest. The horses stood with heaving flanks and sweat-streaked sides, swallowing great mouthfuls of fresh mountain air.

They had come to a world utterly different from the one below. Even the soft clouds that sailed above appeared to have come down to meet them. To the right a tall, dark peak shot up, its topmost pinnacle encircled by a wisp of vapour. The sky was a brilliant blue. Nature was wrapped in peace, and the weary climbers lay there drinking in the beauty of it all.

"Great view from the bluff yonder," grunted Jim. "Any of you girls game for a stroll over there? It's only half a mile."

"Jim, you're a fiend!" burst out Timothy, "to suggest such a thing after that climb! Hit him on the head with that hunting-crop of yours, Miss Betty! It might knock some sense into it!"

"It might fracture his skull!" She smiled at him. "Who would be responsible?"

"No darned fear, it's too thick!"

"Well, who's coming?" asked Jim, rising.

"Not me!" said Timothy with decision. "And

I can speak for Jane and Nell. As for our little friend from across the sea—Ha! I'm glad something with a little sense is going!" as the dog, Bluey, with a brief glance at Ikey, trotted after Jim. "Do you trust your valuable dog with that man?" in feigned wonder.

"You bet I does!" returned the other.

"Feel up to it?" Jim asked Betty abruptly, as they left.

"Quite. It was an awful climb, but I feel perfectly fresh again. This air is so bracing. Isn't it lovely up here!"

"Wait until you get to the bluff," he growled. "Come on; we'll have to step it out. I want to make our camping-place in good time."

They had scrambled on to a little platform of rock that topped the vapour-encircled pinnacle. About them everything was vague and nebulous, for the mist still clung to it; then a sudden puff of wind sent it whirling into space, and uncovered the glory of the world below.

Betty found herself looking over a land that the hand of settlement had gripped, that was slowly changing from drab, silent wilderness to busy life. Far beyond lay red ploughed fields, white stubble and browning grass, and beyond that again the waters of Bass Strait, deeper in colour than the azure of the sky above them. Here and there showed gleams of silver, flowing rivers at whose mouths vigorous towns were fast growing to the dignity of cities. From one of

them crept out a dark spot that fouled the sun-drenched air with a trail of smoke.

"Produce-boat leaving for Sydney," remarked Jim prosaically, and turned to look at Betty. Her cheeks were flushed, and the soft skin was wonderfully delicate and smooth. The firm, red lips were slightly parted, the brown eyes brilliant.

"Isn't it glorious!" cried Betty, and the rapture of her voice and look was sincere and compelling. "Oh, you are a dear to bring me here! But what's the matter?" she went on. "You look quite white! Has the climb been too much for you?"

"The climb? Good lord, no! Miss Betty, I —Oh, confound it!" he muttered to himself. "I wish I wasn't such a thundering fool!"

Catching sight of the view behind them, Betty once more forgot herself in nature's glory. Behind was an utterly different scene. Rugged, boulder-studded hills rose to mountains tipped with snow. At their feet lay open plains dotted with heavy scrub and jewelled with sapphire lakes. It was beautiful and grand, with a touch of savagery and a suggestion of extreme loneliness. Through this country they must journey to force the half-wild cattle from their fastnesses in the scrub, and drive them to the lush pastures of the lowlands.

"We're on the roof of Tasmania," Jim told her. He was trying hard to regain his composure. "There is Cradle Mountain, one of our highest peaks. Barn Bluff lies yonder; and away

to the south is the Great Lake, the biggest body of fresh water in Australia. It's rough country, though."

"But very lovely!" she murmured, "the loveliest scene one could imagine."

"I've seen something more lovely!" he stammered.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" she demanded. She had been so engrossed in her surroundings that she had taken little heed of the man by her side.

"Nothing," he growled. "Let's go back."

"Oh, no; not yet!" she pleaded. "Can't we stay a little longer?"

"If you wish." He was ungracious, because he felt he had made a fool of himself.

"Thank you—" she began, then stopped with a quick scream.

Something that buzzed like a vicious wasp struck her on the shoulder, and almost simultaneously came the whip-like crack of a rifle.

In an instant Jim swept her to him, and jumped from the rock, crouching low at its base. Again came the vicious buzz, and once more echoed the whip-like crack.

Bluey, who had jumped with them, growled savagely, and his wise brown eyes sought Jim's; then he slunk away to investigate.

"Hurt?" Jim asked tensely.

"M—my shoulder!" she stammered, unable for the moment to grasp the true position. "What—what was it?"

"Bullet. That Price! Here, let me!" He ripped the thin cloth, that was showing a stain of red, from the smooth, white shoulder.

"Thank God!" he muttered. "Just a graze. Hardly any blood. If that devil had hit you badly, he'd never see another sun rise!"

"But—but he couldn't have meant it for me?"

"He didn't. Keep down while I have a look."

"Don't!" she implored. "Don't stand up, he might hit you!"

"Right!" He sat down beside her. "Hullo, Anderson is having a go at him!" as the crack of a rifle came from another direction. "Glad he brought his rifle with him. Arm hurting?"

"A little numb, that's all. What a brute he must be!"

"He's a pretty bad lot. It gave me a devil of a scare! I was sure you were hit badly. When I meet Price, I'll not forget this!"

"I should think not, seeing he meant to murder you!" She shuddered.

"That's nothing."

The burst of anger over, Jim was his casual self again. Betty was considerably shaken, and marvelled at Jim's calmness. She understood now how such men win the treasured little cross that Jane had so proudly shown her.

"It's all right." He tried to comfort her in his blundering way. "He'll be a mile away by now. Anderson's shot 'll have scared him properly. He's a cowardly brute!"

"Oh, Mr. Jim! What if he had hit you?" She

leaned closer to him. She was holding out the white flag of surrender, but he was too blind to see it.

"But he didn't, so what's the use of worrying? You needn't give him another thought; he won't try a shot at you again. Don't bother your head about him!"

"I'm not bothering about *him*."

"Who then?" he asked in his blindness, and looked down at her.

Betty heard him give a little gasp. She saw the flame in his eyes as they met hers. She was conscious that his lips were parting for a torrent of words, and——

"Well, I'm jiggered!" a voice behind them exclaimed. "If you two don't take the cake!" Up rushed Timothy, white of face and panting from hard running. "I really thought he had got the pair of you when you whipped off the rock like that!" The relief in his face was immense.

"Miss Betty's shoulder's grazed; nothing more!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE others were in a state of considerable alarm, but Jim's calm behaviour soon restored their placidity. Anderson was furious, for he loved his domineering young employer more than a father loves a son.

"What 're you going to do, Boss?" he asked him. "Join up with the p'lice and hunt the fellow? It ain't safe for you while he's about!"

"Why not?" said Jim sharply. "He won't try it on again. Don't worry about him."

"I ain't! It's you! If I can get me hands on him, I'd give him pure hell!"

They wound down a fairly steep hillside, at the foot of which flowed a little river. Jim pointed out the camping-place to Betty—an open space on the opposite bank, hedged by thick scrub. When they reached it, the men started to make camp for the night.

"Some bloke coming!" exclaimed Ikey in surprise, for strangers were few and far between in this lonely land. "Bluey's spotted him."

The dog was sniffing the air and growling softly. He had an uncannily sensitive nose and ears, and Ikey's training had helped to develop those senses to an extraordinary degree.

"Here he comes!" said Dunstan. "Better hide that old musket of yours, Anderson, or you'll frighten him away. He doesn't look very formidable!"

A small boy on a horse hardly bigger than a pony rode towards them. His mount snorted and swung round as he sighted the camp, but the rider, jamming in the spurs, forced him on. However, the animal pulled up within twenty yards of them, and refused to budge an inch farther. As Jim advanced, he watched him with a wary eye, ready to bolt at any hostile movement.

"Which of you blokes is Mr. Langthorne?" the lad asked in a high treble.

"I am," smiled Jim. "What's the trouble?"

"Mr. O'Reilly says to tell yer to hurry to the station, and not make for Green Lake first. There's been a hell ov a lot o' trouble round here with cattle-duffers. They run off close on two hundred head; but Joe Elmer got most on 'em back."

"That's bad. Perhaps we'd better let the muster go for a time."

"Mr. O'Reilly says he wants yer to get through it d—n quick, for he's scared they'll run off the whole shoot. He ain't on fur putting it off. I heered him tell Joe as what you bought 'ud be at your risk, and if they shook 'em, you'd have to pay fur 'em, thank God!"

"That's candid, at any rate." He went close to the pair, and the bush pony backed away from him, snorting. "We are camping here for the

night. Hobble your horse out with ours and stop. It's too late to go back."

The boy's black eyes looked unwinkingly at Jim; they were like those of a hawk. Horse and rider were well matched, and fitted in with this wild, lonely land. The lad was evidently older than he looked. His keen eyes wandered from Jim to the others, then steadied and looked hard at something. Jim glanced round to see what it was, and noticed Betty, who was a little apart from the others,, watching them interestedly.

"Miss Betty," he called.

"My word, she's a hummer!" the boy whispered as she came to them. "I've seen a few females, but none of 'em was like her!"

"Let me introduce you to a local product, Miss Betty. Two, I think. Your horse bred up here?"

"Foaled four year ago not two hundred yards from where we stands. He's as tough as a d—d old badger, and can gallop like hell."

Betty's eyes opened wide in surprise at hearing such language from youthful lips, and Jim grinned at her.

"You shouldn't say things like that!" she admonished the boy gently.

"Like what?" He was puzzled. But the black eyes were taking her in, and no detail of face or dress was lost on them.

"Those swear-words!"

"Them's nothing! You should hear Joe Elmer when he's wild! He kin knock spots off me!"

Betty gave it up in despair, and smiled into

the beady eyes. There was no boldness in them, only the admiration of a primitive soul.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Hawkey, they mostly calls me. Got another, but Joe says it ain't no good. This your girl?" he asked Jim, with childish innocence.

The flame in Betty's face found an excellent counterpart in her companion's, but a sudden burst of choking laughter from behind took Hawkey's attention from them. Timothy had come up just in time to catch the lad's words.

"I say, young shaver!" he choked, "This young lady is the King of England's wife's sister! So you mind what you say!"

"Crikey!" said the staring lad, "I thought she was some sort o' toff! She's pretty enough for a queen!"

"Now, Miss Betty," said Timothy mischievously, "that's a genuine compliment; the most sincere that's ever been paid you, I bet. And I'll be hanged if I don't agree with your admirer!"

"Mr. Lowe, don't be silly!"

"What about camping with us for the night?" Jim's manner was abrupt, even harsh.

"Gotta go back. Mr. O'Reilly said to tell yer, then go straight home, for me and Joe has to start mustering early to-morrow. Guess I'm fooling away me time here. Good night, all." He rode away into the deepening night.

"What an extraordinary boy!" exclaimed Betty, as they watched him disappear. "One

would expect to find a child of his age exceedingly shy, seeing how few people he must come in contact with."

"Most of 'em is, Miss Deene," remarked Anderson. "As shy as hawks, They'll bolt if they sees yer a mile away. Hawkey were always a funny kid, feared o' nothing and as straight as a die. They calls him Hawkey on account of his eyes. They're just like a hawk's."

"Won't he get lost going back, Anderson?"

"Him lost!" the big man chuckled. "Couldn't lose him if yer dropped him in the middle o' Africa. He'd come out somewheres."

The night passed uneventfully. Shortly after dawn they saddled up, and rode through a land jewelled with morning dew. It was close to midday when they reached the station, and O'Reilly met them at the yards and gave them a hearty welcome.

"Glad to see you all. The Missus will have a time with the ladies. Her tongue's getting that rusty for want of a crack, she's taken to slanging the dorgs! Where in the name of Moses did that blue-looking animal come from? Look at him! As chummy as Mickey with my ruffians! They generally eats any curs that comes this way."

