

# The Bridle Track

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**The Bridle Track**  
**Sydney**  
**Angus and Robertson**  
**1936**

TO  
MARGOT

## WHO MADE IT THE BRIDAL TRACK

This worship of Horse  
Is a sin and a curse,  
So we hear in our parson's talk;  
But we're steering straight  
For the Golden Gate,  
And we may as well ride as walk.  
Shall our friendship break  
O'er the way we take  
Since neither will follow it back!  
Let him hump his load  
Down the two-chain road —  
I'm going the  
    Bridle  
        Track!

W. H. OGILVIE.

# Book I: The Coming of Lancelot

## Chapter I

THEY rode into the westering sun along the dusty, rutted track that stretched toward the hazy line of the river timber. The last straggling shanty of the town fell behind, and with the clear road before it, the packhorse jingled freely ahead with the stiff new swag strapped across the bulging pack-bags. In its wake rode the drover, middle-aged and stocky, with the unimaginative, stolid features of the steady toiler for whom the gilded dreams and hopes of fortune do not exist. He sat squat on the thickset, black horse with the loose reins swinging at every stride, his worn clothes bleached by the sun and many washings to a faded neutral tint.

At his side jogged the boy, fresh-faced and slim, in his brand-new rig-out — khaki shirt and moleskins, supple elastic-side boots, and wide-brimmed felt hat — struggling hard to curb the exuberance that bubbled up in him. Yesterday life was a drab, depressing thing; just another day of fruitless waiting and hanging about the dusty, untidy, alien town with the hope of ever finding a job receding farther and farther. To-day, life held a glamour that needed no artificial stimulus. He had crossed the threshold, and despondency had vanished like mist before the sun — the past with its memories a discarded thing, locked away with the formal clothes of yesterday in the trunk at the hotel now well behind them.

The exhilaration of the moment was something to be, enjoyed without pausing to analyse it. It was a vague, subtle compound of the complete novelty of everything — the stiff new clothes with the store smell still hanging on them, the comfortable feel of the big stock-saddle with the added hint of safety from the wide triangular knee-pads, the free swinging gait of the bay horse under him, and the quiet drover with long stockwhip hanging from his forearm riding at his side, talking to him not as a boy and a newchum but as an equal — and calling him Bill!

The name was still new enough to demand a pause before he fully realised it was his and responded to it. New scenery combined with new unaccustomed clothes, the feeling of self-consciousness that invests a boy's entering on his first job, the sense of superiority of a pedestrian elevated to the saddle — all these may herald the beginning of a new epoch in one's life, but none shuts a door so effectively on the past as the adoption of a new name.

It had been MacAndrew's suggestion. When his shrewd, casual

questioning had satisfied him that although the boy was totally inexperienced, he had in him the makings of something that the few remaining beer huns in town could never attain to, he had held out his hand. "Right you are then," he said, "we'll pull out as soon as you're ready. My name's Tom MacAndrew. What did you say yours was!"

"Muir!"

"What else!"

The boy had hesitated. The reticence born of school years where he had almost come to forget that he ever possessed other than a surname till he went home for holidays was still upon him, and his reply was suspicious ... grudging. "Lancelot Atherton Muir."

Then MacAndrew's expressionless nod and his kindly "Suppose we call you 'Bill.' It's easier to remember," had given a feeling of relief to both of them. The boy had sudden disturbing memories of the one person in that other life who had called him "Lance," and MacAndrew was thinking to himself as his eyes glimmered idly at the nearing timber, "Lancelot — and ginger hair! I reckon 'Bill' will save him a few hidings."

Clear of the town they broke into a long easy canter. The boy's lack of saddle experience was evident, and although the drover was slightly troubled in his mind about it, his expression betrayed none of his feelings. When a glance showed the unaccustomed moleskins creeping up to Bill's knees in concertina-like folds, MacAndrew eased the pace and taught him to stand in the stirrups and let them slip back.

The distant smudge of the river timber grew plainer, till they could distinguish the stout trunks of the coolabahs and the soaring branches with the long pendent boughs; then the little cavalcade clattered across the wooden bridge. Upstream, between steep earthen banks the river was a dry, dusty bed; below the bridge lay a solitary pool of yellow water edged with slimy, black, trampled mud holding the partly engulfed carcasses of a cow and several sheep. Across the bridge where the tracks spread out fanwise, MacAndrew headed the packhorse northward up the faint track that threaded the fringe of the coolabahs.

The sun was dropping low in the western sky when the drover pointed ahead. "There's the mob. Camp's just ahead." The boy's eyes searched the timber but failed to discover anything. Then a fine haze above the tree-tops caught his attention and as they drew nearer it thickened till through the dust a gleam of moving white grew and took shape. The timber thinned to a few scattered trees and twisted shrubs, and then before them opened up the sheep. From the bare river channels out across the plain the mob were spread, a grey-white mass, a quarter of a mile wide, drifting steadily along.

As they approached, a boy on a rough-coated pony followed by a black kelpie materialized from the shade of a tree and jogged across to meet

them. Bill, eyeing him with curiosity, saw a boy of about ten years, short and thickset, yet looking older than his years by reason of his clothes. They were unmistakably cutdowns and still several sizes too big, giving him the appearance of a little old man.

“Everything all right, Bob?”

The boy nodded, his eyes covertly taking in the brand-newness of the newcomer as he replied, “Had to leave a couple of old ewes on the dinner camp. They were settled!”

“Well, I’ll go on with the packhorse. This is Bill Muir — my son Bob!” The two young people looked at one another, Bob inclining his head in an awkward nod while Bill’s stiff “How-do-you-do” was edged with a restraint that plainly signified “I’ll meet you half-way but don’t expect me to be effusive.”

MacAndrew watched the two youths sizing up one another, and chuckled silently, then as he prepared to follow the packhorse forging calmly through the sheep, he broke in on their invisible sparring. “Like to come on to the camp, Bill, or would you rather stop with the sheep! We’ll be putting them in the break pretty soon.”

“I’ll stay and help with the sheep if you like.”

“Right! Bob, take him over to Dinny.”

