

# The Romance of a Station

**An Australian Story**

**Praed, Mrs. Campbell (1851-1935)**

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## **Prefatory Note.**

“THE Romance of a Station” begins on the solid earth of experience, and wanders across the border-line into the misty cloud-region of Fancy and Fiction.

The opening chapters picture faithfully enough the scene of one of my own early homes, and describe life on an island which may be found marked on any map of Australia. Almost all the incidents are real, and even the most romantic of the episodes have their foundation in fact.

R. M. PRAED.

# The Romance of a Station an Australian Story

## Chapter I. Across the Narrows.

“THERE'S a fire at the South End, Mrs. Ansdell. Your husband is signalling for Rame's boat. You'll see him this evening.”

I ran out to the verandah of the Police Magistrate's house. Yes, there was the beacon light shining like a big red star, low down in the heavens, far off across Gundabine Bay. I heard one of the pilots shouting at the verandah of the wooden public-house opposite:

“Rame, I say! Hurry up with your nobbler. There's Ansdell on the Island signalling to be brought over.” Then I saw Rame slouch out of the bar, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his Crimean shirt, and trot down to the wharf; and I knew that in two or three hours' time my husband would be with me, and I was glad, for I was a bride, and this had been our first week of separation.

“I shall go back with my husband to-morrow,” I declared resolutely.

Mrs. Jarvis, the Police Magistrate's wife, shook her head remonstrantly.

“It will be much wiser to wait a little longer. The house isn't ready for you: I fancy the carpenters are at work still.”

“I'll help the carpenters,” I replied.

“There are no servants, and you aren't used to roughing it in the bush.”

“Oh, yes, I am. Why, I have lived all my life in the bush, and I love it. If you had ever seen dear old Bungroopim, Mrs. Jarvis, you wouldn't wonder that I am glad to have married a squatter instead of a townsman.”

We both laughed, for we both knew that that wouldn't have made any difference; and Captain Jarvis put in —

“Oh, yes; I know what your ‘bush’ was like — cool verandahs covered with roses and Cape jasmine and grape-vines, mountains in the distance, good buggy roads, and plenty of neighbours — lots of girls and young men, and races and picnics, and good times all round. That was kid-glove roughing it, Mrs. Ansdell, and you'll find life on the Island a different sort of thing.”

“The roses and the Cape jasmine will cover the verandah in time,” I answered; “and as for the girls and the young men and the good times, I don't care about all that now.”

“But the mosquitoes, Mrs. Ansdell?” said his wife. “You can't imagine how bad they are on the Island at this time of the year. Don't you think it would be wiser to wait till the plague has lessened?”

“The mosquitoes could not be worse than they are here,” I returned; for

as we sat in the verandah the air was full of the buzzing of insects, and we flourished whisks of horsehair while we talked.

“I am sorry to disturb your calm resignation,” said Captain Jarvis, “but I am afraid they will if I do not. The Island mosquito is a peculiarly ferocious beast. Let me give you a bit of advice, Mrs. Ansdell. Buy up all the gauze netting and all the Persian insect-powder in Gundabine before you go over. It's a fact that Lambert and his hands always went out mustering with their heads in bags.”

Lambert was the former owner of the Island, from whom my husband had a few months before bought the station and the cattle which ran upon it.

In spite of Captain Jarvis's warnings, and Mrs. Jarvis's gentle dissuasion — in spite also of a certain sinister suggestiveness in the compassionate interest which was shown in me by every inhabitant of Gundabine, from the postmistress to the storekeeper's assistant, my resolution, fixed some days before, had not wavered. I was determined to brave all discomfort — to brave even my husband's opposition, and to insist upon returning with him.

I had been married only a month. I was longing to start on my new life, and to settle into my new home, the blue shores of which were tantalisingly visible across the bay; and here I was, imprisoned in this dreary coast township in sight of the Promised Land, and forbidden to pass the strip of water that separated me from it. I liked the idea of living on an island. This stretch of country, forty miles long by fourteen broad, was to be our kingdom — my husband's and mine. There was no one to dispute possession except a little colony of pilots who lived at the lighthouse and telegraph station quite at the north end, and with whom I determined to make friends — they had already sent me wedding presents of coral and mother-of-pearl from the nautilus shell.

The undulating outlines of our Island gave promise of picturesque scenery. It was all interesting and romantic. There was something fascinating in the thought that only at full or new moon, when the tide was lowest, could man or beast swim across the Narrows to the mainland. I liked the idea of being separated from the world by that long, lonely, man-grove-fringed strait which, no broader than a river at its neck, widened out some twenty miles lower into the beautiful Gundabine harbour that had filled me with admiration as we had entered it in the coasting steamer. In calm weather the bay was blue and smiling; but when a south-east gale blew, and the waves dashed on the little islets that stood like a row of sentinels between the great island and the mainland, and the sea-horses chased each other, it was no pleasant passage to make on a dark night in Rame's skiff or the Island boat. But I did not let myself foresee possible storms and terrors, and I would not dwell upon practical difficulties and inconveniencies such as the carriage of household goods

and stores, and having to send to Gundabine for our mail. Neither Alec nor I had realized these as yet.

I broached my daring project to Alec that night, but it was a long time before I could win his consent. The mosquitoes were awful, he said; then the carpenters had only just finished their work; and there was no one to clean the place except the stockman's wife, whom Alec described as "an ill-tempered shrew." Nothing was ready for me. The place had a bad name, and all Alec's efforts to get a servant in Gundabine had been unavailing. We must wait for the next emigrant ship, and then he would go to Stonehampton and bring back a tidy girl. In the meantime I had better stay where I was. He did not think I should ever like the Island. He had not dreamed that mosquitoes could be so bad; he had bought the station in the winter — had he inspected it in the summer he would have known that it was not a fit place for a lady to live in. He was anxious and disheartened, in short; and this made me only the more determined to go at once and share the discomforts of which I thought but lightly. He gave in when he saw I was resolute, but it was not till the last moment, and not till I had drawn a doleful picture of my suffering and loneliness at Gundabine. It could only be a question of number and degree between mosquitoes and sandflies here and mosquitoes and sandflies there. I had two hands, I urged, and no discomfort could be more unendurable than the stuffy squalor of Sykes's hotel, with the noise of the bar always going on beneath my room.

We were sitting in the balcony of this, the only decent inn in Gundabine, and overlooked the one long straggling street of the township. Opposite was the square-verandahed red-brick building where the Police Magistrate lived, and which contained all the Government Offices. A little lower stood a large weather-boarded shanty placarded in big letters, "A. Bell & Sons, Agents for the A. S. N. Co.," which twice a week was the scene of brief activity when the passenger steamboats put in from north and south. A wooden pier extended some fifty yards into the muddy inlet upon which Gundabine was built. Here a pair of Chinamen were gesticulating over the unpacking of a boatload of vegetables, and three or four half-naked gins, with their piccaninnies slung on their tattooed backs, whined piteous entreaties for tobacco to an angler perched on one of the log bulwarks of the pier. Further back lay a mud flat fringed with mangroves, and inland upon the crest of a rise stood a public-house, a wooden chapel, and a general store, outside which a variety of heterogeneous wares lay exposed, from a side-saddle to a sausage machine. There was an air of utter stagnation about the place, and it was quite a relief to the monotony when a bushman in his Crimean shirt and cabbage-tree hat, with the pannikin rattling at his saddle-bow, and his valise strapped before him, cantered down the road and dismounted at Sykes's, exchanging a greeting with Captain Jarvis as

he passed: "Who's down? Come over and have a nip" — the common salutation in Gundabine; and I used sometimes to wonder how many "nips" it was possible for a Gundabinian to swallow in the twenty-four hours without getting seriously drunk.

Sykes's itself was a wooden two-storeyed building with verandahs above and below, the lower one screened from the road by several flowering oleanders, and the bar opening upon it, while its edge formed a convenient lounge for the tipplers who frequented it. Two or three gaunt Papaw apple-trees, with their tall bare stems, feathery tips, and clusters of yellow fruit growing out from beneath the leafy crown, overshadowed our balcony and gave a sort of Oriental look to the place; a creeping passion-fruit twined round the wooden pilasters; already, though it was hardly dusk, the hum of millions of insects had begun. The air was hot and clammy, with that curious sense of teeming life which a tropical evening brings. But for the light breeze which swept up from the sea it would have been unbearably oppressive. Our boat lay at anchor beside the pier, and just then a short, squat man — he whom I had watched the previous night, with his flannel shirt open at the breast, and a bowie knife stuck at his belt, staggered out of the bar, though he had kept his senses sufficiently to touch his hat to us in the balcony.

"Rame is half seas over already," said Alec. "We must be off to-night. He will be too far gone to manage the boat to-morrow."

Rame, otherwise a fairly useful member of Gundabine society — for he was always ready for an odd job — shared the local weakness for a "nip," only he called it a "nobbler."

"How is the wind, Rame?" shouted Alec.

"S.S.E., and be damned to it," replied Rame.

"You idiot!" returned Alec. "Can't you answer a civil question without swearing? Go and sober yourself, and bail out the boat. The tide serves at midnight; and, mind you, if I find a dram in the locker, overboard it goes."

Rame lurched along to the pier, and Alec went out to satisfy himself as to the condition of the two black boys.

We embarked a little after midnight. It was still very warm, and perfectly clear, and the steady breeze from the south did not deserve Rame's anathema, for it was bearing us swiftly towards our destination. A bright moon shone in the cloudless heavens, which were of that deep unfathomable blue that suggests infinity. There were myriads of stars — "God's candles," as we children used to call them — all the glittering Southern constellations, the Cross and its pointers high above us, and Aldebaran and Orion and the flaming tail of the Scorpion.

Alec steered, and Rame and the two black boys managed the sails. The currents were dangerous here and there, and we were obliged to tack often. I sat at the stern wrapped in my cloak, with my face bared to the

wind, and my pulses stirred by the beauty of the night and the loneliness and immensity of the scene. All was silent; even the men seemed awed, and I did not hear Rame swear once during the trip. We soon got away from the noises of the shore and the humming of insects, and there was no sound except that which the waves made against the bow of the boat as she glided through the phosphorescent water. As we got out into the Bay, however, we could hear the roar of the ocean beyond, and Rame remarked that it was "blowing pretty stiff out there." The islets seemed to sleep peacefully in the moonlight, all but one, from which curled up the smoke of a watch fire. The lights of Gundabine faded gradually as we sailed up the now narrowing strait. On our right the undulating contour of the Island; on our left the low bank of mangroves which marked the line of mainland. The tide was low, and the snake-like withes of the mangrove roots looked uncanny in the moonlight. Occasionally we passed a white beacon, which rose up like a grotesque ghost, its long arms casting flickering shadows on the water, or a red buoy wabbling above a sunken reef. Now we rounded a rocky point where stood a deserted cluster of Chinamen's huts, the remains of a *bêche-de-mer* fishing station; now we tacked across the Narrows to a little sandy bay which the waves lapped with a monotonous swash.

The passage of seventeen miles occupied us about four hours. The dawn broke, and a grey tender light crept softly over sea and land; then it flushed to delicate pink, and the sun rose round and red behind the straggling gum-trees on the Island. We had entered a tiny inlet bordered on each side with mangroves, of which the waxen green branches were level with the rising water. Rame unshipped the oars and rowed us to a pier of slabs built out into the creek, on one side of which was a rude boat-house made of saplings laid transversely. Alec let go the tiller and sprang on shore.

## Chapter II. My Kingdom.

ALEC held out his hands to me, and I stepped with a feeling of elation on to my new territory. Here, I am bound to confess, it disappointed me. The shore was barren-looking and stony, and the grass rank and withered. Lanky unhealthy gum-trees, with whiteybrown bark peeling off like scales, as if they were afflicted with some nasty disease, reared their lean heads above stunted wattles and spiked dried-up grass trees. As I looked inland I could see nothing but vistas of these melancholy white gums — a genuine red ironbark dropping stalactites of gum would have been a refreshment to the eyes. Presently I became aware that the air was alive with mosquitoes — grey, long-legged, ferocious monsters of the breed which infests the sea-shore. No, Captain Jarvis had not exaggerated their voracity! They offered a palpable resistance to one's hand, and their noise was as the roar of distant machinery, while at the same time I was conscious of severe prickings in every part of my body that was not guarded by double and treble layers of clothing. Alec watched me with anxiety.

“There, I told you,” he said. “I ought not to have let you come. But they are not as bad as this at the house, and they are always worst in the early morning.”

“Where is the house, Alec?” I said. “Let us go there at once.”

“It is five miles off,” he replied; “and the mosquitoes would eat you alive going through the swamp. Here, Charlie,” he called to one of the black boys, “yan along a head station; murra, make haste.\* Tell Tillidge to put Smiler in the cart and come for missus. You won't mind the cart,” he added; “the new buggy isn't put together yet.”

Charlie ran off as fast as his legs would carry him. Rame calmly lit his pipe and began to bail out the boat. Island Billy, the other black boy, took his tomahawk and cut off slabs from a neighbouring grasstree, while Alec collected twigs and sticks. Together they made a fire, Billy remarking compassionately to me: “Mine think it, missus, make em corbon big fellow smoke.† That make mosquito plenty sleep.”

I felt grateful to Billy. If the smoke did not make the mosquitoes “plenty sleep,” it kept them away a little. I sat down on a stone beside the fire, tucked my feet under my gown, and with watering eyes bent my head forward, while with a wisp of blady grass I switched at the mosquitoes behind. Meanwhile Rame joined the group, smoking like a

philosopher; and Alec and the black boy lit their pipes too, and kept up a desultory conversation in blacks' vernacular about a certain "poley" cow which was missing from one of the camps. By-and-by there was a crack of a stockwhip behind us, and Tillidge, the stockman, appeared on horseback, the black boy behind him driving a rough dray on two huge wheels, with iron chains and girders, and a board placed crosswise doing duty for a seat. Tillidge was the stockman, and a head-stockman never, if he can avoid it, drives or walks.

Tillidge was the typical Australian stockman — long, loosely-made, lean and disjointed-looking, sitting his horse magnificently as far as the saddle, but with his legs dangling anyhow in his stirrups, and a shortnecked spur on one foot. His face was red and burntup in appearance — a queer jumble of features, none of which seemed to belong to the other, and with an expression as stolid as that of a dummy. He was dressed in tight moleskin trousers turned up at the ends, and elastic-sided boots — a stockman always turns up his trousers at the ends; and he doesn't, as a rule, and unless he is inclined to be "flash," wear breeches and gaiters. These he leaves to his master. He wore a grey flannel shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbow, a silk handkerchief tied diagonally across his chest, a cabbage-tree hat ornamented with a strap round the crown, and a bit of greasy string, held by his front teeth, keeping the hat in a tilted position on the back of his head. He had a broader strap round his waist, to which was slung a small leather watch-pocket and a large pouch containing his clasp-knife, tobacco, a bit of old silk for crackers, and such-like etcaeteras. His stockwhip was coiled round like a snake, and hung on his left shoulder, with the handle dangling in front. He jogged along in an unconcerned way, his pipe in his mouth, till he got close to us; then he pulled up, nodding to Alec's "Good-day, Tillidge," and replying in a short, morose manner, running his words one into the other, as a bushman does, "G'd-day, sir."

Alec had already explained to me that Tillidge's wife — our only woman-servant on the Island at present — was a shrew. Tillidge bore her ratings in philosophical silence; and the habit had so grown upon him that he rarely opened his lips, except when it was actually necessary. But he was an admirable stockman, and, to use an Australian expression, could "put his legs over the worst buck-jumper that ever was foaled." His knowledge of the run was so valuable just now, while a mob of store cattle was being collected, that Alec begged me as a favour to interfere with the sweet will of Mrs. Tillidge as little as possible, and to put up with her bad temper, lest she should insist upon her husband throwing up his place at a day's notice. As I had come over on my own responsibility and in face of Alec's disapproval, I was quite prepared to be meek and submissive in my behaviour to the Tillidges.

"All been going on well at the station, Tillidge?" Alec asked.

“Four heifers square-tailed yesterday, sir; and the strawberry cow's calf died last night,” replied Tillidge, and relapsed into monosyllables, till Alec said cheerfully, “You see, I have brought Mrs. Ansdell over, Tillidge. I hope your wife will be equal to the extra cooking and all that,” when the stockman maintained a silence which I felt to be ominous.

Our portmanteaus were put into the back of the dray; Tillidge rode on ahead. Rame and the black boys set off walking by a short cut across the bush. Alec helped me up to the board and then mounted himself, and shook the whip over Smiler's back, thus dispersing a cloud of mosquitoes which the poor animal had been vainly trying to whisk off with its tail. As a parting attention, Island Billy had handed me a branch of wattle, and while we jogged along in the springless vehicle over stones and stumps and fallen logs, the iron chains and staples clattering as we went, I waved the wattle-branch among the mosquitoes at my back with one hand, while with the other I held tight to the girders to prevent myself from being shaken out. But when we came to a hill, the wattle-branch had to be thrown away, and I bent backwards to clutch the portmanteaus, which were in danger of slipping between the girders on to the road; and then the mosquitoes settled in a dense black swarm about our heads, and but for something comic about the whole situation, and for Alec's distress, I could have cried with fatigue and irritation.

The sun was high in the heavens now, and brooded with a moist, clammy heat. There was no sea-breeze among the thick gum-trees, and the she-oaks in the swampy ground were strangely still. I used to like the faint quivering sound which the she-oaks on the Ubi made, and it would have been home-like to hear it now. The birds had wakened, and there were little inarticulate twitterings in the boughs overhead, and the parrots called shrilly to each other, but I missed the crack of the whip-bird, and the soft cooing note of the Wonga-Wonga pigeon, and the sweet familiar chirp of my old friend the willy-wagtail. Suddenly I was startled by a demoniacal “Ha-ha-ha,” caught up and echoed by a chorus of invisible imps. They were only laughing jackasses, and I had heard their harsh merriment often enough, but it sounded drear and uncanny on this bridal home-coming.

By-and-by we reached a sliprail and entered the station paddock, where the milkers were browsing peacefully, and the horses whinnied as we drove by. They looked lean and harassed, poor things; and I did not wonder at it, if they had to pass their days and nights in waging war with their tails against the mosquitoes. One or two of them were cobs, and had no tails; and I raged then and afterwards against the inhumanity of former owners, who had deprived these poor beasts of their only weapon of defence.

We could see the house high above us, on a steep hill too precipitous to be ascended at this point any way but on foot. Deep gullies furrowed the

hill, and it was covered with thick tussocks of long-bladed grass and gum saplings, with here and there a big ironbark gum. There was a cleared space on the top, where the house was built. It was bare except for the grey gaunt skeletons of some dozen or so of white gums which had been "rung," and had bleached and withered. Alas, for my visions of the pretty cottage with its verandah and garden and its creeping roses and bouganvillea! The sun beat pitilessly upon a commonplace, new-looking wooden building, with a verandah, it is true, but a verandah unsheltered by trellis or drooping eaves. The house stood upon log piles, through which daylight shone conspicuously, and which were high enough almost for a grown-up person to stand upright beneath them; and, as I prophetically foresaw, to give shelter to a flock of goats that bleated by the stockyard fence. I could make out no garden, no greenery of any kind — all was bleak, glaring and desolate, beyond description.

We drove round by a waterhole pleasant to look upon, with the she-oaks round it, and the blue and yellow lilies on its surface. The stockyard lay close by at the foot of the hill. Alec was proud of the stockyard, and pointed out to me the height and impregnability of the great grey corner posts and rails, and the superior construction of the "crush," or branding lane, and the bailing-up pen. I was quite bushwoman enough to appreciate these advantages, and rejoiced accordingly; but my eye wandered to a wilderness of a garden beside the milking-yard, where two or three tall papaw apples towered above a mass of promiscuous vegetation; and I sighed when I saw that the greenstuff was mostly fat-hen — though I consoled myself a moment later by remembering that on the Ubi I had seen the free selectors use the fat-hen for spinach, and that we should not, therefore, die of scurvy; but I could not help exclaiming, at the discovery that there seemed nothing else eatable. "Oh, Alec, I thought pumpkins grew everywhere!" and Alec answered remorsefully, "Well, you see, Rachel, they don't grow wild; and I suppose when we were busy taking delivery of the cattle nobody thought of planting them. But never mind; as soon as I have cleared off this mob of store cattle, I'll set all hands to work, and we'll grow vegetables as fast as a Chinaman."

Alec was collecting a mob of bullocks for which a purchaser had offered, and a sale of which was absolutely necessary to pay off the mortgage on the station, and free us from the bank that had advanced us money for our start in life. We both had a horror of debt, and a dread of being sold up, like many an Australian station-buyer, who can only pay down a third of his purchase money, and who, in bad times of drought or pleura-pneumonia, is obliged to hand over his home to the obliging bank which has backed him. We weren't afraid of drought on the Island, and from our isolated position we had little cause to dread pleuro-pneumonia, and our debt was not a very large one; still, we wanted "to start fair." So Alec and I were of one mind about leaving everything else to take care of

itself till the store cattle had been safely crossed over the Narrows; and I quite agreed with him that it would be advisable to make any sacrifice of pride to keep Tillidge, who knew every nook and corner of the Island, and would bring cattle into the mustering-yard whose existence we could not have suspected.

Mrs. Tillidge did not belie her reputation. She looked a shrew; and as she came out into the yard when the dray drove up, and gave me a surly sort of greeting, I quite decided that I had better make no attempt to assert my authority as mistress of the place, for I saw that it would certainly be disputed. I did not feel disposed to resent her want of cordiality then. I was so hot, so tired, so cramped by my uncomfortable drive, so glad to have reached "home," so glad to be no longer enveloped in that buzzing, pricking cloud. It felt fresh and comparatively cool up here on the brow of the hill. The wind blew straight up from the ocean; and I began to understand why the late proprietor of the Island had perched his dwelling-place so high, and why green things wouldn't grow, and why the dead trees and even the grass tussocks curved in one particular direction.

The yard, into which we had driven, was enclosed on one side by the house, on the opposite one by the kitchen, and some rude slab buildings in line with it — the meat-store, and carpenter's shop, and such-like; and on the other two by a rough fence of perpendicular palings. There was a covered pathway across the yard, connecting the house and kitchen. A pair of ancient gins with skinny arms and hideous wealed faces sat there smoking short clay pipes. They were clad in red blankets slung over one shoulder and under the other. Several naked piccaninnies sprawled at their feet, uttering funny inarticulate sounds, and playing with the dogs, of which a tribe lay round — kangaroo hounds, mongrels from the camp, and some of a nobler breed, who kept a little apart on the sunny boards, as if they resented the proximity of the blacks. A flight of log steps led to the causeway; and out of the crevices lizards nimbly darted, their bright eyes and copper scales glittering in the sunlight. Two corrugated zinc tanks, one at each end of the front building, caught the sun also, and seemed to radiate heat. A low waterbutt close by one of them was evidently used for the washing of horses' backs when they came in hot from the run, to judge by the hoof-marks on the damp gravel, the dented quart-pots, and the saddles and bridles and straps hurled promiscuously on the verandah, at one end of which the tub stood. On the low verandah-roof of one of the outbuildings two or three bullock-skins were stretched out, and hung conveniently over the eaves, so that a strip of green-hide could always be cut when wanted, and the spiked palings of the fence supported junks of salted beef set forth to dry. A little covey of hawks swooped and swirled in the air above, but did not dare to pounce down upon prey so well guarded; for whenever the carrion birds came a little

nearer, the gins removed their pipes and began a loud crooning yell, "Wirra-wurra!" winding up with a fierce discordant "Wa-ah!" and I now understood why they sat there, and how they earned their tobacco.

All these little things imprinted themselves on my mind in a curious, vivid way. I suppose this is because it was my first home, and I was very young then and a bride. Girlhood is like a voyage on some soft hazy sea, where there are beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and balmy breezes which waft one onward, and storms too that never bring shipwreck, and islets where one may linger and dream of the Land of Possibilities at the end.

And then the land is reached, the possibilities become living experience, and there is a glamour over the first sights and sounds that greet one in that land which never grows dim or is forgotten. I can see the whole scene as distinctly now as though it were before me in actual reality — the untidy yard, and the bleary-eyed gins, and the swart, shiny piccaninnies tumbling off the causeway, and the dogs lazily lifting their heads to bark in a perfunctory fashion. Beaufort the big stately buckhound, who, though he was selfish and indolent, and too much of a fine gentleman to be of any use, was a credit to the establishment, and too well-bred to do a mean action; then the goggle-eyed bull-pup, who was so hideous that it was a distinction to be his owner, though he was a dog whose education had been neglected, and who never acquired the manners of good society; and there was Rose, the pointer, who put me in mind somehow of Mrs. Micawber — she was always surrounded by a brood of puppies, either in the infantine or the gambolling stage; and she had a worn, draggled appearance, and a pair of melancholy brown eyes, and at the same time an air of gentle, ladylike protest, as if to say that hard circumstances had placed her in a position of life for which by birth she was not fitted, but that she meant to do her duty all the same. Poor Rose! she had a way of beating a tattoo on the floor with her tail, and looking at one with her sympathetic bleared eyes; and that was the mode in which her emotions expressed themselves. When I was without servants, and had to cook the salt junk and make bread for the men, and wash up the plates and dishes in the kitchen, Rose, in the intervals of licking her puppies, would thus dumbly show her appreciation of the state of affairs, and I am sure that she wished to convey a sense of similarity between my position and her own.

Then Alec called out, "Monte! Christo!" and there bounced from the house a big black retriever, which jumped on to his master, and an Angora goat, with matted fleece that touched the ground, and a funny little knowing head and tiny horns like those of a child's toy lamb. Monte was a retriever which Alec had got out from England at a great expense, with a view to duck shooting on the Island, but who could never be brought to adjust his instincts to sport in Australia, and who was otherwise a bad dog, addicted to lying on the beds and to misbehaving

himself generally. As for Christo, Alec had imported him also, with the idea of starting an Angora goat farm, and selling the hair for the manufacture of shawls at a fabulous price; but it fell through somehow, and by-and-by Christo became an inconvenient pet, for he took up his quarters in the pantry by day, and made his couch in the bath by night, and he had to be banished at last. Perhaps I had better mention here that the bath-room, which sounds an unwonted luxury for the bush, was a bit of the back verandah next the tank partitioned off, and in which a zinc-lined bath had been built. There was always a bucket near the tank, so that we could fill the bath for ourselves; and its great advantage was that it had a hole in the bottom stopped up with a wooden bung, and that the water could be let off through the floor, and would meander under the house among the log piles and down the hill into one of the gullies — you had only to look through one of the wide cracks in the boards to see its course. Nevertheless, the bath-room had a great deal to do with the sale of the station, and had caught more than one intending purchaser. It was noticeable that the Island often changed hands, and that such transfers usually took place in the winter, when the mosquito larvae had their existence hidden in the grass tussocks and under the leaves of the lilies in the water-hole. There was as yet no record of a deed of purchase having been signed between the months of November and April, when the mosquitoes were in full force.

Alec had certainly been right when he described the house as dirty. It was very dirty. I don't think the bare wooden floors had been washed for months; and the carpenters had left plentiful *debris*, both in the rooms and the verandah. On the whole, however, it was rather a pretentious sort of house for the bush. It was built of sawn wood, and lined with well-planed boards; it was shingled, and it had not only a bath-room, but a pantry as well. There were three good-sized rooms in a line looking on to the verandah, which went round three sides, and was a long way from the ground and fenced with a light railing; then there were four smaller ones behind; and there was a tiny excrescence built out into the yard, called the office. It was in the office that all important interviews were held, agreements signed, brands entered, and the mustering roll of cattle made. There was a fireproof safe in which the station ledgers were kept, and a copying press, though to the best of my knowledge it was never once used; and the great Island seal, and the firearms and ammunition, and the big map of the station and the library, consisting of a dozen or so yellow-backed novels, "Spooner on Sheep," and "The Diseases of Cattle," "The Art of Horse-breaking," and "The Family Physician." Here also the medicine-chest was kept, and the supply of diachylon plaster, and in "pleuro time" the virus for inoculation. It would have been a cosy room if it had not been so dirty, and if the rafters had not been infested by bloated tarantulas, and an uncanny species of lizard of a sickly spotted

white, which had the curious habit of unfastening its tail when pursued, and of making off on its stump. These lizards inspired me with a superstitious terror. I have never solved the mystery of that movable tail — whether the reptile came back in the dead of night and recovered its property, or whether it had the power of growing a new tail whenever it pleased.

On the office side, which was the most sheltered, there was a wee enclosed patch — an abortive attempt at a flower garden. It was overgrown with rank grass, and there was an aloe in the middle, and one stunted poinsettia shrub, which threw out a branch or two of crimson leaves when winter came on. I had high hopes of this bit of garden, and planted verbenas, and Indian shot, and other hardy plants; but nothing would ever grow in the dreary, sun-scorched, stony plat. All round about the other end of the house was perfectly bare and wind-swept. The easterly side of the verandah was the only spot where on summer evenings there was a chance of being free from mosquitoes; and for that reason I chose for ourselves the bedroom and dressing-room which looked upon it. No hill rose between this exposed plateau and the open ocean seven miles distant. The south-east gales raged furiously round it, making the skeleton gum-trees quake and shiver bursting open the French windows, and sometimes blowing down the canvas ceiling. On such nights, above the wind, we could distinctly hear the roar of the Pacific.

The view from the verandah was extensive and pleasant to look upon. There was nothing to break it except the tall gum-trees which grew on the hump of the hill behind. In every other direction we looked out upon grey-green undulating slopes. We could not see the ocean or the Narrows, but across the strait on the mainland a blue-peaked mountain cut the horizon line. The mountain was called Mount Akobaora, which is the native name for the laughing jackass.

This was my home. Within, it was crude and rough; but that could be remedied. Captain Jarvis had promised to bring over our furniture in the pilot schooner, which would carry it all at once. The Island boat had gone on a special trip for the piano. The instrument stood forlornly in the bachelor parlour, its silk facings and crewel-worked back sadly out of keeping with walls painted the crudest and most offensive blue, and with the coloured prints from the *Illustrated News* which adorned them. Grosvenor Gallery art canons did not prevail in the Australian wilds. I felt very despondent at the sight of those walls, and the cheap mahogany chiffonier and horsehair covered sofa and armchair. Mrs. Tillidge came sulkily in and laid the table for lunch while I was pondering the possibility of softening down that terrible aniline blue. The sun poured through the uncurtained windows, and I discovered to my horror that I was doomed to a western aspect. Mrs. Tillidge placed a piece of dry salt

beef on the table, and flanked it with an equally impenetrable-looking three-cornered junk of bread — evidently the section of a camp-oven loaf — and a tin teapot and three iron cups. I wondered who was going to use the third cup. Presently Alec came in, followed by a short, weather-beaten, bearded man, whom he introduced as Mr. Kempsey, the second pilot at the North End. There wasn't much to be seen of Mr. Kempsey's features, he was so covered with shaggy hair; but his eyes gleamed benevolently, and I took a fancy to him at once. He was very shy at meeting a lady, but when he saw our meagre fare and our untidy condition, and glanced up at the white canvas ceiling, which was speckled with mosquitoes waiting for dusk to come down and settle on their victims, his compassion got the better of his shyness.

“You'll have to fetch in a good load of grass-tree, Mr. Ansdell,” said he. “Lambert kept it burning day and night, all along the verandah.” Then he produced a *dilly-bag* carefully lined with newspapers, and emptied from it a dozen rosy-cheeked apples. “Polly — my girl — sent these,” he went on. “If she'd ha' known that you were over, Mrs. Ansdell — and her mother would have worked the telegraph for a day or two — she'd ha' come over to help you put things straight.” Polly, I learned, was Mr. Kempsey's daughter, who was also telegraph-mistress at the Pilot Station. When we had admired the apples, Mr. Kempsey took from the capacious pocket of his blue blouse a pot of strawberry jam, explaining that when a Tasmanian brig came by he always did a bit of smuggling, for it didn't harm any one, and they'd be badly off at the Pilot Station if it wasn't for these bits of relishes. “I didn't suppose your store was rigged up yet,” he said; “and anyway you wouldn't have thought of fetching apples from Gundabine, Mr. Ansdell,” and then he regretted that he hadn't known that I was “along from Gundabine” too, for the missus had been saving some pots of apricot jam to send me; and if “I'd ha' thought, now,” he added, looking at the uninviting piece of beef, “those Tasmanian walnuts that Polly puts in pickle — they are a relish you couldn't get in Gundabine — and there was a whole sack of fresh onions.” But he brightened up, and exclaimed, as Alec came in with a bottle of grog he had just opened, “It'll be of no consequence, though, Mr. Ansdell, for there's the horse you'll be sending for your brother; and Billy can put the onions in his pack.”

Alec's brother, who was a lieutenant on board H.M.S. *Alecto*, just arrived on the Sydney Naval Station! I wondered what Mr. Kempsey meant. Alec gave me a comical look, and laid a blue telegraph paper beside my plate. The salt beef choked me as I read —

“From LOFTUS ANSDELL, H.M.S. *Alecto*, Sydney.

“To ALEC ANSDELL, Pilot Station, Moonbago Island.

“Got leave. Coming to see you. *Charlotte Corday* will drop me at the Pilot Station.”

I had not met my husband's brother. I had an impression that he would be fine and superior and English, and accustomed to seeing life from the "Government House" point of view (all naval officers who came to Leichardstown were asked to stay at Government House), and that his idea of bush hospitality would mean riding parties, and kangaroo hunts, and dances, and fare which, if homely, would be of its kind sumptuous. My heart sank within me as I thought of the salt beef, and of the limited supply of mosquito curtains, and of Mrs. Tillidge's sour face, and of the dirt everywhere.

"Never mind," said Alec. "We can't put him off now, seeing that the *Charlotte Corday* is due the day after to-morrow. We must make the best of it. Loftus won't mind. He has been cruising about the South Sea Islands, and he is used to roughing it."

This did not console me, for roughing it on a man-of-war is a different thing from roughing it on an island and being devoured by still, as Alec said, we had to make the best of it; and as soon as Mr. Kempsey had gone, I went into the spare room and inspected the mosquito curtains, which I found sadly the worse for wear. Mending them gave me occupation for some hours. The room certainly did not look comfortable. The floor, like all the other floors in the house, was bare, except for the accumulation of dirt which had been brought in by the muddy boots of its late occupant. There was a bed, and there was a washing-basin on a chair, and a looking-glass against the wall, and that was all. To be sure, our own room — which for a moment I magnanimously thought of resigning to the dreaded brother-in-law — was not much better. The floor was quite as dirty, and the washing apparatus stood on a board placed across two chairs; but then it had a magnificent mahogany looking-glass, and the mosquito curtains were in slightly better condition. On reflection, however, I decided that the looking-glass would be thrown away on Loftus, who, Alec informed me, did not shave. I wondered if it would be possible to set the black gins to work with a scrubbing brush; but when I went out late in the afternoon to try and put this bright idea into execution, I found that the gins and their lords, beguiled by certain information which Mr. Kempsey had unthinkingly imparted, concerning the whereabouts of another camp of blacks near the Pilot Station, had dismantled their gunyas, packed their *dilly-bags*, shouldered their piccaninnies, and were already on their way to the North End. Mr. Kempsey had taken away the junks of beef for the consumption of the pilots; the hawks were on the search for prey elsewhere; and the gins' occupation was gone. It was a bitter disappointment. I did not dare to appeal to Mrs. Tillidge. Alec had ridden out to look for the poley cow; and so I employed the remaining hours of light in unpacking my portmanteaus, and ruefully contemplating my pretty frilled petticoats and trousseau oddments, and in wondering how

long the supply would last, and who would starch and iron my frills when it had come to an end.

\*“Go to the head station; make great haste.”

†“I think, missus, we will make a great smoke.

### Chapter III. The Coming of Loftus.

THE sun set over Mount Akobaora, and I sat on the steps of the verandah watching it go down across the Narrows. The air was very still and warm, and there were bush-fires about; a smoky haze shrouded the forest wolds, turning them to a soft bluish-grey, which, while the sun lingered, had the faintest flush of rose. Then that died out. The night insects came out of their hiding-places, and curious indistinct chirps and noises mingled with the hoarse croak of the frogs in the water-hole at the bottom of the hill. Above it all there was a low definite and continuous roar. At first I thought the wind had risen, only the heads of the grass-tussocks did not bend. Then I realized that the air was thick and black, and angry buzzings sounded close to my ear, and sharp pricks on my bare hands and neck made me wince. It was the sudden rush and onslaught which the mosquitoes, in hiding during the glare and stir of the day, always made at nightfall, when there was not sufficient wind to blow them back into sheltered corners. I wrapped myself round as best I could. When Alec came in from the run, he and the black boys, following Mr. Kempsey's advice, set buckets filled with burning grass-tree all about the verandah and sitting-room. We ate with such appetite as we had from the same beef and bread which Mrs. Tillidge had furnished forth for our luncheon, and munched Mr. Kempsey's apples, and mournfully reflected that this was only early December, and that mosquitoes might reasonably be supposed to rage till March. It was not a cheerful prospect, but we were determined not to take the dark view of things, and Alec impressed upon me that this was really the first evening he had known upon the Island when there was no breeze.

"It is generally enough to knock a fellow down, let alone the mosquitoes," said Alec; and we planned how we would dispose of our knick-knacks and wedding presents, and how we would curtain in a corner of the verandah, and how we would cultivate the arid patch of garden, and, after a little time, revel in roses; and how, as soon as the cattle were across the Narrows, we would get rid of the Tillidges, and have a hard-working, cheerful "married couple," who would rear poultry, and curry the salt junk, and accommodate themselves to circumstances generally; and how at the end of all things we would sell the Island when the cattle had multiplied — and they multiplied in our imaginations after the fashion of the ring-straked and speckled cattle in the herds of Laban,

the son of Nahor, which Jacob tended — “You know that's one advantage in an island,” said Alec, persuasively, “there's no one to brand our calves, and the cattle can't stray away, and so the stock are bound to increase more quickly than they could on a mainland station” — and how then we would invest our rapidly-made fortune, and set sail for England. That was how we talked; and Rose beat her sympathetic tattoo on the floor all the while; and we were not at all cast down, considering how our skins smarted with the mosquito bites, and how the smoke from the burning grass-tree got into our eyes and up our noses, and made us cough with its pungent aromatic odour.

“As soon as we get settled down a bit, we must have Lina Sabine over,” said Alec; “she will be a nice companion for you; and she must be dull too, for Sabine has to be a good deal away at his reef now that he has gone in for gold-mining.”

I knew all about the Sabines, though I had only seen Mrs. Sabine once when she had come into Gundabine for the day with her husband. She was very pretty, and she was very young, and she had only been married a few months. I wondered why she had married Mr. Sabine, who was loutish and stupid, and had the reputation of taking more brandy than was good for him. But then so many people in the Gundabine district did that, and Mr. Sabine, who was a squatter, over from Mount Akobaora, had struck on a rich reef, and was going to be a millionaire, it was said. Mrs. Sabine had been one of the northern belles, and Alec told me that she had had more offers than she could count, and before she married she had been considered a flirt. I wondered sometimes if she had flirted with Alec, and if that was the secret of his interest in her; but he never would tell me anything about that, and only said that he and Lina had always been first-rate friends, and that Sabine wasn't half a bad fellow; and that she was a clever girl and a lady, which was more than he could say for all the Gundabine young women. On the whole I was disposed to like Mrs. Sabine, and I was disposed not to be jealous; and I didn't press Alec as to whether he had ever had any tender passages with Lina. I think that young wives who question their husbands closely on these points have a very undeveloped sentiment of honour as regards other women. In fact, though I do not like to say hard things of my own sex, I cannot help feeling that the unsatisfactory condition of social machinery is in a great measure due to this want of loyalty between woman and woman. Sitting over our conjugal *tete-à-tete* in the verandah, we could hear Mr. and Mrs. Tillidge indulging in a conjugal wrangle in the kitchen over their pan of burning grass-tree. That is to say, we could hear Mrs. Tillidge; for Tillidge seemed to keep true to his philosophic principle of silence. Mrs. Tillidge wasn't going to wait on people that ought to have been brought up to wait on themselves, and that were no better than she was herself, and that should have the sense to stop over in Gundabine till they could

persuade a servant, as *was* a servant, and used to muck, to come and let herself be eaten alive by insects. If Tillidge thought that Mrs. Tillidge meant to stand it he was very much mistaken, and if he thought that soda scones and milk puddings and starched muslin skirts were necessary for people that chose to settle themselves in an island that — let alone women — wasn't fit for beasts to live in, why *he* might make them, and starch them, and iron them, and — viciously — gauffre them, too, if he pleased; but *she* wasn't going to, that was all. Mrs. Tillidge had been hired to cook for a master, but she hadn't been hired to cook for a mistress; and she wasn't going to set two lunches in the day for anybody; and if people were hungry, they might wait till the gentlemen came in from the run, or else help themselves. Then the wrathful monologue became inarticulate, and seemed to have moved to a little distance, being diversified with sundry clattering and snapping noises. Mrs. Tillidge was evidently settling the fire for the night. After a bit, Tillidge's voice sounded for the first time, slow and rasping, but with a quaver in it which we felt boded ill. "Now, look here, Louisa, I ain't going to be bossed into doing a nasty trick; and I tell you I mean to see those store cattle across the Narrows; and you may jaw as much as you please, but I won't go off till the whole lot are mustered; then I'll clear out as fast as you please, for I don't like being eaten alive any more than you do." And we heard the back kitchen door bang, and concluded that the discussion was closed for the present. Alec and I drew a deep breath, and looked at each other and laughed uneasily. The situation was critical. Mrs. Tillidge might succeed in "bossing" Tillidge, to our serious inconvenience, perhaps to the loss of our great sale; and it would be all my fault.

"We must get through the muster as quickly as possible," said Alec mournfully; "and you must do the best you can with Loftus, and keep out of that vixen's way. I believe she is right, Rachel, and the Island isn't fit for beasts to live in, let alone human beings. Look at those poor wretches of horses."

Indeed, I had been pitying the horses for some time, though I hadn't called Alec's attention to their misery. A dozen or more had gathered round the verandah railings, and were poking their heads into the smoke and whinnying piteously. They couldn't get under the curtains, poor brutes! and their garment of hair was small protection against the savage assaults of the Island breed. "Oh, Alec," I cried, "you must send away those miserable things without any tails. How could any one have been so barbarous!"

I wanted him to put out the buckets of smouldering grass-tree, so that the horses might gather round the smoke; but he was afraid to do that, lest the buckets should be kicked over, and the grass round the house, and perhaps the fence, set alight; so we went to bed and lay in comparative peace within the netting, listening to the whirr of the insects,

which was like that of machinery in motion, and the melancholy snorts outside. I stayed awake a long time, suffering as Abraham might have suffered had he known of the tortures of Dives. Those horses got on my nerves, and kept me awake many a night afterwards.

I did the best I could the next day to make ready for the English brother-in-law, but that best did not amount to much. The poley cow, which was a valuable beast, still absorbed Alec's attention, and he went out on the run with Tillidge and the black boys, so that I was left to my own devices. Mrs. Tillidge kept to the kitchen, or passed stolidly to and fro in the yard as she fetched water from the tanks, true to her determination to ignore my presence in the establishment; and I was too shy and too proud to disturb her by asking questions or favours. I made my bed and put things as tidy as I could in the sitting-room and the chamber destined for our coming guest, and rummaged about till I found a broom and a duster; but the floor was too ingrained with dirt for the broom to be of much use. It was very hot — a still brooding heat, with smoke on the horizon telling of bush fires across the Narrows, and a cloud hanging over Mount Akobaora. I hoped there might be a thunderstorm by-and-by, and gave a few minutes to memories of the delicious freshness, the damp fragrance of earth and flowers, the louder gurgle of running river, the sense of renewed life in man and beast and bird and insect, which have been wont to follow a summer storm among my dear Ubi mountains. But, alas! there was the mournful reflection that here dampness and drip would mean an increased activity in the mosquito world.

There was a great deal else to be thought of, however. As I took stock of our accommodation, I wished with all my heart that Captain Jarvis and the pilot schooner, with our furniture and crockery and groceries, were now on their way up the Narrows. But this was not to be yet, and in the meantime we must all — English brother-in-law included — submit to rough it, with the best grace in our power.

I thought it possible, in spite of the meagre fare set before us on the previous evening, that there might be resources in the commissariat with which Mrs. Tillidge had not chosen to make herself acquainted. After some search I found the store keys hanging on a nail in the office, and went resolutely across the back yard, under the eyes of Mrs. Tillidge, to explore the slab outbuilding with its earthen-floored verandah, and the hides drooping over its bark roof. One of the doors had a great rusty padlock, into which my largest key fitted, and I found myself in a dim cobweb-hung room, with gaping apertures in the slab walls, and bloated tarantulas enjoying themselves in the dusty corners, and the traces of my dreaded white lizard visible in the rafters above. There was a stack of flour bales reaching nearly to the wall-plate, and a smaller one of sticky mats of ration sugar; beside it there was a chest of coarse tea, and under

the window a sort of counter with scales and weights and tin scoops upon it that sorely needed scouring. I found a tub of caked tobacco, and clay pipes in plenty, and kegs of rum, a case of whisky, and soap and soda, and turpentine, and bluestone for horses' backs, and tar, and such-like necessaries of existence on a cattle station; but I found no tinned delicacies, nor any of the small luxuries with which a bush store is usually so liberally furnished. It was evident that no comfort was to be gained here.

Then I went to the meat-store, which was unsavoury and distinctly suggestive of bachelor housekeeping, and where there were only cakes of pickled beef and piles of corned junk and heaps of large-grained salt. I left the place sadly, and wandered about. It occurred to me that I had heard the crowing of a cock, and that where there were cocks there must be hens, and that a dilapidated fowl-house at the back of the kitchen, which I had certainly observed when driving up, might furnish forth fresh eggs; but the hens, if there were any, seemed, like other inhabitants of the Island, untrained in the ways of civilization, and preferred apparently to make their nests among the grass tussocks. Anyhow, there were no traces of occupation in the fowl-house, which I decided would, when lime-washed and provided with straw and boxes, make a very comfortable domicile for respectably brought-up hens. Clearly the Island poultry, for want of improving companionship, had fallen into nomadic habits, and a condition of barbarism which it would take an importation of barn-door missionaries to improve.

I walked back towards the house in a depressed frame of mind, making a little *detour* to the front, through rank blady grass and over the fallen bodies of dead gum-trees, rather than go across the yard and allow Mrs. Tillidge to triumph over my discomfiture. As I approached the verandah I heard a queer defiant cackle, and a lean, leggy, ferocious-looking hen walked out from under the house, and at sight of me flew in a scared manner down the hill. She was not a prepossessing hen. There was nothing comfortable or clucking or domestic or hen-like about her. She seemed rather to resemble a tamed eagle. But still she had evidently laid an egg, and I felt pleasantly disposed to that hen, and anxious to encourage her to be sociable. So I called "Chuck, chuck, chuck!" in a persuasive crescendo, and threw out a handful of weevily rice which I had brought from the store; and presently I had the satisfaction of seeing her return in company with two other hens, gaunter and more savage than herself, but with a certain air of birth, for these were of a hybrid Spanish breed, and had black feathers and red eyes; whereas my hen had come of lowly speckled parents. With them was a cock which had lost its comb and most of its tail feathers. They were good enough to gobble up the rice, however, and then with shrill screeches darted into the gully again. Presently I made my way among the log piles under the house,

and sure enough I found a nest — just such an uncomfortable nest as that hen would have made, a hole scratched in the damp soil at the edge of the channel which the bath water had worked for itself. There were half-a-dozen eggs in the nest, and one of them was pink and thin-shelled, and evidently new-laid. I was as pleased at the sight of those eggs as if I had discovered a treasure, and grubbed about till I got right under the bung-hole of the bath, but without coming upon any more. Determined to pursue my investigations, I crept into the garden patch, and, duly mindful of snakes, poked carefully in the dry grass and round about the aloe and poinsettia shrub, where I was rewarded by finding two more nests, each with several eggs in it. I strewed some rice close to the nest, so that the hens might see that they were to be rewarded for doing their duty. By this time it was long past the luncheon hour; and I began to see that Mrs. Tillidge meant to be as good as her word, and did not intend to set two luncheons in the day. I felt that I hated Mrs. Tillidge. I should have liked to go boldly to the kitchen and demand that a meal should be served. I should have delighted to order fresh scones and fried junk. I would even have sent her to the stockyard to gather fat-hen, to do duty as cabbage for bubble-and-squeak. But I thought of Alec's perplexities, and of those store cattle, and of Tillidge and the debt, so I relinquished the idea of “bossing” Mrs. Tillidge, and meekly searched in the pantry for a piece of the three-cornered loaf, and breaking one of my fresh eggs into a tumbler with a spoonful of Alec's brandy, lunched with grim satisfaction in the thought that at any rate I was not going to be starved out by the enemy. I lunched in the same way — with the addition of a slice of salt beef which I would secrete at breakfast when Alec was not looking — all the time Mrs. Tillidge was with us. She never would serve anything till the sound of cracking stockwhips and lowing cattle was heard, about four o'clock, when the men came in from the run, and Alec was in too great a hurry to get to the yards again to ask any questions. I had every reason to be grateful to those hens for providing me with a relish to my meagre repasts.