"He ain't a cur!" exploded Ikey indignantly. "He's the best cattle-dog in Tasmania—bar nothing!"

"He's a cute 'un, any way. Hullo, Anderson; yer shadder ain't got no less. How's the Missus?"

"Chippy as ever; and Mrs. O'Reilly? She ain't

dumb yet!" The lady mentioned was welcoming the girls.

"I wish the lord she were at times, Anderson, or I were deaf. But we don't always get what we wants in this world!"

Mrs. O'Reilly lived up to her name for hospitality and verbosity.

"You Miss Langthorne?" she rumbled, for she was a massive lady with a voice nearly as deep as Anderson's. "I've heered a deal about ye, and what I've heered is good; but I never clapped eyes on yer before. Same with Miss Osbourne. But who's the pretty darling behind yer! Come out and let's have a look at yer. Are you a Tassy?"

"Miss Deene comes from England," replied Jane. "She's living with me."

"My word, they turns out something-like there! You're a little beauty!" with unblushing candour. "I'll have to keep me eye on O'Reilly while you're here." She winked ponderously at the others. "Come on, you fellers!" she shouted. "I reckoned you'd be here about dinner-time, for I knows Anderson of old. He's a great feller for his tucker! "By gosh! it's grand to have somebody to open up to. O'Reilly's been like a clam lately!"

"Guess you made up for him!" Anderson chuckled.

"None of yer sauce, me man!" she rumbled. "I knows what a lad yer was afore yer got married. Yer needn't get in a funk. I won't let on!"

Many years will pass before the memory of that meal fades from Betty's mind. They all ate at the same table, and Mrs. O'Reilly kept up a continual flow of inquiry, statement, and reminiscence. Nothing disconcerted her; nothing could check the flood. She was supremely and gloriously happy—in complete contrast to her spouse, who sat at the head of the table with a look of extreme depression.

"I hear those steers we've come after are pretty wild, O'Reilly," remarked Jim.

In a moment the man had changed. He forgot his surroundings and the rumbling voice of his massive wife; he was oblivious to everything but his beloved cattle.

It was generally reported that he had first opened his eyes and exercised his lungs on a cattle-camp in the midst of the wilds, and that before he was able to crawl he could sit a horse like a veteran. He was never happier than when he was out on the great, lonely runs, camping beneath the stars, or, in bad weather, beneath the shelter of some overhanging rock.

"Some on 'em's fairly quiet," he made answer to Jim's question; "but others'll go like glory! They're a fine lot, Mr. Langthorne; as nice a lot o' three-year-olds as I've seen. Only put in one winter here, and picked up well this summer. Lost a couple o' hundred o' me best bullocks, most of 'em fat; but we got 'em back again. Whoever them cattle-duffers are, they're smart, and,

from what I hears, they're doing it in a pretty big way."

"Been to the police?" Jim asked.

"The p'lice!" scornfully. "Might as well go to yer grandmother! There was a big, fat chap about here asking dam-fool questions, and then cleared out. Told Joe Elmer that 'conditions here were exceedingly favourable for an organized gang!' We ain't seen him again."

Jim smiled. Evidently Ellis's men were deliberately giving an impression of their incompetence and indifference. He had strong faith in the small, active man with the piercing eyes.

"Better spell your horses this afternoon and have 'em fresh to-morrow," O'Reilly advised. "There'll be two or three hard days ahead of us. Perhaps the ladies would like to do a little fishing. The crick is full of them mountain-trout."

"And I takes 'em," said Mrs. O'Reilly, for she thought that her husband was monopolizing the conversation too much, and her tongue was tuned up nicely. "Them yards want doing up, O'Reilly, and with this gang you'd finish 'em easy. I guess you ladies are full up of 'em for a bit, and if we stops here, them chaps'll be in and out all the afternoon making darn nuisances of themselves. I knows what men is. Knows 'em inside and out!"

"That's why you married one!" Timothy said shyly. "You know a good thing when you see it!"

"I knows a young man who's got a smart

tongue!" she retorted. "But I notice no one's hooked on to him yet!"

"The trouble is, Mrs. O'Reilly," he whispered confidentially, "for years I've been looking for somebody like you!"

"You young smoodger!" she grinned. "What d'yer want outer me?"

"Silence!" he said, and bolted.

Later on the girls strolled towards the little creek, passing on their way the labourers at the stockyards. The afternoon was warm and Timothy, who was ramming a post, looked heated.

"This won't do!" he called out to them. "You want an escort. I love work, but to prove my complete unselfishness I'll come with you."

"You'll stop with yer job," Mrs. O'Reilly rumbled at him. "I know yer of old. You was always keen after skirts!"

"Mr. Tim was always a case!" the big lady informed Betty, "but a real nice chap! He isn't like some o' them English chaps we had up here. Our boss used to send 'em up now and again, but I guess we got the riff-raff—what he wanted to get shut of. O'Reilly swore he'd chuck the job if he sent any more, and that finished 'em. Lord, they was rum uns!"

"I remembers one—and he were the best of 'em—what stuck his boots out in the passage the fust night he come here, and yelled for 'em in the morning. O'Reilly had been out on the run all day, and got home late. What must he do but

tumble over the darned things, and he were so wild he chucks 'em outside. It snowed a bit that night, and you should ha' seen 'em in the morning! He expected us to clean the blame things! Clean 'em, he did!"

"Don't you clean your boots up here?" asked Betty mischievously.

"When they wants it. A bit o' mutton fat, some lampblack and neatsfoot oil does the trick for me. Keeps 'em soft and the water outer them. Mr. Langthorne's a fine feller," with a sudden change of subject. "Don't say much. There's not many like him about."

"Just as well you're married, Mrs. O'Reilly!"

"Too old, too ugly, and not his style." Her direct candour made her companion smile. "Now, if I was like you!"

"You must not say such things!" Betty protested.

"Never mind," chuckled the other. "You and me's going to be good friends. You don't snap at an old woman when she cracks too much. I were born that way. O'Reilly says I slanged me mother when I had me fust bath, and kept going ever since—barring when I'm asleep. He tells me I often yap then; being asleep, I can't say."

"Mr. Langthorne told me your husband was a fine stockman."

"He's right!" proudly. "A good stockman and a good husband. We had three boys and two girls. The boys has got a place of their own down below, and the girls is married. When the young

people left, we felt pretty lonely, nearly as bad as when they went to the war. We had three then. They all went, but one on 'em stopped for good." The kindly eyes filled with tears. "But I s'pose we're lucky. The Slaters—who lives back beyond us—had three, and they all stopped! My God, I hate them Germans!"

"So do I," said Betty softly. "All—all mine —stopped."

"You poor dear!" A great hand fell gently on her shoulder. It was work-hardened and rough, but still shapely, for Mrs. O'Reilly, despite her massiveness, was an admirably-proportioned woman. "And so yer came out here?"

Betty nodded. At the moment, the haunting memory of the past had flowed back in a strong flood, and she could not speak.

The mountain-trout were numerous and greedy; for an hour the girls pulled them out as fast as they could bait their hooks. They were plump little fish, dark in colour with bright-red spots.

"Who's going to clean them?" wondered Jane.

"Here comes a volunteer," cried Nell, and Jim strolled unconcernedly towards them. Too unconcernedly, Jane thought.

"Must ha' got the sack!" rumbled Mrs. O'Reilly, and, for an instant, her twinkling eyes rested on Betty. "Guess he's after a drink o' tea!"

"Any luck?"

"Look!" cried Betty, holding open the sugar-bag that did duty for a basket.

"Something there to clean," he growled.

"I suppose that's why you came?"

"No it wasn't, but I'll do them now I'm here."

Jim set determinedly to work.

"You've got a long job there," said Betty as she came and sat beside him. "I'm going to lighten your labour."

"You're not going to touch them!"

"I am!" She said with vigour, and Jim—unlike Jim—submitted.

"You two'll be some time yet," remarked Mrs. O'Reilly to the industrious fish-cleaners. "S'pose us three has a bit of a stroll along the crick. It's pretty down below. I guess they'll be better pleased without us," she whispered to Jane.

For several minutes Jim and Betty worked in silence; then Betty said, "You are very quiet to-day."

"Am I? Got nothing to talk about."

"But you have someone to talk to!"

"You're right!" he said, and smiled suddenly at her. "How do you like being up here?"

"It's lovely! Mrs. O'Reilly is such a dear! It must be very lonely for her, though."

"I suppose it is. Never thought about it before."

"You've been too much wrapped up in yourself! You want unwrapping."

"I think you are doing it." His steady grey eyes were on hers, and Betty could not keep the

colour from her cheeks. "Look out! You've let two of the fish go!"

They finished the fish, and Betty stooped to wash her fingers. Jim knelt beside her to clean his. Somehow their hands touched, and his strong, firm fingers closed over hers.

"Miss Betty!" he began fiercely—almost desperately, rising to his feet and lifting her, too. "I care very much for you. Can you——"

"Please don't, Mr. Jim!" she implored, almost in a whisper. "Please don't!" she repeated.

"Why?" he asked doggedly, still retaining his clasp.

"Not—not yet!"

"Why?" he asked again.

She raised her face to his; he looked into her eyes, and loosened his hand gently.

"Sorry!" he said, picked up the fish, and strode away.

Betty watched him, her feelings in chaotic tumult. His avowal was so sudden that she was hardly aware of what she had said.

"Mr. Jim!" she called after him, but her voice seemed to have lost its power. "Mr. Jim!"

He was too far away to hear, and, with a little cry of despair she sank down beside the stream, sobbing. Here Jane found her.

"What's the matter, Betty?"

"N—nothing. N—nothing at all."

"Now, Betty,"—she slipped a plump arm about the agitated girl—"tell me all about it."

"I can't!" she whispered. "I've been such a fool! I'm always being a fool!"

"Betty, tell me!" Jane insisted. And Betty told.

"I am so glad, dear!" She kissed her warmly. "So very, very glad!"

"But—but he will never ask me again."

"You must tell him."

She shook her head determinedly, for a woman's pride is a curious thing.

CHAPTER XV

THE first glimmer of the coming day was creeping through the rugged wilderness when they assembled in the big kitchen for an early breakfast. The sharp nip of the morning air made the great blaze that roared up the open fireplace very cheerful. Mrs. O'Reilly cooked and talked incessantly.

They came out into the keen air. Another perfect day of autumn was before them, and they rode away in high spirits.

"Lovely morning, Miss Betty," grunted Jim. "We are lucky in the weather; when it gets rough up here, it can be rather unpleasant."

"It's delightful now. Please tell me what I must do when we reach the cattle. I don't want to make a goose of myself."

"Keep close to me," he growled. "I'll look after you."

"Thank you."

Jim looked sharply at her, and her eyes met his. They were wistful, appealing—and something he did not understand. A great surge of doubt swept through him. Perhaps, after all, he had been mistaken. Perhaps—but he resolutely smothered the thought.

Their first stopping-place was known as Hell's Bottom, but did not look like it. The ground was carpeted with green, and walled with grey and purple; in the centre gleamed a tiny lake like a huge sapphire. A big mob of cattle moved restlessly and bellowed incessantly. Joe Elmer and the black-eyed Hawkey came to meet them.

Elmer—like O'Reilly—had been born and bred in the bush, but preferred a life of single blessedness to the married state. He had a huge admiration for Mrs. O'Reilly, and considered her the only woman that a man could possibly tie himself to without losing individuality and self-respect. He met them at the entrance of the Bottom, and his look of intense disgust, as he noticed the woman riders, brought a quiet chuckle from Anderson.

"What's this?" he growled at Jim. "I thought yer was after cattle."

"So we are, Joe." Timothy, who knew him well, made answer for his friend. "We've brought three of the finest stockwomen in Australia. Come along and let me introduce you."

