

The Confessions of a Currency Girl

Dawe, W. Carlton (1865-1935)

A digital text sponsored by
Australian Literature Gateway

University of Sydney Library
Sydney

2003



<http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/id/dawconf>
© University of Sydney Library. The texts and images are not to be used for
commercial purposes without permission

Source Text:

Prepared from the print edition published by Ward and Downey London 1894
3 volumes: 245pp., 237pp., 247pp.

All quotation marks are retained as data.

First Published: 1894

RB/TD/D269/J1/1 *Australian Etext Collections at novels 1890-1909*

The Confessions of a Currency Girl

London
Ward and Downey
1894

TO MY SISTER GWEN THIS BOOK IS LOVINGLY DEDICATED.

Volume 1

Chapter I.

I AM not aware that I ever had any of that unnatural precocity which is supposed to distinguish the clever child, but I believe I must have been a very small thing indeed when my mind took its first impressions of this terrestrial sphere. What my age was at that particular time I have never been able to ascertain, though I have a most vivid recollection of my father's grand, sad face, seared with pain, as it were, and bronzed by the fierceness of the sun; of my mother, with her gentle ways and winning smiles; and of Will, dear old Will, with his sturdy boyish figure, his fearless blue eyes, and his thick golden curls. And then came Harold, poor little Harold. He was younger than I, and was our pet, our baby. How proud we all were of him. What a grand head we thought he had; and when we saw him take to books as naturally as other children do to toys and sweetstuffs, we all prophesied for him a great future. Then came that dreadful accident to his spine, and we knew that he was crippled for life. Poor Harold! We watched his beautiful face grow thinner, paler, and, oh, so spiritual-looking, so dreamy, so utterly unlike anything of the earth, that often I was afraid to look into his great eyes; and I have seen mother sit with him in her lap staring at him in a blank, wondering sort of way, till, overcome by her emotions, she would clasp him suddenly to her breast and sob convulsively.

But they were peaceful, blessed times, and though I had no knowledge of father's yearly income, I knew that we never had any debts we could not meet, that the larder was always full, and that the clothes we wore were of the finest. Indeed, I was always under the impression that we were very rich, for, with the exception of Mr. Langton — the wealthy squatter from whom we rented our land — there was no one in the neighbourhood who had a better house or finer horses than ours. Father, being a thrifty man, and proud of his wife and family, had saved and schemed to better our condition, and I have often heard him declare that he would let them see if there was anything in the country too good for his children. I didn't think there was, myself — I didn't see how there could be — but I not infrequently wondered who the mysterious “they” were, why he was so fond of repeating the expression, and why he always looked so combative when he said it. Usually his nature was as placid as mother's, and if not quite so sweet — which no man's could be — it was more intense, and this became doubly impressive from the

very repression of the stronger spirit. He would fondle us by the hour, and in the winter nights, when the wind howled fiercely without and the rain fell, turning each little creek into a raging torrent, we would draw our chairs round the big wood fire, father in one corner, mother in the other, and he would read to us stories of heroic deeds, of great fights by sea and land, or the biographies of those great Englishmen who have immortalized their country; or, to please Harold, who usually nestled at his mother's feet, staring with his big eyes into the leaping, crackling fire, he would read or narrate wonderful legends of good and evil spirits, giants and dwarfs, dragons, and all the catalogue of horrors which, strangely enough, are served up to appease the intellectual cravings of the infant. And Harold loved these weird, grotesque stories, and the stronger and more improbable they were, the more interested and enthusiastic grew he over them. And father, with one of his rare, sweet smiles, would pat the lad on the head and call him a strange boy, and at regular intervals would send off to Melbourne for books of poetry and fairy lore, till Harold had quite a little library of such treasures, which he guarded with jealous pertinacity.

It is the pride of intellect that all shall honour it. No matter how the cynic may sneer, the vulgar laugh in his vacant way, nature forces them, inwardly at least, to confess its power. I think this reverence for what we call the brain is, like our religion, born in us. We cannot cast it aside even if we would. A man may not be religious — nay, he may even be deemed irreligious — and yet he will have no one tamper with his faith, nor would he change it for worlds — that is, if he possess any of that doggedness which sets the world spinning. Strange thing, is it not? For, after all, is our religion born in us? It seems so, since man has evolved it from chaos. Or is this brainworship born in us also? Or what is born in us, except sin?

Nevertheless, this homage to intellect is, in its way, as true as most things; and whether it be real or affected — for what is not tinged with insincerity? — it is a fact of which every ordinary observer must be well aware. I know we were all proud enough at the thought of Harold possessing more than the average share of brain-power, and when, in his eighth year, he penned a short fairy tale, which bore a striking resemblance to certain portions of Jack the Giant-Killer, we thought that greatness had at last dawned upon the family, and regarded Harold as a being to be cherished and pampered. What possibilities were not centred in that pale-faced lad? Who could say what thoughts were simmering in that little head? In this is the glory, almost the terror, of children. The imagination fails to picture what they may not be, and the fond parent, left to her own imaginings, sees a star brighter than any other in the firmament. I know my mother worshipped her youngest born; perhaps because she was so proud of his intelligence, perhaps — and this I think

more likely — because he was so dreadfully afflicted. And then, he was never happy unless he could touch her hand, her dress, or at least look upon her; while Will and I, both being strong and therefore independent, grew more in touch, in sympathy with each other. We rode our ponies to school together, and many a helter-skelter over the dusty roads or across the long dry plains have he and I enjoyed; and he, who was venturesome even for a boy, put me up to many a trick of horsemanship, and, instilling me with much of his own recklessness, taught me to despise creeks and fences and boulders, till he used to say there was no better or pluckier rider in the district than I. But that was Will's modesty, for he sat his own pony like an ideal horseman, and knew not the meaning of the word fear. And what a boy he was! Straight and strong as a mountain pine, with eyes as blue as the heavens on a still, hot day, and hair as yellow and curly as a cluster of honeysuckle; the flush of healthy youth on his cheek, and strength and freedom in every movement. Poor old Will! They were happy days, were they not? The air was nectar to us then, and in the very thought of life there was so much joy that we had no time to think of the morrow or the morrow's clouds. And yet they were so dark when they came, and so charged with woe for us.

If there was one thing that kept us free from trouble so long it was, perhaps, the strange, almost lonesome, life we led at Granite Creek — for such was the name of the watercourse which ran through our land. We rarely had any visitors, and more rarely still went anywhere. Once father took us all to Melbourne for a month, and I shall never forget how delighted I was with the marvels of the great city, but when we returned the old lonely life commenced again, never so lonely as now. Oh, to live for ever in the whirl of a great city, amid its roar and bustle, thought I, and for a full month I chafed foolishly at the dulness of Eden. But, after all, there is life, blood, movement in a city. The men in it are the men who move the levers which set the world buzzing. You are one of the mighty; and I often wished that fate had formed me of the other sex, so that I too might go among men and place my hand upon the lever of the world, and set all things in motion. Dreams, of course; but what would the world be without its dreams?

In saying that we never went anywhere, or that we never had any visitors, I meant that we did not engage in social duties to the extent which might reasonably have been expected of us, owing principally, so I thought, to mother's want of energy and father's rooted dislike to society of any kind. He worked hard all day, and so that he could have his family about him when the night drew in, he cared for nothing else. This was a source of considerable surprise to me, for whenever anyone did come to our homestead father was always so courteous, so extremely affable, that one could scarcely help thinking that in the society of strangers he found his keenest pleasure. There were, however, two or

three people with whom our family was on excellent footing, chief among them being the Wallaces of Wallan, and the rich squatter, Mr. Langton, who had known father in England; indeed, they had both been at Cambridge University together.

But of the two the Wallaces were the dearer friends, for there was not that difference in our purses which we had to confront when in Mr. Langton's presence; besides, mother and Mrs. Wallace had been schoolgirls together, and when mother left England to join father, her friend accompanied her, for she too had set her heart on a man who had quitted the Old Country to seek his fortune. Brave men; how I envy them! They are the true knights-adventurers of these later days, and though they swing the axe and the pick instead of riding about in tenfold steel and rescuing timid maidens, they are none the less heroes, heroes to the core. No wonder the new countries thrive when the energy of the old pours into them.

Our friendship with the Wallaces dates back to my earliest recollection, and I know I used to think Mr. Wallace a very great person, and one possessed of unlimited power, especially after I had seen him at a great auction sale disposing of countless head of cattle in the most unconcerned and indifferent manner imaginable — for he was auctioneer, civil engineer, architect, estate agent, and goodness only knows what not. He had been everything in his day, father used to say, and had tramped the colony from end to end; had fought in the stockade at Ballarat, and had been mainly instrumental in effecting the capture of more than one notorious bushranger. But as trooper or digger, swagman or gentleman, he was always the same kindhearted, genial man; a trifle pompous, perhaps, a little rough on the surface, and liable, at times, to make use of blunt language — language, too, which might easily disconcert you were it not for the eternal twinkle in his clear eyes. Of a different pattern, but equally as genial and full of warm affection, was his good wife. She and mother, as I have said, had been schoolgirls together, and the devotion of those two old friends would have convinced the most cynical that there is yet unswerving love and loyalty in the human heart. It seemed as though they had formed themselves on each other's virtues, and had striven all the days of their life to live up to their lofty ideal. That they failed in their endeavours I cannot even now believe, knowing how weak flesh is.

The Wallace family consisted of two children, Arthur and Ella, the boy being some two years older than Will, the girl a few months older than I. But in spite of the disparity of our ages — and children are great sticklers in this respect — we were fast friends from the early days of our infancy. Indeed, I had no other girl friend, and if I was not staying with Ella, Ella was staying with me. Then there was Arthur, too, of whom they always teased me — a great, shy, overgrown boy who used to look exceedingly

embarrassed whenever I spoke to him, and who would blush and tremble like a baby at any little attention I might be considerate enough to pay him. Yet he was a handsome lad; that is, I think he must have been, for he had a pair of great, brown earnest eyes — almost as earnest as Harold's — and a dark, clear-cut face like those which I have so often seen since in pictures of young Italians. But I never thought much of poor Arthur's looks then, for those were the days of the ephemeral mind for which there is no morrow.

Chapter II.

AND now the first cloud was rapidly beginning to darken the horizon of our lives, and a gloomy cloud it was, through which our sun sought in vain to shine. I have, as I have said, noted that father never went anywhere, and that mother, with the exception of her friendship with Mrs. Wallace, lived her life shut up within herself; and I have likewise wondered why they should live so strangely when both were gentlefolks, well to do, and therefore most desirable acquaintances, especially in such a limited social circle as that of Wallan and its neighbourhood. But I was soon to learn the cause of this self-inflicted solitude, and then I ceased to wonder at it. A breath will wound the sensitive spirit, and they were both sensitive and vulnerable. Though the many would have received them with open arms, neither father nor mother would lay themselves open to the shafts of the brutal.

I was ten years old when I was first made aware of my heritage, though for a long time previously I had become conscious that wherever I went I was the object of considerable attention. Even the girls at school took to looking at me in a quizzing sort of way, whispering, and then leaving off their whispers as I approached; and upon several occasions I had seen old ladies put up their glasses, look me over curiously as though I were some strange animal, and then mutter, "Dear me," "What a pity," "And so pretty, poor thing," and then turn away with a shake of their heads. I could never understand those curious glances, those ominous head-shakes, and used to think that there was something supremely grotesque in their exhibitions of pity; for I was young and strong, and not unhandsome either; at least, my modesty has every reason to believe that I was not, and moreover, I had known no care — except one slight attack of measles — since the day I had first entered on this sublunary scene. There was plenty of that to come, unfortunately, but as yet my path had been a sunny one, and I gave no thought to the winter which was surely creeping onward.

The full significance of it all befell me one day in school. We were hard at our geography, and when the question time came round it so happened that I was asked what Botany Bay was famous for, and upon my immediately answering "Convicts," all the girls about me gave such unmistakable signs of tittering that the teacher's face flushed hotly, and I saw her regard me with a look of the most intense pity. Not

understanding why she should thus honour me, though guessing intuitively that there was something wrong, I returned her look with one of wonder, and, maybe, one of appealing also, for she came over to me and said, "Never mind them, Florence dear. They are only ignorant country children. Pay no heed to them." But when I told mother that night, she took me in her arms, sobbed over me, and called me her "poor unfortunate child;" and when father came in she told him, and I saw his face grow black as a thunder-cloud.

"They shall go near that school no more," he said, addressing mother. "I will not have my children insulted."

And I saw mother look up at him, oh, such a pitiful look, and his own hot eyes grew suddenly dim. He turned his face away and walked to the other end of the room.

"It is we who are to blame," she said. "God forgive us."

"Perhaps!" he exclaimed angrily. "But why should blame attach itself to these innocent children?"

Mother, instead of replying, for father was then in one of his combative moods, turned and caressed me more tenderly, while Harold, his big eyes full of wonder, put his arms round our necks, pressed his beautiful face in between our faces, and mingled his tears with ours. That night remains in my memory as one of the saddest I ever knew, and yet one of the sweetest too, for all the loving tenderness which we had hitherto experienced from our parents was eclipsed by their love of that night, and I well recollect that when I went to bed I wept myself, joyfully wept myself, to sleep.

But we went to that school no more, and father engaged a governess for us, who used to come over from Wallan three times a week; though, if the truth were told, most of our education was undertaken and completed by mother, who had once been a creditable scholar, and who remembered sufficient to take me through the world, though we intended that Will, and Harold too, if he were strong enough, should go off to Melbourne to finish his education.

And so the weeks sped by, and though I had not forgotten the cause of our leaving the school, and mother's subsequent tears and father's anger, I was yet too young to puzzle over what I could not possibly comprehend, and had it not been for the occasional glimpses of my old school-fellows, it is more than probable I should have forgotten it altogether. One day, however, the mystery was made clear once for all, and, young as I was, I knew that a shame had fallen on us from which we should not escape this side of the grave.

Will and I were returning one day from Wallan, where we had been to order in the week's stores, both mounted on our ponies, and as full of life as two young people of ten and twelve can be. I know I was thinking how splendid it was to have a pony of one's own, and to be able to

scamper along the roads or across the paddocks without the slightest exertion — to oneself — when we came to the slip-rails which led into one of Mr. Langton's large paddocks, which in its turn led, by a grassy road over which Will and I had had many a furious race, to our own home. Through this paddock we invariably went while going to or returning from Wallan, and through it we now proposed going. On reaching the rails, however, we were surprised, and not agreeably so, to see three of the town boys seated on the topmost rail eating sour apples.

“Hullo!” cried Will, imperceptibly drawing rein; “there's that Patsy Dillon and his friends. They've been stealing our fruit again. I told Smith to keep his eyes skinned, but I don't believe he'd take the trouble to chase anybody if he saw them.”

“But this is that awful Dillon boy,” I ventured.

“Of course it is,” was the reply. “But what of that?”

I thought a lot of it, for this Patsy Dillon, a lad of about fourteen, was a terrible young scapegrace, whose reputation for impudence and wickedness was unequalled in the township. He was the acknowledged bully of the place, the terror of all respectable children, and the admiration of all the worthless members of that mixed community, who applauded each evil effort, and prophesied that he would prove to be one of the grandest bushrangers the country had ever turned out. And it must be confessed that Patsy strove hard to live up to the exalted opinion his friends held of him, and never by any chance did he miss an opportunity of doing wrong, or of injuring or insulting all who came within his category of “stuck-up.”

That we were classed among the stuck-up — that is, the respectable — we knew well, and Will and he had on more than one occasion bandied some words of an uncomplimentary nature; but Will, like the rest of the younger boys, had a sneaking respect for Patsy, fostered, no doubt, by fear, for Master Dillon was deemed a boy of uncommon pugilistic prowess.

As soon as I saw this ill-dressed, ferocious young monster perched perkily on the rail, eating our apples, too, with an attendant monster on each side of him, my heart failed me, and, pulling in my pony, I whispered to Will that it would be better for us to turn back into the main road and abandon our thought of a grassy gallop.

Will shook his head. “They've seen us, Flos. If we were to turn back now, they'd know I was afraid of them.”

“But aren't you, Will?”

“No, I'm not,” says he defiantly, but all the same the poor old fellow looked very serious as he rode up to the rails.

There sat the three boys grinning like so many monkeys, but not one of them offered to move.

“Hullo, Hastings!” cried that dreadful Dillon boy, his horrid mouth full

of our fruit, "ave a apple?"

"No, thank you," says Will, as dignified as a young lord, or, as I take it, a lord ought to be. "I should be very much obliged to you, though, if you wouldn't mind getting down while we pass through." And springing from his pony he handed me the reins.

"Git down," echoed Patsy, with an impudent grin. "Well, I'm blowed!" The proposal almost took Master Dillon's breath away.

"If you wouldn't mind," said Will.

"But I do mind," said Patsy, with an evil look. "You just git up, young feller, and take yourself orf."

"Very well," replied Will, who entertained no thought of making the young scamp descend from his perch. "I shall not forget to let Mr. Mackenzie (Mr. Langton's manager) know about this. He's had his eye on you for a long time, Patsy Dillon."

Patsy uttered some rude remark, but Will turned to remount his pony without replying.

"Bah!" cried the young ragamuffin, seeing Will was not inclined to quarrel, "who'd take any notice of what you say, you convict!"

Convict! I looked at Will in wonder, my astonishment growing as I saw the blood rush furiously to his face. Then it passed away as suddenly as it came, leaving him as white as death.

"Convict," repeated the Irish boy, with an evil leer. "You're a nice one to give yourself airs, ain't you? If my parents is poor," continued the young monster, mockingly, "they're honest, and that's more than you can say, you *lag!*"

Will clutched his bridle nervously, so nervously that the bit jingled loudly. A dreadful look came into his face, a look that I never wish to see in a young boy's face again. One moment he seemed to hesitate, then swinging suddenly round walked back to where the three boys sat. Looking up at his tormentor, who with his mouth full of fruit sat grinning as usual, though rather nervously now, he said savagely, "You're a liar!" and seizing Master Dillon by the ankle, brought him ignominiously to earth.

In a moment there was a dreadful clatter and confusion. Master Dillon, bounding to his feet, cursing more horribly than a bullock-driver — trying, like all his class, to terrorize by the violence of his words — rushed at Will, and in a moment they were pounding away at each other like two young demons. I screamed loudly, and Will, thinking, as he said after, that something was the matter, left his adversary and rushed over to me. This move inspired the Irish boy with renewed courage, and he began to taunt and threaten us to such an alarming extent that I, growing extremely terrified, started to cry. I begged Will to come away, but he was as obstinate as an unbroken colt.

"There, there, don't be frightened," he said, trying to pacify me — dear

old Will! "He called me a convict, Flos. He's a liar, and I'll make him eat his lies."

"Come on, then," said Patsy, throwing off his coat and turning up his dreadful shirt-sleeves, "and let's see what sort of stuff you're made of. Come and tell me how you was lagged."

"Don't, don't, Will!" I cried, for I knew of the evil reputation of that horrible little monster, and I fully expected to see him pulverize poor Will. But Will, once his blood was up, was his father in miniature, and as such was not very easily daunted.

"Look here," he said, his face quite hard and old-looking, "I'll fight him if he kills me." And with that he pulled off his coat, handed it to me with an excited sort of smile, and deliberately rolled his sleeves above his elbows.

As long as I live I shall never forget that fight. Even now my blood warms at the recollection of it. I live my young days over again; I see that evil little monster, Dillon, and Will, face to face; their hands fly like lightning through the air; they roll from side to side and come with a crash to the earth; again they uprise and once more fall foul of each other; and all the while my heart is beating as though it would burst, the blood rushes so tumultuously through my brain that I almost fall from the saddle, and the tears which rush to my eyes dim my vision. But at last I hear the sound of a dreadful blow, and the next moment Master Dillon is wriggling on the grass with Will standing over him with clenched hands: and he makes the young vagabond eat his words as he said he would.

Dear, brave old Will! How my heart went out to him as he stepped up to me, a smile on his poor bruised face. I did not ask him if he were hurt; I knew that his wounds were honourable. I could only say, "Oh, Will, Will!" and cry again for joy.

To slip on his coat and mount his pony, which I had been holding, was the work of a moment; then turning to Dillon, who presented a deplorable front, and his two companions, who did not yet seem to fully comprehend the downfall of their hero, he commanded them to let down the rails, an order which they reluctantly obeyed, and into the paddock we passed.

We rode on for some time in silence, I glancing alternately at Will and he looking nervously about him as though he were ashamed to meet my eyes. Poor boy, as though the shame were his. Rather was he a hero of whom I was decidedly proud. He would be a man some day, and stand up for me always, fearing nothing, afraid of nobody, secure in the knowledge of his own strength. Oh, what a grand thing it must be to be a strong man!

And as I thought of all these things, and wondered and admired his prowess the more I thought, I was at a loss to understand why he, who was usually so amiable and easy-going, should have flared up so

excitedly and fought so desperately over a word.

“What did it mean, Will?” I asked.

He turned to me, a strange look in his flushed eyes.

“Mean?” he echoed. “What do you mean?”

“Why did he call you a convict?”

I saw his hot face turn very pale, but he answered with a palpable effort of indifference, “He wanted to insult me, I suppose.”

“He won't do it again, Will?” I said with a laugh.

“Not to my face anyway.” And digging his heels into his pony, away he darted, I following hard in his tracks.

As we approached our house — a roomy one-storied building of alternate brick and granite, with a large verandah in the front of it over which was twined creepers and roses and grape-vines — we beheld father and mother sitting in the verandah, and before Will could stop me I had galloped towards them, flung myself from the saddle, and rushed up the steps crying out that Will had just beaten Patsy Dillon in a flight. Poor mother rose from her chair with a look of intense alarm on her face, and when Will, all bruised and dirty and stained with blood, approached in a shame-faced way with his head hung down, she sprang towards him and embracing him passionately began to sob. And then poor old Will sobbed too, and Harold, his big eyes starting out of his head, limped up on his crutches, and learning the cause of the tears, began to whimper in unison. As for myself, I could have cried till further orders.

At last father spoke.

“So you have been fighting Patsy Dillon,” he said, “and your sister tells me you have beaten him?”

Will muttered something about it not being his fault, but that father's statement was substantially correct. I thought that for a moment father's eyes glistened with pride, though I believe I also doubted if that look betokened a softer feeling. I understand it better now.

“Have you forgotten,” went on father rather sternly, “that I have more than once warned you to avoid such boys as Patsy Dillon?”

“No, sir,” said Will, looking up through his tears, and a fine, honest, manly boy he looked as he spoke, “but he insulted me, and — and, I had an old debt to settle with him, and I settled it.”

“And him too,” I said, laughing and crying at the same time.

Mother pressed him fondly to her, and turning to father, said, “Surely, Frank, you are not angry with the boy?”

“Not yet,” said father with a strange smile, “for though I do not approve of his fighting every ragamuffin in the town, I would not have him forget to always stand up for his rights like a man. Hard knocks he'll get in plenty, and I should like my son to be able to give as well as take. But I must know more of this insult of which he speaks. What was it?”

A painful flush passed over Will's bruised face, and he held his head

down without speaking; but I answered quickly enough, "He called Will a convict."

In a moment father's whole demeanour underwent a curious change; his eyes blazed ominously, and he looked from one to the other with a look of terror and fury, like an entrapped lion might. Then he turned suddenly away and strode to the far end of the verandah. Poor mother pressed the warrior closer to her, though her excited eyes were riveted on her husband.

But presently father returned to us, and though he again had command of himself, his face was still changed and very terrible. Haggard, almost ghastly, he was, and his eyes shone with so much rage and pain, that I had only courage enough to take a momentary glance at them.

"Is this," he said, and I could not help noticing how his voice quivered — "is this the first time you have been called that name?"

"No, sir."

"You have never mentioned it to me."

"No, sir, because I knew it was all lies."

I saw mother and father exchange a deep look, the meaning of which I could not then fathom.

"Of course, of course," he answered hurriedly. "For the future you must keep to yourself, and have nothing to do with these people. Such persons, evil themselves, are always trying to drag someone down to their own level. Now run away and tidy yourself. Children," turning to Harold and me, "you will find the tea already laid within."

But as I went into mother's room — the windows of which opened on to the verandah — to lay aside my hat, I heard her and father, who were still outside, speaking in a low, earnest voice. What they said I could not quite catch, and I did not dare stay and listen; but as I was leaving the room I heard him say, "And for this, dear, we have brought those poor children into the world."

"God's will be done," she answered in a choking voice.

I took a hasty glance through the window, impelled to this action by something greater than curiosity. Mother's face was hidden on father's breast, and her body was shaking with sobs. His arms were about her, and he was kissing her hair.

What could it mean?

Chapter III.

AND now I think I may as well abandon even the pretence of mystery which may have shrouded these opening pages, for ours is, or hopes to be, a plain-sailing narrative; our aim the relation of simple facts in proper sequence.

The covert sneers which we had borne so long in ignorance, the pitying looks, the whispered conversations broken off as we approached, the thousand and one slights which I see so plainly now, though happily ignorant of them then, were not without their cause, or bred of spite alone, for we were currency people — convicts! Or, at least, when I say we were convicts, I mean that father had been transported to New South Wales, and that as the just laws of heaven and earth declare that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children, we were of the race of Ishmael. For a long time I did not quite know what it meant, and it was not till I was fifteen or sixteen that I thoroughly understood my position. Not conscious of being inferior to those about me, I could not understand the difference between the convict and the free. Try as I might, I could not see where my inferiority lay; nor was I the less surely convinced that there was no boy in the district the equal of Will. And if father was sent to New South Wales he was a gentleman with it all, and any man might have done as he did. Not that he was without blame, but it seems hard that he should have paid so dearly for a moment of justifiable passion, been branded with the indelible brand, stained he and his from generation unto generation.

It all came out one day. I was then in my sixteenth year, and Will, who was nearly three years older, was then a great big fellow, promising exceptional development in the next few years. There had been a row that morning out in the sheds between him and one of our men, over some young cattle which the latter was branding. I don't know exactly how it came about, but Will said the fellow was unnecessarily brutal to the poor beasts, and when he remonstrated with him the man threw down the brand, made use of some very violent language, and told him to do it himself. Now Will was never one to be trifled with. Though even-tempered enough if you did not purposely cross him, he had yet all father's fierceness of disposition with little of his restraint; beside which, he was a very powerful young fellow, as healthy and hard as a gum-tree; one who would as soon fight as not, and who would put up his hands

quicker than he would take them down. He therefore ordered the man to pick up the branding-iron and go on with his work.

"I'll see you d——d first," said the man.

Will took a step nearer him, an angry light in his eye.

"Do what you're told," he said.

"Not for you," snarled the man, "nor no other d——d convict."

Will's fist shot out and the man went over with a crash. Then followed a bit of rough and tumble; but the man was no match for Will, who soon gave him all he wanted and then drove him from the yard, threatening him with a like chastisement if he ever showed his face there again.

This was the story Will told as we all sat at tea that evening. Father paled visibly at the mention of that dreadful word "convict," and I saw mother put out her hand and draw Harold a wee bit closer to her.

"And now," said old Will at the conclusion of his narrative, his eyes fixed on father's face, his own face very troubled and serious, "I want to know what it means, dad. I may not be a man in years, but I am both big enough and old enough to understand things now."

"Well?" said father, though just a little nervously I thought.

"I want to know," continued Will, "if there is any truth in this convict business, because if there isn't, I'll break the neck of the next man who taunts me with it. You don't know what I've put up with, dad, in one way and another. As a boy I have often been ashamed to hold my head up; as a young man I have suffered more deeply still. Not that they say anything outright — they know better than that — " he added grimly, "but people can look what they think as well as speak it."

"They think," echoed father hotly. "Why, boy, they are not fit to wipe your boots."

"Perhaps not," answered his son queerly, "but that is not what I want to know."

Here mother interposed with some remark about keeping oneself to oneself, to which father did not reply, but rising from his chair began to pace rapidly up and down the room, every now and again stopping and staring out through the window. At last he stood stock still and faced us, and we all drew our breath hard, knowing that something unusual was coming.

"It is time you knew, Will," he said, looking desperately serious even for him, "and I think, dear," he added, turning to mother, "that the other children are old enough too."

Mother shook her head with a frightened look and tried to speak, but the effort only ended in a low sob. Harold crept over to her and hid his face in her breast, and I felt as though I should like to do the same, but the spell being on me I could not then have moved for the world. Will dropped the pear he was peeling and looked up into his father's face in his own resolute way.

“You are good children all,” father began, “and as such are worthy of the highest honour. Think, then, how it must pain me to be able only to dower you with a heritage of shame.”

“Then it is true?” gasped Will incredulously. “You are a ——.” He stopped, flushed, and then held down his head.

“A convict?” asked father, with a queer smile. “Yes. But listen to me, Will, and you, too, children, and remember what I say, for this subject must never be broached again. Perhaps I ought not to broach it now, but I think I owe it to you, children, and, moreover, I wish only to justify myself to you.”

After speaking thus, he strode nervously up and down the room for a minute or two, then coming back to his chair, and seating himself deliberately in it, he unfolded, with a few swift touches, the secret pages of his past.

“It is neither my wish nor intention to dwell on what I was, for the remembrance of what I was and what I ought to be would but intensify my wretchedness. Yet you must know this, children, for it may give you some small comfort when the clods with whom you are surrounded affect to despise you, that your grandfather was the twelfth baronet of our house, and that in your veins flows blood as good — if we may reckon its goodness by antiquity — as any in England. This seems a vain and pitiful boast now, but I have not forgotten that I was proud of it once, nor do I pretend to forget that it will add to your prestige in the eyes of the world.”

“You never mentioned this before,” said Will.

“No, because — because when my disgrace came on me I bore another name, and as in my trouble my family forsook me, I took a solemn oath that no word of them or theirs should ever pass my lips; and only now, when I see that by speaking I may lighten your load a little, do I venture to break it.”

Will bowed his head without speaking, while father, after passing his handkerchief several times across his forehead, continued, —

“Being the third and youngest son of a not over-wealthy father, at no time might my prospects have been considered too encouraging, but I must confess with shame that I was the principal instrument to my own destruction. One folly led to another, follies whose recapitulation would prove of little profit, till at last, driven desperate by my own straitened circumstances, and the relentless enmity of my people, I took the Queen's shilling, not as Francis Lawrence Hastings, but simply as Frank Lawrence. You see, I had pride enough to shield them even when my heart was hot with anger.

“Well, things went on smoothly enough, if one may call the life of a private soldier smooth, till a certain Captain Hawkes, a gentleman whom I had known in other days, joined our regiment.” Here I saw mother hide

her quivering lips in Harold's hair. "This man," continued father, "a pompous upstart, had been an unsuccessful suitor for the affections of your mother, and, rightly or wrongly, he deemed me the cause of his failure. For a long time, however, I escaped recognition by him, but at last the time did come — though, for his own ends, he never acknowledged the recognition — and then my martyrdom began.

"I will not weary you, or anger myself, by recounting the numerous insults to which I was subjected by that man, the countless petty indignities which were thrust upon me, and all, too, with his tongue in his cheek, as it were, for never once did he admit to having pierced my identity. But at last the climax came. One day on parade he called me that which no man of spirit could bear unmoved, because it is an insult to his mother's memory. My blood, never too well under control, boiled up and I answered him back. White with anger he rode up to me, and, before I had any suspicion of his intention, cut me across the face with his whip. In a moment I was a raging madman. The memory of all the wrongs I had suffered at this man's hand inspired me with frenzy. I stepped out from the line, and, swinging my rifle, brought it across his head and knocked him senseless from the saddle.

"For a long time he hovered between life and death, but he did not die, and so I escaped the death penalty. As Frank Lawrence — for until I was convicted did he guard my secret — I was tried for attempted murder, found guilty, and sentenced to ten years' transportation. Of my life here I need not speak. You know all that is necessary to know. In the due course of time she who had been faithful to me through all my follies and my bitter banishment came out to join me. Your mother, children, was that woman, the sweetest, noblest creature that God ever gave to man." And speaking thus, he arose, and went over to her, and put his arms about her neck and kissed her; and she, poor soul, began to sob loudly, and Harold and I joined in, and I am not certain that father's eyes were not likewise running over with tears, only my own were so dim that I could not see clearly.

Will had abandoned his pear, the poor boy's heart being too full of grief to eat, and after a great struggle to keep down the emotion which was bubbling to his lips, he said, "I am glad you have told me, father. I only wish I had known before. I was afraid you had done something wrong."

"Wrong!" echoed father with a curious laugh. "They don't usually give a man ten years for doing something good. But I understand you, Will. I was never a rogue."

"Thank God," said his son, and rising left the room.

So this was the secret of father's life. This accounted for the innumerable strange, sometimes pitying, looks which greeted me on every hand, the whispered broken sentences which so often reached my ears — "currency people," "sent out, you know," "what a pity," etc. So I

was really a convict's daughter; I possessed the overwhelming convict taint. Henceforth I was to be the scorn of all the more favoured mortals; no matter what I might be, or what I might do, that one word "convict" would overshadow all; for to us Australians — I was going to say *free* Australians — there is no taint so terrible as that of transportation, no crime so black as that of belonging to that unhappy class, and though things are changing a bit now, the old prejudices die hard. They tell me that the racial hatred in the United States of America borders on the intense. It must be something like our terror and hatred of the convict. Father a convict! It seemed impossible. He, with his gentle ways, his noble face, his ever kindly eyes. He, a convict — one of those creatures whom I, and most like me, had always regarded as a set of monsters little inferior in iniquity to the denizens of the pit. Yet from his own lips had come the words : there was no gainsaying them. We, like the Jew of old, were cursed, and would wander on and on seeking peace and never finding it.

That evening as Will and I were seated in the old summer-house at the bottom of the garden, talking over the new terror which had fallen upon us, we heard the click, click of Harold's crutches coming down the path, and, lest he should discover our weakness, I hurriedly dried my eyes, while old Will stood up to pluck a rose, whistling dolefully as he did so. In a moment the boy had hobbled to the entrance where he stood looking at us, a strange light beaming in his big eyes. Then he came into the house and sat himself beside me.

"Sis," he said tenderly, laying his hand on mine, "you are crying?"

"What nonsense!" I answered, trying to look indignant, though my spirit sank and my eyes grew dimmer as I watched him.

"Of course it is," he said with a strange laugh, "ask old Will there, who looks as bad as you."

"Well," said Will, owning up like the man that he was, "I confess that it has knocked me a bit silly, old boy. I couldn't, couldn't think that father had ever done anything wrong."

"Wrong!" echoed Harold excitedly, his pale face flushing hotly, "do you call it wrong to do as father did? I don't then. If I had been in his place I would have killed that dog of an officer." And he brought his crutch down upon the floor with a tremendous bang.

"Well, you can't say the old man never tried his best," said Will with a grim smile. "Not that I blame him — don't think that. I'd have done the same in his case — perhaps more — but it won't make any difference to us, will it?"

"But why should it make any difference to us?" asked Harold.

"Ah!" said Will with a sigh, "you have not gone about as I have; you don't know what they think of convicts."

"But I have read enough of them," was the reply, "and very foolish

characters they seemed; as absurdly ferocious as the wicked giant in a fairy tale. Why, I have laughed over them by the hour. Surely no one in his senses would believe in such a class?"

"If they do not," answered Will, "they will pretend they do, if only to annoy the likes of us."

Harold began to look serious.

"Do you really think," he asked, "that they will look down on us because father defended himself like a man?"

"They won't stay to think of that. We are currency people, Harry. They'll never get beyond that, my boy."

"But we need not necessarily be bad on that account."

"You do not understand this generous, Christian world," said old Will, and I never recollect his voice sounding more bitter. "It is not content with the torturing of the parent. Its Bible teaches it that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children, and it takes good care not to forget the teaching."

"But we have done nothing wrong," said Harold. "It is not fair that we should suffer."

"Fair!" echoed Will, with a growl of disgust. "You don't want much, do you?"

"Only justice, Will."

"Then you may get it in the next world, Harry, old boy, but never in this. A queer go, isn't it? What do you think of it?"

"I hardly know," replied Harold in a low voice, "but I think you must be mistaken, Will, because such selfishness and injustice cannot be universal."

"Oh, isn't it, though?" was the dogged reply.

"I would rather believe not," said the boy, "indeed I would. How can they think ill of us when we have done nothing to merit their censure? To me it seems like going against reason."

"And is," says Will, "and against justice too; but it goes on all the same."

"I can even understand them looking askance at father," continued the boy, as if oblivious of Will's remark, "because, rightly or wrongly, he has been criminally punished by the laws of his country, but what have we done that we too should be looked upon as outcasts?"

"We are his children, Harry, and a bad tree cannot bring forth good fruit."

"But is he a bad tree, Will?"

"According to law."

"But not to knowledge or reason. And is his fruit bad? I think not. You are a good fellow, Will; who can deny that? — and I am sure there is not a better girl in the colony than Flos. As for me," he added, in a choking voice, "surely no one could be envious of me? God has punished me

enough already.”

“Too much, poor little Harry. Never mind, old fellow,” continued Will, putting one arm lovingly round the boy's neck, “you'll have a glorious revenge yet. Wait, wait till the world is echoing your name, and greeting you as the first great Australian poet.”

“I'm afraid it is only a dream, Will,” said the poor boy, who for a moment had flushed at his brother's words. “How can a wretched little cripple, a currency boy to boot, ever hope to make a great and honourable name?”

“Why not, if he has the brain?”

“Ah!” sighed Harold, “if he has the brain.”

“Which you have, dear,” I said. “Remember, you are only a boy yet. You cannot do great things till you are a man.”

“Then I shall never do them,” he said. There was something so profoundly touching in his voice that I felt my heart rise almost to bursting. I had to turn aside to let the tears fall unobserved.

“What are you crying for?” he asked, slipping his thin white hand into mine. “I don't mean that I shan't live, Sis, though I sometimes think that it would be better for me if I were to die. It would be kinder, anyway, for I don't think that I shall ever be proud again.”

“Nonsense,” said Will roughly, though he too held his face away, and stood looking out across the rapidly darkening plains, “why shouldn't you? Haven't you got brains, and isn't that the grandest thing a man can possibly have? None of your common cleverness either, but the real thing, Harry. Why, in a few years all Australia will be singing your praises. Who will care a rap then whether you are a currency boy or a prince's son? Work, hope, and never let yourself be daunted. It is a fight between you and the world. If you won't give way, it will.”

“But you are very strong,” said Harold. “What am I?”

“If it were a mere matter of physical strength,” said Will, “I should have my doubts, but happily it is not. Once get the ear of the public, and though you were a chimney sweep they would applaud you. The few will always decry — for nothing enrages the unsuccessful like the success of others — but the many will uphold; that is how men have lived down the opposition of powerful cliques. Go on, Harold, think and work; write and write again, and if you win, your prize will be the greatest earth can give.”

Dear old Will! I never thought he had it in him, but he had read a good deal, and I shrewdly suspect that he had listened well to father and Mr. Langton, who talked very deeply at times. Anyway, he soothed poor Harold's sorrows and filled him again with hope, and when we all three returned to the house, some half-hour later, we seemed to have already left half our trouble behind.

Chapter IV.

THE next day Arthur and Ella Wallace rode over from Wallan, and though the society of my only friend should have proved most agreeable to me at that period, I was yet conscious of a certain restraint in her presence, which did not escape her prying eyes. She would insist upon my being ill, and as I had to prove to her that I was not, I recollect assuming an unusual gaiety and expressing a more than usual affection. The fact is, I was really nervous before her, for whenever she looked at me with those earnest eyes of hers, she seemed to read my heart, and that, in its present state, was precisely what I shrank from opening. Yet how I longed to do so, and would have done had not fear held me back, though I could not doubt the genuineness of her affection. We had grown up as sisters, having no other sister. If I was not staying at Wallan she was with us at Granite Creek, and we used to say that, like our mothers, we would be friends through life, and through death too, if such a thing were possible. She was a girl of my own age; we had similar likes and dislikes. I knew that she was devotedly attached to me, and I shrewdly suspected that she was not an indifferent admirer of Will. Whatever there was in the past I felt sure she would ignore, doubting not that she would still cling to me, though in my veins ran the criminal blood of all the world. A fig for your fairweather friend, say I! Give me the one who will stand by you in your darkest days, when evil tongues whisper, and eyes are upturned in righteous horror; who, knowing your virtues (for had you none he would never have loved you), tries to understand your vices; who puts himself in your place and strives to think what he would do under like conditions. This is the man you will never lose, if you have any good in you; for when he thinks, he sees and understands. Only the worst of it is so few people can think, or will take the trouble to learn.

Before the Wallaces left that afternoon Will approached me looking rather serious.

"I've been thinking it out, Flos," he said, "and I have come to the conclusion that it is better to get it over."

"Get it over," I repeated, simulating ignorance of his meaning; "get what over?"

"You know well enough," he replied almost fiercely; "this convict business. I've been skulking about the whole blessed day like a real criminal. I don't know what Arthur 'll think of me, poor old chap. He's a

good, simple fellow, Flos. I hope you'll make it up one day.”

“Don't talk nonsense, Will.”

“Nonsense,” he echoed; “where is the nonsense?”

“I do not want to marry. I shall never marry.”

He laughed. “So all young girls say, but, you know, they have been known to change their minds.”

“I shall not change mine. Even if I had the wish, who is there that would marry me?”

“You!” he exclaimed, in a tone of astonishment. “Why, thousands, to be sure, and only glad of the chance.”

“A currency girl?” I added bitterly.

“The sweetest girl in the country,” he said tenderly, his defiant eyes growing wonderfully soft as he looked into my face. And then he put his arm about me and kissed me, and told me that he was only afraid there was no one in the country half good enough for me.

Dear old Will! I know it was your true love that proved my angel in the days that were to come.

“I am sure Arthur knows there is something up,” he went on, after he had finished singing my praises, “and I think, dear, that we had better make a clean breast of it — tell them all there is to be told. If Arthur is what I take him to be he will respect and like us all the better for our confidence. If it's the other way about, well, let him go. It will be another illusion shattered, that's all, and we shall not miss much in losing him.”

“I am sure you wrong him, Will. It would make no difference to him, nor Ella either, whatever we might be, or whatever father had done.”

“I am one with you there,” he replied, “but we shall see.”

Later on Will and I walked part of the way back with the Wallaces, he leading Ella's horse and Arthur his own. We walked on very solemnly for a long time, till Arthur suddenly burst out laughing.

“Well, I'm hanged if we're not as solemn as a funeral,” cried he. “What's up with you, Will, old man?”

Will, being thus bluntly appealed to, looked at him earnestly, and then at Ella and me. I nodded encouragingly.

“Look here, old chap,” he said, and I thought his voice sounded very strange, “something is up. You'd look serious, too, if you were in my shoes. Not that I wish you were, Arthur — God forbid!”

“You have had a hard knock, old man?” said Arthur in a low voice.

“Yes,” said Will, “a clean knockdown, old fellow; but not, I hope, a knock-out.”

Then he told our secret exactly as father had told it to us.

“So you see,” he added, “we are convicts — yes, convicts — why should I shirk the word? I won't pretend to say that I'm not glad father was no criminal, neither shall I attempt to justify his actions. I only know that I would have done the same. So much for the man. As for this thing,

this brand which Flos and Harold and I shall bear to our graves — this convict mark upon our foreheads — I tell you candidly, Arthur, I'm afraid of it. What matters it to the world that my father is incapable of crime, is he not, in its view, a criminal of the most atrocious nature — a denizen of Botany Bay? Why Botany Bay should be worse than Pentridge, or any other prison, I leave the wise ones to expound. To me there is no difference. But perhaps I own a bias. I know that it is so, however, and that I shall carry about with me a secret which will make my life one long torment. I shall shudder at the name of convict, and turn white at the sound of Botany Bay. I know that henceforth I shall be an outcast, and a coward on that account."

"Never a coward, Will," said Arthur, taking his hand, "and never an outcast either while I and mine have a roof above us."

Poor old Will shook his friend's hand without speaking. Then he said in a quivering voice, "That's good of you, Arthur. I thought — forgive me, won't you — that you too might turn on us when you knew what we were."

"Could you think so badly of us?" said Ella, who had not spoken before.

"No," said Will, "I could not, in my heart of hearts. I tried to be hard, that was all; to prepare myself for anything. It has been a great effort to tell you both, but now I'm glad you know."

"My dear old Will," cried Arthur, "we have known all about it this many a day. Long before you did, it seems. But there, there, it makes no difference to us. Let us hear no more of it. It is not an agreeable subject, so why shouldn't we drop it, now and for ever? Any fellow who thinks the less of you for it is a cur and beneath your notice. Of one thing you may be sure — no one shall twice speak ill of you in my presence."

"Thank you," said Will, once more shaking his friend's hand. "You are the same good fellow I always believed you to be. You give a chap new hope."

"And you?" cried Arthur, looking hard at me.

"Oh, I shall exist at Granite Creek," I answered. "Ella and I have made up our minds to live and die in single-blessedness."

"Heaven forbid!" said he. "You would never be so selfish?"

"I can't answer for Ella, of course. She may be weak enough to succumb to the attractions of some male charmer, but I, never."

"I hope you will let me come and see you sometimes?"

"Well, if you pass your examinations successfully," said I, alluding to his study of medicine — for it was intended that he should become a disciple of Æsculapius — "I'll send over for you occasionally to come and doctor our sick cats — for of course we shall have lots of cats, like true old maids."

"I shall feel honoured," he replied gravely.

Why," said I, "you have the professional tone already," and I somewhat flippantly imitated him.

"I am practising," he replied without a smile.

"Though not yet in practice?"

"Precisely."

That was the worst of Arthur; he was always so grave, so very much in earnest. If he looked at you, there was a seriousness in his looks which, at times, was absolutely unpleasant. You could not be frivolous with such a man. Everything he said he meant, and being utterly devoid of commonplace tittle-tattle, he was oftener silent than otherwise. Now this may be an excellent trait in a man — for is it not Solomon himself who tells us that silence is golden? — especially in the company of men, whom we will suppose have a smattering of knowledge. But it is absolutely necessary, for his own advancement in our good opinion, that a young man of these days should be able to play the fool occasionally — no very great effort being required in most cases. Girls, as a rule, do not like a serious man, although they think they do. I half suspect they imagine him to be continually searching their inmost heart and analyzing their every motive. What a monster, to be sure! Conceive a man prying in behind this barrier of bone which shields that mystic matter which we call our brain, reading our every thought, and comprehending our unuttered desires! Or conceive him gloating like a demon over our captured heart as it writhes beneath his microscope, telling of the stains and waves of blood which go to make up the sum and passion of our life! Who is to be safe with men like this let loose? We know well that we are all better than our neighbours, and yet even we have some things by us which we would not care to show.

Woman, to whom custom has refused to grant that freedom of discourse so arbitrarily claimed by man, has consequently many more secrets to guard: she is, in fact, a storehouse of secrets, a cushion pricked all over with invisible pin points of hopes, and fears, and desires. Therefore, how necessary is it to preserve the outward gloss! But should you chance to tear aside that satin binding which looks so fair, you will see the centre, or heart, transfixed with innumerable impressions bubbling blood of many colours. Not all black, thank heaven, but just enough to make us wish to keep the cover on. Now, as we detest the microscope, so do we the prying eyes of the inquisitive. Humanity is an easier book to read than dullards imagine, but it is a perverse book and resents the magnifying glass personally, though it always makes use of it to look at a brother or sister. The worldling will let a woman think he believes her to be all that she pretends; he is wise. She too, is not without her cunning, and fools him to the top of his bent — a task of infantine ease. But what she cannot tolerate is your superior sort of person who looks at her with steady, earnest eyes, eyes which seem to look through

hers and penetrate the secret chambers of her brain. There is something offensive in this person. He will not take her at her own valuation.

Not that poor old Arthur was such a dreadful creature as this. It is true he was always very earnest, and, for a young man, singularly reticent, but more open, honest eyes, I do not think I ever saw. The only fault about them was their almost inhuman steadiness, a fault, I grant you, which some people of our acquaintance would give much to own. In short, he was not fool enough ever to be popular. He would have been irresistible to ladies over thirty. Such a man was first cousin to the Sphinx. Your purse, honour, life itself would have been safe in his keeping. But to girls who are "green in judgment" such men are extremely trying. I liked Arthur well enough, I always thoroughly believed in him; to me he seemed quite different from the generality of boys, but at the same time there is no denying that I did think him just a little *slow*. Was he not also as ignorant of the world as I, and could I possibly look up to anyone whose knowledge was no greater than my own? Then again, though always respectful, and, when I come to think over it, even courteous at times, the poor fellow was sadly lacking in the glorious attribute of *style*. This is an essential for woman-worship, and I'm afraid our embryo doctor was at a sad disadvantage in consequence. Will called it "side," but I knew better. Moreover, a vain girl cannot be expected to recognize her hero in one whom she heard described as the "clumsiest owl in Wallan." It rather takes the pride out of her, even though she has only a sneaking regard for the said owl.

We walked with Arthur and Ella a good mile from the homestead, repeating over and over again solemn vows of eternal friendship. For good or ill we swore allegiance; let what might ensue, nothing should ever come between us.

"There," said Will, as the Wallaces mounted their horses and cantered off along the dusty road, "there go two of the best people in the world."

"Yes," I said, "two of the best people in the world." He looked at me quickly, but seeing I was serious marched on in silence.

"What do you think of her?" he asked, when we had traversed some hundred yards or so.

"What have I always thought of her?"

"Of course," he answered with an awkward laugh. "I should have asked you what you thought of *him*."

"And I should have replied what business that is of yours."

"Hoity-toity," says he, "how we flare out, just as if there was something in it."

Though I could see he only wanted to tease me, I yet grew mightily indignant, for there was more truth in his insinuations than I liked to own. Yet what brother ever cared for his sister's indignation? Indeed, he does not seem to think that sisters have a right to grow indignant. It is a

thing beyond him; equally as much so as the fact that his sister is like other women, no better, no worse. This seems a preposterous idea, and takes him a long while to grasp — if he ever does. I am not certain that there isn't a shade of sacrilege in the thought. Will says there is, but then he was very fond of me, and in his fondness forgot my human frailties. It is a beautiful thing though, this reverence of the sister. Think of it, ye girls who have disagreeable brothers. How do you know but that in their heart of hearts they may think the best of men unworthy of you? And how do ye try to live up to their standard, O my sisters? When the temptation comes, do ye ever stay to consider that ye may cast an everlasting slur on one who loves like unto God Himself?

As we continued our journey through the paddock, the one before the rails of which Will had annihilated the power of that little monster, Patsy Dillon, we were overtaken by Mr. Langton, who, as was his wont, pulled up his horse and gave us the time of the day.

“Homeward bound, children?” he asked, after the usual salutations had passed.

“Yes, sir,” said Will, touching his hat, for everybody was extremely civil to Mr. Langton, not so much, I think, on account of his wealth, which was reputed boundless, as of himself; for he was a genuine man, a gentleman to his fingertips, as father used to say, though those tips might have broadened a little through hard work. For he had done his share of toil like the rest of us, and by his own skill and industry had built up Langton Station, one of the finest estates in that part of the country. It was of him father rented the five hundred odd acres known as Granite Creek, for he and dad had been schoolfellows, companions, in the Old Country, and he was not one to kick a man who was down.

“You did wrong, from a practical, sensible point of view,” said he, when father had finished his story, “but you did what nine out of every ten *men* would have done. I haven't forgotten old times, Hastings, so you must throw in your lot with me.” And so father, who had some practical knowledge of farming, took up his selection on Granite Creek; and there he built our house, and round it planted the roses and the grape vines, and the beautiful English trees with their dense foliage, through which even the fiercest sun failed to pierce. In three years he transformed the sterile track through which the little creek ran into a miniature Eden, and then, having some money by him, he sent to England for mother, who had corresponded with him all the time.

“First and foremost,” wrote he, “I must let you know what you have to expect should you determine to join me. I am a convict, never forget that. The crime I committed is one for which I do not grieve, but it has brought a punishment you can little imagine. I will not say that I am altogether an outcast, but even here, in this free country, where so many of my class are at large, the antipathy against us is so overwhelming that

I and mine must ever be subjected to unceasing humiliation. On the other hand, dear," and here mother has often told me the paper was so blotted with tears that she could scarcely decipher the writing, "if you are brave enough to risk all this, if you think that you can find contentment with me, and happiness in seeing me happy, come, and if a life's devotion can recompense you——"

Well, well, it's a sad romance, isn't it? Who would think that that grave-eyed man who bends unceasingly at his toil from morning to night, content to see his wife and children about him, repining not for the lost days, wishing no other life, had suffered so much, so much? Or who would imagine that that tender, grey-haired woman, with her pale, sweet face, had ever possessed sufficient courage to face the dreadful, shameful life in the new land? Ah, me, the days of martyrs and heroes are not yet passed.

Quiet, and yet so courageous; going about with her sweet sad smile and her soft words — what a woman was here! I know she keenly felt her position, and I understand now why she preferred the peace and solitude of her own home to the rush of the outside world. But her face was sad, oh, so dreadfully sad, and when she smiled she was saddest of all. Yet there was with all her quiet dignity a force of character which told of a courage equal to her love. That might, perhaps, be taken for granted, considering all that she had done. Yet I remember one dark winter's night when she proved herself possessed of the courage of a hero as well as the devotion of a saint. Father was away from home that week with some cattle which he had taken to the Boorta Show, and about twelve o'clock one night we were all awakened by the violent barking of the dogs. I remember how we all rushed to mother's room, Harold and I clinging to her, Will standing by her side with a half-defiant, half-frightened look on his little pale face. We could distinctly hear the tramp of the robbers on the verandah. Now they were trying the door, now the windows; but they were evidently novices at the business, for they did not succeed in effecting an entrance. And all the while we clung to mother, moaning piteously, while she alternately took us in her arms or patted our heads, telling us in a low trembling voice not to be afraid, for that God was watching, and He would protect us.

At last the men began to knock at the door, and still we stirred not. Meanwhile the barking of the dogs grew louder and angrier. We heard one of the men utter a furious exclamation. Then a shot followed and poor old Ponto went off howling.

This seemed to waken mother from the lethargy into which she had fallen. We were in an isolated position — a mile at least from any other house. On ourselves must depend our salvation. Mother, kissing us, whispered us to remain quiet, and then silently quitted the room, followed by Will. The half minute of their absence seemed like an

eternity, but when they returned I saw that she had been to the kitchen, for she now held father's gun in her hand, a weapon which had always hung above the kitchen mantelpiece. Poor little Will was by her side, the kitchen poker grasped firmly in his little hand. The lion's cub, you see, had something of the lion's spirit.

By this time the knocking on the door grew louder, and mother, fearing they would ultimately break it in, called out, "Who's there?"

"A friend," was the reply.

"No friend would call as you have at such an hour as this," answered mother.

"Friend or not, old woman," said the voice, "you'd better open the door pretty quick, or I'll break it in." And as if to give us a foretaste of his intentions, the owner of the voice delivered sundry heavy kicks on the panels which made them creak.

"Frank," cried mother, pretending father was in, "you are wanted outside."

At this the two men laughed loudly.

"Very good, missis," cried the voice derisively, "but we happen to know that the old bird's at Boorta. So open the door and have done with this nonsense. It'll be the worse for you if you don't."

"I will not open the door," answered mother, and her voice had grown so hard that I scarcely recognized it; "and what's more, I am armed, and I'll shoot the first man who enters the house."

Well, they didn't attempt to enter. They growled and threatened much, and swore more, and when they were leaving fired several bullets through our windows; but beyond that they did no harm, and after waiting for quite half an hour to make sure that they were gone, we all knelt by mother's bed and mingled our sobs with her prayers. I shall never forget that night. The brave, sweet woman, the sturdy little son; the wild night without, and the wilder men. She who would not, under ordinary circumstances, have raised her hand against the meanest of God's creatures, would have fought that night, ay, and killed too, ere harm should befall her little ones. And Will, with the kitchen poker in his poor little hands — a very David, forsooth, an infant Titan! Whenever I think of that night I always murmur Campbell's beautiful thought, —

"A noble mother must have bred
So brave a son."

Chapter V.

MEANWHILE Mr. Langton, whom I have most shamefully neglected all this time, walked on beside us, chatting in his genial, cheery way — he being very fond of us children — till we approached our house and he beheld father's form in the distance. Then, shaking his horse up a bit, he trotted on ahead, and we watched him ride up to father, dismount, make his horse fast to a rail, and then go up on the verandah.

“Come over for a yarn,” said Will. “Strange that he should take the trouble to ride over for the express purpose of talking with the old man.” Will sometimes used this rather vulgar appellation in speaking of father; but as I knew he meant nothing disrespectful by such familiarity, I cannot say I ever resented it.

“Not so strange either,” I replied, “since they suit each other and have tastes in common.”

“A currency man, you know,” suggested he.

“But a gentleman, too, Will, and therefore the equal of Mr. Langton, and the superior of nine-tenths of the people hereabouts.” I am afraid the modesty of this speech is not too apparent, but when your case is not a particularly good one, a little braggadocio may be permissible.

“Yes,” said Will, not wishing, as I could see, to dispute the point.

And yet a child may surely be excused for extracting every ounce of consolation from the prestige of its parent? And father was a man who must have commanded respect even under the most disadvantageous of circumstances. I have often heard Mr. Langton declare that he was the only man in the district to whom it was a pleasure to speak, and that it was a lucky day for him when Hastings came to Granite Creek. And how they did talk, to be sure, upon every known subject it seemed to me, bandying the names of the great classic writers with a freedom which showed considerable familiarity with those worthies. Science, poetry, philosophy — there was no subject upon which they did not linger and upon which they did not disagree. This, of course, proved the very fuel of their argumentative fire, and if at times they piled on a little too much of it and the flames spouted up rather ominously, they always burnt low again with inconceivable rapidity. Both men had excellent tempers well under control, and understood that argument was applied to argument, not man to man. This is a thing over which many people blunder. They identify themselves with their argument, and in consequence look upon

the destruction of one as the annihilation of the other. Such people live a life of tumult and die despised.

To Harold these conversations were school, college and university all in one. A training so unique no small boy ever had. For hours he would sit, curled up in his low chair, his eyes fixed intently upon the face of the speakers, his ears taking in every word. And Mr. Langton grew to like and admire the boy, and often, in the middle of his hottest arguments, he would turn from father to the attentive lad appealingly, "Now what is your opinion, Harold?" At which poor Harold, overwhelmed with confusion, would blush most painfully and confess his ignorance with a stammering tongue. But Mr. Langton was wont to declare that there was much more in the boy than the superficial glance took in. He knew of Harold's hopes and ambitions, and did all within his power to foster his love of study. Books on every conceivable topic he sent over for the delectation of the rising poet, though volumes of verse, travel and biography were the boy's especial delight.

"We shall make a poet of you, Harold, never fear," the squatter one day said, after having duly perused one of the poor boy's effusions. "I won't say these verses are perfect. Candidly, my lad, they are not; your poet does not grow like a gooseberry. But you have form and style, and you are imitating good models. By-and-by you will not imitate at all; then you will be a real poet."

"But is it not impossible not to imitate somebody," asked the boy, "when the writing of poetry is confined to certain rules?"

"Only in the form of the verse," was the reply, "though Whitman, the American poet, has even despised that. Thought and expression you may cultivate. Rhyme only is really arbitrary, but it, being mechanical, is easily conquered. Why, you don't want even an ear for it. As for imitation," he went on, "I should let that concern me little, for I hold that every man is original; that no two men write alike, that, moreover, to do so is an utter impossibility. So-and-so has a few pronounced characteristics which he employs, well knowing their value. They are mere pyrotechnic displays of intellect shot out to enthral the shallow; flash squibs of thought which startle you for the moment. They are but another form of Vanity, as the Preacher would say. You will find the wisdom they illumine as old as Solomon — a wise man notwithstanding certain erratic actions. He discovered, even in his day, that 'the thing which has been it is that which shall be, and there is no new thing under the sun.' So don't trouble your head about so-called originality, Harold. Write as nature dictates, and when you have learnt to separate the wheat from the chaff, learned, in fact, to know what others have written and thus avoid it, you will find the wings of your innate originality quite strong enough to bear you through the clouds of ephemeral criticism."

All of which Harold took to heart, that is, as much of it as he could

understand, and went about his verse-making with new inspiration. Already he could see the golden dawn descending. Like the shower which enwrap the wondering Danae fell the sweet hopes about his heart, and he would come to me and put his arms about my neck and tell me the thousand and one secrets which filled his breast. And I used to listen to his verses and duly praise them, and not untruthfully either, for they were good verses, giving promise of future excellence.

“How do they sound?” he would whisper, his face aglow, his great eyes burning into mine; “do they sound like poetry?” And I would answer, “Beautiful” — I believe I would have said the same had they been the vilest doggerel ever written. “You will be the first great Australian poet, never fear. Every man in Australia will be proud of you. Perhaps, in time, the English will recognize you too, though I am afraid that much an Australian would appreciate would be meaningless to them. Still, Harold, if you can conquer England, you have the world at your feet. What do you think of that, my brother?”

“I cannot think of it,” he would answer excitedly, “I dare not. But it would be wonderful, wouldn't it, Sis?”

Poor Harold! Wonderful indeed!

As Will and I approached the verandah, the conversation, whatever it had been, ceased, and Mr. Langton turned and surveyed us with a look of genuine admiration.

“And I'll wager they don't think any the worse of you for it,” I heard him say as we mounted the steps. “Ah,” he continued as we advanced towards them, “a bonnie pair, Hastings, a bonnie pair. You ought to be a proud and happy man.”

“And am I not?” asked father with a smile.

“Of course you are; how could you be otherwise? I would I were half as fortunate.”

“You!” exclaimed father amusedly. “What have I in comparison with you? If I am occasionally happy, you ought to be in a perpetual state of bliss.”

“On the assumption that as I can afford to pay for fifty dinners a day, I ought to be able to eat them. Not a bad proposition. Why should not a man be capable of eating fifty dinners if he can get them? Is there a more pleasurable sensation than that of eating good things?”

“I may think so,” said father, “but I will grant you that many do not.”

“Which means that like is made for like; but as we are like no one thing, but seem to be the affinity, the component part of everything that interests us, you will understand that we should quickly tire of even fifty dinners *per diem*. The beggar who has health and a hearty appetite yearns for the money bags of Croesus; and poor old Croesus, who hasn't a sound tooth in his head, who cannot even digest a nightingale's tongue, who is never, sleeping or waking, free from some pain, some annoyance, feels

that he wouldn't mind changing places with the beggar.”

“And to what does all this unfathomable talk tend?”

“That you are more to be envied than I, and that I was never so jealous of any man as I am of you.”

“You're joking, surely?” said father.

“A sorry joke. You have that for which I, with all my flocks and herds, sigh in vain — a loving family. There was only one creature in this world who could have made my wealth a real blessing, and she, God rest her, passed away before success had fairly crowned my efforts.”

“Believe me,” said father, and I could see that he was thinking of his own dear helpmate, his eyes grew so wondrously soft, “I can imagine your loss, and sympathize with your sorrow. But there is a lot of happiness in life, even for the most despondent, if they will search diligently for it. Come now, reflect. Fate has been kinder to you than to the generality of her sons. Go down on your knees and thank her.”

“And yet to me my reward does not seem to exceed my deserts.”

“Nor would the purple of the world seem out of place on the shoulders of an emperor — to him, at least. What it would seem to the world is another matter. Not that I blame the human craving for more, more! It is that which has kept the world spinning all these centuries. It is that which has invented steamships, railways, telegraphs, telephones, and our whole catalogue of earthly wonders. The spirit of man is like the universe it inhabits — boundless, infinite; an animal one minute, a God the next. That it shall never cease craving for the unattainable is the price it pays for its greatness.”

“Then you think it would be wise if we were all to try and make the best of what we have?”

“There is no little reason in such philosophy.”

“Ah, my dear fellow,” said Mr. Langton, “it may be within the bounds of reason, but it is beyond the bounds of practicability. Give a man gold, and he strives for power; give him power, and he yearns for power unlimited; give a woman a necklace of stars, and she will sigh for the sun as a pendant to it. Satisfaction is an unknown word, or at least an unexperienced sensation.”

“And still I repeat, you ought to be satisfied.”

“Ought to be, and is — two different things, aren't they? Not that I really have much cause to grumble, only I like to talk. Old men, like old women, were ever noted for their garrulity. Fred's a bit of a bother to be sure, and seems to be rushing to the dogs with express speed. If the rascal wasn't so like his mother, I'd disinherit him to-morrow. These young fellows little think, as they throw their gold about, what trouble it cost their fathers to gain it.”