There was no thunderstorm that day, and the mosquitoes were not quite so bad in the evening. The next day Alec went up himself with the spare horse, and brought back his brother from the pilot station. I felt very nervous when I heard Loftus's decidedly British voice in the yard; and my Australian shyness of the travelled English visitor — who is held in very different estimation from the ordinary “new chum” about to serve his Colonial apprenticeship — prevented me from going out to welcome him as I might otherwise have done. The voice was very hearty and good-humoured, but it had a round, imperious ring in it, I thought; and the polite but formal way in which he requested Mrs. Tillidge to give him a glass of water made my soul shrink.

“You haven't got any beer, have you?” he asked.

“No,” said Alec. “You don't often get beer in the bush. It's an expensive luxury — the carriage and all that, you know. But there's plenty of grog inside.

Loftus did not seem to care about the grog. “By Jove!” I heard him cry, “what's that? I declare it's a mosquito; and I never saw such a big 'un, even at the Solomons.” And then I heard him tell how, when they were cruising along the South Sea Islands, where mosquitoes were troublesome, they always put to sea when dusk fell, so as to get away from them.

“We haven't got a man-of-war here to put out to sea in,” rejoined Alec; “and I may as well tell you straight off, old fellow, the mosquitoes are a caution on this Island.”

“I suppose I can stand them if Rachel can,” replied Loftus; and by this time he had got into the sitting-room and we had made acquaintance. I began to think that I need not be so much in awe, after all, of my English brother-in-law, though he was of quite a different type from the ordinary colonial young man, and even from Alec, who had rubbed off a little of his polish, and took rather a pride sometimes in being more bushman than the bushmen. Loftus was very good-looking, bright, cheery, and gracious, with a sailor's ease of manner and a sailor's compact figure and somewhat rolling walk. He was clear and fresh-complexioned, and I thought with a sigh how the mosquitoes would love him. He had not been in the house ten minutes before he had made himself quite at home. First of all, he made us tell him all about our marriage, and what we had paid for the station, and whether “the governor had come down handsomely,” and then what sort of a wedding present I would like best, and what was the pedigree of the bull pup; and what yield of wool we hoped to get from the Angora goat, Christo; and where our supplies came from, and how much it would cost to start a steam-launch between the Island and Gundabine. He insisted on being taken into every room, declared the office to be as cozy a den as any one could desire, if only it were cleaned up a bit; inspected the station ledgers, took down “Spooner on Sheep,” resolved to glean all the information possible about Australian rural life, and was much disappointed at learning that there were no sheep on the Island.

He was most anxious to investigate the peculiar customs of the white lizard, and would have tried then and there to hunt one out and get hold of a tail if the tarantulas had not set him off on a new tack. It seemed to me that there never was any one with such an inquiring mind as Loftus. He did not object at all to the accommodation we offered him, and seemed to regard the chair washstand and the dirty floor as part of the business. He grasped the situation at once, entering into our difficulties about Captain Jarvis and the pilot schooner, and soon it became a joke of his to demand truffles, caviare, a spring mattress, or a Turkish bath with

the most lordly assurance, and then to exclaim, “Oh, of course; it's in the pilot schooner!”

He was wont to declare that the pilot schooner must be as big as Noah's ark to contain all the things we said were in it.

## Chapter IV. The Battle of the Shirt.

WE did not let Loftus into all the secrets of our establishment. We did not tell him about the trouble with Mr. and Mrs. Tillidge, lest he should feel strained in his relations with her; and we were certain that she would not allow herself to be embarrassed by them. Fortunately Loftus seemed to share Mr. Micawber's views as to dramatic fitness in regard to emigration. He quite revelled in the iron cups, and preferred his clasp knife to the horn-handled one laid for him, as being more appropriate to a settler's condition. He did, however, think it a little hard that a young woman who had been brought up to a milder form of bush life, and presumably was not sustained by any idea of the dramatic, should be condemned to salt junk as hard as nails and camp-oven bread. As for himself, it was of no consequence; he was accustomed to junk. But, having already learned from the blacks that there was wild duck to be had for the shooting, he announced his intention of going out the next day with his gun, and giving us a treat at to-morrow's dinner. We got on very well, on the whole, at the first meal. We had it early, before the mosquito onslaught had fairly begun, and our pans of grass-tree were set alight at sundown in the verandah. Loftus bore the attacks of the foe with equanimity, only every now and then ejaculating, "By Jingo! this does beat the flies in Honolulu!" Mr. Kempsey had sent us the apricot jam and pickles, and I had boiled some eggs in my etna, disdaining to apply to Mrs. Tillidge, who eyed the addition to our party with sullen resentment; and I related my adventures in search of the eggs, and my plan for Christianizing the poultry.

But as we sat on the verandah afterwards among our smoking pans, the men with their pipes, I waving about a palmetto-leaf fan, and the brothers, who had not met for many years, comparing notes and talking over reminiscences of their youth, Loftus grew gradually more and more uneasy under the attacks of the mosquitoes.

He slapped himself and wriggled about, and then got up and tied his trousers tight round his ankles with handkerchiefs, wondering where in the name of fortune they all came from, and lurched up and down the verandah as if it were the deck of a man-of-war, haranguing and slapping all the time; while Alec kept on asseverating that it was all because of the muggy weather, and that when a breeze sprang up our enemies would vanish, and tried to divert Loftus's thoughts by tempting suggestions of

pig-sticking. There were some pigs on the Island which had gone wild, and with regard to which my housewifely imagination was already working and picturing rashers of streaky bacon and nice brown hams. Loftus took very kindly to the idea of pig-sticking, and also to that of stock-riding, though he stipulated that he should not be sent out on a run on a buck-jumper, and that he should be allowed to carry his gun with him. The mosquitoes roared that night like Pacific breakers on the Great Barrier Reef, and it was with some trepidation that I prepared to meet Loftus in the morning. I wondered if I could have left any holes unmended in the mosquito curtains. Apparently I had left a good many, or he had not tucked them in properly. Poor Loftus was a shocking spectacle. I found him wrapped in dismal contemplation of a black velvety patch at one of the corners of the canvas coiling, where myriads of mosquitoes, stupefied by their debauch, had huddled one upon another, to sleep off the effects of their orgie. "If one could run a needle here and there through them, what would be the colour of the ceiling?" darkly suggested Loftus. He told me that he had spent the night in waging war against his tormenters with a towel, and in pondering how he might best make himself an object of repulsion to them. "I think kerosene might do it," he said. "You see, after living for so long on horses and natives — for you and Alec are a little stale, you know — my blood is a variety to them, and they like it." Accordingly he anointed himself with paraffin oil, and for a while was quite jubilant over the success of his experiment. He went out early with Island Billy and shot some ducks, which he took round to the kitchen and delivered to Mrs. Tillidge, with polite instructions as to how they ought to be dressed. I heard his remarks from the sitting-room, and knew that Mrs. Tillidge had received them in grim silence.

After that Loftus betook himself to the stockyard, where square-tailing was going on. I had to explain to him first that "square-tailing" meant chopping the ends off the tails of those animals which were drafted through the crush into the mob destined for sale. Loftus was very much interested in the process, and we walked down together in the full heat of the day to the stockyard, where a small herd was being manipulated by Alec and Tillidge and the black boys.

There was a cloud of dust over the yards; and below it a confusion of heaving red and yellow backs and tossing horns. Through the dust Alec appeared, seated on the thick top rail of one of the inner fences, while Tillidge jumped hither and thither, poking up the animals with a long pole, and every now and then making a rush for the rails as a pair of horns came dangerously near. Above the bellowing of the cattle rose the shouts of the men — now Alec calling out, as he waved his stick towards one or other of the yards, "Milker over here," or "Store mob!" or "That one to the Fats"; and then Tillidge would wrathfully adjure the black

boys stationed in the corners to open and shut the gates upon the beasts which were drafted through. "Now then, Billy, be smart with that gate"; or "Look out for that baldy bullock," — or, to the dogs, "S'ool him, Bleuey!" "Heel him up, Spider!" It was quite surprising to see the taciturn Tillidge so energetic and ejaculatory.

The scene was really rather exciting, and, though I had often beheld such an one, I could not help taking up my stand for a little while at the outer rails, well away from man or beast, and watching it with my head craned round the corner post. Loftus sprang up to the cap of the fence, and from thence commanded the situation. I observed him every now and then make a lurch down the other side into an empty yard, when the horns came close under him; and he soon saw that it would not do to keep his legs dangling, but drew them up to the top rail, so that his knees and his chin were on a level, and it was a wonder how he contrived to maintain his balance.

Luncheon — if any special name can be given to meals which were all exactly the same — was over, and Loftus smoking his pipe in the verandah, when Alec drew me aside with consternation and amusement on his face.

"I'm in a fix," he said. "Loftus hasn't got any clean shirts. He wants a shirt washed at once. I didn't like to tell him that Mrs. Tillidge would see him to Jericho before she washed a shirt for him; and that anyhow I couldn't ask her, for fear that she should boss Tillidge to the extent of making him pack his swag and go off. What are we to do?"

"Lend him one of yours," I suggested.

"No use at all," said Alec. "His shoulders are six inches broader across than mine. He'd split any one of my Crimeans. It's showing up the nakedness of the land," he went on; "and Loftus is such a good fellow, but he is a bit sensitive about things, and it would make him downright uncomfortable to think he was putting us to inconvenience. He would rather wear his shirt grimy than that."

"It wouldn't want starching, would it?" I asked.

"Oh! dear, no," replied Alec. "It's one of those silk and wool affairs — no trouble at all if Mrs. Tillidge wasn't such a wretch."

"Well," I said, "if it will save the credit of the establishment, I don't see why I shouldn't wash the shirt. Only you must never let him know."

So it was arranged. Loftus's shirt was smuggled into my bedroom, and as soon as he and Alec had gone back again to their square-tailing I set myself to my task, which was less easy of accomplishment without sacrifice of dignity than I had imagined. In the first place, there was nothing to wash it in but my basin; for though I had seen zinc tubs and a bluebag, and irons, and sundry washing apparatus on a shelf at the back of the kitchen, I had gleaned that all this was Mrs. Tillidge's private and personal property, and I could not, of course, demean myself by

borrowing from her. Then, too, I had to fetch the water I wanted in a bucket from the tank right under Mrs. Tillidge's eyes. I hoped, however, that she might account for my two or three journeys on the supposition that I had taken it into my head to water the aloe and the poinsettia shrub. I found that the piece of soap in my bedroom was quite insufficient for the undertaking, and had to make an excursion to the store, thus further provoking Mrs. Tillidge's curiosity. Thence I conveyed across the yard, and partially concealed in the folds of my dress, a half bar of yellow soap, and some blue, and a flat iron, which treasure I rummaged out of a box of odds and ends hidden away under the flour bin. I am a little ashamed to write of my shifts and contrivances to save my dignity, but perhaps if I had not been a bride, and shorn of all the glories of bridehood through Mrs. Tillidge's evil disposition, I might not have felt so anxious to preserve in her sight the little remnant of superior circumstance that was left to me. I made a blue-bag out of a sock of Alec's and lighted a fire against a stump outside for my iron to heat at, and at last set to work on the shirt. The water in the basin had to be changed a great many times before it was rinsed clean. I dried it on the grass, ironed it on a shawl which I spread upon the ground, and when all was done, laid it neatly folded upon Loftus's bed.

I was changing my dress for dinner, and Mrs. Tillidge in the next room was laying the table, when through the wooden partition I heard Loftus say in a gracious manner —

"I'm so much obliged to you, Mrs. Tillidge, for getting up my shirt so nicely. I shall have another for you to-morrow."

"I didn't wash your shirt!" rejoined Mrs. Tillidge, defiantly.

"Didn't you? Then I've got to thank somebody else, it seems," said Loftus, pleasantly; "but I made sure it was you, Mrs. Tillidge."

"I wasn't engaged to do washing," said Mrs. Tillidge, loftily. "I don't undertake service. It was Mrs. Ansdell that washed your shirt, I suppose."

Alec told the tale. I could hear the brothers laughing. When I came into the sitting-room, Loftus cried —

"Now, look here, Rachel, I'm going to set-up a laundry for myself, at my own end of the verandah, and I don't want to be interfered with."

We explained the position of affairs, and Loftus agreed that any sacrifice of pride must be made rather than that Mrs. Tillidge should "boss" Tillidge into spoiling the sale. It was hard, however, for Loftus to repress his indignation when Mrs. Tillidge set down the inevitable lump of gutta-percha-like beef and the three-cornered loaf. "I say," he ejaculated; "what about my ducks?"

"Mrs. Tillidge," said Alec, in a tone of gentle insinuation, "I thought Mr. Loftus had shot some wild duck?"

Mrs. Tillidge was stolidly indifferent.

"I believe so," she observed, without a smile.

"Two brace, and as fine birds as you ever set eyes on," put in Loftus.

"Mrs. Tillidge," said Alec, "it's too late to-night, but might we not have those ducks for dinner tomorrow?"

"Well, they're there," assented Mrs. Tillidge, sulkily — "if anybody likes to pluck them. And I am sure I don't know who will like to pluck them. The black boys are camping out, and there ain't a odd-job man on *this* station."

"Mrs. Tillidge," said Loftus, "if you will permit me, *I* will pluck the ducks." Loftus was deeply moved by this miscarriage of his attempt to improve our bill of fare. "I will be odd-job man to-morrow," he declared; "I will put off my first experience of mustering. To-morrow, Rachel, I will wash my shirts; and then I will pluck the four ducks — and then — I will scrub out the office."

We ate a peripatetic meal that evening, and came to the conclusion that perhaps after all it was as well that our enjoyment of the ducks was postponed, since Alec still insisted that there must be a wind to-morrow which would settle the mosquitoes. Loftus found that the paraffin oil was of little avail when night closed in. "Nothing does it but smoke," he exclaimed dejectedly, "and it must be green smoke, I see."

He went outside and cut some long wisps of the grass-tree heads. He bound the withes round till they stiffened, and when lighted smoked like smouldering torches; then taking one himself, he gave one each to Alec and me. A stranger would have laughed to see us as we walked rapidly round the table, holding what seemed like green tapers, the smoke of which, as we moved, kept our persecutors at bay; and every now and then pausing to eat a mouthful, or cracking some dismal joke at the comical appearance we presented, Loftus haranguing all the time, and poor Alec looking as miserable as though he were personally responsible for our discomfort.

But the next night a storm of wind did rise, and such a storm! It began with thunder and hail, and ended in what Alec called a real south-easterly burster. The canvas ceilings bulged like a stage sea, hailstones rattled on the roof, and rain beat in torrents under the ill-fitting French windows. The next day all was clear, only a heavenly coolness followed the hail, and for several days the south-east gale blew strong and clear, bringing us respite from our petty warfare, and filling us with renewed vigour and cheerfulness. The horses, poor beasts, welcomed the change as joyfully as we did ourselves. They, too, enjoyed life once more. They no longer congregated at evening round the verandah, but kept down in the rich pasture of the flat, whence, above the souging of the wind and the eerie cries of the curlews and howls of native dogs, we could sometimes hear them whinnying to each other, as if in mutual congratulation. Loftus set up his laundry, as he had announced he would, and openly washed his

shirts at one end of the verandah, and dried them on the railings. He also plucked the ducks, and brought me the feathers to stuff a cushion with, for he said he was determined Mrs. Tillidge shouldn't score on those birds. He took them round to the kitchen when they were all prepared, and politely insisted that they should be cooked for dinner. In very shame she was obliged to agree; and I may as well mention here that for the rest of Loftus's stay we feasted upon ducks, hot and cold, which he shot and always plucked himself. He talked a good deal about fishing excursions to the Narrows, and worked himself into an enthusiasm over the preparation of tackle; but an hour's experience of the mosquitoes and sand-flies down among the mangroves at the landing quenched his ardour, and we did not hear anything more about fried bream and dressed crab. The mosquitoes were the only things that seriously affected Loftus's energy.

After he had plucked the first lot of ducks and had announced to me the truce with Mrs. Tillidge, Loftus went off again, and presently I heard a considerable commotion in the yard — a sound of much drawing of water and loud requests for scrubbing-brushes, to which Mrs. Tillidge responded not over promptly. When I went out I found that the office had been cleared of all its furniture, and that a raid had been made on Mrs. Tillidge's tubs, which, filled with water, stood in a row on the back verandah. Loftus was surveying them with the air of Nelson on the deck of the *Victory*.

“I mean to scrub it out, Rachel,” he declared, in a tone of fierce determination; “I shall get rid of those beasts of spiders and lizards, and make a cosy smoking den out of it; and then it strikes me that if we could manage a curtain of mosquito netting to fit down over the doorway, we might have peace in the evenings. This wind won't last for ever. But, look here, don't you come round and open the door, for I shall probably take off my clothes to this job.”

I left him to his undertaking, in which he was still engaged when Alec and the men came home from their day's muster. As I sat in the verandah, at work on a piece of cheese-cloth which I had unearthed in the saddle-room, and which I thought might serve the purpose of a curtain better than mosquito netting, I could see rivulets straining down from under the house, which testified to the thoroughness of Loftus's cleansing operations. By-and-by he came out, very red and very hot, and looking as if he had only just got into his garments, but extremely triumphant. He showed me the mangled corpses of three large tarantulas and a centipede. But, to his infinite regret, he had not solved the mystery of the white lizard and its movable tail, for he had not been able to investigate the rafters satisfactorily.

“You could eat your dinner off every single square inch of the place,” he exclaimed, and there was no doubt about the advantages we reaped

from that scrubbing bout of Loftus's. Instead of the bare glaring, blindless, western sitting-room, with its horrible blue walls and aggressive oilcloth, in which there was certainly not one square inch on which the eye could rest without being affronted, we now had a sweet-smelling, cosy little parlour, the walls of their soft native brown, shaded from the sun, and into which penetrated every cool south-eastern breath that blew. Loftus's plan of the cheese-cloth curtain answered admirably by dint of a little contrivance. We tied it round the lintel and kept it dropped all day, and at night, when the mosquitoes were roaring and buzzing outside, we sat in comparative immunity from their assaults behind our protecting barrier; and, but for the small drawback of directly facing the kitchen window, and the painful consciousness that we might at any moment hear some home-truths from the lips of Mrs. Tillidge, our evening chats and Loftus's and Alec's family reminiscences would have been very enjoyable.

Loftus after this abandoned housekeeping operations, and took to going out on the run. He particularly requested that the quietest horse on the station might be given him, and at Tillidge's suggestion King Cole was brought saddled into the yard. King Cole was long-legged and scraggy, with a huge head and resigned expression which reminded me of Rose, the pointer. His tail was lopped, he had suffered much from the mosquitoes, and he was covered with bald spots where the girth had chafed him, or a crack from a stockwhip had caught him, or some other mishap had caused the hair to fall away. Loftus forthwith changed his name to Lazarus, and it certainly seemed to suit him better than the somewhat ironical appellation of King Cole. Loftus and Lazarus had sundry adventures together; but though they were not always of the same mind, they seemed to understand each other, and while he was on the Island Loftus would not mount any other animal. Upon one occasion, when Loftus was duck-stalking, Lazarus broke his bridle, which was fastened to the bough of a ti-tree, and refused to be caught, marching on serenely in front of his master, deaf to blandishments and objurgations, and stopping to gaze back in amiable derision at a distance of twenty yards, then trotting forward again. Loftus had a ten-mile walk with his gun, in the full heat of the day, and had to go back to the head station for Tillidge's assistance that the saddle might be saved, as Lazarus showed every intention of bolting to the bush. Another time a native dog, suddenly surprised, snapped at Lazarus's heels, and Lazarus perpetrated a mild buck-jump, and landed Loftus on the ground. He did not, however, run away this time, and Loftus, nothing daunted, mounted again and chased the native dog, which he shot and skinned, bringing the tan hide to me as a trophy. Then there was a very terrible encounter with a wild pig, in which Lazarus distinguished himself by bolting into a morass and getting bogged, and when Loftus was for some moments in a perilous

position, but managed to escape up a gum-tree with only the loss of his shoes in the swamp.

While Alec was short-handed during the muster, Loftus undertook to carry rations to the pilot station, and accordingly set off on Lazarus, with his swag of salt beef in front of the saddle, and armed with full directions and a pocket compass. But though he carefully followed the track of the line of trees which had been blazed, Loftus lost his way. He told us that a kangaroo had got up just under Lazarus's nose and set them both wrong. The two wandered about all day along gullies and hills and scrubs, and then night fell, and Loftus in despair determined to put his trust in Lazarus, and giving the horse his bridle, let him go whither he would. Lazarus was a horse of cool judgment. He stopped and browsed reflectively, while Loftus, not to be outdone in philosophy, lighted his pipe and waited. Presently Lazarus, having reviewed the situation, and having decided upon the best course to pursue, pricked up his ears, turned his head in a sideward direction and jogged on cheerfully, in the end proving himself worthy of complete confidence. Loftus, however, owned that he did not altogether feel comfortable, as Lazarus, forsaking the faintest vestige of track, forced his way through reek-neck gullies, at the imminent risk of dislodging both the swag of meat and Loftus himself, who had not been trained to bush-riding.

Alec and I were sitting in the office behind our mosquito screen when a chorus, composed of Monte's aggressive bark, the bull-pup's cantankerous whine, Rose's deprecatory yap and tail-tattoo, and Beaufort's big contemptuous growl, told us that Loftus had come back. It was a feature of Island life that, except at new and full moon, when the Narrows were crossable, we need never be under any alarm and uncertainty as to late visitors, for we knew that the only possible arrivals must be from the pilot station. Loftus was just a little crestfallen, but determined not to be beaten. There never was anybody so energetic as Loftus. He at once declared his intention of setting forth again the first thing next morning, and of delivering that meat or dying in the attempt. He begged the unwonted treat of a supper of corn for Lazarus, and went down himself with a tin colander to the bin where our crushed Indian corn was kept, and measured out a substantial feed.

## Chapter V. A Message of Deliverance.

IT was the 23rd of December. Loftus had bidden me good-bye. His good-bye was mournful and compassionate — like the farewell of one who is seeing the last of a doomed comrade. Loftus said that he should be surprised to find that the mosquitoes had left anything of me when he came back from his two years' cruise in the South Seas. It was quite certain that the mosquitoes had eaten a good deal of Loftus. He made us observe his shrunken proportions, and declared that he should now find no difficulty in getting into one of Alec's shirts. His bones stood out. He was pale, except where his skin showed red inflamed patches. His sufferings were acute. He said they reminded him of a certain mode of torture prevalent among the Red Indians, in which the victim is left by an ant-bed and gradually bitten to death. He said that though I was native-born and uninviting on that account, and though Alec was well-hardened, he had a presentiment that he was leaving us both to be slowly devoured. He implored that we would take immediate steps to sell the Island. On the last night of his stay, after deep consultation with Alec, during which he learned all about the mortgage to the bank, and how much depended upon our muster and sale of cattle, he wrote a telegram to Alec's father in England, couched somewhat after the terms in which a beleaguered garrison might supplicate immediate relief from the commander of the army. This desperate idea had, indeed, occurred to us before. We had spoken of it with bated breath, and had shuddered in awesome prevision of the outburst of paternal wrath which such an audacious step would certainly call forth. But Loftus's intrepid spirit knew no fears. He said that the Island mosquitoes were the only things in the world that had ever made him quail. So he wrote out the telegram — I had a notion then that he meant to send a pathetic message on his own account, telling of the mosquito plague — and Alec rode with him to the North End to see him put off in the pilot boat to the mail steamer, which was due to pass on the 24th, and also to make quite sure that the telegram was sent safely. There seemed something sacrilegious in the idea of entrusting that telegram, like an ordinary message, into the hands of Polly Kempsey, who, however, though she was only sixteen, was a dear little girl and an excellent operator — that telegram which, in wild moments of elated hope, we ventured to fancy might bring about the reduction of our debt and lift us above anxiety over the number of cattle we could muster for

sale, and the propitiation of Mr. and Mrs. Tillidge's temper.

The lonely little pilot station jutting out into the Pacific was our closest connecting link with the great world. Its lighthouse marked on one side the entrance to Stonehampton Harbour, as may be seen in any map of the Australian coast, for, like the ostrich burying its head in the sand, my localities hide themselves under thin disguises. Every steamer that passed within the Great Barrier Reef northwards to the Equator, or southwards towards the Antarctic zone, was sighted from the Cape. Sometimes, when they were signalled, the steamers would slacken speed and wait for the pilot boat, and except when we had business at Gundabine which obliged us to cross the Narrows, we always chose to be dropped off the Island in this way, so that at a few minutes' notice we might have found ourselves bound for the Loochoo Islands, or the Persian Gulf, or any other place in either hemisphere. It seemed so strange that we were able to flash our little message from this desolate headland right into the very heart of Suffolk, and to get an answer back in a few hours — that we could, by spreading our wings, as it were, fly from our rock in the Pacific to any quarter of the globe. There was a thrill of freedom in the mere thought.

Our muster was at a standstill; the men were to have their Christmas holidays, and they were all going that day to the South End to meet Rame's boat, which was to take them across to Gundabine for a "spree." Rame brought our mail over from Gundabine once a week, or thereabouts, as weather, inclination, and his condition of ebriety dictated, and left it in an old boathouse at the South End, whence Black Charlie or Island Billy fetched it, also as circumstances allowed. Sometimes, when the hands were busy, or it was blowing a south-easter, we would be for several weeks together without any mail; but that was not of much consequence, since we could always telegraph from the pilot station.

I went out to the yard to give Island Billy directions about this same mail — which, by the way, owing to the festive occasion, Rame forgot to bring — and, to my surprise, saw Mrs. Tillidge dressed in a riding habit, with a bandbox slung on to the pommel of her saddle, in the act of mounting Tillidge's own "lady's horse."

"Why, Mrs. Tillidge," I said, faintly, "I didn't know that you were going to Gundabine, too?"

"I am going to spend my Christmas with my papa and mamma on their selection, Mrs. Ansdell," replied Mrs. Tillidge, with an air of sour patronage; then she added, with more asperity, "As I hadn't undertaken a general utility situation, I didn't suppose that I was to stand on ceremony and ask permission."

"Oh, certainly!" I answered, vaguely. I was a little awed by the intelligence that Mrs. Tillidge was the daughter of a Free Selector. I wondered if he were an agricultural Selector or a bucolic Selector, which

last, as everybody knows, ranks next in the Australian social system to the aristocratic squatter. I was relieved when Mrs. Tillidge, with an ungracious inclination of her head, rode out of the yard and waited outside while Tillidge fastened the straps of his swag in a somewhat shamefaced manner. In truth, after the first shock, a sense of wild exultation seized me. To have the Island all to myself for three days without Mrs. Tillidge! To be able to scour, sweep, and poke about the premises undeterred by the consciousness that Mrs. Tillidge was gloating triumphantly over my humiliations! The prospect seemed at the moment little short of perfect bliss. If only Island Billy were left me — Black Charlie had departed to join his tribe — or if by the fortune of Heaven there should be a blackgin anywhere close handy, why I might revolutionise the island before Mrs. Tillidge came back.

“Island Billy,” I called out, detaining him as the rest rode down towards the stockyard, “suppose it budgery (good) blackgin sit down close up humpey?” I said insinuatingly, in the queer vernacular which intercourse with the Ubi blacks had made familiar to me.

“Baal (no) mine think it, missus,” returned Island Billy, stolidly.

“Island Billy,” I went on persuasively, “what for you go spree to Gundabine? What for you no stop and spree along a Island? Plenty mine give you grog, tobacco, plum-pudding, dried apples, pickles, sardines”; and with a reckless disregard of all moral responsibility I piled up the list of delicacies tempting to the aboriginal palate, and of which, alas! I well knew the store was barren. Probably Island Billy knew it too. Anyhow, he shook his head, uttering a gruff “Baal, missus,” at each pause that I made. At last, evidently visited by some faint qualms of remorse at leaving me alone to my fate, he remonstrated with me upon not having brought a “white Mary” across from Gundabine to cook. “I believe, baal, that fellow come back,” he announced darkly, waving his arm in the direction of Mrs. Tillidge; and then he went on to explain that he himself was under solemn obligations to go over to the mainland. “You see, missus,” he said, his bright black eyes growing bigger and more glassy, and the tattoo weals standing out on his ebony face as he pulled down his lower jaw after the manner of a black when he alludes to “Debil-debil” — “My word that fellow brother belonging to me corbon coolla (very angry). Altogether black fellow coolla. Suppose me baal go corroboree close-up Gundabine where black fellow camp, I believe that fellow pialla (entreat) Debil-debil and make me bong (dead),” which, being interpreted, means that Island Billy would incur the wrath of his tribe if he did not join their war-dance, and that they would probably pray to the Debil-debil to kill him.

There was no standing out against Debil-debil, and I desisted from my arguments. Island Billy stuck his heels into his horse's sides, and, with the odd guttural “J-ch-k,” which the black makes when he is starting off,

began to gallop down the hill. But an inspiration seemed to strike him, and he pulled up and wheeled round, saying, in a consolatory manner, “I believe old St. Helena” — pronounced Sentilena — “sit down along a Narrows. Budgery gin Sentilena. Plenty that fetch crab. Mine look out Sentilena”; and uttering another hoarse cry, he darted away again, and disappeared over the crest of the hill.

Alec was not coming home until the next day. Thus there was not a soul on the head station but myself, and I own that my first anxiety was to ascertain that I could make fast the doors of my bedroom when night came. Not that I was really frightened. I had been brought up in the bush, and was accustomed to its loneliness; and, besides, I knew that in settled districts, where bushrangers do not prowl, there is nothing to be alarmed at. Still it was a relief to find that the carpenters had put inside bolts to the French windows.

There is no need to describe all the mighty works that I did that day — how, emulating Loftus's energy, I carried buckets of water into my bedroom, and scoured and mopped the floor; how I disinterred a piece of chintz from the depths of one of my trunks and manufactured a draped dressing-table out of it and this same trunk; how I tidied the pantry, and rummaged about the kitchen, and began my mission among the poultry, and did a little laundry work on my own account; and finally went to bed, to sleep the sound, sweet sleep of fatigue. But not for long. I awoke with a start, and sat up in bed, feeling a sensation of alarm. The ground seemed to tremble beneath me. Something was knocking violently against the wooden floor of my room. Above the roar of the mosquitoes there was a tinkling of cracked bells, and a sound of melancholy bleating. What had happened? I got up and looked out, for as long a time as the dense buzzing, pricking crowd in which I was enveloped would allow. It was bright starlight. The Southern Cross was sinking. I saw the vast dark forest stretched out before me, with the few gaunt, skeleton gum trees standing like sentinels on the bald patch close to the house. There were two or three white unshapen forms lying beneath the gums; and then I remembered the flock of goats, and that it was Island Billy's duty to drive them each night into their fold. They had taken refuge under the house to-night, and it was their horns beating up against the boards and the bells they wore round their necks which had aroused me from my dreamless slumber. I did not sleep any more that night, but drew aside the blinds and waited and watched the dawn creep slowly up over the Narrows. Gradually the darkness lightened. The blackness of the forest became a soft smoky-grey, and Mount Akobaora in the distance defined itself more and more clearly against the sky. Then there stole along the eastern horizon a wonderful pink glow, which grew and deepened till it reached the mountain. It tinged the folds of vapour rolling back from the Narrows, and came gliding on over the blue-grey tops of the gum trees,

till they too melted into the exquisite rosy flush. It was very beautiful. Many a time afterwards that view helped to console me for the discomforts of Island life.

The animals and feathered creatures in my kingdom greeted me that morning as if in sympathetic endeavour to atone for Mrs. Tillidge's desertion. The crows and parrots seemed to caw and chatter louder than usual. The lean, scared-looking Spanish hens came with evidently friendly intention and pecked the corn I threw them; the goats browsed sociably close to the kitchen — ill-kempt, scraggy quadrupeds, with running eyes and sores on their bodies, where the mosquitoes and marsh-flies had bitten them. They bleated plaintively when I called to them, and scampered a little way, then looked back as if in doubt whether to accept my overtures. All the dogs were on the causeway. Rose brought her puppies in, one by one, and laid them down upon the kitchen floor, gazing at me with her great pathetic eyes, and drumming with her tail while I raked out the open fireplace and set the kettle on to boil. I was eating a meagre breakfast at the kitchen table, and ruefully contemplating the remains of Mrs. Tillidge's last three-cornered loaf, when a shrill whining voice called outside —

“White Mary, missus!” — and then there was a strange discordant, monotonous shriek — “Ya-ah woo — ra! Corbon, me sick. Corbon, me old. Ba — al husband belonging to me. Budgery eli. Yah! Ya — ah! Sentile-na!”

There was a clatter, and five or six great slimy crabs, or “eli,” as Sentilena called them, crawled out of a dilly-bag, which had been thrown in at the door, and which was immediately followed by Sentilena herself.

Sentilena was very old; she looked as if she might be a hundred. She was shrivelled and emaciated; her hair was snow-white, and her complexion was two or three shades lighter in ground tint than that of the generality of blacks, for she was a half-caste. She had the most hideous face possible to conceive, covered with a lattice-pattern of blue weals and tattoo marks. She was blind of one eye, and had lost half an arm. A ragged red blanket was slung over one shoulder. She stretched out her remaining arm, bony and corrugated like her face and breast, while she went on howling, “Woo-ra! Woo-ra! Baal, me catch possum. Poor fellow me! Missus, gib ole Sentilena breakfast. Corbon, Sentilena hungry.”

I handed her a piece of bread, and poured some tea for her into a pint pot. When she had eaten and refreshed herself, she chased the crabs, which were crawling about the kitchen, greatly to the discomfort of Rose and her puppies, penned them into a corner, and offered to make a fire outside and boil them if I would give her some “chimbacco.” Sentilena's services were not to be despised. She put the crabs down to boil; then I made her clean the frying-pan. Afterwards we chopped some wood between us; and then, while I baked a batch of soda bread, which I am

bound to confess turned out a failure, Sentilena squatted in the doorway and enlivened my labours by the recital of her friendly relations with various former owners of the Island. Her reminiscences were somewhat of the nature of *chroniques scandaleuses*, for Sentilena's career, as I learned, had had its romantic, not to say tragic episodes.

Sentilena had once been young and beautiful. In the days of the first settlers on the Island she had reigned a dusky Helen at the head station. She had lost her eye from the cut of a tomahawk inflicted by her third husband, King Tommy, from whom the white man had beguiled her. Then she broke with her tribe, and now she lived alone in fallen majesty. She had the reputation of an Atalanta-like fleetness, and when her charms failed her, and she ceased to find favour in the sight of master or stockman, she took a contract to run the mail to the mainland, swimming the Narrows, and never once failing in her engagement. But a shark bit off her hand, and she swam the Narrows no more. Now all her powers of running had gone from her.

“No good, Sentilena!” she whined, rocking herself to and fro, and striking her scarred old breast with a gesture of desolation. “Plenty soon bong Sentilena!”

Alec's “Coo — ee” sounded cheerfully at dusk as he came within sight of the station. He was very wrath when he heard of Mrs. Tillidge's departure.

“Let her rip!” he cried, flourishing a blue telegraph form before my eyes. “Here's good news for Christmas. The governor has turned up trumps. Loftus is a brick! Mrs. Tillidge may boss Tillidge into doing what she pleases, but she shan't boss us any longer. It won't matter now if we do muster a hundred head short of the mob we counted on. I'll get all the beasts we have collected over the Narrows next moon; so cheer up, old girl, and don't knuckle under any more to Mrs. Tillidge. Just you read that.”

Sure enough, on that stiff blue paper was inscribed what seemed to me the fairy legend that a certain solid sum would shortly be lodged to Alec's credit in our Sydney bank. By what telegraphic magic had Loftus worked this miracle? We felt certain that it was his doing, but how? We could not conjecture then. Afterwards we learned that Loftus had, as I suspected, enriched the treasury of the North End telegraph station to the extent of some seven pounds, and had wired that it was a case of ruin and death, and that if the paternal coffers were kept closed, he himself would advance us the necessary sum.

Alec and I dined joyfully on cold crab, and did not have bad dreams or indigestion. It blew a hurricane that Christmas Eve — one of Rame's south-easterly bursters; but it was a glad and welcome hurricane, for Christmas morning rose cool and clear, and the mosquitoes, driven by the wind, settled in a thick black velvety patch in the remotest westerly

corner of the most sheltered verandah room. It was our first married Christmas, and how Alec and I laughed as he went out to drive in the milkers, and I accompanied him as far as the wood heap to gather sticks for the fire, greatly exercised in my mind as to our Christmas fare! Our commissariat was low. Pending the slaughter of a bullock on the men's return, there was only one tiny piece of beef as hard as a bullet in the meat cask. The bread, too, had run out; and though I could make fairly good scones with thick milk and carbonate of soda — what the Americans call saleratus bread — the baking of them in a camp oven was for me no easy matter. I began to understand why Mrs. Tillidge's bread was so heavy, and why it was always burnt black at the bottom, while it remained dough on the top. The camp oven was a round pan with a lid, standing on three legs, heated by a fire on the ground underneath, and another fire on the lid, and as the lid had to be lifted very often in order that one might ascertain how the baking was getting on, and as, in so doing, the top fire always tumbled off — to say nothing of the risk of letting it fall in upon the dough — it will be seen that our daily bread was a luxury not to be had without some trouble.

Our Christmas dinner was not exactly a sumptuous repast. I tried to make rissoles out of the salt junk, but the fat in the frying-pan caught fire, and the result was not appetizing. It ended in our dining off cold crab again, supplemented by a couple of eggs which the lean Spanish hens had been so obliging as to lay in the aloe. I never knew such uncomfortable hens. They obstinately refused to enter the downy nest made for them and baited every day with Indian corn, but persisted in laying under the bunghole of the bath or in the aloe. Each morning Sentilena brought a fresh dillyful of live crabs, and always emptied it at the kitchen door, so that we had an exciting chase after the crabs, some of which got away altogether, and came to a lingering end among the grass tussocks. In fact, we lived mostly upon crabs during that Christmas week when Alec and Sentilena and I kept house together.

## Chapter VI. The Island Mail.

CONTRARY to Island Billy's predictions, Mrs. Tillidge did come back; but before she had been many days upon the Island the long-sealed phials of Alec's wrath burst upon her, and one morning he came in, looking very pale and determined, to tell me that he had given Mrs. Tillidge her choice of moving into the empty hut near the stockyard or of going to Gundabine that very day. In any case, it was settled that she was to clear out of the kitchen. Alec told me that she had tried to "boss" Tillidge into throwing up the situation, but that Tillidge, with more firmness than might have been expected of him, had declined to be "bossed," and had assured Alec that he meant to see the cattle across the Narrows. Alec insisted that under this condition of affairs I must go back to Sykes's and wait there until he had got the capable "married couple," of whose curries and creams, vegetables, poultry, punctuality, and civility we dreamed in our sanguine moments. The tide would serve about mid-day. Weare — a bush carpenter who had come over from Gundabine to finish a new calf-pen in the stockyard — knew how to handle the boat which, with Alec himself and Brown, the second stockman, would be sufficiently manned; and, though it was blowing a head wind now, and Weare shook his head and prophesied a regular south-easter before nightfall, Alec was convinced that we could get to Gundabine in one tide, and that, as a south-easter always blew for forty-eight hours, we had better try and get across before it was at its worst. So after an early lunch, for which we foraged resolutely ourselves, Alec and I rode down to the landing, Weare and Brown having gone on ahead to bail out the boat and make her ready for the start. At the last moment Mrs. Tillidge gave us to understand that she considered the discomforts of the hut preferable to even so short a voyage in my company, and I had the ignominious feeling that I had been forced to beat a retreat. Could Alec have been induced to consent, I would gladly have taken possession of the kitchen, with Island Billy and Sentilena as subordinates.

Nevertheless, as we glided out of the little creek into the middle of the Narrows, there was comfort in the thought that mosquitoes and sandflies were for the time left behind. The tide, now at its full, lapped the waxen branches of the mangroves, which lay like tiny green islands a little distance from the shore. The strait was gently heaving and rippling, its waters a clear and intense blue. The sky was blue, and the sun shone

brightly, but the southern horizon had a lowering look, and there were smoke-like clouds scudding fast to the north-west. It would have been overpoweringly hot but for the flying clouds that every now and then veiled the sun, and the breeze which blew up freshly from Gundabine Bay — nothing much now, but swelling with every mile we made.

The wind was too far ahead for sailing, and we had before us the prospect of a twenty miles' row. The men chatted cheerily at first, but after awhile, when pulling became harder work, relapsed into meditative silence. As the afternoon waned and the Narrows widened, the wind freshened steadily. The sea became almost indigo-blue. Great ridges of waves faintly whitened came rolling towards us, angrily buffeting the boat, which raised herself laboriously over them. Every now and then a fierce surge would spit out foam and send its spray sharply upon our faces, and upon the backs of the men rowing. We were keeping under the lee of the Island. Currents and mudbanks did not allow a boat to cross high up the Narrows, as would have seemed the natural proceeding, for thus we should have skirted the mainland, and would have avoided the rough and often dangerous passage across Gundabine Bay, which was in reality the open sea at the mouth of the harbour. By-and-by we could see it stretching out close before us, a dark, turbulent waste seething and tossing with white moony patches leaping up in points of milky light and melting into leaden greyness, where they touched the vaporous sky, when the horizon closed in, and the sea was merged in gathering dusk. The mainland on our right was getting farther and farther. One felt something of consternation in watching its receding outlines grow greyer and more indistinct. The sun had set. Great brassy-red streaks splashed the swelling body of dun cloud, and shed a savage lurid glow on the black weltering waters. The tide had turned. We had passed the *bêche-de-mer* fishery and the deserted Chinamen's huts. It seemed hours while we rounded a point of low-lying treacherous rocks over which the breakers swirled and hissed. The boat seemed to struggle sullenly against the seas which struck her bows, and lifted them dripping out of the water, causing a sort of recoil in her, and making her start like a live thing, so that a frightened sort of tremor went all through her frame.

I love that shock and thrill with which a ship in a storm meets the giant force of the sea, leaping up as if in frenzy, and lunging through the great green mountains, then swooping down into the valley, closed in by glassy precipices, and plunging headlong forward, to mount triumphantly once more.

But in an open boat, on a dark night, upon a rough sea, one feels nothing of this excitement and exultation. There is only the sense of powerlessness, loneliness, and desolation. It makes one think of a soul let loose in space. I have a vivid remembrance of that scene — the deepening night, starless, with a thin, wet moon and rushing murky

clouds, from out which at intervals the pallid light would stream forth, and as suddenly go in again, as if the orb were diving in an upper ocean. I can see the dark outline of the boat slant-wise, as she heaved and bounded, the black fork now swept by misty spray, while the steely white-topped waves and the inky hollows went rushing by. It seemed as though sea and sky were racing. I can see the men in their wet clinging shirts, Weare, broad and brawny, the muscles of his arms and shoulders showing; Brown, sinewy and lanky — the stockrider's build — both straining doggedly over the oars; and Alec squarely gripping the tiller, keeping it straight and rigid, while our bows met full the blow of each advancing surge that hurled itself upon us, and for the moment hid sea and sky. As it came one saw nothing but the curved crystalline ebon wall, luminous here and there with phosphorescent gleams, and the coiling wreath of foam which, cut by our stem, would part asunder with a crash, slinging the spume-like shot against us, and scattering opalescent whiteness upon the gloom around. Then, as we heaved upward, the lamps of Gundabine far off on our starboard side would quiver like spectral candles for a second, and go out as we sank again into the trough.

As the boat fell off from the sea, the tops of the waves washed on board her, drenching us through.

“We can't do it, sir,” said Weare. “We must get her bows round, and put into the South End bight.”

Watching his time, when the next black hill had come and dissolved beneath us, Alec wrenched the tiller hard over. “Pull,” he shouted. The men were bent double. The boat groaned and trembled. As she swung round a wave dashed up and caught us on our beam, half filling her, and making its cold stickiness felt to our skins. Before another wave could strike us we had turned. The dark configuration of the Island spread an indefinite mass in front of us. Instead of wrestling with the sea the boat now seemed to fly before it, darting up on the crest of a surge and leaping down as if in a wild effort to escape from the oncoming wave behind. This only lasted for a minute or so. We had no sooner got under the lee of the South End Cape than, apparently by a miracle, we were in smooth water. Presently our keel grated upon shingle. Weare and Brown jumped out and hauled up the boat through the surf, and Alec lifted me out on to the Island again.

We were very like shipwrecked people, soaked through, hungry, and forlorn. The shore seemed bleak and inhospitable — a curving strip of stony beach with black rocks, against which the breakers roared, jutting out at each end, and a few thin scant-leaved mangroves, unhappy out of their native mud, sheltering a rough log boat-shed that ran down almost to the water's edge. Behind rose the grey-brown dunes of the Island, and close to the shore was a ragged brigalow scrub. In the faint moonlight we

could see the black shadows of the trees upon the rank grass, and we could hear the howl of the native dogs blending with the rumble of the surf and the peal of the wind.

We took shelter in the boat-shed, and Alec and the men collected sticks and dead branches, and made a fire on the gravelled floor. We tried to toast a few wet sandwiches we had brought with us, and bemoaned our want of forethought in not providing ourselves ourselves with tea, and a billy in which to boil some water. The night wore on, and I fell into an uneasy sleep, with my head upon a log. It must have been near morning when I was awakened by a gruff "Coo-ee," the swash of oars, and the crunching of a boat on the beach. Then came a volley of oaths, and a leather mail-bag was pitched unceremoniously into the shed, and fell, scattering the embers of our fire.

"Is that you, Rame?" called Alec, still half asleep.

"Yes, it is, and a d — — d rough time of it I've had," shouted Rame; "and a hell of a row there'll be when I get back, for the steamer's signalled and I'm wanted at Bell's wharf." As he bailed his boat, Rame poured forth a torrent of half-tipsy profanity, directed at the folks that lived on an island and expected to have a mail contract kept with a south-easter blowing. He cursed the wind, he cursed the sea; it was a sort of reversed song of the Three Children, for he seemed to curse all things in heaven and earth, and never ceased, notwithstanding Weare's stern injunction to hold his jaw if he couldn't sweeten it, for ladies were present. Rame made off at last, delivering a Parthian-like charge and a general notice that he wasn't going to risk his life in Gundabine Bay, and the loss of his job ashore for the sake of any more anathematised Island mail-bags. Weare observed apologetically that Gundabine was a place that got most chaps into a way of liquoring up and cussin', and that it wanted a deal of character in a man to stand agin it. Alec cut open the mail-bag, which was heavy with the delayed Christmas literature, and then Weare brought in some dry sticks and made a blaze, by the sputtering light of which we read our letters and looked at our Christmas cards. One of Alec's letters — he explained that it was from a Stonehampton pal — seemed to rouse in him no little interest. "By Jove!" he cried, "Lyndon is cleared all right. Well, I am glad of that." He looked at me alertly, as if he were eager to communicate some pleasing piece of intelligence, and had begun, "You remember my telling you about Tom Lyndon, Rachel," then stopped, checked by the presence of Weare and Brown. He waited till the men had gone out. "What do you think?" he said; "those vouchers have been found, and the missing money has been accounted for. It was a case of sheer muddle and negligence on the part of one of the subordinates. I always said that the Government jumped at conclusions without taking any pains to have the matter investigated, and that it would come straight when they went out

of office. Anyhow, Tom Lyndon is cleared, and the new Minister has put him back on to the Stonehampton and Balloo Railway.”