"I'm d—d if yer do! I don't want no females when we's mustering. What was yer thinking of?" He looked reproachfully at O'Reilly.

"I were thinking of you, Joe!" he grinned.

"Was yer! Well, yer can do all the—cutting-out yerselves. I ain't going to make a holy fool afore!" wrathfully. "You mind the time the boss brought his ole woman and his daughters up here? You mind that! And you mind the ole

cow we got outer the scrub by Blue Lake; how she charged and bolted, and we ain't seen her since! You oughter remember, O'Reilly, seeing as she ripped yer hoss! I'm off back to the station! If yer objects, yer can sack me!"

"Don't be a fool, Joe!" O'Reilly was annoyed, and showed it. "Come and have some tucker, then we'll make a start to cut out."

"No tucker and no cutting-out fer me! I'm off!" and he rode away.

"D—n the fool!" O'Reilly exploded. "This makes it awkward for us. Him and me and Hawkey there is the only ones as knows where the cattle hang out. You can get bushed pretty quick round here. I reckoned on us three doing the scrubs and the hills, while you others could stick to the gullies. Blast the silly fool! He's an obstinate brute when he gets an idea inter his head."

But help came from an unexpected quarter. Hawkey, who had eyes for little else but Betty, suddenly became aware that his friend was leaving them.

"Where's he going?" he asked in his shrill treble.

"Home," grinned Timothy, who had not realized how important it was that this man, with his extraordinary sense of locality, should be with them. "He objects to working with ladies."

"With the Princess," He had taken the other's statement of yesterday literally.

"With the Princess!" repeated Timothy solemnly.

"Crikey! And Joe only telled me the other day that you must do as a Princess orders yer. He can't know she's one! Come on, Princess, and tell him!" he shrilled at Betty, putting his wiry pony to a gallop.

"What the dickens!" began the astonished O'Reilly, as he gazed after him. "What the dickens is he talking about?"

But Jim, who had sensed something of the true position, turned sharply to Betty.

"Go with him!" he said peremptorily. "Ask Joe to stop."

"But—but I can't do anything!" stammered the girl.

"But you can try!"

With an uncertain look at him, Betty galloped off. Hawkey, who glanced round and saw her coming, raised his shrill treble in demands for Joe to stop.

"What the hell's all the row about?" the stockman shouted angrily, pulling in his horse and swinging round to the lad. "It's no go, Hawkey. I'm off, and I reckon you'd better come too!"

"But—but the Princess! She's coming to ask yer, and you know you must do what she tells yer!"

"Ther what!" Elmer exploded.

"Mr. Lowe says she's a Princess!" The round, unwinking eyes were fixed on the other's beseechingly. "Do stop, Joe!"

"Mr. Lowe's a d—n liar." He bit the word off with a snap.

Joe Elmer—stockman, recluse, and woman-hater (so he imagined)—had often wandered with this lad into the realms of romance. He had caught a brief glimpse of Betty as they came up, and to have to tell this eager lad that she was but common clay rather appalled him. His starved heart loved the half-wild waif, who knew absolutely nothing of the great world beyond, except from the word-pictures his friend had painted in glorious colours laid on with a lavish hand. His features were grim as he awaited the approach of the on-coming envoy.

"Well!' he shot at her as she reached him. "What d'yer want?"

"Mr. Elmer!" panted Betty, whose short gallop had brought out the glow of splendid health in her soft, flushed skin.

"Do stop!" she went on, and her smile broke down the last barrier. "I've heard such a lot about you from Mrs. O'Reilly. She said you would do all you could for us, and we have been looking forward so to meeting you!"

Betty's statement might sound highly-coloured, but it was based on facts, and she considered the circumstances justified an enlargement of the actual truth.

"Where d'yer come from?" he asked abruptly.

"I came from England. This is my first experience in mustering cattle."

"I knew that Tim Lowe was a liar! He's

always talking rot. Said you women was the finest stockriders in Aussie! And you ain't never headed a beast in yer life!"

"Never! But you mustn't take any notice of Mr. Lowe."

"I doesn't. It's against me principles, Miss, but"—he looked quickly at Hawkey, who was devouring Betty with his eyes—"seeing as this nipper has sot his heart on me stopping, too, I'll come back."

"Thank you, Mr. Elmer." She veiled the triumph in her eyes, for a woman is always a woman, no matter how humble the conquest.

"Ain't she a hummer, Joe!" Hawkey whispered reverently, as they rode back. "She even beats them fairies you was telling me about!"

But the shame of his capitulation was upon him, and he only growled.

O'Reilly actually swore in his surprise, and was reproved by the delighted Timothy. Anderson's chuckle threatened to disrupt his huge body, and made his horse throw up his head in startled expectancy.

"Shut up, Anderson!" O'Reilly growled. "He may hear yer!"

Elmer rode directly up to the station-manager.

"I'm agoing to stop," he stated, "'cos yer wife told that young lady I'd do all I could for 'em, and I don't wanter make a liar outer her!"

"How did you manage it, Miss Betty?" Jim whispered to her.

"It really was very easy," she replied.

"Was it. I believe if you made up your mind, you could do anything with a man!"

"I wish I could!" she whispered.

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly, but she did not answer.

It did not take long to cut out the steers Jim wanted, but it was after sundown before they got back to the station. On the following day they left for Green Lake to complete the muster. Anderson had cleaned his rifle carefully, and carried it rather ostentatiously slung on his back. He was never far from his employer, and his close attention rather irritated Jim.

Green Lake, on whose shores the muster was to take place, lay in a sloping valley blanketed with patches of dense scrub and myrtle forest, through which ran lanes of open country that crossed and recrossed in elaborate confusion. The waters of the lake had a peculiar greenish tinge—whence its name—and its shores were strewn in places with brilliant pebbles that the original discoverers had at first taken for gems.

The lake was one of nature's jewels placed in her own barbaric setting; the country round was beautiful with the beauty of the untamed savage. In the early hours of morning, soft mists would creep down to its waters. At times it would draw across itself dense curtains of fog. Now and again a kangaroo could be seen sipping its limpid waters, or a herd of cattle, thirsty from feeding on the coarse grasses of the heights above, would wander down and foul its clearness as they

waded in to drink. Soaring eagles and preying hawks planed swiftly to its glittering beaches to slake their thirst, while their keen, restless eyes watched for foe or victim.

As the party topped a narrow ridge, the lake lay before them in all its glory. The late summer day, with its clear, crisp air, made it a place of enchantment. Forgotten was its savagery; only its beauty remained, vivid, exhilarating, impelling.

Soft wafts of air rippled the transparent waters here and there; floating wildfowl broke its placid surface. Above them there was a faint whistling sound, a long-drawn plaintive cry, and a wedge-shaped flock of swans—bodies inky black, but wings patched with white—made swiftly for the waters below with outstretched necks and trailing feet. The placid waters cascaded in sheets of foam as the heavy bodies struck them.

It was round this lake that Elmer had woven some of the tales he had told to Hawkey; and the lad, who was never far from Betty; edged up to her.

"See them swans, Princess?" he whispered. "Joe says they's black for the sins they bear. They was once angels wot got turned outer heaven, and when they cries out like that, they's praying to go back."

"They can't be wholly bad." Betty smiled into the round, black eyes. "They still have some white."

"Joe says," and the lad's voice was hushed and

earnest, "that when they're all white they'll go back and be forgiven. I often hears 'em wailing as they flies overhead at night, and that makes me feel bad. It's hard luck, ain't it, to be always flying and begging, and never get there, for them patches on their wings don't grow no bigger. It's hard, ain't it, Princess?"

Betty hardly knew how to answer this serious, romantic child. He was so very earnest, so very positive about what Elmer had told him, that she began to wonder if the other's teaching might not culminate in tragedy.

"Don't you think it's hard?" he repeated.

"Very, very hard. But, perhaps, when the white feathers begin to grow, they may go somewhere else until they're all white!"

"D'you think so?"

Betty hesitated; then, "It must be!"

"I'll tell Joe that! I asked him why we didn't see them changing, and he didn't know." Joe Elmer's imagination had been at fault for once.

"Hawkey," said Betty, suddenly, as a thought came to her—for she had heard of this lad's almost uncanny prescience and his intimate knowledge of the wilds. There's a man, a very bad man, who tried to shoot Mr. Langthorne; and he might try again. Hawkey, could—could you do me a favour? Could you help me to guard him and watch that the man did not get another chance? For my sake, Hawkey," she whispered softly. "The Princess asks you!"

The round, black eyes opened their widest then blazed with intense eagerness. A real romance had come into life. He was to guard the lover of a princess, for the Princess herself had asked him!

"You bet!" he answered in words that were of the bush and oddly unromantic, though romance was seething within him. Hawkey had not learnt the phrases suitable to the occasion.

"Thank you," she said very softly.

"But, Princess, he oughter be a prince," he whispered to her. "Joe says princesses only marries princes, and Jim Langthorne ain't no prince!"

Betty blushed at his innocent suggestion.

"Of course he isn't; but you will help to guard him, won't you?"

He nodded vigorously, then dropped behind, for Jim had ridden up, and Hawkey was quite content to worship from a distance.

Betty had made her request in all innocence. She could not know its ultimate effect, or that this strange child of the wilderness would regard it as a sacred duty to be carried out with faithful devotion that only death could end. She looked upon him merely as a useful scout who might help Jim to safety.

They journeyed on, picking up small mobs of cattle that Elmer and O'Reilly brought down from the adjoining hills, until the drove became of considerable dimensions. Presently they came to a roughly-fenced enclosure of several hundred acres, where they left the cattle for the night; in the morning they would continue to gather more.

They made camp in the lingering twilight, and after the evening meal slept the sleep of the healthily-tired. There was no one to see a youthful figure that sped away to the horses like a shadow. The wise Bluey saw it go, but only thumped his tail sleepily. It went to a wild-looking pony that whinnied softly at its approach, and the two disappeared in the moonlit bush.

The campers slept on unaware of a second figure that had crept up a ridge near them and was peering down intently. For ten or more minutes it remained there, then went as silently as it came. The moon rose higher, and beyond the ridge men flitted through the bush. The watcher joined them, and they made for a close-walled gully where a big mob of cattle rested uneasily.

"Well, who is it?" asked a voice sharply as they approached.

"Only a mustering party. But some of 'em may be along here any time to-morrow."

"Move the cattle into the Neck," came the voice again. "We may have to rush 'em through the mountains. I wish to heaven the Boss was here!"

A smooth, soft laugh sounded close behind them, and as one man they swung to it. From the blackness of a patch of myrtles came a slight, active man leading a horse that dragged at the reins and followed wearily.

"Getting in a funk, boys?" The voice was smoother in speech than in laughter. "Shift the cattle along to the Neck by all means, but don't get white-livered. Is Charlie Price here?"

"I seen him slip away a few minutes ago," one of the men said.

"Get me a fresh horse, and move the cattle along as quietly as you can. I'll join you later."

Price had gone back to the ridge that gave a view of the sleeping camp. The vindictive spirit of revenge dragged him there against the quaking clutch of his cowardice. The thrashings he had received at Jim's hands had roused a devil of spite and fury within him.

Reaching the top, he cautiously wormed his way to the other side, and below him lay the camp in the moonlight. Each recumbent form was faintly outlined, and he tried to pick out Jim's, but the distance was too great. Then he noticed a jumble of blankets that held no figure, and the fear gripped him that someone might be on the watch for him. It was very still up there on that moonlight night, but the silence did not betray two creeping figures—one small and slight, that writhed towards him like a snake; the other larger, that stepped along with noiseless activity, and then stopped motionless, watching.