“You know the saying in reference to putting old heads on young shoulders. The world was old before our young days, Langton. Yet, you

see, I am here. The knowledge of my mistake may act as a slight deterrent to my son in some few things, but the broader paths of life he will have to walk for himself.”

“I suppose so, though it seems incredible that it should be so, considering how much we might teach them. But Will there looks strong enough to trudge any road — isn't that so, William?”

Will said he was not afraid to face the great conundrum of the future.

“I should think not,” said Mr. Langton. “You're all right, Will, while you keep those brawny arms and that straight back of yours. And Flossie there, she too has her hopes, I can see. Come, come, don't blush, child. You shall be pretty enough for him, never fear, But where's my dreamer, my young poet, all this time?”

“His back is bad,” I said. “He is in bed.”

“Poor poet. He is a great sufferer?”

“Great, sir.”

“May I see him?”

“Oh, yes.”

So the good squatter, extracting a book from his pocket, for he never forgot to bring Harold some sort of present, rose from his seat and went into the house with father.

As soon as they were gone, Will looked at me and began to grin.

“He's a queer old chap, isn't he?”

“He's a dear old man,” said I somewhat indignantly.

“Yes, of course,” says Master Will, still grinning furiously, “but don't you think? — ” Here he stopped and tapped his forehead significantly.

“How dare you! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

“Well, you know, Flos, he can't be too securely tiled. Did you ever hear such talk, such a lot of arrant nonsense out of Bedlam?”

“I was never in Bedlam,” I answered rather airily, “so cannot say.” And I bowed to him, thereby implying a compliment of a dubious nature.

“Bedlam or no Bedlam,” he replied, “if that's the sort of rubbish they've been shooting into little Harry, I don't wonder the poor boy has taken to poetry.”

“I'm afraid I shall never be able to pity you for a similar falling away.”

“Don't you be sarcastic, miss. I like poor little Harry as much as any of you, and no one would feel prouder than I of his success; but if Mr. Langton is the fountain from which he draws his inspiration, I begin to tremble.”

“You are a very foolish fellow, Will, and don't in the least understand human nature. Do you for one moment suppose that Harold is going to swallow everything that comes along? And don't you know that man is a talking animal; also, that he is not without some touch of the peacock? Do you follow me?”

“Of course I do; but I'm hanged if you don't beat about the bush as

much as he does. Why don't you out with a thing when you have it to say?"

"When a sensible person has a thing to say he, or she, makes the most of it."

"To show off his cleverness?"

"Will, you are too precipitous; the possessor of too much bone and muscle." But at the same time I could not help admiring his huge limbs, limbs which would be bigger yet and stronger too.

"And not enough brain, eh, Impudence?"

"You are as God made you," I said sympathetically.

"And not badly made either — at least so I've been told," he added with a sly look. And stretching out his two big arms, he caught me round the waist and held me out as though I were a baby.

"Peacock!" I cried, struggling to free myself. "That girl is making a fool of you."

"Girl?" said he, assuming a look of wonder.

"Yes, Mr. Innocent. I know all about it, and everyone else knows that Polly Lane is the biggest flirt in Wallan."

"She's pretty, though," says he, the big idiot!

"Not half as pretty as Ella Wallace," I replied.

"Ah, but Ella's mother doesn't keep a pub," he answered nonchalantly. "You've no idea what a jolly place a pub is."

"No, I have not," I replied with some asperity.

"A cosy chair," he continued, unheeding my remark, "a pipe, a glass and a pretty girl. What more can the heart of man desire?"

"Much, I should think."

"But you are not a man."

"If I were, I should be ashamed to own that my aspirations rose no higher than the bubbles on a pint pot."

"You are forgetting the pipe and the girl. But that reminds me, Flos. I heard over there," nodding towards Wallan, and meaning, of course, the "Shearer's Rest," over whose beer-taps the siren Polly Lane presided, "that Captain Fred had lost heavily on the Cup. I suppose it was that to which Mr. Langton referred just now?"

"Probably."

"He must be an awfully wild fellow, Flos. Keeps a racing stable and the Lord knows what not. They say he dropped ten thousand to Bo Johnson over that one race. Lucky beggar!"

"Lucky! Why, the man must be a born idiot."

"Ah, you women don't understand," said he sapiently.

"I should think not."

"I mean, he's lucky to be able to lose ten thousand."

"Anybody could lose it, if they had it, and wanted to."

"Oh, you're hopeless. But here come the old people. I'm off." And with

a knowing smile he darted from my side and disappeared round the corner of the house. Poor old Will had had enough philosophy for one day.

This Captain Fred, of whom he had made mention, was Mr. Langton's only son, and, if report erred not, would one day inherit his father's vast wealth. We saw little of him at Wallan at any time, so that he was a sort of exaggerated myth to most of us, but rumours of his wild doings in Melbourne reached us at odd intervals, intensified, no doubt, by repetition and distance. I know we all regarded him as a very terrible sort of person, but then in Wallan we were a simple race of beings, and really knew nothing of the people who lived in the world of great cities. We had our race week once a year; a race ball usually wound up the festive proceedings; all the rest of our lives was flat, stale and unprofitable. I think such girls as Polly Lane had the best of it in townships like ours. True, she drew beer and had to countenance much choice bush dialogue; but, if rumour may be trusted, she had her moments of recompense. I know she was saucy enough to be happy, and I am likewise certain that she did her best to entice Will away from home, feeling sure that she only did it to pique me. Will thought my suspicions decidedly uncomplimentary to himself.

Captain Fred was an honorary captain of our local volunteers. He had a captain's uniform, and very naturally called himself after it, but whether he knew anything of military matters, or whether he ever attended drill, I cannot say. I know it was his custom to appear in uniform at the annual treat he gave the corps at Langton Station, but there, I have every reason to believe, his soldiering began and ended. He clung to the title, however, and whenever we saw his name in the paper the "Captain" always preceded it. And how fond we Australians are of a title, and what won't we do to gain one — from our tradesmen to our politicians, who are also tradesmen. Our athletes are "professors," and each unskilled medico, who shames the title, writes "Doctor" in large letters all over his insignificant person. And what think you means all this frothy talk of imperialism and loyalty but the ulterior hope of gain? Loyalty to what, to whom? A man must be loyal to his own country before he prates of loyalty towards others. Pity it is that Australians do not govern Australia, though they too fall in adoration before the god of "honours." I wonder what we would think of ourselves if we had a few lords, and why we should not have them I am at a loss to comprehend. It is extremely aggravating that the British Government does not humour us in this also. They had better look to it if they want to pass Imperial Federation, for no honest man could possibly think of pledging his country for a beggarly knighthood. We are quite English enough to worship the creation. So much, in fact, do we out-Herod Herod in this respect, that it has long been a considerable surprise to me why we do not manufacture a few

batches of lords of our own — as they do in England, every year. Truly, our new creations might for a period pose as the butt of vulgar ridicule, but laughter is evanescent by nature, nor can people laugh for ever. In a year we should get used to them; in a generation they would be blue-blooded. No one would laugh then. Really it is too absurd for a growing country, and one which entertains hopes of an independent nationality, to subject itself to the whims of a monarch (who is only human), or a prime minister, who, alas! is only human too.

Not that I believe Captain Fred was any the worse for his little vanities. We love an honour, not for the thing itself, but because people honour us for it. And who can deny that Captain does not sound better than Mr.? I am quite prepared to admit that it should not; that one is really as empty or as full as the other, but we cannot disguise the fact that it is not so common, and a superfine world fails to see anything attractive in common things.

So Mr. Frederick Langton was Captain Langton, and if it pleased him to be so bedecked, I really don't know that it did anyone else harm. We all called him Captain naturally enough, and I won't say the title did not enhance his reputation. It certainly raised him a little out of the commonplace; threw a sort of halo round his half fabulous personality, added a charm, so to speak, to his vices and his virtues — if of the latter he ever had any. He certainly was a man to set an unsophisticated heart throbbing, for your scapegraces have a great charm for women, or rather girls, who are headless women. I had not seen Captain Fred above a dozen times, and had not seen him at all for the last two years; but I used to hear so much of him that I often caught myself wondering what manner of man he might be. There is something extremely fascinating in a rakish reputation, be it of man or woman. Like runs to like, I suppose. Still, the bad are never wholly bad; neither are the good too good. If, however, Captain Fred was anything like his reputation, or what was left of it, he was one to set a young girl by the ears. Handsome he was — he certainly looked well in his photograph — and I have a vivid recollection of a pair of impudent blue eyes, and a heavy, well-curved moustache, but beyond that I had little to go on, except his reputation, and that, alas, was in such a dilapidated condition that I dared not venture far upon it.

Of his sister Maud, for he had a sister some four or five years younger than himself, I knew a little more, for she and I had often played and ridden together before — before I knew that I had any cause to be ashamed of my father. But I recollect one day her governess putting the old question, “Was it true? etc.” From that moment Maud Langton and I were only on bowing terms; outwardly we remained good friends, but our friendship had little warmth or geniality in it. I was not slow in guessing the reason of her coldness, and having no little pride of my own we soon came to a tacit understanding. Then she went away to

Melbourne, to school. Afterwards she lived with some relations in Toorak, and I knew by the number of times her name graced the fashionable intelligence of the newspapers that she was a star of the higher heavens. I won't say I envied her, though, perhaps, that were a true definition of my feelings. Yet how could I help contrasting her lot with mine, though the action brought a thousand bitter thoughts to my heart, and the bitter tears to my eyes?

Chapter VI.

AND so one after the other rolled the days along, changeless except for the changing seasons. Ours was a very even, methodical life, and if we knew no great joy we experienced no deep sorrow. I suppose there are thousands who live the same dull, happy lives, for happy they are in their own uninteresting way. Happy the nation that has no history. Happy the people, too, say I. I sometimes forgot that I had one, and wished that I might forget it altogether. But that was not to be, worse luck! Our miseries, like our vices, are too fond of us ever to part company.

Harold still went on with his verse-making and his reading. Poor boy, he could not walk much owing to his sad affliction, but whenever the weather was fine (and sometimes in summer it was a little too fine), he would hobble across the paddock to the creek, and there would sit by the hour reading, and dreaming, no doubt, of the great verses he would write, and the fame which would one day be his. What a fairyland is this in which these young poets exist. A dream-life whose ways are strewn with roses, the odour of which, rising up to the brain, intoxicates the soul. What know they of the ways of the world and the harshness of man? Do they ever think of it, I wonder, these unpractical poets? Or do they hear the birds sing always, as they, too, bird-like, whirl through the summer air? They dream of fame, surely, but not as men dream of it. In their craving is no sordid thought, no vain, pretentious fluttering of the poetic wing. They have but one idea — to produce the beautiful, to make sweet music. As the birds sing, so sing they, till the elder birds peck them and they die.

Will went his way also, which was not that of Harold; yet he was a good fellow through and through; as strong as Harold was weak, as practical as the poet was dreamy. He was a great help to father now, and was given a pound a week pocket money, or wages, so that he was quite independent, and as a consequence he soon took unto himself the masculine air of importance. Not that he carried it off with very much dignity, for he could never be anything but a great, softhearted boy. I saw, with something much akin to fear, that his visits to Wallan did not decrease with his exalted status, and I doubted not that Polly Lane and the "Shearer's Rest" were the attraction. I dreaded that girl, and knew that she would like to do me an ill turn through him; but he always laughed at me whenever I spoke of her, and told me that she was a profound

admirer of mine.

“She knew that would please you, you booby,” I said, for our family devotion was a by-word in the place.

“Don't be uncharitable, Flos,” he replied. “Try to give the girl credit for being honest once in a way. Everybody knows that you are beautiful. She only spoke the truth.”

“But I am not beautiful,” I said in my vainness, not unwilling to hear my praises sung even by a brother's lips.

“By George, ain't you?” he said — he was never very particular in his choice of words, poor old Will! But in his eyes there was something better than the sound of sweet words. Dear old fellow I wonder if all brothers and sisters love each other as we did? If so, how pleasant some portion of their lives must have been; in what a world of delightful memories they may revel when time has stiffened their joints and bade them sit down and think.

Of course I couldn't scold him any more after his flattering estimation of myself; it would have been like putting a knife into my own breast. Neither could I tell him how Ella had coaxed me to speak, because she had forbidden me to mention her name. Poor Ella! So I dismissed him with a warning against all red-haired girls; at which he laughed and said her hair (meaning Polly Lane's) was golden; kissed me and pointed out that my own shone with a reddish tinge in the sunlight, and then read me a warning against myself, which, in the light of after events, reads somewhat like a prophecy. But I understand you now, Will. Dear old fellow, you knew more of the world than I, clever as I thought myself.

One Sunday, shortly after this abortive attempt of mine to lead Will into the narrow way, the Wallaces, mother and father, Arthur and Ella, drove over in a body and took Granite Creek by storm. Arthur was going to Melbourne on the morrow to enter the university, and so it was decided that we should all dine together and wish him God-speed. We were all awaiting them on the verandah when they drove up in their nice new pair-horse buggy, and while Will and Arthur took the team round to the stables, I led Ella away to my room, mother showing a like attention to Mrs. Wallace, who, as I have already mentioned, had been her friend and companion in her young days in England. And how delighted they always seemed when they met — as though they had been parted for years. Mother used to say that the sight of her friend's sweet face reminded her so much of the old, happy days; and then she would suddenly check herself and smile, and wonder how she could have been happy without her children. Poor thing! I see with different eyes now. What knew I then, what could I even guess, of the misery which had been hers, the dull hopelessness more bitter than the sharpest pain? She never complained; she had always a kiss and a smile for us children, a sad smile, truly, but, oh, so sweet. To father she was the calm, serious

helpmate, the holy lover. Soft of speech, tender, solicitous; never did I know them speak angrily to each other; no shadow of a frown ever came between them. She, knowing what he had suffered, strove hard to lighten his burden, and he, forgetting nothing of the debt he owed her, worshipped the very ground she walked on. Often of an evening, as we all sat round the fire, he in one corner reading, she in the other plying her busy needle, have I seen him drop his book, look steadily at her till his eyes grew dim, and then, rising, walk over to her and take her dear head between his hands and kiss her as he must have kissed her in the days when they knew no sorrow. What would their lives have been under happier circumstances? Could they have loved each other more, would they even have been happier? Perhaps not. To me it seems as though this thing we call sorrow, sad and pitiful though it be, were the one thing requisite to insure man the eternal peace of heaven. Through sorrow, by sorrow, and out of sorrow come all things glorious; the sad symbol is it which veils the tiding of great joy. Only can the heavy thoroughly rejoice when it has emerged from the black clouds of despair. For the joy of nations was not the Cross uplifted on the Hill of Calvary?

Upon returning to the verandah we found the little party seated in easy chairs chatting amiably and eating peaches. Mr. Wallace was loudly dilating on the beautiful proportions of his new buggy, which had only arrived from Melbourne that week, while mother and Mrs. Wallace sustained a separate conversation on their own account. Will and Arthur were in the far corner of the verandah, also eating peaches, but looking very serious. At least Arthur was, for his dark face looked darker and gloomier than usual.

“Poor Arthur,” said I to Ella, “how serious he looks.”

“Yes, poor boy,” she answered mysteriously.

“I suppose most people feel rather queer when they leave home for the first time?”

“If that were all,” she said, “I wouldn't mind it so much.”

“All! What else can it be? He is anticipating home-sickness already,” and I'm afraid I laughed somewhat heedlessly at the thought.

“How can you, Flossie! You seem to forget that Arthur is a man now.”

“Yes, I suppose he is. How strange it seems, doesn't it? Why, I can shut my eyes and fancy that it was only the other day we went quong-dong hunting together.”

“He is twenty,” said she, as though that were a patriarchal age.

“Of course; and is about to enter the university, and become a famous physician. Fancy old Arthur famous.”

“Why shouldn't he be!” she exclaimed reproachfully.

“Of course; why shouldn't he be? I hope he may be.”

“Then why don't you tell him so?”

“I suppose I never thought of it.”

I saw the pained look shoot across her face, and it at once struck me that I had been more than unsympathetic. Before I could explain, or get an explanation, however, Mr. Wallace called me to him, and my thoughts were immediately diverted into another channel.

He was singularly like Arthur in appearance, though the finely-chiselled face of the boy was here enlarged and coarse. The eyes were the same, though, and I doubt not but that the chin would have been as like, could I have seen it for the brindled beard which hid it. The mouth, too, was cut in the same firm way, though the lips had not the full curl of the boy's. They used to say that thin mouth of his could look very cruel at times, and I have heard more than one story of the hard bargains he was wont to drive. I know not if they were true: perhaps there was some grain of truth in them. I know he was proud, not altogether purse-proud, but pompous like most successful men. That, however, is one of those petty weaknesses to which humanity is susceptible; it concerns us little. He was never hard to me or mine, and if he indulged in the "gentlemanly vice" of avarice (perhaps traceable to his Caledonian descent), as some said he did, it concerned him only. To us he was always amiable, the best of friends. As father and husband he was irreproachable — no mean catalogue of recommendations.

"Come and sit beside me, Flossie," he said, "and let me think that I'm a boy again. It isn't often, you know, that I get the opportunity of making love to such a fairy."

"Whose fault is that?" I answered, entering into and enjoying the banter, for among Mr. Wallace's many qualities might be reckoned his love of a joke.

"My own, truly," he replied with a mock sigh. "What a depraved wretch I must be to shut the gates of Paradise on myself."

At this there was a general laugh, though I could see that father did not receive the nonsense with much favour.

"You have not forgotten how to turn a pretty speech," he said; and though he smiled, it was not too gaily. "If Florence were like other girls, I should tremble for her vanity."

"Vanity," exclaimed Mr. Wallace, "is an excellent thing, and knows how to take care of itself. Don't you tremble for vanity, Hastings. It is the stream which sends this mill-wheel of a world buzzing; the life and soul of the universe. Keep vanity well in hand, as you would a partly-broken colt, and behold we have pride, emulation, and, indirectly, genius, immortality." And at the conclusion of this magnificent outburst he turned to father with a triumphant look. Father smiled, but answered not. Perhaps he did not take such a broad-minded view of the subject as his friend; perhaps, too, knowing Mr. Wallace of old, he thought it would be a futile business to attempt to argue with a man who continually held himself up as a successful example of his own argument. No matter what

the subject might be, Mr. Wallace would introduce into it his own personality, and from such premises would argue that such and such must be correct. "I made money easily; therefore money is easily made." When a man takes this tone there is no gainsaying him.

"I think your idea of vanity differs slightly from the general meaning of the word," said mother slowly.

"And pray how?" exclaimed Mr. Wallace, cocking up his ears, ever ready for an encounter.

"By it we mean something contemptible, shallow, conceited. Pride, on the other hand, is a noble quality."

"My dear madam," was the airy answer, "they are six of one and half-a-dozen of the other. Vanity, pride, and arrogance — a hair's-breadth don't divide 'em. Vanity in the great is emulation, ambition; ambition in the vulgar is vanity. Punctilious sticklers may rave about the precise shade of meaning, but I say they're triplets, nothing more nor less. Now take me as an example, a successful example — " But we were luckily spared any further panegyrics on the great Me by the timely arrival of our cook, who brought the welcome intelligence that dinner was ready. So into the house we trooped, for whereas argument, transcendental or otherwise, can keep, the dinner rapidly goes cold.

We did not entertain very often, but when we did we strove to make a creditable show, and on this occasion the table, if it did not actually groan under the good things — which I have often read of tables doing — seemed to rejoice in the splendour that bedecked it. Father sat at the head with Mrs. Wallace on his right hand, mother at the foot with Mr. Wallace on her right hand and Harold on her left. Then came Arthur and I, Ella and Will. Cook, we called her "cook," though she was only a "general," flustered about with a face like a bit of beet, puffing and blowing like a porpoise and looking as though she were slowly melting in the heat; while the young girl whom we had engaged for the day, a farmer's daughter entirely ignorant of service, went about dropping the potatoes on the floor and chipping our best bits of china. Still it was a great feast, a feast for the gods, as Mr. Wallace more than once declared; and, by the manner in which we manipulated our knives and forks, I have good reason for believing we did it justice — that is, all except poor Arthur, who seemed to be neither in appetite nor spirits.

When the meal was over Ella and I put on our hats and strolled away down to the creek, and as we walked I could not help referring to Arthur's constrained manners, a reference which did not altogether please her, for she said something about people having no sympathy and caring little what became of "poor boys"; all of which, being so much Greek to me, I passed over with a smile, as people will a quotation in French which they do not understand.

"Will, too," she remarked, as though she were about to pay me back in

my own coin, "seemed so unlike the Will of old times that I should have thought he was going away as well."

"Perhaps he is," said I mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" The question came rather hurriedly.

"He has not stopped going to Wallan yet," I answered with a meaning look, enjoying her consternation and being ignorant of the real pain I was inflicting.

"Was he there last week?"

"Every day."

"And he never called on us once." This she uttered very sorrowfully.

"You don't keep the 'Shearer's Rest,' " said I.

"I wish we did."

I could not help laughing outright. "What would papa say to that?"

"Do you think," she said, and her hand slipped into mine, and her earnest eyes sought mine, "do you think that he — that he really cares for her?"

"No," I answered decidedly, seeing that consolation was sorely required, "how could he?"

"But she is pretty."

"She is freckled."

"I know it, but what are a few freckles? Besides, they say she is not very particular."

"Oh, but he is."

And yet, strange to say, she did not seem to get as much consolation from this statement as might reasonably have been expected; so I continued to dilate upon Will's lofty nature and elevated principles, showing off against them, in a very unbecoming and unflattering guise, Miss Polly Lane's many infirmities. To all of which poor Ella listened with a resignation which was almost pitiful; and as much as I had hitherto disliked the alluring syren of the "Shearer's Rest," I now felt that dislike was too mild a word to give adequate expression to my feelings.

Here, however, what further conversation we might have indulged in on this painful topic was brought to a hasty conclusion by the sudden arrival of Will and Arthur.

"You're a queer pair," cried the former as he came rushing up. "What did you want to run away like this for? Arthur and I have been looking for you everywhere."

"We wanted to talk," said I.

"Talk," he echoed. "What can girls find to talk about?"

"What can't they, you mean. Oh, lots of things, from the latest fashion to the 'Shearer's Rest.' "

He looked at me rather quizzingly and asked me what I meant.

"Nothing," I answered with a laugh and walked on with Arthur, leaving him and Ella to follow at their own sweet will and explain matters if they

chose.

For a time Arthur and I walked on in silence, he looking everywhere but at me, I stealing furtive glances at him, for in these little matters I fully believe the woman is invariably more self-possessed than the man. And I account for it, not through any physical superiority on her part, but simply because she need do nothing but hold her head down, blush or simper, while he makes most exhaustive and ridiculous efforts to escape the bog into which he has floundered. Then again, unless he should happen to know his subject, or make a very accurate guess, he is apt to begin operations on one who will not be operated upon. Confusion worse confounded naturally ensues, and the poor fellow cuts a lamentable figure as he beats an ignominious retreat. Amusing enough to the onlooker; but, said the frogs, what is play to you is death to us. Instinct, however, is man's unfailing guide; a sort of Southern Cross in his volatile firmament — fixed, perhaps the only thing unchangeable about him. Let him follow this and it will rarely lead him astray; otherwise he is a blind creature.

That poor Arthur had something troublesome on his mind I could tell by the sympathetic throbbings of my own heart. I more than half-suspected what it was, and grew a trifle flurried in consequence, for no matter how little a girl may care for a man, the fact of his loving her must make him seem different from other men.

"I suppose you know I am going to-morrow?" he said at last.

Poor boy! Of course I did. Hadn't I known it for more than a month?

"Oh, yes," I answered, "and I suppose you are glad to go?"

"For some things, yes, though for others I am sorry."

"Sorry! How can you be sorry when you are going away under such favourable conditions? If you work hard you may get your degree before you are twenty-five, and then think how proud we shall all be of you."

"Will you be proud of me?" he said, quite boldly I thought, and not at all like Arthur.

"Of course," I answered with a smile, "as proud of you as though you were my own brother."

He turned away with an impatient gesture.

"But I am not your brother."

"I have always thought of you as one," I answered maliciously; "but if you wish to disown the relationship —"

"I do wish to disown it."

"As you please."

"Because I wish to claim a nearer."

He now began to get very red in the face, and his earnest eyes seemed to look right through me. He stammered, too, quite painfully, and I could see that the poor fellow was in a state of the most acute agitation. I believe I grew half afraid myself. Anyway, the laugh that accompanied

the question, "A nearer?" was more than half hysterical.

"Yes," he repeated, "a nearer. Have you, truly, never thought of me as anything but a brother?"

"Of what else should I think of you?" I asked, nervously.

"As a lover," he said, trying to take my hand.

"Oh, no! not that," and I drew back with a slight gesture of pain.

"I was afraid you had not."

For a moment he looked at me with eyes so full of tenderness that I felt my heart thump, thump with a sudden longing to throw myself at his feet and beg his forgiveness; but at that moment the loud voice of Will broke in upon me, and the good impulse died away.

* * * * *

That night the Wallaces drove home by moonlight, but before their setting-out Arthur found me alone in the garden.

"I don't know when I shall see you again," he said, "but you won't forget me, Flos, will you?"

"Of course not. What makes you think of such a thing?"

"You are not angry, then?"

"Oh, no."

"Brother or lover," he whispered in a low, excited voice, "I am always yours, yours for ever, body and soul. Don't forget that, will you?"

"Hush, hush! You must not talk like this."

He laughed in a grim sort of way, but continued, "I've had my old silver ring made into two — a small one and a large one. I want you to accept the smaller as a keepsake. It's not worth much as a gift — not what I'd like to give you — but in days to come you may prize it as a remembrance. Will you have it?"

I did not like taking it, but, being ashamed to refuse, assented. He slipped the thin silver band over my engagement finger, whether by design or accident I do not know, then lifting my hand to his lips kissed it passionately.

Chapter VII

AND so slowly the days ran themselves into weeks, the weeks to months, and all the while we led the same dull, objectless sort of existence: rising in the morning and going through our allotted toil — whatever it might be — eating, and going to bed again. True, I never expected to see a new sun every day, but I none the less grew tired of watching the old one sail across the great plains and go down night after night behind the big trees by the creek. I used to wonder if my lot was ever going to change, or if I was doomed henceforth to live only as the shadowy atom of a woman; a creature who grew lean or fat, long or short as the sun rose or sank, as the clouds fluttered overhead. I had in my nature all the youthful craving for change, a craving which we women, or women such as I was then, cannot gratify without risking much. Poor little fool! And yet how can one know till one has learnt?

Will, who had much of my nature, who was, in fact, a masculine me, having no sexual restraint upon him, felt not the dreariness of our life with an equal intensity, or if he did his reputation sadly belied him; for with shame must I own that he had lately developed a most pronounced partiality for certain persons at Wallan who shall be nameless in these pages. Mother, I am glad to say, never knew half the things they said of her handsome boy, though if she had it is ten to one she would have rejected them as unworthy of credence. He was still her boy, though he now turned the scale at thirteen stone seven and stood over six feet high, and he would be her boy even when his hair was grey and he had sons and daughters of his own. It was a source of much distress to me to hear of what they called his loose ways, for I not unnaturally thought that our dreadful heritage might make him reckless and hurry him to the dogs. And yet I never wholly believed it, for there was always consolation in his kind words and his loving ways, and whenever I saw him stretched out at mother's feet, his head in her lap, as though he were a boy again, I knew that the poison had not yet entered his blood.

As for Harold, he seemed to take little note of the changeless days. It always broke the monotony for him if he were well enough to hobble down to the creek and back, and his journeyings round the garden of a morning were an invariable source of delight. No flower bloomed, no leaf appeared which escaped his eager eye, and I verily believe that he was intimately acquainted with each particular weed. There in the old

summer-house, with the roses and the grapes growing within reach of his hand, would he sit by the hour reading his favourite authors, or conning carefully his own hopeful verses. But he suffered much in those days, poor boy, and his beautiful face grew paler and paler, and, though he would not own it, his hopes more feeble. "Oh, if I could only write one verse," he would say, "one verse that will live when I am gone." It was a modest enough wish as you meant it, Harold, but, ah, what a wish! It almost broke my heart to see his pitiable resignation, so sadly hopeful, and yet so surely hopeless. Poor boy. And when they sent back those first verses with the curt information that they were "not suitable"! Not suitable, forsooth! I should think not when they had never printed any real poetry in their rag of a newspaper. But no one ever knew save you and me. We were not going to let the world into all our secrets. Yet we had our revenge, didn't we, when the big Melbourne weekly inserted your "Ode to a Butterfly"? It was worth having our disappointment to experience such a pleasure; nay, without that disappointment the pleasure would have been but the ghost of a sensation. There was hope then that the first great Australian poet was born. What castles we built, what cities reared on the airy foundations of our exultant hope. Alas! what knew we of the world and the world's ways? Alas! that hope too, like us, should be born to sorrow to pass away in pain.

Of mother and father little need here be said. They lived the same peaceful life, only, if anything, they were quieter in their ways, more reserved than they had ever been. It was only when Mr. Langton came over to Granite Creek that father seemed to shake off his great depression. Then, waking up as it were, he would be as brilliant, courteous and affable as in the old days, and Mr. Langton would go away vowing that Hastings was the happiest man in the world. Happy! and every day that sad face was growing sadder, and the once muscular and upright figure now owned a perceptible stoop. To me he seemed like a man who thought too much; a dreamer of dreams, and not too pleasant ones either. How could they be? What had he not lost by that one act of madness? Better, perhaps, had his blow proved fatal. It would have been a short shrift then — and oblivion. No years of painful penance; no tears that could not wash away the past; no children of sorrow. He was never the same after his confession. I think it broke his pride — annihilated his dignity. He had been father, protector, god: but with his own hand he had shattered the idol. It seemed as though he could no more believe in it himself.

I saw Arthur but once during this period. It was when he came home for the Christmas holidays. He was doing famously at the University, so he told me, and hoped to gain his degree without a single plucking. Of course, I congratulated him on his success, and hoped that it might continue; but nothing of a nearer nature passed between us. He did not

even mention his ring, and I, because I had long since ceased to wear it, never broached the subject, although I was not slow to observe that he too was without his half. Of Ella, I saw, as usual, a great deal, and while she was lamenting Will's backsliding, I was chafing, fool-like, against the restraint of the curb, forgetting that but for that restraint, we fools of women would too often dash ourselves to pieces.

But change was coming now with a vengeance. That for which I had yearned so long was close at hand. The orchestra had struck its last chord; a moment's silence as of the grave was to follow. Anon the little bell will ring out — that same soft tinkle heralds in comedy or and by some mysterious process the unwieldy curtain uplifts itself and the stage is laid bare. I wonder how we shall like the play?

One day a man rode hastily up to Granite Creek and inquired for father. He had ridden with all dispatch from Langton Station. Mr. Langton was ill, very ill, dying he (the man) believed, and he had expressed a wish to see father. The news came like a thunderclap to us all; we plied the man with numerous questions, but could elicit little other information from him. He seemed to know nothing but that Mr. Langton was ill, and that he had been sent to acquaint Mr. Hastings of the fact. So father, even while the fellow was speaking, jumped on the messenger's horse and galloped away at break-neck speed, the man himself following leisurely some half-hour after on father's big roan.

After some three hours of anxious waiting father returned looking extremely dejected, and we immediately guessed the worst. Nor were our guesses erroneous. Mr. Langton was no more.

"He was unconscious when I got there," father explained, "and never rallied again."

"Then he did not recognize you?" said mother.

"No, poor fellow. He opened his eyes the moment before he died, but they were glassy and vacant-looking, and already dead."

And then he told us how it all came about; how three days previously Mr. Langton had been thoroughly drenched while riding from Boorta to Wallan, and had thereby caught a severe chill which rapidly developed into acute pneumonia.

"Why did they not send for you sooner?" said mother.

"He wanted me," was the reply, "but the doctor would not hear of it. Afraid that I might agitate the patient, or some such nonsense. He, however, told me that Mr. Langton had appeared exceedingly anxious about my lease of Granite Creek, and had spoken of making it over to me entirely. But of course nothing was done, and all he said was naturally looked upon as so much wandering talk."

"Poor man, to die with no one near him whom he loved."

"I have often heard him declare that it is the way all rich people die. But the doctor telegraphed to his children, and they are expected here this

evening.”

So the good squatter was gone at last. It seemed incredible that that apparently healthy man should disappear from the face of things so suddenly. Only a week before he and father had sat on the verandah for over an hour arguing Plato and the immortality of the soul, and now — well, he now knew as much about the soul as Plato. I think it always a hard fact to realize that people are dead; dumb, still, cold eternally. We miss them, and we shall never see them again, at least while this earthly shell holds together; and yet I often think they are not dead, for with an effort of memory I can bring them before me, and see them smile, and hear the tones of their well-beloved voice. And what are these intangible ghosts, these perfect shades of nothingness? Fancy, of course, an effort of the imagination. Nothing more?

Out of respect to the deceased, father, Will and I went to the funeral, and, if I may be allowed so to speak, a great affair it was; the biggest thing ever seen in Wallan. People flocked in from all the country round, many out of respect, but more out of curiosity; for there was not likely to be such another display in Wallan for many a day to come. Certainly there had never been one like it before. It was estimated that the vehicles alone stretched over half a mile — and a curious collection of craft they were — while a *queue* of pedestrians, another half mile in length, plodded on in the dust of the wheels. With one thing, however, I was particularly impressed, and that was the decorum preserved by this huge crowd. To all it seemed to be the one serious moment of their lives. Men whose reputation for wildness was the talk of the district, here showed how like other men they were. Perhaps, even they too thought of the day that was to come.

I did not see Maud Langton at the funeral, and learnt afterwards that she had not followed her father's remains to their last resting-place, but Captain Fred was there decked out in all the trappings of woe, which, however, did not detract from his *interesting* personality. Yes, even surrounded by every sign and symbol of woe, I could find a thought for a man's appearance. But then, was he not a curiosity, a fabulous hero to us; a sort of mystery and terror, a forbidden luxury like the tree of knowledge? Too like, alas!

After the ceremony the more intimate, or, I might say, the more respectable acquaintances of the deceased drove back to the house and were there most lavishly regaled with a plentiful supply of choice funeral baked-meats, and if the majority of the good folk did not thoroughly enjoy themselves, there is no sign by which we may detect enjoyment. I know I was so vastly amused watching the antics of the masticating crowd, that I did not perceive, until father touched me on the arm, that Captain Langton had joined us.

“My daughter,” said father presenting me.

“Daughter. By Jove!” And he looked at me so intently that I had to bow low to hide my confusion.

“You have forgotten her, I suppose?” said father.

“I'm afraid I must plead guilty,” he said with an apologetic look at me. “Is it possible that this is the little girl who used to play with Maud?”

“The same,” said father.

“By George, how she's grown.”

I thought the conversation was veering to a somewhat personal point, so I walked over to Will, who stood a couple of yards away, and asked him some silly question, thereby showing my resentment.

“Your son, I suppose,” I heard him say to father, for my thoughts were on him as well as my back.

“Yes.”

“By Jove, how like each other they are.” And I knew his eyes were watching me all the while.

Presently father approached us.

“Captain Langton wishes to reintroduce us to his sister,” said he. But neither Will nor I moved. I had not forgotten the old days, and I was prouder now. Will had not forgotten them either.

“Flos feels faint,” he said, “I must take her out on the verandah first.”

“By all means,” interposed the Captain, “I will bring my sister to you.”

Will gave me his arm and led me through the crowded room.

“There,” said he, as soon as we had reached the open air, “I hope he will understand that we don't want to curry favour of him. If I were you, Flos, I wouldn't be introduced to her.”

“I don't care one way or the other,” I replied. “She is, or can be, nothing to me. But after all she was only a girl then, and perhaps she may wish to forget, so why shouldn't I?”

Will growled out something about my being put upon, and looked very cross. He wouldn't be patronized himself and he wouldn't have me patronized, and he'd be — what followed was lost in an inarticulate gurgle, for at that moment Captain Langton and father approached with Maud between them, and I saw old Will's look of resentment change to one of uneasy wonder.

Tall of figure and shapely in outline, with a pale, calm and very beautiful face, Maud Langton looked, as she stepped gracefully towards us, as fair a picture of young womanhood as one could wish to see. There was no sign of tears in her lustrous eyes; no red or swollen lids proclaimed the misery she must have endured. She looked as placid as though there were no such thing as woe, and grief were an unknown term. And yet with it all I thought of her as a most melancholy figure; in her movements there was an indescribable motion of sorrow, which the heavy crape dress she wore, though it showed off the exquisite whiteness of her skin and the unusual shimmer of her hair, deeply accentuated.

“This is my daughter,” said father, and there was a proud ring in his voice as he spoke.

“My old playfellow,” said she, coming forward and shaking me by the hand. “What a time it seems since we last saw each other.”

“Longer, indeed,” thought I, “than there was any necessity for.”

But I returned her pressure of the hand and smiled back at her, though I could not forget why we had parted so long before.

“And this,” said father turning to her, “is my son Will. You must remember him?”

“Do you mean to say,” said she in her languid way, turning her wonderful eyes full upon old Will, who looked none too comfortable under the scrutiny, “that this is the boy who used to ride as though he had no neck to break?”

Father smiled and said he was afraid Will was somewhat reckless in his young days, but that her surmise was substantially correct. As for poor old Will, he blushed as furiously as any schoolgirl, and muttered that he believed he did ride very foolishly as a boy, but that boys really never knew the meaning of the word “fear.”

“Nor,” said she, “if one may judge by appearances, should I think it occasioned you much concern now.”

Will smiled and said he didn't think it did. But there, he was sure to please the women with his handsome face and his great loose limbs, for to a woman is there not something wonderfully fascinating in that physical strength which never can be hers?

“But did you not have another son?” said she presently. “A little cripple, was he not?”

“Yes,” said father in a low voice, which conveyed a distinct reproach, “I have a son who met with an unfortunate accident.”

“Poor little fellow,” said she, but though her voice was pitched in a softer key it entirely lacked feeling. There was a languid, patronizing ring in it which I thought peculiarly offensive. And yet it might have been only my thought, which had not yet forgotten the past; for when she turned to her brother and spoke she addressed him in precisely the same manner. Perhaps it was her style; perhaps again the sadness of the gathering was not without its effect. It could not well be otherwise. The wonder was how she bore up so well. She was a lonely girl after all, and what she had done to me in the old days had nothing to do with the present. So I talked to her of her father, and told her how fond we all were of him, and how often he came to take tea with us, and of the many happy hours we had all spent together; and as I spoke the tears came into her eyes for, I believe, the first time, and she declared that she had not been a very loving or dutiful daughter, and that she would never forgive herself for her selfish indifference. In five minutes — for when they saw us walk aside the men very considerably quitted us — we had gone over

much of the old ground, and in ten minutes she was imploring me to call her by her Christian name as before. "Let us be Maud and Flossie as we were or old," she said. "I seem to be the most utterly lonesome creature in the world."

I was not one to bear resentment especially to one who seemed so sorely in need of help, and who held out the hand with the wish that bygones should be bygones. Moreover, how did I know that she had really intended to cut me? I had been sensitive of slights all my life, and when I knew that there was good cause for shame, I saw nothing but a perpetual insult. A look, a half-heard word, sent the blood rushing confusedly through my veins. I had always demanded more consideration than my position entitled me to, and when I knew that there was a real cause for slighting me, my demands increased; so that between one thing and another I, at times, contrived to make my life a burden.

At length our trap drove round to the door, being one of the last to make its appearance, and Captain Fred and his sister came out on the verandah to see us off.

"You will come and see me soon, Flossie, will you not?" she said, as she bade me good-bye. "You know I shall be awfully wretched in this lonely place."

"You, I hope, will not forget us either," said the Captain, addressing father. "I know all about your life-long friendship with my father, and I trust that I may not be unworthy to fill his place in your good opinion."

"You may be sure," replied father as he shook the young man by the hand, "that my friend's son shall be mine, if he wishes it."

Then followed a general invitation to us all. Langton Station was a big place and desolate enough at the best of times; therefore, what was it likely to be now? If we had any pity for them, we were implored to show it by coming over and cheering them up on every possible occasion; and not until we promised, and let them know that there was some likelihood of our promise being kept, did they seem inclined to part with us. But at last away we went, and for quite half an hour none of us spoke a word, being, apparently too full of thought. Of what father was thinking as he sat smoking his pipe, I cannot say for certain, though by the gloomy look on his face, I might easily have made a shrewd guess; but of what Will and I thought, the following brief dialogue may, perhaps, afford a clue.

We had gone on, as I have said, for a long time in silence, when suddenly I exclaimed, unconsciously, it seems to me, "I am sure he is a much-wronged man."

"She is very beautiful, though," says Will.

At this we both looked up into each other's face and laughed confusedly.

Chapter VIII.

THAT night we were all strangely reticent concerning the funeral, which was the more surprising considering what a new experience it had been. I never knew old Will to be so silent, so preoccupied, while I, who had my full share of woman's garrulity, found it an almost intolerable nuisance to have to narrate, for Harold's benefit, the more important incidents of the ceremony. Did I see Captain Fred, and what did I think of him? Did he show any sign, bear any visible mark of being the terrible person he was generally represented to be? To all of which I in turn replied that to me he seemed an extremely amiable young man, and that I already discredited a good half of the rumours which had reached us concerning him.

"Ah, Sis," cried he, looking at me in his shrewd way, and I do believe the boy was uncannily shrewd, "you must be careful, you know."

"Careful," I replied, assuming a look of innocence, "careful of what?"

He smiled roguishly as he answered, "Women, like moths, are attracted by glitter. The Marguerite scruples vanish in the glare of the Faust-like diamonds."

"What do you mean by that?" I exclaimed, trying to look indignant and feeling that I was playing my part exceedingly ill. "What do you know about women?"

"Great men were living before Agamemnon," quoted he with an impish look. "I have read, my sister."

"Filled your head with a lot of rubbish," said I.

"Not all rubbish, either," says he with a tantalizing look. "But come, tell me some more about this wonderful creature."

"I will tell you nothing," said I. "You are laughing at me."

"Not at you, Flos; only with you."

"Then if you will kindly tell me where the joke comes in, I shall be glad to laugh too," I answered, rather crossly.

"Really," he said, "one would think I had been trying to shatter a day-dream; I who live in dreams, and by dreams, and with dreams. And Maud — did you see her?"

"Yes."

"Well, would you mind telling me what you think of her?"

"Ask Will," said I. "He seemed to be not a little impressed with what he saw."

“Is that so, Will, old fellow?” cried he to that young giant, who was walking pensively up and down with a pipe in his mouth — for he had now been smoking before father for the last six months.

“What's that?” says the giant, emitting a huge cloud of smoke from his jaws.

“Flos tells me that you were not a little impressed with a certain young lady to whom you were recently introduced.”

“Eh, what?” says Will, looking a little confused. “Oh, yes. A clinker, Harry, by George! Such a face, and figure, and style! By George, that's what I call style. Thorough-bred all over.”

“Beats Polly Lane?” suggested Harold in his quiet way.

“A baker's hack and a Cup winner,” says Will.

“She is beautiful, then?”

“Isn't she, by George!”

That “by George” of Will's expressed a lot, though I always considered it showed a decided lack of imagination. Yet the way he rang the changes on it, making it now tender, now furious, and now singularly impressive, was, in itself, a display of no mean order. These catchwords, however, if they are apt to grow monotonous, have this advantage over a variety of epithets; that whereas the latter are often more forcible than polite, the former retain their unaffected purity. Thus, indirectly, is the person speaking, and the person spoken to, benefited to an appreciable extent, for the ears of the one are never polluted, and the soul of the other is never placed in jeopardy.

“I should like to see her,” said Harold.

“You'll write your finest poem after you have seen her, take my word for it.”

The poor poet smiled sadly. “What have I to do with women?” he said. “They like men, Will.” And he glanced meaningly at his brother's splendid frame.

“Do you think they haven't a soul above flesh and blood?” says Will almost indignantly.

“I try not to think about it, old fellow,” was the weary answer. “There is only one woman for me, but she is a goddess, and the ancients called her a muse.”

“This one is a goddess too,” said Will, drawing seriously at his pipe.

“Smoke,” said I, appropriately enough, for I did not altogether relish the thought of any woman creeping in and cutting me out.

“Right, Sis,” said Harold, “let us blow it away like good children.” And seizing his crutches he arose and hobbled off down the garden to indulge in a good think. Poor little Harold! Martyr-like he bore his sufferings, and he was never known to rail aloud at his destiny; but when he made use of such expressions as “They like *men*, Will,” there would come into his eyes a look so full of anguish, of wretchedness so unspeakable, that

every pulse within me used to palpitate with pity. "Look at Will," he would say sometimes, "as beautifully symmetrical as the Apollo Belvedere" (of course he had read all about those sort of things), "while I — " It seemed as though even he dared not express his own thought. Not that I think he was envious of Will, for the word "envy" conveys the meaning of something despicable. We may yearn for the crown of glory without wishing to drag it from the head of our brother. He would not rob Will of his strength, though he might cry out against his own ill-fortune. Yet I have often caught his eye wandering over his brother's form with an intensity absolutely painful. In those moments I knew a very volcano of desire burnt luridly beneath that frail earthly shell, only the glare of which shone out through his wonderful eyes; bright lightning flashes which seared with fire the dark background of his life. What he suffered then no earthly tongue could tell. Such moments, known only to himself, made life well-nigh intolerable. "At such a time," said he, "I too, like Job of old, could curse God and die."

On the second day after the funeral Captain Langton and his sister rode over to Granite Creek, and as their arrival was totally unexpected they rather upset our little household. I know I was taken utterly by surprise, for hearing the clatter of hoofs and the barking of dogs I rushed out on the verandah with my big cook's apron on (for I was making a quince and apple pie at the time — a delicacy, especially when prepared by me, which was much appreciated by the family), and found myself face to face with our distinguished visitors. I suppose I blushed deeply — I know I felt very confused — but as a retreat in order was out of the question, I faced the four gleaming guns (of eyes) with what dignity I could command. After all, the making of a quince and apple pie was not a very heinous offence. I know many people who would not think the eating of it too severe an ordeal.

"I'm afraid your dogs regard us with suspicion, Miss Hastings," said he, still sitting his horse and smiling as though he thoroughly enjoyed the clatter. "Are they very dangerous?"

"Not in the least," I answered, whipping off the apron and stealthily wiping the flour from my hands as I spoke. And then with sundry fierce flutterings of the aforementioned apron I succeeded in driving the obstreperous quadrupeds in the direction of the stable.

He then laughingly helped his sister to dismount, and they both followed me on to the verandah where mother and Harold soon joined us. Then tea was ordered in due course, and before we had got half-way through it Will turned up looking as spick and span as though he were going to church. Harold gave me a quiet look, for he had a sly sort of humour, notwithstanding his perennial martyrdom, and I began to grin. The Captain, whose eyes seemed to be ever on me, after watching me for a few moments with a singularly curious look, requested me to explain

the cause of my merriment; but as I could not put old Will away by informing them what his occupation had been half an hour before, I excused myself by declaring I didn't know why I was laughing, a confession which threw the party into spontaneous laughter.

"This is what I call jolly," said the Captain as he drained his fourth cup of tea. "I have an idea, Mrs. Hastings, that you will be seeing a lot of Maud and me during the next few weeks."

Mother, of course, said she would be delighted to see them whenever they could spare the time to call.

"Thank you," he said, evidently appreciating her courtesy and kindness. "You don't know how pleasant it is to find such friends in our trouble. I am sorry to say that Maud and I are little better than strangers here, but I assure you that we seriously mean to atone for our past sins by a most rigid penance."

"I should think you would find plenty to occupy you now without the penance," suggested Will.

"I'm afraid you're right. And the worst of it all is, I have no head for business. Mackenzie almost plagued me to death yesterday with one confounded thing and the other. A week of it and I shall be a raving madman."

"By George," said Will, "I know plenty of fellows who would like to risk being driven mad in the same way."

The Captain smiled and appealed to me for support, but as I could not understand a man thinking it too much trouble to look after his own interests, I am afraid my support was of an injurious nature.

"And how do you think the old place looks?" said mother, turning to Maud. "Had you forgotten it at all?"

"No — that is, I don't think so. You know I spent some very unpleasant years in it, and unpleasant things are the ones which we do not easily forget." She spoke in the same placid, unemotional manner. Whether she described some interesting event, or an event of no interest, her voice underwent no marked inflection. It was slow, measured, and remarkably pure, but as void of all enthusiasm as she appeared to be. Will called it "style." I thought of it not quite so flatteringly.

"Maud finds the old place very lonely," said her brother, coming quickly to her rescue, he being not slow to perceive that the effect of her speech upon us was anything but satisfactory. "You see," and here his voice became duly solemn, "one might say that the shadow of our dear father is still in the house. Of course I know that we shall get over it in time, but there is no denying that death is a mysterious and a solemn thing."

With all of which mother entirely agreed, taking it in as some new truth; but she was a good soul, God bless her, and gave everyone credit for being as good as herself.

“You must be very lonely?” she said.

“You are right, Mrs. Hastings,” was the quick reply. “Not that the loneliness will particularly affect me, as I shall have so much to do; but poor Maud — I really don't know what's to become of her.”

“Oh, I shall go melancholy mad, I suppose,” drawled Maud in her sweet voice; “or take to jumping fences and fancying myself a kangaroo.”

At this sally we all laughed, sadly I thought, though by the way old Will grinned as he devoured her (metaphorically) he must have regarded it as something excruciatingly clever.

“I hope it won't be as bad as that,” said mother with one of her gentle smiles.

“There's no knowing what will happen in a place like this,” replied the Captain solemnly. “Now if you would only permit Miss Hastings to come over and stay with us for a couple of weeks you would be doing two benighted Christians a charitable action.”

“Do come, dear,” pleaded Maud in her placid voice. “I promise you that we shall be as jolly as we can under the circumstances.”

“Would you like to go?” said mother, regarding me fondly.

“Oh, yes,” I answered, and in fact the invitation offered a change at which one in my aimless condition would be inclined to jump.

“Then that's as good as settled,” cried Captain Fred. “When can you be ready — to-morrow?”

I said I thought so, and it was then decided that he should come over in the afternoon and drive me back. Then our little party broke up, though before the Langtons departed the Captain issued a general invitation to the Hastings family — a standing order, he called it, being a military man — which set forth that at any time there was a knife and fork at the table and a horse in the stable for any member of the aforesaid family.

“You, at any rate,” he said, turning to Will, “won't forget that one of the best jumpers in the country is at your disposal.”

Old Will positively beamed with pleasure. “I'm not likely to forget that,” he said.

“I see you're a sportsman,” laughed the Captain. “We can depend on you.”

“You mustn't disappoint us, Mr. Hastings!” It was Maud who spoke, opening wide her languid eyes for the first time and looking right up into his.

“No,” he said, “you may depend upon that.”

And then they walked away together, and I could see her laughing and looking up into his face, while he, poor old fellow, simply devoured her.

“How good of you to come,” said Captain Langton, for he and I walked in the wake of the other two. “You can't imagine the great boon you are about to confer on us.”

“Oh,” I said, “it is you who are to be thanked for offering me the invitation.”

“Then you don't get much change here?” he asked.

“Change!” I exclaimed, laughing at the suggestion, “*We* have no such word.”

“How horrible.”

“I suppose it seems so to you who are used to” — I was about to say something which was better left unsaid — “used to the life of big cities,” I added. “But to me, who have been accustomed to nothing but the bush, it does not seem so terrible.”

“No doubt. I suppose it's all what one's accustomed to. But have you never thought of the life that is led in big cities, nor wished to share it?”

“I should think that has been the wish of most country people at some time or other; but we are very stupid here, you know, and often fancy that we are as well off as our brothers of the cities.”

“I daresay you are,” he replied. “At any rate, to know when you are well off is a happiness given to few. I would to heaven I had been contented to live as my father lived before me. I should have been spared many a sorrow and many a regret.”

And this was the man whom rumour had painted in such extraordinary colours! I felt quite maternal as I said, “I am sorry for you if you have suffered, but don't you think that we bring half our misery on ourselves?”

“That's it,” he said, as though the thought had driven home a newly-discovered truth, “that's just it. But we are blind and stupid and cannot learn.”

“Will not, you mean.”

“That's near it,” he said with a smile. “I was putting it mildly.”

“You live a lot in town?” said I, beginning in turn to question him, my curiosity running away with my discretion upon the discovery that this terrible Lothario was after all not such a very terrifying person. Indeed, could I have banished the thought that he was the owner of the vast Langton estate, the gay Don Juan of our gossip, I am sure I should have detected no sign or trademark of his supposed calling. To me he seemed to be getting on in years (he could not have been less than three-and-thirty); but that period of man's life has a unique fascination for girls of my green days. He is yet young enough to love and old enough to have lived; has none of the peevishness of old or middle age, nor none of the insipidity of the callow youth. He is a masterful mystery, and all women love mysteries.

He looked at me before replying, a look which said as plainly as a look can, “What are you driving at?” He, however, answered carelessly enough, “Yes, a good deal. But, of course, I shall alter all that now. Then I was only the heir.”

“Shall you bring any of your racehorses up for the meet?” I asked next,

for our race-meeting was due shortly now, and Will had put me up to getting a good tip if I possibly could.

"I shall win everything worth winning," he said, "for I mean to bring old Bounder up."

"What, Bounder who ran second in the last Cup?"

"Yes, confound him! He'll have to make amends for the trick he played me then."

"I was sorry to hear that you had lost so much," said I, growing quite confidential.

"How did you know that?" he asked with an amused smile.

"Oh," I replied, "we always hear of the doings of great personages."

"The gossips honour me," he said. "I had no idea my doings interested anyone but myself."

"And the bookmakers," I laughed, for I'm afraid I was not behind the door with my sauce-box.

He too laughed, and I noticed then that the skin about his eyes puckered rather ominously, though the eyes were decidedly handsome, and declared that he had not thought of encountering such cunning in Arcadia; but what else he might have said remains a mystery, for at that moment Will came shouting after us, and on turning round, we discovered that we had, unconsciously, strolled away from the other pair.

"Miss Langton wants to know if you are going to walk home?" bawled Will, who stood some fifty yards away.

"No," shouted the Captain as he waved his hand — a signal of dismissal which Will immediately acted upon, for without another word away he darted on the return journey. "I should like to, though," continued my companion as he tried hard to look into my face, an attempt which I frustrated by coquettishly turning my head aside, "if you would walk it with me."

"Why, it's over five miles," said I.

"Yes," said he, "I believe it is." And by the tone of his voice I knew he was wondering if I were really a fool.

We slowly retraced our steps to the gate where Will and Maud awaited us, she seated on her horse, he standing by its head. She was evidently not a little annoyed at having been forced to wait, though her young Titan was there to bask in the glory of her countenance, if it so pleased her refulgence to turn on him. She seemed to smile rather amusedly as we strolled up.

"I thought you were lost," she said, "like the Babes in the Wood."

"I am not certain that we should not have been if left to my own resources," replied her brother.

"You couldn't lose Flos anywhere within fifty miles of Granite Creek," said old Will, blundering like the big idiot that he was.

Brother and sister smiled.

“That's lucky,” she said. “I wish you could say the same for me. Tomorrow, Flossie, remember. Fred will come over some time in the afternoon. Good-bye, Mr. Hastings. You will come and see us soon, will you not?”

What Will said, I didn't quite catch, but I saw her look into his face with eyes that burnt into his eyes, setting fire to the powder-train of his soul. He took her daintily-gloved fingers in his great brown hand, and I felt that he was holding them rather long, longer, in fact, than common courtesy warrants; for I had an instinctive recollection at the time that the Captain was doing much the same by my own hand, which he further engaged by pressing affectionately. No doubt Will was similarly occupied. There is a wonderful uniformity about human nature, though it is surprising that in this *blasé* world these finger-pressings, sighs and burning looks never go out of fashion. Perennial, sun-like, they rise and set through time towards eternity, and mark a day. When Eve had eaten of the Tree of Knowledge and saw the first fiery look of wonder in Adam's eyes, she trembled, and her newly-awakened soul leapt up in her eyes, and she *knew*. And ever since then the sons and the daughters of men have likewise looked and known; and with the new sun the new fire is kindled, and that which was born in Eden no time shall sweep away.

We didn't speak much as we walked back to the house, both being, I take it, just a little preoccupied. A new thing had come suddenly into our lives, without warning, as it were, and we were not yet accustomed to it. At least I was not, and I think that poor old Will was even more agitated than I. There could be no doubt of his admiration for Maud Langton, whereas my feelings, I flatter myself, were not so apparent. It is true I felt honoured in a sort of way, for how could a poor vain girl help feeling flattered at the attentions of this young Croesus? It is silly, I know, for no man can honour a good woman. Oh, that women would only remember it! Yet there can be no denying that we do make ourselves cheap, more's the pity. And so I felt honoured (poor fool) and not a little terrified, and I began to dream and hope and fear, like the mad thing that I was. Ah, me, it requires an effort to make these confessions. It is like swinging one's heart in the air for every passer-by to laugh at; pricking one's soul with innumerable pin points of conscience. And yet this self-inflicted torture is not without its reward. That the heart is not better for having bled is a false thing, for even with the setting down of these petty follies I seem to purge myself of many a little sin.

Harold was still in his chair as we once more mounted the verandah.

“Where have you been?” he cried. “I thought you were never coming back.”

“Just down to the paddock,” said Will, throwing himself in his big cane chair and pulling out his pipe.

“I should have thought you had gone farther,” said he, looking

meaningly at his brother.

Will was not so dull either as to be unable to see this.

“Should you,” he said, with a laugh, “and where should you think I had gone?”

“So far, old fellow, that you'll find it a tough job to get back again.”

“That's the worst of you poets,” said Will, with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, “you have such awful imaginations. By-the-way, Harry, show us the sonnet.”

“Sonnet!” exclaimed Harold.

“Yes,” said Will, laughingly, “the one you have written to her during our absence.”

“Do you mean Miss Langton?”

“Who else could inspire you?”

“Oh,” said Harold, quietly, “I could not write a poem to Miss Langton. It would be like pouring cold water down my own back.”

“Not a very poetic simile,” says Will, rather off-handed.

“Nor a poetic subject.”

“A true poet ought to be able to gush about any subject.”

“So he can — if he choose. But how did you like the Captain, Will?”

“You'd better ask Flos,” said he, thus turning the tables on me: and evidently not wishing to undergo any more of Harold's cross-questioning, he arose from his seat, lit his pipe and marched off.

That was one of Will's good points. He liked us so well that nothing could induce him to quarrel with us. When the storm began rumbling in the distance, and the horizon grew black and threatening, he prepared for the deluge by disappearing beneath his metaphorical umbrella.

“I hope the poor fellow's not smitten,” said Harold, after watching his brother's tall figure disappear round the corner of the house. “He's much too good to be made a fool of.”

“Why should he be made a fool?” I asked, as much for my own sake as for his.

“Because he's not for her, nor she for him.”

“I'm sure he's good enough for any woman,” said I, once more trying to improve my own position.

“But remember who she is and what we are.”

“If I thought that would make any difference,” I exclaimed, growing mightily flushed, “I would not go near their place to-morrow.” And yet I almost repented the words as soon as they were uttered.

“I am not certain that wouldn't be the wiser course to adopt. There, there, don't think I'm always finding fault. Blame rather this unfortunate affliction which forces me to sit and think while the rest of the world is up and doing. Forgive me, dearest, won't you?” The tears were flashing in his great eyes as he looked up at me, holding out his arms.

“What have I to forgive?” I said. But as I hid my face against his I am

not so sure that my tears did not mingle with his too.

Chapter IX.

ABOUT three o'clock on the following afternoon Captain Langton drove up to the house in a dashing mail phaeton, the like of which had never been seen at Granite Creek. Indeed I doubt if such a turn-out had ever been seen before in that part of the country, for his father was never ostentatious, and there was no one else who could have afforded such a luxury. I could not help thinking of Mr. Wallace and his new wagonette, and how envious he would be when he saw this magnificent affair with its pair of high steppers, and its groom in the back seat with his folded arms.

“By George,” said Will, for the whole family had come out on the verandah to see the show, “the Captain does it in style, and no mistake. What a grand pair, by George! Did you ever see such action, Flos? And look at that servant! Well, this is something like, you know!” — etc.

At that moment the carriage entered the gateway and the Captain dashed round the semicircular path which led to the door, and pulled up before us with a suddenness which brought the horses back with a tremendous clatter. Then the servant, who all this time had sat as impressive and impenetrable-looking as the Sphinx, suddenly jumped from his seat with an alacrity most astonishing and darted to the horses' heads.

Captain Langton then alighted and came towards us, the same affable smile on his good-looking face.

“Is our passenger ready?” he asked, after formally shaking hands with all the members of the family.

“Quite,” said Will, “though I'm afraid her box won't add to the dignity of your turn out.”

The Captain thought this an excellent jest, though I failed to see it in the same light, for my box was an old cumbersome wooden one which mother had brought out with her from England twenty-five years before. Will, however, lumped it out on his back with as much pride as though he were carrying the crown jewels of his late serene Majesty, the Great Mogul, though I thought I saw the nose of the sphinx like groom elevate itself the eighth part of an inch, as his eyes encountered the ancient structure. Servants have an unspeakable horror of poverty. They despise the “honest poor” more cordially than did ever a Roman his slaves, and unless their master's purse be full, feel even for him a contempt which

borders on the despicable. I didn't at all mind the master seeing my shabby trunk, but the servant made me feel uneasy.

At last, after having kissed and said good-bye to my dear ones, I mounted the phaeton, Captain Langton first helping me to do so, then springing to my side the moment after; the groom stepped back from the horses' heads, the Captain shook the reins and away we started at a rare pace. For the first few moments all was excitement, and then, strangely enough, I thought of the servant, whom I felt sure we had left behind in our hurried departure. On turning round, however, I beheld that worthy individual seated in the same grim fashion, looking for all the world as though he had never left the seat.

But in the meantime Captain Langton was regulating the pace of his team, a task which required no little patience as well as tact, for the horses were in tremendous fettle and carried on like a couple of kittens. By degrees, however, he broke them into a steady trot, and while we bowled along through the fresh, sweet-smelling air, I all aglow with excitement and the novelty of the situation, he talked to me of many things of no particular interest, though I recollect thinking that the tones of his voice would make any subject interesting. And when he looked into my face in his strange, half-melancholy way, and told me that the drive had brightened my eyes, and added a wonderful bloom to my cheeks, there was so much respectful adoration in his gaze that my foolish heart began to beat wildly, and my pulses to throb as though some new electric fluid had entered into my blood.

At last we passed through the big white gates which gave access to the broad drive which led by a circuitous route to the big house, before the door of which we eventually pulled up. In a moment the servant was in his old position at the horses' heads; then I was helped down by my companion, who led me up on to the verandah where stood his sister Maud, a rather melancholy figure in her deep black dress.

"Welcome to Langton," said he, as my feet touched the topmost step of the verandah.

"Welcome," repeated his sister, coming forward and kissing me. "You don't know how glad I am to see you, dear," she went on affectionately, slipping her arm about my waist and leading me into the house. "I do hope you won't find the old place very dull."

"I am sure I shall not," was my reply, "for a place would have to be very dull indeed to seem so to me."

"It's very gratifying to hear you say so, dear. Of course we shall be buried alive, but as the tomb is a commodious one we shall have plenty of time to explore it. We can ride, you know," she went on, as though it were necessary that she should make apologies to me, "and indulge in sundry other little innocent amusements, but father's death will prevent us keeping anything like open house."

And yet there was always somebody in the house, either a squatter friend or a boon companion from Melbourne, and I don't think we three, that is, Maud, her brother and I, had more than a dozen meals by ourselves during the whole period of my visit. Certainly, it was the most singular house of mourning I ever entered, and though everybody declared, as in duty bound, that the shade of the deceased still hovered in the air, it being imperceptible troubled us but little.

Langton Station was generally accounted one of the finest properties in the Wimmera District, and it was currently reported that the late Mr. Langton had left over a million in hard cash. But be that as it may, the run was known to be a highly prosperous one, and no one dreamt of doubting the truth of the statement. It (the run) stretched for miles and miles through the best grassed, best watered parts of the district, and afforded excellent pasturage for the countless flocks and herds which rambled over its vast surface; and I have often heard father say that the Langton wool was always the best in the market, so that the owner's income, in good seasons, must have been an extremely handsome one, even in these days of gigantic fortunes.