I was as much pleased as Alec, though I had never seen Tom Lyndon, and did not know all the ins and outs of the affair. It had never been actually made public, and little scandals and peculations in Government offices up North were, alas! not of such infrequent occurrence as to occasion a violent stir when they did happen. Tom Lyndon was a handsome, clever young Government official, whom the Ministry of Progress had put in charge of a branch railway that was being constructed between Stonehampton and a township up country. The progressive Ministry went out, however, before the works were well under weigh, and the new Ministry, whose rallying cry was retrenchment, put a sudden stop to the railway, wound up accounts in a casual manner, and dismissed young Lyndon with a small compensation. Ministries in Leichartsland are rather apt to do things in a casual way, and official responsibilities are perhaps not quite so clearly defined by departmental limits as in the commonwealths of older civilizations. Tom Lyndon left Stonehampton and went on private business to Singapore. It was not till after he had gone that vouchers, representing certain moneys for which he was responsible, were discovered to be missing. It was at once assumed that Lyndon, instead of paying out these sums, had himself made use of them, and this assumption was strengthened by the fact that he had taken upon himself the payment of his father's debts. He was the eldest son of a spendthrift superannuated Government official, who, after living for a good many years on his sons' earnings, had lately died, leaving them a legacy of liabilities. Possibly the filial motive weighed with the Minister for Works. Possibly he knew himself guilty of a scarcely official haste in settling up the financial affairs of the unlucky railway. At any rate the Government did not prosecute young Lyndon. He stayed away from the colony — his name there, at least, under a cloud. His friends affirmed his innocence, though they blamed him for his proud apathy in not insisting upon having the charge disproved. His enemies declared him guilty, and outsiders showed but a anguid interest in the whole matter, which was gradually being forgotten, when, in accordance with the usual vicissitudes of Leichardtstonian politics, the parsimonious Government ended a brief and inglorious reign, the progressive one came back, and in the general rout which followed, the Lyndon mystery was cleared up, the missing money accounted for, and now Alec read out to me that Mr. Lyndon had received a handsome apology, and was triumphantly reinstated in his old appointment.

Alec had known Mr. Lyndon in Stonehampton, and had told me the first part of the story more than a year ago, in the early days of our engagement. I had wondered much concerning it, and lamented the blight which had fallen upon a promising career, though then I had no

expectation of living near Stonehampton, or of being brought into any sort of association with Mr. Lyndon. The story was connected somehow with my own little drama, and it seemed strange to hear its sequel now, under these adventurous conditions, in the lonely boat-shed on this wild night. It seemed stranger still when Alec said thoughtfully —

“I wonder whether Lina Sabine has heard this, and if she is sorry now that she didn't trust him and wait?”

“Why?” I asked eagerly, scenting a romance. “Were they in love with each other?”

“He was in love with her,” answered Alec; “and I think she was as much in love with him as any one so shallow and emotional could be. Yes, I believe she cared for him, but I'm afraid it wasn't in her to be staunch.”

If Alec knew any more, he did not seem inclined to betray confidence. He said he didn't think it fair to rake up people's ashes, and that Lina was one of those impressionable, many-sided, dramatic people who can imagine themselves into any part they please, and that when she married she had probably imagined herself into love with Mr. Sabine and complete forgetfulness of former romantic episodes.

I was intensely interested in Lina Sabine — I always called her to myself by her Christian name — though I had only seen her for a few minutes one evening in the dim light of Mrs. Jarvis's verandah at Gundabine. My interest was partly owing to a vague fancy that Alec had once been in love with her, but principally because all that I knew and heard of her wrought on me in a curious manner like a spell. There are people who affect one in that way, even on the slightest acquaintance, or, indeed, on none at all. And then I have a kind of theory that the social system is kept working by certain magnetic currents which drive the human atoms into combination, according to subtle laws of attraction. Possibly in future enlightened ages these laws may regulate our social relationships. I could not help fancying that Lina Sabine and Mr. Lyndon and I had just got into one of these currents, and that we were bound to be drawn together very shortly. Perhaps it has something to do with what they call odic force. No doubt occultists would give some sort of ready explanation of this and other mysteries. I don't know how otherwise to account for many strange coincidences such as have certainly come within the experience of most persons. One hears a name mentioned casually which one has never heard before, and, lo, it is as though a psychological chain had been forged, for all manner of trivial incidents lead to a relation with that unknown person till one becomes enmeshed in the very web of his or her personality. Why should it be that person and no other? Why should it be that particular incident and no other? Why should one choose to go to the loft fork of the Y and not the right?

But as we sat watching the dawn spread over the sea and pale our fire

of dried leaves and twigs, I made Alec tell me all that he could or would about Lina Sabine and her marriage. Everybody had been in love with Lina Trass, Alec said, Lyndon among the rest. She had been the show beauty of the North ever since she was sixteen. She had spent her winters mostly in Stonehampton, though her people didn't belong exactly to Stonehampton society. Her father kept a store on the road to the diggings, and her mother had served in a shop; but Lina had been educated at a boarding-school in Sydney, and, moreover, she was one of Nature's ladies, "and just as pretty as you can make 'em," said Alec, enthusiastically. It was not surprising that when she came to stay with a married school-fellow at Stonehampton all the best people should take her up, and should forget about her father the store-keeper, and the mother the milliner's assistant. But, of course, it was an understood thing that she must marry well, and Lina fulfilled her mission by marrying Mr. Sabine some six months after the Lyndon episode. Mr. Sabine, according to Alec, was a lout. He was bad-tempered and boastful, he was unpopular with men. In every respect, except in birth and money, he was Lina's inferior. When he first came to Gundabine several years ago, everyone had laughed at him. He could not get a woman to marry him. It was a joke in the district that he had proposed to every good-looking barmaid and free selector's daughter, and that all had refused him. But he went home to England for a year or two and got polished up. He came out again with money, made a splash, and finally struck gold close to Mount Akobaora, and then the matrons and maids, instead of spurning, looked kindly on him — for, as Alec said, human nature is much the same in Gundabine as it is in Belgravia — and the end of it was, that he fell in love with Lina Trass, and married her after a few weeks' engagement.

"I'd like you to be nice to Mrs. Sabine, Rachel, when you come across her," Alec said. "We might get her over to the Island when the mosquitoes have gone off a bit. Poor Lina! There are some people one always associates the idea of tragedy with, somehow. Lina Sabine is one, and old Daniel Liss is another.

"Who is old Daniel Liss?" I asked.

"Oh, you haven't come across him? — a queer miserly old misanthrope — quite a character. He has stations along the coast, and he was after the Island, but I bought it over his head. I almost wish Liss had it now, Rachel," Alec added ruefully. "It's not the place a married man should have gone in for."

I asked Alec if Mr. Liss had been in love with Mrs. Sabine too.

"Good gracious, no," said Alec, laughing; "he never was in love with any one, or if he was, he has managed to keep it dark. All the same, Lina Trass had better have married Dan Liss, who never in his life bounced man, woman, or child, than an ill-conditioned braggart like Sabine."

We are come to tell us that the boat was ready, and that we had better be

putting off. The wind had lulled, as it does in the early hours, and Weare said that we should nip across in no time. The sea was swelling and troublous still, and had a leaden, treacherous look. The sun had not yet risen. The breeze when we got out blew keen and fresh, and seemed to put new energy into our tired and aching bodies. Weare set the sail, and we raced before the waves. There was something deliciously exhilarating in the speed and the bounding motion of the boat. A big steamer had just moored at Bell's wharf. It was the boat from Leichardtstown. All was bustle. Goods were being landed. The narrow pier was crowded with busy people and loafers. Newspapers were being handed about. The police-magistrate was there, and the telegraph-master and store-keepers, to say nothing of Sykes's crew. In fact, all Gundabine seemed to have turned out, and I felt rather shy of encountering the gaze of the township in my draggled and battered condition. A row of faces peered down over the parapet of the pier as Weare made the boat fast, and Captain Jarvis held out his hand to help me up, saying, with a laugh, "Thought we should soon see you back again, Mrs. Ansdell. Ain't the mosquitoes cannibals now?"

A great slouching giant of a man, with a heavy jaw, loose lips, big dark eyes, and cantankerous expression, dressed in a well-made tweed suit, that contrasted with the careless get-up of the bushmen round, accosted Alec crossly: "I say, Ansdell, it is too bad of you people to let yourselves be put upon. I want you to stand in with me, and make a row with the A.S.N. Co. I'm not going to let these captains cheek me. Here am I getting tons of stuff up by them every week, and they can't put in at Cooranga to oblige me. The fact is, they are so accustomed to roughs, they don't know how to treat a gentleman. What do I care about that fellow Lyndon, or whether he catches the Colonial Secretary at Stonehampton? Why should my business give way to his? I shall bring an action against the Company, and force them to pay me my expenses for going back overland to Cooranga from Stonehampton."

"You don't mean to say that Lyndon is on board?" cried Alec. "By George, I must see him — only got my mail an hour or two ago. Tell you what, Sabine, I'll join in bringing an action against Sykes, for letting Rame get drunk and forgetting my mail. Good-day to you, Sabine. Look here, Rachel, I'll just settle you in at Sykes's, and then come back to the steamer"; and he hurried me off.

"That was Sabine," he said, as we turned in between the papaw trees at the hotel. "I wonder if his wife's here. He is always wanting to make a row about something."

I felt quite a thrill of excitement. There were dramatic possibilities even in Gundabine. Wasn't this just one of the coincidences that give ground for my theory of magnetic currents and attractions? But I was too tired and hungry and sticky with salt water to indulge in philosophical

reflections just then. Alec ordered me some hot coffee, and saw me with my damp portmanteau into a bedroom that opened on to the upstairs parlour. I was sitting there a little later, refreshed by my toilet, once more presentable, and enjoying the unwonted luxury of a moderately civilized breakfast, when the door opened and Mrs. Sabine came in. She said, "How do you do?" to me, in a nervous, hurried manner. "I heard of your coming over this morning," she said. "There's only this one sitting-room. You don't mind my being here too? My husband has to go on to Cooranga, and I — I couldn't stop by myself — I had to come along here."

Of course I told her how glad I was of her company, and how pleased at the opportunity of seeing something of her. "The steamer is in," she said suddenly. "I suppose you don't know. .... It isn't gone yet? There's always a great fuss here when the steamer comes in. It's the only excitement they've got here, except sampling. Do you know what sampling means?"

I confessed my ignorance. "Stonehampton is a better place to 'sample' in than Gundabine," she said. "The street is longer and there are more public-houses. Sampling means starting at one end of the street and taking a nip at each inn or handy private house all the way down. They seem to sample a good deal here, beginning at the Captain's at the top of the hill," and she laughed a little hysterically, and went restlessly to the window and back again. All the time that we talked generalities I could see that her attention was straying. I could not turn my eyes from her, she was so pretty. I had not seen Miss Ellen Terry in those days, but I have since often thought that Lina Sabine as she was then bore a great resemblance to her. Lina had something of the same sweet sensitiveness and grace of gesture. Her face seemed all exquisite shadows melting into each other. There was a touch of emotion in everything she said or did. She had a little tremulous way of clasping and unclasping her hands as she talked, and an appealing, surprised expression in her large eyes, which were as blue as lobelia flowers. She was much more than pretty. She had what the French mean by charm.

There was a great deal of noise in the bar below, where "sampling" must have been going on pretty freely. Distant tones floated up too from the pier. I thought I could recognise Mr. Sabine's rasping voice, which at its best must have been disagreeable to hear. In my mind I pitied the woman who had to live with that voice. We stood in the balcony and looked out. We could see the tops of the steamer's funnels, and a trail of smoke rising from them. The verandah of the post-office opposite was almost as crowded as the verandah of Sykes's beneath us. I noticed that Mrs. Sabine sheltered herself behind the screen of passion creepers, and that her delicate flush deepened into two vivid red patches as she gazed intently outward. Suddenly her face became quite pale, and, following

the direction of her eyes, I saw that they rested upon a group of gentlemen walking up from Bell's shanty — my husband, Captain Jarvis, Mr. Sabine, and one or two others. among whom I noticed a tall, dark, good-looking man with whom Alec was talking, and whom I guessed at once to be Mr. Lyndon. They were making straight for Sykes's. I heard Alec say as they stepped on to the verandah, "No, I can't stand that rowdy place. Come up to the sitting-room, Lyndon, and have a parting drink for good luck — coffee, if you like, with a 'stick' in it. I want to introduce you to my wife."

Lina Sabine turned abruptly and gazed at me with the wild look of a creature that finds itself entrapped. She put out her hand impulsively and clutched my wrist, drawing me back to the parlour. The footsteps and voices sounded distinctly in the passage below. Her grasp tightened. She was trembling like a frightened child. As our eyes met straightly, I knew that there were to be no flimsy conventionalities between us. Her eyes said that she meant to trust me, and that she was appealing to me for sympathy and help, and my heart went out to her as woman's heart will go out to woman.

"Oh, what shall I do? They mustn't see me. You don't know. I couldn't see him like this. Mrs. Ansdell, what can I do? My room is ever so far away; and I *can't* see them."

"My dear," I exclaimed, "it is very easy. Come into my room." I led her within and locked the door. I had hardly done so when the men came into the parlour. The partition was of wood, and we could hear every sound. Lina and I stood close together, not speaking. Her hand still clasped my wrist. When I moved it tightened as if to enforce silence; and when Alec tapped softly at the door and called "Rachel," she turned on me in a fierce, scared way, and made an imperative gesture forbidding me to answer.

We heard Alec apologise for my absence, and tell the tale of our adventures, adding that I was probably sleeping after my wakeful and exciting night. "Better luck in Stonehampton, Lyndon," he said. "I am going to bring Mrs. Ansdell up, and I suppose you'll be there, off and on, till the railway is finished."

"I hope that I may make Mrs. Ansdell's acquaintance somehow, but I shall be camping at the Works all the time, and Stonehampton won't see much of me," answered a very pleasant voice with, I thought, something of bitterness and melancholy in its cadence.

I felt a shiver run through Lina's frame as she heard the voice of the man she loved — oh, I was sure that she loved him. She stood very still, bending a little forward, as if every nerve were straining. Her grasp upon me may have caused some electric thrill of sympathy to pass from one to the other. I seemed to know that every word Lyndon uttered was like a knife-stab to her. The grating of her husband's tones must have been even

keener torture. Mr. Sabine still harped wrathfully upon his grievances against the A. S. N. Company, but in rather a more conciliatory manner, as if he had discovered that Mr. Lyndon was a person of some importance, and not to be ridden over roughshod. I was certain that Mr. Sabine was a bully. Mr. Lyndon's answers dropped as politely and coldly as ice-water. Did Mr. Sabine realize the position of affairs? Had he the least idea that his wife and Lyndon had once loved each other? Apparently not. He said something about fetching Mrs. Sabine and having his valise taken down to the steamer, and went out of the parlour. We could hear Alec and Mr. Lyndon talking to each other. Alec congratulated him on his reappointment, and Mr. Lyndon answered drearily —

“The Government thought they were bound to do something for me, though they need not have bothered themselves. I wish they had put me anywhere else but in Stonehampton. I hate the place, and the whole thing. It's rather like the triumphant return of the persecuted hero in the melodrama, isn't it? — only there's no villain in this piece. In the melodrama the wronged hero always comes back to marry his true and faithful love, the also persecuted and virtuous heroine, and that's not in this play either. I suppose,” he added with an abrupt laugh, “a good many nasty reasons were found for my keeping out of the colony?”

“Well, I almost wonder you didn't come back and fight it out,” said Alec.

“Perhaps I should if I had been guilty. The truth is, that I didn't care. What satisfaction would there have been in throwing up a good billet at Singapore to come back here and defend myself against the braying of contemptible asses? There was *one* person who I thought would have believed in me; whose faith I wouldn't have insulted by writing a line of denial. When that person doubted — well, one didn't trouble oneself about the rest.”

Lina made no movement while he was speaking, only a deep, long indrawing of her breath, as a woman does when in great pain. Then she seemed to become suddenly nerveless; her hand dropped from my arm. She sank noiselessly upon the bed, and sat limp and huddled up, her face only tense and strained, the eyebrows drawn together, the lips parted, the blue eyes wide. There was something very dramatic in the whole situation — the unconsciousness of the man, the agony of the woman — nothing but that thin wooden wall, and the tragedy of a ruined faith between them — the commonplace sounds and incidents as the waiter brought in coffee and cognac, and Alec joked about the “stick” — which is Australian for a *petit verre* — at that early hour in the morning. Mr. Sabine, who had come back, did not see that it was a joke, and resentfully maintained the benefit to be derived from a dose of rum and milk before breakfast. Mr. Sabine's fractiousness was allayed somewhat

by the mention of races which were to be held at a bush-place near Stonehampton, and for which he wanted to get up a Corinthian with gentleman riders. He had a racer about whose speed he bragged loudly. Then the warning bell rang on the steamer, and Mr. Sabine began to fuss and to grumble that he could find his wife nowhere. All the time Lina sat perfectly motionless and indifferent to what he was saying, as though she had got past the stage of caring for that.

“I hope you'll keep your wife in better order than I can mine, when you've got a wife, Lyndon,” said Mr. Sabine, with noisy familiarity. “I don't know where Mrs. Sabine has got to — gadding up to the Judge's, or gossiping over with Mrs. Jarvis, I suppose. Anyhow, I can't hunt for her. The steamer will be off presently. Are you fellows coming? Get your wife to teach mine her duty. Ansdell.” And he went out. We heard him down below in the bar calling out something to Captain Jarvis, and bidding Sykes look after Mrs. Sabine till he came back. Then the steamer bell rang again loudly. Alec and Mr. Lyndon hurried off, too, and Lina and I were alone.

## Chapter VII. Lina's Story.

I WAITED a little while for Lina to speak, but she sat still on the foot of the bed, her eyes fixed on vacancy, her hands loosely clasping her knees, never looking at me nor saying a word. I went up to her and kissed her silently. "My dear," I said. I was not much older than Lina in reality, but I felt then as if I had been her mother. She took no notice of me for a minute or two, then said, in a harsh, quavering voice, "Well — you heard, Mrs. Ansdell."

"Call me Rachel, Lina."

"Well, Rachel, you heard. *I* was the woman he counted on to believe in him. *I* was the woman whose faith he wouldn't insult by writing to tell her he wasn't a thief. Oh, why didn't he write? Why didn't he write? Why did he believe in me?"

"You didn't doubt him, Lina?"

"Yes, I did. I loved him, and yet I thought it might be true — true that he was a thief. I'm not a lady, you know. I didn't understand the way *gentlemen* take these things. I was set on marrying a gentleman, Rachel, you see — and I *have* married a gentleman! You mightn't think, perhaps, that Mr. Sabine was an English gentleman; but it's true. It's printed in the Baronetage of Great Britain. I heard it before he proposed to me; and Milly Robinson, whom I stayed with in Stonehampton, she read it too. And we talked over everything together — it never was my way *not* to talk over things; and we settled that a man who was falsely accused would have written at once to tell the girl he loved that he was innocent. That was the way we argued. We didn't know, either of us, that sometimes a gentleman is too proud to deny a base charge — to the woman he loves."

"Lina," I said, "I don't quite understand; for if you were engaged to Mr. Lyndon, surely he would have written."

Lina altered her position a little. She looked at me questioningly for a moment, then away again.

"No? You don't know? Your husband didn't tell you about me?"

"Alec never told me any of your secrets, Mrs. Sabine."

"I like Alec Ansdell for that. I always liked him. I think it was because he didn't make love to me." Oh, Alec! — my heart gave a little bound. "But he must have known," Lina went on. "I wanted a letter taken to — to Mr. Lyndon at the very last." Her voice lowered and quavered

again. "I was a little beside myself. I couldn't let him go, and not make him understand that I — that there was a bond between us, and that I meant to be true to it — I did mean to be true, *then*. I wrote, and there was nobody I could trust with the letter but Alec Ansdell — I trusted him."

I felt a glow at the thought that Alec had been true to poor Lina's trust. That seemed to bring us two women very near together. I sat down on the bed beside her, and stroked her hand, and told her all I felt; and I asked her to try and look upon me as her sister, and confide in me.

Lina turned on me the dreariest and most heart-rending look, and then in her odd flighty way she laughed a harsh little laugh, and made a sudden tragicomic gesture.

" 'I'd rather be a toad and bay the moon, than keep a corner in the thing I love for daws to peck at,' " she cried. "That's how Mr. Sandy Macbean quoted Shakespeare when in a very tragic mood he proposed to me. Did you ever meet Sandy Macbean — the man whose 'forte is tragedy'? My forte is tragedy; but I will confide in you, Rachel, for all that, and here's my heart to peck at."

Presently, in a broken, simple way, she told me her story. It was a very common story — only that of a girl who had been educated above her surroundings — a susceptible, artistic girl with a natural dramatic capacity for making situations, and with a certain depth of feeling below an outward shallowness and impressionability. "You wouldn't believe how sensitive I am," the poor thing said, "though I have got no 'born call' to be sensitive, as they say about here. It is horrible. Everything always jarred upon me. My father and mother and brothers and sisters jar upon me. My husband jars upon me — though he *is* a gentleman — my whole life is a jar. And it has always seemed to me so wrong and so unjust. I have always felt that I was meant to be happy. I was determined that I *would* make myself happy, and do what I wanted. That was my undoing. I wanted to make Mr. Lyndon fall in love with me; at first just because I saw that he didn't want to fall in love, and had put his whole mind on other things. I did all I could to make him fond of me, and I succeeded. But I was punished for it, Rachel. I fell in love with him myself. And do you know what being in love with a man is? It's giving him the right to torture you. He doesn't mean to do it; but he does it all the same. Oh, I did love him! I have never in my whole life loved any one like that. And yet" — again she laughed in that miserable fashion — "I didn't love him well enough to believe he could be honest." She was silent for a few moments, her gaze fixed drearily on the wooden wall. "I'd give a great deal to take that year out of my life," she exclaimed passionately. "Why aren't we allowed the power of rubbing a sponge over bits of our slates? There's no good in remembering. It doesn't make one better; it makes one worse. I haven't even the poor

satisfaction of thinking that he treated me badly,” she went on. “When his appointment was done away with, he would have gone without saying a word — without telling me that he cared for me, or getting any promise from me — he was very strong. But one night, the very last, I *made* him tell me. He wouldn't take any promise. He wouldn't let me speak, lest, he said, I should say something that it might be better for me were left unsaid. He told me that he had made a vow to himself not to think of love or marriage till his father's debts were paid, and his mother and sisters provided for. He said that even if there were no pressing duty he would not involve a girl in a long, unsatisfactory engagement, or drag her into a poor marriage — he had seen enough of that. And so he wouldn't even let me say that I cared for him. He said that he had given himself two years for his task, and that then if I was unmarried he would come to me. I saw that he was struggling against himself. I saw that he didn't believe in me. ...” Lina stopped and put her hands to her face for an instant, as if she were shutting in something. “It was the very last night,” she resumed, almost in a whisper, “and we were alone in Milly Robinson's verandah — oh, I can see it all now! — the little thin moon, and the paddock with the holes where we went craw fishing, and the shrubs in the garden. I can smell the stephanotis — it was all in bloom at the end of the verandah — and the verbena that I was crumpling in my hands while he talked, and I looked up at his side face, all stern and rigid. He wouldn't look at me, not even when he said that he loved me. Oh, I loathe and I love the scent of verbena — we've got a bush of it at Akobaora.” Her voice flamed out and sank once more. “He wouldn't let me speak. He only took the bit of verbena from my hand and put it in his breast, and he was gone, and I've never seen him since, till to-day. I saw him, but he didn't see me.” The despair in her tone was poignant.

“But you wrote to him?” I urged.

“Yes, I wrote to him. I couldn't let him go like that. I wrote to him. I said that I loved him, and that I would wait. I don't know what I said. I grow hot sometimes when I think of it. I gave the letter to Alec Ansdell, and he gave it to him just as the steamer was going. This was his answer.”

She held out her right hand. On the third finger was a guard ring, with an Eastern arabesque pattern upon it. “He took that off his little finger,” she said, “and sent it to me. He told Alec to tell me that it was his pledge. There was no time to write then; but I got a little letter from him from Cape York, the only letter he ever wrote to me. He said in it that though the ring pledged him, I was completely free. He said he had learned my dear letter” — she dwelt pathetically on the phrase — “by heart, and had kissed it and burned it, and that I must not let him be a clog on my life, or turn away because of him from anyone I thought I could love better — anyone who would make me happier. Well, Rachel, that's all. In a

month after he had gone it came out about the defalcations. Everybody was against him, and he didn't write. I know I am a weak, easily-persuaded girl. I must always fly before the wind. The wind drove me from him. I wasn't strong enough to stand still and face it. I'm not strong like him, in that kind of way. I am strong in some ways, and I won't let myself be crushed now. I've got the sort of nature, Rachel, that makes people commit suicide to be out of a trouble. My love was a trouble to me, and I tried to kill it by marrying Mr. Sabine."

There was a little silence between us. I did not know what to say.

"I suppose *you* couldn't have done that," Lina said suddenly. "You can't understand it. But you would if you'd been me. If you'd had to live at Coolibah Flat, you'd have hated it just as I did. And you'd have got tired of waiting and wondering and lying awake at night, crying and aching here." She pressed her hand tragically upon her bosom. "It's such a real pain that I often fancy there's something the matter with my heart. No; you'd have said to yourself, 'I won't let my life be spoiled. I'll get away from it all and forget.' It doesn't take me long to forget. That's part of my disposition. I had almost forgotten. And then, when I heard that he was in the steamer, and — and — to see him and hear him speak like that — oh, it hurts. I can't bear it. And they laugh; they're laughing outside and drinking! and that's life — and we've got to bear it; and to laugh, too."

She had broken into sobs. She flung herself forward on the bed, and lay, her head buried, her body shaking. I could only look on. There was no use in trying to comfort her; and I felt that it was better the storm should spend itself. After a few minutes it passed over. She lifted herself like a lily that rises when it has been beaten down by wind and rain. She pushed her pretty fair hair away from her face, and wiped the wet from her drowned eyes, laughing hysterically.

"I have made a nice exhibition of myself, haven't I? Don't you despise me? But you shall see that I have got some pride, though I am not a lady. No, I know what you are going to say." She stopped me as I began to protest against her estimate of herself. "It's quite true. I'm not genuine mahogany. I'm only iron-bark grown at Coolibah, and veneered at a Sydney manufactory of manners, don't you see? You needn't think, though, that I'm going to make a fool of myself. I'm too proud for that. I mean to forget. I mean to be happy. I mean to get my money's worth out of life. We are going home, you know, as soon as Mr. Sabine has settled his affairs. Then it will be easy to forget. So few girls have the chance of marrying a rich man, and of being taken to England — into a baronet's family.'

She had got up, and was standing before the looking-glass, smoothing her ruffled hair, and then dabbing her eyes with a wet handkerchief. Presently she turned to me, making one of her pretty quick gestures, and

saying, with a kind of half-mournful, half-playful vivacity —

“Will you unlock the door for me and let me out now? I think we have had enough of tragedy for one morning. I'm going to be gay, for a change. I abolish the past — grim, grisly spectre, it may go and make other people miserable. I'll not have it near me. Good-bye. You shall rest, and I will go up to the Judge's and eat grapes.”

I unlocked the door for her. I could not help kissing her as she went out. She warmly returned the kiss.

“Now we have made a compact of friendship,” she said; “and you won't tell tales on me. I wish you'd soon ask me over to the Island. I don't mind the mosquitoes, and I know how to efface myself when you and Alec want to honeymoon.”

She was an odd creature. Her moods puzzled me. Sometimes I wondered what had been the meaning of this wild ebullition of feeling. It was almost impossible to believe that it had been quite real when I heard her talking brightly with Alec, laughingly recalling episodes of her Stonehampton visits, and even composedly asking a question or two about Mr. Lyndon. Alec said that she was a born actress, and had begun to imagine herself into a new part. I suspected, however, that it might mean something more than this, and gave her credit for repenting of her hysterical outburst, and for an effort to prove herself capable of self-control.

During the week we were together at Sykes's, she did not again speak of her poor little love-story. Her mind seemed feverishly set upon leaving Australia, and breaking all the links with her old life. She was always talking of how they would sail immediately Mr. Sabine had settled the affairs of his reef, and how she meant to enjoy herself in England. She had evidently determined, as she phrased it, to get her money's worth out of life. I admired her for her spirit. I pitied her as one might pity a brave child, struggling against tears, and determined not to show it had been beaten. I was touched inexpressibly to see how the poor thing withered up when Mr. Sabine came back, and how all her vivacity was quenched, under the influence of her husband's quarrelsome, braggart manner. She had a certain sensitiveness, physical as well as moral, which made her shrink away when he snubbed her, as was a way of his less from unkindness than from desire to show his importance. He was a bully, and never lost an opportunity of asserting himself over his weaker brethren. Perhaps the Gundabian tendency to “sample,” which was exemplified to a remarkable degree in Mr. Sabine, contributed to intensify his fractiousness. He had his good points, however; he was liberal with his money, and he very often did good-natured things. I have known him in the midst of a cantankerous disputation, in which he was doing his best to offend everybody, go out and give three or four sovereigns to some man who came to him with a pitiful tale about a sick wife; then he would

come back, snap at his own wife, and snarl at us all in his resentive, choleric fashion. He liked to be king of his company, and would curry favour with the selectors and storekeepers by introducing Lina to them. He was very proud of her, and would trot her out for the admiration of his friends as if she had been the chief attraction of a travelling show of which he was the master. He would bid her wear this dress or that; would decorate her with jewellery; would tell her to be amusing, and then, if his mood changed, would contemptuously snuff out her small sallies by advising her not to make a fool of herself. Certainly, but for the incontrovertible testimony of Burke, no one would have imagined Mr. Sabine to be a man of patrician descent. He took Lina back to Akobaora before Alec would allow me to return to the Island. My exile, however, was not a very long one. By good luck, a well-recommended "married couple" in want of a situation turned up at Gundabine, and we engaged them forthwith. Mrs. McGilray was a huge, ungainly Scotchwoman, so tough and dry that when conscientiously putting before her the inconveniences she might have to suffer on the Island, we did not think it necessary to lay great stress upon the onslaughts of the mosquitoes. Mrs. McGilray courageously expressed it as her opinion that all the talk against the Island was nothing but a pack of havers, and what she told us of her capabilities in the matter of pickled rounds of cream cheeses, "singit head," and oatmeal cakes made our mouths water. I felt that we should be safe with Mrs. McGilray; perhaps I had better say here that, on the whole, she justified my confidence, and that McGilray, a short, dapper man, with a perky, encouraging way of saying after everything, "And why not, sir?" who had been a ship's carpenter, and knew how to sail a boat as well as understanding the culture of vegetables, would wipe from the Island the stigma of having no "odd-job man."

Altogether things looked brighter. At full moon the big mob was crossed to the mainland, and though Alec's graphic description of the scene at the Narrows — of the heaving, tossing, roaring mass of cattle urged into the sea by the cracking of stock-whips, the breaks away and furious gallops into the bush, the excited horses with dripping sides and reddened nostrils, spurred by their riders in and out the water, plunging this way and that, and swimming up and down stream in pursuit of some fugitive beast — made me sorry that I had not been there to see; still I was rejoiced at the thought of finding the Island cleared of "extra hands," free from the bustle of the muster, and, above all, quit of Mrs. Tillidge.

The pilot schooner, freighted with our long-delayed furniture, all the goods and chattels over which Loftus had made merry, took us and our married couple up the Narrows; and, though when we reached the landing the mosquitoes were as ferocious as ever, the new buggy was waiting, and my second entry into my kingdom seemed far less ignominious than the first.

## Chapter VIII. The Great Fire.

DOMESTIC affairs at the Island, which in the beginning were chaos, resolved themselves before long into order, under the light and leading of Mr. and Mrs. McGilray. Undoubtedly, Providence had had a finger in the selection of this peerless “married couple.” The McGilrays seemed to combine all the virtues and to exhibit none of the vices which had distinguished one or other of each “married couple” of my previous experience. I could write an essay on Bush married couples — but I forbear. Let the Tillidges suffice for one example; the McGilrays for another. McGilray was the perfect type of a handy odd-job man; and, as for Mrs. McGilray, I only wished that Loftus could make her acquaintance. I felt sure that if anything could reconcile Loftus to the thought of our fate on the Island, it would be Mrs. McGilray's way of stewing salt junk. To her Brunton Stephens, the Australian poet, might have addressed his panegyric upon his Chinee cook: —

“There was nothing in creation that he didn't put to use,  
And the less he got to cook with, all the more he did produce;  
All nature was his kitchen range, likewise his cookery book —  
Neither Soyer nor Meg Dod could teach that knowing Chinee cook.”

Alec and I sometimes consulted together in alarmed foreboding as to whether there might not be some dark secret of the law behind Mrs. McGilray's tragic contentment and incomparable ragoûts, and whether Alec, too, in his character of Justice of the Peace, might not find himself moaning in the words of the narrator of the poem: —

“Oh, art, and taste, and piquancy, my happy board forsook,  
When I came the J.P. over my lamented Chinee cook.”

After our return from Gundabine, our first aim was to put things to rights at the head station, and to make ourselves comfortable. Now that the big mob of cattle had crossed the Narrows, there was no need to take much trouble about stockkeeping. Brown, the lanky Australian youth, was kept on as being equal to all present emergencies, while Alec wrote letters to agencies and cast about the district for a worthy successor to Tillidge. The horses — most of them having sore backs and girth-galls after the muster — were turned out to “spell” in the bush. Island Billy was set to break in new milkers — so far, cream and butter had been

unknown luxuries, and the supply of milk not to be depended upon. Weare, the carpenter, who had come back with us in the pilot schooner, was taken off the stockyard job, and turned into the kitchen, where he fixed up an open range, and built in a Colonial oven, welcome indeed after our previous difficulties in the matter of baking. Alec and McGilray began operations in the garden, cleaned out and remodelled the meat-store and dairy, and whitewashed the fowl-house — certain barn-door missionaries, comfortable clucking domestic speckled hens, which we had bought in Gundabine, being turned out to preach morals and manners among the lawless Spanish brood — while Mrs. McGilray and Black Charlie mopped, swept, and scrubbed within doors. Mrs. McGilray put me in mind of Loftus in her untiring energy, only she set to work in a much more solemn and portentous manner than had been Loftus's wont. She stalked about like a grim, gaunt destiny, five-foot-ten high, in bird's-eye cotton, wearing a mushroom hat, to the brim of which a frill of mosquito-netting was fastened and gathered in round her neck. This was the only sign she gave of being troubled by the mosquitoes. Perhaps they found her too tough a morsel to be pleasant eating, and left her alone. At any rate, she made no complaint, and listened in sublime contempt to McGilray's half-jocular, half-pathetic grumblings, which floated across the yard to us in the office.

“I'm just put beside my understanding, Janet, for I'm thinking that these beasties are the Lord's way of telling us that the blacks are no more than the lost tribes of Israel turned up in Australia, and that we are not treating them as we ought. I wouldn't mind so much if they'd got the length of making bricks for the forge chimney,” pursued McGilray, ruminatively; “but if we're to be afflicted with the seven plagues of Egypt, I'd rather they went on in the Bible order. I'd be glad, for the sake of variety, to take a spell at frogs and darkness.”

Mrs. McGilray was a woman of heroic nature as well as of heroic size. She had a genius for organization, and in a very short time had accomplished wonders, apportioning to each of us the task best suited to his or her strength and capacity. She even utilised old Sentilena, who still hung about the place, brought up crabs, scared away hawks, and looked, it seemed to me, a grotesque ghost of my courtship days, for she had discarded the tattered red blanket for an old pink gown, which I had worn when Alec proposed to me. It is true that, for sentimental reasons, I had cherished this gown even though it was no longer wearable; but as I was unpacking my trunks at the edge of the verandah and shaking out the cockroaches from my clothes — they had got in at Bell's warehouse — Sentilena sidled up insinuatingly to inspect the finery, her one eye gleaming, her toothless jaws expanding in aboriginal ejaculations of wonder and delight.

“Tsch! Tsch! My word! Budgery that, missus!” Then, some ancient

instinct of coquetry reviving, she snatched up the pink dress, slipped it over her head, and holding it against her waist, executed a *corroboree* "*pas seul*" on the grass. Finally, she declared that if I would give her the gown, and a whole fig of tobacco, she would "sit down one moon along a humpey, make altogether tin pot plenty clean, and fetch up eli\* every morning"; whereas if I refused, she would immediately yan (go away) and — awful threat! — take Black Charlie with her. I thought Sentilena's "eli" were worth buying — to say nothing of Charlie, and the cleaning of the tin-pots, into which Mrs. McGilray had as yet vainly tried to persuade her, so I threw sentiment to the wind, and presented her with the sacred gown, which, I may remark, was, after contact with Sentilena's person, redolent of other associations than those of a hallowed past. It gave Alec quite a start and qualm, when he came up from the yard, to see Sentilena, her hideous wealed face and bony extremities protruding from this garment of romance, as she squatted on the kitchen doorstep, her pipe in her mouth, filled as per contract, surrounded by an array of greasy tindishes, soot-caked frying-pans, and dirty saucepans, which Mrs. McGilray had collected from various parts of the establishment, and had bidden her scrape clean with a broken-bladed knife.

Before many days had passed we had greatly changed our mode of living and the aspect of the house. The floors were spotless; canvas lounges stood invitingly in the breezy south-east end of the verandah; glass and china were ranged on the pantry shelves; snowy mosquito curtains draped all the beds, and old boxes had been turned into dressing-tables with muslin flounces. The terrible blue of the sitting-room walls had been softened by engravings and wooden brackets; the aggressive oilcloth was partly covered with rugs; flowered chintz veiled the horse-hair sofa, and the pickings of Loftus's ducks had stuffed cushions for the wooden arm-chairs. Our wedding presents were set about on small tables of McGilray's manufacture, and dark blinds at the French windows subdued the awful glare of the western sun. Christo, the Angora goat, was banished from his quarters in the bath and penned in the fold with the plebeian goats, and we found that, by extemporising a screen and leaving open the bath-room door, we could let in the south-east breeze without bad result to ourselves, and make a draught that was decidedly unpleasant for the mosquitoes.

But now a wonderful event happened, which was as memorable in the annals of the Island as the Hegira in those of the Caliphate. It was scorching weather, even for February. There had not been a thunderstorm for weeks. A burning sun had withered up every blade of grass; the leaves of the gum-trees gave forth a peculiar dry rustle as a faint wind stirred them. All day a terrible heat brooded and stilled every sound of bird or insect life except the metallic whirring of the cicadæ which reached the house from the wattle thicket on the ridge. As one looked

over the country to the ocean on one side, and to the Narrows on the other, the low, wooded ridges showed a dull grey-brown instead of the usual blue-green of the eucalyptus foliage. There were fires on the mainland, and the outlines of Mount Akobaora loomed dimly through the smoke. Every breath was as if it came from a furnace, and the beasts on the near camps lolled with protruding tongues, and could hardly be got away from the water-holes.

Alec was a little anxious, and watched the clouds eagerly for a sign of rain. Island Billy was sent to scout, and to warn away any blacks who might be camping near the fences, and whose fires might spread and set light to the grass, which, in such weather as this, would burn like tinder. Island Billy reported that, if there were any blacks, they must be camped on the coast, and, unless a south-easterly gale sprang up, there was not much fear of their doing damage. Alec congratulated himself once more upon being the possessor of an island run, where there were no boundaries to guard, and, having some important business in Gundabine, set off one afternoon with Brown for the South End, intending to cross that night in a skiff which we now kept in the boathouse, and which made us independent of Rame and of head-winds in the Narrows.

When I went to bed that night, the heat was still intense, the air close and muggy, the horizon to the westward smoke-obscured, and the mosquitoes swarming in myriads. Buckets of burning grass-tree were set along the verandah, and in the sitting-room and my bed-room I had lighted pans of Persian insect powder, the smoke of which had a soporific effect on the mosquitoes, and though we ourselves suffered from it as if we had been narcotised, this was preferable to the attacks of our tormentors. About the small hours I was awakened from a heavy sleep by the banging of the French windows as they crashed backwards and forwards, the roaring of a gale round the exposed corner of the house, and a strange flapping above my head, which I soon discovered was caused by the canvas ceiling having been torn from its fastenings by the wind penetrating beneath the eaves, and having partially fallen, so that it was blown to and fro in the most uncanny manner. I got up, made fast the window as best I could, struck a light, and looked at my watch. My heart stood still at the thought that at about this time the tide would serve for Alec, and that unless deterred by the gale — which I felt to be unlikely, for he was in a hurry to get back — he would now be crossing that dangerous Gundabine Bay. I went back to bed, and lay awake for a long time listening to the wind, and haunted by the remembrance of that black, tossing sea, and the thought of the little boat racing before the blast and pursued by those great hungry, foam-tipped waves, that seemed to my excited memory like awful monsters springing greedily towards their prey. I dozed off, but woke again, shivering with dread and with fateful conviction, from a dream vivid as reality, in which I saw a strip of

shingly beach standing out distinct in the gloom of night, with black rocks jutting out into a milky sea, and breakers dashing over them; and Alec himself, his face white and his hair streaming with wet, borne up on the curve of a glassy wave, flinging out his arms and clinging to a rock as the wave roared on.

I looked again at my watch; it was four o'clock. I did not need to reason with myself. I knew as well as though I had been at Alec's side that his boat had been capsized near the Chinaman's Island, half-way across Gundabine Bay, I knew, too, that Alec was safe. After the first shuddering terror there came to me indeed a sensation of relief. Alec was not drowned; nothing more could happen that night. I *knew* that he was safe. He would remain on the Chinaman's deserted island till daybreak, and then he would signal, and Rame would take him off.

I can't account for this "ghostly" experience of mine. The psychical scientists would say that it was an instance of telepathic communication. Perhaps centuries hence an enlightened generation will have acquired the art of communicating telepathically at will. It is quite clear to me that my soul was with Alec that night. It has been equally clear to me several times in my life, that while I lay asleep my soul flew over miles of intervening space, and made itself known to one dear to me. Sometimes the soul of that other one has visited me, and long afterwards we two, in the flesh, have compared times and conditions and feelings, and have told each other that this thing certainly was.

I did not stay in bed any longer, but got up, a new fear striking me. The wind shrieked and wailed, making the wooden building shake on its piles, and hurling the canvas seats against the palisading of the verandah. The ceiling flapped like some giant bat; and the goats, which had a way of escaping from their fold on stormy nights and collecting under the house, made strange noises with their scraping horns and tinkling bells and melancholy bleating, which heightened the uproar of the wild night. When I had put on my clothes I went out into the verandah and stood at the corner which jutted out upon the bald brow of the hill. It was like being on the deck of a ship. I saw a curious sight. To the right and to the left of me, as I faced south, the horizon was lurid. On the mainland, Mount Akobaora was like a volcano belching flame. The fire was blazing on its summit, and spread down the deep gullies along its sides in zigzag rifts, giving the appearance of streams of molten lava. Right down to the shore were vivid patches and wavy lines of light. There was nothing to be alarmed at in this. The Narrows lay between us, and I only wondered vaguely if Lina Sabine was at home to enjoy the sight. But to my left, oceanward, there climbed swiftly over the rocky ridge what seemed like an array of strange fiery forms advancing in scattered ranks, extending to the width, perhaps, of half a mile. I remembered having noticed a thin curl of smoke against the sky late that afternoon; but it had given me no

anxiety, for the air was so still, and what wind there was came from the north-west. But now the gale was blowing straight in my face. The bush was on fire. Alec was away; and what was to save the stockyard — the pride of the island — and our paddock fences? On the top of that distant ridge, which for a space was arid and stony, I could see the tall gum-trees standing out at the edge of the bush, and the fire twisting up their limbs like red-hot serpents. Even as I watched, the flames — blown over the intervening rocky patch — caught the tops of the gum-trees, and spread down the ridge till it seemed a sheet of fire. Dawn broke and paled the illumination. I knew that below the ridge lay a morass some miles in extent, green with she-oak, and probably retaining moisture enough to offer a check to the fire. In this morass dwelt a number of wild pigs, those which had afforded sport to Loftus and Lazarus. After the inconsequent fashion of such fancies, I thought of Elia's essay, and the possible gastronomical discovery of an aboriginal Bo-bo, and I wondered whether the origin of bush fires might not be traced, like the Chinese epidemic of conflagration, to roast pig.

But it was not a time for airy speculation. I roused up the McGilrays, who, in their turn, called the black boys. At daybreak we were all standing on the highest part of the hill, gazing in consternation at the fire, which, apparently having met with a barrier at the morass, had divided, but was creeping round to south and north, and would ere long meet again in the dry gum forest on the other side.

I asked McGilray helplessly whether it was not possible to do something by which the fences and the stockyard might be secured. The stockyard lay at the foot of the hill, and had no barrier between it and the oncoming fire except a range of broken, unconnected water-holes.

“And what for no, mem?” replied McGilray, perking up his chin after the usual formula; but he collapsed immediately, and remarked weakly that he and the two black boys, and all the green wattle boughs they could carry would be very little use in beating out such a fire as that; while Island Billy could only suggest darkly, “Mine think it Bunyip sit down alongee swamp,” as though that fabulous monster of aboriginal legend must be in some way responsible for the whole business, and McGilray added that he judged it might be a good thing to collect our valuables and the station ledgers and make for the boat.

Mrs. McGilray had said nothing as yet, but now she turned upon McGilray with a scorn that is indescribable, and uttered the one syllable — “Man!” “I'm thinking,” she said to me, after a moment's pause, “that if we could burn the grass all along the waterholes before the fire gets near, we might save the stockyard; but there's no time to lose.”

Mrs. McGilray mustered the available hands, six of us, counting Sentilena and the black boys. She despatched McGilray and the boys to cut wattle boughs and commence operations; then, directing me to put on

a stuff kirt and veil and my thickest boots, she dressed herself in like manner, and before sunrise we two were tearing down the hill towards the spot, a little way from the stockyard, where McGilray had already started a thickly-spreading patch of smoke. The big water-hole lay quite close to the stockyard; the little ones, some distance apart from each other, describing a broken backward curve. Our object was to burn the grass for a good many yards between them, so that when the fire reached this point it would have nothing to feed upon.

The wind had gone down a little, and here it was much more sheltered than on our exposed hill; nevertheless, the fires we kindled spread rapidly, and in a few minutes had gained the line where we were placed at intervals prepared with green branches to beat out the flames. It was hard work, but to me by no means new. I had helped before now to beat down a bush fire. The dead leaves and dry grass crackled and spluttered; we were enveloped in a cloud of thick smoke, and the wind blew a shower of fine ashes against our breasts and faces. Fortunately, here the timber was scant, and there was less danger of the fire getting the better of us. We were too excited to think of reptiles lurking in the long grass and undergrowth. Once a black snake glided past my feet, and another time, Island Billy, shouting "death adder," flung away his bough, snatched up a stick, and began to belabour what at first sight seemed a short, stumpy bit of log lying on an ant track. Now and then, a startled opossum would leap up, uttering its queer guttural "gr-r-r"; or a jew lizard, routed off a fallen tree, would elevate its extraordinary ruff, stand still and hiss for a minute, and then move on; or an iguana would scurry ahead of the smoke and make for the handiest gum tree. We fancied that we could hear the roar of the more distant fire above the screeching of the parrots and cockatoos which, disturbed by the commotion, circled in noisy flights overhead. By nine o'clock a broad black belt stretched away on each side from the big water-hole, and we felt that the stockyard was safe.

Grimy and weary, we were turning back to the house, when Island Billy cried, "Look, look, missus. Plenty fire; sit down along hill, close-up humpy!"

The smouldering portion first set alight had broken out again, unnoticed by us in the ardour of our task, and the fire was fast climbing the hill on the Narrows side, where the long-bladed grass grew rank in the steep gullies, and the ascent was too difficult to be made except in cases of haste or emergency. I glanced with dismay at the dead skeleton gums close to the house, and thought how readily they would burn in this wind-swept spot, and how easily a spark might be carried to the shingled roof, and destroy our dwelling. There was nothing for it but to try and beat out the flames as they mounted the brow of the hill.

Not in our success, but in our failure, lay the great achievement which

must for ever stand out in Island history. Nearly all the vegetation on the plateau was burnt to tinder. I could almost have cried at the blackness of the desolation. With difficulty we saved the aloe and the poinsettia. Nothing but charred stubble remained of the fat, tall grass tussocks, heaped up with the withered refuse of many a summer, and the larvae of countless myriads of mosquitoes. There was the secret. I began to realize it dimly when dusk came unaccompanied by the low roar and the dense, brown, pricking swarm to which we had grown accustomed. In burning those ancient grass tussocks, we had burned the mosquitoes. It was indeed a blessed fact. Each succeeding night proved its reality.