Bill turned the bay horse in the wake of the shaggy pony on whose ribs the diminutive rider’s heels beat an ineffective tattoo. The black dog poked out in front and little groups of sheep standing heads together in huddled knots broke up at his approach and ambled after the main mob with the outstretched necks and stiff, jerky gait of near exhaustion. The dust lay thick on the narrow ridged backs and their flanks were concave hollows under the sharp caves of their loins. The earth seemed devoid of grass. Here and there a stubby blackened tuft remained to show where a clump of grass had been, but everywhere — across the plain and among the broken gullies converging on the channels — there was no hint that this had ever been other than a dusty, sterile waste.

Bill was experiencing a vague feeling of annoyance. The boy pushing on ahead, rounding up the stragglers with a sharp “*Hoy!*” or an encouraging whistle to the dog, appeared totally oblivious to his presence. As they reached the flank of the mob, he jerked the pony to an abrupt halt and Bill’s horse ranged alongside, stopping from apparent force of habit without consulting the rider. Bill forgot his annoyance in his inspection of the horseman riding to meet them. He looked at the man, then at the horse; something in its carriage, in its action as it picked its way across the broken ground held his eye till it halted in front of him, stretching out a shapely nose to exchange greetings with the bay horse he rode.

“Dad’s back, Dinny. This is Bill, the new bloke!”

Bill met the casual scrutiny and the quiet “Good day” with a reserved

nod. The man was somewhere in the region of forty. His eyes were hidden under the hat brim and a straggling moustache and a week's stubble effectually disguised his features. He sat easily in the saddle and the long black plaited thong of a stockwhip hung looped from his forearm.

“Got a dog?”

“No ... I'm afraid I haven't.”

The three sat in silence for a while, Bill fidgeting uneasily while the two, gazing out over the sheep, had every appearance of being naturally at ease. Gradually the sense of being slighted dissolved in the gathering consciousness that the man and the boy had not merely accepted him, but had outdone his own dislike of effusiveness by refusing to show any curiosity or ply him with questions. Their silence was a natural sense of quietness that accrues to men whose solitary mode of life offers more opportunity for thought than speech; a shunning of idle conversation for the mere sake of hearing themselves talk, and an avoidance of futile questions when the newcomer carried his history all about him in his brand-new clothes, his stiff seat in the saddle, the way he held his reins and wore his hat. Even in the way he glanced restlessly, unseeingly about, compared with the slow, keen gaze of the bushman who draws his information and his inferences from the sun, the sky, the trees, the tracks, and to whom a glance at the brand on a horse or a bullock, or the condition of a mob of sheep tells a story and obviates a multitude of preliminary questions.

Dinny straightened leisurely in the saddle and glanced at the sun, low on the horizon. “We'll put 'em in, Bob!”

The boy tugged the unwilling head of his pony round, belaboured the staring ribs with his heels and jogged off, his black dog, interpreting the situation, loping ahead with new energy. Bill glanced interrogatively at the elder man. He was still undecided how much of the taciturnity was natural or due to the occasion.

“Been on the road before?”

“You mean droving? No. This is my first trip.” He paused, then with a sudden burst of frankness, “As a matter of fact, I know nothing at all about this, but ...if you will tell me what's to be done, I'll — I'll be very grateful.”

Dinny nodded with apparent satisfaction. “There's nothing much to learn. Not with sheep, anyhow! If it was cattle. ...” The glance that swept the woolly mob held a trace of contempt that changed to a meditative wistfulness. Then he roused, and without appearing to move in the saddle, swung the bay horse toward the rear of the mob. “Just dodge the tail along. Don't hustle them or they'll lie down on you! Camp's straight ahead.”

Against an arm of timber in front of the mob, the white rectangle of a

tent-fly caught the low rays of the sun. Dinny left him to ride up the wing to turn the scattering leaders in, and Bill forced his horse at the laggards, getting a mild thrill at their short, jerky rushes from almost under the horse's feet. The mob closed together and assumed a solid tractable form with young Bob and his dog on the left wing, Dinny steering the leaders on to the camp from the right, while Bill rode back and forward across the tail, keeping the listless, weakened sheep up to their mates. The dust rose thick and choking. Bill shouted at the laggards till his voice grew husky and his throat was dry and dusty.

A fence materialized ahead, deflecting the leaders toward the gap in the break, and a chorus of baa-ing mingled with the dust-laden air. Bill, closing up with young Bob, gradually made out the semicircle of wooden stakes supporting a light rope fence running out from the wire fence and enclosing the mob. When the last weak and weary members had hobbled inside, MacAndrew appeared with a heavy maul; more pegs were driven into the ground across the gap and a further section of the rope fence closed the mob in for the night.

Bill led his horse toward the camp in Dinny's footsteps. In spite of his taciturnity, there was something about the man's quiet unhurried efficiency that prompted the boy's attachment. He felt instinctively that he would receive help and understanding and there would be no cheap derision at his mistakes.

They pulled off the heavy saddles and spread the sweat-sodden saddle-cloths over them against the drooping pole of the wagonette. "Here's your hobbles!" Something landed at Bill's feet with a heavy click and he looked up sharply at the owner of the harsh nasal tones — a long, slouching individual with thin features and a slit of a mouth. Bill picked up the hobbles — they looked like outsize handcuffs — and, following Dinny's example, fastened both straps round the one foreleg.

"Look out when you take the bridle off," Dinny cautioned him. "That horse jumps away." He slipped his own bridle over the bay horse's ears. It walked a few short paces, then went down on its knees with a grunt of enjoyment, flopped over and rolled luxuriantly in the dust. Bill undid the throat-lash and had just slipped his fingers under the bridle when with a quick twist the bay horse snatched his head out of the bridle; the bit caught in its teeth and the bridle was jerked out of the boy's hand while the bay's quarters swung menacingly round as it bounded forward. Bill jumped clear to find Dinny watching him closely. "I'll show you how to fix him next time," he said. The thinfaced horsetailer mounted on the boss's horse, put the horses together and drove them into the dusk in a melodious clatter of bells and hobble-chains.