The house itself was not one suitable to the estate on which it was built, being a long, low rambling place, half wood, half granite, though it was so embowered with creepers of every description that it would require a more than superficial glance to discover where the one ended or the other began. A broad verandah, screened with roses, grape-vines, and the beautiful Virginia creeper, traversed three sides of the house, and here we always had tea of an afternoon, or dinner if it were too hot to stay in doors. Let the sun be never so warm, behind this thick screen of leaves the atmosphere was invariably delightful, and Maud and I used to lounge about on the easy chairs in very thin attire, drinking cool drinks or pecking at grapes and peaches. It was all a new delightful life to me. At first it seemed a little strange to be surrounded with every luxury, to have nothing to do but lie in the shade, eat peaches and read novels; to ring a bell when one wanted one's shoes, and not even have to brush the dust from one's own habit.

But I think there is no creature on earth so quickly adapts itself to circumstances as a woman. In three days I was as much at home as though I had been born to the life; in a week I had caught Maud's languid tones. For this, however, I was duly thankful, for she spoke beautifully, with a voice as soft as some dream-melody. When I got to know her better I didn't wonder at poor old Will's blind tumble into the intricate meshes of love's net. Had I been a man I believe I would have loved her for her voice alone. In this, I am well aware that I, indirectly, pay myself an extravagant compliment, but my candour compels me to admit, though it puts my modesty to the blush, that I have been told by persons of the sterner sex much of this which I have written concerning Maud.

Oh, vanity of vanities! I may well laugh at these things now, for my eyes are open and I see; but in our young days, in the spring of life when all the trees are covered with their fresh green leaves, and new emotions sprout continually in the garden of our breast, we gather all these sweet things in our arms, nor stay to think that the weeds and flowers grow side by side. In those days no grim phantasies baulk the way to enjoyment. All is real and all is marvellous. Were it not for the price we pay for ignorance, what happy days we might call them.

And here another thought intrudes itself. As the little gods of our own small worlds, why should we not, like the greater gods, expect some sign of adoration, or, like the one Great God, demand it? For if it is pleasing to us, is it not also pleasing to Him, of whom we are the visible form, the divinity made manifest? I take it there is something more than mere vulgar conceit in our love of what we call admiration. Our blood tingles, our eyes flash like heaven's own stars, and we tread with feet of air over the roughest road; but it ennobles us at the same time according to our natures, and if it fill the soul of one with petty pride, even that raises him into regions he had never hitherto trod, and makes of him, too, a symbol of divinity. "We touch heaven when we lay our hands on a human body." Perhaps the thought is not all a dream.

The days sped pleasantly enough at Langton, despite the fact that it was a house of mourning. After breakfast we usually went for our ride, the Captain invariably accompanying us; in the afternoon we drove, if we felt so inclined and the day was not too oppressive: otherwise we lounged about in our sweet do-nothing way. Maud improved greatly on acquaintance, though she still retained a certain coldness, as part of her nature, which was not at all times agreeable. Still, if you could remember that she meant nothing by it, and take her indifferent qualities along with her good ones, you would find her strike a very even balance. She was consistently charming, always affable, though to me it seemed a conscious affability; yet I doubt if she had ever before exerted herself to please anyone to the same extent. And yet, in spite of all her coldness and seeming indifference, I knew she was a vain woman and as fond of admiration as any of us poor creatures; and I often thought she merely suffered old Will to wait on her simply to please her vanity. She had been much spoilt, that I could see, and looked upon the adoration of men as her unassailable right. I am afraid, however, that I never properly appreciated Will's servile submission. Another man, another thousand men, might have bowed the knee to her in grovelling adoration without my thinking the proceeding in any way derogatory to their natures; but when it came to my own brother it altered the complexion of things. She must indeed be an excellent woman who can pass the critical examination of an embryo sister-in-law.

Captain Langton, on the other hand, had none of his sister's hauteur or

coldness, but was unaffectedly genuine, making one believe that he thought little of his vast wealth and enviable position. Always considerate and courteous, and exceptionally so to me, he seemed to belong to a world of which I was entirely ignorant. I had read of men studying to please, living, as it were, only for the sake of obeying a woman's behests; but hitherto my experience had led me into that groove where men and women are alike expected to look after themselves. My every suggestion was obeyed with an alacrity which was quite embarrassing; no wish nor whim of mine was left ungratified, if it were possible to gratify it. Nor would he listen to any remonstrance on my part.

"You are here," he said one day, when I complained of his zeal in attending to my petty wants, "and while you are here you must really permit me and mine to devote ourselves to making your stay a happy one."

"But I am really not accustomed to all this luxury and consideration," I answered. "It will entirely spoil me for the old life at Granite Creek."

"I scarcely think so," he replied, looking hard at me as he spoke, "and if it should, what would it matter? You are not likely to spend your life in this out-of-the-way spot."

"Who can say? And, after all, Wallan is not such a bad place."

"I suppose not," he laughed; "but it is scarcely good enough for you."

I know the blood rushed to my face and the fire to my eyes, but concealing, poorly I must confess, the effect of his words upon me, I said that Granite Creek had always been my home, and that to me it was the one dear spot in the universe.

"You have been happy there?" said he.

"Very happy."

"Lucky indeed," he said, as though speaking to himself. "I, you see, have never known what it was to enjoy the blessings of home. My father, good man though he was, was narrow of soul and could not understand the spirit which was not cast in his own mould. My mother I scarcely remember. But I think that I too might have been different had she been spared to me."

"You have suffered, then?" said I, for there was so deep a tone of melancholy in his voice that my heart rushed out to him.

He laughed gaily, or rather made a sad attempt at gaiety. "Of course I've suffered. Who hasn't? It is man's heritage. A sad one, isn't it? But you were speaking of Granite Creek," said he, suddenly reverting to the former subject, as though he wished to avoid speaking of his own sorrows. "Do you really think you could be happy in such a place for ever and ever? Have you no wish to see the world? Have you never dreamt of the wonders that lie out yonder waiting for you to explore?" And he waved his hand as though embracing the earth and heaven with

his thoughts.

“Oh, yes,” was my reply, “for who is there that is young who would not like to travel? Harold and I have many a long talk about the wonderful cities of Europe; and he used to say that he would take me to see them when he became famous. Poor Harold!”

“Ah, then, I was not altogether wrong in my surmises. Granite Creek, I have no doubt, is a very beautiful place — a sort of fairy oasis in this bush desert — but it seems that we dream even there.”

“Why should we not?”

“Why not indeed? The mortal would like to be an angel, and, if we could only know the truth, I daresay we should find the angel sighing to be a mortal. We can't command our dreams, you know, though I see no reason why such modest ones as yours should not be fulfilled.”

“They may be yet,” said I half-saucily.

“A beautiful woman,” he replied, “need never dream idle dreams.” And though I knew not exactly what he meant, I felt he wished me to understand that he considered me beautiful; and consequently many foolish emotions ran riot in my breast. What did I not dream as I lay there looking up into his handsome face and listening to his low serious voice? a voice which at times rang almost as sweet as Maud's. There was something wonderfully fascinating in it all to a girl who had only been accustomed to the very small mercies of the world; for I hold that however sincere the affection may be in itself, the more material side of this fleshly spirit manifests itself in all we think or feel. How many girls are there, I wonder, who would not have thought as I thought, felt as I felt?

“Do you know,” said he, looking down into my eyes, “that I am thinking of going to England next year?”

“I did not know,” I answered, trying to look away from him and feeling as though a dark cloud had shot suddenly across the sun of my universe.

“Yes,” he continued, watching me all the time with a voracious look, “I have long had a wish to see the Old Country, in fact, all the old great countries of Europe, and I think it's about time I gratified it.”

“You will have a pleasant trip,” said I, knowing not what else to say. “Shall you take Maud?”

“I think not; and as for the pleasant trip, that will depend entirely upon who accompanies me.”

But just here, as the conversation was taking a tender and confidential tone, and I was already beholding myself careering through the famous cities of Europe with a certain person by my side, our *tête-a-tête* was broken in upon by Maud, who, however, no sooner saw the significant position of our chairs than she stood still looking inexpressibly stupid, hesitating whether it would not be more politic to beat a hasty retreat.

“Excuse me, dear,” she said, and she looked singularly knowing as she

spoke, "but I really didn't know."

"Know!" I echoed, feeling exceedingly uncomfortable.

"There is a visitor for you."

"A visitor," I cried, "I wonder who it can be?" But at that moment, catching sight of Ella, I bounded from my chair, leaving the Captain disconsolate, and sprang into my friend's arms. It was the first time I had seen her since coming to Langton, and we had so much to say to each other that I hastily carried her off to my room under the pretence of relieving her of her cloak and hat.

"You have altered," she said, holding me in her arms and kissing me as though I had committed some fearful crime.

"Altered," I echoed with an affected look of indifference. "How could I alter in two weeks?"

"You have, all the same," she replied in her quiet way, which always reminded me so forcibly of Arthur. "You are not the girl you were at Granite Creek."

I laughed at her, and kissed her, and called her a foolish old thing, but I knew all the time that she was speaking the truth. In the light of the new day, the past seemed like a confused, partly-remembered dream. I had drunk from the cup of luxury and had given my soul up to foolish dreams. I had looked above my sun into the blue beyond, and the mystic light there dazzled me. I could not see. I was like one wrestling with an invisible assailant. Yet into my spirit was blown the breath of a new life, and through my veins the blood coursed like living drops of fire.

Chapter X.

EARLY the next morning Will rode over to breakfast, looking as spick and span as you please, for he, like myself, had been quick to take a hint, and, outwardly at least, he had already begun to imitate Captain Langton. He knew, poor fellow, that women are captivated more by glitter than quality, and I shrewdly suspect it was with the hope of appearing to advantage before a certain young lady that he had donned his best manners with his new riding-suit. He certainly looked capable of captivating any woman's heart, and I marked with pleasure, for I had grown mightily fastidious of late, that when he spoke he pitched his voice in a minor key and avoided using slang to any great extent — to entirely avoid it would be a sheer impossibility. Altogether I was not displeased with the progress he was making, and if I feared for the result of his mad infatuation — as mad it most certainly was — I yet had sufficient belief in him to trust his strength of character to see him through the trouble. That Maud had any love for him, that is, such love only as would satisfy his ardent longing, I doubted, if not entirely disbelieved. I did not think he was the sort of man for her, for such women do not value such hollow victories. It is no pleasure to them to possess a slave; they require a master. I think she liked him well — well enough to keep him revolving round in her train of satellites — but that she entertained for him an affection of a serious nature I could not credit. But he, poor old fellow, unconscious of aught but that she was the most dainty and entrancing creature he had ever seen, worshipped before her shrine with blinded eyes, and a heart so full of conflicting emotions that it drove every other serious reflection from his head.

It had previously been arranged that we should picnic that day at a place called Fern Tree Gully, an enchanting spot some ten miles from the station, and chiefly on this account Will had ridden over as already stated. He, the Captain, Maud, and I were to compose the party, so immediately after breakfast we set about preparing for the outing. First of all we saw to the hamper, that most necessary piece of baggage, and then dispatched the sphinx-like groom on the journey in a buggy. He was to drive to a certain ruined hut on the borders of the Gully and there prepare for our arrival.

And here I may as well confess that my horror of that apparently taciturn personage had gradually yielded to a no more offensive

sentiment than that of curiosity. At first he used to look at me in a hard, quizzing sort of way, which I at the time deemed impertinent, though I pretended not to notice it; yet when I once happened to look closely into the man's face I was surprised to see an unmistakable look of pity in his eyes. This, you may be sure, astonished me considerably, and my curiosity getting the better of my dignity, I waylaid him one afternoon in the garden and entered into conversation with him, thereby hoping to discover what sort of fearful wild-fowl he might be. But in him I was greatly disappointed, for I found him a quite intelligent personage, though profoundly depressed. He, however, seemed to appreciate the honour I conferred upon him, for he must have exclaimed, "Thank you, miss," at least a score of times during our short conversation. I also discovered that originally he must have been intended for a jovial fellow, for he had a pair of the merriest little twinkling lights of eyes that I have ever seen, and though his face was decidedly ugly and as hard as a piece of leather, his nose slightly elevated out of the strict line of beauty, there was a curve about the corners of his ugly mouth which, I felt sure, concealed a world of sly humour. What brought him to his present doleful state I had yet to learn, but I felt convinced that Bobbie (for Bobbie Flaskett was the gentleman's name) had some mighty sorrow gnawing incessantly at his vitals.

At last we four got under weigh, all mounted on the best blood in that part of the country, and as we raced break-neck over the long stretches of grass, laughing and screaming to each other like so many children let loose from school, I could not help thinking that there was no happier girl in the whole world than I, or a more glorious or exhilarating feeling than that of being borne in a mad gallop through the fresh air and the bright sunshine.

"To the Withered Wattle," roared Will, as he pointed to a big dead tree which stood on a small eminence nearly two miles ahead of us, and sitting down on his great hunter he showed us the way over the first fence of post and rails.

Thud, thud, thud! We were beside him in a moment, and with faces set we raced neck and neck like four demons. Now it was a gully we dived into, now a small creek we took with a flying leap; now a fallen tree, and now another great fence of post and rails. No matter what the obstacle might be, we raced at it with the reckless impetuosity of idiots, and cleared it too as a kangaroo would a water-hole. Oh, it was a mad gallop! I felt every nerve of me on fire; my brain was in a whirl, my eyes danced in my head like a couple of mad things. My hands involuntarily tightened on the rein; I cut my mare across the shoulders, a swinging slash. And then I felt her gather herself up as though she would jump out of her skin, and away she tore like a storm-cloud through the sky. I shot by Will, whose weight was beginning to tell on his mount, with a triumphant

wave of my whip; drew up to Maud's crupper, then to her girth, and after a short sharp struggle left her behind as well. But almost at the same moment I heard the beat of hoofs on my right, and on glancing round discovered Captain Langton rapidly overhauling me. He was evidently very much in earnest, and was making his horse go for all it was worth. He smiled defiantly as his eyes met mine. "I'll beat you," he shouted, and pointed to the goal, now half a mile away. I nodded acceptance of the challenge and away we went neck and neck.

He was mounted on a superb animal, one that had pulled off more than one steeplechase in and about Melbourne, but I also was mounted on one of the best cross-country horses in the Langton stables, and moreover, I had a decided advantage as regards weight. So away we went, leaving the others farther and farther behind with every stride. Occasionally I stole a glance at him. He was riding for dear life, a look of fierce determination on his face; an aggravated look, as though he did not relish the thought of a girl giving him so much trouble. That he meant to win, if it were in man and horse to do it, was unmistakable. And so I, too, entered into the spirit of the conflict, and determined to beat him at all hazards, for it seemed to me the race I rode was something more than a mere horse-race — a symbol of that race which ends only with life. I put my teeth together and took a firmer grip of the reins. The mare answered to the pressure nobly, and in a moment I was quite half a length ahead. I turned to him with a smile of triumph — I couldn't help it — and our eyes met. He looked downright cross, but I was too set upon beating him to do anything but smile at his anger. He spurred his horse viciously forward till he had recovered the lost ground, then sullenly pointed ahead to the fence we should have to clear before we had the straight run home. I smiled in acknowledgment of his salute and eased my mare a little.

The fence referred to could not, I should think, have been less than five feet, though most probably an inch or two higher, and was built of such heavy timber that it presented a really formidable obstacle. However, we had neither the time nor inclination to hang back now. In a minute we were upon it, and like two birds we rose at the self-same moment. My mare's hind legs rapped it loudly, but she fell on her feet all right, and as he, too, had cleared it without mishap there was only left the stretch of a few hundred yards to the withered tree. I saw him bend forward and urge his great horse on with whip and spur, and the fury of the race entered my blood. I pressed my lips firmly, muttering, "I will beat him, I will, I will," and I'm afraid that I, too, whipped my beautiful mare somewhat severely. But at such moments one does not stay to think humanely. I only know the mare threw up her head, pulling me forward on her mane, and like an arrow shot above the green grass. For a few strides he kept pace with me, then gradually dropped behind. The up-hill part of the journey was too much for him. I sailed under the great withered arms of

the wattle, half-a-dozen lengths ahead.

As I eased the mare he rode up to me.

“You were one too many for me this time,” he said, “but I'll have my revenge, never fear.”

“You'll have to train a little first,” said I, smiling all over, for I was flushed with my victory and vastly delighted in having thus beaten him.

Then up came Will and Maud, the former's mount looking as though he had had enough of the giant for one day.

“A grand race, by George!” said Will. “I'd give anything to be about three stone lighter, so that I could keep pace with you.”

“It would take the old gentleman himself to keep pace with your sister,” said the Captain somewhat irritably in spite of his smile.

“She always was a terror over the sticks,” Will answered. “I remember when she was a bit of a kid — ” and here he was launching off into one of his numerous reminiscences anent my wondrous childhood — for he was always devotedly attached to me, dear old fellow, and never imagined it possible that I could be anything but a source of interest to everyone — when I pulled him up sharply.

“Don't be silly, Will. I could not have won the race without the horse.”

“The horse is a clinker,” he replied, “but so is the rider.” That was the worst of Will. He would have his say if he died for it.

“I think you are right, Will,” said Captain Langton as he helped me to dismount, for here we gave the horses a rest, he and Will rubbing them down with dry grass. “Horse and rider are so thoroughly in harmony with each other that it would be a great pity if we ever separated them. Do you think I could prevail upon you to let Miss Hastings accept the mare? She beat me fairly and deserves the prize.”

Will first looked at me, then at the mare, and then at him. “It's deuced kind of you,” he said, “a splendid gift, by George. I'm sure it would delight her immensely. But the old man, you know — he's rather queer about that sort of thing.”

And so the dear old fellow blundered and stuttered like a great booby; but the Captain only laughed and declared it would be a thousand pities if the mare and I ever parted company, and that he would see to it that we did not. As for me, I felt exceedingly uncomfortable, more especially as I thought Maud was laughing noiselessly at me all the time. Her brother's open admiration was scarcely to her liking, I think; but for that reason I need not have judged her harshly, considering how I had thought of her and Will.

After a rest of some fifteen minutes we all mounted once more and continued our journey, this time like peaceable Christians. Yet it was a grand jaunt, when one comes to think of it, and one which, I am sure, each member of that little party will recollect to his dying day. I can shut my eyes and hear the clatter of the hoofs again, and feel the wind-beating

upon my face and tugging at my hair as though it wished to drag it from my head. Now we are sweeping along with a grand, far-stretching stride, now skimming a creek, and now rising to the grim unbending rails. And then a thud as we land on the other side, and then away again as though Satan were at our heels. And how angry Captain Langton looked when it was all over; and how red Will got with the exertion, and Maud — I don't think she altogether relished my victory, for if there was one thing upon which she prided herself it was her horsemanship. Languid and lazy as she was under ordinary circumstances, she became a changed woman when seated on the back of a horse. Then all the ice of her nature grew warm with the blood of life; her eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed. At such moments I thought her the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. I couldn't be surprised at poor old Will's infatuation, for after all he was only a man, with all a man's faults and virtues, and he hoped to win for himself this star of the feminine firmament.

She, however, was extremely affable to him to-day, and though I rode with Captain Langton I did not forget to cast an eye on them occasionally, as a sister should; for I hold it to be the duty of a sister to look well after the brother lest some designing minx step in and lure him from the path you would have him tread. Will was radiant, all smiles and pretty speeches, his blue eyes glistening in the sunlight like two great precious stones — precious stones indeed! And she likewise appeared to be in a most amiable mood, and I began to wonder if she really were getting to care for the genial giant by her side. As for me, I was as happy as a girl could be under such circumstances, and kept up a constant stream of chatter with my companion, who quickly forgot all about his defeat, till we arrived at our destination. Here we were met by Flaskett the groom, to whom we handed our horses, and then, after we had indulged in a little light refreshment, we commenced our ascent of the Gully.

Between two bright green hills the track ran up a gentle slope for a hundred yards or so, which distance being satisfactorily accomplished, we entered a veritable fairy bower of greenery, the beautiful yellow and green fronds stretching above our heads like shimmering waves of sunlight. On every hand the vegetation was so dense that it was impossible to see more than a dozen yards to right or left, though here and there the bright sun above forced its beams into solemn-looking crevices, lighting them up with a radiance both rare and mysterious. No sound broke the stillness of the scene, save for the gentle ripple of the little stream at our feet, the musical mother of the great tree ferns whose roots, laved with her sparkling kisses, sucked in the nourishment which was their life.

“By George,” gasped old Will, lost in admiration at the grandeur surrounding him, “what a place! Wouldn't poor little Harry like to be

here?"

"He is a poet, is he not?" asked Maud, though she knew well enough, I having told her as much at least a score of times.

"Rather," was the reply, and there was no mistake about the exclamation either. "He's going to be the first great Australian poet, poor little chap."

"He hopes to be," said I, seeing her smile quietly at his enthusiasm, and being ready to take up arms on the slightest provocation.

"Does he write poetry?" she asked.

"Of course," said I indignantly. "How could he be a poet if he didn't?"

"Oh!" she answered.

"And good poetry too," said I, seeing that her exclamation implied that all poets do not necessarily write poetry, though they dabble in verse — a fine hair-splitting distinction with which I had no patience.

"He has been here, I suppose?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, once — when he was a little thing. Father carried him."

"Poor little chap," said he quite sympathetically, "he must come here again."

"Ah, I'm afraid he cannot come now. He's ever so much heavier."

"What of that, poor little chap. I'll have a chair rigged up for him and get a couple of my men to carry it. We won't spoil the making of our first great poet for the sake of a little trouble."

"You are very good, Captain Langton. If we only could manage to bring him with us I know it would be giving him one of the greatest pleasures of his life."

"Would it not please you too?" he asked in a low voice.

"Ah, wouldn't it! He has been our baby, you know, and we all do what we can to make him happy."

Then upward we toiled once more, and as he held my hand, for more reasons, I am afraid, than helping me across the little stream or pulling me up the steep places, he talked much of Harold and his prospects as a writer, wanted to know all about what the boy had already done and when he was going to publish, and let me know that he was intimately acquainted with many literary men in Melbourne whose good opinion might be worth much to a beginner. To all of this I listened with a beating and a thankful heart, and if I let my hand rest longer in his than was absolutely necessary, or if my tongue formed warmer words than, under ordinary circumstances, it would have done, it was for the sake of the poor dreamer who had set his soul upon clutching the gossamer wings of the fame-bird.

At last Maud came to a standstill and declared that she would go no further; her boots were wet and her skirt covered with mud (as indeed were mine, only I had never thought of them); she failed to see where the pleasure of such toil came in, and thought it a piece of arrant nonsense

for four apparently sane people to inflict such torture on themselves in the absurd belief that it was pleasure. She had had quite enough of Fern Tree Gully. It was her first visit there, and she would take good care it should be her last. I was not in the least surprised at this sudden outbreak of hers; indeed my only surprise was that she had ever consented to undertake the journey.

“Only a little further, Maud,” said her brother, “and we shall be at the top. Don't spoil our enjoyment by your obstinacy, please.”

“I don't want to spoil your enjoyment,” she answered quietly.

“Then why will you always insist upon playing the part of the wet blanket?”

“I was not aware that I had any decided partiality for that *rôle*,” she answered with a smile. “But as the wet blanket is such a disagreeable companion, why not go on and leave her here?”

“Shall we, Miss Hastings?” he asked.

“I can't leave Maud,” I replied.

“Pray don't consider me,” exclaimed that young lady as she took her seat on the trunk of a big fern which had fallen across the track.

But here I came and sat beside her, an act which caused our two companions to look at each other and then laugh loudly.

“You're not tired, Flos?” said Will. “No gammon, now.”

“Tired or not,” said I somewhat indignantly, for in those days I used to look upon my robust health with something like reproach, “I stay with Maud.”

“She means it, old man,” said he, turning to Captain Fred, whose eyes were on me all this time.

“I'm afraid she does, Will,” was the reply; “though it's a pity that we should miss the view from the top of the hill. If I could only prevail upon her to take my arm, and you could prevail upon Maud to take yours, I think we should accomplish the journey satisfactorily. What do you say, ladies?”

The ladies were mute for a moment or two; then they looked at each other and smiled, and eventually the quartette set out in pairs.

The top of the gully was, in spite of Maud's sighings and moanings, reached in due course, and the view therefrom duly admired, though advancing into the glaring sunlight after the cool retreat of the fern-bower was so dazzling as to produce a strange and none too agreeable sensation.

The two gentlemen smoked a cigar apiece as we sat talking and watching the sun-shadows in the valleys below, and then the Captain, taking out his watch, declared that it was time we returned to luncheon; so, amid more exclamations of annoyance from Maud, we arose and began our descent of the slippery track.

It had seemed to us a singularly hard road to mount, but it was a

decidedly awkward one to descend, and had it not been for my cavalier, whose strong hand steadied me when I slipped, I should have been down at least a dozen times. As it was I did strain my ankle a little, which caused me such pain that I was forced to sit and rest it for a couple of minutes; and I must say that it was almost worth the pain to behold the extreme solicitude of my companion. He was a blockhead and a careless fool; he ought to be jolly well kicked; he would rather have broken his own neck, confound him! than that I should suffer the slightest pain. To all of which I, of course, declared that it was none of his fault; that it was a mere nothing, and that there was no one to blame but myself.

Upon our setting out once more, though this time he would insist upon my taking his arm, declaring the accident would never have happened had I done so before, I was made aware of the fact that we were now entirely alone. Will and Maud, who had been in front of us all the way, not detecting our stoppage, had gone on. That I felt rather nervous at this discovery, and not a little embarrassed, I freely confess, and I began to wonder curiously if he would take advantage of the opportunity thus offered him, and likewise how I should behave when it came to the point. I was half afraid of him yet, though I had seen nothing in him to warrant the rumours which had been set afloat concerning his erratic past. Still, he was not altogether free from suspicion, though, I may add, none the less interesting on that account. If there is one thing we women despise it is a noodle, though, on the other hand, a man has not merely to be a scrapegrace to command our admiration, though I grant you that the stories of his wild doings are never displeasing. I think I should have been less suspicious of Captain Fred had he shown a little more of the scamp, that is, in an inoffensive sort of way. One might have summed him up then with some accuracy; but his present exemplary conduct rendered him a tantalizing enigma.

So down we went deeper and deeper into the mystic gloom of the fern bower, the light now being almost entirely shut out by the intertwining branches above us, and now again radiant as though filtered through leaves of gold. But at length, in one of the dark places above mentioned, I was unfortunate enough to slip again, this time over a root which crossed the path. I'm afraid I gave a little scream, and that in consequence I considerably startled my companion, for he drew me suddenly to him and inquired the cause of my cry.

“I have gone over on my ankle again,” I said.

“The same one?”

“Yes.”

“It has hurt you, dear?”

“A little, I think.”

“What a confounded ass I am,” he exclaimed, “I ought to be jolly well horsewhipped.” Then very earnestly, “Can you walk all right?”

“Oh, yes. At least I think so.” And I set out once more boldly enough, but was quickly reduced to an ignoble limp.

“Why, you're fainting,” he said suddenly, seeing the ashy look on my face, for at that moment I really thought I should faint, so acute was the pain in my ankle. Then he plunged his handkerchief into the stream which ran at our feet, and with it bathed my temples till I felt the deadly sickness pass away.

“Thank you,” I said, “I feel better now. How silly of me to be sure; but, do you know, all the strength went out of me for the moment. I am a nice one to bring for a picnic, am I not?” and I tried to laugh at my misfortunes.

“By Jove, you've got some pluck,” he answered admiringly. “I know what it is to sprain an ankle. But now what about our next move? Do you think you can walk at all?”

“I shall have to,” said I, making a feeble effort to rise to my feet. “We cannot be very far from the hut now.”

“Not far, I think, and yet too far for you to walk in your present condition.”

“How shall I get there, then?”

“You must be carried.”

“Carried! You could not get the mare up here.”

“I shall not attempt it.”

“You will go for Will? Yes, that is a good idea. I shall be all right here till you return.”

“I shall not go for Will either, for you might faint during my absence. I have caused you mischief enough already; let me now earn my forgiveness.”

I'm afraid I understood him well enough. At any rate my heart began to beat as though it did, sending the tell-tale blood back into my face. Yet, woman-like, I had to assume an ignorance of his meaning by asking him what he meant.

“You can't walk,” he replied; “I can't leave you here, so you must allow me to carry you.”

Of course I objected. I couldn't think of such a thing. He really must run for Will. I was very sorry to cause him so much trouble, it was just as annoying to me as it must be to him, but if he wouldn't mind bringing my brother I should be ever so much obliged to him. And so on, and so on; and all the time I was quivering with excitement — an excitement which quite banished my physical pain — and wondering what it would be like to feel myself in those strong arms. To all my objections, however, he returned some plausible argument, and as I felt that only by letting him have his way could we reach our destination, the upshot of it all was that he lifted me in his arms as though I were a baby, notwithstanding my substantial weight, and bore me along in the cool shade of the green and

golden ferns.

Chapter XI.

AT last we emerged into the open, when to my inexpressible relief, for however pleasant the situation might have been it was nevertheless a delicate one, I beheld Will running towards us.

“What's up?” he panted, as he came tearing along. He was quite fifty yards when he shouted, so that by the time he reached us the Captain had, in answer to my eager request, somewhat grudgingly deposited me on the grass.

“Flossie has sprained her ankle, and I have had to carry her. I'm glad you've come, old man; you can lend me a hand.”

I could not help admiring his coolness. Glad Will had come, indeed, and only a couple of minutes before he told me he would the distance were ten times as great. But, of course, I wasn't going to say anything, and I'm sure old Will never suspected that, for the Captain, his arrival was decidedly inopportune.

“Are you in very great pain?” asked the dear old fellow — after he had been given a hasty account of the accident — his face betraying the utmost concern.

“Can't you see she is?” said Captain Langton, somewhat irritably. “Look at her poor face.”

“No, no; not in the least,” I answered hastily. “It smarts a little, that is all.”

“Poor old Flos,” said Will. “We must get you round to the hut, and treat you to a cold water bandage. By George, your ankle's swollen like a pudding.” And with that he took me up in his big arms and hurried away with me, Captain Langton following with a none too agreeable look on his face.

Upon arriving at the hut, which had once been the abode of a solitary shepherd, but which now had fallen into disuse and disrepair, a little stimulant was given me, a cold bandage applied to the swollen limb, and in a few minutes, save for the dull, throbbing pain, I felt another being. Maud was greatly distressed at the accident, and extremely solicitous for my welfare, so much so, in fact, that I immediately began to upbraid myself for ever thinking that she was more selfish than I, or nine-tenths of her fellows. I think, when all's said, that human nature is much the same in all of us. As we cry or laugh in unison, so do we think and feel. The common aim of all is the same — happiness; the common end the

grave.

Presently Will entered the hut and bore me out on the grass, where, beneath the shade of a big tree, rugs and cushions had been piled up to make a comfortable couch. Here, also, the servant had spread a snow-white table-cloth, which was laden with countless delicacies; and though at times a grass-hopper did lurch into a jam tart, and the flies buzzed around us like a swarm of winged demons, we yet contrived, amid jest and laughter, to demolish a substantial meal. Had it not been for my unfortunate accident, I think I should have been supremely happy, for not alone was everybody in the highest spirits, which must have proved contagious, but I had experienced that day a new and wonderful sensation, which, though I knew not yet whether it was the harbinger of life or death, had filled me with a great joy. Life, it seemed, truly, and bright as though born in the sun-kingdoms. Yet there was a terror in it too, a sort of dark cloud which might bring the night and the rain, or which might but conceal the effulgence of some new sun. Captain Langton, as I have said before, had always been to me a source of extreme curiosity. The stories which wove their interest round his erring personality were legion, and if half of them were true he must have been almost past praying for. I used to wonder what he was like, and why he didn't marry, and — and many other foolish things; for, being gifted with a most surprising imagination, I not unusually constructed my air castles in the most fantastic styles of architecture. Strange castles they were, too, with fairy towers and grim dungeons, in the former or the latter of which I spent my idle days.

After luncheon Captain Langton brought out his cigar case, and he and Will began blowing great wreaths of smoke from their mouths, the man Flaskett, even, participating in the enjoyment of the fragrant weed, for to him his master had flung a cigar, telling him to be off and smoke it.

“He seems a rum sort of fellow,” said Will, as the man picked the cigar up, mumbled out some thanks, and rolled off. “Looks a regular convict.”

I couldn't help smiling in spite of my physical pain — the allusion was such a very unfortunate one. But that was just like old Will. He would blunder over a clump of thistles with his bare feet and discover after, by the pain he suffered, that he had been doing that which he should not have done. I saw a quick look pass between Maud and her brother; it was just a flicker of the eyelid, but it did not escape me.

“He was a queer sort of chap when I first picked him up,” said the Captain, with an amused smile; “but I am gradually breaking him in.”

“Breaking him in?” echoed Will.

“Well, taking some of the nonsense out of him; teaching the beggar to know his place; ridding him of the preposterous ideas he entertained as to the dignity of his status. As though a fellow like that could have any status.”

“Why not?” I asked, seeing that this was most probably the cause of Mr. Flaskett's dolefulness, and feeling a passing inclination to enter the lists in his favour. “Australia is a free country. He has a perfect right to be proud and independent.”

“But pride in his station is absurd.”

“I do not think that pride in any station is absurd.”

“But, my dear Miss Hastings, when you are nobody and give yourself airs, you become a laughing-stock.”

“Nobody,” I echoed, with a look of surprise. “How can a man be a nobody?”

“I see what it is,” he said with a laugh. “You are one of those dreadful socialistic — republican sort of people. Rights of man — not forgetting woman — equality, fraternity, and all that sort of thing. As though there ever were equality, or ever could be.”

“Not equality as you understand it, certainly not.”

“And pray how do I understand it?” he asked, with a quizzing smile.

“You'd better not press for an answer, old fellow,” said Will, grinning furiously. “She's pretty hot on politics, I can tell you, and rocks it in fairly warm when she's set going. You should hear her and Harold at it. They'll argue by the hour about the rights and wrongs of the world.”

“Which they intend to set going on a new and improved plan, I suppose?” said the Captain, with a mischievous smile.

“Now you're laughing at me, Captain Langton,” I replied; “and it's very unkind of you. Respect a wounded enemy.”

“Ah, yes! I'm afraid I'm a very unworthy foeman. Please forgive me, and let me hope that it is not yet too late to inquire how the ankle is progressing?”

I was pleased to say the ankle was progressing favourably. It was not to be a very serious sprain, I thought; and though I expected it would prevent me getting about as usual for a little time, I nevertheless proposed remounting my horse again when the time came for our setting out. To this, however, the Captain would not listen.

“You must go in the buggy,” said he. “Flaskett shall ride my horse back and lead yours.”

“But what's to become of you?”

“I shall drive you back.”

“But,” said I, tantalizingly, “I cannot allow you to coop yourself up in a buggy, well knowing that you would be regretting the homeward gallop all the time.”

“But if I prefer playing the martyr?”

“Which I may be permitted to doubt. No, no, I assure you the servant will do most admirably.”

“Would you rather I didn't come?” he asked, in a low, reproachful voice. His eyes looking into mine, made my face burn.

“How can you say such a thing, Captain Langton?”

“Then I will come — if you have no objection?”

“Objection! I thought you would rather ride.”

“Did you?”

To this direct appeal I could not answer, for the earnest look in his face embarrassed me. The jest had grown serious all of a moment. He, however, considerately spared me a reply, for stepping over to where Will and Maud sat, he informed them of the arrangement he had just made, and then coo-eed loudly for the servant.

“Coo ee,” came back the answer from some bushes on our left, and a few minutes after Mr. Flaskett loomed in view. Then the three men bustled about the horses, while Maud put away the silver and folded the table-cloth, I looking lazily on, being forbidden to stir.

At length saddles and bridles were properly adjusted, the horse harnessed to the buggy, the remnants of the feast stored carefully away beneath the seat, and I lifted bodily into the trap. Then the Captain mounted to the seat beside me, and the next moment the little cavalcade clattered away.

I must confess to a keen enjoyment of that drive, in spite of the occasional sharp twinges which shot through my foot. My companion was solicitude itself, and it is surprising how extremely tender a man can be when he lays himself out to it. I was very foolish, I suppose, but I felt a sweet gratification in my helplessness which whispered that the misfortune had not been too dearly bought. There was no pain, only a numbed remembrance of a pain, conducive, like the opiate, to lethargy. It was a pleasure to shut one's eyes, and listen to that soft voice of his whispering kind words, and feel the warm sun, tempered by the soft breeze, permeating one's body, as it were, and filling with a dreamy langour every chamber of the brain. I do not profess to recollect half of what he said. I have a confused remembrance of many tender phrases, and of looks which meant more than he dared utter; but it was all sensuous, all balmy and blissful, and full of delightful dreams.

At the junction of the Wallan Road, where we turned off to Langton, we pulled up for a moment to say good-bye to Will, who was to leave us at this point and strike out for Granite Creek. He, dear old fellow, looked happier then than I had ever seen him look before, and as I glanced from Maud to him I thought an understanding seemed to exist between them. For his sake I hoped it might be so, for I knew that he had set his heart before her feet for her to cherish or spurn. It is a sad thing when a man or woman comes to this. When pride vanishes in the mistrack of passion, the genius of destruction may be said to smile. Out of the foolish day descends the desolate night, and though the bondage of love be sweet, sweeter than a Caesar's might, more glorious than the triumphal march of an Alexander, may we not also liken it to the ignoble flight at Actium?

Sweet is it to kiss the hem of her skirt, though the dust of the highways still clings to it; sweet is it to know that he is ours, body and soul, bound with invisible fetters heated in the furnace of the soul and shaped on the anvil of the heart; yet sweeter than all is it to feel that we are *his*, and that from him, as from the sun, we catch the glow and glory of our being.

I invariably got into this train of thought whenever Maud and Will presented themselves before my mental vision. It seems to me now that I might have been better employed in looking after my own affairs, but it is singular how dull our vision is when we look back into ourselves, and how particularly bright and powerful it is when we look into other people. Not alone do we put the *right* construction on their actions, but we likewise analyze their motives and build up their thoughts; in fact, I am not so sure we do not at times credit them with much of which they never dreamt. And how solicitous we are of our dear friend Ethel. We do hope she will not make a fool of herself over that conceited prig, Raffler, who only talks of the destructive fire of his eyes' artillery, and the number of silly female hearts he has broken in his day. How Ethel, in turn, pities us with all her heart as she thinks of the occasional visits of dear Mr. Jones, sighs as she contemplates the excesses of our folly, and daily prays that the friend of her youth may never know the meaning of that sad word — Regret. But I suppose this careful consideration of our neighbour's welfare arises entirely from our humane wish of well-doing, and I have no doubt that the species, as a rule, thoroughly appreciate the delicate attention.

It was with rather a doleful cast of countenance that poor Will tore himself away from our little party, but he was to ride over on the following morning to ascertain how the sprain progressed, and that, I think, was the only bubble of consolation in his cup of bitterness.

“You will take care of yourself, dear,” he said. “No standing, you know.”

“I will be as good as gold,” I answered merrily, for the foot seemed better already, and I was delighted at the thought of escaping a lengthened inconvenience.

“You will watch her, old fellow,” said he, turning to Captain Langton. “Remember she's young and giddy, and — you understand?” he added with a smile.

“Perfectly. I'll set a guard over her, and if she attempts to move we'll tie her down.”

Will nodded acquiescence to this arrangement; then after a few hurried words of parting turned his horse's head in the direction of Wallan, and trotted off.

Upon our arrival at the station, Captain Langton would insist upon having me carried into the house, though I assured him that I was perfectly able to walk. To this, however, he would not listen, but sending

the groom Flaskett for a chair, he helped that worthy to carry me to my room, where they left me to the tender mercies of one of the maidservants, who duly applied another bandage to the swollen limb and treated me according to the rules of the "Family Physician," which rules I read aloud for her benefit as she worked.

And then I think I must have fallen asleep, for when I awoke the sun had already set, and through my window I could see the Southern Cross lying low down in the sky. Feeling rather hot, for the night was somewhat oppressive, I was about to spring from my bed to hurry out on the verandah when I recollected that I had sprained my foot but a few hours previously, and that to stand on it might, at the present moment, cause it considerable injury; yet when I did sit up and let it dangle on the floor, it felt so much better that I determined to risk the consequences. Therefore, after bathing my face in cold water, I hobbled quietly towards the verandah and slipped into the long cane chair, which, on account of my having shown such a decided partiality for it, was always called mine. I had not, however, been ensconced among the cushions many minutes before I heard a well-known step coming up the gravel path; the perfume of a cigar — and I knew the perfume of those cigars well by this time — was next wafted in on the warm breeze through the trellis of roses, and then the dark outline of the wanderer appeared in view as he began to mount the steps of the verandah.

I lay watching him for several moments, my heart jumping as though it had serious designs of taking lodgment in my throat; for it is a perverse creature, this heart of ours, and has a will of its own which will not be gainsaid. But at length, by persistent coaxing — for it is only by coaxing that you can get the creature to do anything — I prevailed upon it to comport itself with becoming dignity, nor bring its unhappy mistress into ridicule.

The Captain, in the meantime, stood staring stolidly out across the great dark plains, over which the moon's shadows cut fantastic capers, and I could tell by the way he pulled at his cigar — whose glow shone out through the darkness like a fierce *ignis fatuus* — that he was thinking of other things than the mystical stillness which surrounded him. Presently he uttered an exclamation, half sigh and half of anger, and flung his cigar away down the gravelled path, where for a moment it spluttered like an exploding squib. Then he came towards me with hands outstretched, as though groping for the chair.

"If you wouldn't mind," said I, with a little laugh, as he stumbled against my frail couch, making it quiver ominously.

"You!" he exclaimed. "By Jove, I didn't know you were there. How long have you been here?" This was asked rather earnestly, I thought.

"Only a few minutes."

"I was under the impression you had gone to bed; and I should like to

know how you dare come out without my permission?"

"Please, sir, the invalid is ever so much better, and she wanted a little fresh air.

"I am glad to hear that she is better, but I must give her a good scolding for being so mutinous."

"Spare her this time."

"Well, well," he said, seizing a chair and seating himself beside me, "I suppose I must overlook this first act of insubordination, but if ever — oh, if ever — No," he added in a solemn voice, "the consequences will be too terrible even to mention."

"Then pray don't. You know you might terrify me and so throw me back a week or two. But where is Maud?"

"Writing letters, I think, or she was a while ago. Poor Maud, I'm afraid she finds the life here rather enervating. If it wasn't for this confounded funeral business, you know," he went on, "we might have a jolly time."

I did not say I thought they jogged along fairly well for a family in mourning, but such, nevertheless, was my impression. I merely replied that death was a solemn thing, and that out of respect for the departed the living must at least don the semblance of woe.

"Oh, I was very fond of the old man," he said, "though he was a bit hard to get on with at times; and I'm sure that Maud was fond of him too, but she, poor girl, has not been accustomed to this sort of life, and I know it chafes her."

"I daresay she does find it rather dull."

"Dull isn't the word."

"Ah," thought I, "if I only had the chance of always being dull in the same way." But I said aloud, "Of course I cannot understand it, never having been used to much; but it seems incredible that anyone should tire of this place in a few weeks."

"Wouldn't you?" he said.

I thought his voice sounded full of suppressed impatience, but I answered with a laugh, "I do not think so."

He was silent for several moments, during which I could see him tugging fiercely at his moustache; then he said, reverting to the old question, which he never seemed to get beyond, "And do you mean to say you never wish to go out into the world, to see the great things of the world? Surely, surely you could not be content to pass your life in this wretched, out-of-the-way hole?"

"I have tried to school myself to such a life," I replied.

"But it is not possible that you should ever live it?"

"Who knows?"

"But you cannot seriously entertain the thought of such an existence?"

"I am afraid it is too serious a thought to be entertained lightly."

"But you would like to go — you would like to see the world?"

His words came quickly, hotly from his lips, and I knew by the way he breathed, by the way his hand trembled as he rested it on the back of my chair, that he was thrilling with excitement.

“What a perfectly superfluous question,” I replied with a little excited laugh.

“Florence,” he said, slipping suddenly on his knees beside me and pressing my hand between his burning palms, “I want you to come away with me, dear, to leave this dreadful old life behind.”

“With you, you?” I gasped, his passionate voice thrilling me to the quick.

“Yes, dearest, with me, because — because I love you better than the whole world.”

* * * * *

But why should I go on? All I remember of those mad moments was his kneeling beside me, pouring a flood of passionate words into my ears, and kissing me like one half mad.

Volume 2

Chapter I.

I MUST confess to a feeling of extreme nervousness as I entered the breakfast room next morning, for my heart, though brimful of gladness, yet seemed but half conscious of the great difference between this day and yesterday; uncertain whether it hovered in the clear atmosphere of a serene sky, or hung trembling on the silver lining of some mysterious cloud. The night had passed in whirling dreamland, and now the day was come.

The greetings of the day were exchanged in the usual form, and anxious inquiries made respecting the condition of my foot, which I was pleased to say was much better. Indeed I no longer entertained any serious thoughts concerning it, being convinced that two or three days' quietness would be sufficient to set me up again. But in the meantime the conversation wandered away in the usual petty channel, though I could not help thinking that the everlasting smile on Maud's lips concerned me in some way, and that the curious looks with which she favoured me were meant to search out my secret. He, on the other hand, with the exception of an unusual tenderness in the tone of his voice whenever he addressed me, chattered away, as though no dear words had passed between us, of the picnic of the previous day, our mad race, and a dozen other incidents of merely personal interest. Yet when Maud left us to go and attend to her birds, for she had a canary and a magpie of which she was extremely fond, he came to me where I was sitting, put his arms round my neck and kissed me.

"Darling," he whispered, and the mere sound of his voice made me quiver, "you have made me the happiest of men." And nestling to him I told him how glad I was; how happy he had made me, and I'm afraid I laid bare the secrets of my foolish heart.

"You love me, then," he said, "the morning has brought no change?"

And I answered in the fulness of my heart, "Rather has it increased the affection." At which he pressed me still closer to him and vowed that I was as sweet as I was beautiful; and his eyes, meeting mine, set fire to my soul, and I trembled so that I could not speak, but, hiding my face on his breast, sobbed aloud.

Then he led me out to my chair on the verandah, and seating himself beside me, told me much of his life which had hitherto seemed so mysterious, and all with such an air of candour that I believe I loved him

more for his misfortunes and the way he had been misunderstood, than for his appreciation of myself.

“But I have done with it all now,” he said. “The world and I have parted company at last. I gave it my allegiance and it has cheated me vilely. It has been doing the same thing ever since it has been a world, only we won't profit by the experience of others, fools that we are. But you, little one, have stepped into my life now, and with you by my side I know that I shall soon be able to snap my fingers in the face of the past. Unless — unless you too change like the rest of the world.”

“Never,” I said, and I meant it too.

“I believe you,” he replied fondly.

“You are, you must be different from the rest of them, or I should never love you so much.”

All of which sounded extremely sweet in my ears, making them tingle with pleasure. It was all a new and wonderful thing to me, this love, and, moreover, there was something singularly fascinating in the thought that it was he — he who had been the wonder and mystery of the place — whom I should love, and who in turn should love me so well. At first it seemed incredible that he who had seen so much, had met so many women who must have been more fascinating in every way than I, should lose his heart to me; but our pride increases with the knowledge of our value, and though little to-day we grow big in a night. Not, I hope, that I was vainer than other girls, but the spirit which was in me had grown strong of a sudden. Yesterday I was a child; to-day I am a woman. I felt proud of the sudden growth, too, little thinking that with the dignity of woman-hood would come a woman's woes. Why should I? There was no cloud on my horizon, and every breeze that blew came through the trees of Paradise.

Besides it would be a glorious thing if I — if I could reform him. Wean him from what I still believed to be his evil courses, notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary; set him up honoured and respected; give him the position which was his due. The child of rumour was a misbegotten imp; the real man was affectionate if erring, contrite if foolish. Had he not said himself that a good woman could lead the most depraved of men into the better way; and did I not feel that he meant I should be his “good woman” and lift him out of the slough of his own soul? And then — and here the mother Eve came in — what a triumph it would prove over all who had ever dared to look down on me and mine. As the mistress of Langton Station I should be able to take my place with the foremost in the land, and no one then would dare whisper in my presence that I was a currency girl. I knew what respect his wealth would command, and I was glad he was so rich, because I knew they would crawl and cringe to me, and beg a look of recognition, and be thankful for a smile.

I am sorely afraid my heart swelled with its own great vainness as I contemplated these pleasant thoughts. Yet who can blame me? Was it not natural that I, the lowly, should wish to rise? And if I stared too long into the sun and grew blind thereby, seeing nothing but a world of brilliant scarlet, was it not according to the unchangeable laws of nature? And then I loved him too, or if I did not it was that which seemed like love to me, and would till some stronger, sweeter passion grew up. I know I had never been so deliciously happy in all my life. Every hour of the day I congratulated myself on my great good fortune; and stretched out on my easy chair I would look dreamily out through the roses, away up at the blue sky, and wonder if its inhabitants were as happy as I.

And if I was happy, dear old Will was happy too. I could see that, poor old fellow, in spite of my own blindness, and was not a little grieved in consequence; for he was too good a fellow to be trifled with, and I did not believe Maud really cared for him — that is, as such a man should be cared for. There was no real gladness in her voice when she spoke, no true light in the eyes which looked into his, however fascinating they may have seemed. My own woman's nature had taught me how to understand and appreciate our feminine tricks, and I could see that she was stringing him on, playing with him, teasing him as we have all teased the sterner sex in our day. I could almost laugh when I think of man's vainness, were it not that the thought of Will brings the tears to my eyes. But after all he is a man, and must live and learn as one. He was no blinder than I, and we no worse than the millions who have gone before.

This infatuation of his, however, though it conduced little to the peace of his mind, had one distinct advantage: it sobered him wonderfully. He rarely visited the town of Wallan now, and never by any chance went near the "Shearer's Rest," or paid court to its bewitching goddess. What she made of the change I don't know, but we were all glad enough at home, for mother and I had begun to wonder if he were going to turn out loose in his ways. She, dear soul, wept often when she heard of his doings in the town, and of his frequent presence in shady company; for he was the life of her life, the very blood of her heart. I think she too was afraid that he might grow reckless at the thought of his inheritance. Therefore the change was welcomed as an intercession from heaven, and if a mother's love could compensate him for what he had abandoned, he was well repaid. That the thought of the happiness he had caused her had influenced him in his actions, I will not say, but those actions did bring happiness, and therein lay their virtue. Old Will was now a most exemplary youth, and had dropped, with his companions, much of their ungracious style. He dressed better — I think Captain Langton had not a little to do with it, though, of course, he could not be expected to cut such a dash as that gay soldier. Still, he looked a handsome young giant in his new clothes, grand enough to win the heart of any woman in any land.

No wonder Maud Langton liked to have him hanging about her. It was not often a woman had such a slave at her beck and call.

About noon of the day following our picnic to Fern Tree Gully, Master Will rode over from Granite Creek to make inquiries respecting my sprained ankle. The family were in a state of extreme consternation, he said, mother having upbraided him greatly for not having brought me home, as no one but herself knew how to doctor her child. Sweet soul. She could not know how little that child had thought of her, or of aught beside the joy which had crept so sweetly into her own breast.

“So if you don't want the family over here this afternoon,” said he, “you had better let me drive you home for an hour or so. Nothing will satisfy them but seeing you in the flesh. Mother would have insisted upon me getting out the buggy and driving her over last night had father's counsels not prevailed. Poor thing, she has magnified the trouble amazingly, and I am quite sure she has horrible visions of broken legs, amputated limbs, and heaven only knows what not.”

“That's so like her.”

“Bless her, you know what a tender old soul she is. She has been picturing you lying all night on a bed of agony with clumsy servants doing everything the wrong way and causing you indescribable pain. Instead of which, here you are looking saucier and lovelier than ever.” And he kissed me as he used to when we were boy and girl together.

“The Langton air, Will,” said a voice, and the Captain approached smiling in his good-natured way.

“I shouldn't wonder,” replied old Will. “Anyway she doesn't look much like an invalid, does she?”

Captain Langton looked at me and smiled, and my face grew pleasantly hot. There was good cause for my good looks.

“No,” he said, in answer to Will's query; “though I cannot agree with you that she looks lovelier to-day than yesterday, considering she always looks her best.”

“Really,” I exclaimed, “don't you think it would spare me no little embarrassment if you were to wait till I am out of hearing?”

“Girls don't like this sort of thing, you know,” said Will, trying to look comical. “It might make them vain, and that would never do.” At which they both laughed in a patronizing and superior sort of way.

Then Master Will, in answer to a query of the Captain's, next made known one of the objects of his visit: namely, to drive me home, so that my sorrowing relations might behold their injured one. To this Captain Langton replied that he had a little business to transact in Wallan, and that if I didn't mind going there first with him, he himself would drive me over to Granite Creek afterwards.

“Capital,” says poor old Will. “I'll hurry back and tell them you are coming.”

“Don't forget to tell mother to get out the best china,” I whispered, walking aside with him.”

“No. Is she coming?”

“She?” I echoed.

“Maud.”

“Go and ask her, Will.”

“You'll bring her along, won't you?”

“Why should I?”

“Because I want you to.”

“Why should you want me to?”

“Oh, don't be such an idiot,” he exclaimed angrily, as he swung off. I, however, went in search of her, though much against the grain, and was quite relieved when she said she had a headache, and that she would be unable to accompany us; not that I in any way objected to her presence, but I was beginning to think the less she saw of Will the better it would be for him.

As soon as the phaeton, with Flaskett in charge, made its appearance at the door, Captain Langton entered the verandah from the house, and after a few inquiries respecting rugs, etc., I was helped into position; then the Captain sprang up after me, while the man Flaskett jumped up behind in some miraculous manner as the horses dashed off.

My vanity must own to a feeling of triumph while sitting by his side, as we dashed through the principal street of Wallan. How everybody rushed to their doors and windows to look at us, and I knew that many an envious glance was flung after us as we passed along. And when we pulled up at the saddler's opposite the “Shearer's Rest,” how extremely gratifying it was to see those horrid Lanes, mother, father, the whole brood — with the exception of Polly — come out to stare, with jealous thoughts, at our equipage. Polly, no doubt, would not add to my triumph by showing her curiosity, but I saw the parlour curtains twitching, and guessed who was behind them.

Our next stoppage was at the Wallaces, and while Captain Langton and Mr. Wallace discussed business, Ella came and led me away, and made me relate how I had met with my misfortune, and sundry other incidents connected with our excursion to Fern Tree Gully.

“Are you sure you have told me all?” she asked, as I drew breath after a somewhat ambiguous recital.

“All worth telling,” I answered unconcernedly.

“You have forgotten nothing?”

“What was there to forget — or remember either, for the matter of that? A gallop, a somewhat disastrous journey down the damp gully, and a cold luncheon.”

“Nothing else?”

“How quizzing you are,” was my petulant reply.

“Am I, dear? I suppose I am getting jealous. I'm afraid you won't care for our little place after the grandeur of Langton.”

“What a foolish idea,” I answered, kissing her as if to emphasize the remark, though in reality I could not help thinking that their house did look insignificant after the Station, and that Ella herself seemed to lack something of that distinguished air so evident in Maud, “what a foolish idea to be sure, as though you were not my one and only friend, and as though I did not love you better than anyone else in the world.”

“Of course I am very foolish,” she answered, apparently relieved by my sudden outburst of affection; “but I think it would break my heart if you were to let another girl step in between us now, even though she were as rich and beautiful as Maud Langton.”

“Maud and I are excellent friends, and she can really be very charming when she likes, but our natures are as divergent as the poles. If we were to live together for a thousand years we should never be nearer to each other than we are now.”

Ella looked as though this statement caused her infinite satisfaction.

“And how do you like Captain Langton?” she asked. “Is he really such a dreadful person as they say?”

“On the contrary, Ella, he is very charming.”

“Then he has shown no signs of that depravity with which we credited him?”

“How can you?” I exclaimed indignantly, putting a strange force in the little query.

“My dear, I am only asking for confirmation of the current gossip.”

“Then you ought to know better, Ella.”

She looked at me in her quiet, scrutinizing way, and then said slowly, “Is it as bad as that?”

“I don't know what you mean,” I answered shortly, though the blood that rushed to my face belied every word I uttered. “Moreover, I am not accustomed to being catechized in this way.”

“This way, dear?”

“Yes,” said I, now thoroughly aroused, angry with myself for getting angry, and angrier still for allowing myself to be driven into a corner, “this insinuating way. It's not like you, Ella, not in the least.”

And so, fool-like, with every word I uttered I gave away my secret, and, what is more, I might have lost my dearest friend too, had she not treated me with the utmost consideration. I saw the pained look sweep over her face as I spoke, and when she turned aside I knew it was to hide something more tangible than a look. In a moment the wish to throw myself on her breast and tell her all swept in upon me; and then the next moment I did not dare, for what had I to tell her? I seemed to recollect for the first time that nothing but words of love had passed between him and me. Till now they had seemed life, hope, an eternity of delight; now

they were only words. For the moment I trembled, feeling ashamed of my day dreams.

"I had a letter from Arthur this morning," said she, turning to me her sweet face in the old sweet confiding way. "You will be glad to hear that he is getting on splendidly at the University."

"Glad indeed. Is he still as sanguine of passing through without a failure?"

"More so, if anything. He says his mind is open now, and he can take in the science in big doses."

"He always was a steady-going plodder. I really should not be in the least surprised to hear of him succeeding," I added loftily.

"I think he will succeed," she said quietly.

"I am sure I hope so. I suppose he has not quite forgotten the family yet?"

"He could never forget your family, while you belong to it."

"Has he still got that silly notion? Dear me. I should have thought he would have sunk all remembrance of Wallan in the gaiety of Melbourne."

"It would, perhaps, be better for him if he could, but I'm afraid he will never forget you, Flossie."

"What nonsense! You will hear of him marrying before he's two years older."

"He will never marry," she answered seriously, "unless he marries you."

"He is only a boy, Ella. He will forget all about me for the first pretty face he sees." And, indeed, I hoped it might be so, for I liked and respected Arthur too well to cause him a moment's unhappiness.

Just as she was about to reply Mr. Wallace hurriedly entered the room.

"Come, my dear, hurry up," he cried, "the Captain is waiting. How's your foot, child? Awfully sorry to hear of the accident. Hope it's nothing serious?"

"Nothing," I answered laughingly, for I could see that though he strained at his usual politeness he could not get away from the great idea that Captain Langton was waiting — the man of broad acres and vast treasures was waiting; and though Mr. Wallace was an excellent man in all respects, he had a very natural affection for a heavy purse. This may account somewhat for his evident anxiety.

"Come, come, Flossie," he went on excitedly as I stayed to kiss and say good-bye to Ella. "Do you know that you have kept Captain Langton waiting quite five minutes?"

"Have I really?" I answered, looking very shocked, and as I made my way towards the door, I felt myself wondering what sort of order the Captain had given the worthy man.

But at length we got away, and once more the little town turned out to

admire our equipage as we dashed through. My companion, far from being annoyed at having to wait those five minutes which seemed such an eternity to Mr. Wallace, was in excellent spirits. Indeed, I never knew him to be in what he called better form, and he made me laugh consumedly as he imitated the pomposity of Mr. Wallace. It was evident Captain Langton did not understand that worthy man, and I never thought it worth while to enlighten him. This is not infrequently the way with one's friends.

At last the old house loomed in sight, and I must own to feeling just a little bit ashamed of it. The shame was mine, truly, and I felt deeply my own ingratitude and error, but it did look so very insignificant after Langton Station. Why, here was I thinking we were gentlefolk, and dreaming of a certain baronetcy away in England, and all the while we were only farmers. Little time, however, was given for reflection. The horses dashed through the gateway, and a few moments after I was in the bosom of my family; and truly delightful it was to feel their warm welcome, and see the smile of joy on each dear face.

“The foot, the foot,” they all cried, “how is the foot?”

But I had scarcely time to answer, “It is well,” before mother seized and led me off to her room, insisting upon making a searching examination of the affected member.

Chapter II.

AND so my visit was at last drawing to a close. After five weeks of novelty and happiness, weeks which were undoubtedly the most enjoyable I had ever spent, I was about to return to the old hum-drum life at Granite Creek, and, if the truth must be confessed, I did not look forward to the change with any degree of pleasure. Not that I liked my dear ones less, but because I had lived another life. I tried hard to wish that I had never accepted the Langtons' hospitality, but I found the effort a vain one, for my soul loved the "lordly pleasure house," and I had drunk deeply of the intoxicating draught of riches. The Langtons were returning to town; the Captain would most probably go to Europe for the summer, and I — what would become of me? I dreaded to think, for the thought always made me utterly wretched, and so I tried to banish it and revel in the few sunbeams which were left me. He was still the same thoughtful lover, tender ever, smiling always; and yet I used to think there was a restraint about him at times not altogether satisfactory. Still this only appeared at odd moments. Like a cloud it passed across his face; but the sunshine was all the brighter after, and whatever happened he was always deferential and polite to a degree. Extravagant, truly, he was in praise of my beauty, which he declared surpassed that of any woman he had ever seen; but that, instead of being regarded with suspicion, was what might naturally be expected to fill a girl's heart with gladness. But with this exception I was astonished at his excessive modesty, considering the remarkable reputation he bore. Of course I had long since entirely disbelieved in that reputation. I knew that no man, who was as black as the world had painted him, could possibly have hidden his wickedness so long from my searching eyes; and when he spoke of his projected trip to England, and suggested, in many ways, that I should accompany him, I knew it was modesty alone which prevented him from asking me outright to be his wife. I could see it in his eyes. Besides, had he not hinted at it a hundred times in a hundred different ways? — only I was a woman and could not let him see that I understood aught but the plain words, "Will you marry me?"

It was the day previous to my leaving for home, and as I walked slowly up and down the great verandah, dreaming the last few weeks over and over again, and wondering if I should go back to Granite Creek the happiest or the most miserable girl in Australia, I beheld Will come

trotting up the well-gravelled drive. He sat his horse rather loosely, I thought, an uncommon thing for him, and one which I could not help noticing.

“Why, Will,” said I, as he dismounted and handed his horse to Flaskett, who, hearing the beat of hoofs, was immediately in attendance, “what on earth is the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” he replied almost surlily, “I’m all right.”

“No, you’re not, dear,” I said, taking him by the hand and leading him to my seat in the far corner of the verandah. “You’re far from being all right, and I want to know what ails you.”

“Nothing, I tell you,” he repeated doggedly. “Surely a fellow ought to know whether he’s right or not?”

“And so he does, Will.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“But you know well enough, and so do I, that if you have no bodily ailment, you have something very serious on your mind.”

“How do you know that?” he asked with a nervous smile.

“Anyone who looks at you must know it. Your face is positively haggard, you are not a bit like yourself — you — you look frightened.”

“A cur, eh?”

“No, dear.”

“I feel like one anyway.”

“You could never look it, dear.”

“Upon my word,” he said, “I think you grow nicer every hour of your life. I don’t believe any other fellow ever had such a sister.”

“I am sure no sister ever had such a brother,” I answered, and I meant it too.

He laughed and kissed me, but I am not so certain that it was laughter which dimmed his honest eyes.

“Dear little Flos,” he said; and then he turned away his face and pretended to study intently the distant plains.

“What brought you over this morning?” I ventured at last.

He started suddenly as though awakened from a reverie, surveyed me somewhat nervously, but answered not.

“Was it to see me?”

“Yes — partly.”

“No one else?”

“You are laughing at me.”

“Indeed I am not.”

Looking at me earnestly, and seeming convinced that I was not, he answered in a low voice, “Yes, I did come to see someone else. Have you guessed my secret?”

Guessed his secret. Poor, simple old fellow.

“Secret, my dear Will,” I replied. “Why it’s been as plain as daylight

ever since you saw her.”

“Is that a fact?” Poor old Will seemed not a little astonished at this statement of mine, for he opened his big eyes in a most amusing manner, interrogating me with a stare.

“Of course it is. No one could help seeing it.”

“Do you think she knows?”

“She is no woman if she does not.”

“Well, it's nothing to be ashamed of, is it?” says he, owning up in his blunt, manly fashion. “I can't help it, I sometimes wish I could. But she is very beautiful, Flos, and I love her greatly, madly I might almost say, for when I get alone and think, and think, I feel halfmad at times.”

“Have you told her how you love her?”

“No — not in words; but, as you say, she must have seen it.”

“Yes, yes, but women like to hear the words, Will, words which they cannot possibly misunderstand.” I was thinking of myself at the time, and so spoke somewhat earnestly in consequence.