The fire raged nearly all that day. We watched it creep up to our black barrier and slowly draw off sideways like a baffled foe, till its course was hidden by the hills to the north of the head station. But we could tell by the volumes of smoke and the look of the sky that it was spreading; and, though the gale had fallen, I began to tremble for the cattle and the winter supply of grass. At four o'clock the sky darkened. Lightning flashed from the black masses of cloud on the western horizon, which banked up till the gloom was of night. Thunder pealed angrily. The stillness was like the holding of a world's breath. Then the heavens burst, and rain and hail fell for the space of half an hour. When the storm ceased, there was no more smoke. A delicious coolness revived man and beast; the naked gullies gurgled with running water, and birds and reptiles rejoiced.

\*"Eli," crabs.

## Chapter IX. Lina's Fancies.

IT was a great surprise when, the next morning, at the time of high tide, Brown came up on foot from the Narrows, appearing by the short cut up the charred hill-side, whence he shouted to me that he had orders to put Smiler in the buggy at once, and go down to the landing for Alec and Mrs. Sabine. I was sorry that Lina's arrival had not been delayed till the green grass had had time to spring up, but glad that, at least after she left the landing, she would not be devoured by mosquitoes. I wondered within myself whether Mr. Sabine was of the party, and devoutly hoped that he had remained at Gundabine. All was explained when the buggy drove up. Lina, looking fragile, nervous, and lovely, told me that Mr. Sabine had gone up to the north on business, leaving her in Gundabine, and that she and Alec had made a plan between them, and he had brought her over in Rame's boat, and that she was going to keep me company while Alec was in Sydney. For Alec had received letters in Gundabine referring to the clearing off in part of our mortgage, and the remittance which his father had sent out from England, and was obliged to start for Sydney with the least possible delay. He explained all this to me as soon as we were alone. There was something more than the emotion of an ordinary greeting and imminent leave-taking in his manner. I knew what it meant, and I knew that he would try to keep from me the danger he had run in crossing the bay, so as to save me anxiety in the future.

"Oh! Alec," I cried, breaking down, "I might as well be a sailor's wife at once. I shall never know a moment's peace when you are away, and there is a south-easter blowing. Let us sell this place as soon as we can, and go and live on the mainland."

Alec reasoned with me gently, assuring me that since the Island had been inhabited by white men, there had hardly been one serious boating accident. But when I said to him, gravely, "Alec, I want to know what was happening to you about four o'clock in the early morning of yesterday," he looked at me in a startled manner; and I told him the story of my dream. It was all quite true. The gale had caught them as they were sailing across the bay, and had upset the boat, fortunately close to the Chinaman's Island. Alec and Brown had managed to swim ashore, and in the morning they had signalled for Rame to take them off. But the boat was lost for ever.

Alec went to Sydney by way of the pilot station, and Lina Sabine and I

were left alone. During Alec's last hours we two were selfishly occupied with ourselves and with station business. Alec had a great many directions to give — how I was to write up the station log regularly; how Brown was to report to me each day's operations on the run; near what particular camps the tailing mob was to be pastured, and so on. Mrs. Sabine showed, too, that she had the faculty of effacing herself, so that I did not notice at first how pale and delicate she had become, what a depressed, frightened way she had, and how nervously she started at the sudden sound of a footstep or the slamming of a door.

It was Mr. Kempsey, the pilot, who seriously called my attention to the change in Lina, since once he had travelled with her, in the steamer from the Cape to Stonehampton, when she was bright, beautiful Lina Trass. Mr. Kempsey rode down from the pilot station to buy meat, the day after Alec went, bringing back the pack-horse laden with more Tasmanian apples and smuggled jam. Mr. Kempsey, in his rough sailor blouse, with his weather-beaten face and kindly eyes, was always a welcome sight. He took the deepest interest in our affairs, and, as most of our important business was transacted by telegraph, he and Polly were in nearly all our secrets. His delight in the extirpation of the mosquitoes was almost more than he could express. It would find vent in spasmodic congratulations jerked into every pause in the conversation. But I could see that his eyes were constantly wandering to Lina, and just before he left, when I was weighing out the meat for him in the store, he said anxiously and confidentially —

“Mrs. Ansdell, you'll have your hands full presently, I'm afraid, with that pretty piece of white and gold chaney in there. She ain't fitted for being left to herself in the bush with a husband like that Mr. Sabine, who is never happy unless he is making a row. She is one of the laughing-crying sort, all nerves and fancies, that as like as not will go melancholy if they ain't always cotted. She's that ‘unked’ now, that I shouldn't wonder if she did go melancholy; and if she does, you just take my advice and bring her up to the pilot station, and I'll ship you to Stonehampton to the doctor.”

There was a good deal of truth in what Mr. Kempsey said. He had some odd phrases, and his “unked,” which meant sick, sorry, and something of what the Scotch call “fey,” somehow expressed Lina's condition. She was certainly very much altered. I was able to observe the dreary expression of her face when it was in repose; she had grown terribly thin. Her pretty, vivacious manner of gesticulation seemed to have become a travesty of itself. Her large, bright, blue eyes had a pathetic, startled, at times frightened, look. She alternated between a hysterical kind of gaiety and listless depression. Though she would sit silent for ever so long at a time, she could not bear to be alone, and would follow me about the house, among the chickens, and into the

kitchen, apologising with her joyless little laugh, and saying that she had been almost entirely by herself at Akobaora of late, and that it had got upon her nerves.

Something had undoubtedly got upon her nerves. I wondered whether it was Mr. Lyndon's return, and regret for her want of faith in him; or whether, as I suspected, her marriage had turned out a miserable mistake. I felt certain that she was most unhappy; but I did not know how to approach her with sympathy. Since that wild burst of confidence at Gundabine, she had drawn in within herself; and now, except for an occasional bitter speech, she made no allusion to her own private sorrows and disappointments.

One night, after I had gone to bed, she came to my room, wrapped in her dressing-gown, and looking very pale and wild.

"Rachel," she said, "would you mind my staying here with you? I don't know what has come to me. I can't bear to be by myself. My nerves have gone all to pieces." And then she added, hesitatingly, and almost in a whisper, "I have such horrible fancies."

I made her lie down on the bed, and took her hands in mine. Though the night was quite hot, they were as cold as stones, and she was shivering. I covered her with blankets and brought her some hot brandy and water to drink, and gradually she got warm again.

"Lina," I asked, "what sort of fancies?"

She did not answer at once, and then she said abruptly, in a resentful tone —

"It is a great mistake to suppose that people are not punished in this world for having given others pain. The pain comes back on oneself. A girl who behaves heartlessly is always paid out. That's justice, but it is hard upon her when judgment comes."

"Lina," I said, "you are thinking of Mr. Lyndon, and there's no good in that."

"No, I'm not," she replied. "I'm thinking about myself." She was silent for awhile, then said, in a very low voice, "Rachel, do you think one could ever get to hate a man so much that one would really want him to die? Do you remember Gwendolen — in *Daniel Deronda*, you know — and the dagger she locked away in her dressing-case? I feel like Gwendolen. I'm frightened — frightened of myself."

She turned away from me, shuddering. I could not get her to tell me anything more that night. By-and-by she seemed to sleep. It was not till two or three nights afterwards, when the poor thing had another nervous crisis, and woke up cold and trembling, and clinging to me, beseeching me to save her from her bad thoughts, that I drew from her what her trouble was.

Once she had begun, her confidence poured forth unchecked; and it seemed a relief to her to open her heart. The trouble was what I had

guessed all along, intensified by ill-health, want of companionship, and a naturally morbid tendency. She was very wretched. She had been trying to make a brave fight, but Mr. Sabine frightened and cowed her by his masterful, quarrelsome ways, his jeers, and his violent temper. He did not mean to be cruel, she put in pathetically. He was only like a schoolboy who pulls off flies' legs to show his superiority. It was his nature. She described her lonely life at Akobaora: Mr. Sabine was often at the mine; and when he was at home she wished, for peace sake, that he would go away. She had no one to talk to. She was obliged to bottle up her thoughts and all her gloomy imaginings. Mr. Sabine was very angry with her if she seemed unhappy. Sometimes, when she felt that she *must* cry, she would go out into the bush and hide herself among the gum-trees and sob till her misery had for the time spent itself. It was only the hope of soon leaving Australia that helped her to endure. She felt that she had sold herself and had not yet been paid the price. It was terrible; she hated herself, and she hated him worse than she hated herself. If she lived that life much longer, she knew that she must die or go mad. Now he said that he could not settle up the affairs of his reef, and that they would not be able to go to England, and then what could she do? How could she bear it? Did I believe in people being under the influence of evil spirits? Sometimes she fancied that it was an evil spirit which put wicked thoughts into her mind — thoughts about her husband. The confession halted, and her words came brokenly and with difficulty; it was because she was ill and nervous. Oh, she knew that, she was always telling herself that; and she would see a doctor when she went to Stonehampton. But knowing that, didn't make the thoughts less dreadful; they frightened her. What kind of thoughts? She did not like to tell me. I would think she was mad. One kind was about a little pistol which Mr. Sabine kept loaded in her bed-room. She was always seeing herself pulling the trigger of that pistol. And another was about a Malay knife he had brought from Singapore. She had locked away that knife, because she was afraid of it. She was afraid of other things too. But all this was less terrible than an awful feeling of dread — of spiritual desolation — dread, she didn't know of what; she couldn't explain or describe. It seized her suddenly at times — mostly when she was alone, but very often when she was laughing and talking. It would come all in a moment; it was like nothing I could imagine.

There was another fit of nervous trembling. I dosed her with sal volatile, and playfully scolded her, making light of her revelations. I told her that she needed rousing up, and cheering and tonicking; that her blood didn't nourish her brain properly; that her nerves had run down; that she had been reading too many sensational novels, and had allowed her imagination to become morbid, and to get the better of her good sense; and that a trip to town and a few bottles of steel wine would set

her all right again.

I felt more strongly, however, than I would let Lina see, and in my heart shrank from the responsibility of keeping her for a fortnight in the bush in her present shaky and nervous condition. I felt sure that she ought to have medical advice and a change of scene from the eternal gum-trees, and I determined that I would act on Mr. Kempsey's suggestion, and take her to Stonehampton, where I had been told that there was a clever and sympathetic doctor. Accordingly I summoned Brown and McGilray, and after a consultation with them, decided upon trusting to the pilots to put us on to a passing steamer. I felt that I could not brave the Narrows again in a south-east wind, and without Alec; and, besides, we should have to wait nearly a week for the steamer, as so few called in at Gundabine. Brown was told to get in the quietest horse in the paddock which would carry a lady. Lazarus was chosen for me, and my own hack given to Mrs. Sabine. McGilray was put in charge at the head-station during my absence, and it was arranged that we should start that afternoon.

Lina took very kindly to the project. She got quite gay over the packing of our saddle-bags; but I had no reason to regret my resolution, for she relapsed again mentally and physically before we had come to the end of our twenty miles ride.

I never saw a place so lonely as the pilot station. Except the faint blue outline of the coast, on the other side of the Stonehampton Harbour, there was nothing to be seen from it but sky and ocean. It was a humped, treeless, swelling promontory covered with short grass, that made it look as if it had been shorn, which stretched out from the dense forest of the Island into the vast Pacific. There was a red lighthouse at the point, with brown rocks sticking out like teeth below it, and a little cluster of wooden houses seemed to grow like mushrooms on the cliff. A few goats browsed on the green humps, and the tall, bare telegraph poles stood out against the sky.

The chief pilot was away with his family on leave at this time. None of the other men but Mr. Kempsey were married, and when we got down to Mr. Kempsey's house — easily distinguished as the terminus of the telegraph wires — Polly Kempsey appeared to be the only representative of feminine humanity on the station. Polly was a shy, odd little woman of sixteen, reminding one somehow of a scrub kangaroo or a native bear, brought in and tamed, with her short, shaggy, brown mane, her bright, black eyes, and her startled way. She looked as if the wind had interfered with her growth, and perhaps it had, for she had never been away from the Island in her life, and had bent before the gales. Polly's knowledge of the world was chiefly derived from the telegraphic messages which were incessantly clicking through the house, and which practice from infancy enabled her to read by sound as they ran. In this way Polly must have

acquired a mass of miscellaneous information, for the Cape was a through station, and all messages, political, departmental, European, and otherwise, flashed along the line. Polly got twenty pounds a year as telegraph mistress, and I believe it would have been impossible to find a more expert operator. The needle clicked all the time, as we sat in the little parlour making friends over the cup of tea Polly prepared for us. It was very hard to get Polly to talk, though when set going on her own subject, her sentences were jerked out with an extraordinary rapidity. She had got into the way of making long and short pauses on her words, as if she were keeping time to the telegraph needle; and her face wore, when she was silent, an abstracted listening look, such as I have seen on the faces of mediums who were supposed to be carrying on communication with an unseen world. Once, when the needle stopped for a minute, Polly announced in her abrupt manner: "Mr. Gladstone has announced to the House of Commons that, in consequence of the vote on the Irish University Bill, Her Majesty's Ministers have tendered their resignations."

"Why, Polly!" I exclaimed, "how do you know that?"

"It's just gone through," answered Polly; "and there" — she waited as the needle recommenced — "The attitude of the Sultan of Zanzibar is unconciliatory; and Sir Bartle Frere's mission is a failure."

Lina went off into a fit of hysterical laughter, and Polly looked surprised, but supposed that it must seem queer to a person not accustomed to it. She told us that I was to have her bed, which was in the operating room, and said she hoped the instrument wouldn't keep me awake. "You won't understand it," Polly continued, warming to her theme; "so I dare say it will seem like any other noise. But it do go on so at nights, when I'm half asleep and half awake, with its mort of news" (Polly had picked up some of her father's expressions, which I learned long afterwards were old Northamptonshire), "its Fenian plots, and earthquakes, and poisonings, and treaties, and folks worrying at each other over things with long queer names; that when I get up in the morning, it's like as if I'd been dreaming the world had turned crazy."

Mr. Kempsey, who had been out with the pilots in the boat, came in by-and-by, and, saying that he would relieve Polly at the instrument, told her to take us to the beach and show us about, to look in at the lighthouse at the same time, and see that the lamp was all right, and to fetch up the goats, so that we might have some fresh milk for supper. Polly's duties seemed multifarious. Mr. Kempsey gazed compassionately at Lina, observing that she didn't "look deadly well," and that there was bound to be a steamer next day, or the day after, and he'd keep on the look-out for smoke. We sent telegrams to Alec and to Mr. Sabine, up north, also to a hotel at Stonehampton, and then we went down to the beach, where Polly waded about among the rocks and broke off oysters for us. The fresh sea

air and new surroundings did Lina good, and she slept soundly that night. I lay awake for a long time in Polly's bed — a wooden crib with a mattress exhaling the peculiar odour of dried seaweed — the roar of the sea almost drowning the tick of the telegraph instrument, while every now and then the warning bell would jingle, and Polly or Mr. Kempsey would come in and take down a message, reading off the tape as if to reassure me lest I should imagine some awful European disaster had taken place. “Only the *Mary Ann* barque, Twofold Bay, sighted off Beacon Point”; or “*Taralpa*, A. S. N. Co., signalled Cooktown. No good for you”; or — one of the last — “Big floods coming down Stoney River I doubt if the Stonehampton steamer will get up and so the night wore away.

## Chapter X. The House of Memories.

STONEHAMPTON is some forty miles up from the harbour, and the telegraphic report of big floods was curiously corroborated on the morrow by the washing ashore of the carcasses of several drowned sheep and cattle. Such floods are frequent enough without any previous warning. A river will often "come down" in this way, there having been tremendous rain high up in the ranges, and none at all in the country near its mouth.

Contrary to Mr. Kempsey's prognostications, however, we did get up the river. In the grey of our second morning at the pilot station, smoke was sighted to seaward, and Lina and I were hurried, half-dressed, down to the beach, carried through the surf on Mr. Kempsey's back to the boat, and finally received on board a mail steamer bound north, which was putting into Stonehampton.

Oddly enough, the first person who stretched out his hand to help us on board was Mr. Robinson, the husband of Lina's schoolfellow, and also a friend of Alec's, though as yet I had never met him. He was a good-looking, quiet, middle-aged squatter, who had a house in Stonehampton, where his wife was now staying — the house of poignant memories to Lina. When he heard our plans, he insisted, in the genial bush fashion, upon our giving up all idea of going to a hotel. There wasn't a decent one in Stonehampton, he said. They were all rowdy places, only fit for Never-never new chums down on a spree. We must go with him to his house. Milly would never forgive him if he didn't bring us along; and so on.

I fancied that Lina, shrinking from the revival of painful associations, would refuse his invitation; but, to my surprise, she seemed to wish to accept it, and when I agreed, grew quite excited at the prospect, her brilliant colour coming and going, and giving her an even more fragile appearance than when she was pale and listless, her soft laugh tinkling, and all her pretty little play of gesture starting anew. Lina was a great puzzle. I really think that, in a sort of way, she enjoyed being harrowed. At any rate, she thoroughly enjoyed being the heroine of a situation. We were a long time getting up the river. The flood was coming down — a turbid, yellow torrent, which, as it reached the bar, seemed to make a distinct path of its own, like that of the Rhone where it falls into Lake Lemman. Great quantities of driftwood floated with the current, and many

bodies of dead beasts. There were living ones, too, their heads above water, still swimming, and being fast carried out to sea. It was a melancholy and curious sight. We passed a little island in mid-stream, a low mangrove-covered mud-bank, which was packed with animals that had taken refuge there — cattle, sheep, horses, as well as kangaroos, opossums, emus, and many wild creatures, all crowded together in a dense mass, half drowned, and completely tamed with fright.

It was quite late in the day when we got to Stonehampton, among the low wharves and wooden warehouses, which stood along the flat banks, jumbled up with streets and ferries, queer one-storied shops and verandahed dwelling-houses, closed in with yellow alamandas, passion fruit, and orange begonias. The banana plantations, the feathery bamboos, the gorgeous creepers, the different sorts of cactus, and the hibiscus trees, with their pink and red flowers, gave the place a tropical look; but otherwise it was crude, unpicturesque, and steamy, and we were glad to drive off in Mr. Robinson's buggy to the higher ground, a little way from the river, where lived most of the Government officials and the better-class residents.

Lina gave an odd involuntary sigh, casting back a pathetic, meaning look at me, which seemed to say, "Do you remember?" as we stepped on to the verandah — the scene of her parting with Mr. Lyndon. There was the stephanotis drooping its waxen trails, and the scented verbena clambering up the wooden pilasters, and stretching out in the dusk, the paddock with its cida-retusa shrubs and little water-holes, "where they used to go craw-fishing" — all the background of poor Lina's romance. Milly Robinson was a gay, affected little woman, who said smart, silly things, and was, perhaps, the worst guide and monitor which could have been found for Lina Trass. She was very kind to us, however, making us effusively welcome, setting to work immediately to plan all manner of diversions, and refusing to believe that there was anything the matter with Lina, till the poor girl herself settled the question by going off into one of her hysterical shivering fits, and finally subsiding into a dead faint.

Lina was very ill for several days. The doctor said that she had narrowly escaped a severe nervous malady, and commended my wisdom in bringing her away from the bush, which undoubtedly had had the worst effect upon her sensitive organization. As soon as she got better, he said that she must have plenty of cheerful society, gentle exercise, and all the distractions that could be devised, a prescription that fitted admirably with Mrs. Robinson's views and suggestions. The Stonehamptonites all called upon us, and we assisted at a series of mild after-dinner festivities, at which Lina and I wore our trousseau gowns, and the men mostly dressed in white duck or thin alpaca suits. We lounged in the verandah, flourishing mosquito-whisks and fans, or strolled about the garden in

pairs, while somebody made music in the drawing-room; then all came in at ten or thereabouts to eat cake and melons and strawberry-guavas, and imbibe iced drinks. It was arranged that we were to remain with the Robinsons till our husbands joined us — Alec from Sydney and Mr. Sabine from the north. Mr. Sabine wrote fussy letters to the doctor and to his wife, which last were a jumble of bad spelling, scolding, exhortations to spend as much money as she liked, and not to let Mrs. Robinson “boss the show”; but on no account to wear her smartest dresses till he came down — bluster, conceit, and general anxiety. Alec wrote that he was delighted I was having a pleasant change, and making acquaintance with Stonehampton, that I was to be sure and not worry about the Island, and that he would come to me as soon as he could, and, if possible, arrange to stay for some up-country races which were to be held shortly near Mr. Robinson's station, and at which he proposed to run one of the Island horses. These were the races in which Mr. Sabine had so greatly interested himself. He had succeeded in getting up a Corinthian for gentleman riders, and meant to ride himself a horse about which he had bragged considerably when we were staying at Sykes's in Gundabine.

The uneasiness which I felt at first on the score of a meeting between Lina and Mr. Lyndon gradually subsided, for I heard of him as being very hard at work on his railway, and not at all likely to visit Stonehampton while Lina was there. But my theory of magnetic currents comes into play again. Destiny seemed to have ordained that they were to be brought together. This was how it happened.

Mrs. Robinson had organized a visit to the bachelor manager of a great meat-preserving establishment, who had very pretty and roomy quarters some distance up the river. It was settled that we were to go there one afternoon, in the company's steamer, dine, dance, and stay the night, returning the next day to Stonehampton.

Lina was in unusually high spirits. The manager of the meat-preserving place was an old admirer of hers — not in any serious or melodramatic fashion, but sufficiently so to impart piquancy to the excursion.

“I feel like a prisoner in the Conciergerie, or one of those places during the French Revolution, Rachel,” she said, laughing. “Any night now I may hear my name in the list of the condemned. Mr. Sabine is on his way down, and I'm expecting to see his steamer signalled; and I'm going to dance and make merry before my execution.”

I never saw Lina look prettier than she did that day, in a soft falling black dress, with her yellow hair escaping from under her little hat. We took down fichus and evening shoes, as the way is at these primitive entertainments, and gave a festive appearance to our toilettes generally by decking ourselves before dinner with such flowers as the garden offered. The verandah was, like many others at this time, festooned with stephanotis in full bloom, and Lina gathered great withes of the waxen

green leaves and snowy flowers, and hung them about her bodice, her waist, and in her hair, in a manner that would have seemed utterly fantastic in anyone else, but which suited her to perfection.

We were in the middle of dinner, which was served in a somewhat impromptu fashion, with a good deal of laughter over the shifts and contrivances of a bachelor *ménage*, when a tall good-looking man, whom I felt sure at a glance was Mr. Lyndon, appeared from the verandah, stopping at the end of the table where our host was seated, with Lina at his right hand and me at his left. Lina was placed with her back to the window as Mr. Lyndon came in, and I don't think for the moment he knew who she was. Certainly his manner was quite unembarrassed, as he said, "How do you do, Kelmarsh? I'm awfully sorry to come in so late; but when I heard that you had a party, I stopped at the foreman's quarters to make myself respectable. I found that I was obliged to be in Stonehampton to-morrow, and I thought my easiest way of getting there was to ride over here from the Works and trust to your sending me down the river in your steamer. No, don't trouble to make room. I'll find myself a seat somewhere," as Mr. Kelmarsh, with a noisy welcome, was rising to fetch another chair.

"There's plenty of room here," said Mr. Kelmarsh, "if Mrs. Sabine doesn't mind moving a little nearer me and letting you sit next her. You know Mrs. Sabine, Lyndon?" And thus the two met.

It was an anxious moment, and I think Mrs. Robinson felt uneasy, for she bent markedly across the table and drew everyone's attention to herself by attacking Mr. Lyndon with some flippant banter about the dusky daughter of a Malayan Maharajah with whom rumour had connected his stay in Singapore.

Mr. Lyndon gave one look at Lina, as he held out his hand, saying quietly, "How do you do, Mrs. Sabine?" then turned to Milly Robinson and jestingly parried her thrusts. I don't think that anyone not noticing him very closely would have observed the momentary spasm which came over his face, the tight setting of his lips, and the stiffening of his features, as if he were nerving himself to bear some sharp pain.

As for Lina, she said not a word. She only looked fixedly at her plate for a moment or two after the greeting, and presently went on talking to Mr. Kelmarsh as if nothing had happened. She was a little more subdued, that was all. I saw that she flushed up suddenly once when she became aware that Mr. Lyndon's eyes glanced down at her right hand and rested upon the little curiously wrought ring of which she had told me the history, and which she still wore. But, on the whole, she showed more dignity than I had expected from her. It is quite true that the weakest and most emotional women can, upon occasions, be the bravest and most self-controlled.

"Don't get into a funk about me, Rachel," she whispered a little later,

when we were together in the verandah. "It's all right. I'm strung up to it now. I shan't make a fool of myself, as I did that day in Gundabine. Only promise that you won't go far away from me. If you see me on the edge of a precipice — I like playing on the edge of precipices — don't try to pull me back, but keep near and just prevent me from toppling over."

The music struck up, and Mr. Kelmarsh came to ask her to dance before she could say any more. I watched her as she whirled round. I had never seen her dance before. She was like a sylph, or like some laughing Undine, and for the moment seemed soulless and light-hearted. Mr. Lyndon disappeared. She danced now with one and now with another; and I too, allowed myself to be led off, and so had less opportunity of observing her. The dancing, however, was somewhat desultory and spiritless. The floor was bad, and it was too hot for much exertion. Very soon the little company broke up into knots and couples. By way of rallying it, Mr. Kelmarsh asked Lina to sing. I forget whether I have ever mentioned Lina's singing. She had a voice of no great power or compass; but its tones were like those of a bird — they were so sweet and true; and she had a plaintive, totally unconventional way of singing negro melodies and wild little bush songs, that was like nothing else I have ever heard. Lina's singing was as distinctly a part of her own self as her yellow hair and blue eyes, and the strange thing about it was its mournfulness. Her voice seemed to come from a long way off, and at times there was a tremble in it that somehow always brought tears near to my eyes.

Milly Robinson sat down to the piano to play the accompaniment. Lina never made a fuss about her singing. She stood up now without any preliminary flutter, her hands folded simply before her, looking, as she stood, in her soft black dress and all the stephanotis flowers, and with her hair a little tossed and her eyes gazing over everybody away beyond the room, like a figure in a child's fairy story. She sang from memory a little nigger song of which she was very fond. I didn't know then where it came from — it has become popular and hackneyed since that time; but I never can hear it now without wanting to go away and cry. I used to feel a little like that even then, Lina made it so pathetic. I find myself always using that word in relation to Lina, but it comes more naturally than any other. She was not very heroic, nor very true, nor very good, but she was pathetic.

I went out into the verandah when Lina began, and took possession of a squatter's chair in the darkest corner, at the end where there were no windows shedding light from the drawing-room. It was a little bowery place, closed in with ferns and an ancient grape-vine, that cast odd shadows on the bit of grassy bank leading up to the boards. A clump of bamboos rustled and quivered close by, making strange human noises. Outside, the garden was all dark and shadowy, with here and there a

cluster of great white datura bells, showing like ghostly patches. Lina was singing —

“So it's good-bye, children, I'm gwine to go  
Where de rain doan fall and de win doan blow,  
And your ulster coats you will not need  
    When we ride up in the chariot in de morn.  
But your golden slippers must be nice and clean,  
An' your age must just be sweet sixteen,  
An' your white kid gloves you will hab to wear,  
    When we ride up in de chariot in de morn.”

We all know the chorus to each verse! —

“Ah, dem golden slippers! Ah, dem golden slippers!  
Golden slippers I'm gwine to wear bekase dey look so neat!  
Ah, dem golden slippers! Ah, dem golden slippers!  
Golden slippers I'm gwine to wear, to walk in de golden street.”

But when Lina had finished singing this last verse, and paused for several moments, no one took up the chorus, as some had done with the other verses. Then Mr. Kelmarsh called, “Chorus, chorus,” and asked loudly, “Where's Lyndon? He hasn't joined. Come on, Lyndon.”

There was no answer, and the chorus died away. Lina did not wait, but stepped out in the verandah, and came round towards where I was sitting. I was going to get up to show myself, when suddenly a figure rose quite close to me from the edge of the verandah, where it had been all the time, its back towards me, indistinguishable in the shadow of the grape-vine.

“Lina!” the man said, then added, “Mrs. Sabine,” in a hesitating, half-bitter way, and advanced to meet her. It was Mr. Lyndon.

Lina gave a little cry, and came forward too. She stood leaning against the verandah pillar, and he stood facing her.

“Will you let me speak to you for a few minutes?” he said. “I should like to congratulate you on your marriage. I should like to ask if you are happy.”

Lina did not answer. I sat quite still; there was no use in getting up now, and making them feel uncomfortable. I hated the idea of playing the caves-dropper, even involuntarily; but after what Lina had said a few moments ago, there was less need for me to feel compunction. I felt that it might be better for her if I were near, and that at any rate this was what she herself wished.

Mr. Lyndon waited for her to speak. She was still silent, her head drooped, and he said abruptly, “If you would tell me that you were happy I should mind less.”

Lina looked up at him, clasping her hands before her impulsively after

a way she had.

"I never told you anything that wasn't true," she said simply, "and I can't tell you that."

"You never told me anything that wasn't true?" he said in a quiet tone, as if he expected the other part of her answer. "Are you quite sure of that? When you wrote to me on the steamer, and told me that you loved me, was *that* true?"

"Yes," she said very low, but very distinctly, and there was silence for a minute.

"Why did you do it?" he broke out. "Not because of me. I never asked you to give me your promise. I wouldn't take it from you — but for your own sake? Why didn't you wait a little and let the old fancy die? It couldn't have been more than a fancy, Lina. If you had loved me you would have believed in me."

"And you?" she exclaimed passionately. "Oh, you shouldn't be hard on me. You were hard then. If you had only sent one line — one word! If you'd said to me before you went away even — 'Lina, be true to me,' that would have been something to hold by."

"Did you want that? Didn't you know that it was because I loved you so?" he said with an infinite tenderness, and a keen reproach in his voice. "I wanted to give you a chance, dear; I knew how frail and how impulsive you were. I wanted you to be sure of yourself. I knew that at the best it must be a long time before I could come to you, and that then I couldn't give you money and position and all that. I couldn't look forward then and see that by now I should have finished the work I had set myself — and for what? I *did* write to you — it was a relief to pour out my love for you in that way; but I never sent the letters. I said to myself that it wouldn't be fair on you, and so I burned them all."

"Ah!" Lina shuddered as if he had been telling her the fate of a live thing. She half stretched out her hand to him and let it fall again. "I wanted you to tell me. I wanted to *know* that you loved me. I always wanted a great deal of telling for me to feel sure that anyone really loved me; I couldn't believe that people could go on caring for a girl like me who had nothing but her prettiness, and not so much of that. And then it was all so terrible and bewildering."

"You mean," he said sternly, "that you wanted me to tell you that I wasn't a thief."

Lina uttered a sort of groan.

"Don't be too hard on me," she said again; "I wasn't made to stand out against things."

"My dear," he said very gently, "I'm not hard on you, I've no right to be hard. You were not my promised wife; I'd left you to yourself, and you couldn't stand alone. My poor little Lina!"

Neither of them spoke for a little while. Presently Lina said —

“Why did I do it? I don't know. Why did I try to make you care for me at first? Why did I send you that letter — on the steamer? It's all the same thing; I've no stability or proper pride; I threw myself at you, and Alec Ansdell knew it; and then I began to feel doubtful and ashamed.”

“I gave you my pledge,” he interrupted quickly.

She held up her hand and looked sadly at the ring on her finger.

“Ah! It ended there.”

“What makes you wear that?” he asked almost roughly. “There's no meaning in it now — there was then. Take it off and give it back to me.”

She put up her other hand as if to obey him; then seemed to change her mind, and held out the hand with the ring on it suddenly to him.

“Will you take it off,” she said, “if you think it's wrong for me to wear it? Nobody knows except — except Rachel Ansdell. It can't matter now; and it has a meaning still — for me.”

He took both her hands in his and kissed them.

“Be it so!” he said; “in memory of the might have been. It was a near miss, Lina;” and he gave a harsh, short laugh. “It only meant a little faith and a year's waiting.”

“Oh, why am I turned this way and that — like a reed shaken by the wind?” Lina cried impetuously. “That's how it is; I am a reed. It's my nature; all I am fit for is to laugh and sing, and look pretty, and be gay when the sun is shining and people are kind; but when the clouds gather over and a storm comes, and there are harsh words, I can't stand up against them.”

He drew closer to her, and bending over her, said in a deep moved voice —

“There's a different look in your eyes — like the look of a child that has been beaten. Lina, do you mean that he is unkind to you? By God! if I thought that, I'd say to you now — this very night — ‘Lina, my darling, come.’ ”

The passion with which he said these words thrilled me to the very heart as I listened — guiltily. It seemed a sort of sacrilege — a wrong to him to remain there hearing such an entreaty. My impulse was to start forward and throw my arms round Lina and hold her back from that precipice. I had the dread lest in a gust of feeling she should be borne off her feet. But Lina was not so weak as for a moment I feared. I bent myself anxiously, straining my eyes to watch her every gesture, and to try and read her thoughts on her face. In the dim light I could see her look change; she seemed to look back a little, and her eyes turned upon him in a questioning, startled manner. Her agitation subsided; her voice was more collected and had a rebuking ring.

“You mustn't talk like that,” she said. “I oughtn't to have said what I did; everything is different now, and the past is past — only a ‘might have been.’ But I wanted to tell you the truth; I wanted you to know that

I did care for you, and that I wasn't quite so bad as I seemed. Now you know; and you must not make it harder for me; you must never say words like that again.

“Then,” he said doggedly, “I must never see you any more.”

“Good-bye,” she said firmly; “it's better like that. Don't come anywhere that I am going to be; don't come to the races at Balloo. Mr. Sabine will be there — and I couldn't bear it. We are going to England soon, I hope, and that will make things easier. There's nothing for me but to live the life I've made for myself. I've got to pull my nerves and my spirits together, and get the best out of the world that I can — that's what I've been telling myself the last week or two. I've been running down and getting morbid. You know I never was one of the plucky ones; I had a feeling that I shouldn't do much till you and I had met once again. Now it's over, and you understand; and Mr. Sabine is coming to-morrow. Tell me that you forgive me; and then do what you did before — go away and leave me to myself.”

Her appeal seemed completely to take the passion out of the man. He spoke very gently and sadly:

“It is you who have to forgive me,” he said. “There's nothing in my heart, Lina, but love and pity and respect for you. I'll do what you want; I'll not say one more word that can distress you — only, good-bye.”

He gave one long look at her; then, without taking her hand, he stepped down into the garden, and was lost in the darkness.

## Chapter XI. Lina's Presentiment.

I DID not make my presence known to Lina then. I felt that the time to tell her of it would come later. She stood quite still. For a moment I thought she must be in pain, for suddenly she gave a little cry and staggered against the verandah post, where she leaned with hands tightly pressing her bosom, and her eyes closed.

"Lina!" I called, but she took no notice. I sprang to her side, and put my arms round her, and my hand on hers, which were deadly cold. Presently she looked at me in a bewildered way, and heaved a sigh of relief, straightening herself once more.

"Is that you, Rachel? Something came over me — a pain like a knife in my heart — just for a minute It's all right now."

I questioned her anxiously; but she made light of the attack.

"Oh, it's nothing! I've felt the same sort of thing before, only not so bad; it was a kind of spasm. Well, that isn't wonderful. I have been having a scene — a bad scene. I used to fancy I liked scenes. I don't think now that I shall want a scene ever — ever again in my life." She paused, and added after a long silence, "I'll tell you about it some day, Rachel. When one sees the precipice, one doesn't want after all to fall over it. I didn't need you to hold me back. It's all nonsense saying that the heart isn't the seat of the emotions," she went on, looking at me with her wide-open eyes, and speaking with tragi-comic earnestness. "Why, I could disprove that theory from my own experience. My heart has ached — *ached*, when I have been unhappy; and I stabbed my heart to-night, Rachel, just as surely as if I had driven a dagger into it. Come along, let us go in."

We none of us saw anything more of Mr. Lyndon. The next morning he had gone. Mr. Kelmarsh told us at breakfast of his disappearance in the night, and how they supposed he had taken it into his head to kill his "Government screw," by riding it straight to Stonehampton, instead of waiting for the steam launch.

I suppose Milly Robinson guessed the reason; but she had the discretion to say nothing, which I felt to be a little surprising.

We went back to Stonehampton in the steam launch, and, when we reached the Robinsons' house, to our surprise found Mr. Sabine lying in a long chair in the verandah, calmly drinking a brandy and soda. His steamer had come in some hours before it was expected. After the first

greetings, during which he discovered that Mrs. Sabine was looking uncommonly well, and that the doctor had been trying to take advantage of a man who owned a paying gold-reef, Mr. Sabine relapsed into his normal condition of argumentativeness, falling foul of certain bland statements of Mr. Robinson's about the forthcoming Corinthian at Balloo. It soon became very evident that Mr. Sabine's trip had not improved his temper. Perhaps he had been "sampling" extensively up North. Certainly he was even more fractious and unreasonable than he had shown himself at Gundabine; he snapped and bickered about everything, and with a want of logic in his contradictoriness that was intensely aggravating. I have a conviction, strengthened by little things I have heard since, that his brain was partly turned. Lina sat all the evening in a state of apathy, answering him submissively when he spoke to her, but taking no notice of his ill-humour. Her flickering vivacity seemed quenched as effectually as if his captious snarls had been patent fire extinguishers. He insisted upon knowing what gowns she had been wearing, taking exception to this one and that, and giving orders that a magnificent pink silk was to be reserved for a rowdy dance at the Balloo public-house, which, Mr. Robinson said warmly, was not fit for a lady to go to, but to which Mr. Sabine declared that he meant to take his wife. He didn't know but that, instead of going to England, he might stand for the district, and so he would make himself popular, and give a treat to the free selectors, who he'd be bound would appreciate Lina's condescension. Milly Robinson was annoyed, because she wanted Lina to wear the famous pink silk first at a bush ball she herself was going to give at their station on the first night of the races, and there was a good deal of cantankerous discussion upon the whole subject.

There was not room at the Robinsons' for us all, and the next day Mr. Sabine carried Lina off to the hotel, where, at an enormous expense, he had engaged all the available accommodation. Alec made his appearance a few days later, and took me to stay with some friends of his own. The Robinsons went up to Balloo to prepare for the reception of their guests at the races. So it happened that we were all more or less engrossed with our own affairs, and Lina and I did not see much of each other in the short time that we remained at Stonehampton before the bush festivities, in which everybody was to take part.

Alec just now was deeply exercised in his mind over the engagement of a stockman for the Island. He had already interviewed several specimens of the brisk, spry, second-rate stockman — for the Island as a place of abode was not in favour with the first-rate ones — but none had taken his fancy so much as a man called Balfour, an ex-gentleman who had been ruined in squatting, but was otherwise, according to all accounts, "a thundering smart chap," and an embodiment of all the virtues connected with the bucolic profession. He was a splendid rider;

would save his wages in breaking in buck-jumpers; a thoroughly knowing hand among stock, accustomed to managing a coast station, with his head well screwed on his shoulders, and presumably with class proclivities which would ensure his siding with the master against the man in the case of collision, which would, in fact, make him see things generally from the master's point of view. So Alec reasoned. Flash, perhaps! What stockman was worth his grub who wasn't a bit flash? Of course there are always a few shady stories about a fellow who has been sold up; and, by the way, it wasn't a square and orthodox selling up by a respectable bank, but a case of mortgage to a rascally Melbourne firm of Jew money-lenders. Tried to make a fraudulent settlement on his wife, and to sneak some cattle off the run on the sly while his wife was singing to the men who were taking delivery at the head station! Well, Watts of Tarrabilla — and there couldn't be a more honest old fellow between this and the Gulf of Carpentaria — said the stories were all lies, that Balfour's wife was a lady, and that it was a moral impossibility for a Balfour of Kilcummin to run otherwise than straight.

Odd, importing the *noblesse oblige* principle into the stockmen's huts; but Alec admitted that he had a lurking belief in "*noblesse oblige*," and in the efficacy of the chivalric code even under the trying conditions of a square-tail muster; by which, in contradistinction to a "book-muster," is understood the selling of a station at the rate of so much for every beast actually brought into the yard, and in such case the temptation on the part of the seller to pass the same beast twice is obvious.

I felt a little shy of Mrs. Balfour, "the lady" domiciled in the mud-floored slab hut half-way between the house and the stock-yard. I foresaw certain difficulties of etiquette which might arise from such delicate relationship between the hut and the head-station, but Alec pooh-poohed all trivial considerations; and the end of it was that, after a good deal of consultation, Balfour of Kilcummin was engaged as stockman at seventy pounds a year and the usual rations.

Balloo is about forty miles from Stonehampton, and is the township to which Mr. Lyndon's railway was then in process of being run. We stopped our buggy at the works, and Mr. Lyndon came to us looking, I thought, very worn and haggard. He chatted for a little with Alec, bringing him out a drink, and made me go into his tent and have some biscuits and tea. He said that he was not going to the races, though he had given some of his men a holiday that they might attend. Alec and I knew his reasons for staying away, and we did not ask any questions or mention the Sabines. When Alec said something jokingly about a pleasure-trip to Sydney as soon as the railway was finished, Mr. Lyndon shook his head and looked at us both rather sadly. "No, I'm going to work hard, and scrunch all the nonsense out of me," he answered. "I mean to cut the district directly I have done here; and if I can get the

Government to give me a job that will keep me a long time away up north, right out of the track of civilization, I shall accept it gladly. I think they owe me something, and I shall ask that favour.”

Why Balloo should have been chosen as the terminus of a railway, puzzled me immensely when we passed through it that evening on our way to Balloo Vale — the Robinson's station — which was five miles farther on. There was a racecourse, to be sure — just now the scene of tipsy preparations for the morrow's merry-making. We had a view of it as we drove by — a treeless flat, with some dreary-looking prospectors' holes, old claims, and mounds of earth in the middle, the visible sign of an abortive attempt to find gold. It was surrounded by a dense gum forest, and facing a sort of Tattenham Corner and straight run in was a rickety wooden stand roofed with boughs and flanked by a seedy refreshment bar, on which was profanely inscribed in large letters, “Ho, every one that thirsteth! Come and try Thackwaite's reviving Rum Relish,” and by a booth where a stuffed alligator was advertised as an attraction to sightseers. The course was marked by poles and little flags. Several of the rough grass-fed horses were being exercised on it, and Mr. Thackwaite was evidently already doing a thriving business. Most of the population of Balloo appeared to have migrated to the racecourse. A bullock dray loaded with wool bales was drawn up at one side of the refreshment bar, and a cluster of blacks' gunyahs close by sent up smoke through the gum-trees and added some elements of excitement to the scene in the shape of a few naked piccaninnies and frolicsome gins.

As for Balloo itself, three or four low bush public-houses, each with a small mob of shepherds and stock-hands on the spree, sprawling in the verandah, a miserable bark-roofed store in which diggers' tools, tin billies, zinc buckets, saddle-straps, coloured blankets, and a variety of such miscellaneous merchandise was exposed for sale, half-a-dozen tents and a tribe of barking mongrels, and the township's claims to commercial distinction are fully enumerated. Alec told me that one of the members of the progressive ministry had a vast sheep-station a little distance from Balloo, and that it was to facilitate the carriage of his wool to port that the “railway dodge” had been accomplished.

It was almost dark when we passed through the sliprails at Balloo Vale. We did not need to inquire if the Sabines had arrived, for we could distinctly hear Mr. Sabine's rasping voice in the yard abusing his men for not taking proper care of the famous racer, which, it appeared, was “dicky on its legs,” but which Mr. Sabine was vowing to ride all the same, and to win the race with, unless it dropped beneath him.

We found Lina in the parlour with Mrs. Robinson. She looked pale and nervous, and was very subdued all the evening. She would not play cards, and declined to sing when Mr. Sabine came in from the verandah, where he had been having a noisy discussion with some of the other

gentlemen over the merits of their respective horses, and ordered her to the piano. Mr. Sabine had a way of making his wife show off before his friends which Lina resented. She looked at him with a gleam of spirit when he scolded her, and said in a low tone, "It's a mistake to throttle a bird if you want it to sing prettily."

He went away crossly, but by-and-by came to me and questioned me anxiously as to what I thought of Lina. Did I find her looking ill? Did I know what made her so queer? Was there anything he could buy for her which would cheer her up? Had I noticed the opal bracelet she was wearing and which he had ordered for her from Sydney? Certainly Mr. Sabine was a very odd man.

Later on, when I went to my room, Lina followed me.

"I've had a bad time, Rachel," she said. "Ask Milly Robinson how she likes Mr. Sabine on closer acquaintance. When Milly comes to marry her own daughter, I don't think she will pin her faith so entirely on Debrett as she used. I am sure that Milly begins to doubt the prudence of investing all one's capital in a gold-reef and an English gentleman."

Lina's laugh was very pitiful. But she wouldn't let me pity her.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, Rachel. Now I am preaching to *you* not to be morbid. And let me tell you, dear, that I'm not afraid of myself any longer. I was ill and nervous, and now I am better again. You know I've got such a light nature that trouble doesn't weigh upon me after I've got used to it. You needn't think that I shall give way under Mr. Sabine's system of breaking the bruised reed and quenching the smoking flax. It's his way to have tantrums; he isn't really bad at heart. I always fancy he would be quite different if he were away from all these dreadful Australian surroundings. I shall get some good out of my investment. I always said that I would. I was always determined, somehow or other, that I would be happy. Besides, I know that this isn't going to last. Rachel, did you ever have a strong presentiment? Do you believe in such things?"

She looked at me quite gravely and earnestly. I told her that I did believe in such things, and asked her what she meant.

"Only that I have a presentiment which all the reasoning in the world wouldn't shake. It isn't a miserable one at all — quite the contrary. I've had it the last week or two. I know that some great change is coming in my life — a good change. I feel like a child that has been in punishment, don't you know — locked up in a dark closet, and who has been told that it will be forgiven to-morrow, and taken away to some new beautiful place where it is to begin all afresh. That's my presentiment. It means, I think, that we are going away — to England, I suppose, and that I shall begin a new life there."

We talked on for a while. Lina was in a softened mood. She said no more bitter things, and when I told her of Mr. Sabine's conversation with

me she seemed touched, and repeated, "He isn't really bad at heart. You know, Rachel, one reason why I want so to get away is because I think the heat here — and everything — has a bad effect upon him. He told me the other day that he had a sunstroke once, and that his head often feels queer still. And he drinks too much brandy. It will all be different in England."

Presently Lina said good-night to me. She had not been gone many minutes when Alec came in. There was an excited look on his face, and he held an open telegram in his hand.

"They have just brought this over from Balloo," he said; "it has been passed through from the pilot station. Rachel, what do you think? The people through whom I bought the Island have telegraphed that there's a chance of selling it well. I'll be bound that it's old Daniel Liss who is after the place again. Read."

I took the telegram and read:

*"From BURNETT AND NEAME, Stock and Station Agents, Sydney.*

*"To ALEC ANSDELL, Moonbago Island.*

"Wire if still disposed to sell. Have got good offer for the Island of four pounds ten per head by yard muster. Cattle will not rise higher at present. We advise you to entertain the offer."

"Well, Rachel," said Alec, "when I was in Sydney I told Burnett and Neame to be on the look-out for a good purchaser; but I didn't say anything to you lest nothing should come of it and you might be disappointed. Now, however, we must make up our minds."

We consulted together late into the night. Alec put before me that, even under the most advantageous conditions of sale, he would not have sufficient capital to reinvest in a large station in civilized regions, and that, though we should probably make our fortune in a very few years if he took up a run as he would propose in the unsettled district out west, we might there have to encounter discomforts greater than any we had as yet faced on the Island. But it was the thought of Gundabine Bay and the south-easters which decided me. Before we went to bed Alec wrote out two telegrams which were to be sent from Balloo on the morrow, on our way to the races.

First —

*"From ALEC ANSDELL. "To BURNETT AND NEAME, Sydney.*

*"Am prepared to entertain offer."*

Second —

*"From ALEC ANSDELL. "To COLIN BALFOUR, Gundabine.*

“Arrange to begin work at Island in ten days' time. Important that you should learn the run as soon as possible.”