Swags were unrolled, and Bill, armed with soap and towel, joined young Mac and Dinny at their ablutions. As Bob stepped away from the battered tin basin, and groped for the towel stuck in his belt, Dinny stood

back and beckoned Bill silently forward. The boy picked up the dish of dirty brown water with its scum of soapsuds when a hand descended on his arm. "Steady on, lad! This is a dry camp. We've all got to wash in that!" Dinny smiled grimly at the consternation on the boy's face and jerked a thumb toward the wagonette. "Them two drums is all we'll see till to-morrow dinner-time."

Bill put down the basin and stared with unconcealed distaste at its thick, murky contents. Dinny quietly tipped a pint of fresh water from one of the drums and added it slowly to the dish. It looked as brown and discoloured as the original, and Bill, somewhat reassured, slowly immersed his fingers. He knew the dust lay thick on his face but he dreaded the touch of this pea-soupy fluid in which practically everyone in camp had already washed. At the moment he would have given anything for a bucket of clean, cold water. But the prospect had to be faced. He felt Dinny's keen, inscrutable eyes on him, and with a sudden flurry splashed the liquid on to his face, screwing up his eyes and holding his breath lest it reach beyond the superficial skin.

He stepped back and Dinny washed unhurriedly. "Saves soap when you come last," he observed dryly. Young Mac reappeared and picked up the basin. Bill followed him wide-eyed. To what further purpose was this awful fluid to be used? The excited rattling of a chain in the dusk advertised a dog tied to a stake toward the break. The boy planted the dish in front of the black kelpie and the sound of its eager *lap-lap-lap* rose above the envious whimperings of the other dogs in the further darkness.

MacAndrew hailed from the fire, "Come and have your supper while it's hot, Bill. You'll find the tools on the tailboard and the tucker at the fire. Bring the pint off your saddle."

As he ducked under the tent-fly stretched over the wagonette, the cook, an old man with a hairless, yellow face and one blind, stony-looking eye, grinned affably at him from the piled plate on his knees. The boy picked a tin plate, a wooden-handled knife, and a three-pronged fork off the tailboard where a slush lamp flickered fitfully. An appetizing odour of roast mutton rose from the camp-oven beside the fire; the tea in the blackened billy was thick and milky-looking, but Bill was too thirsty to let his mind dwell on further probabilities in that direction. MacAndrew sat perched on a small log, his plate on his knees; Bob and Dinny sat on the ground on the opposite side of the fire with their plates on the ground. They still wore their hats, and ate in a preoccupied silence, and Bill with his hair freshly combed felt snobbish and alien. The mutton was lean, dark, and stringy, but he had not realized till then how hungry he was, and he found himself enjoying the meal better than any he had eaten for weeks.

George, the cook, started to wash up, crooning tunelessly to himself;

the others stretched out on the ground round the fire, leaning on their elbows. Dinny rolled a cigarette with surprising deftness. He was the only smoker until Reg, the horsetailer, entered the firelit circle with a bridle slung over his shoulder, but after silently lighting his cigarette with a glowing coal, he slouched across to join the cook. Bob, feeling at peace with the world, turned ruminatively toward Bill, but Bill's interest was on MacAndrew and Dinny conversing in low tones. Mac did most of the talking, Dinny being content to nod occasional agreement or put a brief, considered query.

"There isn't a man left in town," Mac was saying. "Even the beer hums are out, though they won't stay long out of sight of a beer pump. Things are bad everywhere — and everybody wants to shift their stock now while they can get them away. Any bagman with a couple of horses and a pack-saddle calls himself a boss drover these days."

"No chance of picking up a dog?" Dinny queried.

"A dog! It wouldn't be safe for any sort of a dog to show his nose in the street. If you took a sheep-dog within a mile of Longreach they'd shake him the minute you took your eyes off him. You've seen that dog of the station-master's — that long, flap-eared spaniel? He's been pinched three times — to work sheep, mind you — and they even took that yapping little Pomeranian of Mother Murphy's! Sheep-dogs ...!" The drover shook his head sadly and rose, preparatory to turning in. Dinny, still smiling reminiscently, prepared to follow, and Bill turned to find himself alone at the fire with young Mac.

"Want a hand to fix your swag?" the boy ventured after a long silence.

"Thanks, but I think it's all right."

"You'll sleep cold the way you've got it — your feet are higher'n your head, and you didn't clear the bindy-eyes and gibbers before you unrolled it."

"The what?"

"Bindy-eyes ... goat-heads — them sharp burrs — and stones."

"Oh ... er, thanks very much."

Bob sprang eagerly to his feet and led the way. Now that the ice was broken he waxed comparatively voluble. "There ain't no moon to-night or you'd be better in the shade. Don't ever sleep right against the butt of a tree," he cautioned sagely. "You might get a snake or a porkypine or something in your blankets." And so he left Bill to assimilate that cheerful bit of bedtime news.

For a long time Bill lay stretched out straight in his blankets on the hard, springless ground staring up at the stars. The immediate world was invested in a pleasant, friendly silence, and the deep indigo of the heavens held a suggestion of endless, unplumbable depth — distance piled upon distance stretching to the borders of infinity. The stars stood out with a clear, limpid brilliance — closer, brighter, and more intense

than he had ever imagined possible, and the Milky Way was a broad, opalescent belt across the heavens with black depths gouged out of it. A cool night breeze whispered vagrantly along the ground just lifting the corner of a blanket and letting it fall again. The banked fire smouldered dully, and from beyond the wagon-fly where old George was snoring lustily, came the hesitant bleat of a sheep; a warm, acrid smell wafted to Bill's nostrils — the unforgettable smell of sheep that, once implanted in a man's consciousness, stays with him for life.

## Chapter II

EVERY bone in his body had a private, individual ache. The ground underneath had the hard, relentless feeling of concrete, and the cold penetrated his blankets to his very bones and made him shiver incessantly. Bill uncovered one weary eye and surveyed the world. It was still dark as pitch, but the fire threw cheerful pennons of flame at the gleaming stars, making old George look like a gigantic spider as he dragged a shovelful of dark red coals out and planked a camp-oven on them. A terrible weariness and longing for sleep possessed the boy, but his aching bones rebelled at the hardness of his couch and the cold air made him long for the warmth of the fire.