“I dare say you are right,” he replied, “but to tell you the truth I have been afraid to speak to her.”

“Afraid, Will?”

“Yes. That's why you see me looking such a cur.”

“But who is she that you should be afraid?”

“If she were a queen or a beggar maid it would be the same,” he said.

“So much depends on her answer that I have been afraid to risk it.”

“Then you will never know.”

“I shall know to-day,” he said. “What do you think of my chance?”

I could not tell him what I really thought of it, so I replied, “She will never have a better man at her feet, Will, if she lives till she's a thousand.”

“She's not likely to have many at that age,” says the poor old fellow with a sickly smile.

“Oh,” I said, “women have to be pretty old, you know, before they abandon hope.”

“Has she — has Maud ever spoken of me?” he asked at length, though not without considerable embarrassment.

“She admires you greatly as a man, but whether she ever thinks of you as a lover or not, I don't know. If your attachment is as serious as you say, why have you not tested her long ago? You might have lost, Will, but at any rate you would have been spared this uncertainty.”

“I have been on the point of speaking a dozen times,” he confessed, “but the dreadful fear that she did not care for me has held me back. Yet she has been very nice to me at times.” (What gracious condescension, I thought.) “And often I could have sworn she cared for me; and once,” here his voice dropped and he looked uncommonly serious, “I believe I would have got it out if she hadn't looked at me with that surprised, half-

amused look of hers which is more withering than the anger of any other woman.”

I knew it well, nor did her behaviour surprise me. It was what I had believed and feared all along. She was flattered at having this grand specimen of young manhood in her train, and there all interest in him ceased.

“Will,” I said, for I meant to prepare him for the worst, “it is quite right that you should have this interview with her, and learn from her own lips what her feelings are towards you; but you must bear in mind that she came to us almost a stranger, that she has given you no real encouragement, and that she may possibly have formed an attachment with someone in Melbourne of whom we are entirely ignorant. Therefore it is as well, dear, for you not to build too highly on your hopes.”

“You have heard something?” he asked suspiciously.

“Not a sound. Only I would have you remember that though you loved her ten times more dearly than you do, that would not necessarily make her love you.”

“No,” he said, “of course not — I'm a fool. Anyway, Flos, I mean to put an end to this uncertainty. Where is she?”

“In the drawing-room, I think. She was reading when I came out.”

“I will go to her. I must know what it is to be one way or the other.”

So into the house he went boldly enough, though I knew that he, poor fellow, was in a whirl of excitement. I know I was, for I guessed what the result would be and dreaded it accordingly. I stood by the front door for a moment till I heard her words of greeting, and then, fearing to face him after the interview, I seized my hat and hurried off down the garden. Here I took up my position in a little rose-grown summer-house, which stood back some twelve or fifteen paces from the drive, for from here I should be able to catch the expression of his face and so see how went the day. Poor old Will. Five minutes after he had left me I heard the sound of rapid steps coming along the gravel, and on looking through the foliage discovered him advancing hastily, head down, and evidently much agitated. My first impulse was to rush out and call him, for I saw too well what the result of the interview had been; but as he came opposite the little summer-house he lifted his face for a moment and I saw such a fearful look of pain, horror and hate thereon, that I shrank back frightened, and his name died soundless on my lips. Away he passed in the direction of the stables, and a few minutes after I heard the tramp of his horse's hoofs as he set out on his desolate journey homeward.

For a long time, how long I cannot tell, I sat in the little arbour wondering what had passed between them, though the gist of it I could, unfortunately, guess too well. Yet this could have been no mere rejection of his suit, else why that awful look of anger? — a look I had not seen on

his face since the day Patsy Dillon called him a convict. Could she have used that dreadful word, that one word in all the great English language which drove the manhood from his heart, and brought him quivering to his knees?

At length, after a long consultation with my own thoughts, I quitted my retreat and wended my way indoors; but as I approached the drawing-room I heard brother and sister laugh merrily over some pleasant jest. She was evidently sitting at the piano, for every now and again came the soft ripple of a note or two struck at random. And yet I distinctly heard him say, "What infernal impudence," and she, laughing oddly, answered, "So I thought," and with that she dashed off into one of her favourite compositions.

I had little doubt that it was Will of whom they spoke, and not caring to enter at such a moment, for I should have been unable to control the anger which was smouldering within me, I passed hastily to my room, and in a none too pleasant frame of mind whiled away the time till dinner.

At table, however, my host and hostess were perfectly charming, and had I not known much, and guessed more, I would not have thought it possible that either could think ill of any member of my family. Indeed, I am not certain that by degrees I did not entertain a more charitable feeling towards them both, for the way they dwelt on my approaching departure, and the nice things they said touching the loss they would both sustain, set me wondering if I had not judged them with unwarrantable severity.

"So it's to be to-morrow, little one?" said Captain Langton that evening as he led me out to the well-known corner of the verandah. "And when and how am I to see you again?"

"You may come to Granite Creek, you know."

"Yes; but I cannot live at Granite Creek, and to live anywhere without you is impossible." As I remained silent, wondering how I too should be able to live the old life over again, he continued, "Have you no terror at the thought of this parting? Is it nothing to you? Are you content to go and leave me like this?"

"What can I do? It is no pleasure for me to go back to the old dull life. I sometimes wish that I had never come here."

"Then why should you go back to the old life, my darling?" And he pressed me closer to him, kissing me passionately; and I abandoned myself to the sweet dream and thought that I was happy.

"Why?" I echoed, and wondered what was coming next.

"Yes, why, since you love me, since I love you? Why should we not be all in all to each other? I shall wish for no happier lot than that of being always near you. Florence, darling," and here his voice became intensely passionate, "I love you better than my life, and if you will trust your dear

self to me, I swear to you that I will live only for the sake of making you happy.”

What answer could I make to such a sweet outpouring of the heart? I hid my face on his breast and told him that I loved him; and he kissed me as though he knew it not already; and the stars came out and danced merrily across the dark blue bosom of the night; and the moon sailed on above the tree-tops, flooding the world with streams of white fire, and every breeze that stirred the rose leaves in their sleep bore the sweet intoxicant of their breath into my throbbing brain.

What visions I dreamt, what castles built. The new great world, which I had yearned so long to see, was to be opened to me at last, and I was to partake of its wonders. We were to go direct to Melbourne; from thence take ship to Egypt, visit Alexandria, Cairo, and the great Pyramids; then cross the Mediterranean to Brindisi or Naples and enjoy an extended tour all through Europe. Was prospect ever so entrancing? I, a mere bush girl, who had spent the best part of my life in envious dreamings, I was to see, to do all this. No wonder my brain reeled so that I scarcely comprehended what he said beyond that he loved me, and that he and I were going to live only for each other.

“It will be a glorious trip,” I said, “and one which I have longed to undertake ever since I was big enough to know that there was another, a stranger world beyond the sea.”

“You have dreamt of it, then?”

“Ah, haven't I! It seems scarcely credible that my dreams are about to be realized.”

“It is credible enough,” he answered, “though I must confess I feel as though it were incredible that to me should fall the happiness of making you so happy. Ah, my darling, your dreams shall be nothing to the reality. Let us love each other always, always.” And again and again he pressed his lips to mine, as though from my lips he drew his breath of life. And I, forgetting all but the ring of his passionate accents, forgetting poor old Will and all the dear ones at home, closed my eyes and wondered what I had ever done to merit such happiness.

And when he knew that I had drunk deeply of the dream-cup, and that I was already lost in the confused whirl of things, he said, “There is only one request I have to make, my darling. This engagement must be kept secret for a little while longer yet.”

“But I may tell mother now?”

“No, not yet — not till it is all over.”

“All over,” I echoed.

“Don't you understand that it would be scarcely paying due respect to my father's memory for me to announce anything of the sort at present. I go to Melbourne in a week. You must secretly join me there.”

This proposal somewhat startled me.

"I will come to you," I replied, "but not secretly. Why should we not wait and be married here surrounded by our own people?"

"Do you not love me well enough to trust me?"

"Of course I love you — but — but — ." I felt myself grow giddy, suddenly realizing that I stood on the brink of a fearful precipice.

"But you do not trust me? And yet I would lay down my life for you."

"Perhaps I am very ignorant," I said, feeling sorrow for the pain I was causing him. "You know I am only a bush girl, so if I appear rude you must pardon me; but I could not do as you wish — indeed, I could not marry any man without the consent of my parents."

He laughed coldly, a disdainful laugh, too, the sudden anger darting from his eyes. "My dear girl," he said, "I think you must be under some misapprehension. Why should you imagine marriage to be a necessity?"

I could scarcely believe my ears at first, but like some loathsome torrent his true meaning rushed in upon me. Trembling with shame and confusion, I rose to my feet.

"Do you mean to insult me, Captain Langton?"

"No, no; a thousand times no," he added hastily. "You misunderstand me entirely. There are reasons which prevent me from offering you my name."

"There can only be one reason. You are married?"

He bowed his head without speaking.

"Oh, it was cruel of you," I gasped. "Why, why did you not tell me this before?"

"Because from the first moment I set eyes on you I loved you," and he again attempted to take me in his arms, but I repulsed him hotly, "and because I knew that you would show no mercy once you knew all. But the world is before us, darling. Why should we not live only for one another?"

"Captain Langton," I said, and I was glad the night hid my tell-tale face, "we have evidently been much mistaken in each other. I beg that you will never mention this subject again." I turned to go, but he seized me by the wrist.

"Don't be a little fool," he said crossly. "If my impatience has led me into error, why not forgive me frankly, since I ask for pardon?"

"I will forgive you, then, but let me go."

But instead of so doing, he drew me to him in spite of my resistance, and I dared not cry lest I should alarm the house. And into my ears he poured streams of passionate utterances, which, had they flown only from a pure source, would have delighted instead of terrifying me. But the same dreadful meaning was there, and every sacred sentiment he expressed was rendered hideously unholy by my knowledge of his other meaning. I was beside myself with grief and shame, and could only sob, "Let me go, let me go. How dare you insult me?"

He threw my hand aside with an exclamation of contempt. “Insult you, what damned nonsense! How could I have meant anything else to you?”

A cold, cruel feeling of isolation swept over me. All my anger, all my disgust gave place to a dull, sickening pain at the heart. For the first time I saw myself as he had seen me, and I grew faint at the sight. I tried to speak, and am conscious of mumbling something — what I cannot say — and then, half blinded by a sudden rush of tears, I turned and left him.

Chapter III.

TO say I slept badly that night would be extremely misleading, for it might convey the idea that sleep had visited me in some form or other, whereas I doubt if I slept at all. Hour after hour I tossed from side to side, my brain burning and throbbing as though every drop of blood in my body had flown to my head. So this was the end of my dreams; this was the pure love I had kindled in that reprobate breast; this was the man whom I in my ignorance was going to reform. And all the time he was laughing at me, playing with me for his own ends, and each sweet sentiment, could I have seen into it, was but the perfumed vehicle which conveyed the vile idea. To him, no doubt, I appeared but as a vain, ignorant girl longing for the fruit beyond her reach; the convict's daughter in whom the taint as yet had found no outlet. And I had dreamt of being the wife of this man, and of taking my place by his side amid the best in the land. In his looks I had seen nothing but respectful love; his words had fallen on my heart like drops of honey.

It was with intense relief I beheld the morning break, and as soon as the light was strong enough for me to see, I arose, weary and worn out, and set to work to pack my things, thankful that a few short hours now would see me clear of the hateful house. Over and over again I congratulated myself upon the scene occurring so opportunely, so to speak, for had it happened at any other time, how should I have accounted for the curtailment of my visit? — for to stay on at Langton after what had happened would have been absolutely impossible. Now no one need know how cruelly I had been insulted. The dear ones would welcome me with joy. I should go back to the old life, the happy life, too, if I could only know it.

Thanks to that innate stubbornness of mine — which had so often been designated by a less complimentary name — which would not permit me to show fear though every nerve in my body were quaking, I was able to present myself, as usual, at the breakfast-table next morning, bowing to my host and hostess as of old. It was a great ordeal, to be sure, but trust a woman for going through with her part once she has determined upon it. Every time I looked up I caught his eyes fixed hard upon me, but I do not think he gained much satisfaction from the impenetrable look upon my face. The conversation turned chiefly on the breaking up of our little party, at which Maud seemed quite concerned, but whether she really

was or not I cannot say, though after what had passed between her and Will I should have thought she would be glad to see the back of the last Hastings.

Very slowly, it seemed to me, the meal was got through, but when it was finished we adjourned to the verandah, as usual, and yet with what a difference! Captain Langton lit his after-breakfast cigar and flung himself into one of the big easy chairs, apparently contented with himself and the world in general, while Maud and I stood on the steps looking out across the familiar plains.

"I shall miss you dreadfully, Flossie," she was saying, "but you, I suppose, will be glad to get back to your family?"

"I am always glad to be with my family," I answered. "Yet I can also appreciate Langton."

"Well, it's not such a bad old place, I suppose. They tell me it's one of the finest in the district, though I should detest a fairy palace if it were in the country."

"Then I suppose it will be a long time before we see you here again?"

"Most probably. I go to town on Saturday, and I do not think you will see me here for many a Saturday to come. What I am to do till then Heaven only knows."

"It is only three clear days."

"Yes, but three days by oneself is an eternity. I know I am very selfish, dear, but I do wish you could stay till I go."

I began to excuse myself, mentioning the fact that they were expecting me at home — a clumsy refusal which did not escape her.

"Ah, well," she said, with a strange laugh, "I daresay you are tired of this dull old place. I don't wonder at it. I envy you, though, your journey. I only wish I was going home." And with something very like a sigh she turned from me and entered the house. I, too, immediately turned with the intention of following her, when Captain Langton, who all this time had been quietly pulling at his cigar, sprang hastily to his feet.

"One moment, Flossie." A couple of quick strides and he was beside me.

"Well?" I asked somewhat defiantly, though I have a vivid recollection of trembling in every limb.

"I want you to forgive me for what passed between us last night."

"I had forgotten it."

"I would not have you forget it," he said in a low voice, "for to forget it were to forget me. I love you, dearest, love you, love you. I swear to you that you misunderstood me last night."

"There was no misunderstanding you, Captain Langton. Your words were as unmanly as they were insulting."

"If to say I loved you were an insult, then surely I have insulted you, and beg your pardon. Last night, I confess, I was not myself. The wine

may have loosened my foolish tongue; but now in sober daylight I tell you that I love you, and that I shall be the proudest man in Australia if you will only marry me.”

I looked at him in wonder, not certain that he was sober even now. Yet he appeared sane enough and quite sincere.

“Captain Langton,” I said, “this may seem an excellent jest to you, but it is one that would cost you dear if it were known.”

“I do not understand your threats,” he answered, in an aggrieved tone.

“Nor I your wit.”

“What a Tartar it is,” he exclaimed, laughingly, “and yet what an angel too. I declare, my sweet, that I would prefer to see you in a perpetual passion were your fury not directed against me. Come, speak the word,” and he took my hand in spite of my displeasure. “Will you marry me?”

This persistence angered me, for I had not forgotten his tacit admission of last night — the reason why he could not offer me his name.

“I would not marry you under any consideration, even if you were free.”

“That was a joke,” he said.

“Then you are a liar as well as a profligate!” It was out, rude and hot with passion, and I wrenched my hand free of his grasp. The blood rushed in a torrent to his fair face, and for the moment a most evil light shone in his eyes. Several times his lips moved as though he were going to speak, but with a prodigious effort he repressed the anger which rose to them.

“Why not give in tamely?” he said presently with an odd laugh. “You know very well you can't escape me. Sooner or later it must be. Why put off the inevitable?”

I too laughed, my spirit being up in arms.

“You flatter yourself, Captain Langton.”

“Not at all, Miss Hastings. I know.”

There was something so masterful in his tone, in the half-amused, half-fierce smile on his face, that I could not resist the question, “You know?”

“Yes, I know; because in your heart of hearts you love me.”

He little knew how near he was to the truth, and how a little judicious management might have turned the scales in his favour. Yet my woman's nature would not admit the weakness even to myself.

“You are at perfect liberty to think what you please,” I said. “It concerns me nothing.”

“It concerns you much, and it shall concern you more.”

“We shall see.”

“Do you think I am going to give you up like this?” he cried with sudden anger. “Do you think you are going to make a fool of me to tickle your own vanity? No, by G — d you don't! I'll kill you first.”

“Your threats are in keeping with your character,” said I coldly, turning

to go.

“I did not mean to threaten you,” he said, “but you madden me. I beg your pardon. Will you forgive me?”

“On the condition that you never broach this subject again.”

“I accept the condition. Let us at least part friends.” And he held out his hand, which I pretended not to see. “Won't you even shake hands with me?”

There was no ignoring this direct appeal, so I held out my hand, which he, seizing, drew quickly to him, and ere I was aware of it he had both his arms about me.

“There,” he ejaculated laughingly, looking triumphantly into my face, “I told you just now you were mine. What is the use of struggling, dearest?”

His look of triumph, his consummate coolness, roused my none too gentle nature. There was a masterful, consequential air about him to which my spirit would not tamely submit. He may have thought he was honouring the currency girl by his protestations of affection, but to her there seemed no honour in it — rather the reverse. The words which under one condition thrill with joy the poor heart, which sound as sweet to the ear as the ripple of water in the desert, under another suggest nothing but the most terrifying thoughts. I could no longer place credence in the soft words which fell so glibly from his lips, lips which I am sure had framed the same phrases for many a silly girl. Moreover, knowing him better, I feared him now for the first time. The glamour and the romance no longer burnt, halo-like, about his head. He was what they had said, and had I been less firm by nature it might have gone ill with me. Yet that he should deliberately have set himself the task of ensnaring me was what I could neither overlook nor forgive. That all his solemn oaths, his passionate protestations, had but the one dishonourable aim and object, seemed to me the incarnation of profligacy. And so I wrenched myself free of his embrace, and without a look or word fled into the house.

An hour later they came to tell me that the trap was at the door, and, fearing that Captain Langton would think it necessary that he should accompany me on my homeward journey, I adjusted my hat and dust-coat with many a nervous tremor, though I stalked from my room with the air of one determined to go through with even that unpleasant experience. On the verandah, as if waiting my appearance, were Maud and her brother, he, apparently, having no intention of driving me back, for which I was devoutly thankful, though at the same time a little disappointed.

“Good-bye, dear,” said Maud, kissing me on both cheeks with every token of affection. “I hope you have not altogether regretted coming to us, though we have been unconscionably dull.”

“I have enjoyed my visit exceedingly,” I said; “and as for dulness,” I added with a smile, “I consider we have been positively gay.”

“Heaven forbid,” she replied with a little shudder.

“Ideas of pleasure vary,” said her brother. “Miss Hastings means that she found the place more entertaining than she expected.”

“Oh, well,” said Maud, “you must visit us again under more auspicious conditions, dear. We shall try and make up to you then for all that you have missed now.”

Once more I declared my indebtedness to them for what they had done, then Maud and I kissed again, and Captain Langton escorted me down the steps to the trap, in which sat, sphinx-like as ever, the redoubtable Flaskett.

“I thought you would not care for me to drive you,” said the Captain in a low voice. I almost imperceptibly inclined my head. “But I shall see you soon,” he added as he helped me to mount the buggy. “You must not think that I am going to part with you like this.”

Luckily I had no opportunity of replying. I know I felt the angry blood sweep over my face, but I pretended to ignore the remark by devoting all my attention to the arrangement of my wraps and the voluminous folds of my dust-coat.

“Are you sure you have everything?” shouted Maud.

“Quite, thank you.”

“Then off you go, Flaskett, and be very careful.”

Flaskett raised his whip towards his hat, indulged in that strange “clucking” sound with which horses, strangely enough, are urged onward, and away we went. Maud waved her hand to me, the Captain saluted as became a military man; then a bend in the road hid them and the house from sight.

It was with a sigh of relief, and yet with an unconscious sigh of weariness too, that I turned my back on Langton Station, for, after all, I had experienced there some of the sweetest hours of my life. True the honey had been turned to gall, but we had cared for each other — nay, did we not care for each other still? — and I could not forget, though I called in pride and dignity to my aid. Sitting well back on the cushions, I gave myself up to thought: through each incident of note, since my coming to Langton, I went with a distressing minuteness, nor till I caught sight of the roof and chimneys of the old place at Granite Creek, did I awake to the fact that I was not in my easy chair on the broad verandah of the Station.

I sat up with a sudden start. The man Flaskett stole a glance at me from out the corners of his little eyes.

“I suppose you go to town with Captain and Miss Langton?” I asked, more by way of making conversation than anything else, for I knew perfectly well that he was going.

“Yes, miss.”

“You will not be sorry either?” I suggested; for whereas my first impression of Mr. Flaskett had been one of mistrust and suspicion, a better acquaintance with that worthy had shown me that first impressions are not always to be relied upon. Indeed he had been particularly civil and attentive to me during my stay at the Station, mainly owing, I think, to my having shown him a little ordinary consideration. His ugly face repelled me at first, next it amused me, there being something singularly mirth-provoking in the little man's grim dolefulness.

Mr. Flaskett smiled rather knowingly as he replied to my query, “No, miss, I can't say that I will. Melbourne's good enough for me.”

“Then you prefer it to the country?”

“Rather,” was the laconic reply. “It's my native city, miss. I was born in Collin'wood.”

“Were you indeed?”

“I were. And a nice place it is too,” added Mr. Flaskett with an impressive shake of the head. “A bit rowdy down Smith Street of a Saturday night, to be sure, but quite 'armless for all that. I only wish I'd never left it to become *this*. Ah, miss, I can't tell you how I hate it.” It will be observed that Mr. Flaskett was not entirely devoid of aspirates, though he not infrequently ignored their existence.

“Hate what?”

“Being what I am — a flunkey.”

“Oh,” said I, vainly striving to suppress a smile; “there must be flunkies, as you call them.”

“I suppose so,” said Mr. Flaskett gloomily. “Yet from art to 'orses is a bit of a drop, ain't it, miss?”

“Art! I had no idea you were an artist.”

“I am, though; or was,” he added, correcting himself. “There wasn't a man in the house could carry a better banner, though perhaps I oughtn't to say so.”

“What house?”

“Beg pardon, miss, the theatre. I was an actor.” And as he uttered these impressive words Mr. Flaskett straightened himself as though in imagination he were making a grand entrance at the head of the supernumerary corps.

“So you were an actor. How delightful!”

“Well, it was something, miss,” he said, a dreamy, far-away look on his face.

“Yet if you dislike your present position so much, what made you enter Captain Langton's service?”

“I hardly know, miss, but I think it was disgust with the profession — they gave little Smith the biggest banner at our last revival of Richard III. — and my natural love of 'orseflesh combined. You see, father used

to drive a cab, and so I suppose I inherited my love of animals through him. I think things runs in families like that. I know my Uncle Bill once got into trouble over some 'orses."

"For long?"

"Three year, I think; but poor Uncle Bill was never lucky. Not that they found anything against him, miss, though it was the third time they had him up. But his luck was always dead out. Father used to say that it was a fair put-up job of the police, and that Uncle Bill was as honest a man as ever walked."

"Then he must have been one of the most unfortunate of men."

"He was, no doubt. Well, miss, to leave the stable for the stage was right enough, but to leave the stage for the stable was the foolishest thing I ever done; though, perhaps, natural enough, considering the things that was in me, and the wages the Captain offered. But, miss, I didn't think I was selling my birthright, I didn't upon my word."

"Have you been long with Captain Langton?"

He stole a strange look at me from out the corners of his little eyes. "Ten months, miss." And here he whipped up the horses as though he intended saying no more on the subject, and I, of course, had not the temerity to question him, though I should have welcomed any information concerning a certain person, no matter whence its source.

At last we reached the end of our journey, and all the dear ones came out to welcome me home again, and as I was clasped in the arms of one after the other, and kissed fondly all the while, I felt how fortunate I was in being surrounded by such devotion. Father, I thought, looked graver than usual, and Harold — poor Harold! — if anything paler and more attenuated, but their greeting was nevertheless of the warmest nature, and I knew they were overjoyed to have me back.

"With you away it has not seemed like the same house," said Harold, as he and I sat out on the verandah after tea. "I am sure mother has been at sea during the whole of your absence, waking up only when you ran over to see us, while even I have been mooning about like one who is for ever expecting a surprise. Dear old Sis, how we should miss you if you went away altogether."

"I shall never go away," I said.

"Don't tell me that," he laughed. "You are too beautiful to be left in peace."

"Perhaps not quite so beautiful as you think, Harold. Remember you are my brother."

"And don't you think a brother has eyes? To tell you the truth, Sis, I was dreadfully afraid that you would fall in love with Captain Langton."

"Well, you see," I answered with a forced laugh, "I have returned heart whole and fancy free. But suppose I had fallen in love with him?"

"Don't suppose anything so dreadful," he replied. Then looking sharply

at me he asked, "There is nothing between you, Sis?"

"Of course not. How could Captain Langton condescend to look at me?"

Harold shook his little head sagaciously. "You know you don't mean that. But there's poor Will mooning about the garden. Dear old chap, he seems to have made an awful mess of it. Go down to him, Sis, and see if you can't pour a little balm into his wounds."

So, glad to escape the prying eyes and pointed questions of the younger brother, I seized my hat and hurried off to sympathize, if need be, with the elder.

He saw me coming, and, guessing my intentions, turned his back on me and walked smartly off in the opposite direction. But, hurrying forward, I laid my hand on his arm and made him stop and face me.

"Will," I said, "I want to know all about it."

"About what?" he asked sullenly.

"About her."

He laughed harshly, a hard, cynical look overspreading his handsome face, which, alas, even in one day, had grown to look years older. "It's off — that's all. I wasn't good enough for her."

"Not good enough?"

"No, not good enough. When I told her all, showed my heart like the fool that I was, she looked at me with her grand air of surprise, and forbade me to speak of it further; and when, for I couldn't hold my tongue, I upbraided her for her indifference, coldness, coquetry, she turned on me like a devil and wanted to know how I dared presume to talk to her — I, the son of a convict."

"She did not say that, Will? She could not have been so cruel."

"Perhaps not in those words, but she hinted at it plainly enough. Well, she was quite right; and I'll tell you what it is, Flos, we're only tolerated amongst these people out of a mistaken sense of generosity. This convict taint will prove too much for us yet, see if it doesn't."

I, too, was afraid he spoke truly, but I answered as in duty bound, "Nonsense. How can it affect us, or make you or me different from what we are? There is no criminal blood in our veins: you and I, Will, have as great a sense of right and wrong as any of our neighbours. Morally we are not perverted, and though we suffer as being the members of a class, no one who knows us can say that we have not our full share of human virtues."

"With more than our share of vice. It is no good attempting to gloss the dreadful truth. The old man was sent to Botany Bay, and though we were all angels that one fact would drag us down. We might be forgiven any crime but that. No," he added despondently, "if you want my honest opinion of the case, it's this: The best thing this family can do is to pack itself away, change its name, and make for one of the other colonies."

“I am sure you exaggerate the trouble, Will. There are thousands of people here who would not think the less of you because father was a currency man, if you yourself were honest. I grant you we have had a bad start, dear old fellow,” and here I took his great hand and began to stroke it softly, “but remember we have only begun the race, and if we keep up our heart and run fairly, I think we shall not be the last in at the finish.”

“You're a good little girl, Flos,” he said, squeezing my hand tenderly, “and worth a dozen of me when it comes to a push. But you must understand that I was madly infatuated, and that my infatuation caused me to think myself a much finer fellow than I am. To me it did not seem presumptuous to think of Maud Langton as a man likes to think of the woman he wishes to make his wife. I knew I was not worthy of her, for, birth and wealth apart, few men are worthy of a beautiful, pure woman; but I hoped, somehow, that things might go well with us.” Here his voice became thick and he turned his head aside. Continuing after a moment he said, “Well, well, it's all over now. I won't say that I shall forget her quickly, but I'll try not to remember her too well.”

I was pleased at this manly determination, and, pressing my lips to his sleeve, stole a silent kiss. Poor Will, engrossed as he was with his own misfortune, how little could he imagine the sister he loved so well had but lately been subjected to an insult, against which his own rebuff was but the ghost of a wrong.

“I am glad you take it like a man,” I said. “You must not think that all women are as selfish as she. You will forget her in time, dear old fellow, for she is not worthy of remembrance. Then you will find that there are other women equally as beautiful.”

“I shall offer no other woman my name,” he said moodily.

“Offer her yourself, Will, and you'll find her think little of the name. If I were a man like you, no calamity on earth should cow me.”

“I wish you were a man,” he said earnestly, his face assuming a strange look of concern. “A man can struggle, can put up his hands and hit his opponent back; but a girl — what can she do? Do you know, Flos, I used to think that there was no man fit to kiss your lips — unless it was poor old Arthur — and now I wonder if they can get past the fact that you are a currency girl.”

Poor Will! He little knew how his idol's lips had been desecrated, how she had fallen from her high estate. What would he think could he only know? I hid my face against his shoulder as I answered, “It will concern me little what they think. I shall never marry, so why should I trouble about the vague future?”

“Of course you will marry,” he said with a laugh, “as your mother did before you, and as your mother's mother did before her. Why, I was almost beginning to suspect that there was something between you and Captain Langton.”

Almost beginning to suspect! The dear, blind creature.

“What nonsense,” I replied with an attempt at petulance. “Captain Langton and I were very good friends. He was always exceedingly kind to me.”

“So I thought.”

“Really, Will, if you are going to insinuate in this horrible manner, I think I shall leave you to yourself.” And so away I walked, glad of the opportunity thus afforded me of beating a dignified retreat.

Chapter IV.

THE next two days were spent by me in a strangely objectless manner. I went about the house as usual trying to interest myself in the domestic affairs of our simple establishment, but I now found the concerns of other days petty and tedious to a degree. I could not even be cajoled into the manufacture of one of my famous quince and apple pies. Strive as I would to forget the days I had passed at Langton, I could not for a moment banish them from my memory. My own sense told me that all was over between us, that he would go his way and I mine, for, after what had passed, I did not think he would dare make any further advances even of the most honourable nature. He could not possibly imagine that I should forget the insult he had offered me, and, unless he were the vainest of men, his innate delicacy — for I hold that no one is utterly devoid of that quality — would warn him to forbear; for surely he must know that I was not the sort of girl to lightly take or forgive a wrong. No doubt he saw that. He had played his hand and lost. He would go away, and in the pleasures of the city forget even that he had tempted a soul to destruction. Then after a few more years of dissipation he would marry, like the rest of his class, and another woman would come to Langton. Perhaps I should be there to see. She would flash through the town by his side, as I had done, and all my dreams would vanish in the dust raised by the wheels of her coach.

“You are not yourself, Sis,” said Harold, as he and I sat in our old seats on the verandah towards the evening of the third day. “I have been watching you ever since you came home, and I am perfectly convinced that you don't find the old place exactly as you left it.”

“You have a wonderful imagination, Master Harold,” I said somewhat sarcastically, for I was in that nervous state which warmly resents any little encroachment on its sensitive preserves.

“In this case one does not require an imagination,” he answered with a smile, “but a pair of eyes. The glories of Langton have eclipsed the lesser dignities of poor old Granite Creek.”

“Don't be foolish, Harold. You know you are talking a lot of nonsense. I wish I had never gone near the wretched place.”

“Is it really as bad as that?”

I must own he had me rather sharply there, and that my confusion in consequence was extreme. “Oh, you are intolerable,” I exclaimed

angrily. "It's about time you devoted yourself to something more remunerative than watching other people's actions and construing them to suit your own ill-natured disposition."

"If I were like Will," he said gently, turning two reproachful eyes on me, "I would do instead of talk; but, you see, I am only a cripple, and my doing consists of talking. If I love you, Sis, the fault is yours, not mine. If I am jealous of what I love, it's only human nature, isn't it? But, perhaps," he added sadly, "a cripple's nature is warped like his body, and altogether different from other people's."

I never could be angry a moment when he took this tone, so I held my burning face down for him to kiss.

"I suppose I am very trying," he said, "but you understand me, don't you? Will, dear old fellow, is proud of you in his own big-hearted way — I know he thinks there is not another girl like you in the country — but, Sis, he doesn't love you in my way."

I kissed his pale brow and brushed back the hair from his throbbing temples, and again and again I swore my silent oath that I would prove worthy of this devotion. A marked race we may have been, but it rested with ourselves whether that mark grew broader or fainter.

"Harold," I said, "you must try and believe that I am the same girl you knew before I went to Langton. If I have seen some things there which make me think, you must not imagine that I have forgotten everything else. To you, at any rate, I shall always be the same. And when father and mother go, as in the course of nature they must before we do, haven't I promised to stay on here and keep house for you and Will?"

"For Will, perhaps," he said, "but for me — no."

"You are despondent to-day?"

"Is that anything new?" he asked with a sad smile. "But look, Sis, look," cried he, rising suddenly in his chair; "look who is coming."

One glance was enough for me. I felt the blood rush in torrents to my face, and my body was seized with a sudden vague trembling. There, not a quarter of a mile down the road, coming along at a swinging trot, was Captain Langton. A hundred bewildering thoughts rushed through my brain. What could he want? Why was he coming here? I had hoped that we had said good-bye; for notwithstanding his promise, which was half a threat, to see me again, I believed he would considerably spare me any further embarrassment. Indeed, to put it plainly, I did not think that he would have the impertinence to search me out after what had been. Therefore I could not regard his coming with anything but dismay, though that dismay, conceal it if I will, was tempered with something very like a glow of triumph.

Harold's eyes flew rapidly between me and the advancing figure, but I no longer thought of hiding my confusion, for my heart and brain were too full of the excitement of his coming for me to consider the

proprieties.

“A good stepper,” said he, referring to the horse.

“Yes.”

It was just like him. When he could have approached me with advantage, he drew back and remained mute. Perhaps he needed no words of mine. My face must have appeared to him like an open book.

In the meantime Captain Langton rapidly approached the house, and just as the first thought of beating a retreat suggested itself to me, he caught sight of us and raised his hat. It was too late to go now, so I leant against one of the verandah posts, coolly enough it must have appeared to him, and watched him ride up and dismount, though all the time my heart seemed to cry aloud in its dumb, inarticulate way.

“I have come to say good-bye,” he exclaimed as he advanced towards me with outstretched hand, the same frank smile on his handsome face.

“We are off on Monday.”

“Indeed.”

He looked at me in his strange quizzing way.

“Maud begs me to tender you a thousand apologies for her non-appearance; she was extremely anxious to come, but the gigantic preparations for this journey of ours have quite upset her.”

Now, knowing that Maud was really as placid and unexcitable a creature as I could well imagine, I at first felt inclined to resent this most palpable falsehood, but thinking better of it, I only smiled and said I was sorry she had not come — an untruth as obvious as his own.

“I know she particularly wished to see your mother,” he went on, “to whom I should also like to say good-bye.” Here he looked uncommonly hard at Harold.

“I will tell her you are here, Captain Langton,” said the boy, shuffling hastily to his feet.

“On no account, no. Pray don't disturb yourself. I am really in no hurry.” But Harold, who was quick to take a hint, hobbled off without returning an answer.

As soon as he had disappeared in the house, Captain Langton strode quickly to my side, endeavouring to seize my hand.

“Florence,” he said, “do you know why I have come?”

“To say good-bye,” I answered, looking him steadily in the face.

“To make one last appeal to you,” he added passionately. “For the last three days I have been like a madman. I have striven hard to forget you, to forget what we have been to each other, but have found it impossible. I cannot live without you. Dearest, I——”

“Hush!”

I drew back from him with a little gesture of fear, and he too drew back from me, for at that moment the rustle of mother's dress warned us of her approach.

“So you are going on Monday, Captain?” she said.

“Yes,” he replied, “we have decided on Monday now, and I can't say that I am looking forward to the change with all the pleasure I anticipated. I have come to the conclusion that Langton is not such a bad old place after all; or, I suppose, the idea of possession makes it seem sweeter. But where is Mr. Hastings? I'm afraid I shall not have another opportunity of saying good-bye to him.”

“This is his Boorta day,” said mother. “He always goes to the yards on Saturdays.”

“How unfortunate.”

I couldn't help looking at him, the arch-hypocrite, for he knew as well as I that father always attended the cattle sales on that particular day. Indeed, I might have guessed that he had chosen his day accordingly. He saw my look, and understood its meaning; for the ghost of a smile passed over his face and his eyes seemed to say, “Yes, you are right. I did know all about it, but I wanted to see you only.”

And so he chatted on quite amicably for some time, till looking suddenly at his watch he arose to his feet and declared that he must be moving homewards, as he yet had a lot of work to get through, and that the servants were always so confoundedly indolent unless well watched.

“But, by the way, Mrs. Hastings,” he added, “I was forgetting Maud's request. If you could spare her a few of your famous pink roses, she would be ever so much obliged to you.”

“Certainly,” cried mother, “she is welcome to anything we grow or have, or you either, sir,” she added sweetly.

“Thanks so much,” he said, and I thought he looked just a little embarrassed; “it's awfully kind of you.”

“Not in the least. Here, Flossie dear, run down and cut Captain Langton a bunch from Harold's tree.”

He looked at me to see how I would take the order, but perceiving me immediately prepare to obey, said, “Really, Miss Hastings, I — I don't want to put you to so much trouble.”

“It's no trouble,” I said, turning to go.

“Then as I am an excellent hand at doing nothing,” he replied, laughingly addressing mother, “I'll go and help her.”

And so after me he came right down the long garden, and stood beside me while I gathered some of the choicest blooms from Harold's tree, speaking no word the while.

“Will that do?” I asked, holding out a gorgeous bunch of roses.

“Florence,” he answered, looking at me instead of the flowers, “I want to speak to you.”

“But the flowers.”

“Bother the flowers.”

“Oh,” I said reproachfully, “and I have picked you the very best of

them.”

“It was like you, sweetest,” he said tenderly. Yet I could see that the flowers concerned him but little, so little, indeed, that my suspicions as to the truth of Maud's request were at once confirmed.

“You were not told to ask for these roses?”

“No,” he said, “to tell you the truth I wasn't. I wanted to get you away from the old lady, and couldn't think of a better story.”

“I am surprised at that,” said I meaningly.

“Are you?” he laughed. “I suppose you gave me credit for a better invention?”

“I certainly did.”

“Well, it answered, didn't it? and what after all is a white lie more or less?”

I was afraid Captain Langton's lies had hitherto been mostly of another colour, and I should not have objected to hearing him told so, though as yet I had not sufficient assurance to undertake that mission myself.

But in the meantime we walked slowly along, there being still for me a strange charm about him, till we reached the old summer-house at the bottom of the path, before the entrance of which he stood, saying, “Let us go in here for a moment. I have much of importance to tell you.”

Having expected as much all along, I was not unprepared for this sudden suggestion, so into the summer-house I went and quietly sat myself down, he taking a seat beside me.

“Florence,” he said, attempting to take my hand, “I have come over here to-day once more to beg your pardon, once more to tell you that in spite of whatever I may have said or done, I love you most sincerely, and that if you throw me over you will ruin me body and soul.”

“Captain Langton,” I replied, and my heart beat wildly while my brain wondered and wondered if his heart were truly prompting his utterance, “I forgive you with all my heart, and I pray that you will never mention this distressing subject again.”

“Don't go,” he said, seizing me suddenly by the waist as I prepared to arise; “sit down and listen to me. You tell me not to mention this affair again, but don't you know you might just as well tell me neither to eat nor sleep, for you are food and sleep to me — the very essence of life. Why should a little word have sunk this gulf between us?”

“Because you cruelly presumed on your position and abused mine.”

“I was wrong,” he said humbly, “and I am willing to make any atonement.”

“There can be only one atonement. Let us go our ways and hear no more of this.”

“Anything but that — that I cannot do. I cannot, will not part with you. Have we, then, been so little to each other that you could wish to say good-bye like this? You surely did not fool me into the belief that you

cared for me, only to throw me over when your fancy palled?"

Ah, heaven! And yet how could I lay bare my heart and tell him all. So I tried to laugh indifferently, though half-hysterical it must have sounded, and said, "I think we had better not go too deeply into the cause."

This, coupled with my apparent confidence in myself, angered him exceedingly.

"I see," he said bitterly, "you are like the rest of your sex; you were attracted by that golden glitter which you affect to despise."

In his calmer moments, I know, he would be sorry for having used these rude words, but like all favourites of fortune he was hasty and imperious, and could not brook the slightest restraint or opposition. In a moment I was all aflame and ready, metaphorically, to spring upon him; but suddenly recollecting that the golden glitter had not been without its attraction, I subsided within myself and uttered a low laugh. "You still hold a very high opinion of me, Captain Langton."

I am sure he thought I was purposely teasing him, though could he have felt the pitiless throb, throb of my pulses he would have known that it was play of a very terrible kind. His brow lowered and he gave me a very ominous look, while, with a palpable effort, he swallowed his resentment.

"You know what I think of you," he said. "Why do you wilfully pervert my words and put an entirely different construction upon my meaning?"

"Don't you think," I asked, "that we had better put an end to this folly? If you have other meaning than your words convey, I cannot be expected to understand it."

"Then understand this — I love you."

"I cannot understand that."

His brow grew black again, but he answered quietly, "Then you are denser than the rest of your sex."

"No doubt." And again I rose to go.

"Damnation!" he exclaimed fiercely, forcing me back on the seat, "do you want to drive me mad?"

At this I smiled superciliously, thereby casting a reflection on his present sanity.

"Listen to me," he said savagely, evidently reading my thoughts, "it would be a bad day for you if that time should come."

"I am afraid, Captain Langton," I replied, "that I have allowed this interview to last a little too long. We do not understand each other; we never shall."

"But we must."

"Must?"

He strode up and down the narrow limits of the summer-house for a moment or two as though grappling with some weighty project. Then he turned and faced me, and in his eyes was a look I had never seen there

before.

“Yes,” he answered, and his voice sounded hard and cruel, and was in perfect harmony with the savage aspect of his face, “We must understand each other. It would be better for you and yours.”

“Your words imply a threat. I must request you to be more explicit.”

“No, no; why should we quarrel? I love you, dear, and would not harm you or yours for the world.”

“I confess that I cannot comprehend you. Yet if you have the power to injure me or mine, pray don't let any sentimental considerations stay you.”

“Curse it!” he exclaimed passionately, seizing me by the shoulders and shaking me violently, “who are you, that you should give yourself such airs? Haven't I humiliated myself enough for you? What else do you want me to do?”

“Leave me, that is all. If you do not, I shall call for help.”

He laughed grimly. “Don't be a fool. Who can help you if I like to put my foot down. To whom can you appeal if I say there shall be no appeal?”

I looked at him in wonder, believing for the moment that his reason had quitted him. Seeing the mute appeal on my face, he continued as mysteriously, “It were wise to listen to me calmly, and not thwart me, as you seem bent on doing. As I can make, so can I mar, and I will — I will, by God!”

Though terrified at his vehemence, and though only vaguely comprehending the meaning of his wild talk, I yet had sufficient resolution to answer with brave words, however feeble the spirit was that prompted them.

“I do not know what you mean,” and to me my voice sounded hard and full of contempt, “but you talk like a coward and a braggart.”

For several moments he looked at me as though he could scarcely believe his ears. Then he laughed harshly, strangely. “By George! And you professed to love me once, and I, like a fool, believed you. But don't think that you shall play fast and loose with me. You have maddened me, and by heaven you'll have to pay for it.” And in a moment he had me in his arms and was kissing me with all the fervour of his wilful nature.

“Let me go,” I gasped, struggling wildly, “how dare you?”

“Promise, then.”

“I will not.”

His arms pressed me closer, closer, till I thought he would have killed me.

“Help, help!” I cried, now thoroughly frightened.

“You idiot!” he exclaimed roughly. “Why do you make that noise?”

Yet the noise notwithstanding, I heard the hurried rush of feet on the gravel outside, and the next moment Will stood in the doorway. The

Captain released me with a gesture of annoyance, and I, burning with confusion, for now I would have given anything to undo the mischief, retreated farther back into the bower and stood there quivering painfully.

“What's this?” said Will, after gazing at us for several moments in blank amazement.

“It means,” said Captain Langton, “that I love your sister, and that I have asked her to be my wife.”

Will looked from one to the other incredulously. “Is this so, Flos?” he asked.

I bowed my head still lower, hoping he would take it for a sign of affirmation.

“Then why did you scream for help?”

“Oh, my dear fellow,” cried the Captain laughingly, “I'll explain all about that presently.”

“She will explain,” said Will in his quiet way, a way none the less decided and authoritative on that account. “What is it, Flos? Speak, tell me, dear.” But I could only bound into his arms and fling myself sobbing on his breast.

“This must not end here, Captain Langton,” said Will meaningly.

“What do you mean by that?” asked the Captain haughtily.

“I mean,” said old Will, and I felt his body grow stiffer as he spoke, and the hand which held mine crushed my fingers like a vice, “I mean that I will allow no man to insult my sister.”

“Really, Hastings,” was the disdainful reply, and herein Captain Langton showed a decided lack of judgment, “I think you forget yourself.”

But Will, who was no respecter of money, nor persons either unless they showed themselves worthy of respect, answered hotly, “Probably, but I cannot forget you.”

There was a covert allusion in this which caused the master of Langton to grow suddenly pale. Turning sharply on Will with an oath, he said, “I asked your sister to marry me, and it's a d — d sight more than she deserves.”

Will's face grew whiter than the white angry face before him, and he drew back his clenched fist as though to launch it at the Captain, but, clinging to his arm, I implored him to desist. “Don't quarrel, don't quarrel. For heaven's sake, let him go.”

“Go, then,” said Will, shortly, sharply, and in a tone of such command that it must have fallen on his opponent like a lash; “quick, quick, or presently I may hurt you.”

But instead of seizing his opportunity, the master of Langton merely looked Will disdainfully up and down, a smile of contempt creeping round the corners of his mouth. “I must say you are exceedingly generous. But if this had happened in the old days, I would have had you

flogged for daring to speak to me in this way.”

Though the Captain was talking arrant nonsense, there was no mistaking his meaning. Will uttered a mighty oath. His white face flushed scarlet in a moment, and drawing himself up, much like a dog when it prepares for a jump, he sprang at his adversary. There was a short scuffle and a crash, and then Captain Langton was knocked backwards against the trellis-work of the house. In a moment, however, he was on his feet again, and with an angry cry he rushed at Will. For a moment they sparred round each other, both with faces as white and fixed as the faces of the dead, and then they closed. From side to side they swayed, now against the frail pillars of the house, which quivered ominously, and now backwards and forwards across the floor, no sound escaping them but their hard breathing, till they fell heavily to the earth, Will uppermost. Soon they were on their feet again, and facing each other, both faces distorted with passion. Then was it I rushed between them, and, throwing my arms round Will, implored him to desist.

“I think we had better wait for a more favourable opportunity,” said the Captain, coolly.

Will bowed. “As you please.” And then he took me by the hand, saying, “Come,” and led me back to the house, from one of the windows of which I beheld his late adversary limp over to his horse, mount it, and ride slowly away.

Chapter V.

HERE, then, was a painful end to what had been a bright, if transient dream. I shuddered every time I thought of that dreadful scene in the rose-strewn summerhouse, and for a full week after I went about the place nervous to a degree, trembling at every sudden sound, no matter how familiar. Was I sorry for it all? Heartily, with the strangest sorrow imaginable, for it was not unmixed with a certain glow of triumph. I knew that this last scene would effectually sever the ties which bound my lover and me, and my heart beat ominously, with a sickening dull pain, in spite of my resolve to put the shadow from me; yet, on the other hand, there was no end of satisfaction in the knowledge that I was still the beloved of those nearest to me, and that, notwithstanding my love and my dreams, I had, first of all, remained true to myself.

It was agreed between Will and me that no mention of this affair should be made to our parents, for not alone would they have been powerless to aid us, but it would have caused them anguish inexpressible. I know the very thought of such a thing would have half turned father's brain, for he was most jealous of our meeting with our due portion of respect. Mother, dear soul, would have been the last on earth to think of such a thing befalling her child; but had she known, and the why and wherefore of it all, I do not think she would ever have held up her head again. Harold, I am sure, suspected that everything was not exactly as it should be, and on one occasion he even tried to draw me out, but failing in his attempt, quickly dropped the matter, for which I was heartily glad, as I knew his discretion would forbid him breathing his suspicions to another.

And so a week dragged on, life at Granite Creek progressing at the snail's dreadful pace. Oh, how I chafed under my thoughts and emotions! I grew peevish, irritable, and hated with an intensity hitherto foreign to my nature every clump of trees and every hill on which my eyes had lingered so often and so lovingly: ay, even the great grey plains over which Will and I had scampered early and late, in storm and sunshine, when the thick frost lay on the rank grass, or the dust whirled in blinding clouds driven furiously onward by the scorching winds of the burnt-up north. They seemed to be of me then, dear almost as a part of myself; now they were but a pain and an annoyance. I grew almost to envy the very cattle in the paddocks; and of Will, who once more sought the

refreshing atmosphere of the "Shearer's Rest," whereby he might drink and make merry, and forget, if that were possible, I was profoundly jealous.

All this time we heard no word of the master of Langton, a circumstance which troubled me not a little, for I had not yet forgotten his thinly-veiled threats against me and mine, threats which, in the face of what had happened, he might not stay to execute. Did I think that he would carry out any plan of injury against us? Truly at first I did not, taking his words to mean but so much angry talk consequent upon his repulsion; yet the more I thought of it and him the more terrified I became, for I believe that a passionate man scorned is a more formidable creature than the proverbial woman. And he was one who had grown accustomed to conquest. Purse-proud, and haughty to everyone excepting me, I knew the thought of defeat, and at the hands of a currency girl, would rankle and seem unendurable to him; and, moreover, if one half of the stories concerning him were true, he was not the one to stick at a trifle for revenge. Regret, I knew, was useless, and yet I would have given a good ten years of my life never to have looked on him, or if he had never looked on me. Each morning, as I awoke from my unrefreshing sleep, I would ask myself, "Will it fall to-day?" — meaning the ruin he had threatened — but as the days rolled away, one after the other, and the storm broke not, I grew more composed and thankful. "He loves me after all," I would say to myself, "and love can forgive everything." And a softer feeling for him, a feeling which claimed kinship with that which filled my breast in the first days of our meeting, would steal in upon me, and, so curious is a woman's heart, at such times were he but there to plead, I could have forgiven him all. For, after all, how can a woman forgive not when she loves? And though what love I might have borne for him should have perished by his ingratitude, are we so fond of playing the martyr that we will not even dream? And then think of my surroundings. The quiet homestead, the cheerless plains, the eternal bush. I could not get away from myself even though I wished it. The solitude made Harold a poet; it would have made me a maniac.

One morning, exactly two weeks after that dreadful scene in the summer-house, Mr. Mackenzie, the manager of Langton Station, rode up to Granite Creek and inquired for father — no absolutely novel proceeding, yet one which I now viewed with considerable alarm. On learning, however, that father had gone to Wallan, the manager drew a big, legal-looking envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to me, telling me to be sure and give it to father as soon as he returned. I took the letter in to mother and told her what had happened, and though she looked rather nervously at the formidable thing, having placed it conspicuously on the mantelpiece, she never thought of opening it. I, however, was all impatience, and had I been the wife instead of the

daughter, I am much afraid I should have broken that seal. But then, had I not been anxiously expecting something from Langton Station, and might not this be it?

When father at last returned, mother took the letter to him in their room, and for a long time after I heard them talking, very seriously I knew by the deep tones of his voice. I doubted not that the blow had fallen at last. Only, what was it? I think I should have gone mad had not tea been announced at that moment. Now for a surety I should know what had happened. So, rushing to my room, I hastily plunged my face in cold water, and then, feeling a little relieved, made my way to the tea table. Will and Harold were already seated, and mother was just seating herself as I entered the room. Hers was the face to which I naturally turned, and, as I expected, it bore traces of severe anguish. But I had only time to steal this one quick glance when father entered and took his seat at the head of the table. It was a long time before I could summon up sufficient courage to look at him, but when I did I saw that he too had found the contents of that blue envelope anything but satisfactory.

I never remember a more wearisome meal than that. I ate, as in duty bound, though every mouthful nearly choked me. Mother, however, made no pretence of eating, while father simply toyed with his food. We were silent too, so much so in fact that Will at last wanted to know what had given us all the blues.

"First tell me," said father, looking round on his three children, "if you would like to leave the old place?"

I did not answer, feeling a great lump rise suddenly in my throat, but Will replied, "Do you mean clear out of Granite Creek?"

"Yes," said father.

"Well, that's not very likely, is it?" laughed his eldest born.

"More likely than you seem to think, Will. I have to-day received a letter from Mr. Mackenzie in which I am informed that Captain Langton has decided to call in my lease of Granite Creek. You know, I suppose, that the lease has run out these five years?"

"Quite well," muttered Will, who had grown suddenly blood-red and then as white as death; "but I have heard Mr. Langton say that it was to be made over to you and your heirs for ever."

"He said so," answered father, "whenever I broached this subject to him, and he meant it too; but the deeds were never drawn up. Consequently we have no legal right here, and Captain Langton, if he choose, may at any moment order us to pack up and go." There was so much bitterness in his tone as he spoke that I looked up wondering, scarcely recognizing the voice.

"But it's infamous," said Will hotly. "Are you sure Captain Langton understands what his father's intentions were?"

"I understood that he did," was the reply, "but not dreaming of such a

contingency as this, I never at any time gave the matter much prominence in conversation with him. If my good friend, his father, had not been smitten down so suddenly this thing would never have happened. It was of this lease he was thinking when, on his death-bed, he sent so hurriedly for me. I must apologize to you, children. I am greatly to blame. By the aid of a little judicious foresight all this unpleasantness might have been averted."

"Still," said Will, "who could have thought that Mr. Langton would die so suddenly? It is a pity you did not make your footing secure when you had the chance; yet, I suppose, most men would have done precisely as you did. If the worst comes to the worst, we can go and begin a new life in a new part of the country."

"I'm glad to see you take it in this way, my son; it is a comfort you can little imagine. Yet I have no doubt that when I fully explain to Captain Langton how I stood with his father he will reconsider his decision."

"The devil take him and his decision," says Master William hotly. "I'd rather crack stones all the days of my life than that you should truckle to such a fellow."

"Hush, dear," cried mother, looking quite terrified.

"His private life concerns us little," said father quietly. "I think we had better leave it alone."

"No good can come out of it certainly," was the somewhat graceless reply of his eldest born. "Yet I am firmly convinced that your endeavours to gain a remission of our sentence will be so much valuable time wasted," and with this parting shot he arose from the table.

Outside I found him pacing up and down the garden, and immediately joined him.

"Well," he said, ejecting a great cloud of smoke as he spoke, "it's come. I knew the dog would soon bite us somewhere. Pity I didn't wring his neck when I had my hands on him."

"What shall we do, Will?"

"Do! Why, clear, I suppose," he laughed. "It's a coward's blow though, Flos. By George, I thought he was more of a man."

I thought so, too, but I did not speak, for my pride had received a cruel shock.

"Perhaps when father has seen him they will arrange things satisfactorily," I suggested somewhat weakly.

"No," said he, "they will come to no arrangement satisfactory to both sides. Captain Langton has got his knife into us and he means to keep it there."

"And this is all my fault," cried I passionately. "I wish I had never been born."

Will caught my hand in his and squeezed it tenderly.

"You must unwish that wish, Flos. Will not my love, the love of us all,

outweigh the petty spite of a dissolute scoundrel? Don't you know that I am prouder of you at this moment than I ever was before?"

It was sweet to hear these dear words, overwhelmed as I was with guilt and wretchedness, and I flung myself on his breast and wept with a sad sort of joy. We were still a loving and united family, and while we remained so were proof against the venomous attacks of the envious and the hateful.

Early the next morning father rode over to Langton to interview Mr. Mackenzie, the manager, and during his absence mother and I wandered about the house like a pair of spectres, while for hour after hour Harold sat in his chair, his book unopened beside him, his great dreamy eyes gazing wistfully out across the well-known landscape. Every time I passed him he looked imploringly at me, a look which plainly indicated his wish to be taken into my confidence; but I could not tell him. Indeed, it seemed to me as though my secret must henceforth be guarded with greater surveillance.

About half-past two in the afternoon father returned from Langton, and I could see by the sad smile which wreathed his face as he greeted mother and me that his errand had been a futile one. He must have seen the vital question in our eyes, for he shook his head sadly as he advanced towards us. "I saw Mr. Mackenzie," he explained, "but could get little information from him. The orders have come through Captain Langton's lawyers. Granite Creek was wanted for some new wool sheds. So we shall have to pack up, dears, but as they have very considerately given us a couple of months to do it in, we shall have plenty of time to look round for new pastures."

"Where you and the children are," said mother, "there is happiness enough for me. It won't be without a pang that I shall part from the old place, Frank, but I'm ready and willing to go."

"Always the sweet helpmate and comforter," said father, as he took her head in his hands and buried his lips in her silken, silvery hair, "always my better angel." And truly like an angel she seemed as she looked up into his face and smiled.

"But there is Captain Langton," she said. "You will see — you will write to him?"

"Impossible."

"Impossible?"

"Yes, Captain Langton is on the sea. He sailed for England a week ago."

"Then our last hope is gone?"

"Gone." And he led her into the house as he spoke.

This last piece of information completely stunned me, for I had determined, if all else failed, to go to him myself and implore him, for the love he had once professed for me and mine, to spare my parents this

last humiliation. It would be a fearful ordeal, I knew, and one which would lay open my most vulnerable parts; yet for their sake I would have done more than this — what, I dared not even think. Now, however, my hopes and fears and resolutions resolved themselves into nothing, and I was left to mourn the sorrow I had created.

And so almost immediately preparations for our departure were begun, and once we had hit upon our new home, which was a small farm about twelve miles the other side of Wallan, things began to shape themselves with remarkable rapidity. The extra sheep and cattle were driven into Boorta and Wallan, for it was our intention to only comfortably stock the new land, and there sold, but as prices were ridiculously low at that period we made little by the transaction. Still father and Will, with a couple of our old hands, worked hard outside the home from morning till night, while within mother and I used equal dispatch, so that in something under six weeks from the date we had received notice to quit, we were ready to depart.

Ella, Mr. and Mrs. Wallace, came rushing over to Granite Creek in their new buggy immediately upon receipt of the intelligence that we were leaving the old place, and Mr. Wallace was both loud and deep in his condemnation of Captain Langton. Mother took Mrs. Wallace away with her into her room, and I can somewhat easily guess how the two old friends talked of the past, the present and the future; the past which might have been so happy, the future which could not be. I know mother had looked forward to ending her days in peace at Granite Creek, content to live the quiet life of one who has hoped and lost, and who has no more wish to remember, or be remembered by, the world. Father, I know, for men always complain more loudly than women, had no thought or wish outside his own household, and many a time have I heard him dilate with pride on the wonders he had worked with the once sterile soil of Granite Creek, and declare that Will should step into as neat a property as there was the whole country round. Alas! for his dreams; but then, alas! for all our dreams.

And now the eve of our departure at length came round. It was the last night we were to spend beneath the old roof, the roof that had sheltered us so long, under which we children had all been born and had passed the happy days of our young life — sunny days in which no cloud ever came to frighten us with its dull shadow, or cast a momentary darkness across the clear look-out of our lives. We were no cowards then; the great English language possessed for us no spirit-stealing word. Will was a young hero delighting in noble deeds; Harold a brave sweet singer teaching the world how to be great and good; I a dreamer of dreams, too, happy as theirs, but to be no more realized. What a golden age had passed without our knowing it!

That night was the most utterly wretched one I had ever spent. I

wandered aimlessly, hopelessly about the place, a choking sensation in my throat, my heart cold and dull and heavy. Even the sweet companionship of Ella, who had insisted upon staying with me during the last days, could not raise me out of the despondency into which I had fallen; and when she at last mounted the trap beside Will, who was to drive her back to Wallan, I am ashamed to confess that I experienced a certain sense of relief. Now I could give way to my tears unchecked, and though I blessed her as they fell, I was glad to be alone. And when the night drew in, and the moon began to rise out of the great plains, flooding the world with legions of mysterious shadows, I crept like a guilty thing through the back door down into the garden, and there bade a sorrowful good-bye to every flower and tree I loved.

Chapter VI.

EARLY the next morning we were up and stirring, and though I had slept but little that night, and felt tired and languid when the knock came, I was yet glad to get up, if it was only for the sake of breaking the monotony of my thoughts. In the house everybody was busy, and the horses and carts, the latter partly loaded, were standing at the door. I too set to work, and for an hour forgot some of my wretchedness. Then breakfast was announced, and after we had all eaten a somewhat excited meal, mother and I went away to put on our hats and dustcoats — to prepare for our last drive from Granite Creek. She, dear soul, went about her preparations like one in a dream. She spoke not at all — I do not think she dared speak for fear of breaking down — but whenever she caught me looking at her she smiled, smiled as a martyr at the stake might. Father, too, looked pale and very serious, but as he and Will worked as though their lives depended on our getting away within a certain time, there was no gauging their real thoughts or feelings. Harold looked on from his seat in the verandah, dry-eyed, but thin and pale as a ghost. He rarely uttered a sound, and he tried hard to smile when spoken to, but I, who understood his heart so well, could almost read his thoughts, and I knew that he too kept silent because he dared not speak.

At last we all got under weigh, Will driving one of the waggons loaded with furniture, and one of the men the other. Then father, mother, Harold and I mounted the trap, and for the last time we drove down the old familiar path, out into the no less familiar road; by trees, shrubs, dilapidated fences, all of which seemed to beckon and bow mournfully to us as we passed. And when we came to the rails where years before Will had thrashed the obstreperous Patsy Dillon, the whole scene flashed vividly before my mind's eye. My terror and my ignorance, and Will standing there with clenched fists and flashing eyes because the little ragamuffin had called him a convict. Ah, me, I wondered what it all meant then.

“Sis,” whispered Harold as we began to mount the little hill which lay some three-quarters of a mile from the homestead, “take a last look at the old place.” And turning round, for he and I sat in the back seat, I saw away across the plain, nestling amid the trees which we had planted, the roof of our old home, and my eyes grew dim with the scalding tears that would fall, and through a film as of mist and pain I watched its well-

loved outline fade and fade till we crossed the brow of the hill and the whole scene was hidden from view. And that was the last I ever saw of the dear old place, for it was pulled down shortly after our departure. Harold nestled closer to me and slipped his little cold hand in my burning palm; and thus we drove on in silence over the dusty road, through the town of Wallan, and then once more out into the bush.

About three o'clock we arrived at our new home, which, if not so large and prepossessing as Granite Creek, was yet more prettily situated, being flanked on two sides by the primeval bush, and on another, about three miles off, by a low range of well-wooded hills. There was not another house in sight, which made the surrounding hills look very weird and lonely, and I almost suspected that father had purposely chosen such an out-of-the-way place. Here at any rate he could lead a life of quietness, he and the wife who had lovingly clung to him in weal and woe, who sighed for no other companionship than his, who sought no other love on earth than his love. But for us, for Will and me, it was different. We had both tasted of the tree of knowledge, and though the fruit had turned to ashes on our lips — the Dead Sea fruit of these later days — it left a memory which we could not forget, and which, perhaps, we would not if we could.

During the next two days we were all busy decorating and arranging the rooms, and when we had completed our task the little place looked wonderfully cheerful and home-like, and if we continually regretted Granite Creek, we yet had gratitude enough to thank Providence for the comfort of our new surroundings. True it was lonely, terribly lonely, but I had experienced so few of the pleasures of life, — and those I had tasted had left a most bitter flavour in my mouth, — that at times I was not at all adverse to burying myself in these gloomy solitudes, like poor Eloisa, "The world forgetting, by the world forgot." I suppose some such sentiments come to most of us once in a lifetime. I could almost smile now when I think it over, only I can't see anything to smile at. At any rate my first week in our new home was a singularly wretched one, and not till Ella came over to stay with me did I begin to feel myself again. And then being sadly in want of a confessor or confidant, I suppose, I unburdened myself of the history of my affair with Captain Langton, nor did I forget to narrate Will's story too, well knowing that I might place implicit confidence in her; and while she duly sympathized with me, I knew that she was thinking of the slight put upon the young giant, and wondering how any woman could have done it.

As for the young giant in question, he, so it appeared to me, seemed about this time to grow extremely restless, and after the work of unpacking and rearranging had been satisfactorily accomplished, that restlessness assumed a still more formidable shape, till, out of pity for him and anxiety on my own account, I was forced to approach him with

the subject.