The smaller form was very close now, creeping up behind him without a sound. Closer and closer it came to the unconscious man, until it was a bare two yards away. It rose partly to its feet, then, with a panther-like spring, landed fair on Price's shoulders.

With a scream of sickening terror, Price staggered to his feet, fighting, tearing, striking at the thing that clung to him. He was mad with fear, with but one thought—to free himself from the

unknown horror. Small, steel-like fingers pressed tight about his throat, strangling the frantic screams. He threw himself upon the ground, rolling over and over, clutching at the awful thing that was doing him to death. Suddenly, the grip relaxed; the weight upon his shoulders was gone; he rose staggeringly to see—nothing!

My God!" he moaned, as he rushed to his horse.

The larger figure rose to its feet and looked after the fleeing man. His face held amusement and contempt as he made his way slowly back to the cattle-duffers, who were preparing to move on.

"Price back?" he asked, and there was a drop of acid in the oil.

"A few minutes ago. Seems in a devil of a funk about something!"

The moon was beginning to sink towards the west when a chill wind sprang up, that made the sleepers huddle closer in their blankets. With the wind came slow-moving clouds that dulled the cold light of the moon and hid a boyish form that crept warily towards the camp. It made for the heap of blankets that had caught the sharp eyes of the cowardly Price, and, drawing them about itself, chuckled with satisfaction and pleasure.

"I've scared him, Princess!" it murmured. "Scared him good! He won't come sneaking round no more, and your man 'll be safe. I wish I were big and handsome like him!"

CHAPTER XVI

A RAW chill filled the air, and a leaden sky hung above the campers when they turned out of their blankets in the morning.

"Phew! it's cold!" shivered Jane, holding her hands to the blazing fire that the men had built. "I'm sorry now we refused your offer to erect the tent last night, Jim. But Betty said that if she had to sleep in it she'd be awake all night—now, Tim, what's the matter," she broke off.

"Some o' them steers has broke outer the paddock in the night," said O'Reilly, who had just returned from a tour of inspection. "The fence is pretty weak in parts. We could spare a couple o' hands to fix it while we're mustering."

"Mind stopping, Jack?" Jim asked Dunstan. "You're a good hand at that sort of thing, and we could leave Ikey, too. And you girls might as well stay, for Joe reckons there'll be a mountain fog before the day's over, and you may be a nuisance."

"That's the way to talk to 'em!" grinned Timothy with a wink at Betty. "Jim, you ought to have lived in the bad old days when an autocrat was bowed down and listened to. I can see dis-

tinct revolt in Miss Betty's face; and if I was you, I would get to work at once and quell it!"

"Don't be an ass!" the other shot at him. "Sorry, girls, that we can't take you." Then he caught Betty's eye.

She was smiling at him, but the smile held disappointment and a strong appeal. She knew little of the danger of these dense fogs that smothered the land for days, when none dared venture forth for fear of being lost, except men like Elmer—who, Timothy told him once, found his way by smell.

Jim's knowledge of the ways of women was expanding fast. He read the disappointment and appeal, and it forced upon him a sense of discomfort.

"Oh, well, you can come if you like," he answered gruffly. "But mind you stick close. It's thick country we're going through. Aren't you, coming, Jane?" for his sister was helping Dunstan to erect the tent in case the fog should come.

"I feel rather tired after yesterday's ride, Jim. You girls won't mind if I stop?"

"Certainly not," Betty answered, and frowned at Timothy, who had favoured her with an unblushing wink. "The rest will do you good."

The morning grew greyer as they journeyed on, and the brooding hush caused a strange depression, very different from the joyous excitement of the previous day. They picked up several small mobs of cattle, and were crossing a plain of some considerable extent, when Elmer's

sharp eyes sighted a herd of about a hundred head on the slopes of a fairly open hill to the right of them. They were evidently uneasy, and were bunched up together, watching.

"Some 'uns been after them cattle," he said, "and cleared when they seed us. We'd better get 'em down outer that. Hardly ever knew 'em up there before; there's a bit o' crook work going on."

"You'll stay here with the young ladies, boss, I suppose," remarked Anderson anxiously. The movements of the cattle on the hill above held a distinctly sinister suggestion. Ten to one Price would be there, and the thick myrtles, intersected by numerous lanes and small open patches, would be an admirable setting for his plans. Anderson could not forget those shots on the bluff.

But O'Reilly thought otherwise, and they decided to go all together. It was a difficult climb to reach the cattle; the horses slipped and stumbled continuously, in spite of their sureness of foot. They came out a little to one side of the mob, which, as soon as it sighted them, made off at full speed. With a shout to the others to head them at all costs, O'Reilly spurred his horse to a furious gallop. The girls had hard work to keep the cattle in sight, for Betty was quite unused to galloping through rough country, and Nell had to pull her horse in several times.

Jim was heading a small lot of wild steers that had broken away from the others. Among them were several young, savage-looking bulls, out-

laws of the wilderness, that had never seen a yard or a branding-iron. They were vicious, stunted little brutes, the offspring of equally vicious mothers that had wandered there in their search for solitude.

Twice he turned them, but each time they broke back, and he was beginning to despair of getting them. For the third time he headed them, when one of the bulls charged straight out of the mob and sank its short, thick horns into his horse's side before he had time to swing away. It happened suddenly and unexpectedly. For a moment he was quite unaware that any harm had been done, and it was only when he felt his horse sinking beneath him that he realized it had been seriously injured. Kicking his feet from the stirrups, he managed to land clear of the animal, and saw the cattle disappear down one of the lanes in the scrub. Then he turned to the horse; it was struggling feebly, and in a few moments was dead.

The girls managed to keep up with the cattle until the scrub became so thick that Betty was forced to pull her horse to a walk.

"I really can't ride through this!" said she. "I did my best, but look!" Her riding-habit was in ribbons, and her hands were badly scratched, but her face had escaped without a mark.

"Never mind, dear," comforted Nell, "we must make the best of it. Can you remember the way we came?"

"I haven't the faintest idea!"

"We must do something!" said Nell with determination. "I do believe those wretched clouds are getting lower. Come along, we must find our way out of this."

They rode for fully half an hour, but were more bewildered than ever. At last they struck a fairly wide lane running parallel to their course. Riding along it, they came to a plain of some twenty acres where about thirty head of cattle grazed uneasily.

"There are the cattle!" exclaimed Betty joyously. "We're not lost after all!"

Nell shook her head doubtfully.

"They are cattle, but I don't think they are the ones we were after. We are completely bushed!" she stated dismally, "and I don't think it will be long before the fog is on us."

"What shall we do?" Betty asked desperately.

"We'll try this lane," said Nell, for anything was better than inaction. "It may lead us somewhere, and it can't make matters much worse!"

They followed it for over an hour, down hillsides, across shallow gullies, at times to the right, again veering sharply to the left, until it ended in a narrow passage screened on either side by dense myrtles, the tops of which interlocked overhead.

"I'm sure we have simply been going from one lane to another!" moaned Nell. "We must be in that wretched Maze I heard Elmer tell Jim about. We'd better camp where we are. The myrtles will give us some shelter."

"Let us go to the end of the passage," Betty suggested. "We can easily come back, and it may lead to something."

It did lead them to something—something that made the partly-experienced Nell distinctly uneasy, and the wholly-inexperienced Betty give a cry of joy.

"There's a house!" she exclaimed, for the passage had debouched on to another plain of considerable extent. To the right of it, cuddling into the scrub, was a roughly-built humpy, and a plume of smoke rose languidly from the wooden chimney. "Some one at home. We're in luck!" She cantered towards it.

"Betty, come back!" cried Nell hastily; but it was too late, for she had reached the door and knocked heavily on it with her crop.

The door opened slightly, and a face peered through; then it swung wide and a man stepped out. Nell saw Betty try to snatch her horse's head round, but the man grabbed the reins. She raised the crop and brought it down with all the strength of her slender arm across his head. Nell whipped her horse and galloped to the rescue.

"Stick to her, Pricey!" yelled a jeering voice, and another man came out. "A little thing like that can't hurt yer!"

Betty was striking at the man like a fury; to her horror, Nell recognized the would-be murderer, Price.

"Stick to her, Pricey!" again jeered the man, who was evidently enjoying his mate's discomfiture, for the coward part of the other was uppermost, and he had let the bridle go. "Stick to her, you fool! God Almighty! here comes another!"

As she raced, Nell was uncoiling a long, thin stockwhip, with which she was nearly as expert as the stockmen. She put the finishing touch to Price's discomfiture by a stinging cut across his neck that raised a long, red wale, and brought a scream from him. Then she turned to the other.

But Slimy Grey was of different metal. He was a black-bearded, shifty-eyed man, with the manners of a plausible book-agent. He ducked as Nell struck at him, jerked the whip out of her hand and dragged her from her horse. Betty wheeled to him, but he cunningly kept the fighting Nell between them.

"Price!" he shouted. "Come out you —— coward! Here! none o' that!" as the other appeared at the door with a levelled rifle. "Put it down, you d—d cur! Blarst yer!" Betty had managed to get one in with her crop. "Price, you crawling coward, grab that little devil! I got me hands full with this tiger-cat!"

Nell was fighting desperately. She knew this man's reputation, and in her was the fear of worse than death.

Still clutching the rifle, Price made a grab at Betty. She struck at him hard, but the crop came down across the barrel, knocking it from his hands, but breaking her weapon in two.

"Got her!" he exulted as he threw his arms

about her, dragging her from the saddle. "You little devil!"

As he drew back, she struck him full on the mouth with both clenched fists. She struck again and again, but the scream she tried to utter was strangled by a great hand that clenched her throat, and shook her as a terrier does a rat.

"Hold on, Pricey!" shouted the other. "Don't kill the girl! She won't be no use to yer then. Pitch her inter the humpy and help me with this she-devil! Here, look alive! I don't want me eyes scratched out!"

Nell was struggling like one possessed. She fought desperately, and Slimy Grey was beginning to lose his temper. She gripped him by the beard, and the pain of it brought the savage to the surface. "Take that!" He struck her in the face. Nell staggered, then fell sobbing, almost exhausted, but not entirely cowed. She had recognized Slimy Grey, and knew too well the foulness of Price's mind; they were outlaws of the bush, and would stop at nothing.

Betty was kneeling near her, the slender body shaking with great, choking sobs, for Price had partly strangled her. In struggling to rise, Nell's hand came against something smooth and cold; it was the rifle that Betty had knocked from Price's hand. The two men stood watching, breathless. Grey showed great scratches on face and neck, and Price's mouth was bleeding. He was jeering savagely and foully, for Betty's blows hurt; he gloated over the girls, making

obscene remarks that brought the blush of shame to their terror-stricken faces. Then, with an oath dead upon his lips, he froze to immobility.

Nell had fumblingly grasped the rifle, and was pointing it waveringly at them.

"Put it down, Miss," said Slimy Grey smoothly. He had regained his *sang froid* in a moment. "It ain't safe wobbling about like that! It might go off and do some damage. We don't mean no harm, Miss. We was only having a little fun. Chaps as is away from girls for a time is apt to get a bit uppish. It were only a joke, Miss!"

"Stand back!" ordered Nell, a little shakily. She was on her knees, and trying to force a measure of composure. "Stand against that building. If you don't, I'll—I'll shoot!"

"Not you, Miss!" said Slimy cheerfully, with a vicious side-kick at Price. "You —— cur!" he whispered to him. "Duck and rush her!"

"I'll be d—d if I do!" quavered the other.

"A hell of a mate you are! you cowardly, white-livered hound!"

For an instant a look of fury twisted the other's features, but it went out like a snuffed candle as the barrel of the rifle pointed full at his head.

"For God's sake don't shoot!"

With a look of infinite disgust at his companion, Grey lowered his head and rushed. Quick as he was, Nell was quicker; a cry of pain from Grey, a shriek of fear from Price, and Slimy lay

writhing on the ground, his hands clutching his leg.