## Chapter XII. The Tragedy of the Races.

THE next day rose cool and clear — an unusually favourable day for bush races. From early dawn Balloo Vale was in a flutter of excitement. Stockwhips were cracking, blackboys scurrying to and fro, and shouting to each other in their own language; horses being run into the yard, and racers being sent off so as to get over the five miles' journey between the station and the course before the sun was risen. All we in the house were up betimes too, for the verandah had to be closed in for the dance in the evening, great heaps of ferns and creepers from the scrub were lying about, and must be put up for decorations, and there were the supper and ever so many other domestic details to be seen to.

Alec went off early, with the sober old Island horse he meant to ride in the hurdle race, and with the telegrams, one of which was to decide our fate. Mr. Sabine fussed and grumbled over his own champion racer, which every one said was in anything but fit condition to run, and which we all tried to dissuade him from riding that day. But he was in a state of curious and quite unreasonable excitement, and our expostulations only made him more obstinate and more rampant still. It had been settled that he was to drive his wife and me to the course in his own buggy, and with a pair of horses he had lately bought from a squatter near. Milly Robinson and her husband started off just before us in the station waggonette, taking their other guests; and I must own I felt some keen pangs of regret that Lina and I were not of that party, when I noticed how restive our horses were and in what an ungovernable mood Mr. Sabine appeared to be. Nothing happened during the drive, however, for which the mercy of Providence has to be thanked, and certainly not Mr. Sabine's coachmanship.

Lina took the front seat beside him and made me go behind, where, she said, I should feel more comfortable. Her face looked white and a little agitated as she turned round to me and said, in a low tone, "Don't be nervous, Rachel. The horses are quite quiet. I want to try and get Mr. Sabine to promise me that he will not ride in the hurdle-race, for I am sure it would be better not."

I could hear her pleading, "I wish you wouldn't, Richard. Give it up, just to please me; I am so afraid of an accident."

He answered her roughly, bidding her hold her tongue and not be a fool; and he whipped the horses, swearing at them for being "lazy

brutes," though we were jolting over the uneven bush road at a pace that was extremely alarming. Lina desisted from her entreaties, and sat very still until we reached the racecourse, when Mr. Sabine pulled up beside the Robinsons' waggonette, and, after seeing the horses unharnessed, prepared to leave us for more congenial company.

Lina bent forward. "You *will* be careful?" she said.

"Look here, Lina, he answered, turning angrily back upon her, "remember I won't have any scene here. I can take care of myself. You are to behave like a well-bred woman. If I am thrown I am thrown, and there's an end to it."

"Did you learn your manners in England or in Australia, Mr. Sabine?" cried little Mrs. Robinson, flaring up. "If you expect us to behave like wellbred people, you should set us the example."

I find it quite impossible to write of the humours of those races. There were some odd people present — types of the life and the country, and several comic little incidents occurred; but somebody else must be their chronicler, not I. All the time a feeling of gloom and foreboding oppressed me. I had no mind for laughter, no appetite for farce. It seemed strange that Lina should rally me upon my low spirits. As the day wore on, she herself recovered her elasticity. Mr. Sabine did not come round again, and there were plenty of people to distract her thoughts. She had much of the careless irresponsibility of a child Given sunshine, amusing companions, and gay surroundings — it must be added also, the absence of her husband — and all her pretty little gestures and light-hearted sallies came out like opening buds.

"Did you ever see such an odd girl as Lina?" said Milly Robinson aside to me. "I've been perfectly miserable about her, thinking her heart was broken, and abusing myself for having helped on that marriage; and now you wouldn't imagine she had been crying in my room for an hour yesterday, and telling me that she wished that she was dead."

The great hurdle-race with gentleman riders took place immediately after luncheon was over. After all the fuss, it was a very poor affair. Most of the horses, being raw and untrained, balked or bolted — Alec's among them — and it ended, contrary to all anticipations, in Mr. Sabine winning the Corinthian Cup. He was noisily jubilant, and brought his prize to the buggy, making us all drink his health out of it. Then the cup was filled again and again with champagne and passed round among the jockeys and the people on the course. It seemed to me that Mr. Sabine was entering into lively competition with Thackwaite, and that he made up for the custom his champagne drew away from the bar by patronizing the rum relishes largely himself. He was to ride again in the last race but one of the day, and after that we were to put to and hurry back to Balloo Vale, so that there might be a little time for resting before the dance. When the horses came out for the race, Milly Robinson had already

gone, Alec driving the waggonette; and, at a private request of mine, Mr. Robinson engaged to take the reins in our buggy, and to depose Mr. Sabine to a back seat.

There was nothing much to interest us in this race, for it soon became evident that Mr. Sabine had not the remotest chance of coming in among the first. He did not even seem to be trying, for when the other horses rushed past the winning-post, he was cantering quietly at the farther side of the course. We were watching the winner being led round, and collecting our belongings, in preparation for the start home, when a confused murmur sounded in front of the refreshment bar, and in a minute or two a small crowd had gathered some little distance below it. None of our party paid attention to the crowd, which might very naturally have been attracted by the spectacle of a black fellow belabouring his gin, or of two chiefs practising with their boomerangs.

Mr. Robinson and the men buckled the traces. We were all ready. Somebody called out, "Where's Sabine?" and it was not till Mr. Robinson's overseer came galloping across towards the buggy that any of us suspected an accident might have happened to him.

Lina seemed to guess at once. "Mr. Sabine has been thrown!" she exclaimed, and was hastily moving, when the overseer stopped her.

"No; don't be frightened. Mr. Sabine has come a nasty cropper, but there doesn't seem to be much amiss. That horse wasn't fit to run again. He dropped clean down and rolled over, and the cantle of the saddle has caught your husband and hurt him. He is cut about the face and shaken, but there are no bones broken."

Mr. Sabine, half carried, half supported, came presently upon the scene. He was bleeding from a cut on the forehead, and his great loose-limbed form looked strangely helpless and tottery, but he appeared to be in as full possession of his senses as could be expected in a man who had been largely imbibing Balloo champagne and Thackwaite's rum relish, and who, moreover, had come a nasty cropper.

"D — — the brute!" was all the explanation he gave, as he sank heavily on the ground, still supported by the men on either side of him, and then added gruffly to his wife, who bent over him, "I won't have any scene, mind, Lina; just keep quiet, will you?" and went off into a dead faint.

The overseer said there was a "sort of doctor" somewhere on the course, and went to find him, returning after a minute or two with a cheerful redfaced person, who was, in fact, a retired auctioneer, but who, having had some training as a veterinary surgeon, and keeping a supply of various drugs always on stock, physicked impartially the inhabitants of the township and their horses. The wits of this gentleman, also, were perhaps not quite so fully collected just now as they might have been without Thackwaite's agency. Mr. Sabine was soon brought-to again,

though he seemed weak and dazed. It was decided in consultation with "the sort of doctor" that we ought not to risk the rough ride back to Balloo Vale till it was quite certain that Mr. Sabine had received no internal injury, and that it would be better to take him, for the night at all events, to the nearest house that would afford accommodation. This proved to be the house of the telegraph master of Balloo — a swan-wood cottage with two rooms and a skillion. Thither Mr. Sabine was carried, Lina and I, the doctor, as for convenience he may be called — his name was Todd — Mr. Robinson and the overseer following. The telegraph master's wife was away, so he gave us possession of the bed-room and sitting-room, and took up his quarters in the skillion.

Mr. Sabine was put to bed, and on examination was pronounced by Mr. Todd to have nothing the matter with him except a severe shaking. Mr. Todd had more confidence in himself than we felt in him. He wanted us to leave his patient entirely in his charge, and was emphatic in his assurance that it was the simplest case in the world; that there wasn't the least occasion for us to concern ourselves. If Mrs. Sabine liked to stay, he wasn't the one for going against a wife's duty, but as for Mr. Robinson and me, it would be nonsense for us to give up the dance. He'd bring round embrocations and a cooling draught, and fix up Mr. Sabine comfortably for the night; and would give his word that he'd be all right, so to speak, in the morning.

I determined that I would keep Lina company, and bade Mr. Robinson explain things to Alec, and not let him be uneasy or think of coming to me that night. I was very anxious that Alec, who thoroughly enjoyed a dance, should not be deprived of his fun by the untoward occurrence. Mr. Todd seemed to know what he was about, and we had none of us the slightest suspicion of there being anything seriously wrong.

Mr. Robinson was reluctant to leave, but the thought of his duties as host weighed upon him; and he knew that his wife would be vexed if he did not turn up. So he had a little talk to the telegraph master, got us what comforts he could for the night, and, giving the overseer directions to remain within hail, drove off.

Mr. Todd brought his embrocations, bound up the sufferer's hurts, administered the draught, and departed, serenely declaring that all was well. Mr. Sabine by now seemed very much himself again. He would not let Lina out of his sight, and was a little more ill-tempered than usual; which, however, I thought, on the whole, an encouraging sign.

The night was strange and dreary. A drizzling rain fell. The wind got up and blew in melancholy gusts round the rickety cottage, making the ill-fitting windows rattle, and tossing the boughs of the gum-trees outside. A public-house was not very far off, and with the rain and the wind came the sound of the men singing and shouting over their liquor. Lina stayed mostly in the inner room with her husband, who tossed about

restlessly, and who seemed still in a queer, excited frame of mind, now abusing this person and now that one, and now the horse which had thrown him, vowing that as soon as he could get up he would go out and put a bullet through the animal. The partition was only of wood, and when he spoke loudly I could not help hearing what he said. The parlour in which I sat was a bare, comfortless sort of apartment, with a stretcher-like couch, cushioned in red blanketing, a square table covered with a terrible flowered oilcloth, a rocking-chair, and a few horse-hair seats, some flaring prints, and a guttering kerosene lamp. There were no books or anything to distract one's thoughts. Lina came in several times and sat on the rocking-chair; but every time she did so Mr. Sabine called her back with querulous imperativeness, or perhaps an oath. About ten o'clock the telegraph master brought us in some tea and a coarse loaf, and laid a roll of red blanketing on the stretcher, saying that he would not come in again to disturb us, but would settle himself in the skillion, and that if we wanted anything we were to call him. He was a long, gaunt-looking man, with hollow cheeks, a scrubby iron-grey beard, and a sepulchral way of speaking. He did not seem able to grasp the situation, or the fact that Lina was the wife of the man who had been thrown from his horse. He evidently found it impossible to believe that she was a married woman at all, for he kept calling her "Missy," and addressing me when there was a question of Mr. Sabine's wants.

By-and-by I lay down on the stretcher, and covered myself with a red blanket. I did not mean to go to sleep, but I suppose I must have dropped off. Even then the echo of Mr. Sabine's imprecations mingled with my dreams. Then there came an odd fancy that Lina and Mr. Lyndon and I were sailing down some wonderful Eastern river, through towns where the houses were of ivory glittering with precious stones, and the trees dropped golden fruit, and Lina was singing —

"Ah, dem golden slippers! — golden slippers!  
I'se gwine to wear to walk in de golden street."

Yes, Lina was singing. I sat up and listened, wide awake, and there came over me that feeling of exquisite melancholy which her voice always brought. When she had finished the song, I knocked at the door, and she came out, her yellow hair loosened about her face, and her blue eyes heavy and dim.

"I'm afraid I awoke you, Rachel; but I can't help going off myself, I am so tired, and Mr. Sabine gets cross if I don't answer him. I thought that if I sang it might send him to sleep."

He called her in while she was speaking, telling her crossly to go on, and adding that it wasn't often he asked her to keep awake, and that she might for once do something to oblige him. So she went back and sang

on — negro melodies, and “Wallabi Jo,” and “The Stockman's Whistle,” and all her quaint, simple things, till at dawn he dropped asleep, and she came and laid down on the stretcher and slumbered out of utter weariness.

The telegraph master brought in our breakfast. Then the overseer came and went in to see Mr. Sabine, talking with him several minutes. Presently he returned to Lina and me, as we stood by the window, watching for any sign of the buggy from Balloo Vale or of Alec riding down, and said to her, “Mr. Sabine thinks he would like to get up and dress himself a bit. I'll call in the old man, and we'll see to him. Mrs. Sabine, you just go and take a little turn outside; it'll do you good after your wakeful night.”

Lina and I went out and wandered up the Balloo road a little way. We were not many minutes absent. When we came back to the parlour, the door into the bedroom was shut, and we could hear the overseer and the telegraph master talking in a low tone. Lina observed carelessly that Mr. Sabine must certainly be shaving, he was so quiet; and seating herself in the rocking-chair began to swing to and fro, while she softly hummed a waltz tune.

“I wonder how the dance went off last night,” she said. “I'm sorry we missed it. Perhaps I shall never have the chance of being at a bush dance again. Rachel, I was quite right about my presentiment. Mr. Sabine's mood has entirely changed. He is as eager now to get away as I am. He's like that, you know. He had a freak for staying, and now that's passed suddenly, and he says that he will not stop a day longer in the country than he need, and that he is going straight down from here to put the superintendent in charge at Akobaora, and will take our passages for the next mail boat. He talks of stopping in Japan, America, Italy — all kinds of places. I thought of my presentiment last night when he was talking and I was singing, and the rain was pattering down on the roof. It is really —

“Good-bye, children, I'm gwine to go  
Where the rain doan fall and the win doan blow.”

She caught up the refrain with her little light laugh. “But that's a long way farther than the other side of the world, Rachel. I don't mind how much it rains and blows so that I am on that side and not on this one.”

Just then, while she was still rocking herself to and fro, the door of the inner room opened, and the telegraph master came forward carefully and slowly, closing the door again behind him. He stood looking at us silently for a minute, a grim herald of evil tidings, gaunt, solemn, and with a shocked, hesitating expression, as if he were under a painful responsibility which he knew not how to discharge.

His face frightened us both. Lina stopped short in her swaying motion, and rose from the chair.

“What is it?” she said. “Why don't you speak?”

The man turned blundering and helpless from Lina to me, and then back to Lina again. “Mrs. Sabine,” he began — “Missey. Which of you is Mrs. Sabine? The overseer said I must break it to you. They're in there, the overseer and Mr. Todd. Todd came just as you were gone. He is awfully cut up. He thinks you'll blame him for being so cock-sure. But it's a dispensation from the Lord, Mrs. Sabine, and that's what I told Todd.”

Lina waved the man impatiently aside. “Mr. Sabine is worse,” she said, quietly. “You needn't beat about the bush. Let me go in to him.”

She was moving to the door; but the telegraph master stretched out his arms and barred her passage. “They said I mustn't let you go in, Mrs. Sabine. You can't do any good. He's dead — your husband's dead. He'll never speak to you again. He was more hurt yesterday than Todd knew. There's been a bleeding inside. When he tried to get up, it broke out afresh; and all of a sudden, while we were dressing him, he dropped back and died.”

As, with unconscious brutality, the man jerked out his blunt statement, Lina seemed to stiffen to the rigidity of stone. It was as if she had been petrified, or suddenly frozen with horror. She uttered no word, but only gazed at him with eyes that were wide and glassy. I sprang to her and called her name. Suddenly she gave a sharp, piercing cry. A spasm of extreme pain distorted her face, her hands clutched wildly at her bosom as on that night in the verandah at Mr. Kelmarsh's, when I in my foolish thoughtlessness did not suspect that she might be suffering the agony of mortal disease. She staggered forward away from my supporting arms, and fell in a heap to the ground. My scream called Mr. Todd and the overseer from the bedroom, where the cowards had been waiting for this bungling idiot to break the news they did not dare to tell. We lifted Lina up and laid her on the sofa. We tried in vain to restore her to consciousness. She neither stirred nor breathed. Her heart was quite pulseless.

I could not believe for a long time that Lina was dead. I kneeled by her and chafed her hands, and put my lips to her lips, which were cold already. Her blue eyes gazed back into mine, soulless and unknowing. Her yellow hair lay like a web of gold on the coarse red blanket. The look of pain had gone as if by a miracle from her face. There was nothing but those unanswering eyes to tell me that her spirit had fled.

Horses' hoofs and the clattering of the buggy sounded outside. Alec came in and drew me away. Mr. Robinson and Milly followed. It was Milly's frantic sobs and questions that made me realise the truth.

Yes, Lina was dead. The husband and wife had gone upon their

journey. She who in life had withered in his harsh presence was bidden to follow him in death. But they had gone to that furthestmost country in which jibes and bickering cease, and where there is no marrying nor giving in marriage.

I wish that I were not telling a true story. If I were writing a romance, there should be no inappropriate double tragedy, there should be no loose threads, no irrelevant episode, no anticlimax to this rambling tale of our Island days. The order of Lina's release from her irksome bonds should not be her death signal. She should live and be happy as Tom Lyndon's wife, and I would drop the curtain upon this Island play to the sound of wedding bells. ... But I am only telling the things that happened. I am not writing a romance — and Lina is dead.

## Chapter XIII. Balfour of Kilcummin.

I will not dwell any more on the sad story of Lina Sabine. It was a shadow which came upon us and made us very melancholy; but, after a little while, the blackness of the shadow passed, and we began to live our own life again, and were happy in each other, and deeply interested in the new turn of fortune and the prospects for the future. The Island looked very home-like when we saw it once more, and I confess that for the moment I forgot the terrors of Gundabine Bay and the mosquitoes, and that I felt a queer little pang at the thought of leaving our first married home when we had as yet barely taken root in the soil. I think it was a long letter from Loftus which we got at Stonehampton that almost confirmed our wavering decision.

Brown was waiting for us with horses at the pilot station, so we did not stop there, but rode down home at once; besides, Alec wanted to look about him, and to get things in order for Colin Balfour, the gentleman stockman. Alec intended to make a proviso that the new purchaser should keep him on if he proved satisfactory. The grass was all green and high where the fire had laid the country waste; the old charred tussocks round the house had sprouted afresh, and the scorched gum-trees had put forth new suckers. Everybody and everything seemed glad to see us; Christo, the Angora goat, ran up bleating from the herd; Monte and Beaufort and the bull-pup came out leaping and barking, and Rose, surrounded by puppies, now in advanced stage of gambolling, beat her tattoo of welcome on the boards of the causeway; gaunt Mrs. McGilray stood by a brand-new hen-coop placed conspicuously under the kitchen window, and pointed with a grim smile to the first brood of Christianized chickens which the Island had in our time produced, while dapper little Mr. McGilray, when questioned by Alec as to whether "things had gone all right," replied with his perky formula, "And what for no, sir?"

There were letters awaiting us from Burnett and Neame, the stock and station agents, to whom Alec had in the meantime written fully. As he had suspected, Mr. Daniel Liss was the would-be buyer. He was willing to agree in the main to Alec's terms, and even to a "yard muster," and the agents suggested that he should pay Alec a visit, in which the sale might be definitely arranged.

We talked it all over that night as we sat in the verandah. Alec explained to me the *pros* and *cons* of the situation. There was the

certainty of his being able to clear out of the Island at a considerable profit, for he had bought when prices were much lower, and moreover he had bought by book muster, and was sure that there were many more cattle on the station than the nominal number of the herd. Then there was the superiority of an inland run over a coast one — coast country being proverbially bad for fattening beasts, and the probability of squatting property falling in the market, and many other considerations, all of which had been weighed by us over and over again since the arrival of Messrs. Burnett and Neame's proposal; but we always came to the same conclusion, and so Alec wrote a telegram inviting Mr. Liss to come over when he pleased, and sent Brown off with it on the following morning.

Alec himself went to the South End to meet the new stockman, and I watched with some anxiety for his return with the descendant of the Balfours of Kilcummin, the embodiment of the *noblesse oblige* principle.

He was undoubtedly a very handsome man, this Colin Balfour; but I did not think that he showed any distinct traces of ancient lineage, or of high civilization, being rather the splendid animal type than that of the Bayard — firm-knit, athletic frame, deep-set bold black eyes, large rather coarse features, curling whiskers, and a general look of devilry and self-assurance — altogether more suggestive of backwoods adventure than feats of chivalry. He took off his hat to me with a flourish, and when Alec said to him, "You must make yourself as comfortable as you can at the hut, Balfour, and I advise you to get your feed from the kitchen till you've settled down a bit," the kind of military salute he gave, and the proud but cheerful humility of his "All right, sir," were both effective and touching.

"A dash of the swell about him; but I think he's going to do, Rachel," said Alec. "He has a magnificent hand on a horse — I put him on that half-broken chestnut colt — and there's no doubt that he knows what he is about with stock. I gave him a hint that there was a chance of my selling the station, but he did not seem at all dissatisfied; in fact, rather took to the idea of a muster — I gave him to understand, of course, that I would make it worth his while to scour the gullies for stray calves. He is keen as mustard about learning the run at once. I shall start him on Monday, and I think, Rachel, that to-morrow you might just go down to the hut, and see if anything can be done to make it a little more comfortable for his wife. Rame is going to bring her over as soon as the wind changes."

The next day, which was Sunday, Alec and I went down to the hut. Before knocking we stood a minute or two, and looked at Mrs. Balfour's future abode. It was a rough slab building, with chinks between the slabs wide enough to let in a good deal of daylight — two rooms and a lean-to, and a verandah, with a mud floor supported by gum-saplings which had the bark still upon them. At the back there was a bark shed and a

primitive fireplace, with a boiler and a camp oven standing in it, each raised upon two stones.

Balfour opened the door for us. He looked handsomer than ever in his loose crimson Crimean shirt and riding breeches. He had evidently been preparing his Sunday dinner, for there was a piece of smoking salt beef in a tin dish on the table, and a damper baking in the ashes of the wide wooden fireplace. Alec talked to him in a friendly unceremonious way, as if he had been any ordinary stockman; but I found it impossible to be unconstrained with him. I could not find any fault with the man — he was respectful, good-tempered, and apparently most anxious to accommodate himself to circumstances; but, nevertheless, from the first I took a dislike to him, and I felt that his wife was to be compassionated.

The hut looked quite as uninviting within as it did externally. A rude bunk was fixed underneath the unglazed window; there was a table of iron-bark wood standing upon two stumps in the centre of the room, two or three fixtures of slab, a bench, some tools, a squatter's chair of crude design, some tin and iron cooking utensils, and some other necessaries completed the visible furniture of the place. We ventured to hope that Mrs. Balfour would bring a few small comforts over with her from Gundabine, and that she would not be disheartened at the sight of the hut.

“It is a very good hut, as huts go,” said Mr. Balfour, in an off-hand way, “and, if a man has come down to be a stockman, he must take stockman's fare. My wife has got used to roughing it, Mrs. Ansdell, and knows what to expect; she lived in a tent on the diggings for six months. What matters most to her is the being with me. You wouldn't think it, perhaps, but though I've brought her nothing but misfortune, I honestly believe that if she had it all to do over again, she'd choose me before any man in the world.”

I pitied Mrs. Balfour more than ever.

Alec offered to let McGilray take a day or two at the hut, to put up some canvas lining and knock together a cupboard for Mrs. Balfour's convenience, and we went away, after a little talk on station matters, in which Balfour delighted Alec still more by his readiness, understanding, and regard for his master's interest.

“That's the man I've been wanting for years,” said Alec, enthusiastically, and he poured forth an eulogium on Balfour's virtues and qualifications, which I silently hoped that experience would justify.

After this I did not see much of Balfour, though I heard a great deal about his various excellences. He went off exploring the run, camping out and making acquaintance with the cattle under the guidance of Alec and Brown. We at the head station turned our attention to Mrs. Balfour's comfort, which did not appear to weigh heavily upon the mind of her husband, and I warmed Mrs. McGilray to a grim enthusiasm, and got her to consent to the removal of some small pieces of furniture, and of some

pots and pans and so forth, and to help in cleaning up the place and making it habitable. Altogether, the hut presented a much more pleasant appearance than might have been expected when the day came for Mrs. Balfour's arrival.

She was a worn, thin woman, who had once had a second-rate prettiness — clear, grey eyes, a sharp nose, a full-lipped slightly coarse mouth, high cheek-bones, and a sallow brown skin. Probably she had once been fair and plump, but that was all gone now. When she dressed in the afternoon she had a look of faded smartness, and her manner to me was portentously formal and fine, and so aggressively resentful of patronage that after a while I dropped my well-meant attentions, which I found were ungraciously received. Mrs. Balfour was a disappointment, and Alec was obliged to own that, however admirable Balfour might be as a stockman, socially speaking I should not derive much benefit from his wife. We began to have doubts as to Mrs. Balfour's claims to gentility; indeed, it must be owned a vague distrust had crept up in our minds about the Balfours of Kilcummin generally; but we reflected that perhaps Mr. Balfour had left home when he was a boy, and had married beneath him. At any rate, we did not openly give vent to our suspicions.

One thing was quite clear: Mrs. Balfour, sulky, morose, and third-rate as she was, cherished a genuine, almost slavish devotion for her handsome husband. I am sure that he was not kind to her. There was a look in her eye when he was by which made me fancy that she was afraid of him; but for all that, I believe that she would have gone through fire and water to do his bidding.

There was another inmate of the hut who from the first roused my interest. On the morning after Mrs. Balfour's arrival, I was skimming my milk-pans in the dairy, when an indistinct sound caused me to look round at the slit in the slabs, over which a loose cheese-cloth blind usually hung, and which had been cut in the wall of the dairy for the purposes of ventilation. There I saw poked forward under the cheese-cloth a queer little brown face with two bright melancholy eyes, a fringe of wiry black curls, a pinched little mouth, and a look at once anxious, alert, wobegone, and monkeyish. The face was tiny enough to have been that of a baby, but it was old enough for the face of an old, old woman.

I asked the apparition who it was, and what it wanted, and bade it come round to the door. The cheese-cloth waved over the aperture again, and in a minute there stood in front of me, with two tin billies in her hand, a wee old-woman-child, who, from her height and make, I might have guessed to be six years old, but whose demure and experienced air gave me the impression that she must be quite grown up. She was dressed in a coarse linsey frock, very much mended, her hair was brushed as neatly as its fuzzy nature would permit, and her face was clean, but her little hands were horny and rough with hard work, her boots were going to pieces,

and her spindle legs were bare.

The child held out her billies.

“Please, I'm come for milk. I'm Wunkie Blake, Balfour's kid.”

I filled the billies, and then I asked the child how, if Mr. and Mrs. Balfour were her father and mother, she came to be called Blake.

“They ain't my father and mother,” she cried fiercely; “I haven't got no father nor mother, and I wouldn't have Bully Balfour for my dad, not if you was to whop me all day and night.” She set her little teeth savagely together, and tossed her black mane.

“And so you don't like Mr. Balfour?” I asked. The child gave her head a queer little solemn shake.

“My word! I believe you,” she said. “It's this way, you see. Mrs. Balfour was married to my dad afore he died, and afore she married Balfour. She ain't nothing to me, and I ain't nothing to her. He jes gev me up to her, did my dad, and she's got to keep me till I can go out to service, 'less somebody 'ud 'dopt me.”

A few questions elicited further particulars of Wunkie's history.

“Her ‘born’ name was ‘Lizabeth. Didn't know how she came by Wunkie. ‘Spected she got it at the diggings and it stuck. Lived at the diggings when she was a little kid, and till Duffey cracked up. Duffey took charge of her while Mom went out governessing. Mom had never taught her nothing. Duffey taught her to cook and clean and make pie-melon jam — was there any pie-melons on the Island? No. That was a bad job. Pie-melons kept Balfour pretty sweet — for *him*. When Duffey cracked up she was took to Balfour's, and, my word, weren't they fine! A deal too fine for her; she liked the blacks' camp better. Then Balfour cracked up too.” In poor Wunkie's experience it seemed a law of nature that her protectors must “crack up.” Since that epoch it appeared that she had been acting as a sort of drudge to Mr. and Mrs. Balfour. “ ‘Twas she that cooked the meat and bread. Lor, she could make splendid bread. Duffey had done the baking for the diggings, and she scrubbed Bully Balfour's moleskins and made and mended her own poor little garments — when they gev her any stuff. She 'spected she was thirteen — wasn't anyway fixed on it. She wished somebody 'ud 'dopt her and get her learned something. There was a man on the diggings as said he'd 'dopt her and send her to school whenever he hit on a nugget; but he cracked up too, and then he went off in a rush to the new diggings. And now she must go down with the milk, or Bully Balfour would whop her. No; she wasn't whopped such a great lot — only when the devil got inside her and she cheeked Mr. Balfour. She 'spected the devil got inside most folks when they was kids, and whopping once in a way wasn't much odds to anybody”; and, with this philosophica sentiment, Wunkie departed.

There was a good deal of the philosopher about Wunkie. She took life

as she found it. When it was her fate to be whopped, she accepted it with stoical fortitude, and, I am afraid, whopping was not unfrequently her portion. The ruder responsibilities of the household appeared to rest upon Wunkie's tiny shoulders. As far as I could make out, Mrs. Balfour put her hand to none of the rough work, but confined herself to the concoction of tasty dishes for her husband's dinner, and general attendance upon him, which, as Balfour was often camping out and at all times never home till the evening, did not amount to much. It was Wunkie who scoured and swept, scrubbed, baked, and boiled. My indignation was roused one day by seeing her at the wood heap outside the hut trying to wield an axe which her utmost effort could scarcely lift to the level of her tiny head, and I went within and remonstrated with her guardian upon the tasks which were laid upon one so feeble. Mrs. Balfour, who was lounging in the squatter's chair reading a *Family Herald*, received my expostulation with frigid dignity. She was obliged to me for troubling about Wunkie; and if I could make Wunkie obey her she would be still more obliged. Wunkie knew perfectly well that she wasn't asked to chop wood or to do anything that was beyond her strength; but, out of sheer perverseness, Wunkie always wanted to meddle with what she was told to let alone; and she'd rather chop up a tree than sit down quietly and do her sewing. Wunkie had been bred up to defy her by some people called Duffey, who were relations of Wunkie's mother, and who she had expected would provide for the child. Mrs. Balfour proceeded to tell me how Mr. Blake, her first husband, had been employed in a Government office, and how an unjust ministry had denied his widow's claim to a pension, and how Wunkie, who was not even of her blood, had been left on her hands without a sixpence. I suggested that this was not poor Wunkie's fault, and delicately deplored her forlorn condition and want of education, to which Mrs. Balfour replied that Wunkie was a child of low tastes, and that when, in the day of their prosperity, they had treated her like a lady, she had run off into the bush and had actually been found in the blacks' camp. I did not dare to allude to the whoppings, for Wunkie had bound me over to silence; but when I diplomatically hinted at Mr. Balfour's sentiments towards the child, Mrs. Balfour flushed, and exclaimed in energetic defence of her husband that it could not be supposed a man would feel affection for a cross-grained creature who was no kin to him and repaid all his kindness with insolence. So there was nothing to be done for poor Wunkie but to encourage her to come up to the house when she could, and to try and civilize her by dint of precept and example. The child had instincts of tidiness, and her gratitude was intense when I presented her with a pair of boots and some stockings, and when between us we manufactured a substitute for the dirty, torn linsey frock. She would steal up over the brow of the hill when she had done the work required of her at the hut, and would sit on the edge of the

verandah, silently watching me as I sewed, and every now and then uttering a solemn ejaculation on the subject nearest her heart, "Lor, I wish I could get holt of somebody as 'ud 'dopt me."

The Balfours had been with us several weeks before anything was settled as to the sale of the station. Balfour learned the run with extraordinary quickness, and nothing could have been more satisfactory than his zeal as a stockman. Alec declared that he knew already to which particular camp a stray beast belonged, and was on quite intimate terms with a mob of "scrubbers" which had resisted all Tillidge's attempts to bring them into the yard. Extensive operations were being carried on among the stock in view of the impending "yard muster." Our mail was now fetched regularly across, for who could tell what it might not contain? and the pilot station did a brisk business in telegrams between Alec, Mr. Liss, and Burnett and Neame. Mr. Liss was a long time in making his appearance at the Island, and seemed to prefer letting the agents write reams of stipulations to settling matters by an interview. Alec was certain that his objection to visiting the Island arose from his horror of meeting me. Mr. Liss's aversion to women was a stock joke in the district. He had been heard to assert solemnly that he had never tasted wine or spirits, had never smoked tobacco, and had never kissed a woman. Alec had several stories of Mr. Liss and his queer ways. He had come out a boy emigrant, had worked his way from nothing, and money-making was his passion. Little by little he had bought stations everywhere. They returned him good interest, and he was always on the look-out for paying investments. He never spent an unnecessary halfpenny upon himself, and though he had been known, unsolicited, to subscribe liberally in charity, he invariably refused when pressed to do so, on the plea that women and babies and folks that hadn't the gumption to save or earn, were nought to a hard-working, honest fellow like himself. He was the terror of his various superintendents, for he had an inconvenient way of sneaking up and down between his different stations as a steerage passenger in the steamer, and of pouncing upon his managers unawares. It was related how, upon one occasion, when he came up north to take delivery of a station for which he had paid a large sum in cash, the agents, anxious to do honour to so wealthy a client, went to the steamer to receive him; and how, after vainly searching among the cabin passengers, they found him at last in the steerage, very shabbily clad, and disputing with the steward over some trifling overcharge.

He turned up at last on the Island, giving us no previous warning. It was full moon, and he swam the Narrows by himself on horseback. Early one morning I was churning, and Alec had come himself with the milk to see how I was getting on, when McGilray looked in to say that Mr. Liss was in the yard and wanted to speak to the master. Alec went out, and I heard him welcoming the new-comer and pressing hospitality upon him,

which, however, Mr. Liss stolidly declined.

“Well, sir,” he said, in a dogmatic, nasal voice, “I’m willing to go over the station-books and to look about the run with you, and I’ll come up by-and-by and have a talk over business. But I’m not going inside parlouring. I don’t care about going in among women. I don’t care about ‘if you please’ and ‘thankye’ and company manners and rubbish. Conduct your business on commercial principles and let the women alone, that’s been my *rewle* through life.”

I could not help taking a peep through the cheese-cloth at the master of our fate. I saw a short, square, stumpy man in drab moleskins and tan gaiters, with a loose “jumper” coat buttoned over a collarless Crimean shirt. He might have been sixty years of age, but was hale and well preserved. His face was large for his frame, shrewd, slightly humorous, with small ferret-like eyes closely set together, a coarse iron-grey beard standing out like a fringe, a long, smooth, upper-lip, and a narrow-lipped mouth turned down at the corners. Alec still urged him to enter, rallying him good-naturedly on his misogynist tendencies, and promising him that if he would stay with us, he should have his meals served separately in the office, and should not be required to do any “parlouring.” But Mr. Liss shook his head doggedly.

“Well, sir!” He put out his hand, and, as if to emphasize his words, tapped Alec three times on the shoulder with his short, thick fingers. “It ain’t my fault if you and your missus don’t know old Dan’l Liss’s some folk call ‘em cranks — I don’t. Many’s the time I’ve camped outside a cultivation paddock fence and made my dinner off roasted corn because I wouldn’t go ‘parlouring.’ If you say any more I’ll just swim over the Narrows again, and we’re off the sale. I’m going to camp down by the stockyard, and I’ve just come up to buy a bit of meat and a pound or two of flour, and now good-day for the present.”

Mr. Liss had his way and walked off, having first seen the flour and meat weighed, and having paid for them on the spot. Alec came back laughing and half annoyed, but there was nothing to be done. Mr. Liss camped out and baked his own damper and boiled his own beef. He came up later in the day, and I retired into the background lest his sensibilities should be jarred by the presence of a woman. He had his talk with Alec in the office, and after some haggling they came to terms, and he virtually bought the Island. Very soon the muster began. Extra hands were got over from the mainland, and the place became a scene of bustle and excitement. Every day about four o’clock there sounded in the distance a confused roar like that of the sea, which, as it came nearer, resolved itself into the bellowing of beasts, the shouting of men, and the cracking of stockwhips. Every day when the noise began I saw Mr. Liss mount on the brow of the hill and gaze eagerly towards the moving wave of heaving backs and tossing horns; then he would scurry down to the

stockyard, take up his position on the top rail, calculate the number of cattle, and note the sum of money it represented. It was an anxious time — those first few days of the muster. If there were fewer cattle on the Island than we supposed, we might have good reason to repent our bargain. Every hundred calves meant the addition of £450 to our modest capital. No wonder that I listened excitedly to the distant murmur of the incoming mob, and felt my heart rise and sink in proportion to the volume of sound. Wunkie Blake, who happened to be seated on the edge of the verandah on the first of these critical occasions, readily divined the situation. “Lor, I know all about it. It's like fishing for craws, you don't know how many are coming up. Haven't I heard Bully Balfour talk! He says you'll have a big sale. I heard him say that there was such a lot of dry gullies and queer corners in this 'ere run that you could plant a mob of beasts and nobody be none the wiser. “Look here,” pursued Wunkie, solemnly, “you look out for Bully Balfour, or he'll be up to one of his tricks. You bet he will.”

Wunkie would not explain her warning, which I duly reported to Alec. But Alec was highly elated, and Balfour's capacity and energy even surpassed his hopes. He seemed to have a perfect instinct as to the whereabouts of “cleanskins,” or unbranded calves, so Alec said. All was going well. Each day Wunkie, who was on the look-out, would rush up with the intelligence that there was a “whacking mob” coming. “Old Liss is beginning to look a little blue,” Alec said. “He'll have to fork out more than he expected, and it goes against the grain with him to pay £4 10s. for a calf toddling by its mother. He's sorry now that he didn't insist on a book muster. By Jove, I'd no idea the Island was such a good breeding run.”

## Chapter XIV. The Adoption of Wunkie.

THE mustering had been going on for a fortnight, when there came two or three days of heavy rain, and the damp brought on Mr. Liss a severe attack of lumbago. He refused even still, however, to leave his tent, and would have no one to attend on him, though he allowed us now to send him down cooked food and an occasional delicacy in the shape of pudding or an egg, grimly observing that we were taking it out of him in the price of calves.

One day all the men and blackboys were out, Mrs. McGilray was busy with her week's wash, and there was no one but myself to take the little custard pudding and fresh loaf which had been prepared for Mr. Liss. I started down the hill in fear and trembling, not knowing how I should summon courage to approach the lion in his lair. Half-way down, however, an idea struck me, and seeing Wunkie alone in the verandah of the hut, I called to her and bade her come with me.

Wunkie looked very much more prepossessing now than she had done on her arrival. The milk and abundance of food had filled out her pinched cheeks and made her seem more child-like. Her new frock and tidy boots added considerably to her appearance, and though she had lost none of her quaintness, her frequent visits to the house and Mrs. McGilray's and my exhortations had tended somewhat to civilize her. As we walked along, I could not help thinking of a little conversation between Alec and Mr. Liss which had taken place a short time before they had compared their respective tallies of the day's square-tailing. Alec had duly repeated the conversation, and it was somewhat after this fashion: —

“And how are you getting on with your stations generally, Liss?” Alec asked.

“Well, sir; just keeping my head above water in these bad times,” said Mr. Liss.

“I only wish that I could keep my head as well above water,” said Alec. “But now tell me, Mr. Liss, don't you find life very lonely? I often wonder how it was you never got married.”

“Well, sir” — and Mr. Liss's three fingers tapped Alec's shoulder — “the mistake of my life. sir.”

“But you're a fine man yet,” said Alec, “and you've got lots of money. You don't give yourself a chance. There are plenty of nice girls would be only to ready to say yes to you.”

“Too late, sir; too late,” replied Mr. Liss, mournfully. “When I was a youngster I hadn't got the education or opportunity or the inclination for parLOURING, and now I haven't got the courage to tackle women. Never was used to 'em, sir. Never had any of my own to speak of. I started out here on an outside sheep station at ten shillings a week, and didn't speak to a white woman for twenty-five years. Too late to begin now.”

“Try it, Liss,” said Alec. “I'll lay the Island that I could find you a wife.”

“Well, sir, I dessay. Marry me for my money and for what they could get out of me. That's about it.”

“But what the deuce are you going to do with your money?” said Alec. “Even you can't last for ever, you know.”

“Well, sir; I've not made up my mind, sir. There's a little girl I once met when I was knocking about. I wanted to buy a lot of bulls — no one at home when I asked for the boss — all away at the races, not expected back till to-morrow. I didn't want to go inside parLOURING, and I was wishing little missy good-day; but, bless you, no, sir; she wouldn't hear of that. She was no more than twelve or thirteen — such a sweet, pretty little maid. She made me come inside, and nothing would do but she must show me her garden and her cats, and I must have a game at *bézique* with her — so nice and fetching. I wished I had a dozen like her. You see I was used to big rough ones in my young days. And I stayed with the little maid and spent such an evening as I've dreamed of, but never had the like before nor since. I've often thought of little Jane. She's married now, with a squad of youngsters — married to a flash chap that chucks away his money, and would chuck away mine, too, if he had the chance. I go to see her sometimes — always pleasant she is, no humbug; she never asked me to lend or to hand over. Some day, perhaps, she'll find a nice little balance at the banker's, all tied up on herself — not too much, for the flash husband to pitch about, but enough to make her remember old Dan'l Liss. If I could come across a child like that one — a little thing, mind you — Janie's size — and one that I could keep from marrying a flash chap, why, there's no saying — there's no saying, sir.”

And then I thought of Wunkie.

I sent Wunkie into the tent and strolled along to the garden, where I occupied myself in gathering rosellas for the morrow's tart. It was quite a long time before Wunkie came back; and I waited in some anxiety to hear her report of the interview.

“I gev him the pudding,” Wunkie said, solemnly, “and he eat it all. He arst me if I made it, and I said no, 'twur you that made it; but I were pretty good at making puddings myself. And while I was washing the dish, he got a crink in his back, and, my word! he did screw himself up. And I arst him if he'd got any pain-killer, and he said yes; and I rubbed him like I used Sam Duffey when he had the crinks with lumbager. Then

he arst me 'bout Sam Duffey, and I told him how Duffey cracked up and what a bad job it were for me, cos I never had nobody since, that were as kind to me as them Duffeys and the other chap that didn't strike a nugget, as was going to 'dopt me. And I said I'd come and rub him every day if he liked, and he arst me how much I 'spected to be paid for rubbing him; and when he said that I up and bolted.”

“And is that all, Wunkie?”

“No; he hollered for me and I went back, cos I'd forgotten to put the cork in the pain-killer, and then he made me stop, and he arst me a lot of things, and what I'd like best in the world if I was gev a choice; and I said nothing would be no good to me as long as I stopped with Bully Balfour and Mom” — this was Wunkie's compromise for the more tender appellation, “Mother” — “ 'less somebody ud 'dopt me; then I'd like to be learned to talk like other folks and to behave. 'Spect it ud be pretty hard work to learn me anything.”

“Teach, Wunkie,” I corrected. I may mention that I frequently corrected Wunkie's errors of pronunciation; but habit was strong, and she made no great advance towards the acquirement of polished English.

“ 'Taint no use,” said Wunkie, despairingly. “It's schooling that I want to get holt of. Bothered, now, if I didn't hammer my nail with the tommyhawk a purpose to fix that in my head, and there it's gone again.”

I tried to glean indirectly from Wunkie how Mr. Liss had received her innocent suggestion in regard to 'doption, but all I could get out of her was that the old man was a “rum 'un,” and had “arst” her a lot of things; and then Wunkie's demure little face rippled over in an odd way, and she laughed, a rare occurrence with her. It appeared that Mr. Liss had endeavoured to repair Wunkie's educational deficiencies, and that, taking an old Bible from under his pillow, he had instructed her in reading aloud a chapter of Genesis. But though Wunkie's literary attainments were decidedly elementary, she had frankly informed Mr. Liss of her opinion that he would be the better, too, for schooling, and had puzzled him by the theological difficulties she propounded. With a practical scepticism worthy of Colonel Ingersoll, Wunkie had expressed her doubts as to the carrying capabilities of the Ark, and had put Mr. Liss through a catechism which brought him at last to the humiliating confession that he had never been to school; whereupon Wunkie gravely informed him that he wasn't the sort of chap she wanted to get hold of to 'dopt her.

After this I made a point of sending Wunkie down every day during Mr. Liss's sickness. She carried his pudding to him, arranged his tent, made his tea, rubbed him with the pain-killer, and one afternoon Alec came in, highly amused, to tell me that he had found Mr. Liss and Wunkie absorbed in a game of knuckle-bones, otherwise “fives,” Mr. Liss laboriously driving his pigs to market between his first four fingers, making cubby-house with his horny hand, and, while he adroitly tossed

up the knuckle-bones, repeating after Wunkie —

“Jack be nimble, Jack be quick,  
Jack jump over the candlestick.”

Mr. Liss's lumbago got better very soon, thanks to Wunkie and the pain-killer, and, perhaps, to such innocent recreations, and he was able to mount on to the top rail of the stockyard again, to watch the square-tailing, and to moan over the swelling total and the increasing herd of bleating calves, which last was a sore trial to his parsimonious mind. The muster ended at last. Luck had gone with us. The number of cattle which Alec and Balfour brought into the yard nearly doubled that of the book valuation, by which he had bought. It was evident that no previous owner had possessed such an energetic stockman as Balfour of Kilcummin, and Alec was exultant over the working of the *noblesse oblige* principle. The sale was a grand stroke for us. Prices had gone up since Alec's purchase, and in one short year he had trebled his capital.

One evening I was in the sitting-room, writing all this good news to Loftus, while Alec and Mr. Liss were having their business talk in the office. I never went near them when they were so engaged. Indeed, I strove to spare Mr. Liss's feelings, though I made a point of always greeting him when we met by chance about the place, and day by day warily increased my advances as if he had been a wild animal I was trying to tame. I am bound to say that Mr. Liss took much more kindly to the taming process than I expected, especially after he had made friends with Wunkie. I think he softened when he found that “parlouring” was not expected of him, and we really had quite a confidential talk one day in the henhouse over the mangled body of a respectable barn-door missionary pullet which the savage Spanish cock had pecked to death.

It was very dark that night. There was a new moon, and I remember a south-easter was blowing which made the ceilings shake and the French windows rattle, and deadened the sound of a footstep on the verandah and a little tap against the glass. I heard the tap, but did not say “Come in,” for I thought it was only the blind knocking the pane. Presently, however, the door opened, and Wunkie appeared on the threshold.

She was quite breathless. Her little face was white, except for an angry red weal across the cheek, and there was another red mark upon the small brown hand.

I made her come nearer to me, and asked her what had happened. I could not at once believe that Balfour had been beating her. She had talked so casually of her “whoppings” that without direct evidence I had not been ready to attach importance to the statement; and then I knew that this very morning he had asked for leave to go to the pilot station, and stay the night, on the plea that he wanted to send a telegram on some

private business, and wait for an answer. But Wunkie's first words settled the doubt.

"He's whopped me," she panted; "but I don't care about that. I've run up as hard as I could to tell you that Bully Balfour was up to his tricks. Didn't I say you'd got to look out? I want you to tell master. Give me your sacred word and honour that you'll never let Balfour know as 'twas I that peached. He'll whop me dead if you do."

I assured Wunkie that no harm should befall her. Then I slipped out into the office where Alec and Mr. Liss were in friendly confabulation over station matters. Alec was saying —

"He is a first-rate man with stock; hard working, and plenty of gumption. I don't think you can do better than keep him on. I never knew a fellow pick up a run so quickly."

"Alec," I said, "I want you and Mr. Liss to come at once into the sitting-room. Wunkie is there. Balfour has done something wrong, and she has come to tell you."

They followed me into the parlour. Wunkie was standing by the table. She was trembling all over, and shaking her little fist at an imaginary foe, so agitated that she did not seem to notice the two men, who hung back at the door.

"I don't care!" she cried defiantly. "He may whop me dead if he likes. I'd sooner be dead than let him cheat you that have tried to learn me how to behave. You may just tell the master. I ain't going to let you be thieved, nor that old rum 'un that I rubbed with the crinks in the lumbager. I like him, that I do; and I ain't going to see his cattle took away, nor yours either."

"Wunkie," said Alec, coming forward, "just speak out and say what's up. Don't you be afraid that we shall let anything happen to you. Only take care and not tell me any lies."

Wunkie looked up at him out of her big black eyes, and tossed her mane back from her little resolute face.

"I never tell no lies — 'cept to Bully Balfour, and I wouldn't tell him none only for his whoppings. There's a big mob of unbranded calves planted down in the yard by the Narrows. I heard him telling all about it. They're going to sneak 'em across to-night. Balfour, he never went to the pilot station. He's got two of his pals on the other side. He just sneaked up hisself on foot to have a talk with Mom and get some grub; and I hadn't got a bit of beef boiled, and so he swore at me, and then I cheeked him, and he up with his stockwhip and caught me a crack, and I just bolted, and here I be."