“So I look miserable, do I?” he said, with a strange laugh. “Well, Flos, my looks reflect my feelings.”

“But why should you be miserable?” I asked, for I would rather be wretched myself than that he should suffer. It seems natural enough for a woman to complain. She may go about with a long face bewailing her sorrows and her pains (and what pains she suffers too!). She is a privileged being. But to see a man bowed down beneath the weight of pain or sorrow is to me the saddest sight imaginable.

“Of course I oughtn't to be,” he replied, “and at times I feel half ashamed of myself, and try to get rid of the idea, but it sticks there, Flos, and it will beat me in the end. I know I ought to be thankful that things are no worse, and, taking all things into consideration, think myself a very lucky fellow, but I can't, I can't, and that's the end of it.”

“And what is this dreadful idea of which you seem so much afraid?”

He laughed bitterly. “Then if I must speak plainly, Flos, I don't think this family has much chance in this part of the country, and, since the old man has no intention of leaving it, I have come to the conclusion that — that I will. In the first place I have no taste for farming, and in the second, I would rather go where everyone does not know my history. By-and-by I may forget a little, and then I shall feel a man; if I stay here, God knows what will become of me. Do you not think the project a wise one?”

It was some time before I could reply, the proposal startling me considerably; yet a few moments of thought sufficed for me to look upon it with his eyes. “Yes,” I answered, “I think it is a wise one, though it will break my heart to see you go. There is little hope for you here, and this is not the sort of life a man like you should lead. It will be a terrible blow to us, dear, but I feel that you are right. Poor mother, what will she say?”

“Dear soul,” he said, and I saw his big eyes grow suspiciously dim. “You'll cheer her up, won't you, and tell her it's all for the best?”

“Trust me.”

At that moment Ella approached us, and to her I made known Will's determination.

“Going,” she said incredulously, looking falteringly at him, “going where?”

“I don't know,” he answered.

“But, Will, isn't it very risky?”

Will drew himself up to his full height and extended his big arms. “How can anything be risky while I have a pair of hands like these? They have done a man's work for years, and I think I may trust them a little longer.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said poor Ella, “I know you are awfully strong,

Will. But to go away — it's so dreadful.”

“But not so dreadful as to remain.”

“I don't understand that.”

“Don't you?” He looked so closely at her that she was forced to hold her head down. “Well, well,” he went on, “it's not a very pleasant topic, Ella, so the less we say about it the better. Tell old Arthur, won't you, that I shall never forget him wherever I go, and that no other fellow shall steal in and cut him out. As for you,” and here old Will's confidence forsook him and he grew slightly agitated, “as for you, who have always been such a true friend to us, I — I shall always remember you, too, with feelings of the deepest affection, and I hope that you will sometimes think of me.”

“Sometimes,” gasped poor Ella, who was really in a dreadful state of agitation. “I shall think of you always, always.”

The situation was now growing serious, and I would have given much to be able to steal away and let them work it out unobserved, but I foresaw that any movement on my part would break the spell, and so I stood still and watched.

“I am afraid somebody else would not appreciate quite so much devotion,” said he with a queer, tantalizing laugh. That was like Will. Mother used to say she believed he would sit up and tease somebody on his death-bed.

Ella flushed rather deeply, I thought.

“I don't understand you, Will. No one has the slightest right to dictate to me in any way.”

“Not even Mr. Mulroyd?”

Mr. Mulroyd was the new manager of the bank at Wallan, who had been known to pay sundry little attentions to Mr. Wallace's pretty daughter.

“Not even Mr. Mulroyd.”

“Then you must pardon me for even hinting at the silly gossip,” he said. “You know I claim the old friend's privilege of being jealous, for I had heard that Mr. Mulroyd had advanced several steps in your good graces.” He did not mention the source of this information, though I and Ella guessed that it had come from that perverted Polly Lane.

“Then you heard what is false, Will, and I am surprised that you should listen to such nonsense. Mr. Mulroyd is nothing to me, nor can he ever be anything.”

“I somehow thought it was all a yarn,” said Will, “though strange things do happen, you know.”

“But nothing so strange as that.”

And indeed it was strange for anyone who knew her devotion to Will, to think of her casting down that magnificent idol for such a poor little image as Mr. Mulroyd, an individual whom Will could have tucked away

under one of his big arms.

"I am very glad to hear it," said the big fellow, looking earnestly into her face, "for I should be awfully jealous if I thought it were true."

"And what right would you have to be jealous?" she asked.

"None at all," he replied, "yet I should be all the same."

"Come, come," I said, thinking they had gone quite far enough, "no love-making before my eyes, if you please. If there is to be any of that going on, just let me know, will you, so that I may slip into my vanishing cloak?"

"How can you!" cried Ella, blushing furiously, turning a pair of reproachful eyes upon me.

"There will be no love-making," says old Will solemnly. "My love-making days are over."

"And mine," said Ella, but so gently that I just caught the low sound.

That same evening Will unfolded his plans to the family, and, as I expected, mother wept bitterly, declaring that she would never consent to the scheme; that she would not even hear of it; but father, who listened in silence to his son's project, and the reasons which prompted it, at length said, "Though I deplore your determination, my son, and the causes which have led up to it, I can only wish God-speed to your enterprise. I had hoped, truly, that you would stay at home and carry on the farm when I am gone, and see to your brother and sister, and your dear mother — if I should happen to go before her; but as that may be a far-off event I have neither the right nor inclination to baulk you. Hitherto you have all seemed children to me, and I suppose you always will, but to others you are man and woman, and must do as men and women do. You start badly, Will, handicapped as you are with the onus of my sin; therefore you must be doubly strong and bear your two-fold burden with a brave heart. It will seem heavy sometimes, heavier than you can bear — as it does now — but it cannot harm you if you yourself be brave, which I believe you are." And here he walked across to his son, and in the midst of a solemn silence, broken only by mother's low sobs, he took him by the hand and murmured, "God bless you."

Poor old Will looked like breaking down altogether, but, after a moment's desperate struggle with himself, he said, "I shall try, never fear. When a man goes out into the world with his heart full of love, as I shall go, he feels equal to a thousand perils. You understand me well, sir, and you need have no fear for my mother's son."

At this mother's sobs burst out afresh, at which Will strode over to her and flung himself at her feet, his head in her lap, as he used to do when he was a boy; and she stroked his golden hair and wept till he, with his hopeful chatter, brought back the sad smiles to her pale face.

Early the following morning he set out with his swag on his back in true bush fashion. Father wanted to buy him a horse, but he would not

hear of such a thing, declaring his intention of beginning at the lowest rung, because then he was sure of rising as he marched through the world, as he could not very well descend any lower.

“Shanks's pony has carried many a better man to fortune,” said he. “It is a willing horse, if slow.”

And so he said good-bye to father, and kissed mother and Harold again and again.

“I shall come back soon,” he said, “so don't cry, mother. I know you would rather I went out as a man than stay at home and grow fit for nothing.”

“Yes, yes,” gasped poor mother between her heart-breaking sobs. “Heaven bless you, my son, heaven bless and guide you.” And that was all she could say.

“As for you, Harry,” he said, tenderly pressing his brother's little hand, “remember you are to make all the fame for the family. When I come back I shall expect to find you a great man.”

“Dear Will,” said Harold, suddenly flinging one arm round his brother's neck, “I shall be something greater soon, never fear.” And old Will smiled and kissed him once more, little guessing the meaning of the poor boy's words.

So away the wanderer went, Ella and I accompanying him for some little distance on the road, she, poor thing, looking as white as a ghost, the dark circles under her large eyes giving them an almost unnatural brilliancy.

When we reached the junction of the Boorta Road, for along it Will was to travel, we all stopped and said good-bye. After kissing me, and whispering much that was meant for my ears alone, he took Ella in his arms and kissed her; and what he said in her ear I don't pretend to know, but whatever it was it had the effect of making her ten times sweeter than she ever was before.

Chapter VII.

WITH Will went, or seemed to go, all the vitality of our life. Active, energetic and cheerful, he carried about with him a charm against melancholy which was not without its effect on all with whom he came in contact. I know I missed him dreadfully, for during our lifetime, bound up as we were together and sharing our bitter secret, we had been more than brother and sister — we had been good comrades and close companions. Ella and I, for she stayed with me for more than a week after his departure, roamed moodily about the place, she never weary of talking of him, I never weary of listening. We were like sheep without a shepherd, or children without a parent. “I wonder where old Will is now?” I would ask, and she, sighing, would echo “I wonder,” and gaze with wistful looks across the illimitable stretch of tree tops. Poor Ella. I think I could make a pretty shrewd guess at the words he whispered in her ear as he said good-bye, and though I felt glad that he had spoken them, I almost wished that he had remained mute. Mother, too, was one who suffered terribly during these weary days, and I am sure she could never rid herself of the picture of her son tramping his lonely way amid new scenes and new faces, buffeted by the world, perhaps trampled to death in the struggle. Of course she had never parted with any of us before, and her extreme solicitude made her imagine countless horrors, which I, as in duty bound, did my best to discount.

“Will is a man,” I would say, “a strong man, mother, and is perfectly able to take care of himself.”

“That he is,” Harold would chip in, “and the man who knocks him out will have to fight for his victory.” And so between us we did our best to cheer the dear soul up; but her heart was away with her eldest born, and I knew it would not come back till she heard his knock on the door.

Father went about his work as usual, only he was quieter and more reserved than in the old days at Granite Creek. Never a man to talk much, he had grown almost mute of late. There were none of the old glad evenings round the fireside now. With his pipe between his lips he would sit silent for hours immersed in a book, while mother's busy needle went click, click with tantalizing monotony. He rarely spoke of his son, not through any lack of affection, I think, but he seemed to purposely eschew all topics pertaining to the past. Yet, whenever we got a letter from Will in which that worthy wrote cheerfully of the progress he was making,

father's eyes used to shine with pleasure and his voice grow soft as a woman's. "I think the lad will succeed," he would say; "he is a brave boy." And we who knew him so well understood that his heart was glad. But all the same a change was coming over him which threatened the peace of his life, and also endangered ours. He was, so to speak, the source of our stream of life, and whatever affected him affected us, if not to the same extent in a somewhat similar way, so that when he laughed we were happy, when he was despondent we donned our suits of black.

His manner seemed to undergo a complete change after Will left. He grew peevish, irritable, almost morose at times. It seemed as though he were angry with some invisible enemy — himself perchance — at war with fate and fortune. Hitherto he had struggled with indomitable determination to live down the past, and for a time had succeeded in being happy; but the prolonged battle had taxed all his patience and courage, and I could see that he was wearying of the fight. No longer had he the hope and resolution of youth to urge him on. His one wish had been that he might die, as he had lived, in peace at Granite Creek, but when Captain Langton struck us that coward's blow it shattered the one hope left him. This he never mentioned in my presence — indeed, he made but little of the occurrence — but from the words mother dropped, and my own intimate knowledge of his nature, I knew that he at last was recognizing the futility of further effort. And so he went on with his work in his own moody way, speaking little, smiling never, resigned to hopelessness.

That mine was not a very enviable life at this period may seem a superfluous statement, but I understood the cause of our sorrow, and was sensible enough to regard it with no thought of petulancy. Indeed, I was too saddened at the thought of my parents' sadness to think that they might possibly have made my life a little brighter; moreover, all my time was now taken up in attending to Harold, who, poor boy, had at last taken to his bed. I do not think our misfortunes improved his case, for from the time of our departure from Granite Creek he grew worse and worse, his beautiful face growing so pale and thin that anyone less infatuated than I must have known that his end was near. It was the old trouble, the doctor said; the spine was too weak to bear its burden, and if the patient lived it would be as a life-long cripple on his back. Poor Harold knew, though he wore a brave face in spite of such knowledge, that his life was at a discount. Yet he never complained, and for every little attention showed unbounded gratitude. Hour after hour I would sit reading beside him, or fanning him while we talked over the old days and the old hopes and ambitions, now, alas! never to be realized. He knew this, too, and the thought preyed heavily on his mind. Indeed, I am not certain that he did not fret more about his lost hopes than the thought that henceforth there was to be neither peace nor pleasure for him on earth, or

that at any hour he might be called upon to undertake the great journey. Physically, he at times suffered agony, but the pain engendered by the thought that he had lost all hope of doing something in the world was, I think, the more acute. Often I would catch him crying silently, the cause of which he would endeavour to explain away; but he could never deceive me. I was too well acquainted with his sad thoughts not to know the different symptoms of physical and mental pain. By degrees, however, owing to his increased bodily weakness, he gradually grew more resigned to his lot and was consequently more approachable on the latter malady, so that I was enabled to show the fallacy of deep grief for such a cause. I pointed out how few there were who succeeded in any great undertaking considering the number who set out with the loftiest aspirations; thereby hinting that after all it might be possible for him, even if he lived, to fail — my object being to show him that only the very gifted and fortunate had much chance of reaching the top.

“Perhaps you're right,” he answered wearily, “and as I am not fortunate it is more than probable I am not gifted.”

But this would not do for me. “Gifted you certainly are, Harold, whatever your fortune may be. Yet many would think it no small fortune to have your gifts.”

“You always believed in me, Sis?”

“Always, dear.”

“Well,” he said, “you shall not be disappointed.”

I knew what he meant, poor boy. He meant that I should not be disappointed, because he would never go in for the great prize; but I answered, “You do not know that either. Who shall say what you may or may not be in a year's time?”

He smiled in his sad way as he answered, “Who shall say, indeed? One thing only I know. It is not I whom Heaven has chosen to be the first great Australian poet.”

I couldn't keep the tears back, so I had to turn my face aside while he went on in his low, sweet voice. “It's hard to give up all my dreams, Sis, and such dreams too. But I know I shall never live, and even if I did, the future would still be doubtful, for in this, as in all things, the many are called but the few are chosen. And yet I might have succeeded, and by my individual efforts alone have immortalized my country. Of course it was a dream, a foolish, fond sort of dream, the very thought of which overwhelms me now and makes me ashamed to tell it. Yet once, when I had hope, it seemed easy enough of attainment, and I never doubted that the day would come when the world would listen to my new song of this strange, new land. Like a great voiceless infant has it lain during all these ages waiting for some sweet singer to wake it into life. And he will come one day, the new Orpheus, and striking his lyre will hold the world entranced, and call into life the vast forbidding Bush, and people every

desolate plain and mountain with living wonders. It's no dream, Sis. God will send that man one day, and he will make of our dear country a shrine at which the millions yet unborn shall worship. And I was vain enough to hope it might be I. Well, well," he went on, the tones of his voice sounding like a suppressed sob, "it's all over now, Sis. I shall die like the thousands about me, and my countrymen will never know how much I loved them, and how I coveted glory because I knew it would reflect on them."

I could not answer him. My heart was too full for words. So I fell on my knees beside his bed and pressed my face deep in his pillow, weeping silently.

"Don't cry, dear," he whispered. "I shall be much better off then, if we can only get to think it. I would rather die, if it please God, than live to see all my hopes and ambitions die about me. It will be hard to leave you and mother, and to go without seeing poor old Will; but you'll tell him all about it, Sis; tell him how I loved him, and how proud I was of him, and that I was never envious of him, only sorry, only sorry that I was not more like him. There, there, don't cry any more, or you'll make me cry, and I don't want to do that, because there's nothing to cry for, is there?" And he threw one of his poor wasted arms round my neck and pressed his delicate face to mine, telling me how much he loved me, how proud he was of me, and that he did not believe a boy ever had such a sister; to all of which I responded with tears and caresses and many an inaudible prayer.

Still, the angel of death had set his seal on the lad's forehead, and though it is not in human nature to banish hope, that hope was so mixed with despair as to be scarcely recognizable. All that could be done to aid the sufferer we did, but our efforts merely kept the enemy at bay, staved off the inevitable for a time. Gradually he sank lower and lower till there was no knowing at what moment the end might come.

I remember being awakened one night by father entering my room, candle in hand.

"Come," said he in a strange, nervous whisper, "come to your brother's room."

"Harold is worse?" I asked.

"We think he is dying," he answered.

I did not cry, but a numb sensation took possession of me, and for a moment I felt as though I too were dying.

When I entered the sick room I found mother kneeling beside the bed sobbing as though her poor heart would break, while father, his face full of gloom and seemingly scarred with anguish, stood beside her watching with tearless eyes every movement of the dying boy. In a moment I was kneeling at the other side of the bed, and as soon as Harold recognized me he opened wide his great strange eyes, now greater and stranger than

ever, and asked me to kiss him.

“Don't cry, Sis,” he said, “there is really nothing to cry for. I am perfectly happy, happier than I have ever been before. I feel no pain, and do you know, dear, I am so strong now that I'm sure I could walk if they would only let me try.”

At this mother wept aloud, while between my sobs I whispered that we would let him walk when he got better.

“Come closer, closer, Flos,” he said. “Put your arms round me. That's right. Ah, my dear, dear sister. I was dreaming just now,” he went on, after a pause, in a low fast-failing voice. “I thought I was walking alone, upright, like other men. It was the old dream, dear, and yet not the old dream, for it was real this time. And as I walked among the people I noticed that they all bowed low to me, and with glad faces followed in my footsteps; and when I asked one who was standing by what it all meant, why they should follow me, he pointed to a golden lyre which I held in my hand, and upon which, unconsciously, I had been playing such sweet music that all who heard it forgot their pains and their sorrows and followed me rejoicing; and so, proud in my strength, and pleased beyond expression at the thought of giving so much happiness to mankind, I struck the lyre louder and louder, the music growing richer and fuller and more beautiful. And as I walked my step was as springy and light as though I trod on air, and thinking this strange, because I was a cripple, I looked down at my legs, and behold, they were perfectly straight: I gazed in a pool of clear water and saw that I was stronger and more beautiful than Will. And then a great happiness seized me, and falling on my knees I offered up a thanksgiving that I, the crippled currency boy, should be made as beautiful as the angels. And then, like a great wave of music descending from the sun, I heard a grand, sweet voice cry out, ‘Enter, thou weary one. We have no currency people here.’”

* * * * *

And so the night dragged slowly on till the morning, solemn and sad, rushed over the great world: and into the vanishing shadows of night poor Harold passed away.

Chapter VIII.

PERHAPS I ought to apologize for dwelling thus on the gloomy side of the picture, but to me our sorrows have appeared more worthy of note than our joys, because the interest in them is stronger, and they have made, on me at least, a deeper and more lasting impression. That happiness had been ours, and brightness and gaiety too, it would, perhaps, be superfluous to mention, for in our peaceful home, when as yet we children did not know the mark was on our foreheads, pleasure and joy were sure to dwell. Yet the dark days have completely eclipsed the bright ones, and to narrate our foolish pleasures would seem to me both trite and commonplace. No doubt I am an emotional being, though before I set myself the task of composing this history, I imagined that if not quite an unemotional creature, I was nevertheless not a little of a philosopher; but when I sit down and think of the old times my emotions run away with my philosophy, and I am a woman first. But I am digressing, as the novelists say, and I am afraid we have not yet done with the darker side of the picture.

Harold's death cast a deep gloom upon the house, a gloom from which we never emerged. He had been so patient, so gentle, and had given promise of such talent that we had entertained the most flattering hopes of his future. Poor boy! And yet not so poor if I could only think it. Terrible as it all was, it would have been more terrible still to live and fail. To sink back to the level of the millions, all his grand visions faded to nothingness, his wonderful hopes destroyed; an atom of dust in the great whirlwind of the world. Himself a soured and whining mortal, envious undoubtedly, spiteful perhaps. Death, at any rate, had spared us and him all this. Now we could dream of what he might have been; live, as it were, in the glorious world that he had pictured, and say that had he lived he would have realized his own life's dream, which was that he should be the first great Australian poet.

Mother, who seemed to me to be somewhat failing of late — indeed, ever since Will's departure she had not been the same woman — broke down completely over this latest catastrophe, and for weeks after the funeral went about with a face so sad that my grief for Harold's death was lessened considerably through my anxiety on her account. Father, too, suffered more than words could tell, though he, manlike, said little, but went about his work in the old mechanical way; yet the gloom

deepened in his face, and his whole mien was enwrapped, as it were, in a cloak of hopelessness of the sombrest hue. Where it would all end was now the question, and I must confess to many a gloomy thought as I surveyed our future prospects. That mother was really ill, though she never complained, I could not doubt. She bore the marks of suffering too plainly on her dear face. Father seemed well enough in body, but as if to counteract whatever good he might have derived from his physical well-being, his mental ailments streaked his sad face with great lines of woe. Then the dry season came and ruined our prospects of harvest; the sheep and cattle died for the want of grass and water; in the day the whole of the northern sky was black with the smoke of bush fires, and in the night these same fires glared round us ominously, as if but waiting an opportunity to spring upon us. While, to make matters worse, Will suddenly ceased writing to us about this period, so that we knew not whether he were alive or dead, a state of suspense and cruel conjecture which did not improve mother's condition. The last letter we had written to him had been returned through the dead-letter office stamped "not known," so that till we heard from him again we could only guess darkly. Of course poor mother would insist upon the worst having befallen him. "He is dead," she would say, "dead, dead," and repeating that terrible word, in which she seemed to find a melancholy charm, would weep her broken heart out.

"No, no," I said, trying as I always did to restore her lost confidence, though I used to wonder at the cause of his silence till my own heart grew faint, "we must not think that any harm has befallen him. He was made to fight his way in the world, and he will; but he is poor now and the way is hard. He is the sort of man who must win in the end. Obstacles there will be to surmount, and many ills to bear, but a brave heart, mother, fears neither ill nor obstacle, and Will has that."

"God bless him," she said, "my handsome boy. But the taint, Flossie, I fear the taint."

I, too, feared it, but I did not say so. Poor old Will, he was heavily handicapped.

"Will is a man," I replied. "He must learn to bear his burden."

"Ay, poor boy. But he is a man as you say, every inch of him." It was pleasant to hear the ring of pride in her voice. "I would you were one, too, child," she added, "or that your future were secure."

"Don't think of me, dear," I said. "I am your daughter and Will's sister. I shall never forget that."

"Yes, yes, but a girl — all alone?"

I put my arms round her neck and kissed her. "But I am not all alone. Have I not you and father, and who knows but that Will may soon come back with plenty of money for us all?"

"Yes, yes, who knows?" And with a sigh she turned her face towards

the distant hills — for she and I were sitting out on our verandah during this conversation — those hills behind which her son had journeyed nearly a year ago. I turned with her and presently beheld, coming slowly along the road which led up to our gate, a solitary horseman. She saw him also and a sudden flush shot over her pale face.

“Is it he, Flossie, is it he?” she cried excitedly. “Tell me, child. My eyes grow dimmer every day.”

I knew whom she meant, and for a moment dared hope the wanderer was returning, for the man sat his horse like Will and seemed to be of the same size. But as he emerged more into the open, the sun caught his shining head-piece, and I knew it was a trooper.

“Not Will, mother,” I said. “If I am not much mistaken it is Sergeant Winton, of the Boorta police.”

Poor mother sat back with a sigh, and in another minute all doubts were set at rest, for the well-known figure of the sergeant loomed plainly in view.

“What can he want?” asked mother, surveying him with a look of uneasiness.

“What can he want but to see father?”

When the trooper reached the gate he dismounted very slowly and fastened his horse to a rail, and then with a quick, nervous look to right and left advanced towards us, his spurs clinking noisily as he walked. He was a fine-looking fellow and had the reputation of being one of the smartest and boldest men in the force, yet as he approached us he looked so extremely nervous that you would have thought he was about to apprehend, single-handed, a pair of Dan Morgans.

“Well, sergeant,” said mother, “what brings you over here to-day?”

Instead of answering he touched his hat, saying, “How are you, Mrs. Hastings — and you, miss?”

“We are very well, thank you, sergeant,” mother answered. “Won't you be seated?”

The sergeant muttered something incomprehensible between his teeth, but which sounded like a polite refusal, and leant against one of the posts of the verandah, twirling his moustache somewhat excitedly. I could not help noticing the man's strange behaviour, though the why or wherefore of it interested me but little.

“You have come from Boorta?” asked mother, by way of making conversation.

“Yes,” said the sergeant.

“I suppose you saw my husband there?”

“Yes.” The sergeant gave his moustache another excited pull.

“It's about time he came home, sergeant. You should have brought him with you.”

“Yes,” said the sergeant.

“Then he intended riding back with you?”

“Eh, what?” exclaimed the worthy trooper, starting from his reverie and curling furiously. “Yes, of course — no, that is — the fact is, Mrs. Hastings, I have some bad news to tell you.” It was strange how the man suddenly blurted out the truth after beating about the bush so long.

“Bad news, sergeant,” said mother, pressing her hand to her breast and trying to look brave. “What has happened?”

“Compose yourself, my dear madam,” said the trooper kindly. “But the fact is — Mr. Hastings has met with an accident.”

Mother did not speak, but she leant helplessly back in her chair, her face growing fearfully white. Her lips moved but not a sound escaped them. The mute look she turned to the trooper was the most piteous I have ever seen.

“What was it, sergeant?” I asked. “How did it happen?”

“A steer got loose somehow as Mr. Hastings was riding up to the yards. Frightened his horse, they say, and he was thrown.”

“Is he much hurt, sergeant?”

He looked at me and then at mother.

“Yes,” he answered in a low voice.

“Not — not — ” I could not get the dreadful word out.

The officer bowed his head.

“Dead?”

“Yes.”

I could not describe the sudden fear which seemed to paralyze my every sense. I stood looking at the trooper with blank amazement, repeating the word, “Dead, dead?”

“Yes, miss. He was thrown on his head. Neck broken, they said. But look at your mother. My God, she's dying!”

This brought me back to my senses, as it were, and I sprang to her, throwing my arms about her. But I felt no answering pressure from her arms, and when I kissed her lips they were deadly cold. No wonder the sergeant thought she was dying.

“Water, quickly,” I gasped, and away the great trooper rushed, returning immediately after with a cupful.

Then, without speaking, he and I set assiduously to work to revive her, he patting and stroking her hands, I applying my handkerchief to her forehead in the form of a wet bandage. But it was a long time before she opened her eyes, and then it was only to smile faintly and request that she might be taken indoors out of the cold — a request, the fulfilment of which was rather puzzling. I looked at the sergeant and he looked at me.

“May I carry her, miss?”

“Oh, if you would, sergeant.”

“If I would,” he exclaimed. “Just as if I wouldn't!” And without further ceremony he took her up in his arms and carried her as easily and gently

into the house as though she were a sleeping child. Depositing her on the sofa, he stood back while I fell on my knees beside her and gave way to a flood of bitter tears.

How long this paroxysm of anguish lasted I have not the slightest idea. I might have fallen asleep, I might have fainted for all I recollect of it; but when I looked up once more I beheld the sergeant standing by the further window watching me earnestly.

“Can I do anything for you, miss?”

“Thank you, no.”

“But you will be very lonely here, you — excuse me, miss, but I think you ought to have somebody with you.”

“Could you, would you go to Mrs. Wallace and tell her what has happened?”

“With pleasure,” was the prompt reply.

“It will not put you to any inconvenience?”

“It don't matter if it does. There, there, rest easy. Mrs. Wallace shall be with you in an hour's time.”

“Thank you, sergeant.”

“No thanks, miss. Keep up your courage, that's all.” And turning he quitted the apartment. A few moments after and I heard him gallop off along the Wallan road.

For quite an hour after the trooper's departure I sat by mother alternately stroking her hands and freshening the vinegar and water bandage which I had applied to her forehead. Once only during the whole of that time did she open her eyes, and my fears in consequence were naturally most alarming, but when she did open them she recognized me and smiled, and that repaid me for much of the anguish I had endured. She did not speak, but her eyes looked the love her tongue was powerless to frame. I felt all the horror and loneliness of my position keenly — the loneliness adding not a little to my other fears — so that I was much relieved when the sound of hurrying hoofs reached my ears, though I was none the less astonished when I beheld the sergeant, his face like a bit of beetroot, his coat white with dust, enter the room.

“You, sergeant!” I cried. “Where are the others?”

“Coming, miss — that is, I left them harnessing the horses. But as it'll be quite half-an-hour before they arrive, I thought you might be a bit lonely.” It was not without an embarrassment which necessitated a searching scrutiny of the floor that the honest trooper blurted out his apologies for his presence.

“It is very kind of you, sergeant; though I hope you have not allowed your considerations for me to inconvenience you in any way.”

“Not at all, miss. I am only too happy to be of service to you, though I am sorry you should have had cause to use me.”

I thanked him with a smile — a sorry one, I'm afraid — and then

returned to my seat by mother's side, while he, after quietly watching me for some time, stole softly from the room out on to the verandah, where, lighting his pipe, he began to walk slowly up and down.

Shortly after this, amid a great clatter of hoofs and wheels, the Wallaces arrived bringing with them the chief doctor of Wallan, an old gentleman who was reported to be a man of much skill and knowledge. He advanced to where mother lay, white as a corpse, her white hair seeming to accentuate the awful pallor of her face, and I heard him mention, as he turned to Mrs. Wallace, who had thrown herself on her knees by mother's side, the word "heart."

"Is it her heart?" I asked, for I had long known that her heart was weak, and that from it we were to expect danger at any moment.

"I am afraid all is not as it should be with that organ," replied the man of prescriptions. "She seems to have had a very severe shock, and I think the best thing we can do is to put her to bed."

At this the sergeant, who had entered with the rest of them, advanced and offered his services as carrier, and soon we had mother carefully tucked away, with Mrs. Wallace, Ella and I as nurses. The doctor left us after promising to call again on the morrow, and the sergeant, too, rode off with many an expression of regret.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am, Miss Hastings," said the great simple fellow, holding out his hand. "It's little I can do for you, I know, but if that little is ever required you will send for me to do it, won't you?"

"It's very kind of you, sergeant," I began.

"Promise me, then."

"I promise you."

"Thank you." And away he stalked to his horse, swung his great frame into the saddle and once more set out at a mad gallop for Wallan.

Mother was still unconscious when I returned to the room, and the sad looks with which my arrival was received told me too plainly what Mrs. Wallace and her daughter thought of my chances of happiness. Not that I had ever thought much of them myself, though we will look at the bright side of things if we can. I did not say anything, but seating myself at the foot of the bed watched the poor white face before me and thought of that other face which she had loved so well. He had left home that morning apparently in the enjoyment of excellent health, destined, so one would have thought, to live for many a year to come. Kissing me before he mounted his horse he told me of the present he was going to bring me home — and now he was dead. It seemed incredible, impossible! I think I was too bewildered to cry. I felt a strained, hard pain across my eyes, a rising in the throat which made it difficult for me to breathe; and when Ella stole to my side and put her arms about me, I could not help wondering what Will would say when he knew it all. I think I must have been half-mad — numbed, as it were. I know I thought of many

things — some of them grotesque, too — which had no sort of connection with that which was upon my heart and mind.

At last the medicine from Wallan came — for whether it be necessary or not that prescription must be written — brought by a trooper whom Sergeant Winton had deputed as messenger.

“And if you please, miss,” said the man as he handed me the physic, “I’m to stay here to-night.”

“Stay?” I asked with an interrogating look.

“In case I should be wanted for anything. It’s the sergeant’s orders, miss.” And having explained himself thus briefly, the man saluted and withdrew.

“How thoughtful of Sergeant Winton,” said Ella. “I had no idea he was such a nice man.”

“I think he is very kind.” And indeed I was grateful for such consideration, for I always fancy that in times of trouble and sorrow the presence of a man, be he even a stranger, is a source of comfort and security.

We gave mother the medicine as prescribed, and watched for its effect with an emotion which scarcely permitted us to breathe; but all through the long hours she gave no sign of returning consciousness. Once only her breathing grew heavy, which made us think that she was coming to; but our hopes were again destined to disappointment. All too quickly the fluttering ceased; her breath grew fainter and fainter till at last it died away, and there was no motion whatever in face or form.

“She is dead!” I cried.

Mrs. Wallace, who was kneeling at the bedside holding her friend’s cold hand, answered me with a burst of passionate sobbing, between the intervals of which I could distinctly hear the trooper’s spurs jingling as he tramped up and down the verandah.

Chapter IX.

AND so on the same day the two hearts which had beaten only for one another, having no longer the necessity for action, ceased beating, and in the one grave were they laid side by side, separated not even in death. Many shadows had they seen, but many a sunny day had also been theirs, and if towards the end the clouds grew black and threatening, they could not obscure the glory which once had been. Peace was theirs at last. The long life of martyrdom, for such their equivocal existence must have been, was over. There were no currency people where they had gone. Their burden was at last laid aside, and on me, unhappily, devolved the task of bearing it; a task so little in accordance with my spirits that I earnestly prayed Heaven to spare me the infliction; to take me as it had taken them.

For the first time in my life I now discovered the value of true friendship, for during the next awful week, while I wandered helplessly, hopelessly about the house, the Wallaces took upon themselves the duties of the occasion, relieving me of even the slightest detail. I had a vague recollection that preparations for the funeral were going on apace, but as I was not asked to contribute any help I never thought of offering it. And then at length the day came for the last sad rites, and in the Wallan cemetery, close to poor Harold's grave, father and mother were laid in their long home. This last sad ceremony I attended with Mr. Wallace by my side — I the only blood relation of those two who had once been surrounded by friends and relatives, and who, even now, must be remembered by many a one in England. Sadly remembered though, I fear, for when mother, dead against the wish of her people, came out to join father in his shame and his exile, they told her that she was bringing disgrace upon their name, and that for the future she should be as a stranger to them, she and hers — words which proved true enough, for from that day to the day of her death she had neither seen nor heard of them. And though in her more confidential moments she occasionally spoke of her young life, it was always with an effort not unmixed with pain. Father, also, had been treated similarly by his people. They had forsaken him in his hour of extremity, and from that day to the day of his death he had held no communication of any kind with them. Indeed he rarely mentioned his people or his country, and not till that memorable confession of his did we know that he belonged to a distinguished

family, though it was evident to us from our earliest days that he was unlike the rest of the men about him — a superiority which I could not name distinguishing him from them. They, in England, had blotted his name out of the family records, it is said, for his father, who was one of those persons who implicitly believe in the divinity of the English aristocrat, could not forget the shame his son had brought upon their house. Shame, indeed! Poor father! It was a long sad fight, but you had your wife and your children, and could count many happy days even as a currency man. But they have no currency men where you have gone, and it's all over now, isn't it?

It was at this very gloomy period of my existence that the Wallaces proved how sincere was their love for me and mine. Left thus suddenly desolate, and, unfortunately, almost penniless, it is difficult to say what would have befallen me had I been thrown upon my own resources. This, however, was not to be, for these good friends at once stepped in and offered me the shelter of their home. "You are to be our child now," said Mr. Wallace kindly, "and if Will ever returns, why, he shall be our child too. There, there, dear, don't cry. They are happier where they are, never fear." At which we all, that is Mrs. Wallace, Ella and I, burst out crying afresh. Ella threw her arms round me and called me sister, and Mrs. Wallace, looking at me through tear-stained eyes, declared, in the intervals of her sobbing, that mother looked exactly like me at my age. And so the end of it was that I took up my abode with these true friends, who, during the whole of my stay, treated me with the fondest love and deepest consideration.

Arthur had not been present during the funeral, the reason for which was that he was at that time engaged in his final examination, so that had he attended, as he wished to do, he would have been thrown back considerably, and would thus have lost the honour of being one of the few who never experience failure. But as soon as he had finished, without waiting for the lists, he returned to Wallan as quickly as the train and coach would bring him, and by the way in which he greeted me I knew that he had not forgotten the old days at Granite Creek. He seemed to have grown very big and strong-looking since then, and I could not believe that nearly five years had elapsed since the night he gave me the half of his silver ring. How different all the world seemed to me now. What a lot I had seen and suffered since then. Out of respect for my sorrow he never mentioned that parting, or let me know whether his affections had undergone a change or not, though, if a woman may be permitted to judge of such things, I should say they had not. He was the same earnest, kind-hearted boy of our young days, and if his manner was sedate beyond his years, it did not ill-become him, his respectful ways contrasting agreeably with what I had been accustomed to of late.

One day he approached me with an open paper in his hand, his face

betokening the deep pleasure he felt.

“Congratulate me, Flossie,” he cried.

“You have passed, then?” — for I knew to what he referred, the wondering whether he would succeed or not being of late the principal topic of conversation among us.

“Yes, in the first half-dozen.”

“I am delighted to hear it, Arthur, and hope your success at college will be the forerunner of greater successes to follow. Do they know of it in the house?”

“Yes.”

“How proud they must be of you.”

“I think they are,” he said. “But I scarcely gave them time to congratulate me. I wanted you to know.”

“Then once more let me warmly congratulate you,” and I held out my hand, which he took, pressing tenderly. And, had not Ella at that moment appeared, her face glowing with pleasurable excitement, I do not know how far Mr. Arthur might have gone, for he seemed to be rapidly approaching that mood which is termed confidential.

“He has told you?” cried Ella as she ran towards us. “Grand, isn't it? He's third on the list.”

“He told me he was in the first half-dozen.”

“Oh, that's his modesty,” she laughed.

“All clever people are modest, you know — at least they ought to be.”

“Now, don't you chaff me, too,” he said, turning to me. “Three is in the first half-dozen, isn't it?”

“Isn't he clever?” said Ella in all seriousness, thinking only of the honour he had won.

“Very,” I answered with a smile, thinking of his reply, which so discomposed poor Arthur that he looked quite ashamed of himself. “I have always regarded Doctor Wallace as an exceedingly clever man.”

“If it's going to be like that,” he said, “I'm off. When you girls can better appreciate the dignity of my title you may consult me free of charge.” Saying which he walked over to his father and mother, who, like Ella, had followed him out of the house, and I could tell by Mr. Wallace's cheery laugh, and by the pleased look on his wife's face, that they were more than proud of the achievement of their son. Here was the real thing after all, proving again how much better is steady application than your so-called gift of cleverness. As a boy Arthur showed to little advantage beside Will, while from an intellectual point of view he was so far beneath Harold as to be beyond comparison. Yet things were working out strangely, as they always do when fate regulates them. Harold, with all his aspirations, was gone, and into his grave had vanished all our high hopes; while Will, poor old fellow, was nothing better, if alive, than an outcast wanderer. Truly it seemed as though his prophecy was about to

be fulfilled. Would the taint prove too strong for us after all?

I had been living in Wallan now close on eight weeks, and was at last beginning to take an interest in my new life, not that I could ever forget the dear ones who had gone, but when the grave enshrouds our sorrow I think the heart of youth recognizes that it has a life of its own, and consequently is happily able, once the first paroxysm of anguish is over, to bear the calamity with philosophical fortitude. In my case it would have seemed like sheer ingratitude had I failed to profit by the kindness which surrounded me; and though at times I could not help giving way to tears at the recollection of my utter loneliness, on the whole I was gradually growing resigned to my lot.

During these eight weeks of which I have spoken, I had one constant inquirer after my welfare. Never a week passed without Sergeant Winton putting in an appearance at the Wallaces' to make some inquiry respecting the state of my health, and if he could not see me he invariably confided in Mr. Wallace's office boy, and was even at times known to pester the different members of the family.

“Is Miss Hastings well?”

“Quite well, sergeant.”

“You are sure she does not suffer from the effect of that dreadful bereavement?”

“Quite sure.”

“A brave young lady, Mrs. Wallace?”

“I think so, sergeant.”

“And as beautiful as she's brave?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“And you're sure it's left no lasting effect — not injured her in any way?”

“I am sure it has not.”

“Thank you. You will tell her I called?”

“Oh, yes.”

And thus, apparently contented, the worthy officer would mount his horse and ride away.

This little programme he had gone through once, and often two and three times a week, ever since that never-to-be-forgotten day when he rode up to the cottage and broke the death-dealing news. I was agreeably surprised at this unexpected proof of the sergeant's good heart, more especially as he had the reputation of being a hard man and a pronounced misogynist, and I was not slow to let him see that I was pleased with his kindness and courtesy. How the poor fellow was in turn deceived, the following will show.

One day, calling as usual, he happened to find me alone — an apparently fortunate state, and yet a delusive one, as he would tell you. I was in the garden at the time, watering flowers, when hearing the clink

of spurs on the gravel I looked up and beheld the big sergeant bearing down upon me, rather nervously I thought, and I recollect also thinking he looked remarkably well in his uniform — though the hideous square helmet that the police wear, which is neither one thing nor the other, detracts somewhat from a proper appreciation of the individual. He was a fine-looking man, however, helmet or no helmet, and if his face was a trifle too red he had a fine nose, and a moustache which must have made many a girl's heart ache. As he approached me his extreme uneasiness seemed to increase, and unconsciously I was reminded of the sunny afternoon he rode up to mother and me with the news which struck her down.

“Good evening, sergeant.”

“Good evening, miss,” he answered, saluting. “I hope you are keeping well.”

“Quite well, thank you.”

“Gradually getting over your sad bereavement, miss?”

“I think so, sergeant, slowly.”

“You are sure it has left no lasting effects of a disagreeable nature?” continued the trooper, sympathetically.

“Indeed, I hope so, sergeant; though, of course, one cannot forget these things quickly.”

“That's so,” said the sergeant. “Still, you're sure you are better?”

“Ever so much.”

“That's good.”

Then I went on with the watering, and though to him I must have appeared deeply engrossed in my duty, I nevertheless managed to observe that, for want of something better to engage him, the sergeant began to shuffle first one foot and then the other, accompanying these desultory movements with a strange jingling of his spurs.

“Ah,” he said at last, “it was a sad day that, miss, wasn't it?”

Knowing to what he referred I replied in the affirmative, but made no further remark; at which he began to shuffle his feet a little more noisily, creating quite a hubbub as he kept time with his spurs.

“I suppose you have just ridden over from Boorta?” said I, after a long silence, not that it mattered to me whether he had or not, but since he had been so kind in his inquiries the least I could do was to be civil to the poor fellow.

“Yes.”

“And what brings you this way so often?” I asked with a smile. “Are you watching some poor creature in Wallan?”

The sergeant looked exceedingly embarrassed. “There is someone I have my eye on,” he said, his red face growing a deeper and more alarming crimson.

“Is he a very desperate character?”

“Desperate,” replied the trooper, trying to smile, “well, no, I should say not. You see, he's a she.”

“A woman. How horrible.”

“No — pretty as a picture.”

“And you are shadowing her. Oh, sergeant, I'm ashamed of you.”

“I'm almost ashamed of myself,” was the reply. “At the camp they already guess that there's something in the wind, and if it ever leaks out I shall never hear the last of it; but, sooner or later out it must come, so I don't see why — ”

“I'm afraid, sergeant, I don't quite understand you.”

“Why, I thought it was as clear as daylight. I know I'm not up to much, not fit to hold your stirrup, and my billet's not one of which a gentleman would care to boast; but I — ”

His meaning suddenly dawned upon me. “Sergeant, I — I never thought of this.”

“Didn't you, miss? Well, it doesn't so much matter so long as you think of it now. I haven't much to offer you, but if you care for me, just say the word and I'm your man.”

“But, sergeant, I — ”

“If you object to the force, you know,” he went on regardless of me and my interruption — for all the world like a man who has something to say and who has made up his mind to say it — “I can easily drop it. It's not what it was in the early days, and I daresay I'm not too old to tackle a new line. I'm not a bad sort either, miss, at least I think I'm not, and as for me being a woman-hater, that's all arrant nonsense. You are the only woman about these parts for whom a man could care, and that's why I have cared for you and no one else. I've admired you for a long time, Miss Hastings, if you'll excuse me saying so, but it was only when I saw you in your trouble that I felt for you as I have felt for no other woman. And so I got to think about you more and more, and I used to wonder what would become of you if anything should separate you from these good friends of yours; and it was then I said to myself, ‘Sergeant, you must make her the offer. It's a thousand to one she'll laugh in your ugly face, but if she does it'll serve you right for your infernal presumption.’ And so for the past month I've been trying to screw up my courage, and only now have I been able to screw it fast.” Yet notwithstanding this declaration of his he looked so flurried and nervous that I should feel inclined to say that little reliance was to be placed in his statement.

“Sergeant,” I said, not a little affected by his words, “I thank you sincerely for the honourable proposal you have made, and am only sorry that any words of mine should have led you to believe that I regarded you as other than a friend.”

“Your words have always been the right words,” he said. “It is I who have been the fool. You'll forgive me, won't you?”

"I have nothing to forgive."

"You have a lot to forgive," he said, "and it was like my confounded cheek to come plaguing you. I knew all along that it was a piece of presumption, and I ought to have known better than show it, but I'm rather an obstinate sort of fellow and wouldn't acknowledge it. And besides," he added, looking me straight in the face with eyes as honest as the day, "you were a prize worth winning, and though I'm only a trooper I couldn't help having a cut in on the off-chance."

With difficulty suppressing the smile which his strange phraseology had caused to flicker about the corners of my mouth, I answered that all the honour was mine; that no woman could hope for anything better than the love of an honest man, and that I should esteem it a great favour if he would honour me with his friendship in the future as he had in the past.

"And is it to be only friendship?" he asked, rather sadly, I thought, in spite of his red face. "Am I to abandon the hope of ever bringing off that off-chance?"

"If you will, sergeant."

"Well," he replied in a low tone, with philosophic gravity, "if it is to be, I suppose it will be. You're sure you don't mind what I've said?"

"On the contrary, sergeant. I feel extremely flattered."

For a moment he looked at me doubtfully; then taking my hand pressed it warmly. "I'm sorry you don't care for me," he said, "not that I didn't know as much, only that cursed obstinacy of mine wouldn't let me acknowledge it. Yet if I can ever be of service to you in any way you won't forget me, will you?"

"I promise you, sergeant."

"Thank you."

And so the big trooper took his leave, his face no longer blazing with florid life, but tinged with an indescribable sadness. The boldness had disappeared from his eye; he looked anxious and undecided, and I think he suffered deeply. That his affection for me was genuine I could not doubt, and as I conjured up many a little incident which had occurred since the memorable day on which he appeared as death's messenger, I wondered how I could have been so blind as not to perceive the drift of his attentions before. Poor old sergeant. Stimulated by honest sympathy, which may or may not have awakened a stronger feeling, he had determined to offer the orphan the shelter of his home, the protection of his name. To me it seemed ludicrous enough, for rightly or wrongly I had always deemed myself worthy of something higher than a police-sergeant, but to him, no doubt, it appeared quite congruous; nay, who knows but that he may not have been stretching a point in offering his honest name to a currency lass? At any rate, after my rejection of his suit, his visits to Wallan grew conspicuously less, and it was only now and then, by the merest of accidents, that I saw him at all. Then, at least so I

thought, his face had lost much of its old brilliance, his figure had grown slimmer, and he sat his horse not quite so squarely as of yore; but whether it was fancy or not on my part I really would not like to say.

Chapter X.

I HAD now been more than six months with the Wallaces, during the whole of which time they seemed to be perpetually laying themselves out to make me forget the sad past, or at least to lighten its memory. I was one of them now, they said, and henceforth my joys and sorrows should be theirs. That I appreciated such love and tenderness might go without saying. Indeed I grew to feel for Mrs. Wallace a reverence almost akin to that which I had felt for my own mother. I no longer wondered at the devotion and life-long friendship of the two. To me it seemed as though one had founded her style on the other, so that their better qualities (though I could never believe they had any which were not good) assimilated, so to speak, making them as near perfection as human beings go. Even Mr. Wallace, of whom I had seen comparatively little, and of whom I heard much not over-complimentary to that excellent man, improved most marvellously upon a closer acquaintance. Indeed, I was not long in perceiving that most of his faults were mere superficial oddities, and that beneath a somewhat shaggy coat there beat an affectionate heart. He no longer “made conversation” when in my presence, but appearing natural and easy — himself, in fact — was found to possess but little of that pomposity which was supposed to be his prevailing characteristic. As for Ella and me — were we not always sisters? though our coming together, as it were, knit still closer the bonds of sympathy between us.

And yet, apart from the memory of my imperishable sorrow, I cannot say that I was altogether happy here. I know it sounds horribly ungrateful, and I feel myself tingle with shame as I make the confession, and yet it was true, though why it should have been I can find no good reason for saying. Was it that I felt my dependence? I can hardly think so, for if I would not allow myself to be one of the family it was entirely my own fault. Yet not being of their blood, how could I be one of them, unless by marriage? — and that, too, might have been had not a perverseness seized me. The fact is, I could not love to order; and a strange sentiment, as foolish as it was strange, prevented me from forgetting the old days at Langton, days which, in spite of their cloudy ending, contained some of the brightest hours of my life. I don't know that I was in love with Captain Langton, neither do I know that I was not; yet notwithstanding my determination to act as though the past were but

a memory, my eyes, dazzled by the light of those days, saw all other things in shadow. I had stared in the face of the sun, and my subsequent moment of blindness had expanded so alarmingly that I knew not when it would end.

During the whole of this time Arthur treated me with the utmost consideration, never breathing a word of that affection which I knew he felt for me, nor taking advantage of any of the opportunities which chance threw in his way. That forgetfulness was not the cause of this unique behaviour I could see, for whenever his earnest eyes met mine there was something so intense in their gaze, so full of imploring, passionate entreaty, that at times I knew not whether he annoyed or terrified me. Certainly he had grown to excellent manhood during the period of his studies, which showed that he had not forsaken the cricket ground or the river. Indeed, if I recollect rightly, he had a fair reputation as a bowler and oarsman, besides being one of the best back players in the university. There was nothing of the shy boy about him now. To be sure he never lost the soft tones of his voice, or his quiet manner, but his quietness was of the manly pattern, gentle yet firm, and about his words and actions there was a certain decision which rendered them singularly impressive. Knowledge had given him force of character, and whenever he said a thing it seemed the right thing, and whenever he did a thing he went about its accomplishment as though the result were a foregone conclusion. That is, except in his dealings with me. I think he thought too much of me to treat me as an ordinary human being. Though he loved his sister and worshipped his mother, I knew that in reality I was the only creature for whom he had eyes or for whom he had a heart. It therefore became a matter of much conjecture to me how long he could continue to suppress the natural promptings of that heart, my curiosity feeding my vanity and *vice versa*. When, however, to my surprise, the days flew on without bringing the expected unburdening, I actually began to wonder if my egotism had not betrayed my better sense. Yet I think women are not unhappy in deducing certain effects from certain causes, for when they act by instinct they invariably go near the mark. Therefore I was not greatly surprised when one day Arthur approached me saying he wanted to speak to me.

I had been playing the piano a moment before, and, when he entered the room, was engaged in hunting up a piece of music from a huge pile which stood on a small table before me. I felt my hands tremble as I lifted piece after piece, but still pretending the greatest assiduity in the search, I said, "Very well, Arthur; what is it?"

"I think you had better finish there first," he said with a nervous little laugh.

"Oh, I can listen," I added, also trying to laugh and perpetrating an equally feeble attempt.

"I would rather wait," he said. After that there was no more to say, so I turned and faced him. I confess I did not face him as boldly as I should have done, or as bravely as I had faced him during a score of imaginary interviews; but, judging by the quick glance I got of his features, he was too deeply preoccupied to make a minute survey of each little detail.

"I have been wanting to speak to you for a long time," he said, "but for certain reasons, which I need not mention, I have thought it better to defer the idea. You remember when we parted at Granite Creek? — it is more than four years ago now. We were boy and girl then, but I think I let you see even then what you were to me, and what I hoped you might be. Well, we are man and woman now, and I am the master of an honourable profession. My feelings have not changed since that night so long ago — unless it be that they have grown stronger with the years. I told you I loved you then, I love you more now, and if you will be my wife, dearest, you will make me the happiest man in the world."

I did not answer but held my head down, fearing to look him in the face.

"You don't speak," he continued. "Perhaps I am rude, abrupt; perhaps I ought not to mention such things yet awhile. If so, forgive me, won't you, and put it down to my love which is bursting with impatience?"

"There is nothing to forgive," I answered. "Indeed I feel honoured — " And then I began to stammer — for somehow this stereotyped phrase of "feeling honoured" sounded horribly weak and unreal when addressed to him.

"It is I who should feel the honour," he replied quickly, "but I thought you understood all that. You know I am not much of a ladies' man, and whenever I make a compliment I feel a fool; but there should be no need of compliments between us. We must be sincere, you and I." He came over and sat beside me on the couch.

"And why should we be more sincere than other people?" I asked, trying to infuse a little flippancy into the conversation.

"Because we are not as other people — at least, you are not to me. Do you know that never a day has passed during all these years in which I have forgotten to think of you? Do you know that it is to you, and you alone, that I owe the honour of my degree?"

"To me?"

"Yes, to you, for the knowledge that you would be proud of my success urged me on, and though at times I knew the task to be a hard one, I could not fail because I thought always of you as the reward."

"Of me?"

"Yes, of you. I have succeeded, Flossie, as you know, and if my success at college may be taken as an earnest of my success in the future, I may hope that you will not be ashamed to bear my name."

"Ashamed! Oh, no, no! But, Arthur, it is all so sudden — so, so — " I

stammered, at a loss what to say.

“Sudden,” he answered reproachfully, “and I have thought of it day and night for years. Still, dearest, if you would rather think it over, don't answer now, but go and have a talk with Ella or mother. They are good friends and will advise you rightly. Only remember that your decision will make me the happiest or the most wretched of men.”

Here I saw my opportunity, and was quick to avail myself of it.

“It is scarcely generous of you to name two such distinct alternatives. It leaves me such little grace.”

“It is not fair,” he answered honestly, “yet feeling it to be true it came out unthinkingly. You understand me, and must know that I could not be anything but generous to you.”

“I am sure of it,” I said. He looked at me as if expecting me to say more, but what could I say that would in any way conduce to his hopes or happiness? I could not tell him of what had occurred at Langton, and that in consequence I had not the slightest wish or inclination to marry any man, and that the greatest kindness he could show me at that moment would be to leave me entirely alone — a thing he would have done could he only have guessed how earnestly I wished it. Continuing, however, to press his suit with a persistency which was absolutely suicidal — for when a woman is not in the humour there is nothing she resents more than this masculine perseverance — he, not content with my silent refusal, must needs insist upon knowing why I would not marry him — a perfectly natural wish, I suppose, but one which not unnaturally proved very painful to me.

“I'm afraid, Arthur,” I said, and I know there was a ring in my voice which was far from conciliatory, “that you are a little too curious.”

“Inquisitive, you mean. Well, have I not a right to be?” he asked somewhat aggressively.

“I'm afraid I cannot argue that with you.”

He flushed rather painfully, but he was an obstinate fellow in spite of the seeming evenness of his disposition.

“You won't, you mean,” he said with a curious little laugh. “And why won't you?” He looked inquiringly at me as if expecting an answer, but as I replied not, he continued: “Is it that you are afraid of wounding me? If so, I beg of you not to spare me, but tell me truly if there is anyone for whom you care more.”

“No, no.”

“Then there is no truth in this Captain Langton business?”

“To what do you refer?” I asked, fool-like, well knowing what he meant. But I was angry with him for probing at my weak spot, and meant to make my anger cover my unreasonableness.

“Forgive me,” he cried, “I did not mean to offend you, indeed I did not, but I love you so much that the very thought of you caring for another is

like death to me.”

“Don't you think, Arthur,” I said coldly, yet civilly I hope, “that you might make yourself conversant with the facts of a case before you begin to state it?”

“But I have heard so much of you and him,” he blurted out as impetuously as a boy. “I wish to God you had never gone near the place. I have never had a moment's peace since I heard the first rumour.”

“And why should it have affected you so deeply?”

“Because I was afraid of you.”

“You are honest at least. And why should you think so ill of me?”

“I knew you were a woman,” was his ungracious reply.

“But, of course,” I replied with a tantalizing smile, “you did not know me well enough to trust me?”

“I did not say so. Ah, if you only knew how much I love you, you would look with different eyes on my doubts and fears.”

“I am sorry for you, Arthur. What can I say more?”

Yet this interview, though it produced an understanding between us, tended not to the peace of my mind; for, through Arthur, it affected the whole household, and I thought, though I am sure it could have been nothing but fancy on my part, that both Mr. and Mrs. Wallace were colder to me after my rejection of their son's proposal, they being perfectly well aware of his affection for me, and most desirous of seeing us united. I even imagined that Ella's manner had grown more constrained, though, poor girl, she tried her hardest to let me see that I should always be her sister in love if not in law. Then, too, when I once hastily entered the room where Mr. and Mrs. Wallace were sitting talking, I distinctly heard him say, “Fool of a girl. Doesn't know her own mind,” and by the guilty way they both started upon observing me, I knew it must have been me of whom they were speaking. And then one afternoon Mr. Wallace himself approached me on behalf of his son, and in his sharp, short, “going, going — gone” style pointed out how well suited we were to each other, and hoped that I would not have any fear of the future, as Arthur was a good boy and that he (Mr. Wallace) would see that his son wanted for nothing. To this I replied that I cared nothing for monetary considerations (neither did I then), that I respected and admired Arthur exceedingly, but that I had not the slightest inclination to marry.

“Well, well,” he answered somewhat testily, “I suppose a woman is not expected to give a sound reason for her actions. Gets over me altogether. Seems to me you might do a great deal worse.”

“I do not think I could well do better.”

This answer seemed to strike him as being rather singular and not a little ambiguous. He looked at me in his quick, quizzing way — the look that I have seen come into his face when he has been dealing with a facetious bidder. At length, seemingly reassured with his quick search of

my features, he said, "You're a curious girl, Flossie, and quite baffle me — but there, I never did pretend to understand women, though Heaven gave me one of the best in the world. I'm sorry for the boy, because he's a good boy, but if you don't fancy him there's an end of the business. Keep this interview quiet, that's all, and on no account breathe a word to him of it. He'd never forgive me."

And so he left me, but with him he did not take the sting of those words, "You might do a great deal worse." I am quite convinced now that by them he did not mean to insinuate anything rude or disrespectful — it being but the blunt expression of an honest opinion — yet they nevertheless conveyed to me an idea which was distasteful. It almost seemed as though he thought I was under an obligation to marry his son, and that I ought to consider myself an extremely fortunate young woman in getting such a capital chance, so that this, coupled with my dependent position, did nothing towards the conciliation of my rising insubordination; for towards change my spirit of late had developed a marked tendency. Therefore, shortly after this, when Mrs. Wallace, unknown to either son or husband, approached me on the same subject, I could scarcely restrain the anger which rose to my lips.

"You know," went on good Mrs. Wallace, quite complacently, "the poor boy is desperately in love with you, Flossie, and I am sure he would make you a good husband."

"I know he would," I answered, for I still had a profound respect for Arthur in spite of the machinations of his parents.

"And then think, dear, it is a match your mother had set her heart on as well as I. Ah, many a time we've talked it over together and pictured the two families living in perpetual harmony. It was the wish of her life, as it is of mine, and even your father, who was never a talkative man, had likewise set his heart on it — or if he did not say as much," she added, as if correcting herself, "he gave us to understand that he was not opposed to it."

"I am sure I could never hope to do better," I said, and I was conscious of my voice taking a certain tone of irritability, "but I do not want to marry, indeed I do not."

She received this explanation of my apparent perverseness with an indifference which was far from soothing, for when a young girl declares she has neither the wish nor intention of ever marrying, she likes to think that all her listeners are not sceptical.

"The poor boy is shockingly changed," went on the fond mother, ignoring the obvious fact that I was in no sympathetic mood. "He has not eaten less since he was short-coated, and I'm sure, by the dark circles under his eyes, that he sleeps but little."

This was a trifle too much for poor weak human nature. I might have borne a voluminous report of his sighings and his sleepless nights, but

when it came to such an utterly feeble and prosaic detail as short-coating, my long-suffering spirit rose in revolt.

"I'm afraid," said I, and this time there was no mistaking the tone of my voice, "that your motherly solicitude causes you, unconsciously, to exaggerate his ailments, and I am surprised that he should have sent you to relate them."

"My dear Flossie," she said, and her pale face flushed crimson, at the sight of which my conscience immediately upbraided me for my rudeness, "you misjudge both me and my son. Arthur was, and is, entirely ignorant of my intention; and, moreover, he would be very angry if it came to his knowledge. If I have offended you, my dear, you must pardon me, and put it down to a mistaken sense of right, for I only wanted to do what I thought was best for you both. There, there, child, we'll say no more about it."

And so she kissed and left me, and though for the next week things moved on the surface in apparently the same old way, beneath there was an undercurrent which was quietly affecting the whole. It, after all, was not the kind of life I had been accustomed to. The days at Granite Creek had been so full of freedom that I could not tolerate the thought of a tame submission. Submission to what? I might well ask myself the question. Yet to me there was a sense of oppression, or suppression, in the life I now led. There is a freedom of the mind which is not less glorious than that of the body, and this I had not. One cannot have everything, I suppose, but living under observation, a perpetual shadowing, as it were, was not at all suitable to my temperament. I therefore set about thinking how best I might right my imaginary wrong, and as I was considered a fairly well-educated girl, I at length determined to face the world and fight my own battles. Will had done it long ago — poor old Will! — and though I was not a man, I think I had some of my brother's spirit. Anyway, I had no sooner given birth to the thought than I was determined upon putting it into execution.

Great was the consternation in the Wallace household when I made known the project. Ella cried and implored me not to think of such a thing; Mr. Wallace pooh-poohed the idea as one too utterly ridiculous to entertain for a moment; while Mrs. Wallace, with tears in her eyes, declared that she had received me from my mother, her life-long friend, as a sacred trust, and that no earthly consideration would ever let her part with me. Yet in time my determination won the day, and when I had succeeded in allaying her fears, it was she who found a home for me with one of her friends in Melbourne.

Chapter XI.

AND now the preparations for my setting out went speedily along. Luckily Arthur was away on a visit to Sydney, so that I was spared the pain of having to encounter his long face at every turn. Ella, however, was but a Job's-comforter of a companion, and reiterate my love for her as much as I might, I could not convince her that dislike of her and hers was not the cause of my departure. Mr. Wallace called me a spoiled, wilful girl, but kissing me at the same time told me to always look upon him as a father, and his house as my home; while his good wife implored me never to forget that whatever happened I should always find a welcome and warm hearts to love me at Wallan Wallan.

Yet in spite of my resolute display of courage I felt extremely wretched as the train steamed out of the station, carrying me southward on my long lonely journey, and more than once I was like regretting my rashness and obstinacy, though my determination made me close my heart to the temptation. But I was cruelly alone, and as I looked out through the window at the fast flying country, I entertained many thoughts of a doubtful nature. Back into the past I went, the old glad past when we children, proud and happy in our youth and strength, knew nothing of the shame which was ours, and which was going to drag us down and down. Will said the taint would prove too much for us. God help us, I feared it would. Who could say but that which he and I had already suffered was but the commencement of a long list of ills which would leave us without hope of peace on earth, or hope of heaven hereafter? Is it a wonder I curled up in a corner of the carriage and wept as though my heart would break?

At last the great city was reached, and amid the bustle of porters and passengers who, laden with boxes and portmanteaux, seemed to be rushing hither and thither as though their very lives depended on their reaching a certain spot at a certain moment, I stood confusedly looking about when a servant approached me and inquired if I were Miss Hastings, the young lady for Mrs. Ballestier's, and upon my replying in the affirmative he seized my baggage and requested me to follow him, informing me as we went along that he had been sent to fetch me; at which I felt distinctly relieved and silently thanked Mrs. Ballestier for her thoughtfulness. A neat little carriage of the wagonette species awaited us outside the station, into which vehicle I popped, and some

half-hour later we drove up to the door of my new home, which was situated in one of the most select parts of South Yarra.

Upon descending from the vehicle in question I was immediately shown to my room and at once proceeded to remove all stains of travel, and while I was yet engaged in this peculiar operation there came a knock at the door with the request that the mistress would be pleased to see me in the drawing-room when I was ready.

“In a moment,” I cried, and straightening my rather aggressive hair so that I might look as much like a companion as possible, I descended the stairs with just a little fluttering in the region of the heart.

Upon entering the drawing-room, which struck me as being most prettily furnished, I was at once made aware of the presence of a spruce little lady of from forty to forty-five years of age, elegantly dressed, and evidently one of those wonderful women of whom I had read so much, who will not permit that old rascal Time to say that they are old. Certainly upon a close inspection the skin of her face seemed not quite so smooth as a baby's, and her mouth had a decidedly ugly twist about it; yet her figure was wonderfully neat, and when you got a back view of her, and saw that stylish, well-dyed head set on the top of that well-clothed figure — a charming figure too, elastic and well-rounded — you might easily have mistaken her for a young woman of five-and-twenty. I know I did, and once I remembered telling her as much, and had I asked at that moment for a fifty pound rise I'm sure she would have given me it.