He must have dozed off in spite of the discomforts. A persistent, cracked voice pierced his hazy consciousness and he gave reluctant ear to old George's "Daaylight! Breakfast's ready!" Of daylight there was neither vestige nor sign. The stars still leaned down like diamonds from fathomless black velvet, but figures were stirring and a wonderful whiff of frying chops wafted across from the fire. The noise of water's gurgling into a tin dish galvanized him into sudden action and he hastily threw back the blankets. He intended to be early at the wash basin in future.

In later years, when Bill looked back on his first droving trip, those three long weeks of alternately coaxing and forcing weak, exhausted sheep, sullen from protracted hunger, he would bite his lips with vexation at the recollection of the mistakes he made. Later still, there came another period when he could afford to smile tolerantly at his memories. But at the time, as they followed the dry, winding course of the river up to Aramac, then out through the desert scrub and spinifex to their destination, other material things bulked too largely in his mind to allow any time for introspection.

The first few days left him with an accumulation of aches that made him long for nightfall. His first surprise that everyone should turn in so soon after the evening meal did not last long. Thereafter, when he crawled stiffly off his horse and let him go in the growing dusk, his aching body and legs chafed raw by the saddle made bed seem the nearest equivalent to heaven, and it seemed that he had just rolled himself into his blankets and dropped into a deep, dreamless sleep when old George's high-pitched chant of "Daylight! Break-fast's ready" woke him again to the cold realization of another day.

He would rise stiffly and painfully, every aching muscle protesting in the chill half-light that faded the eastern stars. After a quick, perfunctory wash, he would roll and tightly strap the swag and leave it near the wagonette. Breakfast consisted of damper and lean chops, piping hot, and as they ate, the sharp, distant cracks of Reg's whip and a string of vindictive early morning oaths would rise above the drum of hoofs and the crackle of snapping branches. Then the horses would surge on to the camp in a wild jangle of bells and hobble-chains that sent the startled sheep rushing and huddling to the far corner of the break.

Bridle in hand, they would encircle the mob, single out and catch the horse they intended to ride that day. Bill's bay was a rogue that took the joint efforts of all hands to catch, and the boy whose previous experience had commenced with horses ready saddled for use, was a long time in acquiring the patient skill necessary to circumvent the cunning of bush horses. Dinny stood by, one morning, his own horse bridled, while Bill pursued the elusive bay back and forward through the churning mob until, winded and speechless with impotent rage, he swung his bridle and slashed at the disappearing rump. The horses split and scattered, pursued by Reg in a cloud of lurid comment on the chronic uselessness of newchums.

When the horses were brought back, Dinny took the bridle from Bill without a word, singled out the bay, walked straight up to his shoulder, slipped the bridle on and handed the horse over to the waiting youth. Bill sulked for the rest of the forenoon.

On the dinner camp, young Mac lit a fire and put his quart-pot on; Bill filled his quart from the water-bag on his horse's neck, and set it beside the fire on pebbles as he had seen the others do to let the flames draw underneath. When it boiled he skimmed the yellow froth off with a twig, emptied in the tea and sugar ready mixed and picked off the quart with his hat, then sat down in the thin shade of a whitewood and had his lunch. As soon as he had finished, he put his gear back on the saddle and rode round to Dinny's little fire on the opposite side of the sheep. Dinny gave him a casual glance then turned his eyes back to the restless mob. Bill dismounted and stood diffidently in front of him. "Dinny, I'm sorry about this morning; but honestly, I want to catch my own horse."

The man on the ground nodded casually. "That's all right!"

"Will you tell me when I'm doing the wrong thing?"

"I'll show you how to go about it."

"What was wrong this morning?"

"We-ll, pretty well everything. He's a hard horse to catch, that fellow. He's been spoilt." Dinny emptied the rubbed tobacco from his palm into the cigarette paper. "You've got to remember that one man can't surround a horse in the middle of a plain, but if you use your head — and keep your temper — and don't let him think you're anxious to get that bridle

on him, you'll be all right." He licked the cigarette paper and nipped the loose ends off. "Horses ain't machines — they're none of them alike. Don't be scared of them and don't make them scared of you — *and hold on to that temper of yours!*"

That paved the way for further sessions. Sometimes a curt word of advice ... "Keep your hands down. You're not driving a hansom cab!" Or at other times when they were alone, Dinny would drop his cloak of taciturnity and talk horse. He would tell of horses and horsemen he had known; their deeds and their methods; how so-and-so could teach a colt to lead on a strand of cotton, or some other famous horse-breaker whose colts had mouths like silk.

Except on two subjects — horses and cattle — Dinny's conversation was limited to monosyllables. One aspect of Bill's problems he faced with diffidence. The trend of a democratic lifetime had been directed toward minding his own business and refraining from interfering with others, so that when he noticed Bill passing his annoyance with the sheep on to his horse, his first impulse was to turn a blind eye to it.

But his interest in the youth prevailed and when Bill next rode toward him, Dinny dismounted and called him to him. The mystified Bill stood still while a flattened hardwood stick was thrust between his teeth. Then Dinny struck the projecting end of the stick a sharp blow with his hand. Bill's head jerked suddenly sideways, the stick dropped to the ground and he clutched his aching jaw while a myriad stars whirred round in his head. He wheeled on Dinny with an outraged glare. "What's wrong with you?"

Dinny swung calmly to the saddle. "Next time you jerk at a horse's mouth like you did awhile back, you'll know what it feels like!"

Bill blinked — and remembered.

His attitude toward the other members of the camp varied considerably and his first hastily conceived opinions had to be constantly amended. Reg, the horsetailer, who made capital of the newchum's mistakes and who took every opportunity to tease and provoke him, raised a smouldering hate in the youth; Bill's policy of snubbing and ignoring the man merely had the effect of goading him farther.

Old George, the cook, he tended to despise, and he persisted in treating young Mac with aloofness in spite of, or perhaps because of the boy's attempts at friendliness. The fact was that both were possessed of the self-consciousness of youth that copies the pattern of its elders and tries to ignore the speech and habits of its juniors. MacAndrew he regarded with respect. He was his boss, who had given him a chance, and he was determined that old Mac should not repent his bargain.