"And here you shall stay," said Alec, in deep, wrathful tones. "He shall not strike you again. You're a brave, honest little girl. Look after her, Rachel, and keep her to-night. I'm going quietly down with Brown to the Narrows, Liss. We'll be beforehand with the rogues."

Alec went off. Mr. Liss said nothing, but lingered awkwardly while I tried to soothe and console Wunkie. Now that the fervour of her effort had subsided she flung herself on the floor, and went into a fit of crying and sobbing, ejaculating brokenly, "I wish I was dead, that I do. I hate Bully Balfour and Mom; and they wished I was dead. I heard 'em say it. What's the good o' living? Nobody wants Wunkie."

Suddenly Mr. Liss, who, as the child sobbed, had been standing still looking at her with a strange expression on his face, stepped close to us, and said abruptly, "Wunkie, *I* want you."

Wunkie raised her face, all wet and stained with tears, the red mark upon it showing cruelly, and stared at him wide-eyed. The idea was new to her. She evidently did not grasp it.

"You!" she said. "I can do nothing for you. You're all right now. You ain't got no crinks."

"But I shall have 'em agen," replied Mr. Liss — "always get the lumbago in the rainy season. Look here. I've got something to say — —" He paused awkwardly. "Do ye like old man Dan'l Liss, Wunkie?"

"You bet I do," returned Wunkie, promptly. "You ain't the sort like Duffey and the chap as was going to strike a nugget and 'dopt me, and cracked up i'stead — not so slap-up sharp and free with the tin; but, my word! you and I get on first-rate together; don't we, now? I knows your ways."

A smile of genuine pleasure came over Mr. Liss's face at this statement of Wunkie's. But the gleam in the child's eyes went out, and she burst into sobs once more. "What's the good? I've gone and peached, 'cos I wouldn't see you thieved; and now I'll have to go off to Bully Balfour and be whopped again."

"No; I'm not going to stand that," exclaimed Mr. Liss, with fierce energy. "I'm d — — d if I do. Wunkie — Well — —" He hesitated, and tapped her tiny shoulder with his three stumpy fingers, as his way was when he meant a thing. "You said that you wanted to get hold of somebody that 'ud adopt you and send you to school. I'll adopt you, Wunkie. I'll give you your grub and schooling; and then, after you've grown a big girl and I'm a crawler, you shall come and stop with me and rub me when I've got the crinks."

The child jumped to her feet. She turned to me in a bewildered way, and then to him. I said not a word. I think Mr. Liss had forgotten that I was there; he was looking so earnestly at the child.

All of a sudden she flung up her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"I will," she cried. "I'll be a good girl. You shan't never have to whop me. I'll keep the devil outside. I'll make your puddings and mend your clothes, and I'll rub you in the lumbager, and I'll never tell you no lies, nor cheek you, and I'll learn you all the things I learn myself, and when you're a crawler I'll take care of you."

There was something at once comic and pathetic in the manner in which Mr. Liss accepted the child's embrace. He gave a little start as if he were frightened, but she only clung to him the more, holding back her head, her tiny face glowing as she panted forth again, "I'll be good, I'll be good. I'll do everything for you. I'll never belong to no one but you."

Then he put up his hand timidly and stroked her rough hair. "Very well, my dear," he said simply. "It's a bargain between us; and missus there is witness of it. From this night you're my 'dopted daughter; and old man Dan'l Liss 'ull deal fair by you — so help him God!" And he stooped down and solemnly kissed her.

I went away and left them together. The horses were already saddled out in the yard, and Alec, Brown, and one of the spare hands mounted noiselessly and rode off in the direction of the Narrows. When I went back to the parlour, after having prepared a bed for Wunkie in one of the verandah rooms, Mr. Liss was sitting on a low chair, and Wunkie, on the floor beside him, had fallen asleep, with her head against his knees. The sight of these two touched me curiously. I felt a lump rise in my throat, and my heart thrilled. "You have done a good deed, and God will make her a blessing to you," I said to him.

"Amen!" Mr. Liss answered reverently.

And that was how Wunkie got 'dopted.

When Alec and the men reached the Narrows, they found, as Wunkie had predicted, a mob of steers in the yard by the crossing, all ready to be swum over when the tide should be out. Balfour's horse, saddled and bridled, was there too; but he himself never appeared. Probably he skulked down in the dark, and seeing that the game was up, returned to his hut, determined to brave the matter. Alec let the cattle loose and drove them back a little way, then leaving the men to watch, rode home. He waited till the next morning, knowing that the approaches to the crossing were guarded, and that Balfour would not dare to swim without his horse, on account of the sharks. Anyhow, it would be impossible for his wife to leave the Island without applying to us.

But Balfour did not make any attempt to bolt. In obedience to Alec's and Mr. Liss's command, he appeared defiantly at the office accompanied by Mrs. Balfour. He was discharged, and, Alec told me, received as severe a moral drubbing as could have been administered by any judge on the bench. "You should have heard Liss," said Alec. "I couldn't have believed the old fellow had so much fire in him. By Jove! he did pitch into Balfour for flogging Wunkie. We threatened to prosecute the rogue for cattle-stealing, but I thought to myself that, after all, I owed him a good deal of the success of the sale; though I see now why he was so uncommon sharp at learning the run. Mrs. Balfour flung herself on her knees and implored us to spare her husband; and the end of it is, that McGilray is to take them in the boat to Gundabine this

afternoon's tide; and they signed a paper, drawn up in proper magistrate's form, giving up all claim to Wunkie. She is Liss's adopted daughter now, and who knows but what in years to come the Island may be part of her marriage portion? Well, I wish she may do as well with it as we have done."

Wunkie and her guardian were standing hand-in-hand on the little slab landing-place when we rowed down the creek and out into the Narrows. It was a beautiful May day, with a touch of winter chill in the westerly breeze. Sky and sea were of a soft dreamy blue. Tiny wavelets leapt up and kissed the green waxen mangroves. All nature was smiling and wishing us God-speed.

We put the boat broadside to the creek when we reached its mouth, and waited, taking a last look at the figures on the shore. We all in the boat, Alec leading, gave forth a long-drawn plaintive "Coo-ee." It was our farewell to the Island. There came an answering good-bye from those we had left, and little Wunkie ran forward to the end of the pier, and stretched out her tiny arms to us across the sun-tipped water.

## Chapter XV. A New Departure.

WE did not buy another station for a good many months after our sale of the Island. In the meantime my little baby-girl came, and Alec travelled over many miles out West before he took up new country.

Gunyan was almost at the end of civilization. There was a very primitive township some ninety miles distant from it, to which Mr. Lyndon had extended the Balloo and Stonehampton Railway. Neighbours were few and far between. The climate in summer was atrocious, and in the Never-Never land drought is the squatter's bogie. But Gunyan possessed the best water supply in the district, which made it exceptionally valuable as a property, and Alec had a plan by which all its residential disadvantages were to be overcome.

A little way from Stonehampton, branching off from the Balloo Railway, was a pretty seaside resort much patronized by rich free selectors and Western squatters, whose wives wished to be within reach of their husbands, and yet avoid the worst hardships of the bush. Alec decided that Wombo should be our summer abode, and that during the winter months only, when heat, sandflies, and blight had no existence, should baby and I live at Gunyan. The scheme involved certain weeks, if not months, of separation; but then, as Alec explained, we could rough it up there together from April to November, and there was always the prospect, barring drought, of making a fortune in a few years, and settling down in Melbourne or Sydney — or, better still, taking that much-talked-of trip to England.

The sea was a soft poetic lavender, and the outlines of the islands were blurred by the heat-mist on that February afternoon when we took possession of our cottage at Wombo. The bay had sheltered cliffs and a sandy beach, strewn with sea-eggs and stranded jelly-fish and débris of shells; and along its margin grew a sort of fat-leaved mesembryanthemum, and clumps of bread-fruit trees, looking battered and odd with their reedy, ragged blades of leaf, their great yellow cones, and queer roots spreading out from half-way up the stem, something like the spikes of a huge umbrella turned inside out. At one end of the bay stretched out a high wooded promontory, and within its shelter lay a little rocky knoll overgrown with creepers, pink hibiscus, and tropical-looking vegetation — a vestige of the old scrub, which had been almost cleared away. The other horn was formed by a line of bold bare rocks, riddled

with fissures and beaten by wind and waves into strange fantastic shapes, beneath which the sea made a sudden narrow sweep inland, so that at high tide the village was cut off on one side as by a river.

It was low tide now. Alec, nurse, baby and I got out of the coach with our clocks, birdcages, and portable valuables, and while the vehicle went on its regular way round by road, we prepared to take the shorter cut and wade across the inlet to our homestead exactly opposite. As we took off our shoes, and I kilted up my skirts, we could look across and see in the curve of the bay the cluster of wooden houses with their plots of banana and pineapple, a family hotel, the ultimate destination of the coach, a public-house or two, and, further back, scattered selections with gardens and paddocks, forming a foreground to the rising wolds of grey-green bush that touched the horizon line.

The most imposing of these dwellings was built on a hill at the head of the inlet — a big, rambling, verandahed house, with a great many outbuildings and a very large, luxuriant-looking garden, in which were some fine clumps of bamboo. This was Barradean, Mr. Wilson's selection, and the show-place of the settlement. Mr. Wilson owned several stations up north, and was a person of importance, but he was not nearly so much talked about as his daughter Weeta, generally known by the fancy title of "The Veiled Princess."

It was rather pleasant stepping over the wet, soft sand, feeling it close over one's naked feet, and hearing the swish and gurgle the water made when, out of idle sport, we displaced a shiny wet rock lying in our path, and set the young crabs scuttling away in terror. We had reached the opposite bank, and were preparing to climb the slope on which our new cottage was built, when a woman's voice, shrill, energetic, and yet kindly, stopped us.

"My word! if it isn't Mr. and Mrs. Ansdell! Oh, I must just see the baby."

The lady, one of a party of three leisurely descending the hill, rushed forward and seized Alec's and my hand at the same time.

"Why, Mrs. Wilson!" said Alec.

"Yes," said she, out of breath; "I've been to the cottage. I hope you'll find things pretty straight. It came across me that perhaps there wouldn't be curtains ready for baby's cot; for though there aren't any mosquitoes to speak of, Mrs. Ansdell, still *we* know what one buzzing round will do for a baby. Sweet little darling, how old?" etc.

Here came certain unveilings and some parenthetical baby-talk, at the close of which Mrs. Wilson remarked with emphasis, "Now, Mrs. Ansdell, they call me the manager of the district, and if you want to know your way about, you come to me. They all do — young men and young women, as you'll find, and I just say to them, 'My dear, tell me all about it,' and I take them in hand and turn them round, and set them right

face foremost. Don't I, Mr. Thurston?"

She appealed to a handsome, English-looking young man, who, with a slim, veiled girl, had come towards us.

"Uncommonly obliged we ought to feel, Mrs. Wilson," replied the young man. "You're a mother to us loafers about Stonehampton, and Barradean's a regular home for incurables, and a refuge for the impecunious and unemployed."

"No, no," protested Mrs. Wilson. "I know what I'm about, and I don't give loafers the run of my house. My young men must be gentlemen, and have money to invest. That's my mission — to keep you young fellows of good family out of the way of sharks. There are plenty of sharks in Stonehampton — with their 'sampling' and their unlimited loo, and their bogus companies and their salted gold-mines. My daughter, Mrs. Ansdell, and Mr. Thurston. Perhaps your husband knows Lord Belmont, Mr. Thurston's father?"

"I should think I did," said Alec, shaking the young man warmly by the hand. "My people are in the same county. Archie, old boy, the last I heard of you was that you were going up for the army."

"So I did, but I got plucked — always got plucked. Science and facts ain't my strong point. They tried the Church, but it was no go. Squatting is about my form — when I've got Mrs. Wilson to give me good advice."

"Well, you might have let me have a chance of earning a hundred a year by teaching you colonial experience," said Alec.

"Well, you see, old chap, Loftus wrote home such stories about your island and the mosquitoes, that I thought I'd rather go somewhere else for my colonial experience."

"And how are all the Suffolk folk?" asked Alec.

"First-rate. I haven't seen anything of your people since the last Bury ball. Your sisters were there, and — and — —" The young man stopped short and got rather red.

"Isabel Cave! Oh, I heard all about it," put in Alec. Mr. Thurston laughed rather consciously, and turned away from Mrs. Wilson's sharp glance. I felt certain that he was afraid of Mrs. Wilson, and that he had not told her anything about Isabel Cave. Mrs. Wilson looked quite a person to inspire awe in the breast of a weak young man, and, for all his physical manliness and his undeniable good looks, I suspected Mr. Thurston of lacking force of character.

The lady of Barradean was large and angular. She had quite a majestic presence. Her dress was of rich stuff and fashionable make. Her face was well preserved. A fringe of iron-grey hair, carefully curled, showed beneath her feathered hat. Her false teeth were perfect, and she wore a massive *châtelaine*, with an armoury of silver weapons that rattled with every gesture.

The introduction to Miss Wilson had not been altogether a success. A

sweet muffled voice said, "How do you do?" in answer to my salutation, and I could only imagine the smile with which presumably my further remarks were greeted, for she spoke absolutely nothing, but stood as still as a statue, and as graceful. The Veiled Princess gave a good deal of play to the imagination. She was very tall and beautifully proportioned. I never saw finer sweep of shoulder and set of neck. Her face, closely covered with several folds of grey gauze, remained a mystery, but through the gauze there shot a gleam of deep, dark eyes, and where it was gathered up behind I saw a coil of the most wonderful red-gold hair, which gave promise of gratifying possibilities.

Presently baby began to cry, but not even the fretful wail and the little commotion which ensued disturbed Miss Weeta's serenity. Mrs. Wilson bade us good-bye. She said they had left the buggy up at the township, and were going round by the rocks to get some oysters which were to be scalloped for Mr. Wilson's dinner. Mr. Thurston was carrying a basket and Miss Weeta dangled a black's dilly-bag. I wondered if she would unvail in the ardour of the occupation. Mrs. Wilson gave us a good many parting injunctions as to the method of dealing with Wombo tradesmen, and extracted a promise on our part that we would dine at Barradean the following evening. Alec and Mr. Thurston arranged to have "a real old Suffolk yarn." The veiled girl said nothing, but atoned for the omission by a farewell bow of statuesque grace. We walked up along the prickly-pear hedge which bordered our garden.

"She is like the Venus of Milo," said Alec, reverting to Miss Weeta; "if you could fancy the Louvre Venus on an Australian cattle selection. I'm sure that not all Jupiter's magic could make that Venus talk."

"Doesn't Miss Wilson ever talk?" I asked.

"No; but she looks and she smiles, and that's quite good enough. I can't make out," pursued Alec reflectively, "whether she is very stupid or very clever."

"Is she never seen unveiled?"

"Oh, yes, after dusk and in a darkened room. It's her complexion. But you will soon find out all her peculiarities, and in the meantime here we are."

We stepped into the enclosure, scantily stocked with some hibiscus shrubs, a native tree covered with brilliant pink flowers, two or three baby bamboos, and a few creepers and annuals. The cottage had a wide verandah built in at the back and sides, thus forming several small rooms in addition to the four main ones. It all looked remarkably homelike and we allowed, as the Americans say, that if Mrs. Wilson's passion for managing her friends' affairs always led to such happy results, she must have added considerably to the comfort of the neighbourhood.

"By Jove!" said Alec, "the table ready laid — cold chicken and trifle, and the celebrated Barradean cream junket! She is not a bad sort, after

all.” But he went on to express an ungrateful hope that she didn't mean to go on “bossing our show,” because he shouldn't be able to stand it for a permanency.

“I'll tell you, Rachel, whose show she is doing her best to boss,” Alec continued later on, as we sat in the verandah, and he smoked his pipe and I watched the moon shining over the sea, and enjoyed the soft breeze and the faint mingled odours of gum-trees and brine. “She has got the Honourable Archie in her clutches; he is a soft chap, and will do anything she tells him, down to buying a partnership or marrying her daughter.”

“Why shouldn't he marry her daughter?” I said.

“Because I suspect very shrewdly that he is as good as engaged to Isabel Cave. I know from what my sisters have told me that he proposed to her and that she was not unwilling, but her guardian refused his consent, and she doesn't come into her money for some months yet.”

Isabel Cave, hitherto only a name which had occurred several times in Alec's letters from his sisters, now acquired a new and living interest. I made Alec instruct me upon the situation, which, briefly, was this. The Belmonts were the great people in Alec's part of Suffolk. Miss Cave was the only daughter of a successful Manchester man who had bought a place in the neighbourhood, and Isabel had grown upon intimate terms with Alec's sisters. Archie Thurston was, as Alec put it, “since his time,” having been still at college when Alec left England — a younger son, and, so far, somewhat of a disappointment to his relatives. Old Mr. Cave died, confiding Isabel to the guardianship of a brother, who, like the uncles in the melodramas, wanted to make up a match between the heiress and his own son, and who looked with great disfavour upon the boy-and-girl lovmaking between Isabel and Archie. So, in a milder degree, did the Belmonts themselves, and the result seemed to be Archie's exile to Australia.

It was not long before we heard further particulars about Mr. Thurston's romance. The next morning his handsome head appeared above the prickly pear bushes, and his voice was heard calling, “I say, where can a fellow hitch up his horse out of the way of these confounded thorns?” Alec went to his aid, and presently the two came to the verandah, and settled themselves in long canvas chairs, with tumblers of what Mr. Thurston called the “Barradean swizzle” on the wooden arms of their lounges. “Ginger-beer, ration sugar, a drop of bitters, and a decent dash of rum. It's the old lady's compromise with Wilson,” explained M. Thurston. “The old chap likes his glass, and if the cellaret was left open, he would be pegging all day. But the Major, as we call Mrs. Wilson, keeps the keys, and humours him by standing a large jug of this stuff on the sideboard, so that he can't complain of thirst.”

There was an English mail in, and, like ourselves, Mr. Thurston had

received letters. He was dying to know what Etta Ansdell had told us concerning Isabel Cave. "The fact is, Mrs. Ansdell, we're engaged," he said, sheepishly, "but it is to be kept a secret till we're out of our difficulties."

"Have you taken the Major into your confidence?" asked Alec.

"Why, no! But Weeta — Miss Wilson knows all about it. She is an awfully sympathetic girl, though people do laugh at her about her complexion. I know that if I had a skin like hers — it's beautiful, Mrs. Ansdell — and if I freckled all over with a ray of sunshine, I'd wear a veil too, and so would you. Isabel used to freckle," he added reflectively.

I agreed as to the veil, and praised the colour of Miss Weeta's hair.

"It's glorious!" he rejoined with enthusiasm — "like a Tintoretto, you know. It puts me in mind of Miss Cave; *her* hair is just that golden-red, and she has the same kind of eyes. Don't you think there's a likeness, Ansdell?"

Alec promised to make his observations that evening. "And how about Miss Cave? When are you going to be married?"

"As soon as she is her own mistress. What do you think? She has made up her mind to come out to me. She is delicate, you know — lungs, and all that — and the doctors have recommended a long sea-voyage of two or three years in a warm climate. We've settled it between ourselves. She comes of age this year. I have had a letter this morning, and I'm rather excited — naturally," he added, with a boyish frankness that was very taking.

"Oh, it has gone as far as that?" said Alec. "So she writes to you, does she?"

"Only now and then. You see, she is a very honourable girl and wouldn't do anything underhand; but we think that when there's a crisis it is right of us to let each other know, and so she has written to tell me that she has made up her mind."

"Well, look out for squalls with the Major," said Alec. "My impression is, young fellow, that Mrs. Wilson would like to see Miss Weeta the Honourable Mrs. Thurston."

"Come, that's all bosh," replied Archie, getting suddenly red. "Besides, it's a sort of insult to Miss Wilson. We are splendid friends, and she often asks me about Isabel. She is awfully sympathetic," he repeated.

"Expresses her sympathy by gesture, I suppose?" said Alec.

"Don't chaff, Alec. She talks when we are by ourselves and the Major is out of the way. And you should hear her play the violin! She was educated in Melbourne, you know. I can tell you her playing is first-class. That puts me in mind of Isabel, too. I suppose you don't remember how *she* used to play *The Kreutzer* to your sister's accompaniment?"

"No," said Alec. "She wasn't so far advanced when I knew her."

"Well, Miss Wilson plays *The Kreutzer*, too, and I accompany her. I

told her, the other day, that I could almost fancy I was accompanying Isabel.”

“And what did Miss Weeta say to that?”

“Oh, she — ” young Thurston stammered, confusedly, “she — why, she said — nothing.”

## Chapter XVI. The Veiled Princess.

Mr. Wilson came himself and drove us over to Barradean with his tandem. He was a large, red, burly man, with a fat voice and a casual laugh. "Yep, yep!" he shouted to the horses at the pitch of his strong lungs. The buggy flew along, and a pack of kangaroo-hounds, with red tongues hanging out, barking as they ran, seemed to have some difficulty in keeping up to our speed. The tails of Mr. Wilson's white coat bulged out in the wind, and he held the string of his cabbage-tree hat between his teeth to prevent its being blown off.

Evidently Mr. Wilson was popular among the Wombo selectors. He had a nod and a word for everyone who passed, from the Chinaman, with his load of vegetables, to a party of footsore fencers coming in from the bush, and from a German woman stumping by her cart to a "flash" squatter driving his four-in-hand. His running fire of greeting was diversified by parenthetical remarks to me. "Billy Barlow — the biggest blower in the district. How are you, Billy? Turn up at Barradean tomorrow and do a swizzle. Put him on the wrong side of the brandy-bottle, and he'll beat even *my* stories into fits, and that's saying a good deal. ... Good-day, Wiggins," to a clerical-looking person; "the grinders working better, eh? Stonehampton parson come down here to get accustomed to a new set of false teeth. ... I say, Humphreys, you're wanted at Barradean to-night. Janie Stern says you're a stunner at the polka. Turn round and come along. Humphreys, of the Union Bank, awfully gone on my girl; but £200 a year and a shanty in a bush township isn't *her* style. She's mighty hard to please, is Weeta, she and her mother together: nothing short of an English swell will satisfy them. Shouldn't wonder if they got the crooked stick after all," pursued Mr. Wilson. "I tell Weeta she reads too much poetry. Lord, the amount of trash that girl does get through is astonishing!"

By this time we had swung into the gates of Barradean. There was a bachelors' quarters at the back, and I saw several men in white coats lounging about, who, I presume, were Mrs. Wilson's *protégés*. The place was a queer mixture of roughness and luxury. The stockyard, which lay a little beyond the cultivated enclosure, was surrounded by a small plantation of castor-oil plants, and two huge boiling-down pots had attracted a covey of very noisy crows. I soon discovered Mr. Wilson had a genius for disorder, and that outside Mrs. Wilson's jurisdiction,

Barradean did not sustain the reputation which her housekeeping had earned indoors. The garden was lovely. There were trellises of vines and passion-fruit, and one arcade covered with the granadilla creeper: the fruit hanging inside like great golden blobs filled me with admiration. The bamboos made a melancholy sighing noise, and the air was laden with perfume. It was the kind of garden in which to dream away summer evenings of languorous delight. The thought flashed across me that it would not be difficult for Mr. Thurston to forget Isabel Cave if a beautiful Veiled Princess wove mysterious spells that chained him to her side in such a bower as this.

At one end of the house grew a poinciana-tree, now a canopy of gorgeous flame-coloured blossom. Young Thurston was gathering sprays of the flowers and giving them to a most curious and attractive-looking woman, who stood in a statuesque attitude against a background of orange and green. She herself was a harmony of green and orange. I suppose her sense of colouring was intuitive, for none of us there had studied the modern mysteries of "tone." Perhaps Mr. Thurston had instructed her; he was a sort of *dilettante* in art. In any case, she must have found it a difficult matter to achieve the soft, clinging, "Liberty-looking" dress which was draped from her shoulders, and seemed to be caught at her waist by a girdle of poinciana flowers. She had a wreath of the same flowers on her head, and they were just two tones more vivid than her hair. I never beheld such hair. It hung to her waist in a natural ripple, and each strand seemed to fall by itself. In colour it was simply magnificent. She wore it parted in the middle and standing out from her forehead as it does in some Venetian portraits.

Her face was one of the most peculiar I have ever seen. It was very long. The forehead was too high, the mouth heavy, the eyes blue, full lidded, and with pupils that dilated readily. Certainly her complexion was worth taking care of. The petals of a white rose could hardly have been more smooth, and were scarcely more pale. One could only feel grateful to the veil that had preserved it in such immaculate purity.

"What a pity it is that Rossetti couldn't have painted your daughter," Alec remarked bluntly.

"Who?" asked Mrs. Wilson, in an innocent manner; then added, "Oh, of course. That's what Mr. Thurston says. He says the London painters would go wild about her, and he ought to know. He is a very cultivated young man, Mr. Thurston."

"I don't think it needs much cultivation to appreciate Miss Wilson's beauty," I said.

"Well, now," observed Mr. Wilson, who had joined us, "you'd be surprised to hear that till she was fifteen we thought her downright plain, and called her 'Carrots.' Red hair seems to have come into fashion since my young days. Lucky, ain't it, that we don't all want to be in the

fashion?" and he turned with a guffaw to one of the men near him.

He was followed by quite a small army from the bachelors' quarters, Mr. Humphreys, the hopeless adorer, among them — a lean, shy, straggling creature, who gave a general impression of having run up quickly in a moist soil. The others I took to be squatters and sugar-planters, and there were two or three fresh-faced new chums, whose clothes had an English cut, and of whom one wore evening dress, and was being mercilessly chaffed by the younger Wilson fry.

We were outside the drawing-room, to which there were so many windows that it hardly seemed separated from the verandah. Within were more young ladies, whose type was the eternal commonplace, and their mission — to giggle. Nobody made any attempt to go down to the pair under the flame-coloured tree, nor did they come forward and greet us. Apparently it was the custom to regard Miss Weeta as a goddess to be worshipped, or a picture to be admired, but from whom neither conversation nor social conventions were to be expected. I am bound to say that there did not seem to be many social conventions of any kind at Barradean, and probably that was why everybody liked the place so much. Just now Mr. Thurston seemed to be doing all the talking; Weeta stood in her quiescent manner, only stretching out her arm every now and then to take the flowers he offered her, and which she held in a loose bunch against her skirts.

"Pa doesn't know anything about it," said Mrs. Wilson, after a minute's contemplation of her daughter, and then reverting to Mr. Wilson's statement. "We should none of us have known, if the Prince hadn't spotted her in church with Miss Bellhayes's girls, and been struck all of a heap with her hair and her complexion."

"That settled me," said Mr. Wilson; "I saw what a fool I'd been. If anybody can take his pick of the best of everything it's a prince, and *his* opinion is not to be argued against."

By dint of a few questions I elicited the fact that Miss Weeta had been looked upon as an ugly duckling till a certain royal personage, touring in Australia, convinced the world of Melbourne that a rare swan had been hatched in a hen's nest. If Miss Weeta had been a few years older, there is no knowing whether she might not have been then and there translated to a higher sphere, for the Prince had been accompanied by a fashionable painter and a peer of literary and artistic proclivities, both of whom did their best to immortalise her. The peer had put her into his journal, which was afterwards published, and of which a copy, bound in vellum, was kept under glass in the Barradean drawing-room.

The painter had painted her portrait for his royal patron. "And I have no doubt it hangs in one of the royal palaces now," added Mr. Wilson, with a heave of satisfaction; "and that it frequently makes the Princess jealous."

“At any rate,” said Mrs. Wilson, waiving the question of the Princess's jealousy, “it was a mercy we made the discovery before she went on freckling. There were two big spots on the left side of her nose. It took years to get rid of them.”

“But now we know her value, and we take care of her accordingly,” said Mr. Wilson. “I had a room built, with windows fixed expressly for her complexion.”

“Really! The windows — — ”

“Raised close up to the eaves, and on the north side where there ain't much sun.”

“It must be a great responsibility,” I suggested.

“Buttermilk and glycerine carry us through,” answered Mrs. Wilson, quite seriously; “and fortunately Weeta don't mind staying indoors during the heat of the day. She's fond of reading and playing — the hours she practises her violin would astonish you — and then she designs dresses. She'll take a leaf or a flower and mix up her Judson's dyes till she has got a colour that nobody would ever dream of putting on their backs, but that seems somehow to fit her to a T. She dyed that dress she has got on to the shade of a withered granadilla leaf.”

I was very much interested in the particulars the Major gave me of Miss Weeta's accomplishments, and in Mrs. Wilson's views as to the paragon's ultimate destiny. The upper stratum of English society appeared to be the final goal of both mother and daughter's ambition. They had hoped that “Pa” might have sold out of his stations before now, and that they might have gone to London and cut a dash, and that Miss Weeta might have been re-introduced to the Prince, and that she might at least have had the chance of marrying an earl or a duke. And if it hadn't been for drought and for Pa's good-nature in taking shares in salt-mines that went smash, to oblige a friend, all these desirable objects might have been attained. “Weeta was born to be among the aristocracy,” concluded Mrs. Wilson, emphatically, “and into the aristocracy she shall go.”

“Tell you what it is, Ma, *I* was born to drink when I felt thirsty, and as the swizzle is clean done, and if you *have* your keys handy,” insinuated Mr. Wilson, “Ansdell would eat his dinner all the better for a peg of rum.”

Mrs. Wilson frowned on the hint, and fortunately just then the bell rang, and Mr. Wilson offered me his arm. Mr. Thurston and Weeta were already in the dining-room, and he was laying the sprays of poinciana on the table. She gave me her hand with a dreamy smile. When I complimented her upon her taste in the arrangement of the dinner-table, she said, “Yes,” merely, and smiled again. There was something inscrutable in that smile.

I asked her what she had been doing all day.

“Oh, reading and practising,” she answered.

I told her that I had heard a great deal about her playing from Mr. Thurston.

“Oh, yes,” she said again, and paused. Her eyes rested on my face in a slow, questioning way, and she opened her lips as if she were going to ask me something. I felt expectant, but she turned away as Mrs. Wilson came up and settled me in the place of honour, and I noticed that with quite unconscious magnetism Weeta seemed to draw Mr. Thurston with her, and that he placed himself beside her at the other end of the table.

We were a large party. There were the four commonplace young ladies in muslin frocks and gay ribbons, and there were twice as many gentlemen. Then, after we had begun dinner, a buggy drove up in front of the windows, and a neighbouring squatter and his sister — the Janie Stern already mentioned — got down, and, giving the buggy and horses into a blackboy's charge, joined us at table without further ceremony. Miss Janie Stern, who was short and sharp of speech and eyes, and rather pretty, hoped there was going to be some dancing that evening, and said that she and “Artie” had come to stay over the muster, and that she meant to wake up Barradean before she went home again. The dinner was very well cooked, and gave testimony to the excellence of Mrs. Wilson's housekeeping, but the service was of a most casual kind, and people got up and helped themselves and each other without reference to the sequence of courses. It was all very free-and-easy and unpremeditated, and the life and bustle seemed to me strange after our quiet, unsocial Island life. Outside, in the shadow of the creepers, several dusky beings lounged and watched the repast. One white-haired veteran perched himself on the edge of the verandah and poured forth a sort of chant, of which “Wombeen” was the burden.

Mr. Wilson threw him a bone, whereat the tribe of piccaninnies gathered like a flock of hungry crows. Mrs. Wilson complained that Mr. Wilson encouraged the blacks about the house, so that there was no holding them within bounds, but no further notice was taken till I became unpleasantly conscious of the effluvium of the gunya, and the veteran's gaunt tattooed frame, scantily clad in an old white shirt, with a big mother-of-pearl medallion in its wealed breast, leaned over the host's chair. “Come along, Wilson,” it said, “I been wait plenty long time.”

“Go away, Billy,” answered Mr. Wilson, laughing. “Me come directly.”

“Ba'al,” stolidly declared Billy, “me want him tobacco for that fellow wombeen.”

“He has been catching ‘wombeen’ — that's what they call crabs hereabouts,” explained Mr. Wilson — “and he's bothering to be paid. All right, Billy,” and Mr. Wilson got up, fetched a fig of tobacco, and pacified Billy, who retired again to the verandah.

It was quite evening when we left the dining-room, but there was the

most beautiful moon rising out at sea. As it mounted behind the clumps of bamboos and cast flickering shadows on the gravel walks, the garden seemed more than ever a place of enchantment. Here in the open lay a patch of brightness, and there, where some dense foliage hung, were indefinite vistas and strange alleys of impenetrable gloom. The magnolias and trumpet-flowers gleamed like white stars, and night had robbed the great orange begonias of their gold. Miss Janie Stern suggested that it would be "jolly" to go out and gather cheremoyas, and ran down the grassy slope with a kind of "who loves me, follows me" air.

Several of the young men did follow her, though Mrs. Wilson called out, "Look out for snakes"; but cheremoyas, flavoured with flirtation, appeared an irresistible bait to all but Weeta and Mr. Thurston.

"Nothing short of a rousing dance tune will bring back Janie Stern and that young Humphreys," observed the Major, and she got up and went to the piano in the drawing-room, leaving me in a deep canvas chair not far from the young people.

"Won't you come out?" pleaded Mr. Thurston.

"No," she answered.

"Why wouldn't you let me ride with you this afternoon?" he went on.

"When are you going back north?" she counter-questioned, and there was a note of eagerness in her voice.

"Why, you know," he said, hesitatingly, "I'm going to help with the muster. Mrs. Wilson says your father wants me."

"Wants you!" she repeated. "Goodness! what do you know about stock-keeping?"

"Well," he answered, "you said yourself I'd better learn, so that I might be able to take charge of a station of my own."

"I think you had much better go and get your station," she said. "I can't think why you keep hanging about here."

"I like talking to you."

"About Miss Cave, and playing on the piano and accompanying my violin, as you accompanied her, and, because we have both got red hair, making me into a sort of peg to hang your raptures on."

"I don't call your hair red," he said, with a laugh.

"Don't you? What do you call it, then?"

"The colour of the rising sun and the symbol of worship," replied he, promptly.

"Did you tell Miss Cave that?" she asked. He did not answer, and she said, "It is prettier hair than hers, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," he said.

"You got English letters to-day — didn't you, now?"

"Yes."

"And you were dying to tell me all about them, and that's why you tried so hard to ride with me?"

“Well?”

“Well, why don't you go and make a confidant of someone else — Mrs. Ansdell?”

“Please forgive my interrupting you,” I interposed, “but you put me under the necessity of changing my seat.”

“No, don't go,” exclaimed Mr. Thurston. “Mrs. Ansdell knows all about it,” he added, and moved away. Weeta drew her chair closer to mine. She looked at me seriously for a minute, and unfastened a poinciana spray at her waist, then drew it reflectively along her dress, as if she were trying an effect before she spoke. “You will make a better confidant than I shall,” she said.

“Perhaps I shall make a safer one,” I answered, and was sorry a moment after the words had escaped me, for I saw even in the dim light that she flushed deeply.

“Why did you say that?” she asked presently.

I took my courage in both hands and rushed head-long at the fence which I had built up for myself.

“If you were engaged to be married to a man on the other side of the world, should you not think there was a danger in his making a confidant of beautiful young woman?”

“Oh, well,” she began, “I must say you do speak what you mean.”

I felt convicted of an impertinence, and told her so.

“Oh, I like it,” she replied. “I could get on with you if you would always say what you mean. Do you mean — — ” she added impulsively, and paused. “Am I really beautiful?”

“The Prince seems to have settled that question,” I said.

“The Prince!” She laughed — a ghostly sort of laugh which had no real merriment. “It's funny, isn't it — like being canonized for a practical joke? Perhaps all the time the Prince was only trying to get a rise out of the Melbourne people. I dare say it might be an amusing experience to create a new standard of beauty among a set of savages. But, anyhow, it was a very fortunate thing for me.”

“In what way?”

“Don't you see? Now, I am a person of consideration. There are two things about my childhood which always stand out in my mind,” she went on rather sadly. “One was a saying, half in chaff, half in earnest, among the people about me, that ‘Weeta had a shingle loose,’ and I was pitied and laughed at in consequence. The other was my mother's vehement lamentation that I was so ugly. I used to feel very sorry for my mother, and often I have cried myself to sleep because she found me so unpleasant to look at. It was out of sheer sorrow and not spite, for I don't think I resented my elder sister being always brought forward and shown off. She is married now. She is like my mother, and had black ringlets that hung like corkscrews round her head.”

“Well?” I said, for she had stopped.

“Well, then the Prince came and made them believe that instead of a worthless pebble they had got a precious stone. They accepted the idea on his authority. I don't know whether I am the pebble or the jewel; but I have often thought what a beautiful and satisfying thing it would have been if the mother's love had proved a true touchstone — if she had loved me for myself, and not for what the Prince thought of my complexion and my hair. That sort of love would be a diamond worth having, and after all, you see, it is I who have to make the best of a sham. But it is pleasant to be admired and flattered, and allowed to be as lazy as I please — I always had a horror of glare and heat and active exertion — and so I say nothing, and am thankful.”

The girl's unconscious cynicism touched me to the heart. Was this, then, the clue to her odd demeanour, and were there concealed fires beneath the outward snow?

“It is funny!” she repeated.

I could not help saying that to me there was far more pathos than comedy in the situation.

All this time the Major was within, strumming the Corricolo Galop. She had not played in vain: Janie Stern and Mr. Humphreys were whirling round the empty part of the verandah. Some of the others followed their example in a more languid fashion, but it was, in truth, too hot for dancing. Nobody pressed Weeta to galop. She seemed outside all that boisterous commonplace life. Archie Thurston was smoking with Mr. Wilson and Alec. I felt instinctively that his poetic speech about Weeta's hair had brought about a reactionary mood, which found vent in cattle and horse talk. Every now and then conversational scraps floated towards us. “Have a nip, Thurston,” in Mr. Wilson's deep fat tones; and then, “As fine a lot of horses as ever ran into yard.” Allusions to a certain “slashing chestnut” followed, and later an animated discussion on the advantage of sending “fats” to the southern market, over the simpler business of supplying the Stonehampton Meat Preserving establishment.

Weeta had relapsed into one of her long silences. After a while she said abruptly, “If I had loved Mr. Thurston, I would not have acted as Miss Cave did. I would have married him straight away.”

“She was not her own mistress. She could not act in defiance of her guardian.”

“Couldn't she! I don't suspect her guardian would have taken ship after her if she had run away to Australia.”

“Well, at any rate,” I said, “Miss Cave will be her own mistress in a few months, and then she is coming out to Australia.”

“Coming out to Australia!” Weeta gave a violent start, and leaned eagerly forward. “Coming out to be married?”

“Of course.”

“Did he hear that this morning?”

I told her of his call at the cottage and all that I had learned.

“Coming out to be married!” she repeated, and sank back in the chair with an indescribable resignation and drooping of limb and voice. it will be all over then — for him.”

“Not all over,” I said. “It will be the beginning.”

“Yes,” she said, in the same stifled way; “it will be the beginning. I wonder of what!”

“Of happiness, it is to be hoped,” I said lightly.

She did not answer. Mr. Thurston himself came to her a minute or two later, and asked if she would play. “I want Mrs. Ansdell to hear you,” he said.

She got up. “Mrs. Ansdell and I have been making friends,” she said. “I think I shall get on with her.”

“That is satisfactory, at all events,” he replied, and they went together into the drawing-room, where, though “Il Corricolo” had come to an end, the Major was still fluttering over the piano. She put the music for Mr. Thurston on the desk, and got out Weeta's violin. The girl put herself into one of her attitudes. The sitting-room wall was of cedar, and its rich brown made an effective background for her red-gold and green, and her odd mediaeval style of beauty. She seemed absorbed in the tuning of her violin, and young Thurston, striking a few chords for keynote, with his head turned sideways towards her, became absorbed in the contemplation of the picture. Mrs. Wilson, like a showman, watched his eyes.

She was not admiring Weeta: she was admiring the impression Weeta produced, and her look at Mr. Thurston had in it something shrewd and calculating, as if she were reflecting upon the possibilities of his accession to the family honours. Mr. Thurston was also in his way a study. I don't think I have done full justice to his good looks and a charm of frankness, sympathy, and intelligence which he possessed. He may have been plucked for the army, but he was nevertheless a very agreeable talker, had an extensive acquaintance with light literature, and had various artistic gifts. More than this, he had that hall-mark of birth and breeding and old civilization which is so high a recommendation to the aspiring Australian.

The young man and the young girl seemed strangely out of keeping with their unaesthetic surroundings — she perhaps the more so of the two. It was all odd and inconsistent, but intensely interesting. The violin in itself was an incongruous feature. Who could expect to see a young woman handling a fiddle-bow in a bush-parlour? Certainly, no one could expect that such music would be the result. Weeta played with great delicacy and execution, and with that rarer thing, soul. There was a wail of indescribable woe in the *adagio* of the *Kreutzer Sonata* with which they led off. It gave one that exquisite ache of the senses, that yearning

after the impossible, which is the peculiar effect of some kinds of music. When they came to the *presto* movement, the notes were like moonbeams zigzagging on the waves — like the shadows of leaves dancing on a sunlit verandah.

It was not difficult to imagine that the common passion for music might create a very strong bond between the two. Is there any more perfect mode of expressing the harmony of souls? Mr. Thurston's soul was evidently just then very much in harmony with that of Miss Wilson. His handsome face was quite poeticized by artistic emotion, as with his head tilted a little backward he turned his glowing eyes towards her and claimed her sympathy.

She had come nearer the piano. Her violin seemed to have taken life from her, and to be a part of her own being. I don't know how to express the abandonment which her play of feature and arm suggested. The curve of her elbow was full of unconscious grace. One dreaded the closing chords. They came at last. She shrivelled in an instant into stiffness and apathy. With an abrupt gesture she put down the instrument, and gave a curt refusal to all ontreaties that she would play once more.

It was time to say good-night, and I drove away with the feeling that I had been witnessing the opening scene of a promising piece; but whether it was to be comedy or tragedy, I could not determine.

## Chapter XVII. The Major's Little Game.

MY diaries of that time, which are sufficiently copious — for when Alec was away or baby asleep, I had little to do but diarise — confirm my impression that, dramatically speaking, life at Wombo resolved itself into Weeta Wilson.

Certainly, we saw a good deal of Mr. Thurston, but that young man, in spite of his undeniable attractions, in spite also of his expansive confidences concerning his feelings and experiences generally, resembled the lover in a certain class of novel in that he was more or less of a lay figure. Now, Weeta could not be called an expansive young lady; but even in her taciturn moods she gave food for conjecture. After her little outburst on the verandah that night, I got nothing for a long time but “Yes” and “No.” It was true that I only saw her in the evenings — she was shut up in her own rooms till five o'clock — and then Mr. Thurston was always hanging round. I noticed, however, that her manner with him was quite incalculable; at some times she scarcely answered his remarks, and at others she appeared conversational and even brilliant.

I asked him once what she talked to him about on these latter occasions.

“Oh, she chaffs me in a kind of fashion,” he answered vaguely. “Not in the regular rough Australian way — you know what that is — but much more cleverly.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Oh, I didn't mean — — ” he began, disconcerted. “You know you are only one quarter colonial, Mrs. Ansdell. You've got light and shade. That's the Antipodean deficiency — want of shading. It's in everything — scenery, sky, manners, morals, women especially. They are all — how shall I say it? — provincial. They want tone — atmosphere. Now, *she* has plenty of atmosphere. It's a puzzle to me where she gets it.”

“She” meaning Miss Wilson, I suppose. “But her manners!” I suggested; “aren't they a little wanting in tone too?”

“Good gracious, no. She's so beautifully natural. Her manners would be perfection if she were a duchess. It's her indifference that's so sublime. But I'm convinced that's only a crust. I believe she is capable of feeling intensely. In fact, I have a theory that she has an immensely passionate and romantic nature, and that she knows it, and is afraid of it, and has put

an extinguisher upon herself.”

I advised him not to try and remove the extinguisher.

“Whoever succeeds in doing that will run a chance of being scorched,” he said seriously. “But I shall not be that man. You see, Mrs. Ansdell, Isabel is to me like the mask which chemists put on when they are pursuing dangerous investigations into the nature of drugs.”

I remarked that his metaphors were a little mixed, and that I *had* heard of occasional accidents, in spite of extinguisher and mask; he laughed, however, and turned the conversation.

It was Alec who took upon himself to inform the Major of Mr. Thurston's engagement. He drove me over to Barradean a few days before his departure for Gunyan, with the intention of making his farewell, and, as he expressed it, “of putting things on the square.”

Mrs. Wilson was seated in the shady end of the verandah, working her sewing-machine, with the youngest of the Wilson family playing at her feet. She stopped the treadle, greeted us with effusion, and sent the child for a cool drink for me, and some of the famous swizzle for Alec. Weeta was out riding, she told us, and Barradean was almost deserted. Janie Stern was gone home for a few days, and the two other young ladies, whose names were respectively Maggie and Clara — I never rightly got at their surnames — were in Stonehampton for a ball, and had taken all the young men — the *beaux*, Mrs. Wilson called them — in attendance.

“Weeta declared it was much too hot for dancing, and, besides, she would have had to start this morning, and run the risk of the glare,” Mrs. Wilson explained. “As for Mr. Thurston,” she added, “he didn't want to go, but those girls chaffed him into it. He doesn't seem to care about bush larks.”

“I suppose that, naturally, an engaged young man is not so keen after larks as an unattached new chum,” said Alec gravely, “especially when the thermometer is over ninety.”

Mrs. Wilson looked at Alec keenly. “I was not aware that Mr. Thurston was engaged,” she said in a serious tone.

“It's a sufficiently old affair to be taken for granted,” said Alec. “I believe the young lady is coming out to be married.”

“If this is true,” said Mrs. Wilson, with dignity, “I think Mr. Thurston ought to have informed us before the partnership was decided upon.”

It should be mentioned that, acting on the Major's advice, Mr. Thurston had joined his capital to Mr. Wilson's experience, and had become a partner in one of the latter's northern stations.

“Why, Mrs. Wilson,” said Alec, “a deed of partnership is not invalidated by marriage, like a last will and testament.”

“But a working partner who spends his time dangling after a fine-lady English wife is not likely to increase the profits of the firm,” rejoined the Major with asperity.

“Oh, come, Mrs. Wilson,” said Alec; “everyone knows that you are the kindest woman in the world, and surely you would never be hard on two lovers who have had to bear up against a lot of worry.”

“Oh! so there has been some opposition to the match — on Lord Belmont's part, may I ask?”

“Well, not altogether; you see, Miss Cave — the young lady — is an heiress, and her guardian had other views. Miss Cave is a friend of my sister's, and that's how I come to know what has been going on.”

“Oh, indeed,” drily observed Mrs. Wilson.

“It's all over now, though,” Alec went on. “Miss Cave will be of age this very month, and her own mistress. The first use she makes of her liberty will be to come out to Australia.”

“Most indelicate,” snapped Mrs. Wilson.

“Yes, she is delicate,” said Alec, serenely — “weak lungs. The doctors have ordered her a sea voyage.”

“Mr. Ansdell,” began the Major, majestically, “by your own admissions I gather that this has been a clandestine engagement. I have a horror of anything underhand, and I should certainly not encourage a young man for whom I felt partially responsible to keep a promise made no doubt under pressure, and against the wishes of his relatives.”

“I assure you that you are mistaken,” exclaimed Alec, warmly.

“Perhaps, but if Mr. Thurston was not ashamed of his conduct, if he did not regret this entanglement, why — *why* did he not confide in me, his best friend?” Mrs. Wilson broke her thread viciously, and laid the garment she had been sewing back on the sewing machine, which she pushed away from her as she half rose in her excitement. “I consider that the position has been a most unfair one,” she went on angrily — “unfair to me, unfair to himself, unfair to — — ” She stopped suddenly. Somebody had appeared in the doorway behind where we sat, and, before we had time to look round, another voice had taken up her unfinished sentence. “Unfair to whom, mamma?” The clear, peremptory tone, thrilling with suppressed feeling, was quite unlike Weeta's usual unemotional utterance. “Unfair to whom?” she repeated, coming forward, and recognising our presence only by a sweeping glance, at once frank, indignant, and appealing. She was in her riding-habit, and had taken off her hat with its cloud of veils. There was something of a noble scorn in her air and attitude as she stood balancing herself against the verandah post.

“Weeta!” cried her mother. “Where have you left Mr. Thurston?”