“So you are Miss Hastings?” she said, advancing to me with outstretched hand. I bowed. “I am Mrs. Ballestier,” she went on, “and an delighted you have come at last. I do hope you'll try to stay with me, because it is so tiresome to be continually changing. I think you'll find us pretty easy to get on with. Dora's a bit of a spoilt cat, to be sure, but that's her father's business. He won't have her interfered with. Otherwise he is an excellent man and not in the least obtrusive. By the way, you have seen your room — do you like it?”

I said I thought it an exceedingly cheerful one.

“So I think,” she said. “Mr. Ballestier wanted it for a study — as though anybody ever heard of a study being at the top of the house. But that's just like him. Actually wanted to shift one of the handsomest bookcases in the library up there — which I wouldn't have minded so much, because I might have bought another, had he not wanted to take the books as well. But that's just like him. A queer creature, my dear, very eccentric; but not bad, really not bad.” And then, looking hard at me, she said suddenly, changing her theme like the true chatterbox she was, “Do you know, my dear, I like you, I like your looks: yes, I like you.”

I told her I thought it was very kind of her.

“Not at all,” was her airy answer, “not at all. I am never mistaken in

my first impressions. I know we shall be excellent friends.”

I ventured to express the hope that we might be.

“Mrs. Wallace told me all about you,” chattered the little lady, the words issuing from her lips with a fluency most astounding. “Quite an orphan, aren't you, poor thing? Shockingly sad, to be sure. How you must feel it. I'm afraid you'll think us awfully gay here, but the fact is black melancholy is a guest whom we entertain as little as possible. Selfish, you think? Possibly, but life is really too short to pass it in sighing. I'm sure I couldn't find the time. But you look a little fatigued, my dear. That bell. Thank you. I'm afraid I'm dreadfully lazy, and yet people say I'm the most energetic woman in Melbourne. Thank you, Porson,” as a servant entered in answer to the summons. “We'll have some tea, please. I am sure a cup would prove acceptable at this moment?”

“I'm afraid I have the bush weakness for tea developed to an alarming extent.”

“I am one with you there,” she said with a merry laugh, and when Porson entered with the tea-tray she proved the truth of her statement.

“And how did you leave the Wallaces?” she asked with her mouth full of bread-and-butter.

“They were all well,” I answered. “Mrs. Wallace is coming to town in a month's time and hopes to have the pleasure of seeing you.”

“Dear old thing,” said Mrs. Ballestier patronizingly, “I shall be delighted to see her. It seems an age since we last met.”

“You are very old friends, are you not?”

“Well,” she said with a wonderful little smile, and a depreciating shrug of her slender shoulders, “not really very old. I have only known her since I was a girl. Of course she was a woman then,” she added by way of emphasis.

I was quick enough to perceive that the ground whereon I trod was, if not exactly holy, much too sacred for such profane feet as mine. I therefore backed off it as swiftly and silently as I could, covering my movement, so to speak, by asking her if she had ever met my mother.

“No, my dear,” she replied, “I am sorry to say I never met her; but if she was anything like her daughter, my loss has been considerable.”

All of which sounded exceedingly pleasant, giving me confidence and making me feel at home. I had never anticipated meeting with such a generous and charming reception, and when I went to bed that night I felt a reassuring sense of peace which made me happier than I had been for many a long day.

My duties were not of the most arduous nature. About an hour in the morning I devoted to the education of the only child, Dora, a rather spoilt young lady of ten; but I'm afraid I did not succeed in transferring much knowledge into that head of hers, for of all the wilful children with whom I had ever come in contact, Miss Dora Ballestier was the most

wilful. Her ignorance was really appalling, and try as I might, I found that she neither could nor would learn. Looking upon me as her natural enemy, she, at my approach, would purse up her ugly little mouth — and it was wonderfully like her mother's — and defy me to teach her anything; but as I had no particular love for her I never gave her battle, not caring for the victory even if I were sure of gaining it. Once only I approached the mother with an account of the daughter's misdemeanours.

“My dear,” she said with a laugh, “Mr. Ballestier spoils her, in fact, we all spoil her — you see, she came rather late. We gave into her to begin with, and she's kept the upper hand ever since. She always does as she likes, and she won't do more than she likes, so whenever you find that she is not in the mood for lessons, I beg that you won't attempt to thwart her.”

“But it is scarcely fair to me,” I answered. “I am supposed to teach her; yet how can I succeed in teaching her anything if she won't learn?”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Ballestier with an amused look, “you really mustn't trouble yourself about that. I never expected that you would be able to teach her anything. It's all her father's doings. I've told him a thousand times that he's ruining the child, but he only laughs at me and says that if she won't learn she shan't be made to, and there's an end of it. And my dear,” she added confidentially, “though Mr. Ballestier is one of the most easy-going creatures imaginable, he has a will and temper of his own.”

I did not doubt it, though I had my doubts as to whether Mr. Ballestier's will and temper were very formidable things. Indeed, by what I had already seen of that worthy man, I considered him one of the most singularly simple personages with whom it had ever been my lot to become acquainted. It is true he was a member of the Upper House, and was consequently the Honourable Thomas Ballestier, or Old Tom, as he was familiarly termed by his intimates; not that he ever showed any decided partiality for the flavour of the juniper berry, his favourite beverage being a pint of tanglefoot in a pewter. “Tanglefoot,” his own pet word, meant, when translated, colonial beer. But casting aside that spurious dignity of “Honourable,” there was nothing very beautiful or imposing in Mr. Ballestier. He was not an impressive figure. Indeed he always reminded me of the swagmen whom I had seen in my early days trudging along the Wallan Road; and in imagination I would set a swag on his back, put a clay pipe in his mouth and send him wandering along the dusty roads knowing that he was perfectly happy. It was what he had been accustomed to. I always thought his grand surroundings acted as a restraint upon him, and I am quite sure that he preferred the stables to his wife's drawing-room. Old Tom was not one who readily adapted himself to the superficialities of refined life, and he rarely came to Melbourne unless so forced by some business transaction. He had a big run in the

Western District which took him all his time to manage, at least so he declared. But if the truth must be told, Mr. Ballestier felt at home in the bush and decidedly at sea out of it. There he was monarch of all he surveyed, lord of broad lands and fleecy flocks, and he could go about all day in his shirt-sleeves, nor even put on his coat for dinner unless he felt cold, which was not very often, as he was as wiry as an old gum tree. There was a freedom in the bush which to a man of Old Tom's nature was absolutely indispensable to the enjoyment of life. An Englishman by birth, the son of a Hampshire labourer, he had emigrated, upon hearing the news of the great gold discoveries, to the El Dorado of the southern hemisphere, and after roughing it in almost every part of the colony, not to mention sundry excursions into different parts of New South Wales and South Australia, he at last struck his "patch" in the now thriving township of Geelong. It was not a gold patch that he struck, though, indirectly, it turned to gold. He was then a strapping young fellow full of lusty manhood, and having accepted employment as assistant in a prosperous butcher's business, which business was carried on by a buxom widow whose husband had fallen a victim to his own meat — he choked himself one day at dinner — Mr. Ballestier made so much of his opportunities that three months after taking service he led his mistress to the altar. And thus it was that Mr. Ballestier found his patch, that patch increasing marvellously through his energy and skill. In a few years he was worth a tidy fortune, and as he was always singularly shrewd in his business transactions, he soon rose to the dignity of chief butcher in the town. About this time, and while he was yet elated with the pride of his position, his wife, whose bulk had increased enormously, died of fatty degeneration, and thus, like her first husband, she proved a victim to the excellence of her own wares.

It is not said that the blow greatly affected Mr. Ballestier, but that it did there can be little doubt, for shortly after his better half had left him for a better world, he sold his shop and took up some land in the back country. Success followed this experiment; good seasons came one after the other, and in a few years Mr. Thomas Ballestier was one of the most prominent and prosperous squatters in the district. True, he had rather an exaggerated reputation for eccentricity of manner and dress, and people who came in contact with him were heard to declare that it was a crying injustice that a man who did not know how to live should be blessed with so much of the needful; but when he married Susan Hobson all this underwent a change. The new Mrs. Ballestier, who was an auctioneer's widow, and who, they said, had been "knocked down" to her first husband by a disreputable father for a fair annuity, was a woman of push and enterprise. She had yearned all her life for an opportunity of distinguishing herself, and when it came she seized it with avidity. Once the nuptial knot was tied, and she was really Mrs. Ballestier, the rich

Mrs. Ballestier, she began to put old Tom through his pacings. She cut his hair, trimmed his beard, and made him invest in a necktie, a thing he had hitherto disdained as an uncomfortable superfluity; indeed, she worked as never woman worked before to make her lord presentable. But all in vain. The Honourable Thomas would not take the polish.

“It's no good, Soo,” he would say, after one of her irritating lessons. “All the rubbing in the world won't polish me up — besides, my gal, I'm gettin' a bit tired of the operation. No, Soo, you'd best let me go back to the bush. You needn't come with me unless you like, but go I must.”

And go he accordingly did, and while he was away earning the dollars his wife stayed in town and spent them — a just proportion of labour, so Mrs. Ballestier said. She entertained royally; her dinners brought her quite a reputation, and to gain admission to one of her garden parties, and very charming they were, was the height of a social beginner's ambition. There one met everybody who was anybody, and though the somebodies were in reality very small fry, curiously assorted too, they were the best the country could produce, and if they had neither manners nor grandfathers, they had that which is of far more consequence — long purses. Occasionally the proceedings were enlivened by the presence of some globe-trotting lord or foreign count, but as a rule the distinguished visitors were like angels' visits — few and far between. This I knew was the cause of much secret regret to Mrs. Ballestier, who had the true British reverence of a title; but as she could not induce the Honourable Thomas to visit his native land and set up as a nobility entertainer, she was forced to bow to the inevitable, spread her net and hope. Yet whenever she did get a chance of paying court to a title — though she hated knights, vulgar creatures — she took good care not to let it slip; and at the time of my arrival at South Yarra she was exploiting the Honourable Peter Keestone, second son of the Earl of Arch, a young gentleman of the staff at Government House. What the Honourable Peter thought of her must ever remain a mystery, if he ever thought at all — which I am inclined to doubt. He was not of the thinking kind; yet if he did not love her as devotedly as she imagined, he made ample atonement for his delinquency by his attachment to her dinners. There could be no doubt of his affection for them. Usually he seemed to be a perverse sort of young man, irritable and exceedingly selfish, but when he sat down to dinner with us he became a transformed being. His sleek face used to shine with pleasure; he smiled from forehead to chin; he was a beatific vision. And it was in such moments as these that Mrs. Ballestier reflected some of the glory of her adored one; she seemed to grow years younger; the words flew in sparkles from her lips, and if her wit was not of the finest water there were no connoisseurs at her table to perceive the flaws. At any rate, no one would ever imagine that this fascinating woman, this social leader, was brought up in a bush shanty,

and that her father, old Mick Huggins, had died in the horrors after maintaining a drunken bout of some three weeks' duration.

This, then, was the mistress to whom I now found myself attached, and this the whirling household in which I had been set down. For at least a week I was considerably out of my element, but when I got my bearings, as a sailor would say, I steered a perfectly straight and true course. Nor did I find the place a hard one, or Mrs. Ballestier a very exacting mistress. Beyond my little attentions to Dora of a morning, and they were dispensed with on the slightest pretence, I was with Mrs. Ballestier always. Indeed, she made as much of me after a week's acquaintance as though I had been her dearest friend, and she rarely went abroad without insisting upon me accompanying her.

"You have remained hidden long enough," she used to say. "This will be an excellent chance for you. You are pretty enough to drive any man crazy, and if you don't make good use of your opportunities I shall consider you a disgrace to the sex. Ah, if I only had your face and your years I would look at nothing lower than a prince. But you're not me — you don't push enough. Still, I think you ought to nail a lord at least." Mrs. Ballestier came out with some peculiar expressions at times, caught, I suppose, at the bar of the bush shanty.

"One must first get the opportunity," said I with a smile.

"Oh, yes, you'll do," she replied with a knowing look. "The sylvan simplicity of Wallan Wallan is conducive to contemplation. Well, well, gather your harvest while you may. Remember, you'll never have these years to live again."

And so the harvest began, and in the giddy whirl of the next two months I laid in tares enough to last me for the rest of my life. Not that I didn't thoroughly enjoy the continual round of gaiety, the ceaseless stream of compliments, the animated, if empty, chatter. It was all new to me, and I was young enough to revel in the novelty. I was like a child let loose to play, and I played till I grew tired. Long before the season was over I, like Marianna in her Moated Grange, was weary, and if I did not wish that I were dead, I should have felt no grievous pang at hearing that some of my acquaintances had passed under the face of things. I suppose one must be brought up to this sort of life to take any lengthened pleasure in it; but on me it palled most cruelly, and when Mr. Ballestier was in town I was glad to stay at home to keep him company — for, of course, he would have none of his wife's gallivantings, as he used to put it. I must own, however, that it was invariably at Mrs. Ballestier's request that I remained at home on these occasions, for unless she knew the Hon. Tom was safe away at Barraclough (the name of his station). she displayed an uneasiness most marked, which made me wonder if she really thought he might come in his shirt sleeves to fetch her from some distinguished gathering, or if his presence might prove detrimental to

sundry little arrangements, of which Mr. Peter Keestone was perfectly cognizant. And so after dinner I used to wend my way to Mr. Ballestier's smoking-room — and a miserable little back room it was too, with only a couple of comfortable chairs in it — and while he sat moodily pulling away at his pipe I would read to him all the farming, stock and station news from the pages of the *Australasian* and *Leader*, and little articles and scraps of news I thought would interest him. And as long as I read he would go on smoking, filling and refilling his pipe from a huge plug of black tobacco which he always carried in one of his capacious waistcoat pockets.

At first he was rather shy of me and always called me Miss, but one day his wife happened to overhear him, and ever after he never forgot to add the Hastings. The Honourable Thomas must have been treated to an impressive curtain lecture that night. Yet to altogether break him of his shyness was not possible, and for a long time his apparent awe of me refused to quit him, and I have often laughed silently at the strange tactics employed by that grizzled old man to appear at ease before me. But by degrees the terror I had inspired wore off, and when one hot night, observing that the poor man was undergoing the agony of a violent perspiration, I suggested that he should take his coat off, he bounded to his feet like a school-boy who has been granted an unexpected holiday, and proceeded to pour out his thanks in unmistakable terms. From that moment the barrier was broken down between us, and we became the best of friends. And the more I saw of him the more did he impress me, for I found that, notwithstanding his extreme simplicity of manners, there was much that was most excellent beneath his primitive exterior. He would come to me with all his troubles, and if he made a good or a bad deal on the exchange I was the first to know it; and at such moments the poor old man would hint pretty plainly that there was little sympathy between him and his wife. Even his child, he would add, the child he loved better than anything else in the world, seemed, in the matter of ill-treating him, to take her cue from the mother: but I knew well enough that the child's was a pleasant tyranny, for he was so exceedingly foolish over her that he would have condoned any outrage perpetrated by that wilful elf.

“She's her mother, you see,” he would say in reference to some act of impudence or insubordination on the child's part, “and as such expects everyone to make way for her. I suppose it's born in 'em, natural like, and one oughtn't to be too hard on what's bred in the bone; but it's rather rough on a man when his own kid despises him.”

“How can you talk like that, Mr. Ballestier?” I said. “Dora has her faults, like all of us, but I am sure she is an affectionate child at heart, and I know she loves you.” That I might have been romancing when I spoke of her affectionate nature, I am willing to admit, but that she loved

her father in her selfish way is quite true. Indeed, I think he was the only person in the world for whom she really cared.

He looked at me, and as he looked his rugged face softened wonderfully. "I hope it may be so," he said. "God knows, she's dearer to me than my heart's blood. I'm a lonely old man, Miss Hastings, and I've led a queer, hard sort of life in my time, and I should like to be happy now — to have somebody to love me before I hand in my account."

Strange that this millionaire squatter, who among men of influence was one of the most influential, should be so poor a wretch as to be unable to purchase an ounce of true affection. And that he was a man worthy of love was fully realizable once one took the trouble to study his strange character; but he was quiet and secret in his ways, unobtrusive, almost surly in his shyness. And herein lay the cause of all the evil things which had been said of him, for so rugged a front did he present that the casual observer might almost be forgiven for thinking the outward semblance of the man a fair criterion of the inward. And yet it was not so, for this very brusqueness, uncouth, half-savage as it seemed, was but another form of shyness. In fact, Mr. Ballestier was haunted by the feeling that he was pretending to be what he was not. He knew his own faults better than any of his friends knew them; he knew he was not a gentleman, and that were he fifty times a millionaire he would still be plain Tom Ballestier, the Hampshire labourer's son, the man who had endured hardship upon hardship, hunger and thirst, heat and cold, with scarcely a rag to his back, and never a shoe to his foot; whose days were passed in the laborious search for bread, and whose nights were spent beneath the trees with "nothing but the sky for a great-coat."

And he had won against it all — in spite of fate and its thousand obstacles. To me there was something grand in this rugged, lonely old man. I pitied him, too, with all my heart, but I am not sure that I did not love him more.

Volume 3

Chapter I.

MR. BALLESTIER, however, was not, as I have said, accustomed to making long stays in town, infinitely preferring the solitude and security of his well-beloved bush. Still he would sometimes appear rather unexpectedly and upset the little functions at South Yarra, such as a quiet little dinner with Mr. Keestone, or a jaunt to the races with that young gentleman. Yet in spite of these annoying little drawbacks it must be confessed that the Honourable Thomas was most amenable to reason — his wife's reason, for she had all the sense of the family, as she would tell you — and I have known him keep to his smoking-room, without once disclosing himself, while she entertained her guests in the drawing-room below. The poor old fellow used to pretend he was tired and say he was going to bed, but hour after hour would he sit smoking and brooding over his wrongs, while from below came the sound of music, the laughter and babel of many voices. Once I rushed up to his room, to look for a book which I had highly recommended to Mr. Keestone, and discovering him pulling gloomily at his old black pipe, I expressed my surprise at his not putting in an appearance downstairs. "Ah, my dear," he said, "they don't want me, and I don't want them, so why should we clash?" Poor old man. I'm afraid they treated him rather badly.

And yet, in spite of Mrs. Ballestier's absolute authority, I was not slow to perceive that when her husband was in the house there was more method in her madness, and I noted particularly that Mr. Keestone's presence at the dinner table was not so regular when the husband presided, or rather, I should say, when he put in an appearance — for to talk of Mr. Ballestier presiding was ridiculous — and that in consequence those meals were not half so good as when that young gentleman graced the board. Yet the Honourable Thomas had a steady blue eye which was always open, and Mrs. Ballestier — well, a woman must sometimes humour a millionaire husband.

So in this strange household the days flew pleasantly enough, and by degrees those sorrows which at one time threatened to annihilate my peace of mind, and to escape which I had plunged into the whirlpool of gaiety, grew feebler and feebler, till in the distance they resembled nothing so much as a mysterious haze, behind which I saw things darkly. I had not forgotten, I could never forget, all that I had seen and suffered, but youth was given us for action, old age for thought; one is ever

looking onward, upward; the other, having climbed the hill, sits down to contemplate the way.

During the whole of this time Ella and I kept up a regular correspondence, she writing one week and I the next, and in this manner I was still kept in touch with the old life. Arthur was still in Sydney, so she wrote, and had declared his intention of remaining in that city; and, so the writer went on, she would allow me to draw my own conclusions respecting this determination of his. I believe this little bit of information softened me more towards the poor boy than any of his loving attentions or passionate declarations, and I have a vivid recollection of going to my trunk, after having re-perused the letter, and extracting therefrom the old silver ring which he had given me so long ago, and — But no, I won't say what foolish things I did; yet when I tried to read again that portion of the epistle in which Ella spoke of his great affection for me, I was conscious of the letters dancing before my eyes in an almost impenetrable haze. There was other news, too, for Ella was a pretty and voluminous correspondent, chief among which was the information that Sergeant Winton always called on the day she received my letter (and as I invariably wrote on a certain day, Ella vowed he knew when it was due), to inquire after me, and to beg her to forward his respects to me, which she religiously did. The other item of news, though more startling, was hardly unexpected, considering I had kept a suspicious eye on the lady for some time. Miss Polly Lane, with whom I had at one time feared poor old Will was becoming dangerously entangled, had at last taken the bit between her teeth, despite the curb of propriety, and bolted with a bagman. I cannot say the information came as a great surprise, but I was extremely sorry for her, poor, pretty, foolish thing. I could sympathize with her, too, deeply sympathize, and hoped that his love might repay her for what she had lost.

Of poor Will there was no news, which in this instance I should have been glad to look upon as good news, only I dreaded to think of what his silence foreboded. No reply had come to the advertisements which Mr. Wallace had inserted in the papers respecting him, and for all we knew to the contrary he might no longer be in the land of the living. Still, while death is dubious, we mortals are blessed with tenacious hope, and the more I feared, the more I hoped, trusting, in my impotence, to the supreme guiding power of all. And in this state were things when a new experience befell me, the result of which was to lead to still stranger trials.

Not being entirely devoid of that acumen for which my sex is not unjustly renowned, I was not slow to perceive that Mr. Keestone had begun to look upon me with a discriminating eye, for which honour I felt duly flattered. At the same time his attentions were always respectful and in excellent taste, so that by degrees the strong barrier which I had built

about myself grew pliant, and I forgot to think that I was a lone wayfarer through the gloomy forest of life, and that behind every tree and shrub lurked a would-be assailant. It was flattering, too, in spite of the sneer which rose to my lips just now, for though I had always believed myself to be intensely democratic, I could not forget that Mr. Keestone was the Honourable Peter, not as Mr. Ballestier was the Honourable Thomas, but in a vastly different way. I believe we are all snobs at heart, and that deference to rank comes as natural as eating and drinking. I have seen the plutocrat, who wouldn't shake hands with the premier of the colony because the latter was a self-made man — though his position was proof of his more than ordinary intelligence — I have seen him, I say, crawl round some feeble little lordling, thankful for a nod and delighted with a smile. With us, of course, a lord is a curiosity, but I am inclined to doubt that it is curiosity alone which prompts our deference.

Another thing I was not slow to notice was that whenever Mrs. Ballestier was present Mr. Keestone rarely turned his eyes towards me, but seemed absorbed in his devotions before her shrine. Yet no sooner were we alone than he would glide to my side, and by the tender tones of his voice, and the inexpressible looks of his heavy, not unhandsome eyes, he would seek to make me acquainted with the sad havoc I had worked on his heart. I, however, had profited considerably by experience, and though I did not dislike him, for there was little about him one could dislike — laziness and selfishness being his predominant sins — I did my utmost to let him see that his rank was nothing in my eyes, but that I considered the men of brain and muscle were the gods of the earth. And to give him his due I don't think the consciousness of his birth impressed him very greatly, or lent him, in his own estimation, a fictitious importance, though I have since heard that these people go about with the mask of candour on their faces, but that beneath it the blue blood bubbles to a red heat on the slightest provocation.

We, however, had many opportunities for private conversation, and the more I saw of him the more he impressed me as being superior to his reputation. I found him exceedingly amiable and less of a fool than I expected. You have to get people alone and talk seriously to them before you can hope to discover their good points. Try the experiment on your friends. You will be surprised at the number that will come well through the ordeal. He also evinced a quite affectionate interest in my family, and by some artful questioning, through which I could see without glasses, learnt from me as much of our history as I thought fit to impart, and I must say that he quite won my heart by his generous professions of sorrow on my behalf, and his sympathy for the dear dead. And all this time Mrs. Ballestier, unconscious of the growing estrangement of her idol, continued to feed him up regardless of expense. "The savouries alone used to entice me here," he said to me one night, "but now it is the

sweetest of sweets,” and he squeezed my hand in a way which left little doubt that the compliment was intended for me. And I — well, I feel as though I ought to apologize for myself, and I would were I not afraid that even then some would misunderstand me. But be it remembered that I was alone in the world, and that my future on earth was as vague as my future hereafter: with both I had all to do, but with the present I think we are the more concerned. The hereafter is a belief at most, but the present is a grim reality.

With alarming rapidity was the crisis brought about. Having watched him narrowly for the last week, I could see that he was the victim of a prodigious mental battle, and I could not help wondering how the fight would go. Nay, I would have been more than human could I have looked unconcernedly on, knowing, as I did, the cause of the struggle. The result was fearfully sudden. A hurried whisper in the drawing-room one night, a close pressing of the fingers, a pair of excited eyes looking fervently into mine, and I heard, as through a strange buzzing of the senses, a voice asking me to wed. It was all so sudden that I could not answer, and before I had time to collect my thoughts he dropped my hand somewhat ungallantly and retreated half-a-dozen paces. The next moment Mrs. Ballestier entered, and further opportunity was lost for the night. I thought she eyed us a trifle suspiciously as she advanced, but the Honourable Peter, who, upon occasion, could look as vacant as a Dutch doll, put on his most innocent air and completely succeeded in mystifying her — for the moment, at least. How he got through the rest of that evening I cannot pretend to relate, but from the upstairs window where I sat cooling my excited brain, I heard the big front door bang much earlier than usual, and, so it seemed to me, much savager too. Then all was still again, and for hour after hour I sat thinking over the proposal he had whispered, and wondering what he would say when he knew I was a convict's daughter. Yet why should he ever know? I had heard him say a dozen times that he was sick of the country, and that he only wished he could find some decent pretext for leaving it. Would not his marriage be pretext enough? And once away from Australia, the chances were that I should never meet a soul who had ever heard of me or mine; and what is more, as his wife, in England, no one would ever dream that I had cause to blush for my birthright, that birthright of which, under happier circumstances, I should have been so proud. I confess the temptation was one to which the inclinations instinctively leant, for do we not ever strive to avoid a shame of any nature? — but my better sense revolted against this betrayal of confidence, and I determined, should he ever broach the subject again, to spare myself no whit whatever, but to tell him all and then see the sort of man he was.

The next day I did not see him, he having to attend some official function with the governor; but the day following, as I sat with Dora in

the drawing-room scanning some photographic views, he was announced, the servant showing him in to us while she went to acquaint Mrs. Ballestier of his arrival — a perfectly superfluous task as I knew well, for from her window the mistress would have seen him come, as nothing that went on in the road escaped her prying eyes.

With a strange beating at the heart I rose to welcome him, but seeing he was not alone, my eyes instinctively wandered to the man by his side, in whom I at once recognized Captain Langton.

“How de do, Miss Hastings?” said the Honourable Peter, seizing my hand and pressing it tenderly. “By Jove, what's the matter? You — you look quite ill.” This in a voice of much concern.

“No, no, not in the least.” With an effort I conquered the dizziness which was crushing me to insignificance and smiled back in his face.

“Glad of it, by Jove. Thought you were going to faint, don't you know, I did, by Jove. Let me introduce you to Captain Langton. Langton, old fellow, this is Miss Hastings.”

“I was prepared for much,” said the captain with a strange look, “but scarcely for so much as this. Miss Hastings and I are old friends.”

“Old friends are you, by Jove!” cried the Honourable Peter. “Now who would have thought that?” And Mr. Keestone looked most comically astounded.

“Nothing so very extraordinary,” said Captain Langton with a smile. “Miss Hastings and I have been neighbours and friends for years.”

The Honourable Peter's lazy eyes opened still wider, and I knew he thought that friendship an odd one which consisted of terror on my part and self-assurance on Captain Langton's. The silence which followed this speech was decidedly embarrassing, when much to my relief it was broken by the entrance of Mrs. Ballestier who, full of profuse apologies for that absence which she had purposely created, soon restored by her glib chatter the harmony of the scene. A few words from Mr. Keestone, the meaning or purport of which I have no recollection, and I quitted the room, leading Dora by the hand. I remember bowing coldly to Captain Langton, and I have a clear recollection of him returning my salutation with an amused smile, unintelligible to all but me, but of aught else I remember nothing. The presence of that man, whom I had never anticipated meeting again, was a severe shock to me, for I guessed intuitively that it boded me no good. I left Dora out in the hall and rushed pell-mell to my room where, throwing myself on the bed, I indulged in all the misery of conjecture and suspense.

And yet, after all, he may not speak, though this, I must confess, seemed but a faint hope, remembering who and what the man was. And what if he did? I was getting heroic now. True, my father was a convict, but for what crime? Could any just man or woman think the less of him for what he had done? I doubted it. Then let him speak. I had done

nothing for which I need blush; then why should I hang down my head?

I arose and dressed for dinner as usual, determining to meet charge with explanation, and doubting not that the justice of my claim to live as other people live would be respected; if not, I too must go forth as my brother had gone, and perhaps somewhere I might find peace.

There was only one guest at dinner that night, one of Mrs. Ballestier's female friends, as glib a woman, upon ordinary occasions, as the mistress of the house herself; but to-night neither of them shone with anything like her accustomed brilliance. They eyed me curiously as I entered the room, they stole surreptitious glances at me from time to time during the progress of the meal, and the way they both pronounced the "Miss Hastings" left no doubt in my mind as to what had occurred. Of course I noted it all — they took good care of that — but like Will I grew obstinate with opposition, and I think my conversational powers never shone so brilliantly as they did that night. Perhaps it was because I had never got such an opportunity. Be that as it may, I sustained the conversation till the end of the meal, when Mrs. Scorcher, the lady above referred to, bore Mrs. Ballestier away in her neat little one-horse brougham.

Left alone, I sauntered into the library, and picking up a book, tried hard to read, though I'm afraid my thoughts were anywhere but on the pages. Gradually I wandered off into the old familiar groove, and in the midst of a profound reverie was I when a sharp tap at the door startled me. Springing to my feet, I opened it hastily, only to encounter Mr. Keestone on the threshold.

"You!" I cried drawing back.

"Yes," he said, looking slightly embarrassed. "May I come in?"

"Of course you may. But there is no one at home. Mrs. Ballestier went out shortly after dinner."

"Yes, I know," he said with a sigh of satisfaction. "I left her at the Jones's half-an-hour ago. A rum chap, old Jones, isn't he? Came to the colony with the proverbial half-crown, they say. A wonderful half-crown that. Makes a chap think a lot and wish for a few. May I sit down?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Not at all. I'm afraid I'm very intrusive, and all that sort of thing, but I — I wanted so much to see you — alone."

I bowed without speaking.

"You know," went on the Hon. Peter with a nervous smile, "we're as good as engaged, aren't we?"

"You were serious then?"

"My dear Miss Hastings, I was never more serious in my life. If you will permit me to say so, I love you very dearly, I do upon my word, and when I asked you to marry me, though it was only in a whisper, I meant it if ever a man did in this world."

"It's very good of you," I began.

"Yes — that is, No!" he exclaimed, correcting himself emphatically. "Not at all. I — I don't profess to any of the heroic virtues, Miss Hastings. I'm only an ordinary sort of chap, you know, but I always try not to go back on my word." And he continued to smile in an undecided sort of way.

"I'm afraid," said I, growing just a trifle weary of his flutterings round the object of his visit — for that he had something of importance on his mind, which he had not the courage to communicate, was evident to the dullest perception — "I'm afraid I don't quite understand you, Mr. Keestone. If you have any message for Mrs. Ballestier I shall be most happy to give it to her."

"I have no message for Mrs. Ballestier," he said. "I came here to see you, Miss Hastings, to ask you a question. Don't think me presumptuous, will you? but it would ease my mind considerably to hear you deny it."

"And what may this be," asked I with a forced laugh, the old terrified feeling creeping up round my heart, "the denial of which would prove so acceptable to you?"

He stammered and actually blushed as his eyes met mine. Then looking fixedly at the carpet he said, "By Jove, it seems a jolly caddish sort of thing to do — but, you know, I didn't know you knew Langton."

"You mean Captain Langton?"

"Yes."

"I have known him since I was a child. His sister and I were playmates. My father was his father's tenant, and friend."

"Friend was he? By Jove, the cad!" I think I followed the Hon. Peter here closely enough, ambiguous though he seemed. "You know, Miss Hastings, I can't say I ever cared very much for Langton, and I should have taken no notice of what he said if it wasn't that my brother is not likely to enjoy the title long, poor old chap, and that in England they make so much fuss about titles that the bearer of one cannot live in retirement like an ordinary individual. All his past and even his future form subjects for public gossip, so that if his sheet isn't quite clean he comes in for a pretty rough time of it, don't you see?"

"And all this means?" said I, feeling the old defiance rising in me, though I knew well enough what it meant.

"It means that I'm a confounded cad, Miss Hastings, to have ever listened to Langton's insinuations. But I assure you that I have not considered myself in the matter, and had it not been for my people — "

"What were Captain Langton's insinuations?" I asked, not knowing what such a man might not have said.

"He said your father was a — a government man, but I assure you I didn't believe him."

"Then you were wrong. My father was a convict."

“You're joking, you don't mean that?” he cried incredulously.

“I'm afraid I do.”

“A convict — good God!”

There was more pity in that exclamation than suited me, driven to bay, as it were; and so out I flashed into a long diatribe on my father's wrongs, during which I acquainted him with father's early history, and of the troubles which led to his ultimate deportation to Botany Bay.

When I had finished my harangue I flung myself back in my chair and glared defiantly at the man before me, who, however, instead of taking up the gauntlet, as I vaguely imagined he would, advanced to me with a still more curious look on his face.

“So your father was the son of old Sir William Hastings, was he? What a curious coincidence. Why, we live not ten miles from Whincliffe Priory, the present owner of which, your cousin, by the way, Sir Reginald Hastings, was at Eton and Cambridge with me. Well, well, this is most singular. Do you know, I was very nearly being related to you myself, for if poor old Reggie hadn't been hurried off to the Mediterranean on account of his health, he would have married my sister Fanny as sure as fate. And do you mean to say you have never seen any of your relations?”

“Never.”

“But you write to them?”

“No, I do not think they know of our existence. I knew nothing of theirs till now. Father never spoke of them. Indeed, until a few years ago I did not know what he had been in England.”

“Well, this is most singular,” repeated the Hon. Peter, astonishment still depicted on his face, “and we must talk it over another time, for I can give you no end of information respecting your family; but in the meantime, Miss Hastings, I hope you will pardon me for causing you this annoyance, though since it has led to such a discovery I can scarcely say I regret it. I am sorry, very sorry, that any trouble should ever have come to darken your life, but it shall be no fault of mine if your future prove no happier than your past. Miss Hastings, I ask you once more, will you be my wife?”

“No, no,” I said, gently withdrawing my hand from his, for during this last appeal he had seized it firmly. “It is impossible that I should ever be your wife. You pity me now, but you would regret it six months hence. As you yourself have said, you have others to consider.”

“Confound them — what do I care?” he cried hotly.

“Everything, for are we not all ruled by the opinions of those about us? At the same time believe me to be duly grateful for your good opinion of me. It is doubly gratifying to know that you still honour me so highly, and I think we shall be all the better friends for this little burst of confidence.” I held out my hand in token of friendship as I spoke, which

he took, pressing warmly.

“And is it to end like this?” he said. “Will nothing induce you to change your mind?”

“Nothing,” I answered with a smile, though it cost me something to keep back the tears which this sudden change in his manner had called up.

“Don't you think you are very unkind?”

“I think, and hope, I am proving myself your friend. You will remember this night, Mr. Keestone, along with some of those memories which never die, and the more vividly you picture it up, the more kindly will you think of me.’

“I hope so,” he replied, “though you must forgive me if I venture to doubt it. My recollection of you will be an ever-lasting regret, regret because I lost you, for you are the most perfectly splendid girl I ever met in my life, you are, by Jove!”

I'm afraid we must have been foolishly imprudent, and very much interested in what each other had to say, for neither of us had noticed, until we heard a certain well-known cough in the hall outside, that the library door had remained partly open all through this interview.

“Mrs. Ballestier!” said I.

“Yes,” he answered, looking just a little embarrassed. The next moment the lady in question entered the room.

How much of our conversation she had heard, or whether she heard any, I could not say, neither could I tell from her face, for beneath her perpetual grin she artfully concealed her inner feelings. The only difference noticeable about her at this moment was that she grinned a trifle more than usual.

“What, up so late, my dear?” she cried, addressing me.

“My fault entirely,” said Mr. Keestone. “I'm afraid I've almost kept Miss Hastings up against her will.”

“Oh, it's you is it?” said Mrs. Ballestier with a smile, pretending to see him for the first time. “I thought I heard you tell Mrs. Jones that you were going home to work?”

“So I am,” he said.

At this she laughed somewhat playfully, declaring she knew old Jones's vulgarity bored him, a declaration which tickled him immensely, for he began to laugh loudly, during which ebullition I hastened to take my leave. The door was immediately swung to upon me, but I had not taken three steps before I heard Mrs. Ballestier's voice rise high and shrill. What took place between the lady and her attaché would not, perhaps, be very difficult to imagine.

Chapter II.

IN the morning I arose as usual and prepared for my daily toil by collecting the lesson books which Miss Dora, as was her wont, had stowed away in divers places; for Miss Dora had a pleasant little way of her own of hiding the books, which would have been vastly entertaining had not the duty of finding them devolved on me. On this occasion she had been particularly playful, so that a good hour was exhausted before I had captured the missing articles. I verily believe the child regarded me as an evil spirit who had been sent upon earth for the express purpose of plaguing her; and use my persuasive powers as I might, I could not convince her that I derived no pleasure from instruction, but that the books were used solely and entirely for her own benefit. This oft reiterated statement of mine was exceedingly obnoxious to her, and more than once had she puckered up her ugly little mouth at it and told me flatly that she didn't believe a word I said. And that she was sincere I never doubted, for being built on a curious plan — a sort of twist, one might say — she could not, or would not, entertain a thought that was not in perfect harmony with her own perverted convictions. Poor little thing, I wonder what sort of woman she will be.

On this particular morning, then, having found the books which she had taken such pains to conceal, I went in search of her, but failing to discover her whereabouts, sent one of the maids to her mother's room to make inquiries. The servant returned a moment after with the information that Miss Dora would not receive any lessons that morning, but that I was on no account to go out, as Mrs. Ballestier wished particularly to see me when she came down. Such a curt message had never been brought to me before, for if I was a dependent in the house, I had long since forgotten it. My temper, which was ever hot and ready to blaze out, felt like sending back a hot reply; but scenting danger in the message I schooled myself to prepare for it.

About half-past eleven, looking none too well in spite of her long rest, Mrs. Ballestier descended to the drawingroom, and I, who had been awaiting her arrival, made at once for her presence.

“Good-morning,” she said, rather coldly I thought.

“Good-morning,” I replied, acknowledging the greeting with a somewhat stiff inclination of the head. “You wished to speak to me, I believe?”

“To speak to you! Oh, of course, so I did,” she answered, looking as though she had forgotten all about it. “Sit down, my dear. I'm afraid that what I have to say will sound extremely unpleasant, but I think you will agree with me that the course I propose adopting is the only one open to me under the circumstances.”

I knew what was coming. The dull throbbing at my heart would have told me had my perception been of the densest. I sat myself stiffly on the chair and looked her straight in the face. “I am sure that whatever course you may think fit to adopt will be the right one.”

I could not help it; it seemed as though Satan himself had dragged the sneer from my lips. She felt the sting, too, pretty keenly. A dark flush shot swiftly athwart her sallow features and her ugly mouth gave an uglier twist; but she answered quietly enough, though with no little meaning in her voice, “It is extremely gratifying to know that you have such unbounded confidence in me. I can assure you it will considerably lessen the pain I feel in discharging such a disagreeable duty. You know, my dear, I am not like an ordinary person, and cannot afford to ignore the *convenances*. Were it not for that I should turn a deaf ear to the gossip, nor stop to inquire whether it were true or not.”

“Whether what were true?” I asked, though I well knew at what she was driving. It was an offence to see this woman of the bush shanty taking to herself such airs of consequence. Perhaps the knowledge that even the keeper of a bush shanty could claim precedence over the gentleman convict had not a little to do with the asperity of my manner. God help us! It is a dreadful thing to feel that we are not like others; that there is something discreditable in our past which prevents us from asserting the dignity we feel within. How I used to envy other girls — girls like Ella Wallace — who had no past shame to hide, but who could look into your face and frankly praise or blame, nor fear the retort that rose to the lips. I wonder how it would feel to be such a girl.

“This story,” she said, in answer to my query, raising her cold blue eyes to mine, “which Mr. Keestone told me last night.”

“Perfectly true,” I answered. “Mr. Keestone did me the honour to ask me to marry him.”

This wilful misunderstanding of her meaning, prompted by my perfect femininity, was not without its little triumph. She flushed warmly and looked considerably nettled, but in her quiet, meaning way she replied, “Really, is that so? I shouldn't have thought he would have gone as far as that.”

It was now my turn to feel the dagger's point, for though the words she uttered were insignificant enough, the amount of meaning she put into their expression was beyond description.

“I thought he must have told you all that last night.”

“No,” she said with one of her most affable smiles. “The poor fellow

seemed so affected by the relation of your misfortunes that I suppose he must have forgotten it."

If she had been a man, and I had been old Will, something more than words would have passed between us then, for my naturally impetuous nature was already in high revolt; but being only a woman I could do nothing but let loose my tongue.

"It was very considerate of him," I said, not knowing what else to say, and feeling that defeat too surely awaited me, no matter what I said or did.

"So I thought," she answered; "but then he always was that way inclined. Then I am to take it as true that your father was sent to Botany Bay?"

"Yes."

"A convict?"

"A convict."

"Poor child, how I pity you. I — I really can't tell you how grieved, how shocked, how sorry I am; but I scarcely think you did right in keeping me ignorant of the fact."

"We all have our skeletons," I said. "This is mine."

"But this one is so very dreadful."

"That is why I kept it locked up."

"Of course I can't blame you, you poor child," she said in a tone of deep concern, "and I am sorry that you should have had to descend to any subterfuge, but now that I do know all, I hope you will appreciate the delicacy of my position and not consider that I am treating you with unnecessary harshness. I have none of these petty prejudices myself, but for the sake of those *convenances*, of which I am the slave, and of my child, who really is most strongly prejudiced against you, I think it would be better if you accepted a month's notice."

My heart grew heavy as a stone, and I think my face blanched somewhat; I know my lips felt cold. I made some sort of reply — what, I don't recollect — and quitted the room. It was the first time I had ever been "discharged," and it rather took the pride out of me. But, in the privacy of my own room, reflection coming to my aid pointed out the probable cause of my dismissal, thereby dissipating much of the gloom which hung before my eyes. With the information respecting my parentage, which Captain Langton had so generously volunteered, had also come the knowledge of Mr. Keestone's sudden affection for me, a knowledge which must have produced in her breast an unpleasant moral fluttering. What had passed between them the night before was not very difficult to imagine, and in consequence she had conceived the idea of hanging my father's sin upon my peg. She was not one to relinquish her hold upon the object it had cost her countless dinners to obtain. His allegiance, apart from any affection she might entertain for him, meant

social prosperity to her, unbounded influence in her exalted world; and as such power was as the breath of her body, she clung to it with that tenacity of which it was well worthy.

Thrown thus upon my own resources, my first impulse was to acquaint my dear friends at Wallan with the news of my altered condition, but very little reflection on that head caused me to waver and then incontinently abandon the idea. I had gone forth in spite of their strenuous opposition to such a course, with the avowed intention of pushing my own way in the world; therefore to write admitting failure at the first trial was a proceeding which did not highly commend itself to me, and so I put off the writing of that letter till such time as I should be able to tell them of my new home.

As I expected, Miss Dora professed unbounded delight at the thought of my departure, but, as I did not expect, a couple of hours after she was weeping in my arms, telling me she loved me better than anyone in the world, except her father, and that she would never look at a book again if mamma sent me away. "Papa wouldn't do it," she said, "for he is very fond of you, Miss Hastings, and thinks you the nicest girl he ever met. Oh, I've heard him say so lots of times; and he thinks you're pretty, too — oh, doesn't he! And mamma and he almost quarrelled over you once. Wouldn't you just like to know what it was about? Ah, gammon. But I suppose I oughtn't to tell you these things, ought I?"

"I'm afraid not, dear."

"Well, it's all true," she said.

"Of course it is. If it were not you would never have said it."

"Oh, I don't know so much about that," said the young lady seriously. "I'm afraid I'm shockingly wicked sometimes. I know I have not been very good to you, Miss Hastings, and I'm sorry for it now you're going. You'll forgive me, won't you?"

"Of course I will, and I am only sorry we did not understand each other like this at first."

"I wish we had," she said contritely. "You see, papa was right. He told me what you were, and how I was to behave to you; but I wouldn't, because I was a cross, disagreeable thing. Ah, papa knew. I wish he were here now. I'm sure he wouldn't let mamma send you away."

"Hush, dear," I said. "I could not stay if your mamma wished me to go." Yet I was one with the child, believing that the father would not have parted with me so unceremoniously. He, however, was at that time away on his station, and before he returned I had quitted the house. Yet it was some recompense to feel that I had left one friend behind, and that henceforth Dora would remember me with affection as I should her with pleasure.

The day following my interview with Mrs. Ballestier I noted an advertisement in one of the morning papers which I thought might prove

suitable till something more exalted presented itself. It was a notification to all and sundry that Mrs. Swansea's Seminary for Young Ladies was in want of a governess, and that the yearly stipend was sufficient to keep body and soul together. To this advertisement I answered, setting forth my qualifications, which I'm afraid were extremely meagre — though I understood French and music well, and was not ignorant of the rudiments of drawing — and in due course I received a letter signed Rebecca Swansea, requesting the pleasure of an interview. This I showed Mrs. Ballestier and asked her if, in case of my proving successful, she would omit mentioning aught concerning my father's history, a proposition to which she readily assented.

“You must understand, dear,” she said, and I hated that word “dear” for years after, “that I do not bear you the slightest ill-will — I pity you too much for that — but my position before the world requires me to be particularly careful as to my methods of procedure.” Which, though apparently vague, was easily comprehended by me. I caught the ghost of a smile flickering across her ugly mouth; the insult tingled in my ears, and I have a distinct recollection of growing very hot and confused; but, suppressing the taunt which almost forced itself across my lips, I thanked her, somewhat curtly I'm afraid, for her consideration, and at once betook myself to Mrs. Swansea's Seminary for Young Ladies.

This most excellent training establishment for the future mothers of Australia was situated in an unpretentious street in St. Kilda, and boasted a beautiful brass plate on the door and a more elaborate intimation of the nature of the premises in the shape of a large gilded fancy sign on the side of the house. With a beating heart I pulled the bell, rather timidly I'm afraid — a great mistake, for the quality of humility does not satisfactorily impress all beholders. Presently the door was opened by a fresh-faced girl in a spotless cap and apron, who showed me into a cosy little room and bade me be seated. Here I sat for quite ten minutes, which seemed like an hour, staring vacantly at a big steel engraving of the Prodigal Son, when the rustle of a dress was heard outside and a moment after a short, stout, merry-faced woman entered the room. My courage rose wonderfully at the sight of her smiling face. It was a favourable first impression which the subsequent chatter of the little woman, who was Mrs. Swansea herself, did not materially affect. Of course her establishment was second to none in Melbourne, and of course she only took in gentlemen's daughters, and of course she consequently had to be very particular whom she engaged; but she was good enough to say that I appeared eminently satisfactory, and that, after she had written to Mrs. Ballestier, she would be pleased to communicate to me her decision.

And so I took my leave, and two days after a letter came for me with the assuring declaration that my character was an excellent one, and that Mrs. Swansea would esteem it a great favour if I could come to her on

that day week. This I showed Mrs. Ballestier, who was good enough to curtail my month's notice by a fortnight, being delighted to get rid of me; and so when the week was up away I went with a heavy heart to the Seminary for Young Ladies.

Of my life in that abode of learning, which did not last above three months, I have little to say. On the whole I found the children not half so bad as I imagined they would be. Stupid they were, of course, and wilful, as young ladies are inclined to be, while not a few of them were sadly lacking in manners and consideration for other's feelings; yet on the whole they were an average body of girls, and I think I was very fond of them all. The other teachers and I got on well together, while Mrs. Swansea, in whom I had not been mistaken, seemed to take a parental interest in me, and never lost an opportunity of showing me off to her visitors and neighbours; and it was mainly owing to this penchant of hers that my second downfall came about.

One day a message came for me to bring one of my pupils into the drawing-room, and you may imagine my astonishment when, after leading the child to her mother and explaining how well she was getting on with her lessons, I beheld that the room had another occupant, a lady in a light grey costume, which costume robed the figure of Maud Langton.

"How do you do, Flossie?" she said. "Who would have dreamt of seeing you here?" She rose as she spoke, holding out her hand with an amused smile.

"I have been here three months," was my feeble reply; for I was not a little taken aback at her appearance, and not a little annoyed either at being discovered in such a humble position.

"Three months, really! I had no idea you were in town."

"You know Miss Hastings?" asked Mrs. Swansea proudly.

"I ought to," said Miss Langton with a queer smile. "We come from the same part of the country."

"Look at that now," said good Mrs. Swansea. "What a lucky meeting."

"Yes," said Maud with her cold smile, "is it not?"

Then the two ladies, having duly kissed the little girl, handed her over to me, and off I marched with her, bowing coldly to Maud as I went. I thought Mrs. Swansea looked rather surprised at seeing two old friends part with such little courtesy, but before I had closed the door behind me I heard her expounding the various excellent methods then in vogue in her establishment — an exposition not at all alluring to her visitors, for a few minutes after I heard the front door slam, and from behind the curtain of an upstairs window I saw them drive away.

I felt exceedingly low-spirited as I descended to breakfast the next morning, dreading that Maud, whom I did not trust, might have let fall some hint of my ancestry, though my careful calculation of the time she

and her friend remained after my departure from the room left me some hope. Mrs. Swansea would, I felt sure, monopolize the whole of the conversation once she began descanting on the many merits of her paragon of seminaries, so that Maud, unless she had unceremoniously blurted out my secret, would have had no chance to lead up to an *exposé*, even if she had the inclination. I thought Mrs. Swansea, as she took her place at table, looked a little more prim and dignified than usual, and it seemed to me, though I tried to dismiss the thought as fancy, that there was a certain gravity in the smile with which she greeted me that I had never seen on her face before. Nevertheless, the breakfast passed off in much the usual manner, and we each went about our daily duties, I with a feeling of oppression about the heart, of which I vainly endeavoured to rid myself.

After tea that evening, and while I sat alone at the pupils' piano in the little room upstairs, playing over one of the old songs poor Harold loved so well, the door was quietly opened, and Mrs. Swansea, agitated and quite mysterious-looking, entered.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," she said. "I want to speak to you."

"Well?" I turned at bay and looked her straight in the face, and her eyes fell before mine. I am afraid she must have thought me almost impudent, but I felt that the old sin was dogging me again, and my spirit revolted at the injustice to which I was forced to submit.

"Read this first," she said, handing me a letter. One hurried glance at it was sufficient for me to guess its contents.

It ran as follows: —

"DEAR MADAM, — It has just come to my knowledge that the young woman, Hastings I believe is her name, to whom you have intrusted my child's education, is the daughter of a convict. I am perfectly willing to believe that at the time of her engagement you were in ignorance respecting her antecedents, but being now enlightened on the matter, you will understand that I cannot allow my daughter to receive further instruction from her."

So Maud, like her brother, had struck me in the back. It was a cruel blow, and for the moment deprived me of all strength; but I had of late grown accustomed to reverses, and when I handed back the letter I don't think Mrs. Swansea caught from my manner the slightest inkling of the true state of my feelings.

"Well, child," she said, apparently more concerned than I, "what have you to say? Is it true?"

"That I am the daughter of a convict?"

"Yes."

"Quite true."

She looked at me in wonder, evidently much astonished at my

coolness. She little knew how heartily sick I was of the whole business, and that I was on the verge of taking a morbid delight in my own unworthiness.

“Then I am sorry for you, my dear.”

“Thank you,” I said, considerably mollified by the tenderness of her tone.

“I received this letter this morning,” went on the little woman, “and it has taken me all day to make up my mind whether I would show it to you or not; but I am only a poor woman, you understand, and though I consider you most worthy in every way, I think you will agree with me that it is only natural that I should first look to myself.”

“Perfectly. I am only sorry that I should have been forced to come to you under false colours, but since you understand the difficulties under which I laboured, you will appreciate the motives which made me act as I did.”

“Heaven knows, I don't blame you, child. You did what you could scarcely help doing under the circumstances. I have none of these silly prejudices myself” (how familiar that phrase was becoming!), “but when we are dependent upon others for our living we are obliged to consider them.”

“Exactly. When would you like me to go?”

“I am afraid there is no other alternative. Not that I am dissatisfied with you, you understand, or that I think you unfit to instruct my pupils — there are none of those petty prejudices about me — but I am in that unfortunate position which obliges me to be always considering others. I shall miss you dreadfully, and I know the children will miss you; but if it will be any satisfaction to you, you may trust me to keep your secret.”

“Thank you.”

I think that was one of the worst nights I ever spent in my life, for whichever way I looked the clouds lowered darkly, and out of each came a low moaning wind, the cheerless harbinger of a stormier darkness yet.

Chapter III.

Two days after my interview with the principal of the Seminary for Young Ladies I left that excellent institution for good, its proprietress agreeing with me that since I was to leave shortly, the shorter I made the interval between then and my departure, the more agreeable it might be for all concerned.

“I have no wish to injure you, my dear,” she said, as I stopped for a moment in the hall to say good-bye, “so do not be afraid to send anyone to me, as I always speak of people as I find them.”

I thanked her, rather coldly I'm afraid, for her unconscious condescension stung me. I felt that my humiliation was come indeed. Like any servant, my “character” was to be tossed from hand to hand — a marketable commodity. Lucky, perhaps, to have a character which was marketable. Still, it seemed as though I was coming down in the world with a most exasperating velocity. But we shook hands warmly enough, she and I, and then the doors of the old school closed behind me, and Mrs. Swansea and her model Seminary for Young Ladies became things of the past.

From St. Kilda I drove direct to town and took lodgings in a quiet street in Fitzroy, from which abode I sallied forth every morning, after carefully scrutinizing the papers, with the Micawber-like hope that something would turn up. And a wretched time I had of it, too, in those lonely lodgings after fruitless journeyings over the hot pavement in pursuit of the spectre work; but that obstinacy, for my vanity will not allow me to call it by a better name, which had already prevented me from leaning on my friends during the first hour of my weakness, grew more perverse beneath this bitterer blow, and had I been even in a worse plight, I doubt if it would have sanctioned any appeal for help.

At first I anticipated little trouble in procuring employment of some kind, but as the days flew by, fate treating me with unexampled rigour, I began to grow alarmed, and for economy's sake shifted into less pretentious lodgings where they gave me a back room for a few shillings weekly. Rather too close to the roof to be pleasant in hot weather was this simple apartment, but from its little window I could look across the roofs and chimneys of the adjacent suburb of Collingwood till my eyes rested on the far-off Dandenong Ranges. To be sure it was not the direction in which my old home lay, but it was the bush, free and wild,

and I used to sit by the hour watching, and thinking of the days when we children, happy in our ignorance of cities and men, romped and galloped through our lives, troubling of nothing but in what manner we should pass the day.

I had not been long in my new home before I grew rather suspicious of its character, not that I had ever observed anything ill about the place, but the lodgers, and there were at this time about half-a-dozen of them, seemed to me somewhat erratic in their movements. For instance, they would lie abed all day, getting up only towards the evening, when they would eat their meals and then go out, returning at any time between eleven and the small hours of the morning, often, I am sorry to say, much the worse for drink. Not that they were always drunk, or that they wouldn't like to be, but drunk or sober they invariably ate and drank more when they returned from their nocturnal wanderings; and as they stumbled up to their respective rooms, it was "Good-night, old chap," or "Goodnight, old girl. Gord bless ya." And so good-night a dozen times over, for not infrequently they would hold a heated discussion on the door-mat, which, though often highly sensational in its tone, was never what you could call edifying. Then the men were all clean-shaven, and the house was placarded from top to bottom with theatrical playbills and the pictures of actors and actresses of every grade. Though I never spoke to the other lodgers, except to pass the time of the day, I was soon made acquainted with the nature of their calling, and I was beginning to seriously consider the advisability of giving this haunt of the Thespians a wide berth, when a little incident happened which was to open up a still newer and stranger experience to me.

In the room next to mine lodged a girl of about my own age, a black-browed, black-haired girl of no particular beauty — indeed, if I remember rightly, she had a most decided snub nose — but she had fine bold eyes, splendid teeth, and a most wholesome-looking mouth. She and I had often met on the stairs and were consequently on good nodding terms, but beyond "good-morning," or "good-evening," no conversation of a more confidential nature had passed between us. She, like the rest of the lodgers, went out of an evening and always came back late at night. I invariably waited for her, and when I heard her lock her door I used to turn my face to the wall with a sigh of relief. That she was an actress I knew, and not a very dignified one either, I guessed by her manner of joking with the men. Indeed, one night I heard her come out with some expressions which made me pass her on the stairs next day without seeing her. On the following day I was about to repeat the performance when she touched me on the arm.

"I say," she said, and undoubtedly her voice jarred slightly, "you're not blind, are you?"

"No," I answered.

“Oh, I thought you were,” she exclaimed with a queer smile.

“What made you think that?”

“Because you didn't see me.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said, feeling guilty of great rudeness and therefore extremely uncomfortable.

“Don't mention it,” replied the young lady. “Perhaps you won't be quite so blind next time,” she added with a saucy grin.

“I think not,” said I with a smile, for the open expressions and unrestrained style of this young lady affected me curiously.

By this time we reached our landing, and the girl, opening her door, said to me, “Come in and have a chat. Why should we play the fool any longer and pretend we can't speak without being introduced? I have been wanting to know you ever since you came. Of course, if you don't care for the acquaintanceship — ”

“No, no, don't think that. I'm very glad to know you, indeed I am,” and speaking thus, I stepped into her room, she following and shutting the door behind me. This apartment was even more dreary-looking than my own, for whereas I had attempted a little adornment with mine, she had done nothing to beautify hers.

“A nice crib for a Christian, isn't it?” she said. “Just perch on the bed, will you. It's the only comfortable seat. No, no, the foot or the head, if you don't mind. There's a big hole in the middle. Old mother Simpson, the harridan, charges me five bob for it, too — I mean the room, not the bed — the old thief! But there, I suppose you're just as badly off?”

“Equally,” was the reply, “only I pay more for the luxury.”

“More, do you? What an old rogue that woman is. Do you know, you're a fool to stand it.”

“I suppose I am; but two-and-sixpence more is scarcely worth quarrelling over.”

“Isn't it, though?” replied the young lady somewhat hotly. “Don't you run away with such big notions. It's all very well to stand on your dig. when you've got plenty of the ready by you, but wait till you've been on tour with a governor who don't come up to scratch with the salaries. My troubles, you won't sneeze at half-a-dollar then.” And the young lady wagged her head impressively and looked as though she had undergone the experience.

“You are an actress, then?” I asked.

She flushed and looked embarrassed, then said almost sullenly, “Yes. Are you?”

“I have never been on the stage,” I replied with a touch of dignity.

“Going to try it?”

“I think not.”

“Well, I suppose it's not the grandest profession in the world, but it's better than service any day in the week. What are you going to do?”

"I am in hopes of finding some suitable employment shortly."

"Well," she said, looking at me in a serious, interested sort of way. "I'm not going to recommend the boards, you know, although they have saved me from the wash-tub, not that the wash-tub mightn't be more preferable in the end. But if you have any talent, you know, it's an easy way of knocking out a good living, and if you have a little luck and less dig. — and you're pretty enough to have plenty of luck," she added in a way I did not like — "you ought to get on by leaps and bounds."

"I have no fancy for the life," I said.

"Still, one must live," answered the girl.

I might have answered with Talleyrand that I scarcely saw the necessity for it, but I only said, "I suppose so." Then I told her that I was then in communication for a clerkship, which I had some hopes of obtaining, so that I did not suppose it was possible that I should ever go on the stage.

"Well, just let me know if things don't turn out all right," she said. "Old Sauros would take you on any day for your looks alone."

"Who is he?"

"The gov'nor — the manager of the El Dorado. A regular theatrical what-you-call-um — a philanthropist. Takes a fatherly interest in the waifs and strays of the drama, especially when the gender's feminine."

"I'm afraid I hardly follow you."

She looked at me in her strange quizzing way.

"What are you giving me?" she said.

My ignorance of slang was not quite so great as it should have been, so I replied, "I merely asked you the question. I do not know the man."

"What," she exclaimed, "don't know Jimmy Sauros? Where *did* you come from?"

"From Wallan in the Wimmera district," I answered.

"I thought it must have been from somewhere in the back blocks. Not know Jimmy Sauros, good lord!" And the look with which she favoured me was one more of pity than anger.

"I have not that honour," I replied, not a little annoyed at the familiar tone this young person had thought fit to adopt.

"My troubles!" she exclaimed, which was her favourite exclamation, "I won't go bail for the honour, but I thought everybody knew him."

"But you see I am nobody."

"You don't think yourself somebody, do you?" she asked with a quaint smile, which was too pleasant to give offence. "My troubles! Old Jimmy's a rare canoozer, I can tell you, so if you ever call on him, don't forget to keep your eyes open."

"Thank you, I will," and I rose to go.

"Oh, by the way," she exclaimed with an impudent smile, "that horrid printer has forgotten to send home my visiting cards. I suppose it's the

same with you. But my name is Moorna Lestrangle.”

“And mine is Hastings. I'm afraid my printer has likewise forgotten to send my cards.”

“We'll discharge them both,” said Miss Lestrangle, a suggestion to which I laughingly acquiesced.

And thus did this chance meeting with Miss Moorna Lestrangle — whose real name was Louisa Sprattle — change the tenor of my ways and lead me into other and stranger spheres of thought and action; for when the reply came from the office to which I had written respecting the clerkship, informing me that the vacancy had been filled, I concentrated my whole thoughts on the theatre, and wondered if by any chance I might succeed at such a calling. Truly I had some primitive scruples to surmount before I could think of offering myself for an engagement; but was I not alone in the world? there being no soul to whom my connection with the stage could bring disgrace. Moreover, my little stock of money was getting desperately low, and I had already learned from experience that in the practical worlds of clerkship and education there were many more highly endowed than I, and that my chances of any but the most meagre livelihood from such sources were extremely shadowy. On the other hand, beauty of face and form is a marketable commodity, and unless my glass most grossly flattered me, I had fair cause to be contented with the gifts of nature. I do not think that I am vainer than other women, but God has given us all eyes to see, and it is not necessary that we should be blind when looking at ourselves. So, taking all things into consideration, I thought my appearance would do — for it would be folly to attempt to deny that good looks are not the chief charm of an actress — and that decision being satisfactorily arrived at, I next began to wonder if I had any latent histrionic ability. This last being a thing which could not be proved by the aid of a mirror, I tried to imagine that the so-called art of acting, as represented by the modern school in our modern plays, was not acting at all, but meant merely going on and talking as a lady or gentleman would talk. To do this, I knew, for I was always a diligent newspaper reader, was to be supremely artistic; which it might be in an actor who had risen from the gutter, but that it was such an extremely difficult feat for a man or woman who had been well brought up, I could not see, having yet to learn that life in a real drawing-room was not exactly the same thing as life in a theatrical one.

Again and again I broached Miss Lestrangle on the subject, trying to extract from her her opinions respecting acting as a fine art, but she, I soon discovered, was only an “extra lady,” and that she troubled herself no whit about art or its ennobling influence. This is the reason why she blushed so furiously when I first asked her if she were an actress, for with all her vulgarity she was not without her pride, and did not like to admit the insignificance of her status. So, moving in the dark, as it were,

and yet with my eyes open and each sense alert, I made up my mind to try for theatrical glory, since that was the only glory within my reach.

The next morning, therefore, having arrayed myself in my most attractive guise, I called on the manager of the El Dorado. At first it was impossible that I could see him, he was so frightfully busy — at least so I was told by an ungracious cub who glared at me through a pigeon-hole labelled “pay here.” But it so happened that while I was talking a lanky youth with a pleasant fair face came along, and stopping to learn my business informed me that the great man was then in his office, to which sanctum he (the youth) would willingly lead me if I would follow him. Thanking him I trudged off in his footsteps, and presently he knocked gently at a door, upon which was posted a bill of the play. We heard a voice inside mutter something, at which my guide softly turned the handle of the door and thrusting his long neck forward said, “A lady to see you, sir,” and smiling re-assuringly at me he nodded for me to enter, sliding off himself like a long ghost.