But it was the taciturn Dinny who received his homage and toward whom the wall of reserve he raised against the others was never in evidence. Dinny was always right. He never appeared to hurry but he

was always on the spot to divert strange sheep suddenly appearing in front of the mob, or to sense when a few weary stragglers had been cut off and left behind. Another and more subtle influence accounted for his preference. MacAndrew's interest was centred in the sheep. Everything was subordinated to their interests; his personal comfort and that of the camp came second to the well-being of the flock. He had little interest in horses or even in his dogs, except in that they were necessary for the management of the sheep.

After a few days Bill decided that sheep were the stupidest creatures God ever made. Horses were different — you could do things with them, and Bill felt an added sense of superiority when mounted. And dogs were intelligent; in fact, he fully intended to get one at the earliest opportunity.

Subconsciously, he recognized Mac as the sheepman, Dinny as the horseman; and there lay the root of his worship of the quietly competent stockman, sitting and handling his horse not so much as though he were part of it but as though it were part of him, and inseparable from the long, supple stockwhip looped over the right forearm. Dinny was his model, and in these days when opinions were altered daily, a deep resolve was born that never altered but grew stronger with the passing days — Bill decided that whatever the cost, he would be a horseman.

The mob moved slowly and painfully northward, spreading freely across open downs where the Mitchell-grass tufts still flaunted a showing of dry flag, or working blindly through dense gidgee scrub where the red pebbled soil was bare of grass. Here, especially, Bill lamented the need of a dog. Little mobs of dejected and dispirited sheep would seize every opportunity to hang back and hide under the low, twisted boughs, uncaring and deaf to all the shouting in the world. While the others had their dogs to move the stragglers up, Bill had to get off his horse and dislodge them himself. By the end of the day his voice had shrunk to a dry, husky whisper, his horse was nearly exhausted, and between his impotent wrath at the stupidity of the sheep and his own fatigue, by sundown he was a mental and physical wreck.

One day as they were nearing Aramac a boundary-rider who had come down to see them through his paddocks, casually mentioned that he had a dog for sale. “He ain't much of a worker, mind you, but he'll drive sheep.” Bill jumped at the opportunity and when the station man joined them next morning, followed by a showy black and white and tan collie, he wasted no time in bargaining.

“You can have 'im for a quid if he'll follow you.”

Bill dragged at his money-belt, handed over a sovereign, and accepted the dog before the man changed his mind. He tied a length of light rope to its neck and led it round the mob, exulting as the sheep that had ignored his previous efforts rushed jerkily away before the strange dog. He led it proudly round the wing where Dinny leaned comfortably

forward on his horse's neck. Dinny's black dog bowled up stiff-legged, tail and hair along the back bristling to a menacing growl.

"Isn't he a beauty, Dinny?"

Dinny glanced down his horse's neck at the two dogs, one circling threateningly, the other retreating nervously and getting all mixed up in the rope. "He's too good-looking!"

"But why ...?" asked the crestfallen Bill.

"Four white legs. His feet won't last!"

The boy glanced at the short, broad head of Dinny's black dog, then back at the long, white muzzle of his purchase with the tan spots superimposed on the black over the soft, brown eyes and the clean, regular markings. The kelpie might be a better dog, but Bill could never like him as he already liked this fellow. He rode back round the mob with the dog in tow, sooling him on to the lagging sheep till old Mac came round from the other wing and cautioned him not to run them off their legs.

They halted the mob half-way through the morning. The sheep had had no water for two days and the waterhole ahead was hard of access — a dwindling pool between steep banks with a boggy death-trap at one end. Mac cut off a small mob and started them on their way, when a rapid drumming of hoofs stayed him. A glance at the approaching horseman decided that something serious had happened. He merged his sheep with the main mob and cantered back.

Reg pulled his heaving horse back on its haunches. "Come back quick, Mac!" he gasped. "There's been a smash. ... Old George turned the wagonette over on himself. ... I think he's dead!"

"How did it happen?" MacAndrew demanded fiercely.

"He must have got a bottle of rum off the coach. We started off camp and he began to lay on to the horses. He got them galloping and they hit a stump. ... Over she goes on top of George, and the horses went bush with the pole. I pulled him out, but Gawd he looks crook!"

MacAndrew wheeled on his son. "You and Bill hold the mob till we get back!" He beckoned to Dinny and the three of them shot off in a cloud of dust. Bill stared after them with mixed feelings. He had never been keen on old George. His sallow, hairless face looked uncanny — unhealthy — but the thought of the old man who had been so lively that morning, lying still and dead, caught at his throat.

A shout recalled him to the fact that the sheep had strung out in the lead in the interim and that young Mac was having more than he could do to hold them. Bill cantered round, sending his dog at the stragglers and rushing them back. The leaders were a different proposition, however. Something had stirred them up. The furtive breeze may have wafted a hint of the water toward them and they pressed past young Mac, baa-ing excitedly, ignoring his shouts and the charges of his shaggy

pony.

Bill's dog looked like saving the situation but he was hampered by the rope still attaching him to his new owner. Mac jerked to a standstill beside him, his round boyish face hot and woebegone. "It's no use, Bill. We can't hold them. I'll cut off the leaders and take them in. We can only water a few at a time. You try and hold the others."

They forced a lane through the mob, battering back one side till the others drew away. The two boys raced incessantly backward and forward, their horses dripping with sweat, and Bill's dog dragging on the rope, its tongue hanging out. Then young Mac swung his pony and raced after the leaders, bustling the tail and hustling them into a manageable mob. Bill redoubled his efforts but as fast as he pushed back one salient others crowded out behind him. Then the rope got round his horse's legs and he had to dismount and untie the dog. There was no time to straighten things out, so he freed the dog and mounted again to find himself in the middle of a sea of woolly backs surging relentlessly after the little mob in front.

Young Mac's mob had taken charge. Their trot had quickened to an eager, stiff-legged canter and the boy could only ride up and down one flank in the hope of deflecting them away from the boggy end of the waterhole. Bill was too busy with his own affairs at the moment to know what was happening elsewhere. He got out in front of his mob and called on the dog to follow. It regarded him for a moment, then calmly turned and trotted off to the distant waterhole. The boy stared in wide-eyed consternation at the flagrant desertion. He called again; the dog paid no attention but trotted steadily on. A wave of blinding rage surged over him; he wanted to overtake that dog — to get his hands on him and teach him obedience. He swung his horse round, the sheep still pouring out behind him, when a sudden diversion halted him. A brown horse swept round from the rear of the mob with the sheep falling back before the steady vicious tattoo of Dinny's stockwhip. He shot between Bill and the dog. "Let him go!" he snapped. "Canter round and punch in that wing!"