"Oh, my God! I'd kill you if I could get my hands on you!" he screamed at Price.

"Betty!" Nell's voice was hoarse, and her face like that of a dead woman, "Get—get the horses!"

Their mounts, startled by the struggle, had moved some distance away. Betty made staggeringly towards them, while Nell kept the cowardly Price covered. Grey, though helpless, was still dangerous, and she prayed that her strength might last until they could get away.

Betty was almost on the point of collapse. She reeled as she tried to lead the timid horses. Nell took the reins of her mount and backed slowly away, still keeping the men covered. She began to struggle into the saddle, but dropped to the ground again with a low cry of dismay, as Betty, after one feeble effort, fell sobbing to the earth.

"Betty!" she cried, with all the sharpness she could force into her voice, "Get up at once and get on!"

Somehow she got the girl into the saddle; somehow she managed to crawl into her own. As they swung the horses for the opening, they saw Grey rise to his knees and hurl the broken crop at his companion. Nell had dropped the rifle, for she was too weak to mount while still holding it, and, as they cantered uncertainly away, Price ran shamblingly to pick it up.

Then, like a great, soundless, intangible pall,

the fog came down on them. It shut out everything. It smothered even the ravings of the injured Grey. It brought with it safety and desolation. Where they were going the girls knew not. Their one thought was to get away. Fortunately, they were in the lane before the fog came down.

The fog grew denser and more penetrating. Their ragged clothes were sodden, and Betty shivered violently. The horses were going whither they wished, until the darkness of the shadowing myrtles grew less and less, and the grey fog took on a measure of whiteness.

A little later they heard the brush of stiff, wiry grass beneath their horses' feet; then Nell saw Betty reel dangerously, and collapse on her horse's neck.

"God! Dear God!" she murmured brokenly, as she lowered her to the ground. "What shall I do? Betty! Betty!"

The strain and rough handling had been too much for the gently-nurtured girl; she had gone into a dead faint.

CHAPTER XVII

PRESENTLY Betty opened her eyes and looked at Nell vacantly for a moment. Then she clung to her, sobbing piteously. After a time she regained her self-control, and the girls rose to their feet. The horses were gone; the blanketing fog had swallowed them.

"Never mind, dear!" Nell comforted her. "They're not much good to us in this fog. The men will soon find us!"

Suddenly something loomed before them. They went towards it quakingly, and a thinning of the mist showed a wall of rock that promised partial shelter. But almost at once the mist swept down on them thicker than ever, so thick that they had to feel their way along the rock.

"I think there is an opening here!" exclaimed Nell, stopping short. "Pray God it may give us shelter! Betty, catch hold of me and we'll feel our way in."

Cautiously and hesitatingly they went in. The dryness made a very pleasant contrast to the dampness without. A few yards from the entrance it was pitch dark, and Nell, who was feeling her way, drew something from a crevice in the rock.

"Betty!" she whispered excitedly. "This feels like a box of matches, and—and a candle! Somebody must use this cave."

"Hadn't we better wait and listen for a while?" Betty whispered back. "Oh, Nell! It —it can't belong to those brutes we escaped from?"

Crouching against the wall, they strained their ears for any sound, but there was none except their own breathing and the rapid beating of their hearts.

"I'll light it!" said Nell firmly, "and we can explore."

The match spluttered, then broke into flame, and the candle lit readily. Holding it aloft, they saw that the opening turned sharply to the left. They crept on cautiously, their feet making scarcely any noise on the earthern floor. When they went round the corner, both gave an involuntary exclamation of surprise.

Before them was a rough bed made of sacks suspended between two poles and covered with the dry growth of the silver tussock-grass. Upon the bed were folded several blankets, with a neatness that showed the occupier to be a man of tidy habits. In the centre was a rough table; and at the far side, where the cave ended abruptly, there was a fireplace built of stones, the smoke from which found egress through a narrow opening above.

"I—I wonder who lives here?" whispered Nell. She sank weakly on the bed, for nothing

but sheer force of will had kept her going, and the reaction was upon her. Then she burst into great, choking sobs.

Betty clung to her comfortingly. Although she had not the least idea to whom this shelter belonged, it gave her a pleasant sense of security. Its very tidiness showed that its occupant was a man of particular habits, utterly unlike the foul creatures they had escaped from.

"We'll light a fire, Betty," Nell suggested, her outburst over, as she noted that the former occupant had laid in a stock of dry sticks and wood.

The night wore on. Betty had fallen into an uneasy drowse. Nell covered her tenderly with one of the blankets, then drew another about herself. She had made up her mind to watch, but several times found herself nodding sleepily. At last, in a desperate effort to keep awake, she rose and walked briskly up and down. It occurred to her that, if she made so little noise, a midnight prowler would have small difficulty in taking them unawares. She cautiously made her way to the opening. The night was black, and a fine drizzle fell with steady persistence.

She stood listening intently. Once she thought she heard a stick snap, but it was only a feeble cracking of the fire inside, thrown back by the rocky walls. The chuckling cry of an opossum came to her, softened by the fog, and the far-away quack of a flock of duck feeding on the shores of some lake; and overhead she heard the long-drawn, plaintive wail of questing swans, muffled and made strangely sad by the dense vapour.

She went back to the fire, and tired nature won. Her body sank lower and lower, until she lay asleep, with one shapely arm beneath the beautiful head.

Midnight came and passed. Both girls were too sound asleep to notice a slight form that glided in, stopped short with a muffled exclamation of surprise, and darted into a corner, facing the opening. Then another form crept in, came to the bend in the passage, and stopped dead, breathing softly. The first figure was crouching almost on the ground, as invisible as the second. Suddenly in the narrow cave there was the roar of two automatics; the intruders grappled, and for a moment struggled fiercely; then one broke away, rushing for the entrance. At the bend he turned and fired. The bullet missed its mark, but found another billet.

Betty awoke with a scream. The acrid smell of burnt powder filled the little cave, and in her ears rang the echoes of the shots. At once she was wide awake and calling frantically for Nell, who neither moved nor answered. With a fear that turned her heart to ice, she piled fuel on the expiring fire. It blazed quickly and crackled comfortingly, for the wood was as dry as tinder. It lit the cave almost to the brightness of day, showing the rough bed, the rocky sides—and Nell.

She was motionless. The long lashes lay on dead-white cheeks. With a cry of horror and agony, Betty threw herself beside her friend.

"Nell!" she whispered fearfully. "Nell, speak

to me! Nell! Dear Nell! Say you're alive! Wake up, Nell! Oh, my God!" With a moan she collapsed beside her.

Morning dawned fully. The fog still clung, but the world was waking to life when Hawkey came out of the mist and made direct for the opening. He stared a little uncertainly at the marks of boots, deep in the sodden ground; then he went cautiously in, and in the dim light saw two recumbent figures. Sensing something wrong, he knelt beside them, his small face drawn with grief.

"Princess! Princess!" he moaned.

"Are they there?" came a shout from without, and Timothy entered hurriedly, to find a small boy crouched by the rock, sobbing.

"Are they dead?" said Jane, who had followed him.

He shook his head as he bent to examine them.

A tiny trickle of blood was oozing through Nell's tattered clothing. He cut it hastily with his knife, baring the soft, white flesh, and in it showed a hole from which the blood slowly welled, and a dull-red line that ran direct for the spine.

"Bullet in the side. Ran along under the skin. Lodged near the spine; touching it, I think. Paralysed temporarily. Jane, move Miss Betty away and try to revive her. She's only fainted. Thank God for my three years of hospital training!"

Jane stared at him for a moment. It was not

the Timothy she knew so well, but a hard, straight-lipped man who spoke decisively and clipped his sentences. Dunstan and Elmer were close behind; as they came in, Timothy turned to them.

"Your flask, Jack. Joe, make up that fire and fill those billies. Rinse them first, then put them on to boil. Make a good blaze. Look alive, man!" Elmer gaped at him.

"What are you going to do, Tim?" Dunstan asked in a low voice.

"Cut the bullet out."

"Good God!"

"If it stops there—" He paused, and his face worked convulsively for a moment. "It's the only chance!" he whispered.

"Joe," he continued, "Give me that knife and sharpener of yours; and bring in the kangaroo tail you got last night."

Elmer had a strong partiality for the bushman's delicacy—kangaroo-tail soup; but he little imagined when he cut it from the animal his dog had caught, to what purpose it would be put so soon.

Timothy examined the knife carefully. It was the pride of the stockman's heart, thin-bladed, exceedingly sharp, and scrupulously clean—for Elmer was a man to whom cleanliness was even more essential than godliness. Instead of the usual stockman's steel he had a fine-grained stone that put a finished edge on it almost equal to a razor's.

"Jane,"—for the first time there was a flutter of a smile about his lips, and the straight mouth rose a little at the corners—"I want your help. Do you feel equal to it, old girl?"

"Yes, Tim. You can depend on me."

"Have you a fair-sized needle in your housewife?"

She pulled it from a pocket, and drew out a long needle. Timothy took it, examined it carefully, pressed the eye deep into a green stick, and held it for a moment in the fire. Withdrawing it, he bent it to the shape of a half-moon, and laid it beside the knife and a large pair of tweezers which Dunstan had taken from his hunting-knife.

Blazing limbs lit the cave brightly. The gleam of the fire showed the unconscious figure on the rough bed, the strained faces of the watchers and the calm, rigid features of the operator.

Betty had recovered from her faint. At Timothy's request, they moved her as far away as possible, and she was clinging to Jane frantically, sobbing out her relief on the other's shoulder.

"Anything you can get for bandages, Jane?"

She looked at him blankly for a moment, then put Betty aside, and retired into a far corner of the cave, where a jutting rock gave a measure of privacy. When she returned, her pale face had flushed slightly, and she held out a white under-garment in mute inquiry. Timothy nodded, and next moment the crackling of the fire was drowned in the screech of tearing linen.

"Are you quite ready, Jane?"

She nodded, unable to speak, for she needed all her fortitude. The soft, smooth back was bared, and Timothy sponged it gently with water that had been boiled and allowed to cool. It was the best they could do. The knife and tweezers had cooled, too, after their immersion in the boiling water. As Timothy knelt beside the unconscious girl, he lifted his face to the roof of the cave above them, and his lips moved in prayer.

Picking up the knife, he held it poised, then made the first incision. Jane gave a choking cry that she strangled fiercely almost at its birth, and gripped her lower lip between her teeth until a trickle of blood came. Hawkey bolted frantically to the cold comfort of the clammy fog. Timothy went steadily on, working blindly, but surely. There was no styptic to check the flow of blood, no anæsthetic, should the patient come to consciousness. He trusted that the paralysing effects of the bullet would last until it was over.

Jane glanced at him once; his features might have been hewn from marble for all the expression they showed. He had forced upon himself an iron control, and the life of the woman he loved depended on its maintenance.

At last the cruel knife was laid aside. The fingers gripped the tweezers. He felt, cautiously but firmly. The muscles of his hand grew taut, and he drew out a round-pointed bullet.

Nell sighed, then moaned a little. It was her first sign of life.

"Quick, Jane, the needle!"

She passed it to him; from it was strung a length of strong sinew drawn from the tail of the kangaroo, such as is now constantly used in surgical operations.

Nell flinched slightly, then moaned again.

The last stitch had been tied, the white skin sponged free of blood, and the bandages fastened with the greatest care. Then Timothy rose. The rigidity of his face relaxed. He looked about uncertainly. He reeled, but Dunstan's arm went round him, and lowered him gently to the ground.

"Take this, old man," he said, and held a flask to Tim's lips.

"Thanks. I'll be all right in a moment," he muttered. "Bit of a strain. Out of practice, you know." He lay for several minutes with closed eyes.