With a beating heart I stepped over the threshold of the lion's den and advanced a step into the room. The lion in question, who was sitting writing at a table with his back to me, took no more notice of me than if I had been a cat or dog, but continued to write away in the most energetic manner. Not liking to disturb him, and knowing that he would condescend to notice me when it suited him, I ventured to look about his sanctum in the hopes of better entertainment; but beyond numerous playbills and photographs — mostly of actresses in tights — there was little to make me forget the great man's absence of mind.

At last he flung down his pen with a savage grunt, and exclaiming in a loud, surly voice, “Well, what do you want?” swung round in his chair and faced me. But no sooner was his range of vision brought full upon me than a wonderful change came over his face. His surly looks fled as if by a stroke of magic, giving place to an extreme affability of feature, and rising from his chair he handed me a seat with many apologies, declaring that he had been so overworked and harassed of late that he scarcely knew what he was doing — all of which seemed to me a quite superfluous statement. Yet as he went on chatting about the worries to which theatrical flesh is heir, I could not help thinking that his cares sat lightly on him, for a sleeker or more prosperous-looking individual than Mr. James Sauros it would be hard to find. He was a man of medium height, dark and thick-set, with a pale, flabby sort of face and a pair of strange black eyes arched with shaggy brows. He wore no hair on his face, except a little whisker on each side, though I could not help thinking it would have been a charity had he hidden his mouth. In his spotless white shirt he wore three large diamond studs, and on his large, white, soft-looking hands, which he had a habit of caressing affectionately, he had two great diamond rings. A diamond locket also

hung as a pendant to his massive gold watch-chain.

These things I noted almost intuitively, for the glances I stole at him were mere flashes of looks, my curiosity in that direction being extinguished by the intensity of the looks with which he honoured me.

“Well, my dear,” he said at last in a perfectly familiar tone — indeed it was so familiar that I would not say its familiarity was not lessened on that account — “my dear” being, so I learnt afterwards, the common form of address among these people, “what can I do for you?”

“I have come to see if you could give me an engagement, Mr. Sauros.”

The great man looked very hard at me. “Have you ever done anything in this line?”

I blushed to tell the truth, but I answered, “No.”

“So you want me to take you on?” he asked with a smile.

“If you would,” I replied.

“Do you know,” he said, still smiling amusedly, “that I am besieged with young ladies like yourself, who know absolutely nothing of the profession, and yet who come to me believing that the El Dorado is a sort of theatrical kindergarten.”

“I'm sorry — ” I began.

“So they all are,” he said, “but that doesn't make my lot an easier one, does it?”

“No, and I beg of you to excuse me for taking up so much of your time,” and I rose to go.

“You are in a hurry,” he laughed.

“I must see the other managers.”

“And why must you see them?”

I thought Mr. Sauros was growing facetious, so I smilingly repeated that I was in search of an engagement.

“And how do you know I can't give you one?” he asked.

“I thought the El Dorado was not a theatrical kindergarten.”

“Good,” he laughed, “you had me fairly there. But if the El Dorado is not a kindergarten for the general public, it may be for the favoured few,” and here he shot at me a killing look from beneath his bushy brows.

“You are very kind,” I began, feeling grateful in a moment, “and if success may be gained by application to study, you may trust me to work my hardest.”

“You will not be required to work hard,” said Mr. Sauros kindly. “Be yourself, always yourself, and you will command success.” And then we fell to arranging for my appearance. He offered me a part, not large in interest but still of considerable extent, in the new piece he was then rehearsing, for the performance of which part I was to receive the sum of two pounds ten per week, a scale of remuneration which seemed to me bordering on the colossal. “And if you are not earning ten times that amount in a month's time,” said Mr. Sauros, “it will be entirely owing to

your own fault.”

“But I thought it was not in mortals to command success,” I said.

“It is in you, if you have the inclination,” he replied earnestly.

“Trust me,” I said warmly, “to do all within my power.” At which he laughed a soft, peculiar laugh. Then rising from his seat and telling me to call on him at the same time to-morrow, when he would have the part ready for me to take home and study, he showed me to the door, shaking hands most effusively and beaming on me with all the glory of his face.

At the same hour the following morning I again presented myself at the theatre, and on this occasion the young gentleman, who the day before had so insolently declared that it was impossible for me to see Mr. Sauros, was all smiles and amiability, and when I mentioned the genial manager's name led me to that great man's sanctum with express speed. Word had evidently been left that I was coming, for my escort, knocking at the door, opened it at the same time saying, “The young lady, sir,” and then stepped back for me to enter.

Mr. Sauros did not sit writing with his back to me this time, but upon my entering bounded to his feet greeting me with an ardour which was decidedly embarrassing.

“My dear Miss Trevor,” he said, for like Miss Louisa Sprattle I had, under this *nom de théâtre*, which was my mother's maiden name, sought to hide my identity — perhaps not so much out of compliment to my illustrious name as Miss Sprattle had to hers — “I was just wondering if you had repented of your determination to grace the boards of the El Dorado.”

“I am afraid I should not be able to do so even if I had the inclination.”

“Then that's all right,” said Mr. Sauros cheerfully. “We need not be afraid of losing you.”

“I hope you will not want to,” I replied, meaning that I hoped my first venture might prove successful enough for them to intrust me with another part.

“I shall not want to,” he answered, giving me a meaning look, which I pretended not to see. “I am only sorry I have not a more important part to offer you, Miss Trevor; but as you have had no experience of the footlights, it would scarcely be judicious to give you a big part, would it?”

I confessed it would not, and thanked him again for his kindness in intrusting me with a part of any description, which generosity of his he duly pooh-poohed, saying it was merely a business transaction, and that had he not thought my beauty would be the talk of Melbourne in a week, and thus benefit the exchequer of the El Dorado, he was doubtful whether his philanthropy would have opened a kindergarten for aspiring damsels. But a queer smile played round the corners of his mouth as he spoke, conveying the impression that Mr. Sauros was in a facetious

mood, and that he was not displeased with the evident sincerity of my gratitude. After the compliments, however, the business was introduced, and from a drawer in his desk he brought forth the part, requesting me to read it, which I did in a very nervous manner, though he declared I did it capitally, and that after a couple of rehearsals there would be no fault to find with me. Naturally pleased with his approbation, I was not yet vain enough to imagine that I had succeeded in establishing my reputation as an actress, though if the truth be told I did not look forward to my appearance with any considerable trepidation, believing that the attainments necessary for distinction were not of the most exacting nature. As we are all actors by instinct, so are we all able, more or less, to stand as judges of acting, and I had seen enough of the theatre, whilst living with the lively Mrs. Ballestier, to enable me to distinguish between comedy and farce, though the line is so thinly drawn in these days that you have to put on your glasses to see it. Besides which, I had witnessed what had been called excellent performances, which performances I never doubted of equalling with a little experience. The first essential to good acting, which is common sense, is born in the individual; all others are tricks of the trade which must be learnt. That I could learn these tricks I did not doubt. Besides, too many novices succeeded in this profession for anyone of confidence to fear it; and though in my heart of hearts I was not afraid of the ordeal, it was not without an inward quaking that I attended my first rehearsal, not that I could not speak the words well enough, but because I was so entirely ignorant of the business behind the scenes. Mr. Sauros was there, however, and his presence lent me confidence, besides which, the stage-manager was so excessively polite, so inexpressibly considerate, explaining my entrances and exits with so much affability that I found myself wondering if all stage-managers were as courteous as this one, and if so what a sadly maligned race they were. Having heard Miss Lestrangle's opinion of him, I was on the look out for a monster in human form. Consequently I was agreeably surprised — failing to find the true cause of his actions. Perhaps it was because the “guv'nor's” eye was on him; perhaps it was something else, of which I had a half idea.

“Nice man you call him,” said Miss Moorna Lestrangle, alias Louisa Sprattle, referring to Mr. Sauros, as she and I, after rehearsal, sat in an adjacent coffee-house over a cup of tea and a bath bun, “nice man,” she repeated disdainfully, her big black eyes flashing angry sparks, “nice devil, you mean.”

“I thought him extremely kind,” I said.

“He always is — to your sort.”

“My sort?”

“Look here,” said the girl, favouring me with a strange look, her bold eyes seeming to pierce through me, “don't you know that Jimmy Sauros

has the reputation of making himself agreeable to every pretty girl that enters the El Dorado? El Dorado," she repeated scornfully, "Hell Dorado, more like."

"I did not know it."

"And don't you know," she went on excitedly, "that stage-manager Slosson is the biggest beast in the profession — a foul-mouthed wretch who would have died long ago if dirt could have choked him?"

"I know nothing of him."

"It's just as well. My troubles! and to think you took it all in. It would be funny if it wasn't so serious. But I don't see why I should put you up to all these wrinkles. No one ever troubled about me. I might have gone to the dogs or the devil. Nobody'd have cared, and I don't suppose it would have mattered much. I wasn't quite so green as you, that's all. Why, I don't suppose you even know who old Sauros is?"

I confessed that I knew nothing beyond the fact that he was Mr. Sauros and the manager of the theatre.

"He's the manager of the theatre right enough," she said, "and he'd like to be Mr. Sauros."

I confessed to the ignorance of her meaning by a puzzled look.

"Sauros ain't his name," she said. "Don't he wish it was." And then in a lower voice, as though she were afraid the very cups were listening, "Do you know *what* he is?"

"How, what he is?"

"He's a convict, that's what he is, and if he had his due he'd be in gaol now."

I felt my lips quiver and the blood run cold about my heart. "The fact of him being a convict does not necessarily prove him bad."

"Don't it though," she said. "You take my word for it, it's in 'em — in the blood. They're all bad, every one of 'em."

"I think we had better go," said I, rising. To prolong the argument would not have proved conducive to the well-being of my emotions.

Chapter IV.

LUCKILY for me my part was of little importance, for though at rehearsal I tried to concentrate my thoughts on the business of the stage, I could not wholly grasp my new surroundings, and for the greater part of the time was utterly confused. People came and went, flitting about the dark wings like so many spectres. To me it was all novelty and wonder. And yet I was most anxious to do well — anxious as only a novice can be — and with that intention I followed every movement of the actors with singular intensity, picturing my own movements accordingly. Yet, somehow, those movements never quite pleased me, which was surprising considering the amount of contempt with which I had regarded such accomplishments. I'm afraid I also grew dreadfully nervous — on account of those movements — as the time approached, and angry at my own simplicity when I beheld how coolly all the other people took the coming ordeal. There was, however, some consolation in knowing that in a little time I should be like them.

At last the eventful day broke, the day which seemed to me the greatest of my life. I was dressed hours before it was time to go to the theatre, during which dreary and yet exciting interval I made frantic and futile efforts to “study” my part. What there was in it to “study” I don't know, for it was the commonest of common dialogue, but I use the word as it is used behind the scenes — irrespective of meaning. Study, then, being a failure, I stalked up and down my narrow chamber repeating the immortal lines with true dramatic fervour — that is, as many of them as I could remember, for though a week ago I could have repeated the whole rigmarole backwards, my memory began to cut capers when it should have been most sedate. This proving a further source of great anxiety, I abandoned dramatic literature for the nonce and devoted my energies to the brewing of a cup of tea, for I always carried my own tea pot and spirit lamp with me. This slight refreshment acted like a sedative upon my nerves — for this tannin juice is a wonderful thing — and presently I was not alone enabled to eat a few biscuits, but to read over my part with some idea of its meaning. Then Miss Moorna Lestrangle, alias Louisa Sprattle, came in to borrow my curling tongs, and with her glib chatter soon dispelled the grisly phantoms with which I had surrounded myself.

It was a queer sensation, though, when I heard my cue sounded. My heart gave a great jump, and for the space of a second I stood hesitant.

Then involuntarily I glided from the obscurity of the wings into the glare of the footlights. I saw nothing in front of me but a great yawning space; I seemed to hear nothing but the confused murmur of voices near me. Yes, it was decidedly fortunate that I had only a few words to speak. When the drop fell no one but myself had any knowledge of the agony I endured.

In the second act I was rather better — which was not saying much — having somewhat recovered from my first fright; while in the last act the little I had to do was, to my thinking, accomplished with much credit. I had conquered the terrors of imagination. I had swallowed the draught, so to speak, and so far from disliking it was ready for more.

“Capital, Miss Trevor, capital upon my word. I never saw a more promising first appearance. Allow me to congratulate you, heartily congratulate you,” and Mr. James Sauros seized my two hands and beamed upon me with genuine enthusiasm.

Thanking him, I replied depreciating my efforts, but promising him to do better when I grew more accustomed to the surroundings.

“Of course you'll do better,” he said, “and if I'm not mistaken will continue to do better. In three months' time you shall be my leading lady, and if you'll follow my advice I'll make you the greatest actress in Australia.”

I laughed rather nervously at this, knowing he was merely flattering my vanity; and yet I was young and enthusiastic enough to catch faint glimpses of a far-off glory, so that it would be wrong to say my vanity was not pleased.

“One must work hard before one can achieve greatness,” I said.

“It all depends on what you call greatness — a quality which most people confound with celebrity. But greatness will come to you, with your face, if you will only take the trouble to beckon it.”

“Ah, you are thinking of celebrity now.”

“Well, yes, I suppose I was,” he laughed. “Anyway, just give me a look in at the office before you go, will you? I want to see you particularly.” But before I could gather what the particular business was he had gone.

As I made my way to the dressing-room I encountered on the dimly-lighted stairs a woman who, descending while I was mounting, seemed to purposely block the way. Looking up at her with the intention of asking her to make room, I could see that she had a broad smile on her face, for though the light was at the back of her head I could distinctly trace a row of glistening teeth.

“Would you mind — ” I began.

“Certainly not — Florence Hastings.” The way she emphasized my name sounded extremely disagreeable.

I advanced a step up the stairs, and at that moment she turned her head aside so that the light fell upon a part of her face.

“Polly Lane!” I exclaimed, for it was no other than the siren of the “Shearer's Rest.”

“Vere Siddons,” she answered, correcting me with an impudent smile.

“Are you engaged here?” I asked, for that she could be seemed impossible since I had not noticed her.

“I have that honour,” she replied.

“I have never seen you.”

“I suppose not. Actresses never see supers. Strange, though, that we should both have struck the same crib, isn't it? I had no idea you would ever blossom into an actress. Rather a come down, isn't it?”

“I may not think so.”

“Of course. By the way, has Ella Wallace taken to it too?”

“No,” I said abruptly.

“Still grieving for her Will?” said the girl, with a mocking laugh. “Poor old Will, he was worth the whole lot of you. He would have been right enough if he'd only had a chance like other fellows. I always pitied that poor boy, though I must confess it was a triumph to see him prefer the ‘Shearer's Rest’ to the abode of the worthy Wallaces.”

“You did your best to ruin him,” I answered hotly.

“Not I,” she replied with the same mocking laugh, only it sounded harder and bitterer than before. “I only wanted to make him forget that his father was a convict. But I beg your pardon. I am monopolizing the whole of the staircase,” and with a pretentious bow she moved to one side, drawing her skirts tightly round her. Thanking her I flew quickly up the stairs and passed to my dressing-room, feeling none too sanguine of the success of this meeting. That it was a great triumph for her to see me brought down to my present level I did not doubt, for during the whole of our lives a tacit understanding of enmity had existed between us. I had never spoken to her before, and whenever we met in the street I pretended not to see her, while she, to give her her due, would pass me by with a proud sweep of her skirts and an elevated nose. And now, in spite of all, fate had at last thrown us together, and for the first time we had exchanged confidences.

Mr. Sauros was sitting in an easy chair pulling vigorously at a big cigar when I entered the office, but on seeing me rose hastily to his feet, laid aside his half-finished weed and offered me a chair.

“I was afraid you were never coming,” he said; “but it's better late than never, isn't it?”

I said I thought it was, and also ventured to remark that it really was late — an observation which seemed to escape him, for instead of paying any attention to it, he said, “The more I think over your performance of to-night, the more it impresses me, and I wish to offer you a twelvemonths' engagement at five pounds a week — salary to begin with our next piece. What do you say to the offer?”

What could I say? I jumped at it — metaphorically — telling him in my simplicity that I would do my utmost to deserve the confidence he had placed in me.

“I know you will,” he said. “It is a great pleasure for me to help all who are interested in their work. I think, putting personal considerations aside, that we all have the welfare of the drama at heart, and I know that in introducing you to the stage I have laid dramatic art under a personal obligation to me.”

The admiration of Mr. Sauros, though purely artistic and therefore quite Platonic, was a little too apparent. There was no eluding it, no pretending not to see; and while I answered him that I hoped he did not overrate my poor abilities, I was conscious all the time of a burning on each cheek which must have betrayed my agitation.

He pooh-poohed the idea of overrating my abilities. He had seen too much acting of every description not to know the good from the bad, “And,” said he, “I’ll stake my reputation” (though what manner of fearsome thing that might be no man could say), “that at the end of your engagement you’ll be the foremost actress in the country. Yes,” he repeated impressively, “the foremost actress in the country, and so I’ll pledge you, my dear.” He rose as he spoke, and going over to a cupboard in one corner, extracted therefrom a bottle of champagne.

“Your future success and greatness,” he said, “and in the hour of your triumph I hope you won’t forget who helped you on to the ladder.” He smiled cordially and drained his glass.

“Thank you,” I said, merely sipping the wine, having heard that it was not wise to drink with Platonic strangers.

“Come, come, my dear,” he cried, looking hard at me, “you don’t drink up. Do you dislike the wine?”

“I rarely touch it,” I replied. “It invariably makes my head ache.”

“Pooh,” he said, “there’s not a headache in a dozen quarts of this.”

“But — indeed I am not accustomed to champagne, and, if you don’t mind, I’d rather not. Yet I thank you all the same for your kindness, and your good wishes, which I hope you may see realized.” I rose, holding out my hand. “Good-night.”

“Good-night,” he said, pressing my hand gently. “But stay! You live in Fitzroy, do you not?”

I informed him that such was the case.

“Then,” said he, “as I live in East Melbourne, and as I am going home, I shall be happy to offer you the half of my cab.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sauros, but I — I couldn’t think of putting you to such inconvenience.”

He insisted. He had kept me late and he considered it imperative that he should see me safely home. As for inconveniencing him, he begged to assure me that I should be doing nothing of the kind. “Or if you prefer

my room to my company," he added in an injured tone, "my cab is at your disposal."

What could I say to him then? What I thought was another matter. One thing was certain; I could not tell him my thoughts and stay on at the El Dorado. So the upshot of it was that we left the theatre together, I on his arm, for thus he would insist upon escorting me to the cab.

There were several people hanging about the kerbstone as we emerged, a circumstance which Mr. Sauros anticipated, I have no doubt, and as we entered the vehicle and drove off a woman's shrill laugh rang triumphantly out.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I recognized the voice in an instant. It was Polly Lane's. Knowing I had gone into the manager's private office, she had hung about the doors to see me emerge, and her horrible laugh of triumph told too plainly the enjoyment she derived from seeing me ride away with the notorious Sauros.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Again the shrill laugh came rushing up the street, heard above the crunching of the wheels and the clatter of hoofs.

"What a laugh," said Sauros. "The poor creature must be mad."

"Yes," I said, nestling still closer into my corner of the hansom, "mad with joy."

Sauros laughed. "Poor devil."

I laughed too — almost as madly as the woman.

Chapter V.

THE rest of our drive was a very silent one, void of all incident worthy of record, and broken only now and again by short questions and shorter answers. At last the vehicle drew up at the kerb before my lodgings, and bidding good-night to the amiable manager, whose restraint had so belied his reputation, I hurried in and upstairs, glad to have escaped without injury, and vowing never to risk such an adventure again.

In the morning, as soon as I heard Miss Moorna Lestrangle, alias Miss Louisa Sprattle, stirring, I knocked at the thin partition which divided our apartments, and receiving an encouraging reply, got up, slipped on a gown and forthwith paid that young lady a visit. She was reading the morning paper as I entered, or rather that portion of it which gave an account of the *première* at the El Dorado. She greeted me with a smile of pleasure.

“Well?” I said, beginning to feel very shaky.

“I hope you'll think so,” she answered. Then seeing the awful look of anxiety on my face she burst out laughing. “Don't look so scared, old girl. It's all right. They haven't killed you this time. Look at this.” And she handed me the paper, pointing out by the aid of a not overcleanly thumb-nail a paragraph which recorded my appearance in most satisfactory terms. Of course I was a beginner, anyone could see that, and I was nervous, and I would do better when I grew accustomed to my surroundings; but my voice, face, and figure left nothing to be indeed, I might be looked upon as a decided acquisition to the stage.

“That's all right, isn't it?” said Miss Lestrangle, looking up at me in her perky way; for though arrayed in a shabby old ulster in lieu of a dressing-gown, she yet reclined on her bed of down: very much down, as she used to say, in the middle — alluding to a hole in the bed through which her mattress had an evil habit of falling.

“It's very kind of them,” I said, grateful for the small crumbs of comfort the notice contained. “I really was dreadfully nervous, and was afraid I had made a fearful exhibition of myself.”

“Well,” replied Miss Lestrangle frankly, “it would be nonsense to pretend that you're an actress yet, but I believe you'll make one right enough if you stick at it. Everyone was surprised to see you go through so well — that is, everyone but that cat, Vere Siddons. A spiteful little hussy, mark my words.”

"I never heard much to her credit," I answered wearily. These ever-recurring reminiscences of the past, a past which I so wished to forget, were exhausting my patience.

"Then she does come from your part of the world?"

"Yes; her name is Polly Lane. I suppose she told you who I was?"

"Well, yes, she did pitch some long yarn which went in at one ear and out the other. I never did like her myself," Miss Sprattle went on reassuringly, "but you know in our profession we have to rub shoulders with all classes of people."

"Of course." And yet I could scarcely help laughing at the idea of that gaunt girl in the threadbare ulster taking to herself the airs of a person of consequence.

"What did old Sauros say?" she asked next.

"He professed himself highly pleased with my appearance."

"So, the rascal's at the same old game?"

"I mean," I exclaimed, feeling very uncomfortable, "that he was pleased with my first appearance as an actress, and that he has offered me a twelve months' engagement."

"Oh, oh," cried Miss Lestrangle, opening wide her flashing black eyes, "that's the way the wind blows, is it? My troubles! And what did you say?"

"What would I say? I thanked him for the offer and accepted it at once."

"Of course you did," she exclaimed witheringly. "I'd have known you'd come from the back blocks if you hadn't told me."

"I don't understand you," I said, feeling a little indignant. "I know more than one who would like to have such a chance."

"Yes," she said, "but you're a cut above our class, and I don't want to see you make a mess of it like the rest of us."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I mean this; if you haven't anyone else to advise you, take my advice and don't bind yourself to Jimmy Sauros for twelve months. If you do, you'll regret it. It's a fair put-up job."

"I don't see it," I replied. "Considering that I am a nobody in the profession, and that I am to get five pounds a week —"

"For being a nobody?"

"I think the offer is an extremely handsome one."

"So it would be if it was honest," said Miss Lestrangle. "Jimmy Sauros is one of the smartest and most unscrupulous men in the profession, and if he offers you five pounds a week now, he knows perfectly well that you'll be worth twice the money in three months' time."

"You think he regards me as a sound investment?"

"I do. But if I am not mistaken in the man, that is not the only reason he has for offering you the engagement. But it's nothing to do with me."

My troubles! Why should I bother?"

"What other reason can he have, Moorna?" I asked, though already I had begun to suspect that there was something more than mere generosity and love of art at the bottom of the manager's munificence.

"Look here," she said suddenly. "How do I know you're not poking fun at me? Though I'm not very clever, I half-suspect you know as much as I can tell you."

I assured her I had no intention of shamming the innocent. Truly, I was learning rapidly, but I wanted my ideas confirmed.

"Well, then," she said, "take my advice; make any excuse you like, but don't sign for twelve months. I told you what sort of a man he was. He has honoured you with his consideration, and he'd engage you for twelve years to gain his own ends. I daresay you'll make a very good actress — you shaped well enough at it last night — but you are not yet actress enough for any disinterested person to engage for a year at five pounds a week."

All of which appeared most reasonable to me when I came to think it out, though I could not help deploring the misfortune which seemed to eternally dog my steps. Was I never to be left in peace; to go about my work like other mortals, knowing only such cares as others suffer? It seemed not. Wherever I went, whatever I did, the old past, like a persecuting fate, followed close upon my heels ready to bite whenever I stopped to look around. What there was about me different from other women I could not tell, but those very gifts of nature, of which I was so vainly proud, instead of elevating me as I had dreamed, brought me nothing but shame and regret. True my perverseness had cost me much, for there was one who looked upon me as something of a diviner mould, but, like the "base Indian," I threw the pearl away. Perhaps I did not think so: perhaps I thought that I had yet the power to look and conquer. Man's love is not always a thing apart from man's life.

Then there was this meeting with Polly Lane, this double misfortune, so to speak. The tacit enmity of old would at last find excellent scope for vengeance. Already she had begun to tell my secret. In a week every man and boy about the theatre would have my history in his keeping, embellished, I doubted not, with such insinuations as would naturally spring from an envious mind. Yet it was some consolation to know that professional people are singularly broad-minded. Having a full knowledge of certain sides of human nature, they duly appreciate its weaknesses, and are rarely surprised at anything that happens in this strange world. Had I been Margaret Catchpole herself it would have raised but little commotion in their ranks, swarming as they are with every sort of nondescript. It was strange, though, that she and I, both so far from home, should meet thus; and I felt more convinced than ever that fate had decided to run me down in earnest. I almost laughed as I

thought how doggedly illfortune had followed my steps; but I'm afraid the inclination was prompted by a feeling of utter recklessness.

During the performance that night, Mr. Sauros came behind and spoke to me, asking when I would find it convenient to sign the contract, which he had had just drawn up. "For," added he with one of his pleasant, oleaginous smiles, "having found a treasure I intend to keep it."

"I'm afraid you flatter me, Mr. Sauros."

"Flatter you, my dear, not at all." And he duly pooh-poohed the preposterous idea.

"And yet you have almost turned my head with vanity. Luckily, however, I am not so vain or selfish as to take advantage of your unexampled generosity."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, looking sharply into my face, not knowing whether I was laughing at him or not.

"In a moment of weakness," I replied, now fully alive to the sense of the proceedings, and nowise objecting to the fun, "taking compassion on my peculiar position, you were kind enough to make me an offer which I would not have you regret for the world."

"But I shall not regret it," he exclaimed.

"Pardon me, but you may. In that case I should be more wretched than you. And so, to avoid all possible chance of a mistake or misunderstanding, I think it would be wiser for me to play as I am till I find out if I be really suitable for the stage."

"What nonsense," cried Mr. Sauros gruffly. "Of course you're suitable. No one more so, I should say. And if you're not, what's it to do with anyone else so long as it suits me to have you?"

"I'm afraid that is hardly the same thing," I said with a smile.

"Look 'ere," he said, he usually forgot his aspirates when excited, "don't you be so foolish as to throw up a good thing on insufficient grounds. If you know when you're well off, you'll jump at the offer."

"I know I should do so, and I believe nine out of ten in my position would; but I am scrupulous, I suppose, and could not think of receiving a salary which I did not conscientiously earn."

Mr. Sauros looked very cross at this, thinking me inexpressibly idiotic, I suppose, and, had it not been for fear of giving offence, he would undoubtedly have indulged in a little of that choice language for which he was so justly renowned.

"If I, who pay the salary, am satisfied with the work, I don't see that you will have cause to complain," he argued. "I understand your scruples and admire them immensely, but, between ourselves, don't you think that you are just a bit too honest?"

"Oh, Mr. Sauros," I exclaimed, looking very shocked. "As though one could be too honest."

"Well, well," he said, looking anything but pleased, "I shall keep the

offer open. When you have surmounted those scruples of yours you might let me know.”

“I will,” was the reply, and as my cue came at that moment our conversation was brought to a sudden termination.

For the next three days, except to chat for a moment or two whenever he saw me, Mr. Sauros forbore to pester me with his attentions, for which I was devoutly thankful. But on the fourth day, or rather, night, during the performance, a note was brought me from him, requesting a short interview after the play on a matter of urgent importance. What this business of such importance could be I wondered, and it was not without a feeling of alarm that I knocked at the great man's door, first telling Miss Moorna Lestrangle to wait for me.

“Ah, my dear,” said the great man tenderly, approaching and going through a quite superfluous handshake, “I am glad you've come. I'm off to Sydney tomorrow and shan't be back, I'm afraid, for a month or six weeks, and I want you to decide now about that engagement. I have also here our new piece with a splendid part for you — a part I can see you in, a part that will fit you like a glove.”

“It is very good of you,” I began.

“Not at all, my child. I am interested in you — I may say deeply interested, and would like to see you succeed in your profession. In fact,” went on this magnanimous patron of the drama, “I want you to succeed. The only difficulty about the matter is this. Three months hence we appear in Sydney, where we play for two months certain, and longer if the business prove profitable. From there we go north to Brisbane, the entire company, don't you understand, so that unless you will make one of us I'm afraid we shall have to leave you behind. I needn't say,” he added tenderly, “that such a misfortune as that is a thing I shrink to contemplate.”

It seemed as though he had forced my hand at last. I saw the smile playing round the corners of his mouth as he watched me with an intensity which was almost terrifying. But cornered I was not as yet. I told him I would think it over and let him know my decision in the morning. The fact was, I wanted to lay the case before Louisa Sprattle, and hear what her practical sense had to say to it.

“Very well,” he said, “the morning will do splendidly. I shall be here till one. By the way,” he added, “I'd better make a note of it. You don't know what a poor head I've got for remembering things.” So diving into his breast pocket for his note-book, he brought it forth in company with a flat morocco case. “Oh,” he exclaimed, opening the latter article, “this is something I picked up to-day. What do you think of it?” He handed me the case, which contained a beautiful diamond and pearl bracelet, and then began to scribble unconcernedly in his note-book.

“It's a lovely thing,” I said.

“You like it, do you?” he asked off-handedly.

“I think it very beautiful.”

“Not bad is it? You can have it if you like.”

“Oh, no, no.”

“Why not?”

“Thank you, no, no.” And I held it out for him to take. But instead of taking it he caught my hand, and almost before I was aware of it he had clasped the jewel on my wrist.

“There,” he exclaimed, “the thing is yours. Keep it.”

Though flushed and terribly excited I yet had my wits about me. Quickly undoing the bracelet, I deposited it on the table.

“Why have you done that?” he asked with an ugly look. “Isn't the present good enough?”

Once more I wished that for a moment only I was old Will, but I answered quietly, “On the contrary. It is too good.”

At this he laughed unpleasantly, saying, “Well, well, I am sorry. I shall know better next time.”

I did not like the tone of his voice, and my blood being up I answered hotly, “You evidently forget yourself, Mr. Sauros.”

“Is that to be wondered at, Miss Hastings?” he replied with a meaning look, and a strong emphasis on the name.

I knew in a moment that my story had reached his ears, and that he intended to profit by it, so, turning towards the door, I said, “This is the sort of thing I might have expected from you.”

There was a taunting ring in my voice which could not be mistaken. His face grew suddenly black as a thunder-cloud. “What do you mean by that?” he cried. “Who the devil are you, I should like to know? Fancy a currency girl giving herself such airs.”

“Yes,” I said, “it's almost as incongruous as a convict's taunt.”

The hot blood rushed in a torrent to his pale, evil face, and for a moment I thought that he would choke in the impotence of his rage. But the paroxysm of anger passing, he advanced to where I stood, shaking his jewelled fist in my face and making use of the most awful language. Terrified almost to death, for I thought he would strike me, I backed involuntarily towards the door which, opening quickly, I slammed behind me.

Outside I found the faithful Moorna cuddling against a lamp-post. Seizing her arm without speaking, I hurried her away through the darkness.

Chapter VI.

I AM afraid I cannot honestly say my sleep was soothed with pleasant dreams that night, for Mr. Sauros, in the form of a malignant fury, with outstretched arms and a most diabolical smile on his face, pursued me through long miles of gloomy theatrical forests, and though I ever eluded him, to be sure, or woke up just in the nick of time, he yet contrived to get so close to me that I found the prospect anything but encouraging.

In the morning I arose feeling but little refreshed, and knocking at the partition which divided me from Miss Lestrangle, to prepare her for my coming, I entered the apartment of that young lady, and for a couple of hours at least we descanted on our own personal wrongs, and on the wrongs of forlorn maidens such as we.

“My troubles!” exclaimed Miss Lestrangle, making use of her favourite expression, “it's nothing. It makes you get on your dig. a bit at first, but, lord, it soon wears off. And as for there being any insult in the business — why, such a thing won't enter his head. Most likely he'll think you the biggest fool he ever met.”

“Is he as bad as that?”

“Bad! He don't think it bad. It's life, fun, anything you like to call it — except badness. Nobody blames him. It's us that pays.”

“It's horrible.”

“It is — till you get used to it. Makes your dig. rise, doesn't it? I was never a lady, worse luck, but I was brought up respectably, and I felt it at first.”

“And don't you feel it now?”

“I burn a bit sometimes,” said the girl, “but I always try to give them as good as they bring. I know you will never look at it in my way, but it would be better for you if you could laugh more. Why should you think the less of yourself because now and again a blackguard dares to presume? It's all very well to get on your dig., but dignity don't count. You'll find this a pretty rough road to travel, I can tell you; for girls without husbands, fathers or brothers are not dangerous to attack. Take my advice, forget all about the matter; go down to the theatre to-night and do your duty as usual.”

At first I demurred at this, vowing I would never enter the El Dorado again while that rascal Sauros was its evil deity; but not being without a certain amount of reason, I soon saw the excellence of Miss Moorna's

advice, and that same night we trudged off to the theatre together. Luckily the manager did not show up on this occasion, though I learnt that he had not yet gone to Sydney. I therefore breathed with greater freedom, and when the performance was over quitted the theatre with more assurance than I had entered it. The next day, however, the estimable Sauros did indeed take his departure for the New South Wales capital, an occurrence which occasioned me no little tranquility of spirit.

In the meantime the run of the *Bushranger's Bride*, which was the romantic title of our drama, drew near its close, and as I had not been reengaged for the new piece I knew I should soon have to take my departure from the sacred portals of the El Dorado — a proceeding which I contemplated with little agitation of mind, though my pride might have felt itself considerably humbled.

And here I must confess that for some time now I had not written to the Wallaces, my fortune being of such a nature as to make me ashamed of it. That they could now have little sympathy for me or my affairs I doubted not, and feeling that to all intents and purposes I was an outcast, I determined to go my own way and fight my own battle. Foolish thing! Could I only have known how their hearts ached for me, I would have flown to them with all my shame in my face and besought them to let me live and die in their service. Of Will, poor old Will, I knew absolutely nothing, and, being in no enviable mood at this period, what I imagined of him was not likely to be of a cheerful nature. How I longed for a sight of his dear old face. Poverty would have seemed nothing with him, and misfortune but a thing to laugh at. Poor old Will.

At length the run of our piece came to an end, and I left the El Dorado with my salary in my pocket and my prospects hopeful if vague. I had kept my eyes open during my brief novitiate, and each sense alert, and as I think women take to acting naturally, I quite believed myself capable of essaying successfully any ordinary rôle. And there is nothing in this world like confidence, say what you will, or call it as many disagreeable names as you please. Not that I was so far gone as to credit myself with genius, which poor word is never so badly used as when applied to the stage, for genius is supposed to be original, whereas the worst enemies of the theatre cannot accuse it of that crime. No, I didn't think, and I hoped I wasn't, a genius, knowing how fatal the gift is, but all the same I did not think the work called for anything but a modest talent. And in this I am well aware my views must be peculiar, because I could not get anyone else to look at them, or me, with my eyes. I hung about the doors of the Royal Bunyip Theatre for quite a week in my vain endeavours to interview the august manager thereof, and when I was eventually ushered into the presence of that great man he had nothing to tell me but that he was "full — full-up." I felt that he might easily have told me this a week before, but I was fast losing courage and had not the heart to tell him so.

With a feeble “Good-morning” I departed.

From there I went to the Koh-i-Nor — the stage entrance of which is situated in one of the most fragrant portions of Little Bourke Street — and while I was civilly trying to get a little information from the savage who zealously guarded the sacred precincts of that Temple of Thespis, who should come up to me and touch his hat but Captain Langton's old groom, Flaskett. He was the same grim-looking fellow, a little grimmer if anything, I thought, but as his eyes met mine they positively sparkled with pleasure.

“Good-day, miss,” he said. “Have you forgotten me?”

“No,” I answered coldly, believing the man's appearance was not unconnected with his master, whose name had grown very notorious of late, “you are Captain Langton's servant.”

“Was, miss,” said the man.

“You have left him, then?”

“Long ago. I'm afraid the Captain wasn't my sort. I haven't seen him since he came back from England, though I've heard a good deal of him. In the hands of the Jews, they say — Langton Station mortgaged up to the hilt. A fine place too. A great pity. But beg pardon, miss, I suppose this is all stale news to you?”

“No, I was not aware of it.”

It now struck me that I was scarcely doing a dignified thing in thus familiarly conversing with one whom I had hitherto known only in a menial capacity; but as I looked into the little man's face I thought, ugly as it was, that I had never seen it look so open, so full of dignity and pride, while his voice, beyond being respectful, had none of the humility of the serving-man. Indeed, the change was so marked that I must be blind not to notice it. Moreover, the man had always been extremely civil to me, and one in my position had no right to despise the lowliest.

“And what are you doing now?” I asked.

Flaskett burst out laughing all over his little eyes. “I'm acting, miss.”

“I think you told me you were an actor.”

“I'm afraid I was scarcely that, but I am now; besides, miss, I've took — taken lots of lessons in elocution since then. I had a pretty tidy sum saved up when I left the captain, so I says to myself, ‘Bob, my boy, you've got to raise yourself. No more flunkeying for you, my son.’ So off I went to Professor Dobbs, the great elocutionist, who put me up to no end of wrinkles. And now I'm playing here at the Koh-i-Nor. Only a couple of lines,” said Mr. Flaskett depreciatingly, “but it's a beginning, miss. And one feels a man.” He drew himself up as he spoke and looked, if not exactly what he imagined himself, a very fair imitation of that article.

“Perhaps it will surprise you to know,” I said, “that I too have lately taken to the stage.”

“You?” he cried incredulously.

“Yes,” I laughed. “I played Polly Kettlestone in the *Bushranger's Bride*.”

“Then you are the Miss Trevor they — ” he stopped and looked at me.

“They what?” I asked.

“Raved so much about,” he replied. “Pardon me, miss, but I don't wonder at it.”

The man was evidently so sincere that I could not take offence at the compliment.

“Thank you,” I said. “But I'm afraid I'm but a poor actress yet.”

He gave me such a merry look that I knew it was not of my histrionic attainments he was speaking.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Anyway, miss, you must never own that you can't act. Modesty is a fine thing in its way, but most people would give it a less charitable name.”

“Incompetence?” I suggested.

“That's more like it,” he replied. “But you have left the El Dorado, I suppose?”

“Yes. Mr. Sauros and I quarrelled. Do you think there is any chance here?”

“Goodness only knows,” he answered. “But here comes a gentleman who has a lot to do with arranging tours and companies. I'll introduce you if you like. It might mean something.”

By this time the gentleman in question had danced up to our position, and was then duly introduced. Mr. Smythe Robins was his name, and one look at his sallow, ill-shaven face was quite enough for the sophisticated to fix his occupation.

“Miss Trevor,” he said, shaking hands effusively, and even through my glove I felt his cold hand, “I am delighted to make your acquaintance. I dropped in to look at the *Bushranger's Bride* the other night, and I must congratulate you heartily on your reading of such an intricate part. There was not another woman in the house could have played it, or looked it, as you did, and I only wish to heaven you were free of old Sauros. Six months touring with me as my leading lady would be sufficient to place you in the foremost ranks of the profession.”

Flaskett gave me a sharp look.

“Miss Trevor has left the El Dorado,” he said.

“What!” Mr. Smythe Robins nearly bounded out of his great-coat. Mr. Flaskett repeated the statement.

“Then things couldn't have fallen out more opportunely. My dear Miss Trevor, I am just arranging a four months' tour, to be prolonged *ad lib*.”

“Which means while there is any money in it?” said Flaskett.

“Precisely. Most of my company are already engaged. My dear Miss Trevor, will you be my leading lady?”

I was on the point of declaring my disbelief in myself for such an exalted office, when I once more encountered Flaskett's meaning glance.

"I suppose," said he, "you don't expect Miss Trevor to give you a definite answer at once?"

"No, dear boy, no," said Mr. Smythe Robins airily. "I would not harass the lady for the world. I shall be satisfied if she will give the idea her consideration."

"Oh, of course I will," I said. "I am at present in search of an engagement, and perhaps a few months in the country would be — " I stopped short, having once more caught Flaskett's eye.

"Extremely beneficial," said Mr. Robins. "You're quite right, it would. And what splendid opportunities. Only think of it. We propose playing, among other things, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, the *Hunchback* — I'm a splendid Master Walter — and the *Colleen Bawn* for Saturday nights. Then there are half-a-dozen of my own plays which I will lend to the company at a reasonable figure. Such a *répertoire* as that should fill all our pockets before we've been a month out; for of course you understand that I intend taking the road on the commonwealth plan — share and share alike — to my idea the only just and equitable form of government."

"But who finds the money to begin the undertaking?" asked Mr. Flaskett.

"We each subscribe a trifle — just enough to start us. Once started, of course, and we are all right."

"And the figure?" inquired Flaskett.

"A fiver, and no liability. I'll look you up to-morrow, Bobbie. Think over it, old son — and you, Miss Trevor. I hope to have the pleasure of touring with you both." And waving his hand in an affected manner, he left us.

"Well," queried Mr. Flaskett, "what do you think of it?"

"It seems an excellent opportunity for gaining experience," I replied, "and I am not certain that I shall not think seriously of accepting it. Where shall I find this man again?"

"He's generally knocking about the pubs," was the reply.

"I'm afraid I can scarcely search them for him."

"Of course not, miss, but I can. You come to me if you want him. I'm living out West Melbourne way, and I know the missis would be glad to make your acquaintance, if you wouldn't mind calling."

"So, you are married?"

"Yes," he said, and at the recollection all the laughter went out of his eyes.

"Shall you see Mr. Robins again today?"

"Most probably — if I look in at the private bar of the 'Drop Scene.' A theatrical house, miss, and one of his favourite haunts."

“If you do see him, Flaskett, you would greatly oblige me by getting all possible information, as you understand I am naturally anxious to get an engagement.”

“I understand and I'll not forget, miss — thanks for your confidence — and if you wouldn't mind calling on us to-morrow afternoon and taking a little tea, we should both be delighted.”

“I will come with pleasure, and then you can tell me all about Mr. Robins's arrangements.”

So on the following day I duly set out to explore the wilds of Hotham in search of Flaskett's address, which I at length stumbled upon in an unpretentious street. It was one of a row of small houses which went by the attractive title of Belle-vue Cottages, though where the beautiful view came in, considering the street was a narrow, stuffy one, would be difficult to say. Yes, Mr. Flaskett was at home, indeed he opened the door to me when I knocked, and with many expressions of gratitude for the honour I was conferring upon him in visiting his humble habitation, or words to that effect, he showed me into his drawing-room — for by that dignified appellation did he introduce the little chamber with its bit of threadbare carpet, its six horse-hair chairs, two of which, with broken backs, were only for ornament, and its rude colonial sofa.

“Yes, I saw Mr. Robins yesterday,” he said, as soon as I was seated in the cosiest corner of the aforementioned uncomfortable sofa, “and he promised to call this afternoon and have a chat with you. I also met a couple of the fellows who are going with him. I really think we might do worse.”

“We,” I echoed. “Are you going?”

“Oh, I think so, miss,” he stammered. “I don't know that a little provincial experience would come amiss.”

“But is it a wise thing to give up a town engagement for a country one?”

“Well, you see,” he said, “I shall get a better chance with Robins. I might have to play two-line parts for years at the Koh, and never get a look in. With Robins I shall have a chance of testing my powers, and that's something in these days of prejudice and jealousy. Besides,” added the little fellow confidentially, “not being used to the profession, you don't know the sort of people you'll have to mix with, and unless you have somebody with you who knows the ropes, there's no knowing what tricks they may not play you.”

“I am much obliged to you, Flaskett,” I said, for I doubly appreciated the little fellow's kind thoughts, not of late being accustomed to such consideration, “though I feel sure you must exaggerate the dangers out of respect for me. Let me tell you then that but recently I have had a lot of queer experiences, and that I think I may be trusted to undertake this venture.”

"I am sure of it," was his reply. "But even if you wasn't going, I should," and though I might have had my doubts about this, for I saw that my civility to him at Langton had not been forgotten, I could yet see that he had determined to go, and knowing that a man with his sort of face was not to be easily turned from his purpose, I resolved to say no more about it. Changing the conversation, I asked him if his wife were in, to which he replied in the negative, but in a manner so curious that I instinctively guessed that all was not well in this abode of art.

"She went out this morning to see her mother," he explained.

"Shall I see her before I go?"

"I hope not — that is, I don't think so. When she goes to see her mother they generally make a day of it. That's the worst of the profession. Her mother was on the stage before her, and she was brought up on sticks of grease paint. When you marry, miss, marry outside the profession. There may be a little friction and jealousy at times, but you won't both go to the dogs together. Not that I mean you would, miss, but you know what I mean, don't you?" he added appealingly.

"I think so."

At this moment a boisterous knock on the front door, a succession of sledge-hammer blows which fairly shook the sofa on which I was sitting, announced the arrival of some impatient soul. Flaskett sprang to his feet with an anxious look on his face. "It's her," he whispered in a hushed tone, disappearing with alacrity. Then the door was opened and a shrill female voice was heard expostulating in the passage.

"Shan't, I tell you," it was saying. "Go and lie down yourself. Who the — is she I'd like to know?"

"Go and lie down like a good girl," I heard Flaskett say in a low voice.

"Shan't," replied the woman crossly. "One would think you was ashamed of me."

"And so I am, damn you," he growled between his teeth. The woman laughed, but the next minute turned the handle of the door and entered. She was a buxom young woman of twenty-eight or thirty, very freckled, with ginger hair and brown eyes. A fiery creature I could see, and one in whom Mr. Flaskett found little of the lamb.

"This is my wife," he said, brusquely introducing us. I bowed and said I was pleased to make her acquaintance. Mr. Flaskett favoured me with a look which, without being rude, plainly said he doubted it; then turning to the window he proceeded to catch flies.

I found Mrs. Flaskett possessed a shrill tongue and a steam-power way of using it: the sort of woman who would drive a peaceful man mad in a year. Having plenty to say for herself, and having had plenty of beer that day, which, mayhap, accounted for her husband's unwillingness to let her enter the room, she soon made me acquainted with her own personal history and that of her dear mamma; told me how Bobbie first saw her as

the butterfly goddess in the pantomime and at once fell in love with her beautiful legs, though, she added with a sigh, they had gone off dreadfully since her marriage — as things will. All of which might have been extremely interesting to Mr. Flaskett, but which concerned me nothing.

At last that worthy man turned from the shambles he had created round the window sill and mildly suggested a little tea, a suggestion to which his better half, whom I had put in a good humour by my polite attention to her cackle, immediately showed herself agreeable. She bounded to her feet, asking me if I would stay to tea, and upon my replying in the affirmative, hastily quitted the room.

“Well,” said Mr. Flaskett, looking after her with open-mouthed surprise, “I never saw her in such a good humour — since I’ve been married. If you hadn’t been here she’d have seen me farther, I can tell you. Ah, miss, I thought I was badly off as a flunkey, but I made a greater mistake when I took Elizabeth on.”

“You shouldn’t say that, Flaskett. Don’t you think that when husband and wife disagree the fault is to be found on both sides?”

“Perhaps; yet it’s wonderful how well we agree when we’re apart.”

Poor old Flaskett. When he “took Elizabeth on” he did indeed make a bad bargain, the thought of which preyed relentlessly on his brain. That freedom, manhood, dignity, which were the guiding stars of his life’s journey, were sadly dimmed, I’m afraid, by the unlovely presence of his wife; and I shrewdly suspected that his wishing to go with me had not a little to do with his wish to escape from her. I, however, had no further opportunity of hearing his sorrows, of which, in truth, I was not interested, for at that moment a rattling fusilade was delivered upon the door, a discharge, so to speak, sufficiently loud and long to bring the whole street to their windows.

“Who can that be?” cried Flaskett, starting nervously to his feet.

“Bobbie,” shouted his better half from the kitchen, “there’s somebody at the door.”

“Oh, is there?” replied her spouse facetiously. “I shouldn’t have thought it.” But to the door he went, and opening it admitted the corporeal presence of Mr. Smythe Robins.

“Thought I was never coming, I’ll swear,” exclaimed that gentleman after effusively shaking hands as usual. “Dooce of a queer place you live in, Bobbie, old son. Hardest work in the world to find you. Belle-vue Cottages, by jingo. Where does the belle-vue hang out?”

“On the top of the chimleys,” said Mr. Flaskett quietly, not taking kindly to Mr. Robins’s humour. Mr. Robins laughed heartily. That was the beauty of Mr. Robins. He could laugh at his own jokes or at anyone else’s, though for obvious reasons he preferred his own.

“Not bad, Bobbie, old son. We’ll make you our low comedian yet. Fine

face for a comedian, ain't it?" Mr. Robins appealed to me, a knowing twinkle in his strange eyes.

"When they laugh at me for my face," said Mr. Flaskett rather sourly, "they won't be dying about your beauty."

At this pretty piece of wit Mr. Smythe Robins laughed till he nearly choked, declaring that Flaskett was a gem of the purest water, and that if he was only half as funny on as he was off the stage, he should be our first comedian in less than a month. Then we grew serious and next discussed the business which had brought us three together, the preliminaries of which we soon arranged, Mr. Robins in the meantime borrowing 5*l.* from each of us, that being our donation towards the funds of the commonweal.

"It's the capital necessary to enable us to start that takes the getting," said Mr. Robins as he solemnly pocketed our money. "Once we start, you know, the rest is child's play. The dollars 'll simply roll in. Why, a theatre's as good as a mint any day in the year, and a dooced sight better than a gold mine. I'll tell you what it is, my friends; when the Melbourne Comedy Company takes the road it'll simply coin money."

We said we hoped it might, for I felt rather anxious about my five pounds once I had parted with it, and that Flaskett was anxious, too, I knew well, for he would sooner have committed suicide than let his better half know what he had done. It was next decided that we could not begin our tour too early, and the end of the ensuing week was seized upon, so as to enable us to open on a Saturday night. We would therefore begin rehearsals on the coming Monday. Where those rehearsals were to take place Mr. Robins knew not, but it was at length decided, with Mrs. Flaskett's permission, and for the payment thereof of a trifling sum, that we should make use of that good lady's drawing-room. Then, all things being satisfactorily arranged, Mr. Robins and I took our departure, that worthy man descanting, as we walked along, on the glorious triumphs that should be ours in the near future, and of the gold with which we were to fill our pockets.

As we were to open with *Pygmalion and Galatea*, I bought the book of that diverting piece and applied myself assiduously to learning the text, or that part of it for which I should be held responsible. Luckily I had seen the piece on more than one occasion, so that its scenes were to a certain extent familiar, and as Galatea is a part that "plays itself," as they say in the profession, I had not much difficulty in mastering the little it contained.

Then the great day of the first rehearsal duly came, and with a decided fluttering of the nerves I set out for Belle-vue Cottages. I was, of course, the first to arrive, having loitered a little at the bottom of the street to make up the exact time, and as an adjacent clock was striking twelve I rattled Mr. Flaskett's knocker. I was shown into the drawing-room by the

worthy Mrs. Flaskett, who, remembering me agreeably from our last interview, declared herself as pleased to see me, a piece of condescension for which I was extremely thankful. Then her husband entered, his face shining with a recent washing, and we three sat talking for more than half an hour before Mr. Smythe Robins put in an appearance. But when he did come he was profuse with his apologies, being under the impression, so he declared, that the call was for half-past twelve. And as he spoke he drew from one of the pockets of his great-coat a printed bill whereon, in no small capitals, I was described as the “beautiful and accomplished young English actress.”

“But I am not an English actress,” I said, “and as for accomplished — don't you think you might let them find that out?”

Mr. Robins regarded me with a look of blank amazement, but, perceiving my earnestness, transferred his gaze to Flaskett, at whom he began to wink in a most comical manner. Flaskett, however, looked grave.

“Miss Trevor don't understand,” he said. “She ain't used to our ways yet.”

“Then I hope Miss Trevor will pardon me,” said Mr. Robins blandly. “She may take it from me that the announcement that she is an English actress will not prove detrimental to her already great reputation. In this country we are accustomed to take all things secondhand, even our opinions. Indeed one may say Australia is the greatest secondhand mart in the world. The draught is usually prepared in England, and when so we swallow without a murmur. Other countries have not such a good name in the trade. 'Tis true, 'tis pity. The same may be said of our actors. Do you follow me?”

“I think so.”

“I don't,” said Flaskett.

“Never mind, Bobbie. Cheer up, old son. Take a night off and think it out. Then let it be granted,” he continued, turning to me, “that you are an English actress. You'll find the fiction do you no harm. That you are beautiful, I am perfectly willing to admit, will seem a superfluous statement to all who see you, but when I penned that word I was thinking of the unfortunate few who may not be able to do so. That you are accomplished being an undisputed fact, there is no earthly reason why you should hide your light behind a bushel. Nobody does such foolish things in these days. Tell the public what you are and they'll immediately see it. They're like a flock of sheep. Off one goes with a rush and the others blindly follow. Of course there are always some who won't follow, but they'll be in the minority, and minorities don't count.” And having delivered himself of this elaborate piece of argument, he sidled over to the window and began to kill flies to the tune of “Little Sister's gone to Sleep,” which pathetic ballad he hummed with no little precision as he

engaged in his deadly work.

I looked at Flaskett and Flaskett looked at me, elevating his ragged eyebrows as he did so. What to make of Mr. Smythe Robins I hardly knew, and it is quite certain Flaskett was as much at sea as I. I began to wish I had not parted with my bank-notes, foreseeing no little trouble in the near future with such a voluminous chatterbox at the helm. A sort of human balloon he was to which his builder had forgotten to affix the car, thereby necessitating the absence of all ballast. Besides which I did not care for the cut of his face, once I came to study it closely, and he had a black-brown Mongolian eye which reflected little confidence. Add to this a sharp, sallow face with a high narrow brow, projecting teeth and lips, and you have a fair idea of what Mr. Smythe Robins was like.

“Ah,” he exclaimed as he dispatched a big blow-fly, “they have come at last. Bobbie, would you mind opening the door? Mr. Drysman and Mrs. Robins are come.”

Flaskett did as he was bidden, and in walked a lady and a gentleman. The lady was considerably over her twenty-eighth year and somewhat inclined to corpulency, though by judicious lacing she had contrived to give her figure some semblance of its youthful grace. She also, I saw by a glance, was addicted to the use of hair dye and some liquid face-beautifier, for the latter, coming in contact with the wind, had turned to a beautiful puce. Her companion, who was introduced as Mr. Drysman, was a lugubrious, elongated specimen of humanity, with a sallow face and a dull black eye. Yet he was the chief comedian of our company, and Mr. Robins told me in an “aside” that when Drysman made up his mind to be funny, though the beggar would rarely do it, he'd make you die of laughing, and our worthy manager spoke like one who had often experienced the sensation. One thing was certain: if Mr. Drysman was half as funny as he looked, our fortunes were made.

The next to arrive was Mr. Gerald Chester, our leading man, a gentleman with a bald head, a decided tendency to stoutness, and an odour of beer and tobacco. Yet he was a jovial-looking fellow, with a pair of merry eyes, which, though almost hidden by the innumerable ridges of fat which surrounded them, had a pleasant twinkle whenever you were fortunate enough to see them. His cheeks, too, were somewhat unduly aggressive, and his neck, red and beautifully sunburnt as it was, reminded me of a few inches of a miniature chimney. It had seen some weather, that neck, for in his time Mr. Gerald Chester had played many parts; some queer ones, too. I cannot say that I was impressed with his appearance. He did not seem to me an ideal Pygmalion, though, if the truth must be told, my idea of the sort of man the sculptor ought to be was a very hazy one. His wife accompanied him, a pale-faced little body, who had eyes only for her burly lord. Indeed her devotion to that man was something pitiful, and they had not been with us ten minutes before I

saw that it was also the cause of endless annoyance to him.

Then, when all the principal members had arrived, we attempted our first rehearsal; but when we called on Pygmalion for the second act, we found that he and Chrysos had adjourned to the nearest public-house.

“Well, then,” said Mr. Robins, who evidently knew his men, “that will do for to-day. To-morrow, ladies and gentlemen, at the same time.”

Chapter VII.

AT last the eventful day on which we were to begin our tour came round. We had rehearsed steadily for the last three days, thanks to the universal poverty which prevailed in our ranks, so that it may be said we had a fair, if somewhat hazy, notion of the parts we were to play. To the *Hunchback*, the second piece on our list, we did absolutely nothing in the way of a rehearsal, but Mr. Robins assured me that all the people knew the play backwards, and again he modestly made it known that his own performance of Master Walter was an undisputed triumph. This was encouraging, for I had grown possessed with the idea that we were as poor and ignorant a crowd as ever banded themselves together to deceive an unsuspecting public, and that our temerity would eventually lead to disastrous results. However, like a true novice, I was determined to give a satisfactory account of myself, so I learnt my parts thoroughly, and I'm not sure that I couldn't have prompted the others as well.

Mr. Robins, who hoped a great deal from me, and received much, was extremely gracious to me during our meetings at Flaskett's house, and though there was nothing in my manner, or his, which might warrant Mrs. Robins indulging in a fit of wifely jealousy, there was yet a nicety about our manager's manners which contrasted pleasantly with brusque Mr. Gerald Chester or the sepulchral Drysman. He was as affable and plausible a gentleman as ever lived, was Mr. Smythe Robins, in spite of his Mongolian eyes, and when he pointed out to me, as only he could point, that my interest in the commonwealth would be in proportion to the capital I invested, and the duties I performed, he had little difficulty in persuading me to part with another 5*l*. I felt that I was an idiot, but as he assured me that the money was absolutely necessary to enable us to start, I saw no other alternative than to yield. Had his borrowing propensities ended here, all might have been well, but the very next day he came to me in a terrible state of agitation. The printing was all ready, but the printer would not part with it without the money, and though he had scraped all his spare cash together he was still 30*s*. behind the required sum.

"If you have it," he said, "don't hesitate for a moment. It's only the start that's the trouble. Once we get fairly under way the dollars 'll simply roll in. Of course I shall pay you ten per cent for your money. Not bad as times go, I can tell you."

“It is very good interest,” I said, “and will suit me admirably. But I was under the impression that you had all the printing?”

Mr. Robins smiled rather sadly. “No doubt. I meant you should receive such an impression, and rather than undeceive you I would have made any sacrifice — for you understand, Miss Trevor, that though I am only a struggling actor, a journeyman artist, as it were, I have still a little dignity.” Here his voice grew broken and pathetic, while his little Mongolian eyes twitched nervously.

Mr. Robins had an ambiguous way of appealing to you which was very effective. He never explained things fully — he would not insult your intellect by so doing — but with a few suggestive words, some rapid flourishes of the hands, and some wonderfully suggestive looks from out the corners of his wonderful eyes, he would lay his meaning before you as plainly as though he had described his thoughts in twelve-inch capitals. I understood and appreciated his delicacy in this instance, and without more ado, for I was not one to harp upon a sensitive chord, I handed him over the 30s. with a heavy heart, for it represented all, or nearly all, of my savings. But this, of course, our genial manager did not know. Evidently thinking that I was a bank, or a gold mine out of which he might extract the precious ore with a magnetic glance of his Mongolian orbs, he came to me the evening previous to our setting out and spun some doleful story of not having sufficient money to pay a deposit for the hall in which we were to open.

“But I was under the impression that the hall was engaged,” I said.

“And so it is,” he replied. “I sent them 5*l.*, the usual deposit, but they now demand another fiver before they will let us open.”

“That is a strange way of doing business, is it not?”

“It's an infamous outrage,” was the indignant reply.

“And what reason do they give for such an unusual proceeding?”

“They say they do not know the Melbourne Comedy Company, and likewise profess entire ignorance of me. They tell me that a crowd calling themselves the Sydney Comedy Company once played in the place, who not alone forgot to pay their rent when leaving, but went off with everything they could lay their hands on. They seem to think, by the similarity of our titles, that we may be no very distant connections.”

At this I expressed my sorrow, but as I had no more money to lay out I told him so. He received the information with an incredulous stare; but being eventually convinced that I was speaking the truth, he took a very gloomy view of the situation, though he expressed the hope that the fabric which had cost him so much to build might not, for the sake of a few pounds, totter headlong to the earth. That it did not, the following pages will show, though if it had, Mr. Robins would have been a considerable loser.

It was a bleak, damp morning when, after bidding an affectionate

farewell to Miss Louisa Sprattle, alias Moorna Lestrangle, I betook myself to the Spencer Street Station. It had rained heavily all night, and though the rain had ceased somewhat with the approach of day, it still fell at odd intervals in a tantalizing drizzle. There was no sun in the sky, and the bitter wind which came shrieking through the crazy old station pierced me through and through. Of course I was there nearly an hour before my time, and being too restless and excited to sit before the waiting-room fire, I must needs wander up and down the cheerless platform, staring dismally at the long rows of ghostly-looking carriages.

At last the Sandhurst train was backed into position, and one of the porters, who long had eyed me suspiciously, advanced and wanted to know my destination.

“Swyneton,” I said, for upon that rural spot we were to swoop with our histrionic talons outstretched.

“Train's just in — this way,” and he attempted to seize my box. But in this design I thwarted him.

“I am waiting for some friends,” I explained. “When they come I will call you.”

“All right,” he said, and, favouring me with a stupid look, slouched off.

The fact is, a horrible suspicion had suddenly taken lodgment in my mind. Suppose — I almost gasped for breath at the thought — suppose Mr. Robins were not to turn up? I knew nothing of the man, and Flaskett knew little more. Nay, what did I know of Flaskett either? Might not he be a confederate of this man, and might not they have concocted this pretty little swindle? It was not a pleasant thought for a cold and sunless day, and walk as swiftly as I might up and down the dreary platform, I could not generate much heat about the region of my heart.

And now by ones, twos and threes, the passengers began to arrive, while the porters hurrying hither and thither added a little variety to the cheerless scene. But still no sign of the members of the Melbourne Comedy Company. I grew more uneasy every moment.

“Ah, Miss Trevor, here we are at last. Dooood unpleasant morning, ain't it?”

I could have shrieked with joy. Turning round suddenly I beheld Mr. Smythe Robins, the same imperturbable smile on his sleek face, his little Mongolian eyes positively beaming with gladness, while beside him, encased in a voluminous waterproof, stood his better-half — decidedly his better-half, for she would have made two of him. Her face looked positively blue in the raw morning air, for that liquid preparation she used, of which I have spoken before, has this peculiar quality, that while in the hot weather it gives to the cheeks a roseate tinge, it turns them puce or peacock-green when it comes in contact with the cold. She shook hands very warmly and declared the weather was “downright 'orrid,” a fact I could not gainsay, though I might have denied the accuracy of her

mode of stating it. But all the members of our company were like that. They took far too much liberty with their native tongue, and cared as little for their moods, tenses and aspirates as they did for their prayers.

The next to arrive were Mr. and Mrs. Drysman, the elongated comedian, muffled up to his nose, looking, in his long black overcoat, like an undertaker's mute or an animated coffin. His wife, on the contrary, with imitation diamonds in her ears, an imitation sealskin on her back, and her face encased in a red veil, which showed to advantage her pretty, brazen features, looked exactly what she was.

"Morning, Miss Trevor," moaned the comedian, his sepulchral voice seeming to come from some unfathomable depths beneath his feet.

"Good morning, Mr. Drysman."

"A cheerful day, ain't it?" said the funny man pathetically. "Makes a feller feel glad that he's alive."

"I don't call it a good omen," chipped in Mrs. Robins, who was full of theatrical superstitions.

"Nor me," said the funny man, seriously, so seriously, indeed, that his wife began to giggle, at which I, under fear of laughing in his face, turned aside, when I beheld Mr. and Mrs. Chester sailing towards us, our leading man looking bigger than ever in the prodigious poncho he wore. Then Flaskett and the smaller fry of the company put in a hurried appearance: Mr. Robins, who in the meantime had purchased the tickets, bundled us into the train, the whistle gave a short, sharp shriek, and away we went.