Young Mac came tearing back from the timber, his heels flaying the pony's ribs. "It's a rotten hole, Dinny," he wailed. "They're all bogging at this end."

Dinny glanced quickly round and shook his head despondently. "We can't hold them without dogs. Punch into them till Mac gets back!"

They returned to the fray with the barrage of Dinny's whip to hearten them. Bill, still burning with resentment at his dog's desertion, drove his horse savagely at the on-coming tide. The hollows of his horse's neck and flanks were black with sweat and a lather of foam plastered its ribs. Still the sheep kept surging forward, giving way in front of his rushes only to spread round behind him. Sweat poured down his face and tasted salt on his lips; the dust mingled with it and caked on his features,

rimmed his eyes. He brandished his hat wildly at the unruly mob, shouted from his parched throat and charged again and again. It was useless. He might as well have tried to stop the advancing waves of the ocean. The sheep were all round him, baa-ing excitedly, pressing past with outstretched necks, cantering with a stiff, rocking-horse gait. He pulled up, his breath sobbing, eyes blazing at his impotence, while his lathered horse stood still with drooping head — and still the sheep strained past. There was no stopping them now. He was beaten. He saw them sweep past young Mac in a woolly tide. Even Dinny was submerged.

The boys converged on him, silent with exhaustion and defeat, and as they urged their tired horses toward the waterhole, old Mac came galloping past them. Sheep were piling down the steep banks like a cataract. They left their horses on the bank and fought their way through the surging, heaving sea of frantic baa-ing sheep to join MacAndrew, tragic-eyed and panting with exertion and already covered with grey, slimy mud.

The soupy water was full of sheep pushed in by those behind and still drinking avidly as they swam. A pall of dust drifted across the narrow banks, mercifully obscuring the happenings at the other end, and still the unending woolly cataract poured over the edge, slid down the steep bank, and piled itself madly on the seething animals below, shouldering and trampling them deeper and deeper into the mire while their incessant clamour filled the air.

MacAndrew and Dinny thrust forward to the boggy margin, seizing sheep and ruthlessly heaving them back to the firm earth. As they cleared a patch, grotesque, lop-eared heads and skinny necks slathered in slimy bluemud rose and heaved feebly from the soupy bog. The men grabbed and dragged, grabbed and heaved, and slung unceremoniously to the bank behind. Bill ranged himself beside them while young Mac dragged the rescued farther back. And still the mob swarmed down on them, charging blindly into the just-vacated bog holes on top of the men.

Bill's back ached like a toothache. He tried to stand upright but the pain from his outraged muscles stopped him. Only the difference in their build served to distinguish the men. All were plastered from head to foot, hands, face and clothes invisible under the coating of blue-grey mud. After a time the action of dragging and heaving became automatic. They worked with backs and heads bent, seeing no farther than the immediate vicinity lest the full magnitude of the task appal them.

Some of the rescued got shakily to their feet and staggered off. Some stood propped uncertainly still for a while. Others collapsed and lay prone, their mud-plastered necks outstretched along the ground. Many remained where their mates had trampled them into the mud, the men reserving their ebbing strength for those with chances of recovery.

At length Bill could bear it no longer. The sheep were thinning a little around them. He dragged his sodden boots out of the mud and crawled painfully back among the huddled forms that lined the margin. Young Mac had disappeared to round up the mob. He had no conception of the time of day till he noticed the shadows high up on the opposite bank. This was a day to be measured not in hours and minutes but by events, emotion, exhaustion, and aches. None of them had eaten since daylight, yet Bill felt no craving for food; all he wanted was rest — immediate and unlimited.

MacAndrew stumbled toward him with squelching feet. His features were hidden in mud and his voice was a croak. “Get your horse ... tell them ... camp out on the plain ... handy.”

Bill dragged himself painfully up the bank on scrambling hands and toes and pulled himself up into the saddle. Vaguely he saw young Mac jogging round the sheep, a dog trotting at his heels. It looked like Bill's own dog but he was beyond resentment or jealousy or emotion of any kind.

About a mile back he met the horses and waited emotionless while Reg surveyed him with startled eyes, and more from recognition of the horse than of the mud-plastered rider, gave vent to a concerned “Gawd Almighty. ... It's the Pommy!”

Bill mumbled his message and Reg nodded impatiently, a spate of questions on his tongue. “A wright. The turn-out's coming. George's just behind.”

George! What was his memory trying to tell him about George? Didn't something happen to him one day ... a long time ago? George ...? He turned dull, inquiring eyes on the horsetailer. “Isn't George dead?”

Reg spat in disgust. “Dead! No, the old cow was only drunk and knocked out. He kidded me all right! Took us all day to mend the pole and harness. Look at 'im coming along! Dead! Pity 'e wasn't — the old sod!”

## Chapter III

THEY crawled past Aramac with the crusted mud still clinging to them in evidence of an episode they could never forget. None of them was really conscious of the closing events of that terrible day when utter exhaustion merged sleep with waking so subtly that the change was imperceptible. They worked till it was too dark to see, then stumbled, bent and dazed, toward the campfire, wiping the worst of the mud from hands and mouth, and mechanically swallowing the damper and cold mutton and tea thrust on them before they dropped, too weary to remove either clothing or mud, into their blankets barely unrolled.

The first pale hint of daylight found MacAndrew and Dinny back at the ill-fated waterhole salvaging as many more sheep as possible before the crows picked their helpless eyes out. Bill, haggard and stiff, joined young Mac in shepherding the mob out on some sparse grass, and they camped that night only a mile from the waterhole. The tail of the mob was a sorry sight. The mud, mingling with the short wool, dried and set like cement, and the unfortunate animals dragged themselves along like run-down robots.