"I think she will pull through now," Timothy murmured, as he rose and went to look at Nell, "and thank God, again, for that three years in hospital! Miss Betty,"—the old smile had come back to his lips, and the old whimsical look was in his eyes—"I'm going to insist that you take a good, strong nip from Jack's flask, and rest before you tell your story." He cut the words off short. For the first time he had noticed the bruises on her throat.

CHAPTER XVIII

When Betty had finished her story, she looked at Jane, and a flush came to her pale cheeks.

"Where—where is Mr. Jim?" she asked with slight hesitation.

"We don't know, dear." She drew the girl close to her as she answered. "Jim has been missing since yesterday morning. Anderson, Ikey and O'Reilly are out hunting for him. We think he must have had a long chase after some cattle, and this wretched fog has held him up."

"He'll be all right!" put in Timothy, comfortingly. "Jim is one of those lucky beggars you can't lose, Miss Betty. He'll turn up safe enough!"

It was at that moment that Hawkey's eyes met Betty's and in them he read a faint reproach, a reminder, and an appeal. But Elmer was the only one who saw the small figure glide out into the fog.

"Where're you going?" he growled.

"Back soon, Joe," the boy whispered, and in a moment the fog had swallowed him.

He went through the blanketing mist without hesitation. Fog, rain, the blackness of the night made no difference to Hawkey. He always won

through; and, although intensely imaginative, he knew no fear.

Betty's glowing beauty had stirred his romantic thoughts to their very depths, and nothing would alter his devotion. So he went out into the blind silence with his half-wild mountain pony, unconscious of the doings around him. He reached the scene of the previous day's mustering, and his keen eyes quickly picked up the tracks. He followed them until he came to where Jim had gone after the little mob, then went swiftly and surely in the direction they had taken. He remembered that Jim's horse had been shod with the heel of one hind shoe longer than the other.

Suddenly the pony stopped short, snorted, and tried to swing round. Hawkey spoke softly to it, caressed the quivering neck, and urged it through the mist to something on the ground. It was the rigid body of Jim's horse that the bull had ripped. Dismounting, the lad quickly found the boot-marks, and, leading his pony, followed them at a half-run.

. . . . .

After his horse was killed, Jim tried to find his way back, but the grey sky and labyrinth of innumerable lanes confused him. He tried to follow the tracks, but had not the keen sense and practised eye of Hawkey. He travelled for some hours, but the country was entirely unfamiliar, and the grey pall was sinking lower. Soon it

rested on the tree-tops; then, as if at a signal, it dropped silently about him, restricting vision to a bare two paces. He still held on, undismayed. About nightfall he wormed his way into a dense patch of myrtles that gave a measure of shelter from the fog. He built a fire that dried his sodden clothes, and by it, as night closed down, made a rough couch. When the grey of morning filtered through the close-packed trees, he made up the fire, thoroughly warmed his chilled body, and went once more into the mist.

After a time he found himself in a world that was free from encircling scrub, and his feet brushed through wiry mountain grass. He knew he had come to one of the innumerable tiny plains that dot this region. For some minutes this continued, then he came to dense scrub again, and, following along the edge, almost bumped into a roughly-built hut. Feeling his way softly, he came to the door, and was about to force it open, when he saw something at his feet. It was the broken half of Betty's hunting-crop.

A sullen air stirred the fog, and it thinned for a moment. Some yards away was the other half, and a torn fragment from a woman's dress. Close by was a pool of blood, and splashes of red led to the hut.

Jim stood, thinking hard; then, with fierce swiftness, threw himself against the door. It gave instantly to his rush; he fell headlong on the floor, colliding with the amazed Grey, who was

dressing his wounded leg to the accompaniment of unceasing profanity.

"God Almighty!" he yelled. "Grab him, Pricey! Quick, you blarsted fool, before he gets to his feet! Here, one's enough!" Price, who had gripped a heavy billet, brought it down across Jim's head and raised it for another blow. "D—n you! Do you want to murder the man?"

"Let me smash his skull in! There's that soak in the scrub. We could slip him down it, and who'd know?"

"No, you don't! That one you give him might have done the trick as it is. Quick! Get them greenhide strips afore he comes round. We don't want any murders! Cattle-duffing may get a man a stretch for a year or two, but croaking a feller 'll put the rope round yer neck, Pricey me boy."

Price bound the unconscious man securely. The dry greenhide cut into Jim's wrists, as he jerked it savagely tight; then he rolled the prisoner over on his back.

"Better let me give him another crack and pitch him down the soak," Price urged again. "What the h—l will we do with him if we don't, and suppose he should die?"

"Time to pitch him down then," said the other coolly. "Look here, Pricey! you're a murdering scoundrel as well as one of the biggest curs I've ever struck. If you tries any hanky-panky, I'll split on yer, and that'll mean a neck-stretching. He's coming round, Pricey!" Jim opened

his eyes and stared for a moment uncertainly, then met Price's look with a burning glare that made the other draw back hastily.

"Mind he don't bite yer!" jeered Grey contemptuously.

"Untie me at once!" Jim said. "What the devil do you mean by this?"

"Say please!" Slimy sneered. "Pricey did the trussing, and a good tight job he made of it, as yer can guess he would. You and he ain't chums, seemingly. Blarst!" He made an effort to stand, and a piercing throb of pain shot up his leg. "Get them horses, Pricey! We don't want to be stuck here all day! The next thing 'll be a couple o' Johns coming to call, and you'll be wearing a pair o' bracelets! Get out and bring 'em here!"

Price went reluctantly out into the fog, and Grey limped painfully to one of the bunks the hut contained. Jim's eyes followed Price until the door shut behind him, then turned to Grey.

"Are you going to untie me?" he again demanded.

"Do I look like a fool?" the other sneered. The pain of his wound was rousing the lurking devil within.

"You look like a d—n scoundrel!" Jim retorted coolly. The blow on his head had, fortunately, been a glancing one; except for a feeling of soreness, he was little the worse for it.

"If you don't keep a civil tongue in yer head, I'll clear out and leave yer to Pricey!" the other

snarled. "He won't make no bones about caving yer skull in!"

"What was that hunting-crop doing outside?" Jim asked. Slimy's pain-drawn face twisted into a sly grin.

"Don't yer be too inquisitive. If we has lady friends, what's that to do with you? Me and Price is off on our honeymoons!" His leer brought a quick blaze of fury to Jim's eyes; for the moment, he wondered whether the strong greenhide strips would hold. Jim heaved and panted in his efforts to get free, then lay back exhausted.

"God! oh, God! give me strength to break these bonds!" he prayed inwardly, and made another furious effort.

Straining, pulling, twisting with every atom of his power (and Jim Langthorne was a man whose strength ranked far above the average), he rolled about the floor. Sweat poured from his face, and the blood ran from his wrists. Grey jeered, but now and again felt a quick rush of apprehension as the swelling muscles seemed ready to burst the thongs. Still, greenhide has a strength beyond most things, and his efforts were futile. Then, like the gleam of a brilliant light through the blackness of night, came an idea and an inspiration.

Presently Price returned with the horses, hitched them to a stump outside, and came into the hut.

"Got you tight and safe," he jeered. "It'll be

a nice little payment for that thrashing you gave me. I said I'd pay with interest, and, by God, I will! I've a d—n good mind to take you outside and practise on you with that whip of Slimy's. I guess I could cut the clothes off you in strips. Hanged if I don't!" He made a step towards him.

"If you don't shut yer silly mouth, I'll turn him lose on yer!" cried the exasperated Grey. "We're out to save our skins and them cattle from being took. He's going to be tied up until we get away; then you can do as yer likes. D—n this leg o' mine! It's all your fault, you measly coward! If you'd had the pluck of a louse, it wouldn't have happened!"

"Go to h—l!" snapped Price. "You wanted me to rush her instead of yourself, and look what you got!"

"Because you was too much of a cur to do it! If you'd 'a' rushed her, you'd 'a' got her easy, for she pointed it fair at me. She reckoned yer white liver 'ud keep yer quiet, and, by God, it did!"

Jim worked his bound wrists steadily. The warm blood was slowly drenching the tough green-hide, and—it was the illuminating idea that came to him—greenhide contracts when drying, and stretches when wet. Already one wrist was much looser; when the flow ceased, the blood congealed and his bonds began to stiffen. Quietly he moved his wrists, working them round and round, up and down, until the warm blood had

penetrated every part. The agony was exquisite, as with clenched teeth he deliberately jerked his arms to stimulate the flow.

"I wish Pricey had yer pluck, Langthorne," said Grey, and his voice held a note of reluctant admiration. "If he had, I guess we'd 'a' skinned out every cocky down below, and you as well. If the boss'd known what a cur he is, he'd never 'a' let him inter this!"

At that moment a low whistle came out of the fog. Price jumped to his feet hurriedly, in his face something more than apprehension. Grey cursed softly, then answered with a similar whistle.

"What are you two fools loafing here for?" snarled a voice outside. "It's time you were away with the cattle. What's the matter with you, Grey?" He stepped into the hut, and saw Jim.

"Who the devil's that? I don't want the whole infernal neighbourhood to see me! I've only just given a trooper the slip who's been tracking me for days. Who the devil is he?"

"Jim Langthorne from Looeena," answered Price. "A girl shot Slimy. Plugged him through the leg. We've got Langthorne tied up, and are ready to go now."

"You'll have to be pretty quick if you want to get away with your skins!" the new-comer snapped back. "If it hadn't been for the fog, you two fools would have been in jug by now. And so a girl got you, Slimy. Serve you right! You always were a fool with women. By the

way,"—a sudden thought came to him—"what were they like?"

"One tall, the other short. Good-looking pair."

"M—m—m", he mused, and the others wondered what he meant.

Jim had caught but a brief glance of the man. He was a complete stranger, yet about him was a suggestion of puzzling familiarity. Who was he? Who could he be? He was, of course, the mysterious stranger, the elusive leader of the cattle-duffers, the man whom Ellis had sworn to take dead or alive. Where was the Sergeant now? Jim sawed the greenhide deeper into his wounds, and shut his teeth grimly.

"Well, so long," said Grey, hobbling to the door. "Hope someone'll find yer soon, if it's only an old tiger or a devil or two. Come on, Pricey!" he snarled. "Leave the beggar alone! The boss'll be getting the wind up if yer don't hurry!" Then the rickety door slammed on them and the clammy fog.

CHAPTER XIX

As soon as the men left, Jim renewed his efforts to free himself more fiercely than ever. He was able to do it openly, and the blood-soaked thongs had stretched considerably. With rigid jaw he worked, the sweat streaming from his face, for the harsh hide had cut deep in places, and the warm blood gushed freely. Already one hand was almost free; the thong had worked up to the joint of the thumb, but it would not go over, and he pressed it back again to saturate it more fully.

He was so engrossed that he did not hear footsteps outside the hut, and it was only when the door swung open, letting in the fog, that he knew someone had entered. He rolled over, to see Price glaring at him. The man's face held a look of triumphant, devilish hate. He stood for a moment without speaking, then flung out a stream of foul abuse, strode up to the bound man, kicked him hard in the ribs, seized him by the shoulder, and dragged him out into the fog.

"Lie there, you swine!" he growled, and went back to the hut.

Jim made a frantic effort to get his hands free. The cruel hide peeled the skin from the knuckle

of the thumb, and it was almost over. He was on the point of freedom, and a great surge of joy swept through him. It was just slipping over, when a stinging cut on his hand made him start, and back the greenhide went again.

"You'd get loose, would you!" Price snarled at him. "Take that! and that!" The long, thin stockwhip whistled, and its cuts drew the blood as surely as the slashes of a knife.

Jim rolled hastily over, burying his face in the grass as best he could, steeling himself to bear the torture, and working frantically to free his wrists. The thong slipped on to the skinned knuckle once again, and moved a little farther until it rested fairly across it. A few more agonizing efforts, and it would be over.