And thus did we start out on our tour, and in the witty and intellectual company which now surrounded me, the railway journey was, in spite of the dismal aspect of the outside world, satisfactorily accomplished.

As we drew near our destination the weather grew more deplorable, and when we alighted at the station, which unfortunately is not exactly in the town, the heavens opened and another deluge descended; and as we were forced to hang about the station for close on two hours, no vehicles being procurable, it may not be necessary to more than hint at the hot spirits which bubbled on the refreshment counter. And when at last the rain ceased, or only fell a gentle drizzle, away we went, singly and in pairs, to hunt up our humble lodgings.

It had previously been decided that we should rehearse that afternoon, but our enforced stay at the station had rendered such a proceeding impossible. Flaskett got me a quiet lodging at one end of the town, and took a room opposite, in case I should want him, as he said. Indeed he was so good to me all through this troublous tour that I have not even yet forgiven myself for thinking ill of him, if only for a moment.

At last the night drew in, and a cold, wet, cheerless one it was; yet notwithstanding these natural extinguishers of enthusiasm, there were grouped about the hall in which we were to perform, sundry noisy

loafers, who either stared us insolently out of countenance or descended to actual jeering. Truly, we had fallen among the Philistines. Flaskett, being my true chevalier, walked by with nostrils haughtily erect; but I felt my veins grow suddenly hot, in spite of the apparent rascality of the mob, for what was I or my profession if such people could only regard me as a sort of tame curiosity? Of course, I was only a novice.

I think my knight and I must have been the first to arrive at the theatre, for when we entered that gloomy edifice there was not a soul to be seen, not even a gas-jet lighted. My companion, however, who had brought a candle in his pocket, lit it, and stuck it in an empty gin-bottle which he discovered in one corner of the dressing-room. He then unlocked my box, and was about to take his leave when we were both startled by a sudden sound, half grunt, half whistle, which seemed to come from the room on the other side of the partition. A moment we listened, looking curiously at each other, and then it came again, this time like a mighty sigh.

“What's that?” I asked. “What place is that in there?”

“The men's dressing-room,” he replied — they all had to dress in one room — “but what the noise means I'd better go and find out.”

A moment after I heard him striking a light, but upon his return he declared he could not account for the noise, unless it was caused by the wind rushing through a broken window — a most probable cause, and one which satisfied me entirely.

A few minutes after this Mr. and Mrs. Robins arrived, quickly followed by the long comedian and his smart-looking spouse. Then, all of a hurry-skurry, came poor Mrs. Chester, her wee white face absolutely palpitating with excitement. Her beloved Gerald was missing, and she had not the remotest idea what had become of him. All this we learned between the intervals of her sobs, the poor little creature being most painfully agitated.

“Not know where he is?” cried Mr. Robins, scornfully. “What the dooce do you mean by saying a thing like that?”

“He went out,” she sobbed, “shortly after tea — to see that everything was ready — and I've not seen him since.”

“Drunk again, I suppose,” exclaimed the manager sharply. “Why the dooce don't you look after him better?”

“I thought he had enough at the station,” began the poor woman. “I never imagined that he — ”

“Oh no, of course not,” said Mr. Robins, sarcastically — that was the worst of Mr. Robins; he was so terribly cutting upon occasions — “you thought he was an angel, didn't you? A nice one you are to have a husband, I don't think. Well, we can't go on without him, so you had better go and find him.”

“But I have been to every public house in the place,” pleaded the poor

woman.

“Faugh, the brute!” cried Mr. Robins, angrily. “I’ll tell you what it is, my good woman; if it wasn’t that I should have to double his parts, I should like to hear of nothing better than that sot’s complete extinction.” Saying which he took himself off in a terrible huff and we proceeded with our dressing.

It was now getting unpleasantly near starting time; the gallery and back seats had pretty well filled and by the noise they were making were in a desperate hurry for us to begin the performance. But behind the scenes there was still more confusion, for Mr. Gerald Chester, the Pygmalion of the evening, had not yet put in an appearance. Mr. Robins, his Greek dress only partly hidden by his long Newmarket ulster, stamped up and down the stage foaming and vowing vengeance on the leading man’s fat head, while the leading man’s pale-faced wife slunk off to the darkest corner of the stage to weep in secret.

A quarter of an hour after the time for starting, Mr. Robins hit upon the happy device of gaining a few minutes’ respite by ordering our orchestra — which consisted of a woman and a piano — to strike up, which it did with much perturbation, for the noise in front was growing distinctly ominous. Then all at once it suddenly struck me that the noise Flaskett and I had heard, which had cost us a moment or two’s conjecture, was as like a human snore as anything so uncanny could be, and that it might possibly have emanated from the nasal appendage of our leading man. This idea I at once communicated to Flaskett, who, with a supercilious smile on his classic face, rendered doubly classic in his classic dress, was leaning against a bit of old scenery, evidently enjoying the hubbub. At first he received my suggestion with a frown, but that frown passing as quickly away left his face wreathed with smiles.

“By jingo!” he cried, “I believe he is there,” and away he darted, I following in his tracks.

When I reached the door of the men’s dressing-room a curious sight presented itself. In the middle of the floor was a large cane travelling-basket, such as ladies use for their dresses, and this, after no little exertion, Flaskett and Mr. Drysman succeeded in turning over on its side, when to my astonishment I beheld, very snugly cuddled up — how he had packed himself away in such a manner was nothing short of miraculous — the rotund figure of our leading man. He was sound asleep, his hands crossed tenderly over his capacious lower chest, which rose and fell with a distinct though gentle motion.

“ ‘Ere,” cried Flaskett, trying to sever those brawny arms which, like the Village Blacksmith’s, seemed strong as iron bands, “wake up, can’t you!” And he pressed his fist rudely into Mr. Chester’s lower chest, at which that gentleman sighed sadly.

“Confound it, Chester,” exclaimed the comedian in his far-off voice, and yet a voice of sorrow, too, “why don't you wake up, man? Think we want to keep the bloomin' show open all night? Drunk,” he whispered in an “aside,” which sounded like a far-off moan, “drunk as a lord.”

Flaskett began to grin furiously, thinking the joke an excellent one, but no sign of merriment appeared on the gloomy features of our funny man. Indeed, I never saw him look more solemn, and I quite expected to see him take out his handkerchief and begin to cry.

At that moment Mr. Robins, white and furious, appeared, but uttering an exclamation of joy upon beholding the slumbering artist, he motioned to Flaskett and the comedian, and between them they turned the basket completely over. Then lifting it up, they deposited Mr. Chester, in the midst of a heap of his wife's clothes, in the middle of the floor. How they brought him round I don't know, for doubled up with laughing, in spite of my previous agitation, I was forced to beat a retreat. Flaskett spoke of them dousing him with cold water, a liquid to which he always had an insuperable aversion — but brought round he eventually was, and his classic robes thrown on him. Then when thoroughly awake there was little more to be feared, for he was one of those invaluable actors who play as well drunk as sober.

Yet it was a cruel ordeal for me, a novice, the trouble beginning from the time I mounted my white-washed candle box — for on such an unclassical pedestal had the statue Galatea to stand. My burly Pygmalion, when he went to pull the curtains aside to show me in all my beauty, clutched them so fiercely — really for support — that he tore them down, and he would likewise have knocked Galatea off her candle box had she not suddenly come to life and held him up. This caused the audience to titter, but suppressing their inclination to laugh outright, which was a most astonishing piece of self-restraint, they allowed us to go on with our disgraceful mumming. Over the rest of that shocking performance I ought to draw a charitable veil, and I would were it not that the principal item in our evening's amusement had yet to come.

In this particular piece a dead fawn performs a prominent part, and, as not unusual with prominent characters, was the life and soul of the play — paradoxical as it may seem. This silly fawn, I am told, is invariably a source of annoyance and ridicule, and ours was no exception to the rule. At the last minute we discovered that this necessary “prop” was missing, though Mr. Robins declared that he packed it with his own hands — which, however, nobody believed. But what was still worse, we had nothing that would in any way resemble the missing quadruped, and as I had to weep over it in the play I was naturally much concerned. I suggested Mrs. Drysman's imitation sealskin jacket; but Flaskett, who fulfilled the double duties of actor and property man, approached me consolingly.

“Leave it to me, miss,” he said; “you leave it to me. I’ll see that everything’s all right, never fear.” And so much belief had I in the rascal’s ingenuity, that I banished the trouble from my mind.

Fatal confidence.

The scene came, and when the soldier-lover held out the fawn which he had slain in “arrant wantonness,” he almost slew me — with terror. For, lo and behold! the fawn was no fawn at all, only a piece of drab scene-cloth with a strip of green ribbon tied round its middle. And for this I had to express concern; over this I had to utter no end of nonsense. The audience stood it very patiently for a time — it’s wonderful what a theatrical audience will stand — then they began to titter, and then the titter burst into a hearty roar. We spoke, but could scarcely hear ourselves, and in the midst of the din Mr. Smythe Robins, Newmarket coat and all, bounded on to the stage. He made several ineffectual attempts to speak, but at last getting a hearing he told them pretty plainly that he did not put ladies on the stage to be insulted, and that unless we actors were given a fair hearing he would ring down the curtain. This threat sobered them a little, for having paid their money they wanted their fill of the fun. Then he complained bitterly of the railway authorities, who, it seems, had not delivered our baggage — hence our miserable equivalent for a fawn. And he wound up with a graceful, but embarrassing, tribute to myself, whom he described as one of England’s most popular, accomplished, and beautiful actresses, and declared that as he had been at a tremendous expense to secure me for this tour, he hoped they would extend to me that courtesy for which they were so justly famous.

This speech, which was a clever piece of audacity, produced a soothing and favourable impression on the audience, and amid cries of “Go on with the play,” and “Good old fawn,” we buckled once more to our task. How it all ended I have but a hazy recollection, for all through the latter part of the play my brain was in a whirl. That it did end, however, and that we escaped the just wrath of an outraged public were matters for congratulation. Of my perplexities during this most heinous representation I will not speak, for my command of language could do but little justice to my thoughts or feelings. How I passed through such an ordeal I would not attempt to tell, but my behaviour during that most trying period was the source of unbounded wonder to my *confrères*, who, little realizing what I really suffered, were unanimous in their laudation of my unexampled presence of mind.

Yet if we fondly hoped that with the close of our stormy day a fairer dawn would rise, we were grievously disappointed, for during our rehearsal of the *Hunchback* on the following Monday morning, the piece we were to perform that night, Mr. Robins informed us that the railway authorities had not yet delivered the missing baggage, and that in

consequence our costumes for the piece were not forthcoming. At this there was a great ado, especially among the men, who could not “fake” their modern dress with any degree of verisimilitude. Mr. Drysman, our funny man, and a more melancholy wag I never saw, complained loudly and bitterly in his sepulchral voice; while Mr. Gerald Chester, who had no little of the bull in his composition, performed prodigies with his tongue. He could not understand how things were so mismanaged. It was not the fault of the railway authorities, but of an individual nearer home, and if things were to be conducted in this manner, the sooner they decapitated the present head from the body commonwealth, the better it would be. To this Mr. Smythe Robins replied by suggesting that to Mr. Gerald Chester should be handed the management of the company, but the suggestion was couched in such scathing terms that Mr. Chester threatened to pull his nose, a feat he would most certainly have accomplished had Mr. Robins given him further provocation, for though a boisterous braggart by nature, our leading man was big enough to eat the manager. The latter worthy, however, knowing his man, and likewise what would best suit his own ends, took unto himself an injured tone; deplored the slur which had been cast upon his managerial ability, and bewailed such dissensions in the company — that company to propitiate whose welfare was the one aim and object of his life. I thought I saw Mr. Chester's lip curl at this, and he told Flaskett afterwards that he did not believe our manager ever had the costumes of the play — a piece of scepticism as ungenerous as it was uncalled for, for I never saw a man more thoroughly put out about anything than was Mr. Robins over this particular incident. At any rate no more words ensued between them, so we finished our rehearsal and went home, all fondly hoping that the things would arrive by the next train.

Vain hope. The train came in, but in spite of Mr. Robins's numerous journeyings to and from the station, and notwithstanding the feverish telegrams he had dispatched to Melbourne, that unhappy box, or boxes — I never quite knew which it was — hid itself with exasperating obstinacy. Unfortunately we had been billed to produce this comedy of the *Hunchback* — a rather lugubrious affair, too, when one comes to think of it, but the provincials all the world over like their pudding solid — and as no conscientious manager likes to disappoint his dear public, Mr. Robins's state of agitation may easily be conceived, though I doubt if it would have been quite so alarming had our repertory been a more extensive one.

“I'll tell you what it is,” he cried as he paced excitedly up and down before us — a mute and helpless crew — “we'll have to play it in modern dress.” At this there was no little sneering, with not a few contemptuous epithets. “It's that or nothing,” he continued. “If they'll have it we'll give it to 'em.” And before anyone could make answer he had darted from us,

pulled back the curtain and stepped before the footlights. And here I may mention that never had a popular actor a more decided penchant for speaking before the curtain than our worthy manager. He never let the slightest opportunity slip, and I do not recollect a single performance in which he did not contrive to appeal to the audience in his own person. It seemed as though he longed to throw off his mimic personality and appear before them as a real being.

On this occasion his assurance stood us in good stead. He appealed to the suffrages of his kind friends in front. A dilatory and unequal government had by its gross mismanagement defrauded us of our property and them of their pleasure — though I thought the last an open question. He then informed them that the *Hunchback* was a dress piece, not, as he wittily put it, that other plays could be presented undressed, but this one had a particular sort of dress which considerably enhanced its beauty. He next made them acquainted with the fact that it was in blank verse, and at once proceeded to enlighten them as to the kind of thing blank verse was; which undertaking being duly accomplished, he put it to them: Would they have the *Hunchback* in modern dress, or should we repeat our performance of *Pygmalion and Galatea*? At this last suggestion there was a decided “No!” long and loud and deep. They had seen us once in that piece and were satisfied: by the time we had got through with the *Hunchback* I think they were also satisfied with that.

Chapter VIII.

ON the third night we put up two ancient farces of the horse-play pattern, interspersed with a few comic songs, but as I did not appear in either of them I had not the temerity to venture near the hall; therefore I cannot describe their effect on the audience, though Flaskett afterwards informed me that the songs went A1. Of the plays he said nothing, and out of consideration for his feelings I suppressed my curiosity.

On the following morning we were up early and away, and glad enough was I to turn my back on the scene of our humiliation. Mr. Robins gave me enough to pay my board, with a half-crown over for incidental expenses. This, he informed me, was exceedingly handsome behaviour on his part, as our expenditure had considerably exceeded our receipts, so that to meet all demands he was forced to draw upon his private exchequer. But he was good enough to tell me that he liked me, and that I could always rely on him in my hour of adversity, and that he was sure I would yet build up a fame and fortune of my own. Reassuring words, no doubt, but with the memory of my first experience still so dreadfully green, I shared but mildly in his enthusiasm.

At our next stopping place we fared little better, from a monetary point of view, but our artistic success was more pronounced, and to the artistic soul that, like virtue, is its own reward. The various members of our motley crew, owing to the scarcity of corn in Egypt, entered the town sober and left it so, and in consequence we were the recipients of some laudatory notices from the local press, Mr. Drysman in particular coming in for a perfect eulogy; for thanks to a severe bilious attack, which tinged with acidity that gentleman's melancholy humour, he was really so overwhelmingly comical that to look at him was enough to launch you into hysterics. Each jaundiced eye was a wistful monologue in mourning. Round the corners of his long mouth were traced great lines of sorrow and suffering, so that the comic things he delivered in his dolefullest voice seemed so exceedingly absurd that the people laughed themselves sore. That was the greatest triumph Mr. Drysman ever achieved, though sad to say the poor fellow was really too ill to enjoy it. Here again we performed the *Hunchback* in modern dress — those unfortunate costumes not having yet arrived. The people, however, were good enough to tolerate this little drawback, and as our leading men had the distinct advantage of being sober, we acquitted ourselves with no little

credit, though I myself was once more vastly disappointed in Mr. Robins's Master Walter, and wondered if I could be lacking in sense or judgment. Of appreciation I had none, in spite of that great reputation of which he spoke so much.

Money again being scarce, our receipts, according to Mr. Robins, just covering our expenditure, we arrived in the next town of Shalbot in a thoroughly sedate manner; but here once more, according to the same authority, our monetary success was as nothing compared to our artistic, and though the latter should have pleased us most, I regret to say it did not. Mr. Gerald Chester began to growl, and Mr. Drysman, who at the time was suffering from a severe cold which he had taken on the top of his bilious attack, moaned in unison. They would take good care that they saw into things for the future; and if they did not openly accuse our manager of appropriating more than his just share, they hinted pretty plainly at it. Then of course Mr. Robins grew mightily indignant and said some very sarcastic things; but his indignation quickly cooling down, indifference took its place. "Very well," said he with a most mischievous twinkle in his little Mongolian eyes, "you may take the management out of my hands with pleasure. The fact of the matter is, I've worked too d hard for you and been too d — d honest." At this Mr. Chester laughed in an irritating way, while Mr. Drysman joined in with a cough which was more suggestive of a cemetery than an insult.

At first Mr. Robins looked like a hot retort, but scorning abuse and low insinuation, he mildly said, "You're an ungrateful lot of beggars, and may do as you jolly well please. I've kept you all out of gaol so far, now you'd better see if you can keep yourselves out." And throwing his head back disdainfully, he stalked from our presence. Of course nothing came from the grumblings — nothing ever does. The free-born man asserts his liberty by grumbling, and if you let him have his growl in peace you'll find him afterwards a most obedient and docile animal. We could no more have done without Mr. Robins than a baby without its nurse — a fact of which that wily individual was well aware. He put in an appearance at the hall that night as usual — the same affable soul who had early wormed his way into my little nest-egg — and you would not have guessed from his looks that his glossy feathers had of late undergone such a severe ruffling.

The same ill-fortune dogged us to the next town; but our arrival at Munes was evidently looked forward to with no little curiosity, our reputation having somewhat agreeably preceded us, mainly owing to a very glowing account of our doings which appeared in one of the Melbourne weeklies, which Mr. Robins had penned and then dispatched with a present to a friendly scribe — a gentleman who, unless his reputation belied him, was never known to refuse a drink or a tip. The consequence was that as we opened on the Saturday night we had a

splendid house, and loud and long were the congratulations showered upon each other. Some were sure there was not less than seventy pounds in the house, while the more sanguine, whose wish was father to the thought, added another twenty and then declared themselves below the mark. But be its value what it might, it had a most stimulating effect on our spirits, and we played that evening better than we had ever played before, which, though saying a great deal, was not saying much. Golden visions lulled us all to sleep that night, and I have no doubt that each member of the Melbourne Comedy Company saw himself staggering home, his tour ended, beneath a bag of gold.

Alas!

Early the next morning, which was a Sunday, and melancholy in consequence, Flaskett walked round to my lodgings, looking more melancholy than the day.

“What's the matter, Flaskett?” I asked, immediately perceiving his ill looks. “Are you unwell?”

“Yes and no,” he answered mysteriously. “That is I'm well enough physically but downright ill mentally.”

“Explain yourself,” I demanded, having no knowledge of him in this mysterious mood.

“It's easily done, miss. He's gone!”

“What do you mean? Who's gone?”

“Mr. Smythe Robins.”

“Gone?”

“Bolted, and took our big house with him.”

“Do you mean to say that he has stolen the money — robbed us?” He nodded. “Are you sure?”

“I wish I wasn't. He left last night by the late train.”

“And took the money with him?”

“Yes, miss, and something else not quite so val'able — in my opinion.”

“What do you mean, Flaskett?” I asked, curious as to this further mystery.

“Mrs. Drysman has disappeared, too. Went by the late train, they said up at the station. A nice lot, miss. Enough to make a man chuck the profession.”

“But what will become of poor Mrs. Robins?”

Here an amused look passed over Flaskett's melancholy face.

“I don't know,” he said, “poor thing.” But as I thought he did know I refrained from pressing the question.

To attempt to describe the fury, the despair, of the Melbourne Comedy Company over this affair would be a futile task, as it beggared all description. Mr. Gerald Chester was like a raging bull, and could he at that moment have laid his huge hands on the culprit, he would have eaten him — at least so he declared. And I heard Mr. Drysman, who, poor

fellow, suffered in a double sense, take a solemn and awful oath to be revenged on the man who had so grievously wronged him, if he waited a thousand years for the opportunity; — which was a long time. Among the smaller fry, who had not yet received a penny for their services, the lamentations were no less long and loud, and had the whole scene not been so intensely grotesque it would have been most pitiful. We thought of communicating with the police; we thought of a thousand things, not one of which we put into execution. Besides, the very fates were against us. The day being Sunday everything was at a standstill. I did not see poor Mrs. Robins that day, but when I asked Mr. Chester how she was he grinned curiously and told me that she was bearing her trouble with Christian fortitude, and that Mr. Drysman, forgetting his own affliction in hers, was devoting all his energies to lightening her sorrow. I did not ask for further information.

Still, hope is ever with the brave. We were to play on the Monday and fondly believed that we might be able to do without Mr. Robins, and that sufficient coppers would roll into the treasury, of which Mr. Gerald Chester was now custodian, to enable us to pay our way. Vain hope; fond, delusive dream. We played that night, but to countless rows of empty benches. Like spectres we glided hither and thither, going through our task in a mechanical way, a fixed look of hopeless resignation upon each melancholy face.

And now I was to learn the reason of the mysterious summons I had received that evening prior to setting out for the theatre. It was a short note from Mr. Chester begging me to bring everything of use or value to the theatre with me that night, as I might require them later on, and it might not be convenient for me to revisit my lodgings in search of them. So guessing there was something odd in the air, though what I could not comprehend, I did as I was bidden. After the play was over, however, Flaskett approached and asked if he should help me to pack, “As,” added he, with a curious smile, “we are setting out for Hawkstone presently.” Hawkstone was the next town on our list.

“But,” said I, “how can we be going to set out for Hawkstone? We are to play here to-morrow night.”

“Oh, are we?” he said, beginning to grin. Immediately seeing that something unusual was on the tapis, and being by this time not much surprised thereat, I requested a clearer answer.

“This army's on the march,” says he with an odd smile. “A New Hexodus, as Mr. Drysman calls it.” Now I doubted if Mr. Drysman had called it any such thing, that worthy man's chief vice being a tendency to dropping his aspirates instead of putting them on. But I knew Flaskett. Many a tough tussle had he, in spite of his lessons in elocution, with that abominable letter.

“A New Exodus, Flaskett? What do you mean?”

“There's no money in the treasury,” he began.

“Well?”

“Consequently we are unable to discharge our obligations in the town.”

“Well?”

“Consequently we're going to take French leave.”

“Flaskett!”

“What else can we do?”

“But it's so degrading, so — ”

“So it is,” broke in Mr. Flaskett, “but it would be much more degrading to stay and risk being run in as vagabonds. It's only twenty mile to Hawkstone. Chester's managed to borrow a trap. Who knows but what we may be able to pick up a bit there. Then you can pay your bills — if you like.” With that he locked and strapped my big trunk, and, lifting it on his shoulders, marched off, telling me to follow with my handbag. I did so, and in a stealthy manner he led me round to the back of the hall, and there I saw Mr. Drysman and another lifting the boxes over the fence, on the other side of which stood a horse and trap. In this trap stood Mr. Chester and one of the other men stacking the boxes as they were handed over.

“That you, Miss Trevor?” asked the comedian in a sepulchral whisper. I replied in the affirmative, but rather too loudly, I suppose, for he checked me with a deprecating gesture.

“Gently, gently,” he cried in his hollow whisper. “You don't want the bloomin' town down on us, do you?”

“I'm not particular.”

“I am,” he said with his cemetery laugh.

“'Ere,” growled Mr. Chester from the other side of the fence, “what the blazes are you making that row for?”

“Come,” said Flaskett. “Give me your hand, Miss Trevor.” So like the rogues that we were, we stole quietly down the yard, opened the side gate softly and made our way back to the waggon. Here we found the company assembled, and as the last box was at that moment handed over, Mr. Drysman, who followed it, made known in his sepulchral whisper that we women were to mount the boxes and ride, while the men would walk. At this I hesitated, though hesitation now was of no avail. Flaskett, whose eye seemed to be ever on me, noticed my reluctance.

“Don't be afraid,” he whispered. “Nothing shall harm you.”

Truly there is a wonderful sense of security in the protection a man affords. I mounted the trap without further hesitation, and Flaskett, by removing a box, made me a most comfortable seat at the back of the vehicle. He placed cushions for my back and head, he would insist upon spreading his own rug over me as well as my own, and not till I had declared some score of times that I was splendidly comfortable did he appear satisfied. Then the other women were hoisted into their positions,

and after much fussing we moved away. The men, poor fellows, slunk on ahead like shadows, and soon we were all out in the open country, the few lights of the town twinkling behind us like great fire-flies. The men joked about it after, but I think they all felt the degradation. It was no wish of theirs that they should steal away like rogues and vagabonds, but there was no other way out of the dilemma. As for me, I burn with shame even now when I think of that awful business.

To make matters worse, it was a bitterly cold night, and, moreover, as the country roads in winter are generally in a most deplorable condition, that journey was not one of my most pleasant experiences. The men, once the town was left far enough behind, plodded along through the slippery quagmire, singing snatches of rowdy songs, and laughing boisterously at the misfortunes which were incessantly befalling them. I could not help admiring them, lighthearted, merry rascals that they were. People who have the spirit to laugh at such reverses, are worthy of a better fate. It would have been no easy task to tread that slippery and uneven path by daylight, but to have done so with never a star in the sky, rendered it one of the most distressing conceivable. Yet on they trudged manfully, slosh, slosh through the heavy mud, splash, splash in countless water-holes. By degrees their laughter died away, and save for an oath now and again, when some unfortunate floundered into a deeper hole than usual, they pursued their melancholy way in silence. Poor fellows, the jest was played out. There was no longer any fun in the performance. Still, on they tramped doggedly through the slush, through the dark night and the desolate bush, the gaunt, white gums ever and anon looming up through the thick, damp air, like so many silent ghosts.

I must have fallen asleep in spite of the jolting and the cold, for when I opened my eyes the day was slowly breaking, a dull, sober light spreading itself across the tops of the dripping trees. A more ghostly and depressing look-out I had never witnessed, and I began to shiver horribly, alas, not only at the desolate view. We were still moving, though at a snail's pace, and I wondered if the horse had been kept going all night. Everything was so extraordinarily quiet, too, that I began to grow alarmed; yet on attempting to move to look about me, I found myself so stiff with the cold that for a long time all my attempts were futile. Then the object near me, which I at first took for a bundle of rugs, turned out to be my trusty chevalier, Flaskett. He was curled up between two boxes in a most singular fashion, and apparently sound asleep. I watched him for a long time without perceiving any signs of life. His face was ghastly in its pallor, his lips livid, and round his sunken eyes there were great blue-black circles. Being afraid that he was frozen, or might freeze, to death — for he was without a covering, having given me his rug at the beginning of the journey — I called him. Once, twice, three times I spoke without receiving a reply, but at the fourth summons he

awoke. It was also some time before he could straighten a limb or move.

"I thought it was time to waken you," I said. "You looked frozen."

"I believe I was," he answered. "But you — how do you feel?"

I was forced to confess that I did not feel well, and that, moreover, I did not believe my blood would ever thaw again.

"Are you too ill to walk?" he asked. "That will restore the circulation."

I thought I was not, so first of all, after much rubbing of his nether limbs, Flaskett swung himself over the back of the cart, and then helped me to alight, the vehicle moving all the while. It was then I discovered that all the male members of our company were missing, and I asked what it meant.

"We pulled up at a wayside pub about three this morning," Flaskett explained between his chattering teeth, "and left them there. Poor chaps, they were completely done up. Couldn't have covered another mile if you had paid them for it. And what a state they were in, good lord! Wringing wet and splashed from head to foot with mud. The landlord's going to bring them on in the morning."

"And why didn't you stay with them?" for I could see that he, too, was in a pitiable condition. "You really ought to have done so, Flaskett."

"I daresay I ought," he replied, looking straight ahead of him, "but I preferred to come." I knew why, and thanked him with a look. "Mr. Drysman undertook the office of coachman," he explained, "and I came as conductor."

"Is Mr. Drysman driving?" As we were walking behind the waggon I could not tell who held the reins.

"He's supposed to be, miss, but just now he's either dead, or fast asleep."

We walked on a little quicker and there saw our comedian leaning forward in his seat, his head on his breast, the reins held listlessly in his frozen hands.

"He looks as though he were dead," I exclaimed.

"I never saw him look anything else," was the sympathetic reply.

And now the morning mists were gradually dying away before the uprising of the sun, who, although we could not see him, yet made his presence felt. For the first time we were able to look about us, and though the sight was not a very exhilarating one, we were rendered more cheerful by the knowledge that day was breaking.

And now the driver and his other passengers began to awake, but finding that they were all stiff and unable to move, they set up a great noise; all but poor little Mrs. Chester. But then she never made a noise unless it was over her burly Gerald. Though pale and fragile as a ghost, and more like a dead than a living woman, she never uttered a complaint. When I asked her how she felt, she smiled faintly and answered, "very well," and then launched off into surmises and conjectures concerning

the welfare of her selfish husband. "A decent little woman" was Mrs. Chester — such at least was the encomium she received from every member of the company, which means a great deal in its way.

At length, about mid-day, we reached the hill which overlooks the town of Hawkstone, and here we rested awhile to smarten ourselves up before courting the gaze of its inhabitants. Then we let the waggon go on ahead, Flaskett, Mrs. Chester and I preferring to make our entrance on foot. We were not particularly impressed with the appearance of this flourishing township, for it looked about the last place on earth in which a band of benighted Thespians could expect to pick up their bread and cheese. Flaskett, as we walked along, drew our attention to the fact that not one of our bills was to be seen — a circumstance which caused us no little uneasiness. But more uneasiness yet awaited us, for when we arrived at the town hall, where stood our baggage not yet unloaded, we were informed by Mr. Drysman, who, with some reason, had got an extra fit of the dolefuls, that not alone had the hall not been engaged, but that the advance agent had not even been near the place. Here then was nice news; a pretty predicament. What we were to do no one seemed to have the slightest idea, and I began to conjure up dreadful visions of arrest for fraud, vagabondage, and a hundred different things. Then a friendly policeman, taking pity on our lot, suggested that we should go in a body to the mayor and lay our case before him, and when, later on, Mr. Chester and the rest of the company arrived on the scene, we followed the sympathetic constable's advice.

We found the chief magistrate in his shop, behind the counter, with his sleeves tucked up, he being a distinguished draper. He listened very gravely to the recital of our misfortunes, declared that we had indeed been badly used, and that he would see what he could do for us.

"But, sir," said Mr. Chester, "you will pardon my seeming presumption" — it was wonderful how civil and nice-spoken our leading man could be on occasions — "but what are we to understand by that? We have no money, and they will not let us the hall without a substantial deposit."

The mayor, looking extremely perplexed, declared the situation was an awkward one, a fact of which we were only too well aware. Then after another moment's thought he exclaimed suddenly, "You shall have the hall rent free. There, there, no thanks. I was a pro. myself once. I can sympathize with you. I'm afraid, though, you won't do much in this town. Still, we'll try our best."

And that mayor was as good as his word. Not alone did he give us the hall, but he printed some handbills for us and had them distributed, and an hour before the show started got the town band to turn out for our benefit. But still misfortune dogged our steps. Half an hour within starting time the rain came on again, a steady drizzle, so that many who

might have ventured forth to inspect our wares were kept at home by the hostility of the elements. The mayor, however, took a guinea's worth of seats, and brought his wife and family with him; but even the knowledge of his august patronage did not fill the theatre to overflowing, and when we came to reckon up our receipts we found that we were still five pounds short of the sum that would be required to take us all to Melbourne. This being made known to the mayor, he forthwith promised to supply that sum, a piece of generosity which was voted by one and all to be extremely handsome.

In the morning we were up betimes, and, paying our way like honest folks, betook ourselves to the railway station. There in due time the mayor and the local police force, which consisted of three constables, arrived to see us safely off, and I should think those excellent officials must have heaved a sigh of relief as the train steamed off with the members of the Melbourne Comedy Company.

Chapter IX.

THUS came to a melancholy end all our fond dreams of gold and glory. The train rattled on through the gloomy day, but the journey was void of that merry chatter which so enlivened our setting out. Indeed, I do not think I ever saw such a spiritless assembly. Poor things, we had not a quip or a smile among us. Even Mr. Chester forgot his greatness, and curled up in the far corner of the carriage mute as his little wife; while Mr. Drysman, looking more forlorn than words can well express, stared gloomily out through the window, now sighing and now almost sobbing, yet rarely uttering a word. Had it not been for the consolation he seemed to gain from Mrs. Robins's hand, which he, unconsciously, held all the time, I think the poor man would have broken down entirely.

At last we arrived at the station from which we had departed with such high hopes so short a time ago. A hurried good-bye, and we parted, some of us never to meet again. I was to go with Flaskett till such time as I could get another engagement, when I was to repay him for the shelter he so kindly offered. He called a cab and away we went, I feeling so deadly ill that he had to lead me to, and help me in, the vehicle. The fact is, I had caught a severe chill during our frozen journey to Hawkstone, and though I tried to shake off the deadly sickness, I felt it taking a firmer hold of me hour on hour. Flaskett, too, saw that I was far from well — though I doubt if he had any suspicion of my real state — and his kindness and attention were so admirable that I took many a secret vow to befriend him in the time to come if it should ever lay in my power.

Our reception at Belle-vue Cottages was not of the most encouraging nature. Mrs. Flaskett opened the door to her husband's impatient summons, but, upon seeing who were the arrivals, burst out laughing idiotically. Then turning to her mother, who stood a few paces back, she said, "They've come, ma. What did I tell you?"

Ma, who was a stout person with a pale, flabby face, began to grin even more idiotically than her daughter, so that I at once perceived that all was not well with her. Indeed, I thought she clung to the wall suspiciously, and as Flaskett pushed by both his wife and mother-in-law, my olfactory senses became aware of the presence of intoxicating liquors.

He led me into the sitting-room, arranging the uncomfortable sofa's uncomfortable cushions to the best of his ability.

"There," he said kindly, "sit down. You look quite ill. I will get some

tea for you in a few minutes.”

“I'm afraid I'm a great nuisance. Pray don't bother about me. I shall be well presently.”

“I hope so, miss; but that journey to Hawkstone was a dreadful business. It's given me the rheumatics pretty bad, I can tell you.”

Here there was a shuffling at the door, and Mrs. Flaskett, followed by her ma, entered the room.

“Well, Bob,” said Mrs. Flaskett, smiling wickedly, while her ma clung tenderly to the doorway, blinking at us with watery eyes, “you've come 'ome at last, my boy?”

“It looks like it,” said her husband.

“I hope you've brought that fortune with you.”

“What fortune?” was the sour query.

“Why, the one you were going to make, to be sure,” replied the woman tauntingly. “I've been waiting all this time for that silk dress you promised, Bob, while poor ma hasn't a boot to her foot.” Here the individual referred to favoured us with a most doleful look.

“Pawned 'em, I suppose,” said Mr. Flaskett rudely.

“You wretch,” screamed ma, “how dare you insult your wife's mother!”

“Look'ere,” cried Flaskett stamping his foot fiercely, “this lady is ill, and I won't have her annoyed. Liz, you must behave yourself, while you, Mrs. Mackenzie, or Madame Deleval, or whatever the devil you call yourself, had better make yourself scarce.”

Mrs. Mackenzie, for that was her real name, turned very pale about the lips, but instead of retorting she began to sob, while Liz, clasping her ma in her arms, exclaimed, “How dare you speak to my mother like that, Bob Flaskett? And who is that woman, I should like to know? and what right have you to bring her here in an honest woman's house?”

Flaskett's ugly face grew perfectly demoniacal with rage. With a suppressed but passionate cry he bounded across to his wife, seized her and her mother by the shoulders and unceremoniously bundled them from the room.

“You must excuse them,” he said as he returned. “They don't know any better.”

“I'm afraid,” said I, “that I shall prove a most unwelcome visitor, Flaskett.”

“Not at all,” he answered emphatically. “What's it to do with them — if you don't mind staying?”

“But that's just it, Flaskett, I do mind staying. Not that I blame you — don't think that for a moment — but I have no wish to cause discord between you and your wife. Therefore I should feel greatly obliged if you would try and find out if Miss Lestrangle is still at the El Dorado.”

“Yes, yes,” he said, “I will find out this very afternoon; but I do hope

you won't allow the wife and her mother to upset you. One I can and will turn out, the other I must bear. You'll find her right enough if I can only keep the mother off. But when they get together they drink, and you can do nothing with a drunken woman. She's the worst and obstinest beast under the sun. But you want some tea, don't you? You — you're not going to faint, miss?"

"Only a little giddiness. It's past now. Thank you, I should like some tea."

So after beseeching me to lie still, away he went and prepared the tea things, though first I heard him shuffle Mrs. Mackenzie along the passage, then open the front door and afterwards slam it to with no little vigour. That he had somewhat rudely ejected that worthy lady there could be no doubt, for through the partly open window I heard her expatiate rather freely on my virtues and his vices. Even when the tea, smoking hot, was brought in, she might still be heard, a few yards down the street, haranguing an audience of dirty boys and girls, and had not a policeman come along at that moment, who graciously moved her on, there is no knowing how much of Mr. Flaskett's domestic history she might not have divulged.

Flaskett walked over to the window and looked out. Returning a moment after he said with a sigh of satisfaction, "Thank goodness she's gone. I only wish the peeler had run her in and they'd given her twelve years hard. I thought the journey to Hawkstone terrible, but it's heaven beside a home-coming like this."

Poor old Flaskett! I made no reply, but I pitied him all the same.

After the tea, which refreshed me considerably, he insisted upon my lying down till he returned from his inquiries at the El Dorado and elsewhere, which, seeming to me a sensible proposal, I agreed to. Inside two hours he returned, finding me much better after my sound nap. He, however, had not succeeded in discovering Miss Moorna Lestrangle, for that young lady had gone on tour with Mr. James Sauros's company, but he had been lucky enough to secure an engagement for himself. Miss Vere Siddons, who had made a rise in the world, was taking a company, under a six weeks' engagement, through the principal towns of the North-East, ending up at Parramatta, or most probably Sydney, and Flaskett had just called at the agent's office in time to walk into the engagement, for though no actor he was a useful man to have, and this the agent knew.

"And when do you start?" I asked.

"It's rather sudden," he replied, as though afraid to tell me.

"When?"

"To-morrow morning. But don't let that worry you, miss. I've just had a long talk with Liz. She's promised to turn over a new leaf; promised to look after you like a sister, and never let her mother enter the house till I come back. And I think she'll keep her word, too, for if she don't, she

knows it's the last I'll have to do with her."

What could I say to him? I did not speak much, because my heart was full, but I told him, and the tears which came into my eyes must have accentuated my words, that I would never forget his goodness as long as I lived.

"Pooh," he said, though his own little eyes quivered queerly as he looked back at me, "it's nothing. I'm lending you a bit of friendship now for which you are going to repay me with interest when the brighter days come. I'm going to get two ten a week, and it's safe this time, for Miss Siddons has lots of money, so the agent said. So you see, you and Liz 'll be able to jog along like one o'clock till you pick up something for yourself. Though if I was you, miss, I should sling the boards. Why don't you? Why not write to your friends? Anything's better than this dorg's life."

I was not long in agreeing with him, my ill-health taking all the obstinacy out of me. Calling for pen and paper, I wrote off to Ella, to whom I confided my present unenviable position. This being finished, much to Flaskett's joy, he ran off and posted it with every outward sign of satisfaction.

"Now," he said, "I know you will be all right, and I can go away with a light heart." And early the following morning the good fellow took his leave.

Mrs. Flaskett, who in her calmer moments was not an unamiable, if somewhat slovenly, woman, was consideration itself that day, and I began to think that I had done her an injustice with my unfavourable imaginings. It is true she was not the sort of woman one would care to cultivate outside her kitchen, but to find her in the least degree tractable was a surprise of vast dimensions. How to account for this sudden change nonplussed me utterly. At first I thought it was the fear that Flaskett would carry his threat into execution and leave her unless she conducted herself with seeming decorum, but I soon saw that she cared as little for him as he for her. The one subject, however, which seemed to fascinate her was my relations, or the friends to whom I had written. Every time she saw me she spoke about that letter, and I soon perceived that her worthy husband, probably to keep her in check, had spun some wonderful story of my people and their great wealth. Nor did it suit me to set her right on this point, even had I the inclination, which I had not; for at that time I should have been in bed and under the doctor's orders instead of worrying over my present and my future.

For five whole days Mrs. Flaskett sustained this exceptional amiability, nor during that entire period had her mother put in an appearance at Belle-vue Cottages, at least to my knowledge: but on the sixth day, to my unspeakable despair, my letter was returned from Wallan stamped "Not known," and "Gone away" written across it in blue pencil. At first I

could not believe my eyes, but sat staring at it like one in a dream. If I had felt alone before, how much greater was my loneliness now? I could not realize it; my brain refused its functions, and in the very impotence of my despair the tears rushed streaming down my face.

“Why, what is this?” exclaimed Mrs. Flaskett, entering the room at that moment. “What are you crying for?”

I told her that the letter was returned, that my friends had gone, and that now I was more alone in the world than ever. At first she looked at me in blank amazement, then, as soon as she comprehended the meaning of my words, burst out into a coarse laugh.

“I thought as much. Rich relations — swell friends! A pretty pack of lies. Oh, dear, oh, dear, what a fool I've been!” And she tramped up and down the room uttering a perfect torrent of abuse. I tried to explain, but no explanation would she have. I was an impostor and worse, and she did not see why she should any longer keep one who was so utterly worthless. I had robbed her of her husband's love, and I was now robbing her of her daily bread, or words to that effect. At all this I can smile now, but it was very terrible then. I know my anger got command of my physical weakness and for a moment or two I terrified her with the appearance of my passion; but only for that brief space. The next moment I was gasping on the sofa, utterly exhausted and dazed, and I seemed to hear, as through a clanging of bells, the horrible voice of that horrible woman as she uttered taunt and insult.

At last she left me, and for a long time I lay back on the sofa trying to think, think, but, oh, the pain of it! Yet by degrees my mind grew calmer, if calm its excited state might be called, and I seemed to have but one idea — to get away from this horrible woman without delay. Where I should go, or what do, I thought but little. I only wanted to get away, away. Yet I have a vague recollection that through my mind the word “hospital” was running. I arose to my feet quivering in every limb, almost as helpless as a child. Mechanically I put on my hat and coat, and staggering along the passage opened the front door and passed out.

What streets I traversed, or in what manner I walked them, I could not say, but I have a hazy recollection of repeating the word “hospital — hospital,” and of plodding determinedly on. And then I crossed the road by the library: I saw the walls of the gaol loom up black and horrible through the mist which swam before my eyes. A sudden dizziness seized me. Then I remembered no more. ...

Chapter X.

WHEN I opened my eyes to consciousness once more, though for a long time previous to this I had had a vague idea of being surrounded with comfort, they encountered a bright shaft of sunlight which, streaming through the white curtains of a window, fell full on a choice array of beautiful blooms, which not alone gladdened the eye, but gave to the heart an instant and infinite repose. On the table at the foot of my bed there were also more bright flowers; but I had barely passed beyond the first stage of wondering when the door was opened softly and a woman, attired as a nurse, entered the room.

“Ah, you are awake at last,” she said, looking as pleased thereat as if I were her own child. “How do you feel?”

“Not very strong, I'm afraid,” I answered, and my voice sounded quite strange in my ears. “But where am I, please, and how did I come here?”

“You shall learn all presently,” she said kindly. “The doctor has given strict orders that you are not to talk. But this much I can tell you. You are in the hospital, and you have been very ill with fever.”

“I understand,” I said, the past coming back to me with a rush. “I was trying to reach the hospital when I felt giddy and stumbled.”

“You fainted,” said the nurse, “and the police brought you here.”

“Have I been here long?”

“Two weeks, nearly. You have been unconscious most of the time. But Doctor Wallace is very clever, and while there was any danger he never left your side.”

“Is it,” I said, and for the moment my eyesight failed me and I saw the nurse through a mist, “is it Doctor Arthur Wallace of whom you are speaking?”

“The same, and his mother and sister have not been less attentive than he.”

I closed my eyes, a feeling of indescribable happiness stealing through my weary frame.

“Why do you cry?” asked the nurse, wiping the tears which I unconsciously had shed. “You are better now; you will soon be well again.”

And I said, “I cry because I am so happy,” and she answered, “Poor dear,” and stooped and kissed me. And then I fell asleep again, nor did I waken till the sun was going down. Then I thought I heard someone

breathing beside me, and on looking round my eyes encountered the dear face that had been with me all through my dreams — which were not all dreams either.

“Arthur.”

“Flossie, dear Flossie.” And then he knelt by my bed and covered my hand with kisses and great scalding drops, every one of which found its way into my heart.

“Look,” he said presently, “see whom we have here,” and he beckoned to someone who was standing away back against the window, but whom I could not distinguish, my eyes being too full of tears.

“It is mother and Ella,” he said. “Don't you recognize them?”

Recognize them! Ah, didn't I! But how can I paint that happy meeting? I saw their dear faces, I heard their sweet words, and like one in some delicious dream I lay back gasping with joy.

And now, living as it were in the midst of so much happiness, I rapidly grew strong again, and then they told me all that had befallen them since, as they put it, I had so selfishly quitted Wallan. Mr. Wallace had died somewhat suddenly, necessitating Arthur's return from Sydney; then having no strong ties to bind them to the old place, and Arthur wishing to push his fortunes in a wider sphere, they disposed of the property and came to Melbourne with him, where he was now practising as junior to the celebrated Doctor Slaughter, whose extensive practice it was decided he should take over in due time. Not that an extensive practice was at all necessary, as Mr. Wallace had left a large fortune behind, but Arthur was what plain people call an enthusiast, and loved his work for its own sake. It was during one of his visits to the hospital, in company with the aforementioned Slaughter, that the police brought me in half dead from the streets. Slaughter pronounced my case an extreme one, as the fever had been allowed to get too firm a hold of me. “But,” added Arthur, “thanks to his skill and your own grand constitution — not forgetting God's mercy — we have been enabled to pull you through, and now, dear Flossie, with proper care you will soon be yourself again.”

“The nurse told me how good you were, Arthur. How can I thank you? What can I do, what say?”

But he only pressed my hand tenderly by way of reply.

Of poor old Will they knew nothing. The only piece of news they had to disclose was that a man had once been making inquiries in the neighbourhood of Wallan respecting my family, but who the man was, whence came he, or what were his reasons, no one could say. That it could be Will himself I doubted, though I could not help thinking that perhaps the poor old fellow had trudged back at last, tired out with the struggle, but upon learning that we were all dead or gone he had once more passed away into the eternal bush.

When I was well enough to be removed from the hospital my good

friends took me to their home, where I remained till I was perfectly restored to health, surrounded by every loving care and attention. Then when the hot days warned us of the approach of summer, Arthur took for us a charming little villa at Queenscliffe, and here my convalescence was completed.

One day as Mrs. Wallace and I were on the pier enjoying the soft breeze which blew across the bay, our attention was attracted to a large yacht which, with all her canvas flying, came scudding over the little waves like a great white bird. Most boats would have taken in some sail before approaching so close the anchorage, but this one came on with a rush, as though unconscious of the fact that she was entering shallow water.

“She ain't going to anchor,” said a fisherman who was standing near us, addressing anyone whom it might concern. “Just whipping in to show herself off a bit, and then away again.”

This too was my idea, at which I felt sorry, I could not say why. But no sooner had the fisherman expressed his thought than a shrill whistle rang out from the yacht; she luffed like a fish, her sails disappeared like magic, and a few minutes after she was swinging quietly at anchor. And still we stood watching her with singular interest till we saw three men enter her dingy, one of whom seized the oars and with a few powerful strokes brought the little vessel to the landing stage. Thinking I recognized one of the three, which thought Mrs. Wallace presently verified, we hurried to the place of landing, and there beheld Mr. Ballestier come up the steps. A big man with a golden beard was his companion, but of him I took little heed. Going up to the Hon. Thomas, I held out my hand.

“Have you forgotten me, Mr. Ballestier?” Mr. Ballestier's big friend, who was some half dozen paces ahead of him, just gave us one quick glance, and then turning his back looked out across the sea.

“What,” cried the Hon. Thomas, his honest face lighting up with pleasure, “you don't mean to say it's you?”

“It's I and no one else,” I replied with a smile.

“Well, I never!” exclaimed the Hon. Thomas. “I thought you was dead. Soo said she'd heard somethin' about it.”

“I told Mrs. Ballestier that Miss Hastings was very ill,” said Mrs. Wallace, here interposing, “but not that she was dead.”

“Well, ma'am,” said the Hon. Thomas, “I guess Soo made a mistake. Anyway, Miss Hastings, I'm delighted to see you again, and shall be pleased to see you South Yarra way when you return to town. So will Dora, I'll wager, though you was a very naughty girl to go off in such a huff.”

I smiled, being unable to explain things, and asked him how Mrs. Ballestier was.

“So, so,” said the Hon. Thomas, “though I must say she don't intertain as much as she used to. The last big affair we had was just before Mr. Keestone went 'ome. I suppose you know he's gone to England?”

“I saw something about it in the papers.”

“Yes, his brother died rather suddenly, so of course he's the earl now. A change he ought to appreciate, for he'll be able to give a dinner occasionally instead of always loafing one. But, bless me, here am I chatterin' like an old woman while my friend's there waiting for me. You must let me introduce him. A splendid fellow. Just dropped in for a title, too. The queerest story you ever heard. Sir William,” he called to the individual to whom he referred, who approached in answer to the summons, “let me introduce you to a namesake of yours. This is Mrs. Wallace and this is Miss Hast——Good God, man, are you mad?”

The person addressed as Sir William looked hard at me for a moment, then uttering a strange shout sprang forward and clasped me in his arms crying, “Flossie, Flossie! Great God, it's Flossie!”

“Will, dear Will!”

The recognition, in spite of his beard and altered looks, was instantaneous and mutual. Pass him I might with a quick glance, but one look into the eyes I knew so well left no doubt.

“I say,” said Mr. Ballestier looking a trifle alarmed, “what does all this mean?”

“What does it mean?” cried Will, laughing and crying at the same time. “It means that this is my sister, my Flos, my — oh, heaven, it's my sister!” And he hugged me again and again as though he would squeeze the life out of me.

“Well, I never!” exclaimed the Hon. Thomas. “What a rum go.” And he forthwith relapsed into a state of silent wonder

“See, Will,” I said, as soon as I had regained sufficient breath to speak, “here is another old friend.”

“Mrs. Wallace, as I live,” and before that good woman was aware of it she found herself close-pressed in a pair of masculine arms.

“Good friend,” said old Will, “in all our trouble you never forgot us. God bless you. And Arthur and Ella — how are they?”

“Well and happy,” was the reply, “but they will be happier now. Ah, Will, if your mother could only have seen this day.”

“Poor mother,” he said softly, and turning his head aside looked out across the sea, and I who clung to his hand felt each of its strong fingers quiver.

“Let us go back to the house,” I said. “Ella must know the good news.” So away we went two and two, and as we walked Will told me in low hurried sentences much of the sights he had seen and the privations he had endured since the day he parted from Ella and me on the old Boorta Road.

"I saw much, suffered much," he said, "but I was prepared to rough it and did not mind a bit of hardship here and there. And yet, though I had left the old home, Flos, and the old life far behind, I could not leave myself: I was still Will Hastings, the son of a convict. How they knew this I cannot imagine, but know it they invariably did. 'Hastings,' they would say, 'is your name?' 'Yes.' 'Where do you come from?' 'Wallan.' 'Any relation of Frank Hastings?' 'His son.' 'Oh!' And though they said no more, I knew they were acquainted with enough of my history to damn me."

"Poor old Will."

"Well," he continued, "as soon as I was well out of the district I changed my name and gave out that I had come from across the South Australian border. I suppose it was cowardly of me, Flos, but I couldn't stand their infernal stares and the knowledge that they knew my history. So over into New South Wales I crossed and worked my way up the Darling till I reached the Queensland border. What I passed through during this period no one but myself can ever know, but when I arrived at Moolamunda Station, a place some fifteen miles on the Queensland side of the border, I was half-famished, half-clothed, and in a half-dying condition. Indeed I should have died that time, Flos, had it not been for this frame of mine, which can stand a lot of rapping. Well, they gave me a billet there on one of the outlying parts of the station, where, looking after my sheep, I led one of the most solitary and terrible lives that ever fell to the lot of a young man."

"Poor Will."

"And yet," said he with one of his strange smiles, "I shall ever look back upon those days with the utmost pleasure, for it was there I struck the silver mine of Moolamunda."

"You found the great silver mine of Moolamunda?" I exclaimed incredulously, for I had read countless articles in the newspapers concerning this wonderful mine with its fabulous riches.

"Who's talking about Moolamunda?" asked Mr. Ballestier. "Six months ago I could have got shares in it for a mere song."

"And now?" said Will with a laugh.

"It's like buying money," was the reply. "You were fortunate, Sir William. Nothen like being in the know."

"Considering it was I who discovered it," said Will with an amused smile.

"You discovered it, did you?" exclaimed the Hon. Thomas with a puzzled, incredulous look. "Why, I always thought it was a chap called Tom Higgins."

"And so it was," said Will. "I am Tom Higgins."

"Well, I'm blowed," ejaculated the Hon. Thomas.

"You, Will?" I repeated, for I remembered both hearing and reading of

this Mr. Higgins who was now a millionaire.

"Yes, Flos, I. But you shall hear all about it, dear, another time. I am rich now, how rich I don't know, but my riches came too late to help our dear ones. When they were dying I was roaming the Barrier Ranges with scarcely a shoe to my foot. I sent a man from Queensland with letters and money, saying I would follow as soon as my business would permit; but he came back with such a well-authenticated tale of death and separation that I never believed I should see you again. And yet here, of all places in the world where I least expected it, I meet you."

"Strange things happen, dear Will," I said. "Thank God for this."

"I do," he said, "I do." And thus on we walked for several moments in silence, he tightly holding my hand. But being full of curiosity, I suddenly asked him how he came to know Mr. Ballestier.

"He and I had a little business together, and as I rather liked the old chap I asked him to come for a sail with me."

"Then that yacht is yours?"

"Yes, I bought her over in Sydney. What do you think of her?"

"I thought she looked like a beautiful bird as she came rushing up to her anchorage. What do you call her?"

Will did not answer for a moment; then he said, as though half-ashamed of himself, "The *Ella*."

"So, so," thought I, "he has not forgotten yet." But, having no wish to embarrass him, I said aloud, "Mr. Ballestier addressed you as Sir William just now?"

"Yes, and by the way the old chap keeps on repeating it I think he likes the sound."

"What does it mean, Will?"

"It means that two of our cousins — those cousins whom we have never seen — were drowned while on a voyage to the Canary Islands, and that I, being the next in descent, am the heir. I first saw about it in an old advertisement away up at Moolamunda; and a greasy advertisement it was, too, for old Grogan, our storekeeper, had wrapped my pound of bacon up in the bit of newspaper in which it was printed. It set forth how Frank Hastings, alias Frank Lawrence, who had been forwarded to New South Wales by a parental government, would hear of something to his advantage if he were to communicate with Messrs. Todd and Easeman, solicitors, Old Broad Street in the City of London. Well, I communicated with them, and the result is that I am an English baronet. Queer, isn't it?"

I pressed closer to him and his arm tightened about my shoulders. Stooping down, he kissed me, oblivious of all who might be near.

"They won't sneer at the currency boy now, Flos."

"No, dear."

At this moment, and just as we were within a hundred yards of our house, Mr. Ballestier stopped and said, in a rather uneasy manner, I

thought, that he had two or three important telegrams to dispatch, and that if we would kindly excuse him he would pay his respects to us later on.

“We dine at seven,” said Mrs. Wallace, “and shall expect you at dinner.”

“Very pleased indeed, ma'am,” replied the Hon. Thomas. “You'll excuse me rushin' away like this, but I'm sure you must have a lot to tell each other.” And ere we could remonstrate he was gone.

“Ella,” whispered Will, as he and I followed Mrs. Wallace up the pathway, “is she — is she married?”

“No. But you, Will? I forgot to ask.”

“No, I am not married. I have had no time yet. But where is she?”

“I will go and find her.” So up the steps of the verandah I darted and flew to Ella's room.

“Why,” she said, “I thought you were lost. I was just going out to look for you.”

“Instead of which I have come to look for you. You are wanted.”

“I — by whom?”

“Come and see,” I answered mysteriously.

“Flossie,” she cried nervously, seizing me by the arm, “who is it?”

“Come and see,” I repeated with an aggravating smile. Seizing her by the hand, I led her out on the verandah, in the far corner of which stood Will, his back to us, speaking to Mrs. Wallace. “There is the gentleman yonder,” I said, and at the sound of my voice he turned round. With a strange, excited smile on his handsome face he stepped towards us.

“Ella,” he said; but whatever else he might have spoken was lost in the shriek that Ella gave. He had only time to rush forward and catch her as she fell fainting in his arms.

Chapter XI.

WHEN Arthur returned from town that night his surprise and joy may easily be imagined. "My dear old Will," he must have said quite a hundred times, and each time he accompanied it by either shaking hands or patting Will on the shoulder, to which that worthy always responded with a glad smile and some warm word of friendship. Oh, it was beautiful to see them, and Ella and I, our faces flushed with gladness, sat listening to the talk of the friends, two of the happiest girls in the world that night.

Over dinner we related scraps of our adventures, and it was wonderful what things old Will had seen and done. I suggested that he should write his autobiography, but this he emphatically declined to do, declaring that it was enough for a man to have gone through without having to go over it again. In this Mr. Ballestier supported him.

"Sir William and me has gone through the business," he said, "and we're not so precious fond of dwellin' on it. I know it's a creditable thing for a man to raise himself, but there are some things in my past that I see nothing to boast of."

"The same with me, Mr. Ballestier," said Will. I knew what he meant.

"I thought you'd agree with me, Sir William. Sir William and me agrees on many points, ladies, and though we're naturally proud of what we've done for ourselves, we can't forget that it's been a rough journey."

"That's so," said Will. "Here's to the road that led us to fortune, but may we never have to tramp it again."

"Pre-cisely," chipped in the Hon. Thomas, "my sentiments pre-cisely."

After the meal we adjourned to the verandah when the gentlemen began to smoke, the Hon. Thomas drawing forth from his capacious waistcoat pockets his short black clay with its accompanying plug of coarse tobacco. But it was not possible that we or they should rest content with tobacco smoke that night, so that when Will proposed a stroll along the beach we three young ones jumped at the proposal. Leaving the Hon. Thomas pulling placidly at his strong pipe, the fumes of which filled the air with anything but a delicate odour, and chatting away pleasantly with Mrs. Wallace — whose admirable tact had set that worthy man at ease in a few moments — we four, that is Will and Ella, Arthur and I sauntered away down to the sea, discreetly moving in pairs. And I take it we must have been very much interested in the night — or

each other — for when I looked around, lo, and behold! the other pair had vanished.

“I think we had better go back,” I said. “I don't see Will and Ella.

Arthur laughed quietly, saying, “I suppose not. But do you feel chilly? We must take no risks yet.”

“No — but.”

He did not reply, nor could I go on. He walked by my side apparently deep in thought. Above, in the misty blue, the white moon sailed, full and beautiful, all her glittering canvas spread, and the sea, partaking of her beauty, shone like a sheet of silver. It seemed almost like a sacrilege to call the time night. It was a stranger, lovelier day.

“Florence,” he said at last, “I have waited patiently for this hour. May I speak again?”

“What have you to say, Arthur?” Although I thought he must have heard my heart beat, I yet managed to put this superfluous question.

“Only this, dear, that I love you. You know my heart. It has been like an open book to you ever since I was a boy. All my hopes lie in you, all my joy must come through you.”

“Arthur,” I said, and to make amends for my past folly I took his hand in mine, “I have been very foolish, dear: forgive me.”

All the pain and anguish of years, all the sorrows and all the heart-burnings passed away with those words. Taking advantage of my momentary weakness, his arms went round me; and the moon, as she sailed on her airy way, looked placidly down on one more episode in the old, old story.

“And to think, dearest,” he said, “that we have loved each other all these years, and yet have had to wait so long. I can scarcely believe that you are mine even now. The old silver ring I gave you so long ago was our true wedding ring after all. Look, this is how I have loved you. I have never parted with it since that day.” And he drew from his neck, round which it had been fastened by a piece of ribbon, his half of the old ring.

That I was gratified by this proof of his constancy needs scarcely be said; but in spite of my seeming perversity, I too could give some pleasant proof of my regard. When he had finished speaking I drew from my breast my half of the ring and held it up to the light.

“Dearest,” he whispered, “my dear one.”

But the moon tells no tales, so why should I?

When we returned to the house, Will and Ella had not yet put in an appearance, but we had not been seated long before in they came. Old Will looked himself again, the great, careless, happy boy of our young days, while Ella's great eyes were almost dancing out of her head.

Will looked at Arthur, then Arthur looked at Will, and they both laughed.

“Would you girls mind going away and having a talk?” says old Will,

smiling roguishly. "I want to speak to Arthur."

"And I want to speak to Will," says Arthur, looking at me.

So away we went, but we had no sooner entered my room than Ella threw herself sobbing on my neck.

"Oh, I am so happy, Flossie dear," she sobbed, "so happy, so happy."

I think I guessed the cause.

Shortly after this there was a double wedding in Queenscliffe, and the local paper said, waxing eloquent as even prosaic newspapers will at times, that Old Sol, during his reign of something like six thousand years, had never looked down upon two fairer brides — which we all thought was an extremely handsome compliment.

Will has not yet decided when he will go to England to look up the paternal acres, which, if his lawyers' letters are to be credited, are sadly in need of some of the silver their new owner picked up at Moolamunda; but when he does go Arthur and I intend to accompany him. Flaskett, too, we have decided to take with us, for lately that worthy fellow has made himself so invaluable that he is the most trusted member of our household. Neither Arthur nor Will can do enough for him, and when I think of his goodness to me in the days when there was no hope of reward, I too feel that whatever we may do for this good fellow will be little enough. Unfortunately he is still afflicted with a wife, but the allowance he makes her is a very liberal one, and he tells me that he entertains great hopes of her speedy dissolution.

And now, perhaps, a few words as to some of the characters who have flitted across our stage may not be deemed amiss.

Captain Langton, I regret to say, pursued his course along the road to ruin at a desperate pace. The great estate of Langton at length slipped through his fingers, and the last I heard of him was that he was boundary-riding on a station in Northern Queensland. His sister, Maud, had married well, at least so we all thought at the time, for her husband was one of the wealthiest brokers on the Exchange; but speculation wove her fascinating web about him with disastrous results. The fabulous fortune with which the tongue of rumour had endowed him proved but the swollen shadow of the real thing. His speculations failed, his companies collapsed, and he in turn was convicted of fraud and sentenced to a long term of penal servitude. Maud, when last I heard of her, supported herself and her young children by taking in lodgers at a pound a week. Time plays strange pranks with us, doesn't it?

Mr. James Sauros, the highly respected manager of the El Dorado, still very worthily fills that exalted position, and they tell me that the outside world regards him as a most exemplary citizen. I know he gave 500*l.* a short time back to the Christian Social Purity League, of which he was at once elected a life member.

Vere Siddons is getting on in the profession — at least she is very

much talked about, which is the same thing. Miss Moorna Lestrangle, on the other hand, is one of those humble workers of whom we hear but little, though she too must be steadily rising in her profession, for I saw a notice of her in the paper a short time back which must have made her honest heart beat with joy. Good luck to thee, Moorna, or Louisa, or whatever thy name may be.

And now having approached the end, once viewed with pleasurable anticipations but now with fear, nothing more remains for me to do but to thank all those who have borne with my many faults — which I most heartily do — wipe my pen and fold work. Nor is it, perhaps, incumbent upon me to add that Arthur is now a famous physician — that being precisely what everyone expected. Still, in my eyes, he is a great benefactor of mankind, and I could tell you of some wonderful things he has done, only he will not permit me, being too modest. “No,” he says, “not a syllable.” And as I write these last words he leans over me and presses his lips into my hair, and calls me his dear Currency Girl. And the way he says it, coupled with the memories it awakens, goes to my heart and brings the tears to my eyes, so that I can scarcely decipher the words I am writing. But I love it better than all his other pet names.

Strange, isn't it?