With the little town behind them, the grass improved and the effect on the sheep and horses soon manifested itself. Just ahead of them lay the desert, and Bill, stifling his surprise at drought-stricken sheep being sent to a desert, painted pictures in his imagination of palm-trees and long, wind-rippled sandhills. Instead, the scattered timber drew closer together. Gradually they found themselves day after day passing through thick scrub with patches of rank grass and big green, spiky mounds of spinifex rising like giant pincushions from the blood-red soil. Ant-hills of all shapes and sizes rose hard and unimpressionable as concrete.

MacAndrew returned from his daily scouting of the track ahead and held a long conference with Dinny. Then he circled round and checked the lead while Dinny rode back to Bill on the tail of the mob. "Take it easy! We're going to spell them a while. Patch of poison in front."

"Poison ...?"

"Heart-leaf. I'll show you when we hit it. We'll have to jam the mob together and belt them through without giving them a chance to feed." He rode on to warn young Mac.

That afternoon MacAndrew returned with reinforcements — Reg the horsetailer, and all the available dogs. The sheep were reasonably full

and contented and they were shepherded along into a compact mob. Dinny pointed ahead with his whip. "As soon as the lead hits that stony ridge, drive like hell! You'll see the poison-bush growing there but don't stop to look at it. Now ... into them!"

The bang of Dinny's whip was echoed by the horsetailer's, and Mac's old dog started to yap hoarsely at the laggards. The pace of the mob imperceptibly quickened and a chorus of shouts and yells bunched them together and kept their attention from feeding. They gained the ridge. There was an uncanny impression of loathsomeness about the place. Except for the prevailing spinifex, the vegetation was different from any they had seen. The bark of the trees was of a sickly buff colour and the branches dipped and sprawled grotesquely. Bill saw an old ewe reach out and nibble at the dark-veined, fleshy leaf of a low shrub, and the peculiar heart-shape of the leaf suddenly occurred to him. He charged his startled horse at the sheep and drove it into the mob. The uproar continued but the pace was telling on the totterers of the tail. Bill dismounted to set an exhausted ewe on her feet. She staggered a few steps and flopped again. MacAndrew shouted from the wing, "Never mind her. Keep the others going! We're nearly out of it."

The yellow-barked trees grew fewer, and finally disappeared. A call went up from old Mac. "Right oh! Take it easy!" They were through. Two sheep died before they reached camp and in the morning three more lay stiff in the break.

"We got off light!" Dinny philosophically rolled a breakfast cigarette. "A mob came through last year and lost four hundred on that patch. Anyhow, one more day and we'll be rid of these cripples."

The weather came up hot and sultry. That night something woke Bill with a start, and as he lay marshalling his wandering senses, another big raindrop pinged on his cheek. Thunder muttered ominously and suddenly the sky was lit by a livid flash. By its light he saw two men stooping over the break, and beyond them the sheep milled in ceaseless turmoil, baaing a welcome to the approaching storm. Bill pulled on his boots and joined Mac and Dinny at the break. "Anything wrong?" he inquired.

"We're only slacking off the rope before the rain shrinks it and pulls the pegs out of the ground. We're nearly finished. Better turn in. It's going to rain like hell."

The air was heavy and still. Each vivid flash of lightning showed up the tracery of trees and limbs and leaves. The thunder drew closer, louder, and more menacing, but the stray raindrops still fell singly, smacking flat on leaf and bough and hitting the fire with a venomous hiss. Dinny walked across and stood over him, the end of his cigarette glowing red in the darkness. "Better roll up your swag and put it on the cart. You'll get washed out in five minutes where you are."

Bill joined the others round the high piled fire, muzzy and sullen at

losing his sleep. Old George and the horsetailer still slept under the protecting fly of the wagonette. Then the heavens opened in searing flame, crash upon deafening crash of thunder shook the ground, and the rain hit them in a solid sheet. Bill gasped. The rain came down with a force that hurt. It penetrated his clothes in a matter of seconds. Even his hat did not protect him. He could feel the rain seeping past the leather band, trickling down the back of his neck to join the cataract that ran down his spine and filled his boots to overflowing. The fire crouched, cowed under the onslaught, spitting and spluttering venomously at the drops that tried to reach its glowing heart.

A horrible flow of language emanated from under the cart, and presently two shivering, cursing individuals joined the group at the fire, driven out by the water that was beginning to flow along the ground. Dawn came slow and leaden with every sign of the rain's continuing.

They plodded on all morning, cold, rain-sodden, and miserable as the sheep they were driving. These would stop at every opportunity and stand shivering — heads down, flanks drawn in, and backs humped like camels. Two horsemen in glistening oilskins rode out of the dripping timber and Dinny sighed with heartfelt relief. “If we don't get rid of these damned sheep soon, we'll have none left to deliver.”

Another hour brought them to a fence and a gateway staked to form a narrow opening. Mac, Dinny, and the strangers dismounted and posted themselves on the far side while Bill and young Mac kept the sheep up to the gate. They started to string through the opening in the thin line, and at quick intervals came the drover's shout of “Hundred,” while Dinny's tally rose steadily “ ... Eight ... Nine” and at each hundred, his knife cut a notch in the stick he carried. The mob dwindled till only the old staggerers of the tail remained, pressing, jamming in the narrow opening. The last one stumbled through on groggy legs, and Bill watched it with a feeling of great relief as it joined the untended mob dispersing through the timber in the rain. Now they could relax, the strain was off, and they could sleep soundly at night without the ever-present tension that brings the drover wideawake in an instant.

There was a slight difference between Mac's final tally and the stranger's, but the weather was not conducive to argument and they wasted no time in striking a total. Then the elder stranger looked genially round the morose little group, the rain dripping from his heavy, reddish moustache. “Come on up to the house, all of yez, and have a feed and dry yersilves. It's no sort of a day to be sitting out in the scrub like a lot of wet emus!” They fell gratefully in behind him, the horses slithering and sinking in the sodden, narrow track that wound through the thick timber. At length a small clearing opened before them, and a chorus of barking from the buildings on the opposite side greeted them, indistinct through the misty, driving rain.