“Up at the bachelors' quarters,” she answered, her voice hardening; “so you needn't mind speaking out, mamma. I don't suppose it matters about me if I'm only a doll, as you seem to think, with no brains and no pride, except pride in my complexion,” and she gave an odd, harsh little laugh.

“Weeta!” again cried Mrs. Wilson, with a scandalized gesture. “Well; I

do think you must be going crazy.”

“Not faster than usual,” replied Miss Weeta, laughing again. “I know what you meant to say, mamma — that it wasn't fair on me, Mr. Thurston keeping back his engagement; but you are doing him an injustice. He told me he was engaged.”

“Oh! He told you!” ejaculated Mrs. Wilson.

“I dare say it was a measure of precaution,” Weeta went on. She had relapsed now into her ordinary manner. “I dare say he saw, as everybody else does, that you wanted to catch him as a husband for me.”

“Well! How can you!” ineffectually exclaimed the Major. “And before Mr. and Mrs. Ansdell!”

“Oh, that doesn't matter. They must be very dull not to have seen through us. It's so stupid pretending when everybody knows it's all pretence. If I wanted to play any game, I'd play it square. There's some merit in that. *I don't mind at all your knowing my game.*” She turned to us with a candour that was mystifying. Mrs. Wilson applied herself to her buttonholes, and appeared to resign herself to the inevitable. “It's only the *way* that I mind. You see, Mrs. Ansdell, mother and all of us think a great deal of family because we haven't got it. My grandfather was a shepherd who died knocking down his cheque in a bush public-house.”

“Weeta! be silent!”

“I want to explain to Mrs. Ansdell why we feel it a duty to raise ourselves, mamma.” She began to walk along the verandah.

“My dear Miss Wilson,” said Alec, “I assure you that we don't want any explanation.”

“Well, I want you to have it. You can tell Mr. Thurston, if you like.”

“Certainly not,” I interrupted.

“Well, it doesn't matter,” said Weeta, stopping and gathering some blossoms from an allamada which festooned the verandah post. “You see, I'm quite as ambitious as mamma. I'd like to marry into an English family of lords, or that sort of thing. But we've got no opportunities here. Pa can't leave his station.”

“No, that's it,” interjected Mrs. Wilson. “If it hadn't been for those salt mines!”

“Well, we can't help it,” continued Weeta; “and, anyhow, when a lord comes along in Sydney or Melbourne he's always snapped up by the Government House set. It was quite natural of mamma to catch on to Mr. Thurston, who is quite our best opportunity. Only her mistake is that she makes me too cheap.”

“Well, I'm sure it's you who are making yourself cheap now,” said Mrs. Wilson.

Weeta did not at once reply. I was watching her, and saw a change pass over her face. She blanched and coloured as if she were hurt and ashamed. But she recovered herself directly.

"No," she answered slowly, "it is when girls are foolish enough to care for a man that they make themselves cheap. How do you know that I am not laughing at you all in my sleeve? Suppose it's only a matter of business, and that I'm bent on making the best bargain that offers?"

She paused and looked at us steadily after she had made this curious statement.

"In that case," said Alec, "I can only beg you to respect Miss Cave's right of possession."

"Why?" she asked coolly. "Distance should imply a statute of limitations, I think. If Miss Cave was not prepared to run the risk, she shouldn't have let him go. Besides, Miss Cave's right, as you call it, is a question between Mr. Thurston and herself. *I* have nothing to do with it. I take things as they come to me, and I don't see that it's my duty to be bound by other people's first causes. That's what I call playing a square game."

"It might be suggested that crooked results are an occasional consequence of your theories, and perhaps one might also venture the question, Is such a game worth playing?"

"Only under certain conditions," she answered. "I admit that. I think that Mr. Thurston's elder brother is unmarried, is he not?"

"My dear Miss Wilson, Thurston's elder brother has the constitution of an elephant. For goodness sake don't sacrifice Miss Cave's happiness upon a chance like that."

"I see, you are Miss Cave's knight," she said. "Well, at any rate, if it comes to battle we shall be fighting in the open. But," she laughed again, "I should want to be sure that I had something worth fighting for. Now we all understand each other, don't we?"

"I don't understand you in the least," said Alec.

"Do *you*?" She turned to me, asking the question with a slight tremor in her softened voice, and a wistful look in her eyes.

I shook my head.

"Well, you may some day." She left us, passing abruptly into the drawing-room, and we saw her no more that day.

Mrs. Wilson got up from her chair with an embarrassed laugh. We rose too.

"Well, they always *used* to say that Weeta had a shingle loose," remarked the poor lady, feebly. "Now, *does* she strike you as being very eccentric?"

"On the contrary," replied Alec, "I admire her worldly wisdom."

"Oh! but she didn't mean what she said," Mrs. Wilson went on in a puzzled way. "I am sure she doesn't feel like that about Mr. Thurston. Just think if her affections had been trifled with! *There* was the danger."

"It is a danger against which Miss Wilson seems quite able to guard herself," said Alec. "I confess that I think more of the danger to Miss

Cave. It was in *her* interests that I asked your good offices.”

“Ah, well, she is not married to Mr. Thurston yet. There'll be time enough to think of her when she comes out,” replied Mrs. Wilson, oracularly, and drew away from the subject. She pressed Alec for information as to the cattle-carrying capabilities of Gunyan, and then she commiserated my loneliness, and urged me to take up my abode at Barradean while Alec was away. “There'll be some fun going on during the muster,” she said. “I suppose you know that Mr. Wilson has made a sale of twelve hundred store cattle, and a lot of the young men round are going to help get them in. An excuse for riding parties and dancing in the evening, I say; but, bless you, I don't mind. It keeps the place alive.”

I promised to spend a week at Barradean while the muster was in swing, and then we took our leave declining Mrs. Wilson's invitation to stay for dinner.

On the way home, Alec and I discussed the scene in the verandah. “It was perfectly shamefaced,” said Alec. “By George! talk of a new civilization. That girl might have gone through a dozen London seasons — unless, as her mother suggested, her extraordinary honesty was sheer silliness,” and once more he fell to wondering whether Miss Weeta was very stupid or very clever.

“If she really cares for Mr. Thurston, and took that way of sparing her pride, she is certainly very clever,” I said.

“Ah, there's the problem,” Alec answered.

Yes, there was the problem. Did she care for Mr. Thurston? On that supposition only could one forgive her cynical effrontery. It was impossible to forget that wistful expression of her eyes when she had asked me if I understood her. I remembered, too, several other small indications of depths beneath the glassy surface. Was there going to be a battle between these two women? In this case I had an instinctive feeling that Isabel Cave would get worsted, and yet I was almost ashamed to own to myself another instinctive feeling, that were Fate to decree in favour of her just claim, my sympathies would certainly go with Weeta. Why? I don't know, unless it is that we are always attracted by the mysterious, and Weeta was certainly mysterious. There seemed a kind of analogy between the gauzy folds with which she wrapped her face and the curious reserve in which she hid her real self.

Alec had an idea that he ought to warn Mr. Thurston. I was much more certain that it would be utterly dishonourable to repeat what he had heard in Mrs. Wilson's verandah. Finally, Alec was brought to agree with me, but he could not help saying, chaffingly, to Mr. Thurston the next day, “Look here, old fellow, you'll have to be careful about compromising yourself with Miss Wilson. The Major means business. She declines to accept the fact that you are already appropriated.”

Young Thurston looked discomposd. “Hang the Major!” he said

gloomily; "I wish you wouldn't talk like that. And you are quite mistaken. Why, she congratulated me only this morning, and asked me whether I wished my engagement to be made public."

"And what did you answer?"

"Why, no, of course. I said that I had no right as yet to speak of it as an engagement."

"Ah!" said Alec, profoundly, and murmured as he passed me on his way to the back verandah to interview one of the hands, "I think I guess the Major's little game."

Mr. Thurston looked still more uncomfortable when Alec had gone. He gave me the impression of a man wanting to say something and being unable to say it. At last he burst out —

"Mrs. Ansdell, I don't want you to think me a cad."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing," he said vaguely; "only — — " He got up and stood by the fireplace, which just now was a stack of pineapples, his handsome profile turned towards me. "I wish I knew if — if Miss Cave's coming out has anything to do with — if it's the cause of her — of Weeta's anger against me."

"Is she angry with you?" I asked. It struck me as odd that he should speak of "Miss Cave" and call Weeta by her Christian name.

"I don't know. We had a scene last night. She was so distant and cold — like a piece of marble. She seemed offended with me about something. I was hurt; and I — in short, Mrs. Ansdell, I suppose I had better confess that I made a fool of myself."

"Do you mean — — " I began, and stopped, uncertain how to frame the darting suspicion.

"No, no," he interrupted eagerly. "You don't suppose there was any actual disloyalty to — why, all my heart belongs to Miss Cave; but I suppose a fellow can be honestly in love with one woman and yet have a great regard for another."

"I don't know. Tell me what happened."

"It was her manner. She flared round on me — it was after something I said about Isabel. I didn't think she had it in her. She asked me what claim I had upon her sympathy, why I should expect her to hold out her arms to my future wife. I didn't expect it. I don't know what I expected. The fact is," he concluded, lamely, "I suppose I'm a fool. I think I had better go away altogether."

I could not help saying that I agreed with him, at which he seemed annoyed. "That's nonsense, of course. It would be assuming what is unwarrantable. You *have* every right to think me a cad," he exclaimed, with a sudden burst of self-accusation. "I think myself one while I speak. Besides," he went on, in a different tone, "I should be neglecting my business if I were to go. I am her father's partner now, and there's this

muster. We have got to collect cattle for the northern station as well. I must stay for that."

I was puzzled, and began to be sorrier than ever for Weeta.

"I wish she would take you into her confidence," he said impulsively. "I wish you would tell me if there's anything I could do."

"Or leave undone," I could not help saying. "Perhaps you have done too much already."

"She was flirting with that young man from the bank all the evening afterwards," Mr. Thurston went on dejectedly.

"I thought she never flirted?"

"Oh, in *her* way."

"And I thought he was devoted to Janie Stern?"

"Oh, that's only a *pis aller*. Everybody knows *she* refused him."

He fidgeted about for a minute or two, then looked uneasily at his watch. "I ought to go. I promised to ride with them. They are going to the beach to get oysters."

He went away, and I saw nothing of him for several days. Alec started to Gunyan next morning and I was left alone with baby. For the first week I repulsed Mrs. Wilson's offers of companionship, and continued to evade her invitations to Barradean. Late one afternoon Weeta herself called. I was struck anew with the marvellous beauty of her complexion when she put up her veils, but her face looked, I thought, a little pale and anxious, and she talked a great deal more than was usual with her, though I had already observed that it was when her mother was present that she was most silent.

"It's the heat," she said, in reply to my comment upon her appearance, "and I am rather tired. They are such a noisy set. The men are out all day; but there are the girls and mother and the children. As for the men, being out all day doesn't tire them. At any rate, they always want to dance in the evenings."

"Who are with you?"

"Oh, the usual set — young Stern and some of the people round. And Mr. Humphreys — though he has other things than the muster to think of — comes down about sundown. You don't know how I hate them all."

"But you did not always hate them?"

"No. The old thing is that once I rather liked one of them. I was half-inclined to marry him — I dare say should have married him if his luck had come to him when he first asked me."

"Whom do you mean, and what is his luck?"

"I mean Mr. Humphreys. Haven't you heard of Mount Jessop? They are all terribly excited about it at home."

"I have heard nothing," I replied.

"Well, there was a great gold craze up in Stonehampton a few years ago; nobody was happy unless they were in some mine — or in half-a-

dozen — there were mines being taken up everywhere. Scarcely one of them turned out any good, and I should think that unfortunate Mr. Sabine, who was killed at the races, was the only person who made money out of them. So much was lost that people got disgusted, and dropped the whole thing. Good gracious! I'm telling you quite a history; but now I've got to Mr. Humphreys. He and some of the Stonehampton people bought up Mount Jessop, and have been working it in a languid fashion, losing steadily till just lately, when they struck a wonderful yield; and now it is said that the mine promises to be one of the richest in the world."

"Then Mr. Humphreys may blossom into a millionaire! Isn't Miss Janie Stern very happy?"

"He will not marry Janie Stern," said Weeta, shortly. "He has given her the cold shoulder this week, and she is very unhappy."

"That means, I suppose, that he hopes now he is rich to marry you?"

"I suppose so," she answered. "What do you think, Mrs. Ansdell? Which pays best, rank or riches? You know I told you the other day that I was bent on making the best bargain that I could."

"You said a great many foolish things which you didn't mean in the least, and which I have forgotten."

"No, you have not forgotten, nor have I. I meant every word of them. However, Mr. Humphreys' riches are not quite a reliable quantity yet. I think I had better wait a little while and see how Mount Jessop turns out, and in the meantime Miss Cave may have arrived. There would be some excitement in that." She rose and stood irresolutely. "Oh, I hate them all!" she cried.

She looked as if she were struggling with some emotion which threatened to break forth, and put out her hand involuntarily towards me. It seemed an appeal for sympathy. Then she recovered herself, and half drew it back. "Good-bye," she said.

I kept her hand. "I wish I could help you."

"Yes, you can. I almost think that I could talk to you, if you would not be horrified at all my mercenary and base ideas. Come and stay at Barradean. Mother sent me over to ask you to come to-morrow. Father will bring the buggy for you. There's a crib all ready for the baby. Say you will come. I want you. You may not think it possible, but I do."

"Then I will come," and the matter was arranged.

## Chapter XVIII. Mr. Thurston's Accident.

BUT when I got to Barradean, Weeta was in one of her strangest and most taciturn moods, and showed no particular pleasure at seeing me. She spent the greater part of the day in her own room, except meal times and late in the afternoon, when the horses were brought round and she came out veiled and dressed for her ride. Afterwards she changed her habit for one of her fantastic evening costumes, and allowed herself to be adored till bedtime. Weeta's room was large, cool, and dark, and was situated on the most shady side of the house. The windows were so high and so well blinded, that it would have been difficult for the glare to penetrate, and the venetians of the door opening on the verandah were always kept closed. The walls were of cedar, and were curiously ornamented with the stuffed skins of parrots and the harp-like plumage of the lyre-bird — her trophies, she called them. She had once had a mania for such collections, and they had been supplied, presumably, by her various suitors. The room was furnished partly as a parlour, with a sofa, a large bookcase, a writing-table, and even a piano, but she played most often on the violin, to which she devoted several hours of the day. It was the custom in the drowsy part of the afternoon for those who liked music to gather at that end of the verandah and listen to her practising. She took no notice of our presence, often going over the same passage a dozen times as conscientiously as though she were a pupil in a musical academy. I noticed that when Mr. Humphreys came over from Saturday till Monday, he would in a furtive way make for this corner and sit ruminatively smoking until Janie Stern routed him out to help her gather pineapples or melons. Mr. Thurston, too, was frequently to be found at that corner, but never at the same time as Mr. Humphreys. He always looked guilty when I came upon him on these occasions, and very speedily made some excuse for leaving his position. Then it sometimes happened that Weeta would call me into her room and ask me if I would like to look over her books, or she would beg me to listen to some particular air and would make me lie on the sofa while she played to me, but she never spoke of Mr. Thurston or made any allusion to her burst of confidence — if, indeed, as I sometimes suspected, she had not been all the while playing a part.

She was certainly a curious girl. Her room showed traces of a variety of employments. Had she been brought up amid artistic surroundings,

she would probably have been a painter or sculptor. As it was, she was fond of modelling little figures in the soft clay from the creek, and had them arranged on a shelf over her writing-table, in constantly varying combinations and groups, which suggested the idea that she was carrying out some drama of her own imagining, and these were the marionette performers. Her sense of colour, which was extraordinary, seemed to find its satisfaction by means of Judson's dyes. She spent a good deal of time in copying tints of flowers and leaves, and in adapting them to those wonderful evening costumes, which she wore with an entire absence of self-consciousness, and of the girlish vanity so evident, for example, in Janie Stern's arrangements of starched muslin and fluttering ribbons.

There was something tempestuous in the Barradean atmosphere which was not a consequence of the stir and bustle of the muster. That was easy to be seen. The Major was more than usually fussy, and, it must be owned, extremely ill-tempered. Her ostentatious benevolence to her guests had even a flavour of vinegar. Her bangles and the ornaments of her *châtelaine* clinked in an aggressive manner. Her black eyes and her artificial teeth seemed to vie with each other in lustre. She scolded the servants, was sharp to the children, and treated Thurston with a far less maternal solicitude, and snubbed Mr. Wilson in wrathful majesty when he ventured to complain that she had put a smaller quantity of rum in the swizzle. I don't know whether he contrived to gain private access to the cellaret, or whether the sun was to blame, but certainly as the day advanced his face grew more and more fiery, his manners more free and jovial, and his domestic revelations more indiscreet. He told me that Mr. Thurston's engagement had been a blow to the "Missus," but that for his own part, if Mount Jessop turned out all that was expected, he should consider it a providential arrangement. "For, I tell you what it is, Mrs. Ansdell," he said, "the Missus is just cracked on the aristocracy; but, to my thinking, it's better any day to be the wife of a millionaire than the daughter-in-law of an earl. Not that Humphreys is a millionaire," he added, "but there is no knowing when he may be."

As for Mr. Humphreys, there could be no doubt as to his sentiments about Weeta. He was not a clever young man, nor was he particularly fascinating. He was of the Australian type — tall, lean, angular, good-looking, but distinctly crude. He was probably a much finer fellow in essentials than Archie Thurston, but he sadly lacked the graces of an old-world civilization. His musical attainments were limited to a comic song, and a solo on the concertina which made Weeta shudder. He read a great deal, and, like most persons who have learned life from books, referred often to his favourite authors. Yet all his cultivation was elementary, and the shores of the Pacific bounded his horizon. He had no background, whereas that seemed the most important ingredient in Archie Thurston's personality. He was frank, simple, and sincere, boyishly elated at his

prospect of fortune, and evidently a little embarrassed by his relations with Miss Janie Stern, which his manner seemed to convey were entirely unpremeditated and merely the result of disappointed affection. He was doing his best to draw out of them in a manly way, and to make it clear to all that he had no intention of serious entanglement in that direction. Probably Janie was piqued, and wanted to show him that she did not care, for she helped him a good deal by starting a flirtation with one of the "mustered" young men. It was certain that something had occurred lately to revive Mr. Humphreys' hopes in regard to Weeta. He hung upon her words and looks. It was almost touching to see his eager delight when she singled him out to ride with her — Weeta had a royal way of indicating her preferences. This often happened, though Mr. Thurston generally contrived to come home early from the run, and make one of the party. When Mr. Humphreys was there he fell with a bad grace to me; but on the afternoons when Mr. Humphreys remained at Stonehampton he rode beside Weeta, though as far as I could see they interchanged scarcely a word. Our rides were usually along the sandy shore. We would gallop over the crisp wet beach, the salt wind blowing in our faces; and then a mad spirit would sometimes seize Weeta, and, all veiled as she was, she would turn her horse straight into the sea, and ride out breasting the waves till they wetted her habit, and dashed spray as high as her head. One day a memorable thing happened. It was Saturday. We were a large party, which, however, did not include Mr. Humphreys. Mr. Thurston was with us, Mr. Wilson also, and most of the young men staying at the bachelors' quarters. Mr. Thurston was riding a young horse, and later Weeta gave this as a reason for forbidding him to come near her. I fancy they had had a quarrel, for when we started they rode behind together. We had not got far when both galloped up. He was savagely tearing at the bit, and the horse had its head down, as if it were inclined to buck.

"Take care, Thurston," called out Mr. Wilson, "you'll have an accident."

"We have had one already," said Weeta, composedly. "I don't want Mr. Thurston to come within six yards of me. Our horses don't like each other."

Mr. Thurston pulled back beside me.

"You're not afraid, Mrs. Ansdell? The brute is all right. It was only that I dug my spurs into him, and he lashed out. She made me angry."

"How?"

"You don't know what galling things she can say in that soft, indifferent voice," he exclaimed. "She goads me into forgetting myself, and making speeches that I'd rather bite my tongue out than utter."

"What sort of things?" I asked.

"Things that are unwomanly and abominable. She talks as if she were

ready to sell herself to the highest bidder, Humphreys or any one else. And yet — you know,” he added excitedly, “she has the face of an angel. I don't believe — I will not believe that she is so hard and mercenary.”

“Why should it matter to you? If all that Alec tells me is true you have, at any rate, managed to secure an angel for yourself.”

He drew a deep breath and gave a little start. “Yes, that is true — I *have* managed to get hold of an angel, little as I deserve it. It ought not to matter to me whether that girl is one or not. I am the happiest man in the world. Do you know that she sails this month?”

“You have heard?”

“Yes. She has an opportunity of coming out with some friends who are going round the world — Australia, China, Japan, America, and the rest of it. I don't think she will go round the world — just yet. I am to meet them at Stonehampton. Only think of it, Mrs. Ansdell — never to have changed — it is four years since we parted — and now to meet again!”

But there was nothing rapturous in his tone; and while he spoke his eyes were following Weeta as she rode ahead, her graceful form swaying to the motion of her horse, her right hand holding a great bough of wild hibiscus against her veiled cheek. She had a knack of attitudinizing picturesquely with her bits of blossom and greenery. This served her instead of a whip.

“She *is* like Isabel,” he said, as if pursuing a train of thought. “I suppose that is why it jars upon me when she says such things. Yes, she does remind me of Isabel, though there's no real resemblance. It is quite tantalizing at times, when she has her face covered and I see only the turn of her head and the coils of her hair. I keep fancying that Isabel is under the veil. Of course, it's nonsense; but one can't help fancies, or the way in which fancies influence us. If she were not like Isabel, I suppose I shouldn't care.”

Was it only the influence of fancy? I wondered. He became silent, and his horse, which was very restive and uncomfortable, gave excuse for the breaking of conversation.

We rode to the end of the rocky point which closed one side of Wombo Bay. It was low tide, and from the cliff a long, narrow strip of shingle and rock stretched a long way into the sea. Many of the party dismounted, and began to knock off oysters from the cliff, and there was some suggestion of a fire and of tea. Weeta declined to assist in the entertainment. “You know that I hate gathering oysters,” she replied, rather peevishly, to Janie Stern's invitation. “I shall stay on my horse.”

I was one of those who dismounted; but I left the shade of the cliff and walked along the line of rocks, jagged, wet, and slippery, with periwinkles and sea-weed clinging to their black surface, till I had got too far out to be quite comfortable. I turned back a little, and stood looking out to sea, ready to lose myself in a dream. The day was still, and

the waves only lapped the rocks. It was sundown, and the ocean took a faint pink tinge as it spread out in unbroken loneliness to the horizon. There was something melancholy in the vastness and loneliness of the Pacific. I thought of Isabel Cave speeding across its bosom to the arms of her lover. Was he, in very truth and heart, her lover? There was a sound of horses' feet on the shingle. Weeta, after her fashion, was riding out to sea. She had her veils up, and her face was like that of a spirit in its paleness. She looked down at me for a moment as she passed. The beach was so narrow that her habit brushed my shoulder. "I think this is the end of the world," she said, "and that is the beginning of another one. I've always longed, ever since I was a little child, to ride to another world." She struck her horse with the hibiscus branch till it broke into a canter. I called after her to be careful, but she only laughed. Then there was a rush of other horses' feet past me, and I saw that Mr. Thurston was following her. He rode right into the sea by her side.

"For God's sake," he said, "don't be so foolhardy."

She stopped and looked round at him quite quietly. I could hear distinctly what was said.

"What is there foolhardy about this? There's not wind enough to blow me away."

"No, but there are currents, and suppose your horse were to take fright and to throw you on to those rocks?"

"You had far better take care of your own horse; it is much more likely to do something desperate. Mine is quiet enough. I advise you to go back." His horse was indeed plunging and shying and dashing up the spray. He succeeded, however, in quieting it for the moment.

"And give up the only chance I've had to-day of being near you. No, if you choose to run into danger, I'll stop there with you."

"That is nonsense. Why don't you go back? I told you to keep away from me."

"You've been telling me that every day for the last fortnight," he said sullenly.

"Then why don't you obey me?"

"Because you don't mean what you say."

"Oh! You think I want you to stay beside me. Again, why?"

"Because," he answered slowly, "you don't hate me as much as you try to make me believe."

She turned upon him this time with a kind of suppressed fury in her look and voice. "Ah! you play a manly part, truly — a part that is likely to confirm me in my admiration for English gentlemen. Your vanity won't allow you to let yourself be dropped. You don't like to think I was only amusing myself, experimentalizing, or, if you like to put it that way, judging of my value in the English market. I think I prefer the Australian one, and that galls you. You have been trying all these days to entrap me

into a confession that I am piqued, that I care for you. Should I be likely to make that confession to the promised husband of another woman, even if it were true? You are quite right: I don't hate you. I don't care for you enough to hate you. I only despise you. Now, will you leave me?"

"No."

"Then I must go where you cannot follow me." She urged her horse on to the very point of the spur till its feet slipped on the wet rocks and the waves washed up against its forelegs. I was frightened, and cried out, entreating them to turn. But he stuck spurs into his horse, and pursued her, it seemed into the ocean. The two horses, with their riders, were outlined against the reddened sea and sky. His snorted and reared. It was a dramatic scene. He laid his hand upon her bridle. "You *shall* come with me," he said, with an almost brutal determination. His words and action appeared to incense her. I saw her lift the hibiscus bough and strike at his horse as she wrenched herself free.

"You go too far," she exclaimed. "What right have you over me?"

There was wild confusion for a moment. It was a struggle in the sea. He gave a reproachful cry.

"What right? None. But, if you will have it — I love you." The words broke from him as though he were incapable of holding them in any longer. As she struck his horse it swerved, kicked, and, putting its head down, bucked furiously. The spray which it raised obscured them both. I shrieked to those under the cliff. It was all over in a moment. I saw that Mr. Thurston had been thrown. The horse's hoofs seemed to trample on his head, as the maddened animal freed itself from the saddle, and, with a frantic dash, made for the cliff. A second or two later Weeta's horse followed, riderless also.

There was a rush of people behind me along the strip of shingle. When I reached the place where Mr. Thurston had been thrown, I saw that Weeta was unhurt. She was slowly lifting herself up from the rocks. Her hat had fallen into the sea; her hair was loose. I shall never forget the agony of her face. "Look!" she said, pointing to her habit. It was streaked and spotted with blood, and with something more horrible than blood. "I have killed him," she said, with unnatural calm. "It is I who have done it — and he loved me!"

He lay perfectly still. There was a frightful gash on his head; his face and hair were bathed in blood. It splattered the rocks, and a pool had gathered and was trickling into the sea. The sight was too sickening. I could not look. But Weeta's eyes were fixed with a terrible fascination on all that remained of the man she loved. Yes, I felt sure in that awful moment she loved him. "I have killed him," she repeated, still in that quiet voice.

"For God's sake, Mrs. Ansdell, take her away," whispered Mr. Wilson, who had reached the spot. "This comes of that damned fooling with

young horses. The poor fellow's brains are dashed out. Go, all of you," he shouted to the others who were crowding and pressing forward — "all except some of the men. And let someone ride to the station for a stretcher and linen bandages, and another to Wombo — quick! — for the doctor."

I don't know how we reached home. Some of us forded the inlet, and clambered up by my cottage to Wombo, and I ran in and collected linen and such restoratives as occurred to me, and gave them to the blackboy who was with us, bidding him hasten back to the scene of the accident; while others galloped on to the house of Mr. Gill, the doctor. He was at home, fortunately. We met him riding down as for his life, with his case of instruments strapped before him, as Weeta and I turned out of the cottage gate. She had helped me to tear a sheet into strips, but had never spoken a word. Her face was like that of one petrified in an act of horror.

"They will take him to Barradean by the lower road," I said. "It is smoother than this. Courage, Weeta, there may be hope yet."

"There is none," she said. "I have killed him. Don't speak to me. Let me go home and hide myself."

I obeyed. We cantered back in silence. The others had already reached Barradean. Janie Stern was crying in the verandah. Mr. Humphreys had arrived from Stonehampton on his usual visit from Saturday till Monday. He was evidently watching for us, and looked pale and shocked. He went immediately to Weeta and held out his arms to lift her from her horse; but she shuddered and motioned him off. "No, go away. Let me be," she said, in a stifled voice, and walked straight through to her own room.

Mr. Humphreys caught my hand eagerly.

"Oh, Mrs. Ansdell, have pity on me. Does she care?"

"Is that all you think of?" I cried indignantly — "only if she cares? You don't mind whether he is living or dead."

"Forgive me," he answered humbly. "I would bring him back to life at the risk of my own if I could. But she is all the world to me, and what she feels is the only thing I can think of now."

"And he is all the world to her," I said, "and that is all she can think of now."

I did not mean to be cruel. The words broke from me involuntarily, and I was sorry when I saw how they had hurt him. He left me without speaking, and just then Mrs. Wilson came out, deeply agitated.

She drew me along the verandah towards Weeta's room.

"Oh, Mrs. Ansdell, this is awful!" she cried. "We have sent to Stonehampton for another doctor and for a nurse. Have you heard? Young Stern has just come to tell us what Gill said. They are carrying him on a stretcher. He is alive, but there is very little hope. He must be nursed day and night, and Gill has ordered us to get ready the coolest room in the house."

“Then he must be put into mine,” said Weeta. She had come out while her mother was speaking. “Let us get it ready at once; don't waste time.”

The news that he was alive seemed to have roused her. She lost her stony look, and with feverish energy dragged things from the wardrobes and drawers, and helped to prepare the chamber for his occupation. It was all ready when the measured tread of the bearers sounded on the verandah. Then Weeta slunk away, as if she dreaded the sight, to the room next mine which she had taken.

We could hear the sound of his being carried in, and the voices of Mrs. Wilson and the doctor, as things were got ready and orders given. Then there was silence. They were waiting for the Stonehampton doctor. Darkness fell. It was long past the hour for dinner. All the life and movement of the house seemed stopped. Weeta stood motionless at the foot of the bed, still in her disordered habit. At last she became conscious of the stains upon it, and gave a moan of horror. “Take it away,” she said hoarsely. “Give me something to put on.”

I undressed and re-clothed her as if she had been a child, and brushed and coiled up her beautiful hair. There was relief in the occupation.

When it was done, baby awoke and cried, and I took her in my arms to soothe her, and we three waited for the verdict.

It came at length. There was the faintest shadow of hope that he might live; but there was the awful probability that his brain would be permanently injured.

## Chapter XIX. Dreams.

MR. THURSTON lay unconscious for many days, and the doctors could not tell if he would live or die. The house party at Barradean was broken up, and the muster carried on as quietly as could be, from the bachelors' quarters. The Sterns went back to their own station, and Mr. Humphreys ceased to come over from Stonehampton. I would have gone home also, but that Mrs. Wilson pressed me so urgently to remain, and I thought that perhaps I might be of use to Weeta.

I was disappointed in that hope, however; her reserve was unconquerable. She never alluded to that wild avowal which I had overheard. Perhaps in the agitation of after events she had forgotten that I had been a listener. Then I had felt sure that she loved Archie Thurston. Now, again, I was doubtful. If she loved him, would it not be natural that she should speak? Yet that she suffered deeply, I was certain. Night after night I heard her walking up and down her room, unable to sleep. Her face was pale and worn, and had a tortured expression. I could not help thinking how more than ever Archie would pronounce it like that of an afflicted mediaeval angel. She seemed even to have lost care of her complexion, and would sit for hours unveiled and unoccupied in the granadilla-covered arcade. I think she may have missed the outlet of music. In these days her violin was silent, and indeed all sound in the house was kept as much as possible hushed.

Mr. Gill stayed in the house, and the Stonehampton doctor rode out once a day. The weather got cooler, out of consideration, one might fancy, to the sick man, and there came at last a day when he woke out of his stupor. He was still dazed and very weak, but in a dim kind of way he recognised the people round him. It was a marvellous recovery, they all said. "When one thinks," Mrs. Wilson observed, "that part of his brain was actually scattered on the ground!" But I have noticed that recoveries in the Australian bush are often marvellous. Perhaps it is the pure air; perhaps it is — in most cases — the temperate way of living; perhaps it is the absence of skilled surgeons and the necessity for leaving much to Nature — anyhow, Nature does what science in other countries seems totally unable to accomplish.

Once Mr. Thurston began to mend, he got well, physically speaking, with amazing rapidity. At the end of six weeks he could be moved into a lounging-chair in the verandah outside his room. The first two days he

lay without speaking, content, it seemed, to watch the shadows of the vine leaves flicker on the verandah, and the darting lizards as they played about the wooden steps. He looked very gaunt and thin, and there was a curious dazed expression in his eyes. His beard had grown while he had been lying ill, and the baldness of his head where that great seam crossed it was covered by a skull-cap. It was uncertain still how much he realized of what had happened, and of what was going on around him.

When I first went near him he only smiled, but did not pronounce my name, though later I saw that he knew who I was. Mrs. Wilson he recognised always, but then she had been constantly in and out of his room. Weeta refused to see him. I don't know whether this was from nervous shrinking, or whether she was really afraid that he would upbraid her. There is no doubt that his brain was in a confused and cloudy state, and by-and-by it became clear that a veil had fallen, as it were, between the accident and all that had gone before, and that the further back he forced his memory, the more distant became the images. I wondered if he knew that Isabel Cave was actually on her way out. A letter from Alec's sisters had mentioned the time of her approaching departure, and had begged me to take her under my protection, as it was not probable that her friends would care to remain at Stonehampton, though she might, if she wished, join them later in Sydney or Melbourne. I speculated within myself as to whether she would or would not complete her tour of the world with them. By my calculations, her steamer would be due just six weeks from now.

At this time a strange and unexpected event happened, which completely changed the aspect of Mr. Thurston's affairs. One morning Mrs. Wilson came into the darkened drawing-room where Weeta and I were sitting, in a state of perturbation in which there was an odd mingling of exultancy and disappointment. She had a newly-arrived newspaper in one hand, and a bundle of letters surmounted by the blue envelope of a telegraphic message in the other.

"Mrs. Ansdell, what ought I to do? Here are all Mr. Thurston's letters, and a telegram has just come for him from England. I know it is bad news. Should it be given to him?"

Weeta rose agitatedly. "What bad news? Of course he should not be told. Do you want to drive away his reason?"

Mrs. Wilson turned to her with an expression of deep dejection. "Ah! if things had been different — if only you had played your cards as you might, this would have meant great news for you."

"What in the name of goodness do you mean, mamma? The news? I know what other thought is in your mind. You mean if I had been engaged to Mr. Thurston."

"If you had been engaged to Mr. Thurston, you would have had the certainty of becoming Countess of Belmont. Mr. Thurston's brother is

dead. It is in the telegraphic summary.” She held out the newspaper and pointed to a paragraph, which we both read, and which told of the death, by an accident in the hunting-field, of Lord Colworth, eldest son of the Earl of Belmont.

I could not help exclaiming at the strange coincidence by which, almost at the same time, one of the two brothers had been killed, and the other nearly so, in an accident on horseback. Weeta stood very thoughtful and silent.

“Then there are these letters,” continued Mrs. Wilson. “Some are by the last English mail. I have kept them back. It is impossible to say, in the present state of Mr. Thurston's mind, how much he remembers, and what the effect of a shock might be on his brain.”

“Give me the letters,” said Weeta, suddenly. “I want to look at them.”

She took the packet from her mother and carefully examined each envelope.

“Are they all here?” she asked, fixing her penetrating eyes upon Mrs. Wilson.

I fancied that Mrs. Wilson hesitated. “All! Yes. Why — why do you ask?”

“I wanted to be sure whether there was a letter from Miss Cave.”

“Ah!” said Mrs. Wilson, “that would agitate him. Is there one among them?”

“You know as well as I do that there is not,” answered Weeta. “Both these English letters have the Belmont stamp on the envelope. Are you sure that you have not kept one back?”

“Weeta! Well, I declare, this is abominable — that my own child should doubt my word!” cried Mrs. Wilson indignantly.

I suspected then, however — a fact of which I became certain later — that Isabel Cave had written, and that Mrs. Wilson, for purposes of her own, had purloined the letter.

“I know that you like to manage other people's affairs, mamma,” said Weeta, coolly, “and I thought you might want to manage Mr. Thurston's. Never mind, there are the letters. I think you had better keep them and the telegram till you have got Dr. Hayllar's authority.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Wilson, “that seems reasonable, and it takes the responsibility from my shoulders. Mrs. Ansdell, will you come out and see Mr. Thurston? I can't think why you don't come, Weeta.”

“I will come when he asks for me,” she said, and sat down again with her book.

Mrs. Wilson locked up the letters in her writing-table, and then drew me out to the verandah. But she paused at the door, and went back to draw one of the venetians closer. Then she crossed to her daughter, and looked at her anxiously.

“I declare,” she said, “that freckle is coming back again. I don't know

how you are to get on if you lose your complexion.” She spoke in an aggrieved tone, as if she were not altogether satisfied with some work of art of which she had become the possessor. “I think you might do something to help me,” she continued, in a low, angry voice, “when I am working for your good, instead of sitting like a stock or stone.”

I waited for her no longer, but made my way to the end of the verandah where Mr. Thurston was sitting. He looked stronger and a little more alert to-day, but his face had a puzzled expression as if he were trying to find the clue to a problem which baffled him.

In reply to my questions he said that he was better — much better. “I have walked to the end of the verandah,” he added. “I should be quite well if I did not feel so confoundedly dazed and stupid.”

“You must remember that you had a very bad blow on your head.”

“Yes, that's it, I suppose. There seems a sort of mist over a mist like the spray of the sea. It hides one face that I want to remember, and I can't see it — I can't see it.”

“Perhaps,” I suggested, “it is because the person you are thinking of is very far away, and you have not seen her for a long time — four years it may be?”

I watched him in some anxiety as to how the shot would tell, but he only looked at me helplessly. “Is that it? You may be right. I don't know. I can't think, I can't even recollect her name. If I could but see her face, everything would become clear.”

I did not dare to venture further then. Presently he asked abruptly, “What room did they put me into? I never was there before.”

“The doctor said that you were to have the coolest room in the house, and Miss Wilson gave you up hers.”

The name did not seem to convey any definite personal idea to his mind. “Miss Wilson,” he repeated vaguely. “Yes, I know, the Veiled Princess. They told me about her. Do you know,” he went on, “what has been haunting me all this time? It is the *adagio* movement in the *Krcutzer Sonata*. She used to play it long ago on her violin.”

“Miss Wilson plays it,” I said; “but she has not touched her violin since you have been ill.”

“But I am not ill any longer,” he said eagerly. “I wish she would play it to me. I think it would make me remember *her*.”

“Would you like Miss Wilson to come and play to you?” I said. “Are you quite sure that you are strong enough?”

“Yes, yes,” he answered, impatiently. “Ask her to come.”

I went back to the drawing-room to find Weeta. As I approached it, I heard the sound of Mrs. Wilson's voice raised angrily, and then the slamming of a door. Weeta was alone when I entered. She was leaning back in her chair, with two hands pressed against her forehead, and I saw that her frame was convulsed with sobs.

“Weeta,” I said.

She took away her hands. Her face had a nervous, frightened expression: it was evident that she was quite unstrung. I had already guessed that, in spite of her composure and extreme reserve, she was of a sensitive, impressionable temperament, with a physical terror of anything like rough speech or action. This was the secret of Mrs. Wilson's influence over her.

“You see,” said Weeta, as if interpreting my thoughts, “I am shaken to pieces and ready to do or promise anything. Mamma can turn me as she chooses so long as she scolds hard enough. Well, never mind.”

I told her that I did mind, and tried to make her open her heart.

But she was obstinate and hard. “What does it matter? Mamma is disappointed that I am never to be Lady — what is it?”

“Colworth,” I suggested.

“So he is Lord Colworth now. How strange it seems! Who would have been Lord Colworth, I wonder, if I had really killed him?” She shuddered. “You think I did not feel it much. I have been down into hell since that day.”

“I know it,” I said.

“But not for the reason that you think,” she exclaimed fiercely. “Or was it in heaven? I am not sure. I think that for one little moment I was in heaven.” She got up and walked to the fireplace, and looked at herself in the glass above it. “Mamma does not know that I have it in my power even still,” she murmured, then pulled herself together with a hysterical laugh. “I'm talking great nonsense. I want a safety-valve. I shall take my violin away into the bush and worry it all out with myself and it there.”

“You need not do that,” I answered. “I came in to tell you Mr. Thurston is very anxious that you should play to him — *The Krcutzer Sonata*.”

She made an eager movement. “He has asked for me, then?”

“He has asked for music. It is an experiment. I am half afraid of it. He wants to hear the *adagio* because he thinks that it may bring to him a face that he wants to remember — a woman's face; and he does not connect it with you, for he spoke of you composedly as Miss Wilson and the Veiled Princess.”

She flushed. “I will play to him,” she said, “and at first he shall not see my face.”

She took her violin from its case, and followed me along the verandah; but, instead of going round to the side, she went into a room, the French windows of which looked out on the place where he was sitting.

She opened the venetians and gazed out at him unseen. He was lying back wearily, but the weariness seemed more of mind than of body. He looked very handsome and very helpless. It was a sight that might well have touched the heart of a woman who loved him. Weeta's breast heaved, and a wave of tenderness swept her face — a mingling of

remorse and affection — the look that one might fancy on the face of a mother as she gazed at a child whom she herself had maimed. She placed herself behind the half-open venetian and began to string her violin. He stirred at the sound, and turned inquiringly to Mrs. Wilson, who was sewing near him. She seemed surprised, but an expression of triumphant exultation softened her hard features.

“She is going to play,” Mr. Thurston said. “Ah, now I shall know.”

“Know what?” Mrs. Wilson asked vaguely; but, before he answered, Weeta played the opening bars. Everyone knows the melody. I have always thought it exquisitely pathetic, but now the player's very soul seemed to have gone into the strain. It was full of melancholy passion, of regret, of yearning. This was the language which she and Archie Thurston understood. He raised himself in his chair and sat listening intently, his face rapt, and a bright, clear light in his eyes, such as had not visited them since his accident.

The movement came to an end, and the last notes of the violin died away. Mr. Thurston rose to his feet and put his arms out with an excited gesture. “I know it all now,” he said. “Where is she? Why does she not come? Why will she not let me see her face?”

“Weeta,” said Mrs. Wilson, rising too. “Weeta, come.”

“Weeta!” he repeated again, with that slightly puzzled look and intonation, as if he did not clearly connect the name with what was in his own mind. “Will she not come? I want to tell her all I feel. I have no doubt now. That is what has been tormenting me all this time. I could not make it clear to my mind. And now I know. The music has brought it all back. Oh, tell her that I must see her face — that I must say to her what is in my heart!”

Mrs. Wilson crossed rapidly to the door of the room within which we stood. She pushed back the venetians, and drew her daughter forth into the verandah. “You hear,” she said. “It is for you that he cares.”

The whole scene seems like one in a play. Weeta stood with her violin still held against her neck, her wonderful red hair framing her face, which was all alive and tremulous with emotion, her lips parted slightly, her eyes shining, and a faint pink flush suffusing her transparent cheek. Archie Thurston gazed at her as though she had been an angel visitant long-expected and desired. She made a step towards him, and he took her hand in his.

“At last,” he said, “after so long! I knew when I should see your sweet face, and hear the old music that we used to play together, it would all come back clear, and tender, and beautiful. And now I know. I know that you are the woman I love — the woman I want to be my wife.”

Weeta gave a little stifled cry. It was like a moan of pain. She shrank back, and turned imploringly to her mother, who was standing in the open doorway.

“Mamma, oh, go away! There is a mistake. He thinks I am — — ”

“There can be no mistake,” said Mrs. Wilson, firmly. “It is a mother's place to stand by and guard her child at such a time as this.”

“Oh, go away!” again cried Weeta.

“It is no matter,” said Thurston. “Why should we mind now?”

“Mr. Thurston is right,” said Mrs. Wilson. “Of course I shall remain here, and so will Mrs. Ansdell.” She put out her hand, and held my arm tightly. “There must be a clear understanding. Mr. Thurston feels with me. It is my duty to insist that things shall be placed upon a proper footing. Mr. Thurston, is it true that you love my daughter, and that you ask her to be your wife?”

He did not reply to Mrs. Wilson, but stood holding Weeta's hand, and gazing at her with the utmost tenderness. “You know that is true,” he said, addressing her only. “It was settled long ago. Did I not tell you that I loved you?”

She glanced at him wildly. “Yes — you did tell me — that you loved me.” Her voice faltered and dropped. “Are you sure,” she cried — “sure that it is I — I, Weeta Wilson, whom you love?”

“You, and you only. I love your face, I love your eyes, I love your beautiful hair. You are the one woman in the world for me.”

“Is that *all* you love in me?” she asked, with eager wistfulness.

“No,” he said. “I love your voice, I love your music, I love your soul!”

A struggle seemed to be passing in Weeta's bosom. She did not answer for a minute. I knew by the quick gasps she gave, and by the trembling of her limbs, that she was deeply agitated. Mrs. Wilson watched her with intense anxiety. “Weeta,” she cried, “don't belie yourself for some foolish fancy; you know that you love him. You know what you have been brought up for — what has been always your ambition. Think of your pride, of what people will say of us — of what they are saying already, if he leaves you.”

Still Weeta stood irresolute.

“Speak to me,” he urged.

Their eyes met. That look decided her.

“Why should I hesitate?” she said defiantly, for the first time turning to me. “Other people's happiness is no concern of mine. Why should I not take what is offered me? It has been a fair fight.”

“No, no,” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” she rejoined quickly. “He told me that he loved me, that day by the sea. You heard him say it. It was the truth then; it is the truth now.” Her breathing was stilled, and she held herself erect, and faced him, with her hand in his. “Since you are sure, Archie, it shall be as you say. You have been ill; you have suffered. It was I who hurt you. I will make up for it to you. I will nurse you, care for you, be everything to you. We will stand together, you and I, and none shall separate us.”

I was thrilled by the subdued passion in her voice and manner, and yet I had the strange feeling that I had been helping at a murder.

Not so Mrs. Wilson. "Now, at last, I have gained my purpose in life," she murmured. "Let us leave them, Mrs. Ansdell."

It seemed a fitting moment for the curtain to drop on the scene.

## Chapter XX. "Do You Love Her Best?"

I COULD not stay at Barradean now. The murder had been committed — the murder of Isabel Cave's happiness. She was Alec's friend; she was to be my guest. How should I break this news to her? I could not divest myself of a sense of treachery. At times my heart revolted against Weeta, when I thought of that poor girl coming across the sea to find a faithless lover; at others it had a curious and unreasoning sympathy for Weeta's case. I assured myself at such moments that it was love, and not ambition, which had tempted her. As a matter of fact it was not Weeta, but Mrs. Wilson who drove me from Barradean. I could not stand the Major's triumphant delight at her daughter's brilliant match. The engagement was duly announced the following day; it was all over the country before the week was out. Mrs. Wilson would not now hear a suggestion of any injury to Mr. Thurston's brain. In truth, as far as his engagement was concerned, it appeared healthy enough. He accepted the position with radiant satisfaction, appeared devoted to Weeta, whom he contemplated adoringly, and enacted his part of invalid lover in the most becoming fashion. Weeta was now installed by right as attendant-in-chief, and Mr. Thurston would walk about the garden on her arm, and even accompany her, as of old, when she played the violin. Except for that dazed look which was still noticeable, and for the fact that, to him, life before the accident seemed blotted out, he was much as he always had been.

All this I saw only as an outsider during my occasional visits to Barradean, for I had now no intimate companionship with Weeta. She avoided me, and took up the attitude of having done something of which I must necessarily disapprove, and which it was impossible to discuss. Yet so great was the fascination she exercised over me that I could not make up my mind to stay away altogether, and usually yielded when Mrs. Wilson sent one of her pressing invitations to luncheon or to dinner. Mr. Wilson himself would often come over to fetch me, and would take no denial. He also was very happy about the engagement, never, I fancied, having been fully enlightened as to the state of affairs, and not being troubled with any nice scruples as to Isabel's Cave's rights. It was quite enough for him that Thurston was in love with and had proposed for his girl. "The other one" was not any affair of his. "The missus was always in a good temper now," he told me; and as they had the

misfortune to have a beauty for a daughter — why, it was a comfort to think she was taking her place in tip-top society. “She'll be Lady Colworth, you know,” he added, “and my grandchildren will be little lords and ladies! Think of that! By Jove! if only her old grandfather could have known that when he was knocking down his cheque at the ‘Coffin Lid’ public-house, it might have kept him from his coffin a bit longer. Lord! it's enough to make the old chap turn in his grave to think of the disgrace he has put on the British aristocracy.”