Suddenly Price saw the danger. With a howl of rage, he picked up a stout stick that was lying near, and raised it to bring it down on the skull of the helpless man. Even as it fell, something leaped out of the fog, landed fair upon the shoulders of the would-be murderer, and clenched iron claws about his throat. Price gave a shriek of terror, clutched wildly at the clinging thing, rushed to the hut, banging furiously against its frail sides, and collapsed on the ground. Over and over he rolled. His screams had become muffled gurgles. There was no relaxing of the grip, no weakening of the steel-like legs that had wound themselves about his body. His end was very near.

Once again, Jim was almost free. Price was

still rolling over, but his efforts were feeble, and his cries almost ceased. In a last despairing heave he managed to bang the head of his assailant against a stump; to his huge relief, he felt the grip relax, then let go altogether. Staggeringly he rose to his feet, and stood for a moment, sucking in great gasps of air. Then, summing up the last effort of his strength, he threw Hawkey heavily against the stump, and stumblingly made for the stick he had dropped.

He was just one second too late. Jim, with a frantic tug that stripped the last bit of sound skin from the joint of his thumb, met him with clenched fist that crashed on his face. He came again, with the vicious courage of the cornered rat; and again and again Jim struck. Price staggered, cursed wildly, and collapsed near the broken body of the mountain waif.

Jim knelt beside the lad who lay with strangely-distorted limbs, and smiled up into his face as consciousness returned—the smile that betokened duty done and utter weariness.

"Glad we settled him, boss." His eyes roved to the unconscious Price. "Won't the Princess be glad!"

"Hurt much?" Jim asked him, and the look in his eyes was very tender.

"I don't feel nothink. Just numb-like. Guess I'll soon be right."

But the white face and crooked, nerveless body told Jim that upon the poor lad the seal of death was already set.

Jim was very weary. The struggle had drawn heavily on his strength, not only the physical effort, but the cruel pain of the biting thongs and the loss of blood. Part of the thongs still dangled from his left wrist. He fumbled for his knife and cut them off, then turned to Price, who was coming back to consciousness.

"You brute!" Jim bent down to him. "Get to your feet, you cur! If you have the least particle of manhood in you, stand up and take what's coming to you!"

Price's eyes twitched. He lay without motion, too terrified to make the slightest effort that might bring upon him Jim's cold vengeance. He knew that Jim would never touch him on the ground.

"Get up!" Jim insisted. "Get up: if you don't, I'll pull you to your feet!"

"He ain't worth it, boss!" came Hawkey's feeble voice. "Cripes! here comes another!"

Jim leaped to his feet, and whirled to meet Sergeant Ellis. "My heavens," he said "I'm pleased you're here! This brute,"—twisting a contemptuous foot at the recumbent Price—"has hurt the lad badly. I'm afraid he's done."

Ellis smiled faintly. He was gaunt almost to emaciation. His clothes were little better than shreds, and his hands were skin over a framework of bones. He carried a revolver slung from his hip, and a light rifle in his hands. He was close to the last stages of exhaustion, but the piercing eyes burnt as brilliantly as ever. Brute

strength might might be fading, but courage and determination were undimmed.

"I must ask you to tie him up for me, Mr. Langthorne. I can't even spare handcuffs for him. The pair I carry, I've sworn to use for one purpose only. Have you seen anyone else here?" The eager tone joined the tense inquiry of the eyes.

"Slimy Grey and another man. He was angry because the others let me see him. I was a prisoner, you know."

"Small man about my build?" Ellis gripped Jim by the shoulder, his eyes boring into the other's.

"Yes, about half an hour ago. The three rode off. Price came back. Perhaps he can tell you where they went."

Ellis whirled to the coward who lay still on the ground; in his voice and actions there was no hint of weariness.

"Price!" he snapped, "where's your leader gone? If you don't out with it at once, it's a bullet for your brain and God Almighty for your soul—if he'd touch it! Speak, man!"

"For God's sake don't shoot, Sergeant!" the other cried, "I'll tell!" Ellis pressed the cold muzzle of the automatic against his forehead. "Bend down."

The Sergeant knelt beside him; when he rose, his face held triumph and a great elation.

"Tie that thing up, Mr. Langthorne! I'll be back for him later." The cold greyness of the

fog, that was beginning to swirl and eddy gently to the breath of a rising wind, enveloped him.

Jim tied up Price with the thongs that had bound his own wrists, and the man made not the slightest show of resistence. He was cowed for the moment, but in his eyes gleamed a currish hatred as Jim drew the greenhide, now pliant, firmly round his wrists, and dragged him into a lean-to against the hut. The motionless Hawkey had been watching intently.

"I'll carry you inside, old fellow," said Jim gently. "The fog may lift any time; then we can strike out for the camp."

"The cave!" Hawkey whispered. "You carry me there; I'll tell you the way. The Princess is there, and—and the other. They . . . . looked . . . . like . . . . dead!" His voice trailed off uncertainly. Jim's face went white with a sudden fear.

"Hawkey!" he whispered. "Hawkey!" But the lad was unconscious.

"Price," he said, going quickly to the bound man, "were Miss Deene and Nell here?"

"What the hell's that got to do with you?" growled Price. Now that Ellis had gone, and Jim had evidently decided to forgo the thrashing, some of his errant courage had come back. But Jim looked steadily at him, and the coward part came to the surface.

"Slimy Grey grabbed them," he lied. "Nell put a bullet into him, and he's a nasty devil when roused. I cleared out and left them."

"You're a liar!" Jim said coldly, controlling his fury with an effort. That these beasts should lay hands on Betty was a desecration. "Tell me at once what happened!"

"They cleared out, cleared into the fog; and I'm d—d if I know where they went!"

"Boss," came Hawkey's feeble voice. "I knows. You carry me."

Jim lifted him in his arms as gently as a woman would her baby.

"Where, Hawkey?" he asked.

"In a cave. I'm too . . . . too tired . . . . to talk. I'll . . . . point. You'll . . . . have to . . . . walk. My nag's . . . . cleared out."

"You're not going to leave a fellow like this?" Price expostulated. "If it snows, I'll be frozen to death!"

But Jim hardly glanced at him. Into the fog he bore his broken burden. Behind sounded Price's shouts and entreaties.

Jim's fine physique stood by him splendidly in that blind rush through the mist. A deadly fear was tugging at his heart, for the injured lad's half-coherent words held the suggestion of a tragedy. There was little doubt that the girls had been captured by these men, and the fact that Grey had been wounded proved their position had been desperate. But what happened afterwards?

On they went through the opaque and silent world. Hawkey, to whom speech had become impossible, showed the way with a quivering

finger, and he kept Jim to the track with an uncanny sureness.

The fog eddied noiselessly about them, at times showing narrow lanes of clearness, then settling down more densely than ever.

Hawkey moved restlessly in his bearer's arms. His mind was concentrated on an effort to show the way, and the strain of it was bringing the end nearer. At times he lay absolutely passive, too exhausted even to open his eyes. Then Jim would stagger blindly on, veering from the right direction until an interval of consciousness came again.

He was feeling intensely weary when something dark loomed before them, and Hawkey moved with greater restlessness. They were close to the opening of the cave, where a jutting rock gave some protection, and beneath it someone stared out into the mist. There was a startled cry, smothered almost by a sob, and Betty ran towards Jim, holding out her hands in her eagerness. As she reached his side, she clung to him almost fiercely.

"Miss Betty!"

He reached a hand from beneath his partly-conscious burden, groping for hers; but Betty did not see the blood upon it, or the cruel wounds on the ragged wrists. Her eyes saw nothing but his; then they fell upon his burden.

"He's badly hurt, I think. Is there any shelter I can take him to?"

She led the way into the cave, and called the

others. Timothy was the first to come out. He gripped Jim by the shoulders. "Thank God you're back, old chap!" Then his eyes, too, fell upon Hawkey.

"What's the matter, Jim?"

"Pretty well settled. I'll take him inside."

"Not right in," said Timothy in a whisper. "A patient is already there. And—" he hesitated and spoke in Jim's ear—"from the look of him, the poor little beggar's close to the end. How did it happen, Jim?"

The other told him, and Timothy's eyes blazed.

"Put him down here." He indicated a sheltered nook where they could not be seen from the inner cave.

Jane and Dunstan quickly followed Timothy, but Elmer had wandered away into the fog. Jim laid the injured lad down gently, and Timothy made his examination.

"Done!" he muttered, with tight lips. "Poor little beggar!"

Betty was hovering near; mute appeal showed through the anxiety in her eyes, and as she caught the low words she choked back a sob.

"Princess!" came a feeble whisper. "I brought him back. I—" he stopped and smiled at her, and his eyes were very wistful. It was the last flicker of the flame of life.

"I . . . . were nearly . . . . too late," he went on. The words dropped slowly and with effort.

Betty sank beside him. She bent to the wistful face with an infinite gentleness, and her warm lips pressed softly on his forehead.

"Hawkey! Hawkey!" she whispered back. "Dear Hawkey!" When she lifted her face, his forehead was blotched with tears.

"Princess!" His voice rose strongly. "Joe . . . . she kissed me!"

CHAPTER XX

SLOWLY the mist crept from the peaks around, whirling about the valleys, twisting along the hill-sides, unshrouding the land it had smothered for days. The world was waking to life, tearing off the clammy blanket that had covered it, gasping for the heat of the autumn sun.

Then through a wisp of belated vapour came Elmer, his features working with excitement.

"The P'lice is onter them cattle-duffers!" he shouted. "They're fighting like hell down yonder! Hear that!" The faint crack of a rifle came through the fast-thinning fog. "Give me a gun, boss, I wants to go and help! Hawkey back yet?"

"Hawkey is here, Joe," said Timothy gently.

For a moment the stockman peered curiously at him. Timothy's voice was strangely sad. Elmer saw that something was not well with the lad, and his excitement went from him like a cloak that is dropped. He was once more the taciturn recluse.

"What's up with him?" he asked gruffly. "Ain't —ain't he all right?"

"He's dead, old fellow," said Jim. "One of those infernal cattle-duffers killed him. But he saved Mr. Langthorne's life."

"My God!" Elmer burst out. "Hawkey gone! Dead! Oh, my God! Which of the murdering cows settled him?"

"He's been paid in part, Joe. The final payment will come later. He's a prisoner."

"Where is he? Mr. Langthorne!" He shook Jim by the shoulder savagely. "Tell me where! Damn it, man! Can't yer speak?"

"Steady, Joe!" Jim's voice was quiet, but firmly insistent. "You must stay here. The man will be paid in full. If Ellis is capturing the cattle-thieves, we may want every man to help protect the women. They'll fight like cornered rats, and, for all we know, this cave may be their stronghold."

"Where is . . . . Hawkey?" whispered Elmer.

Jim led him into the cave, to the crushed and silent form that only a few short hours before had brimmed with life.

Elmer knelt reverently beside the body of his little friend. Then he bent to the chill forehead, touching it with his lips.

The rifle-cracks were heard more plainly, and mingling with them was a strange rumble that grew like the roaring of a great sea.

"Go inside!" ordered Jim hastily, as Jane and Betty came out to listen. "Keep well back in the cave."

"What is it?" asked Betty.

"Cattle. The firing has stampeded them, and they're coming this way. Get well back. Heaven knows what may happen if they crowd along

here! Go back, Miss Betty, the brutes are mad with fear."

The rising wind had whirled the last wisp of vapour from about them, but the valley below was blanketed in pure white. Through the mist shot up spires of rock, peaks and distant mountains. Then a lake of vivid blue peeped through, its surface clouded until the wind swept it clear.