The odd thing was that, though everyone knew of Mr. Thurston's accession to rank, he himself was unconscious of the fact till several weeks had elapsed. Dr. Hayllar forbade any abrupt disclosure, and advised that matters relating to his English life should not at present be referred to. Mrs. Wilson, I could see, was greatly relieved at this decision. She would have liked to hurry on the marriage, and have it over before Miss Cave's appearance, but Mr. Wilson would not listen to this suggestion, which he called taking a mean advantage. I believe it was made to him only, and he, in a burst of confidence, informed me of it. I felt deeply troubled. About three weeks hence Miss Cave's steamer would be due at Stonehampton. In my perplexity I took Dr. Hayllar into counsel, though he was a wiry, unromantic little man, wrapped up in his profession, from whom I could expect but little sympathy. In this case I got none.

“Surely,” I said, “Mr. Thurston ought to be made to understand that the young lady he was engaged — *is* engaged to, as far as she knows — is actually on her way out.”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. “What good will that do? He has changed his mind, and is now engaged to Miss Wilson, and there is not the smallest doubt that he is very much in love with her. The other young lady must go to the wall.”

“But, doctor,” I urged, “think of the dishonour of it!”

“Now, look here,” he said, “if you go bothering my patient with questions of honour I won't answer for the consequences. His brain is in a ticklish state still. It will come all right if he is left alone, and allowed to be happy. These lapses of memory generally do come right when the brain gets properly nourished again.”

“But when he remembers everything, and knows too late what he has done?”

“And what has he done? Only made certain of marrying the woman he loves. He was madly in love with her before the accident — that was as plain as a pikestaff; but a sense of honour, I suppose, obliged him to hold his tongue about it. I tell you what it is, Mrs. Ansdell, honour goes a long way in peopling lunatic asylums, and if you go wakening Mr. Thurston's sense of honour just now, you may find that you have helped to put him in one.”

“Don't you think it possible,” I said, “that all this time he may, in his cloudy brain, be confusing Weeta Wilson with the girl he was engaged to? He always thought them alike — he used to tell me so. They have both the same kind of hair, and both play the violin. At first, I think that was what attracted him to her.”

The doctor fairly laughed. “That is a funny idea of yours, Mrs. Ansdell. I am afraid it's a question of the lips which are nearest, for it is clear which personality is uppermost in his mind now. He is about as far gone in love with Weeta Wilson as a man can be. *I* don't admire his taste. It beats me what the fellows can see to rave about in that girl, who is half-cracked, has red hair, never speaks, and keeps her face covered. But that's not my business; she's curing my patient, which is all that I have got to think about. Take my advice, Mrs. Ansdell — let things alone, and do you meet the young lady in Stonehampton Harbour, and break the news to her as kindly as you can. If she is a sensible young woman, she will feel that she has had a lucky escape, and will go quietly on round the world with her friends.”

It seemed the only course to pursue. There was no possibility of hearing from Alec, and I imagined that on the whole this was what he would wish me to do. I wrote to the agents of the steamer, asking them to telegraph to me when she was signalled a day from Stonehampton, and resolved to take upon myself the unpleasant duty of meeting Isabel Cave. I had a faint hope that in the meantime the fog might clear from Mr. Thurston's memory, and allow him to face the position as a man should.

To a certain extent this was brought about. Now that Mr. Thurston was going about much as usual, it became difficult for Mrs. Wilson to superintend the delivery of his letters. Although, except at English mail times, she had no serious cause for anxiety, still there was always the probability of his people telegraphing, and of the message reaching him in the ordinary course. This, in fact, did happen. I was present on the occasion. We were sitting in the verandah shortly before dinner — Mrs. Wilson, Weeta, and I, and Mr. Thurston had just strolled up to the bachelors' quarters. He and Weeta had been practising in the drawing-room, and it was only a few minutes before that she joined us. I was struck by the improvement in her. If Mr. Thurston appeared quite content, she looked no less happy. Her face had gained in softness and womanly charm, and her watchfulness of him and care for his comfort were to me — in spite of my revolt from the whole business — curiously interesting and pathetic. She was not at all demonstrative, taking the whole situation in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, and I was not yet certain whether this arose from the fear of agitating him, or because she was, in truth, indifferent to his love. There was a feverish light in her eyes, and sometimes a look of uneasiness on her face, which showed that she, too, had her moments of apprehension. She turned deadly pale now,

as Mr. Thurston was seen approaching with the ominous blue paper in his hand. He had stopped the messenger on his way to the house, and had taken it from him. He looked pale and bewildered, and staggered a little, as though some sudden news had shaken him.

“Good Heavens!” Mrs. Wilson ejaculated. “They have telegraphed to him again.”

Weeta ran down the steps to meet him.

“What is it, Archie?” she said.

He put the paper in her hand without a word, and she read it aloud: “Received no reply to message. Colworth killed. Accident in hunting-field. Come home. Reply at once.”

There was a pause, in which we all waited, our eyes fixed on him.

“Archie,” Weeta cried, “you understand? It has not done you harm? Oh, Archie, do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” he answered, in a groping sort of way; “I know what has happened. Colworth is my brother. He is dead; they want me at home. What message do they mean?” he asked suddenly, turning to Mrs. Wilson. “You have kept something from me.”

“Archie,” she answered — she, too, called him Archie now — “it was done by Dr. Hayllar's commands. We saw about the — the accident in the telegraphic news from England, and of course we guessed what was in the telegram. We should not have ventured to keep back your letters except on the doctor's authority, and it was not as if you could have done anything. You were helpless, you were very ill, you had forgotten many things. The shock of this terrible news might have been fatal to you.”

He did not seem to pay any heed to her explanations. A troubled light broke over his face, a look of terrified comprehension, as though some chord in his brain had been touched which for a moment startled him into horror. “My God!” he said, “I had forgotten!” Then the horror partly died away, and the baffled expression came back. He took the telegraph paper from Weeta's hand and read it slowly to himself. “Colworth dead! My poor mother! I am the only one now,” he murmured brokenly. The full realization of this present trouble seemed to come upon him. “Colworth dead!” he repeated, and sank upon the edge of the verandah and buried his head in his hands.

Weeta went up to him and put her hands upon his shoulders in a gentle, protective way. “Archie, you must try not to grieve too much. You must remember that you have others.”

“Others!” he cried, and looked up at her wildly: the look of horror had again come into his face. “Yes, there are others. God forgive me, I have not thought of them. I have only looked forward, I have never looked back.”

He got up, and her loosened arms dropped from him. She, too, straightened herself.

Involuntarily we glanced at each other, Mrs. Wilson and I — Weeta's eyes were fixed upon her lover. The same thrill of expectation moved us both. Had the moment of revelation come?

“Archie,” Weeta said, almost with an agony of pleading, “there is no need for you to make yourself wretched by looking back. You are thinking of — of that other woman.”

“Of that saint on earth whose shoestring I am not worthy to so much as touch. It has all come back to me now.”

“It had to come,” she answered. “Since you are strong enough, it is best for you to face it. I am ready to give you up — if you wish it.”

“Weeta!” cried Mrs. Wilson. “What are you saying? It was no engagement. I have Mr. Thurston's own authority for that. He said it was not an engagement.”

“It was what — what he chooses,” said Weeta. “Be silent, mamma; you have no part in this.”

“No part in the ruin of my own child's happiness?” melodramatically interjected Mrs. Wilson.

“It is between him and me,” Weeta went on calmly. “Archie, you have to say what you wish — what is most for your happiness.”

“My happiness!” he cried. “Will that atone to *her* for the insult — the — oh, it is horrible!”

“To her or to me? Your happiness should be dearer than her own to a woman who loves you. It is for you to decide.”

“Ay,” he said bitterly, “I know. I must decide between honour and dishonour; no, that is done already. There must be dishonour, always. It is too late.”

“It is not too late,” she said. “Listen! I'm a proud woman; I will not marry you unless you love me best. If you had not told me that you loved me before — before your illness, I would not have let you bind yourself to me. You are free as air. Say that you love her best, and all is over between us, and there shall be no blame to you; but tell me that I am dearest to you, and then I will cleave to you — no one shall take you from me. Look at me, Archie. Say, do you love *her* best?”

He did look at her, devouring her, it seemed, with his eyes. She looked perfectly beautiful as she stood facing him, her head a little thrown back, her eyes glowing upon his, the odd fascination she possessed intensified tenfold. I think there must have been something magnetic about her which made him powerless to resist her.

“Speak,” she said imperiously; “I tell you that you are free. You have only to let your own heart decide. Choose between us. Take the one who is dearest to you. Say that you love her best.”

He caught her hands. “I cannot say it; it is not true. You have bewitched me. You are my heart — my life. If it is to be dishonour, it shall be dishonour with you.”

Mrs. Wilson drew a deep breath of relief. I had been sorry for her in a grotesque, contemptuous way; but I could not keep silence any longer.

“Mr. Thurston,” I said, “you must face the position fairly. Do you not know that Isabel Cave, who believes herself your promised wife, is on board the *Urania*, and will be at Stonehampton in a very few days? Do you not know that she has come out expecting to be married to you? How are you goin to meet her?”

“I cannot meet her; I dare not meet her,” he said, helplessly.

“*You* will meet her,” said Weeta, facing me. “You will tell her what you have heard from his own lips.”

“You give me a pleasant task,” I said; “though truly Mr. Thurston's way of facing this difficulty should make it easy for a woman to despise him.”

“I am a coward and a traitor,” he broke in. “Yes, I know it. You can't think too hardly of me; but I — I am not myself. I haven't the power to face things like a man.”

“Do you not see,” Weeta flamed round fiercely at me, “you are doing him harm? He is ill. He is not fit for this.”

“And yet,” I replied, “you have put on him the strain of a life's choice between honour and dishonour.”

“Oh, honour! That is false reasoning — all conventional cant! Isn't it the worst dishonour to marry one woman, caring more for another? He has only to act as his heart orders. That is what I take my stand upon — his love. If he had said that he loved her best, you might have taken him with you to Stonehampton. I would have stood aside. But as it is, Archie, I will be strong for you and for myself. Come, you want rest.”

She put her arm within his, and led him away to a little verandah room, which the lovers had appropriated as a sitting-room. They did not again appear. It was a very uncomfortable evening. Mrs. Wilson was resentful of what she called my interference, and made no scruple in telling me what she thought of my conduct. I felt hurt and wretched, and begged Mr. Wilson, who was to drive me home to order the buggy round as soon as dinner was over.

He had drunk just enough to make him ramble on confidentially. “You'll have to knock under to the Missus, Mrs. Ansdell, like the rest of us; and though I feel for you — upon my word, now, I do feel for you — the other young woman being a friend of your husband's, makes it deucedly unpleasant for you — I wouldn't be in your shoes, going to meet her, for something; still, I mean to stand by the Missus and her opinions; and you couldn't expect me to throw over the chance of making my girl ‘My Lady.’ The other young woman ought to be able to look after herself. She had first go in at him, and why didn't she stick to him and keep him from making a fool of himself and other people? Let the best man win, say I, or the best woman; it comes to the same thing.

Queer, isn't it, to see two women quarrelling over one man — three, if you throw the Missus in? To my thinking, Thurston ain't worth it. I like a fellow that knows his own mind. Although he's a lord, I'd just as soon it had been Humphreys. Poor Humphreys! he's awfully cut up. He thought he had a chance. If Thurston chucks her up, he's ready to marry Weeta any day, and say, thank you, on his knees. And Mount Jessop is turning up trumps. He's safe to be a millionaire, is Humphreys, and he has offered to put me in for a good spec. I tell you what it is, Mrs. Ansdell, if you bring the other young woman up here, and help her to fight it out, and she gets the best of it — why, I'm not so sure that you'll make an enemy of me. Remember that.”

When, two days later, I got a telegram from the agents to the effect that the *Urania* was expected in Stonehampton Bay two days later, I wrote at once to Weeta the following note: —

“MY DEAR WEETA, — I think it right to tell you that I am going to Stonehampton to-morrow, to meet Miss Cave. I think, too, that Mr. Thurston ought to be made aware of this, and that you should both understand that I mean to tell Miss Cave everything that I know of the circumstances of your engagement to him. Of course, it is impossible for me to say what she will do; but, if she should choose to stay here, she will be my guest. Please don't think I have no sympathy with you. Though I can't approve of what you are doing, I wish sincerely that I could help you.

“Yours affectionately,

“RACHEL ANSDELL.”

Late that afternoon Weeta answered the note in person. She came alone into the sitting-room, having ridden over with one of the younger children.

“Do you know what has brought me?” she asked, as she threw up her veil and sat down. “It was the last sentence in your letter. The first part only made me harder, but the last showed that you had some kindly feeling for me.”

“Indeed, that is true, Weeta,” I said. I was deeply touched by the manner and expression of the girl. She looked intensely wretched. “I wish I could understand you,” I added impulsively.

“It is not likely that you could do that. I don't understand myself. But perhaps if you knew exactly how I have been brought up and all that I have felt and suffered, you would not be hard on me now.”

“I am not hard on you.”

“Yes, you are. You have said that you disapproved of my conduct. It seems to you shameless and unwomanly. Your letter is, in fact, a declaration of war. You have gone over to the enemy — I suppose I am justified in calling Miss Cave my enemy,” she went on, with a harsh little laugh. “She has everything that I have not got. She has been brought up

among the surroundings which I covet. She is rich, and her own mistress. The only point in which we are equal is that we both want intensely the same valuable property — Archie Thurston.”

“How do you know that she will want him when she hears the truth? She will probably have too much pride to go on caring about a man who no longer cares for her.”

“I don't know in the least,” answered Weeta, calmly. “If you ask my candid opinion, I should say that it would be very easy for her to regain her influence over Archie Thurston. His love for me is only a passing madness.”

“And yet you can hold him to you?”

“It is a very real madness when I am with him, and if I were to marry him, it would most likely always last; but I am quite sure that if I were out of his way, he would discover that he had never really cared for me. You are surprised that I can talk about it so coolly. I think you have been under the impression that it was I who was madly in love with him. I assure you I never encouraged him. He made advances to me.”

“You meant to try and win him,” I said. “You admitted as much to Alec and me, and the excuse I made for you then was that you cared for him.”

“Ah,” she said, “some day, perhaps, you will know whether you were right in your conjecture.”

“No,” I said angrily. “I can't even give you that claim to respect.”

She gave me one of her long, curious looks. “Ah!” she said again, with a little deep-drawn sigh. “Well, I didn't expect you would respect me. I don't respect myself. But I have judged Archie correctly,” she went on. “I have had to think the matter out in order to calculate my chances — if you take that view of it, and I can't blame you, seeing that out of my own mouth I have condemned myself. His temperament was the important factor in the business. He is not a man whom you can admire all round, and I must say that just now he cuts a rather unheroic figure.”

I think she took a sort of perverse pleasure in puzzling and annoying me.

“I don't know why you should have come over to tell me this,” I said.

“I did not,” she answered. “I came over to tell you that Archie has written to Miss Cave. I haven't seen the letter. I didn't dictate it. At any rate, it relieves you from a disagreeable responsibility. He has sent it to the care of the pilot, so that she will probably receive it before you see her.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “That, at least, was considerate of Mr. Thurston.”

“I came over to tell you something else,” she went on. “It is that I value your good wishes, and that I am sorry you have turned against me. I want to try and make you see a little from my point of view, even though it be

ever so dimly. Think how lonely I have been all my life — a sensitive child; nobody guessed how sensitive — the butt of the family, because of my odd ways, and because they thought I was ugly. I had no love of any kind. My mother never cared for me. She was always punishing me for some trivial fault. I used to yearn for love, even that I might feel it for my mother; but I could feel nothing but fear. You can't imagine how imperious she is, and how her will carries everything before it. Even now, when I pretend to be most indifferent, I am in reality cowed by her. Then my father's manners and habits jarred upon me. He used to laugh at me, and call me 'Carrots,' and it was his joke, I told you, that I had a shingle 'loose.' None of them understood me, none of them cared for me. They treat me differently now because they have been told that I am good-looking, though they cannot understand that either. And they see that men fall in love with me, and they have set their hearts on my making a fine marriage. That was always my mother's craze. It is a kind of mania. I dare say I have inherited it. I have never allowed myself to be in love with any of those Australian men who have wanted to marry me. I knew that was not my destiny. I have always fancied that I had a destiny. I am horribly romantic, though I seem stupid. I delight in imagining myself into dramatic positions. When I am sitting silent I am thinking them out. I should talk if there was anything worth talking about. I have an idea that if I were among clever, cultivated people, I should be clever too, and talk brilliantly. I suppose all this seems to you very conceited and ridiculous, but it's how I feel. I long, at times, with the longing of an imprisoned soul, to escape from this mean, narrow life, from the talk about cattle, and the rough, commonplace bush people. I am very ambitious — I want power. Now, do you see? Mr. Thurston can give me all this. He can put me into the position for which I fancy that I am fitted. He is the only person that I have ever known who has shown me what life might really be. He represents a different order of things. He can make me a great lady, one of those of whom one reads in books. And he loves me. You heard him say so. You heard him say it when he had his full senses, and knew as well as you and I that he was bound to Miss Cave. He threw her off that day. He was false to her when he told me by the shore that he loved me. Is it in human nature that I should not take advantage of such an opportunity? I told you I meant it to be a fair fight. I have left it to himself. You heard me offer to free him. He has chosen me deliberately. Well, why should I concern myself about that other girl? Why should I give him up out of Quixotic generosity to a woman who is less than nothing to me?"

She poured all this out with rapid, low-toned utterance.

"You have not pleaded the one thing which would make me give you my heart's sympathy," I said.

"What is that?"

“You have never said that you love him. Everything you have put forth would only lead one to believe that your motives were selfish and worldly.”

“If you are not clever enough to find out for yourself whether or not I love him, I shall not tell you,” she answered slowly. “You must think what you please.” She got up. “I have said all that I had to say, and now I will go.”

I stopped her. “Stay. Is there no way of escaping from this life which you dislike, and gaining the things you want, without marrying Mr. Thurston?”

“Yes,” she said; “I might marry Mr. Humphreys. He will be far richer than Archie Thurston, though he cannot give me rank. He would take me to England or anywhere that I liked, and they say that money will do anything in society. I am not sure that this would not be the best way out of the fix.”

“Then why don't you take it? If some one is to be sacrificed, by all means let it be Mr. Humphreys.”

“Now, you are not fair to him. As far as solid, manly goodness goes, he is worth a dozen of Archie. Why should he be sacrificed? It is not his fault that outwardly he is not attractive.”

“I have nothing more to say,” I exclaimed, exasperated.

“Well! — nor I. Good-bye, Mrs. Ansdell. Heaven save you in your mission!” And she went away.

## Chapter XXI. Isabel Cave.

IT was with a sinking heart that I went down the river in the steam-tug which was to bring off the passengers and mails from the *Urania*. I comforted myself, however, with the reflection that the time of trial would not last long, for that of a certainty, on receiving Mr. Thurston's letter, Miss Cave would decide to go on to Sydney with her travelling companions.

But I was mistaken. When I got on board the *Urania*, a very pretty little lady, dressed in a smart white serge yachting dress and coquettish sailor hat, came straight to me.

"Mrs. Ansdell, I feel sure it's you; Isabel asked me to look out for you. I'm Mrs. Bingham, her friend, and I want to speak to you before you see her. She has had a letter by the pilot this morning, and I feel certain that it is from Mr. Thurston, and that it has bad news."

I saw at once that Miss Cave had not communicated the fact of Mr. Thurston's faithlessness to her friend, and that I must be guarded in what I said.

"She is in her cabin," pursued Mrs. Bingham; "I've hardly seen her since she got Mr. Thurston's letter — I suppose I ought to say Lord Colworth. They telegraphed the news to us at Singapore. What is the matter? Why isn't he here?"

"Mr. Thurston has had a bad accident; he was thrown from his horse, and for a time his mind was affected," I answered.

"Is that all? I was afraid it was something much more serious. For, of course, he is all right now, or he could not have written."

"He is much better; he is able to walk about."

"But not up to meeting his lady-love. I must say I thought him an odd sort of lover when she told me she was not expecting him. I can't help thinking it's something more than that, Mrs. Ansdell. Isabel looked as if she had had a great shock."

"I suppose that she will tell you if there is anything more," I replied, constrainedly.

Mrs. Bingham did not look quite satisfied; but clearly she was not a person who worried herself about troubles that did not concern her. I turned the subject by explaining Alec's absence, and his sister's request that I would receive Isabel Cave.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bingham. "Frankly, it was a great relief to me when

Mima Ansdell — of course you know that we live close to your husband's people — when Mima promised in your name that you would act matron to Isabel. For, you see, my husband's time is limited, and we don't want to waste it at Stonehampton, where they tell me there is absolutely nothing to see this time of year but mosquitoes. Since you will take charge of Isabel, we propose to go on to Sydney, where she can join us after a bit if she likes; but I don't suppose the young man will agree to that.”

“Then she means to come back with me?” I exclaimed in some surprise; but, perceiving Mrs. Bingham's questioning look, hastened to add, “Of course I am only too delighted, and have come here to get her to stay with me; but I did not know if Mr. Thurston's letter — — ” and I stopped uneasily.

“Well, I don't imagine he has thrown her over,” laughed Mrs. Bingham; “and, short of that, she is bound to go to him. Dear old Isabel! She is just the sweetest girl in the world, and, though I am dreadfully sorry to lose her, of course her heart is with Mr. Thurston, and I do so want her to be happy. She asked me to take you down to her cabin when you came. My husband is seeing after her boxes and things.”

We went together to the saloon, and Mrs. Bingham knocked at the door of one of the staterooms. A voice said, “Come in.”

“It's Mrs. Ansdell,” said Mrs. Bingham, “and I shall leave you to make acquaintance, and go and find out when the steam-tug starts back.” She motioned me to enter, and with a little nod ran away again.

A very tall, slender girl, with hair something the colour of Weeta's, was standing before me. She took my two hands in hers. “It was kind of you to come,” she said agitatedly. “I wanted to see you first alone. Will you sit here?” She put me beside her on the cushioned berth beneath the porthole, and I was able to look at her.

Yes, she was a little like Weeta. The colouring and the “Rossetti” look were the same, only that Miss Cave's skin was much less clear, being freckled here and there, as the complexion which goes with such hair is apt to be; and she was, in truth, far less beautiful than Weeta. She lacked Weeta's distinctive originality and perplexing charm. Perhaps her dress had something to do with this, and gave her the conventional air, of which the total absence was Weeta's peculiarity. She wore a tight-fitting tailor-made gown, very neat, but not the least “aesthetic,” as it is phrased; her hair was parted in the middle, and braided as smoothly as its natural ripple would allow. She was just like many a charming and well-bred girl from an English country-house; with all this, she was extremely pretty, and most refined and delicate-looking. She gave me the impression of being deeply moved. The tears welled in her eyes when she put aside, as it were, some poor little commonplaces of greeting with which I tried to cover my own sense of embarrassment.

“Mrs. Ansdell,” she said, “I am not going to treat you as a stranger, for I have read what Alec has written about you to his sisters, and I know that you will be kind and true to me. I want you to be true above all things — nothing else matters.”

I begged her to believe that she might trust me, and that I would act towards her as if she were Alec's sister.

“That's good of you,” she answered. “I know Alec Ansdell, and what he has been to his sisters, and I know he would be a brother to me if he were here now. You know all about that letter — yes, for *he* told me that you understood everything.”

“I don't understand it,” I exclaimed; “but at least I have seen most of what has happened.”

“Will you tell me it all, then, exactly? This has been a blow to me, for I — — ” her voice faltered, “I have loved Archie Thurston dearly. But his letter is unlike him, so strange, and wild, and incoherent. He speaks of an accident. I feel that there must be some explanation he has not given me. Will you tell me about — about this girl for whom he has forsaken me? Is she a good girl? Is she a lady? Forgive me; but I don't understand much about Australian people. Does she love him? How is it that she has taken my place? Will you tell me the whole truth, the very truth? Don't be afraid of hurting me.”

I did tell her the whole truth, as far as I knew it. I felt that it was my duty to gloss over nothing, and yet, as I described the scenes I had witnessed, it was with a sense of shame and compunction, and of treachery towards Weeta, as I had before felt a sense of treachery to Isabel Cave. She asked me many questions about Weeta, among them that one which I could not answer, whether Weeta loved Archie Thurston.

“I think I understand better now,” she said, when I had finished, “Oh, my poor Archie, my poor Archie!” She put her hands over her face for a minute; then went on hurriedly, at first without any show of emotion: “It was too hard a trial for any man, and Archie is weak; I always knew that, but it made no difference in my feeling for him. Weakness sometimes only makes the person one loves dearer. She is very beautiful, and her playing — he is so fond of music, it rouses all that is emotional in him. Yes, I understand, I understand. I don't blame him, and his brain was confused, and he was not able in his mental and bodily weakness to cope with a feeling of that kind. That is what troubles me so. Suppose he were under the influence of a sort of delusion.”

“I don't know,” I said helplessly; “I'm afraid he cared for her before.”

“Yes, yes,” she interrupted; “you told me. I am glad you did not spare me that. If she were a good girl and loved him for himself, and he really loved her — if I were sure of that, I would go on now, and he should not be troubled with me any more. But if she is heartless and worldly, and it

is only ambition — his position is changed, you know, and you yourself say that she has been brought up badly, and her mother is a designing woman — oh, he should be saved from that. His mother and father should be saved that trial; it would hurt them grievously. You know once they objected to me because I am not so well born; but that is all passed now, and I should have come to Archie with his mother's blessing. How sad it is now — now when it is too late!" Again she nearly broke down. "Think what it would be to Lady Belmont to have a daughter-in-law who was unworthy! And poor Archie! when the glamour was past! Mrs. Ansdell," she said appealingly, and looking at me with her frank, sincere eyes, "tell me if you think me wanting in dignity and self-respect — tell me frankly. But I feel that I *must* see Archie and judge for myself. I feel that it would be a false kind of pride that would turn me away and let me be carried for ever out of his life. If I could save him! It is worth a sacrifice. Not for myself, but for his mother's sake — for his own sake and for the sake of the love we had for each other. Something is owing surely to a love which was strong enough to bring me here — strong enough to live through opposition and absence and long silence for nearly five years. Tell me that you do not think me contemptible and unwomanly."

"Oh, I don't," I interposed abruptly, for I began to find myself quite carried away by the girl's frank impetuosity. "I don't think it unwomanly of any woman not to give up her love and her happiness and her life, and perhaps the happiness and the life of the man she loves, without making a fair fight for it."

Her eyes sparkled. "You, too, think I ought to see him? You, too, think I have a right?"

"Oh, yes; I am sure you have," I answered. Something of hope within me began for the first time to tremble and respond to her appeal.

"Listen," she said, and there seemed a positive passion of conviction in her look and her tone; "you said yourself that you couldn't understand this thing. Well, I can't understand it, either; but we may believe without understanding, and this I do believe — that, however all this horrible confusion has come about, Archie is true to me, and that the sight of my face, and the sound of my voice, and the touch of my hand will bring my lover back to me."

She smiled a fearless, flashing smile, like that of one determined to go in for a last ordeal. All the same, there were tears in her eyes, and, indeed, there were tears in my eyes as well. Odd memories came up in my mind of stories I had read about sorceries and bewitched young men, and redemptions by the pure, courageous faith of pure and conquering love.

"Go to him," I said. "God show the right."

So I told Mrs. Bingham that I would take charge of Miss Cave, and that

she might go her way to Sydney without further sense of responsibility.

I wish I could have said to myself that I had no further sense of responsibility, but I did not feel by any means so well assured as to the wisdom of the step I was allowing poor Miss Cave to take. If it should prove a disappointment, what a humiliating disappointment it would be! The poor, forlorn girl would only have published her love and her desertion in vain; and I was by no means sure that Miss Weeta would not be quite capable of openly exulting in her rival's defeat and humiliation — it is not only women who are capable of doing such things — they have learned the way to do them from at least as far back as the days when the god-like heroes of the Iliad jibed over and exulted over and insulted their wounded and dying enemies. It would be hardly fair to expect more magnanimity from Miss Weeta than from one of Homer's heroes. After all, Weeta was certainly not a sorceress, and Archie appeared to know what he was talking about when he allowed us all to believe that he loved Weeta best of all girls in the world. Still, it was idle to think of all that now. I had given my word to Isabel that she should have her chance of redeeming her spell-bound lover — if he were spell-bound — and so far as I was concerned she should have her chance. But I could not help wondering what people would say of me; perhaps especially what Alec would say of me when he came to know all about it. That married woman must indeed be a very heroine of self-assurance whose spirit never sinks at the thought that something she has done, which at the time she thought highly magnanimous, may cause her husband to think her, and perhaps even to call her, a fool.

We spent that night at one of the hotels in Stonehampton, and went on our journey next day. I had certainly great reason to admire the self-control and strength of mind displayed by my poor Isabel. I could read between the lines of her talk without the least trouble. She had made up her mind evidently that she was not to display her anxiety all over the place; that she would not impose any of her burden unnecessarily upon others, upon any other. She asked me all sorts of questions about Australia and its ways, and about the local society, of which she was about to have a passing glimpse; and she said never a word about the people or the subject which, as I knew full well, must be eating into her heart. Sometimes I asked myself to what use this heroic suppression, this almost suicidal trampling down of the feelings? Why not trust me, woman to woman, and let herself go, and let me share her anguish of anxiety in open words, as she must well know that I already share it in feeling and in sympathy? Why should heroism play the part of hypocrisy and hide its real features behind a mask? All the same I respected her resolve and her proud patience.

As we were getting near the end of our journey. I thought it well to bring her back in open speech to its very anxious and, to my mind,

dismal purpose, and I took her hand in mine. It is, I suppose, a law of our being that compassion must touch with its living hand the object of its sympathy. I said, "My dear Miss Cave, suppose this fails; shall you be able to go through with it?"

"What can I do?" she asked simply, opening her eyes and then letting fall the curtain of her lids again. "It is no more than happens to many girls who deserve a better fate than I do. And then, Mrs. Ansdell, I don't believe that any harm will come, for I believe in him."

"Oh, my dear child," I exclaimed, almost losing all self-control, "the other girl believes in him, too; one or other of you must suffer."

"If she loves him really, truly, for himself, as I do; and if she has to give him up — oh, I shall be so sorry for her that I shall take her to my very heart, and cry tears of sympathy over her. I shan't exult, I promise you. Mrs. Ansdell, if she really loves him fondly — in that true sort of way, you know; and if she has won him really — well, I shall say good-bye, and go my way without one word of reproach, and I shall feel some better hope for his happiness than I did when first I heard of this strange thing. But then — then — then — I shall feel sorry — for her!"

"For her?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, for her! What hold could any woman have on a heart that could be given and taken away, and given away again like that? He did love me, as surely as I loved him; and, if he has changed so soon for any cause — why, then, so much the worse for the girl he takes, and not for the girl he leaves."

There was a resolute toss of her prettily-set head as she spoke these words, but I could see that her lips trembled all the while.

"I am glad you are so brave, my dear," I said.

"Brave!" she answered, and she now let her tears have their way. "I don't believe I am a bit brave. I am only confident. I know he loves me."

## Chapter XXII. The Old Love and the New.

ISABEL preserved her heroic attitude, even when we had reached Wombo, and she found herself in the very scenes and surroundings amid which the tragedy of Archie Thurston's desertion had been played. She bade me show her the spur of shingle where he had been thrown from his horse, and shuddered as she looked out to sea, and saw the waves breaking over the bristling rocks. She asked me if Barradean were visible from the knoll where we were standing, and gazed for several minutes with melancholy interest on the pretty low house with its wide verandahs, its romantic garden, and clustering outbuildings, all embowered in bamboos. The place had great natural beauty, and showed to advantage from this point.

"I did not think it was like that," she said, with a little catching of her breath. "It is something like a villa that I know in Italy."

I could see that this association of her rival with picturesqueness and luxuriance of vegetation, and, indeed, an almost tropical charm, produced an uneasy feeling in her mind, and made her more distrustful of her own influence.

As upon the occasion of my own home-coming, we left the coach to proceed by the longer road, and waded across the inlet, it being, on the whole, the most private way in which Isabel could make her entry into the township. I had, for her sake, a nervous dread of the gossip which would certainly fly round the district, if it got to be known who she was, and why she had come. I hated the idea of the false position in which she might find herself, and wished, more than ever, for Alec's strong support. I began even to doubt the wisdom of the course we had pursued. In any case, the only hope was to keep her arrival as quiet as possible, and when the momentous interview was over, to take her back to Stonehampton, and consign her to the Bingham's care in Sydney.

I was a little afraid that we might meet some of the Barradean party on the beach or riding down the hill on which our cottage stood. I felt sure that the Major was quite capable of bearing down on Isabel, and trying to intimidate her into retreat from the field. But this time none of the Wilsons appeared, and Isabel reached the shelter of our cottage undetected. Once in her own room, I thought she would have given way, but she was brave still, and when she came out to dinner seemed interested in the new life to which she had been introduced, asked many

questions about Alec and our personal concerns, found a likeness to her grandmother in baby, and told me a great deal about Alec's people, and their ways and doings. She was determined, apparently — for the moment, at any rate — to put aside her own griefs and anxieties.

The next morning I had my pony harnessed, and set out for Barradean. I had hope that I might get speech of Weeta or Mr. Thurston without Mr. Wilson's intervention, and so, instead of driving up to the usual entrance, I gave the cart in charge of a blackboy who was lounging about the slip-rails, and made my way to the granadilla trellis, where the lovers often spent their early morning hours. Weeta had grown so careless of her complexion during these days of her engagement that I wondered sometimes whether that care had not also been affectation, or whether she was going through such exciting phases of emotion that her former vanities had ceased to have any hold over her.

Her face was unveiled now, though it was shaded by a broad straw hat, curiously trimmed with the grey-green moss which hangs from the gum trees, and of which a long trail fell over the brim and mingled with her red-gold locks. She wore her hair brushed back, and tied with a piece of yellow ribbon, so that it hung in a rippling mass far below her shoulders, and she had on a simple white gown of the clinging stuff she liked, falling straight to her feet, and gathered in at the waist with a broad yellow sash. I thought I had never seen a more striking figure, as she stood leaning against the wall of greenery, her eyes bent down upon her lover, who half lay in a squatter's chair looking up ardently at her. Yet in the faces of both there was a troubled expression, a sort of restless, dissatisfied passion, as though elements in the natures of both were warring, and only held in check by the fascination that bound each to the other. This was my fancy. They were not doing anything, though a book lay on the ground beside them; but there was nothing in their attitude which suggested the idle repose of a lovers' *tete-à-tete*. Weeta was the first to perceive my approach. She knew that I had been to Stonehampton since our last meeting, and what had been my errand there, yet she greeted me as unconcernedly as though I had driven over merely to while away a dull morning. Her moods certainly were quite incalculable.

“Here is Mrs. Ansdell, Archie,” she said.

I saw instantly that a change came over his face. He rose and said, “How do you do?” to me with as much awkwardness as was possible in one so habitually at his ease.

I, too, felt awkward enough. “I have come to tell you,” I began bluntly, “that I have brought Miss Cave home with me to Wombo.”

The announcement startled Weeta. “Ah!” she exclaimed nervously; then seemed to make a resolute effort to force down her agitation. She moved a little farther off, folded her hands before her, and waited perfectly silent. The news affected Mr. Thurston deeply. He turned very

pale, and for a moment or two did not speak. I felt, though I was not looking at her, that Weeta's eyes were fixed steadily upon him.

"She has come?" he said at last, in a shocked, groping way.

"She has come to see you," I answered, boldly.

"Oh!" he exclaimed passionately; "this is worse than everything. I can bear to know myself a cur; I can't bear that she should upbraid me for my baseness."

"She will not upbraid you," I said; "she has no thought of reproach. She — —"

"Stay!" interrupted Weeta, imperiously. "I will go away if you wish it. Do you want to speak to Mr. Thurston alone?"

"No!" he exclaimed; "that can make no difference."

"There is no need," I said. "I have not much to say, and perhaps you had better hear it."

"Very well." She sat down on a bench, her hands lying still in her lap, maintaining an air of armed neutrality.

"Miss Cave only wished to hear the truth from your own lips," I went on. "She thinks this is due to you and to herself, and to the love you once had for one another. She thinks it due also to your parents."

"Oh, my parents!" he burst out impetuously. "What have they to do with it? If they had sided with me at the beginning, and had welcomed Isabel, and fought with me against her guardian, it would all have been different. I might never have — —" He stopped himself with a sudden eager look at Weeta. "What am I saying? It is the wrong to her that hurts me, and that I would undo almost with my life, if I could. It would be a wrong to her, even if — — How could I pretend? When once a thing is done, it is done for ever. We were talking of that now — before you came. We were reading Browning, you know," and he quoted —

"As earth lies bare to heaven above;  
How is it under our control  
To love or not to love?"

"That's the way with me. But it is not for my people to interfere — now. They have learned to appreciate Isabel too late."

"No, Archie," Weeta said calmly; "I have told you it is not too late. Miss Cave herself thinks it is not too late, or she would not come she would not have asked you to go to her. It is to be a struggle between us two women for you, my poor Archie; and in good truth I don't know which of the three is the most humiliated by the struggle. You see," she added, looking towards me, "it was scarcely fair of you to blame me, and to hint that I was indelicate for taking up the line I did. If *I* was indelicate in refusing to give him up unless he himself told me that he did not love me, then how would you describe Miss Cave's conduct? *I* am not saying

anything against it, mind. It's what I would have done myself, and I admire her and respect her for being above your petty standard of conventionality."

It jarred upon me inexpressibly to hear her thus applauding poor Isabel. I wondered how he could bear it, and that the bad taste of her speech did not annoy him; but apparently he had not noticed it.

"Mr. Thurston," I said, not answering her, "will you come with me now to see Miss Cave?"

He seemed to reflect for a moment. "Yes," he answered slowly, and with a greater show of manliness than he had as yet appeared capable of; "since she asks it of me. God knows I have done her harm enough, and the least I can do now is to obey her wishes."

"You must understand that it is with no thought of influencing you that Miss Cave is here," I said, anxious to guard Isabel against any imputation of want of self-respect. "She has come in the noblest, frankest way, putting all care for herself aside. You must not think that she could stoop — —"

"I could think nothing of her but what is highest and most honourable. You need not tell me what Isabel Cave's motives are," he said, with fervid impressiveness. "Don't I know that she is the proudest woman — proud in the noblest sense — as well as the truest and sweetest? Whatever she does must be right, and no one would ever dare to misinterpret it. I will come, Mrs. Ansdell."

Weeta moved when he did, and walked before us to the end of the trellis. "You have a place to spare in your pony cart," she said. "I should like to come, too."

"*You* are coming!" I exclaimed.

"Yes; why not? You won't be so inhospitable as to forbid me your house, Mrs. Ansdell? It's like waiting for my death-warrant, you know. Think of my suspense while those two decide upon my sentence."

"Weeta, you pain me!" he exclaimed, with indignant reproach.

"I'm only putting facts in a straight way, Archie; and it seems to me that we have got down to the bed-rock, as they say. Why should we be afraid of standing face to face — you and she and I? I shall not wrangle and scratch and try to tear out her eyes. I am not quite indelicate enough for that. In heaven's name, let us be honest, all of us, and say what we feel; let us fight in the open, now that it has come to a battle." She laughed in her odd, soft way. "Besides, it is really a dramatic situation, and that's what I've always longed for. And besides, again, how do you know that I may not have something to say — some decision of my own to announce which will change the whole state of affairs?"

I did not try to dissuade her from her plan. Indeed, I had a faint hope that she might, as she said, say or do something which would entirely alter the position. We drove almost in silence to the cottage.

I took them into the dining-room, which was separated from the parlour by folding-doors and a heavy curtain. I knew that Isabel would be either in the parlour or the front verandah.

“Will you stay here while I tell Miss Cave?” I said, and left them.

I was not long absent. When I came back, I saw a strange sight — a sight that set all my sympathies vibrating again for Weeta, and gave me the feeling of being torn in two. Archie was seated at the table, his elbows resting upon it, his hand supporting his head, and he was looking down at Weeta with something of agony in his eyes. She was kneeling beside him, her hand clutching his arm, her face upturned to his, transfigured in its passion of yearning.

“Archie,” I heard her say, and no words can convey the tender cadence of her voice. Oh, she loved him! I was certain of that now. “Archie, my darling, if you leave me you will take my heart's blood with you. Archie, listen. It would kill me if you were sorry afterwards and made me feel so — if you were ashamed of me, or of my people; if I lost my hold on you, and you looked back to this day with hatred of me. Oh, Archie, let me suffer now, rather than that. Go, my darling, if you have one shadow of regret, if you have one heart-throb that is for her, and not for me.”

He caught her to him and kissed her wildly. “I can't give you up. No one can ask that — she least of all. Oh, my love! my love!”

He kissed her again. Weeta broke from him, and pointed to where I stood.

“They have come for you,” she cried, hysterically. “It is the executioner. Go, Archie, and *remember*.”

“Miss Cave would like to see you alone,” I said, coming forward to him. She is in the sitting-room.”

“Go, Archie,” Weeta repeated. Her glamour seemed upon him at that moment more irresistibly than ever before. His eyes were scarcely able to tear themselves away from her face as he left the room, and while she bade him go her whole look and attitude gave the impression of some uncanny syren who was exercising all her power of fascination to keep him her slave. I wondered then that these two women, who were both so strong, should care so much for one so weak.

When the door had closed behind him Weeta sank into the chair from which he had risen, and leaning her arms on the table, buried her face in her hands. She had taken off her hat, and her beautiful hair covered her form, which was shaken with sobs. I went to her and tried to show her that I felt for her sorrow.

“Go away, Rachel Ansdell,” she exclaimed hoarsely. “It's you who have done this — you who have brought that girl here. What right had you? What business was it of yours? Why could you not let things be?”

“Ah, you are afraid then?” I said, uttering the thought which was uppermost.

She lifted her head and looked at me, her eyes shining brightly through her tears, such force and vitality in her bearing that I could not but compare her with the woman I had left and tell myself that it would go hard with Isabel. It was too much to expect that any man would give Weeta up willingly.

“Afraid!” she repeated angrily. “No, I am not afraid — not of what you think. Do you suppose I don't know my power over him? Do you think I don't know that by looking at him I can make it impossible for him to throw me over? I won't give you the satisfaction of thinking that I do it out of love.” She seemed to take a perverse pride in upsetting my theories. “You haven't any idea what a good actress I am. I tell you he *shall* belong to me, though he doesn't love me — not in his heart of heart. Oh, I know that. He is only bewitched, mesmerised, anything you like to call it. But he is mine for all that, and no one shall take him from me.”

She had got up from her chair, and was pacing the room like a mad creature. I did not try to reason with her, but stood waiting. The low murmur of voices from the drawing-room reached me, and must have reached Weeta also. It seemed to still her rage. She paused in her walk, which resembled that of a beast in its cage, and, putting herself into the motionless attitude she could assume even when feeling threatened to overmaster her, waited, as I did, till the interview between Archie and Isabel was over. I don't think either of us could have told afterwards how long we stood in our suspense. It might have been minutes; it might almost have been hours. In reality I believe it was only a very little while. Suddenly the tension was broken. The handle of the door turned. There was a moment's pause, and then, to my great surprise, Isabel entered, followed by Mr. Thurston.

She stood for a moment uncertainly, her eyes fixed upon her rival. She was very pale; but, in her appearance and demeanour, there was a certain simple and delicate propriety which contrasted with Weeta's fantastic dress and disordered hair, and with the evident signs of that storm of passion which had gone over her. Isabel seemed, in her brief glance, to be weighing the nature and claims of her antagonist. She gazed at her searchingly, with wistful wonder and admiration. Weeta stood erect, resentful but defiant; but, above all, surprisingly beautiful. At last Isabel crossed to her, and said simply, “I wanted to see you; I wanted to tell you that I hope you may be happy.”

Weeta gave her a full glance, bright and unrelenting. “Why do you wish that?” And then she added, as if no longer able to bear the strain, “Tell me what it is to be. If I am to be happy, it must be at your cost.”

“Yes,” Isabel answered, still in that simple way; “but I am glad that I have seen you. I shall always be glad. Will you not shake hands with me?”

She put out her hand, and Weeta took it, and thus the two girls stood.

At that moment Weeta seemed the most moved. "It was for him to decide," she said brokenly. "I don't know what you have said to each other."

"We have said good-bye," Isabel answered. "Good-bye without bitterness or reproach. He has chosen you. He loves you. I do not wonder that he should love you best. You are very beautiful — not what I expected. His people will admire you, and you will win their affection. And you must pray that he may never change to you," she added, with a touch of irony that I think must surely have been unconscious.

"Oh," cried Weeta, taking away her hand, and shrinking back. "You do well to say that."

"I did not mean to hurt you," said Isabel, gently. "I cannot doubt he loves you, but he loved me only a few short months ago; or, at least, he told me so." For the first time in the scene her voice shook. "It's all over," she said hurriedly, turning to Mr. Thurston, who stood crushed and shamed against the fireplace. "When we meet again, Archie — for I suppose we shall meet some time in England — you will be married, and we shall have lived down this trouble. Good-bye."

She held out her hand to him with a little queenly movement. He took it in his, and reverently kissed it. Isabel shuddered, as though the touch had hurt her. She did not look at him again, but turned and put her hand in mine. "Come, Rachel," she said, and I took her away.

I did not see her again until the day was nearly over. The door of her room was fastened, and no answer was given when I knocked. I could hear her stifled sobs within, and I longed to force an entrance and take her in my arms and weep over her, as a mother might weep over her child; but I knew that I could bring her no comfort now, and so I went away sorrowfully, and left her to fight out her battle alone.

When she came out her face had a worn, pinched look, and her eyes were red and swollen, but she was quite calm.

"I wanted to be alone," she said. "I wanted to look my fate in the face. When a great shock like this comes and changes all one's life, it is hard at first to accustom oneself to it. Ever since I got his letter I have had to tell myself, over and over again, that this thing is true; that it is real. It seems impossible sometimes to believe that Archie — my Archie, as he used to be — loves another woman."

"Oh, are you certain that he really loves her?" I exclaimed. "Isn't it all glamour?"

She shook her head mournfully. "I suppose all love is glamour — more or less," she said. "Perhaps he will wake up by-and-by from his dream, and then it will be bad for him and for her. Perhaps the dream will last as long as they both shall live. For their sakes I hope it may. My dream is over. It was a strange thing," she went on, "for him to tell *me* of his wild passion for her — those were the words he used. They were like a knife

in one's heart. But the truth was what I had come here to learn, and, that being the truth, there is nothing for me now but to go my way and live it down as best I can."

That very night she sent a telegram to Mrs. Bingham, which she showed me. "My engagement is broken off. I shall join you in Sydney. Will wire the date."

It was settled that we should leave Wombo on the morrow, and wait in Stonehampton for the next steamer. It seemed too dreary to let her go alone.

A happy project occurred to me, and I decided to accompany her part of her way south; to get off the steamer at Brisbane, and pay a short visit to my own people on the Ubi. Thus I came to be Isabel's companion in the darkest hours of her life; and, while my heart ached with pity for her, I felt an occasional pang for Archie Thurston, as I grew to realize what a treasure this was which, in his folly and blindness, he had thrown away.

I had written a little note to Weeta Wilson, telling her of my plans. She sent no answer then, and I never saw her again. A month later, to my intense astonishment, I received from her the following telegram, which was dated from Stonehampton: —

"Try to respect me. I was married privately to Mr. Humphreys this morning. We leave for Europe to-night. "WEETA."

Why did she do it? Nobody knew. Her marriage, like everything else about her, was an enigma. I have never been able to answer to myself the question, "Did she, or did she not, love Archie Thurston?"

I never saw him again either. He, too, had started for England before my return to Wombo, where, shortly afterwards, Alec joined me. The Barradean people were not disposed to be friendly any longer. The Major blamed me for the catastrophe of her daughter's marriage, as she persisted in regarding it, though she must certainly have found some consolation in the reflection that Mr. Humphreys was one of the richest men in Australia.

A year later, I heard of the marriage of Isabel Cave to Archie Thurston — Lord Colworth, as I suppose I ought to call him. I wonder if the glamour of Weeta had quite faded!

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