The little cave that had proved such a refuge was close to the crest of a ridge, and from it they had a glorious view of hill and plain. In front of the cave was an open space of some acres which sloped to a sheer precipice, and was covered with the wiry mountain grass.

Betty shuddered as she saw it, and felt deeply thankful; in the dense fog, they might have easily gone over the hidden cliff.

Then all thoughts were driven out as Jim wrenched her back, and his voice was hoarse in her ears.

The cattle were filling the open space. Those in front had already sensed the danger ahead, and were slacking up, but, pressed by the others behind, were being slowly but surely forced nearer and nearer the edge. The bellows, the rattling horns and rush of the cattle had drowned the sound of rifle-shots. The beasts were even jamming into the mouth of the cave, blocking the exit; one young steer was pushed right in, but, fearing the occupants more than the seething mass without, he thrust back among his fellows with a frightened bellow.

"Joe!" shouted Jim, and his voice came like a confused echo although it was only a yard away. "The poor brutes'll be over the edge in a minute! Are you game to help me try to make them break back? If we can stop them coming on behind, there'll be a chance."

The stockman moved silently to him. Even the raging mass without had not drawn him from his grief; but the knowledge they were on the eve of an awful tragedy brought him to quick action.

"I'm on, boss!" he said huskily.

Dunstan also stepped up, and Timothy looked wistfully towards Nell, but Jim shook his head.

"You two must stay; God knows what may happen in the next few minutes. If it is to be done at all, Joe and I can do it. If not—" He kissed his sister hurriedly, then looked full at Betty.

She met him with a tremulous smile that could not hide the fear in her eyes; in that moment his blindness was entirely swept away, and Jim knew he had won what he had hardly dared to hope for.

Catching Elmer by the arm, he went to the mouth of the cave, where the tight-packed cattle bellowed piteously, and the noise of their panting breaths came as the moaning of a great wind. They were jammed in a solid mass across the front. The nearest tried to flinch away as Jim, followed by the stockman, leapt on their backs, and from their backs to the cliff above, along

which they crept until they came to where the going was easier and the slope of the hill not so steep.

A narrow neck between two almost sheer rocks gave access to the plain, and through it the cattle steadily poured. If they could reach this neck and check the flow, most of the animals would be saved. In Jim's mind were two thoughts—pity for the poor brutes, and remembrance that the majority of them belonged to men who were fighting the wilderness, and to whom the loss might mean ruin.

Elmer reached the gap first and, shouting at the top of his voice, tried to steady the rushing mob. A moment later Jim joined him. Then came a time of such peril that even Jim blanched a little and Elmer was openly afraid. A tree grew out of a crevice in the rock beside the opening, and on this the two men climbed in their attempts to check the cattle. It bent beneath their weight until their dangling legs touched the moving horns, that banged them grievously and ripped their trousers to the knees. For a moment the brutes were halted; as the pressure behind them increased, they came on again, panic-stricken.

"My God, boss, she's giving way!" groaned Elmer as the tree sank lower. "She's busting up by the roots!"

Without a moment's hesitation Jim let go and dropped right in front of the advancing cattle.

If the tree had fallen with them, there would have been no escape; the cattle would probably have gone right over them.

The tree swung up, lifting Elmer clear. But there was nothing of the craven in the silent stockman, and he dropped beside Jim.

Again the cattle checked. Two men in the open put more fear into them than the stoutest bars or branches.

There was no escape now. The leading beasts were almost touching them, forelegs slanted out as they frantically resisted the force behind.

"We can't do it!" groaned Elmer, relaxing his efforts for an instant.

"We must!" Jim snapped. "No hope of getting out!"

They were hoarse from shouting, and Jim's waving arms felt like lead; but still they kept it up, and would keep it up until the hoofs trampled them into the earth. Elmer's cries were like the croak of a raven; he reeled helplessly forward, clutching at a steer that had been pressed out from the others.

In that clutch lay their salvation. The frightened steer sprang back to his fellows, rearing up with a bellow on the massed cattle, checking, for an instant, the pressure behind; before the forward surge could come again, men sprang hurriedly into the gap, and the rush was over.

Jim turned to grip the great hand of Anderson, whose relief found vent in a bellow of joy. He almost hugged his young employer, and his face

beamed. Ikey was grinning wildly, and O'Reilly gave a huge sigh of relief.

"That was a close call, Mr. Langthorne!" he panted. "If we'd been a minute later, it'd been all up with yer. We heard the shots and the noise of the cattle, and we rode like hell! Others all right?"

Jim looked towards Elmer before he spoke, but the stockman had gone back to the cave. Then he told them all.

"Did yer say Price is tied up over at the Plain?" asked Anderson quietly; but Jim noticed that his hands were clenched, and the sinews of his arms stood out like cords.

"I expect the police have him by now," Jim replied. "No, Anderson!" "He's paying pretty heavily for his villainy; you must not go! Besides, you couldn't touch a bound man!"

The big fellow looked at him for an instant, then his hands unclenched and his muscles relaxed.

"You're right, boss. I couldn't."

The rush being checked, the stockmen rounded up the cattle and drove them from their dangerous position. Some twenty head had been forced over the cliff, but they soon had the others back in safer surroundings. They had hardly got them away when two troopers rode up.

"Thought we'd lost the mob, Mr. Langthorne," one of them greeted Jim. "When the shooting began, they went mad. Nice, tidy lot. Must be over six hundred. The cockies down below 'll

be glad of the sight of them again. We've got most of the duffers. Two chaps shot, and one of our men hit, but nothing bad. The rest of our fellows are yonder on the plain where the hut is. Any of you seen the Sergeant?"

Jim told him where he had last seen Ellis. The other looked grave, and, getting off his horse, walked with Jim out of earshot of the rest.

"I don't like it at all," he said in a low voice. "The Sergeant has sworn to get that man if the man doesn't get him first. He's near mad about him. For the last week he's been going night and day; and God only knows how he keeps up! I caught sight of the chap myself, for a second, and—" he was silent, then went on. "It may be only fancy, but he was—"

"Moses! Look! "shrieked Ikey, whose keen eyes had been restlessly searching the hill opposite them. "There's the Sergeant after a chap! He's got him! No, he ain't! God Almighty! if he ain't got the Sergeant!"

Two men were riding at a breakneck speed down the steep hill-side. The man in front turned round in his saddle, and fired. There was a thin, darting line of smoke and a faint report, and Ellis reeled slightly, but still held on.

"My heavens!" the Sergeant's shot! Any way of getting down that hell of a cliff? He'll be killed if we don't do something! Elmer, you know a way?"

"Not a horse-track," answered the stockman.

"There's a place one can get down afoot, but it ain't none too safe!"

"Show it quick!" cried the other desperately. "God! he's plugged again!" This time the Sergeant fell forward on to the pommel of his saddle, then recovered himself. In his hand was a heavy automatic; he would shoot when there was no doubt as to the result.

"The man 'll be killed!" groaned Timothy, who had run out to them. "Why the mischief doesn't he fire?"

"Only one cartridge left, I guess," said the trooper. "Come on, boys, we must do something!"

With Elmer leading, they scrambled and slid down an almost precipitous track. Several times they were in danger of rolling headlong; but they won to the bottom at last, just in time to see the final stage of the tragedy.

The fugitive's horse was on the ground, panting out its life through a bullet-hole behind the shoulder. The rider crouched beside it—waiting. He, too, had only one shot left.

When barely ten yards distant, Ellis pulled up short, and the report of his pistol merged into that of the other's. He sat rigid for a moment; then fell headlong to earth,clutching the grass in the agony of his death-throes.

The other rose unsteadily, staggered to the fallen man, and knelt beside him. For a brief moment he stared, his look of triumph changing to one of agony. He rose feebly, reeled drunkenly, then fell across the body of the Sergeant.

"My God! what have I done?" he muttered.

"Too late!" The trooper was almost sobbing. "This is a bad business, Mr. Langthorne! Great heavens! Look at them two! Are they—" He broke off, and looked helplessly at the others.

Ellis's face was calm and peaceful, but the other's was twisted with a great horror.

"Are they—" he began again in hushed tones.

"They are," O'Reilly answered. "What an awful thing! Fancy them twin brothers shooting one another. The Sergeant didn't know it when he died, I guess; but the other poor devil did. I knew 'em both when they was young fellers. The Sergeant was always straight and a fine chap. Bob was as wild as a scrub bull and as plucky as they make 'em, but he couldn't run straight. Good-hearted chap as a rule, but a devil when roused. Thought he had left the State years ago. They were fond of one another, too. My God! it's awful!"

CHAPTER XXI

A FORTNIGHT passed, and people were beginning to forget the horrible doings about the shores of Green Lake. Nell had been carried to the homestead, where her health and strength were quickly returning. Jane and Betty stayed to help with the nursing, and Timothy was hardly absent from her for a moment, except for a brief sleep or a hasty meal. For several days it seemed as if death must come, but a strong and healthy constitution won out in the end.

Jim and Dunstan, with O'Reilly's and Elmer's help, had taken the cattle to Looeena. On their way the troopers and their captives passed them. Elmer rode up to the bound Price, who was a shivering travesty of a man, looked at him for a moment, then, with a little shudder, rode back again.

"My God! Mr. Langthorne," he whispered to Jim, "I'd sooner be dead ten times over than like that! "He's paying; and paying heavy, too!" Then his eye blurred, as he thought of the fresh mound of earth behind the homestead.

Jim and Dunstan returned late one afternoon just as the setting sun was kissing the mountain peaks with lips of gold. Jane met them at the

gate, and, while she and Dunstan lingered, Jim went hurriedly to the house. Mrs. O'Reilly gripped his hand, then pointed to a little rise beyond the homestead, where a slim figure stood drinking in the glory of this autumn evening.

"She's fretting a bit, but now you're back, the little darling 'll be herself again. You're a lucky man, Mr. Langthorne! The sweetest! The prettiest! The—Why, hang it, the feller's gone!" she chuckled. Don't believe he heard a word I said!"

Tea was over, and Mrs. O'Reilly flatly refused the usual assistance.

"You've plenty to say to one another, and now's a good time to say it. Joe 'll help me. Then, when I'm done, we'll have a good old crack!"

The sun had gone, but a white moon lit the silent land with pale beauty. It was very still. A flock of duck whistled overhead, and the plaintive call of some lonely swan broke the silence for a moment. Mrs. O'Reilly folded up her apron neatly and gave a sigh of relief. Work was over until the morrow. She went first to the invalid's room. Timothy was, to all appearances, feeling his patient's pulse and examining the appearance of her eyes.

"I ain't wanted here, that's plain!" she murmured, and softly retraced her steps. On the verandah she heard Jane's low, pleasant laugh, but the deep shadow of a friendly shrub covered that couple safely.

"Not wanted here, either," she sighed, and went through the house to the back, where a great bushy-topped myrtle stood. O'Reilly had built a seat beneath it, which was a pleasant refuge on a hot summer's day, and a delightful resting-place on a warm evening. The seat was occupied, and she stood for a moment watching wistfully.

"Blowed if I ain't in the road here!" she said mournfully, then stopped and sniffed.

"Hanged if I don't!" she said, and made her way to the stable, from the back of which came the aroma of a particularly strong brand of tobacco she had known for over thirty years.

"That you, Pat?" to a form seated in deep shadow with its back against the building.

A grunt was the answer.

"Pat," she whispered, as she sank down beside it and moved so close that shoulder rubbed shoulder, "I feel dreadful lonely to-night. It's jest thirty-two years since we sat like this, and as the others are doing it, why—why—"

O'Reilly inhaled a great breath of smoke; exhaled it slowly and deliciously; took his pipe from his mouth, laid it carefully beside him, and drew the sleeve of his coat across his lips; reached out an arm, and—

"Why, it's jest like the old days!" his massive spouse sighed luxuriously.

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