They pulled off their saddles and turned the un-hobbled horses out in O'Brien's paddock. Then as they gathered on the back veranda, with the water trickling from them and gathering in pools on the earthen floor, the door opened and O'Brien was with them again — a big, hearty, red-faced, red-haired man with a chest, deep and thick as a bull's — and a wicker-covered demijohn under his arm. "Come on, boys!" he called. "This'll keep the cold out!" He handed a pannikin to MacAndrew and the dark liquor gurgled out of the jar. "Nelson's blood! An' if you want more water than you've got already, the tank's running over."

Dinny drank next and passed the pannikin to Bill. The boy hesitated, then shook his head silently. Dinny stared at him. "Don't be silly! It won't hurt you."

Bill refused again. "I — I promised once——"

Dinny looked steadily at the wan, shivering figure and his tone was deliberate and caustic. "And did you promise not to touch castor oil? This is doctor's orders ... and I'm the doctor!" He pushed the tin pannikin into Bill's unwilling hand. "Get it into you, quick!"

The boy clamped his chattering teeth on a blue lip, then with a sudden movement put the mug to his mouth and gulped the dark liquid. Next instant he was coughing, spluttering, and gasping, the tears starting into his eyes, while his chest burned as if he had swallowed liquid fire.

O'Brien beamed on him from the doorway. "Never be scared of good rum, lad. Make a friend of it! And the way to keep your friends is never to abuse them. Hallo, here's your plant. Get into some dry clothes if you have them. If you haven't I'll see what I've got, then we'll have a feed."

Bill felt a strange elation pervading his body. His cheeks burned, his fingers, white and wrinkled with cold and rain, began to tingle comfortably to the tips, and a feeling of glorious warmth was stealing to his numb toes. He squared his shoulders and plunged into the rain after Mac to help unload the mud-spattered wagonette. He felt uplifted — a conqueror — what mattered rain or cold or discomfort to him now!

They gathered round a big solid table in the kitchen with an open fireplace on one side throwing out grateful warmth. O'Brien, brandishing a huge carving-knife, sat at the top of the table, with his wife, a faded middle-aged woman with a patient expression, on his right, and his daughter Eileen, a big buxom girl for her sixteen years on his left. Tim, the son, mingled with the drovers.

Bill found himself between Mrs O'Brien and Reg the horsetailer. He glanced down the table at the others shuffling awkwardly to their seats; there were not chairs enough to go round, so some had to sit on boxes. Old George sat hunched over a huge plate of corned beef and pumpkin, shovelling the hot food into his mouth and masticating loudly. He still wore his greasy old hat and Bill, casting back in his memory, could not recall having seen the cook without his hat by night or day. There was no

attempt at conversation. Food was a vital, important thing, and appreciation of it could be shown far more effectively in silent concentration, and by the amount one ate, than by any conventional remarks.

Bill, looking up suddenly, found a pair of wide blue eyes fixed speculatively on him. His first view of Eileen had not impressed him. Her straight fair hair was drawn back to a tight bun, and her face was round, high cheek-boned, and expressionless as a boiled pudding. They looked at one another for a matter of seconds, then Bill essayed a polite smile. But the magnifying power of rum refused to acknowledge mere politeness and took a hand in the shaping of that smile with the result that Eileen dimpled with disconcerting suddenness and her beaming response was an all-embracing thing — a regular sunrise of a smile. Bill, somewhat embarrassed, returned to the safer contemplation of his plate.

One after another the diners leaned back with sighs of repletion, wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands. O'Brien produced a plug of tobacco and started to hack chips off it with a pocket-knife; pipes were filled, cigarettes rolled, then tongues began to loosen. The rain still drummed incessantly on the roof, and the overflow from the tank plashed steadily.

They were storm-bound for three days. The men camped in the cart-shed, eating their meals in the kitchen with the O'Briens, and as time began to hang on their hands, Mrs O'Brien found the odd jobs that had been put off and accumulating for years being done. Travel was impossible. Every little gully carried its torrent of muddy water to add to the rising creeks.

Eileen was making the most of a heaven-sent opportunity. Young men there were in their isolated district but few came past O'Brien's selection. She wasted no time on old George. MacAndrew was a nice man but old, and little Mac was too young to be of interest. Dinny was a bit too quiet. She might have persevered with him had he been alone, but there were the other two boys. Reg was all right for a bit of fun, but he was just a little too saucy — used to chasing about with these flash town girls — and he thought because a girl had lived all her life in the bush she knew nothing.

So Eileen fluffed up her straight fair hair and wished it wouldn't stick out in wisps at the neck. She put the old hessian apron away out of sight and wore the new one made out of a clean sugar-bag, and in the evenings she appeared in a light print frock. True, it was getting a bit short and a bit tight, but she liked it better than the black one.

Bill came as an entirely new type to her. He was so nice-looking — like those men in the picture magazines. His fair reddish hair was so smooth and fine and well combed, and he spoke so different from anyone she had ever met. And there was something at the back of his eyes when

he smiled at you — something that sort of kidded you on. Her dad reckoned at first he was a sissy, but she knew he wasn't. So she smiled on Bill and Bill grinned back. He was enjoying the situation for various reasons. Eileen was big boned and heavy in figure and speech — a regular draught-horse of a girl. She spoke with a rough nasal twang that made him wince at times, while her technique had a simple natural directness and total lack of sophistication that could be distinctly embarrassing. But to balance all that, she was the only girl he had met on friendly terms for months, and after the hardships of the past few weeks, the little comforts and the feminine touch, bovine though it might be, were most acceptable.

Another reason was the victory he was scoring over Reg. The horsetailer had waged a determined but hopeless battle for Eileen's favour from the start, and to find himself turned down for the raw newchum he had jeered at for weeks was the final straw.

The gathering tension cleared for a time when MacAndrew returned from a difficult trip to a neighbouring homestead where there was a telephone, and announced that the rain had been general, the drought was practically broken, and, what was of more import to them, he had accepted an offer to take ten thousand sheep down to New South Wales — an eight-hundred-mile trip.

Dinny and Mac talked half-way into the night, discussing routes, the obtaining of fresh horses, and more men. A final two days were spent in getting gear ready, making greenhide hobbles, and removing the shoes from horses due for a spell. O'Brien yarded a mob of his horses, and Mac and Dinny went over to inspect them. They did not take long to pick what they wanted, but when it came to bargaining, O'Brien, true to his ancestry, was prepared to spend an enjoyable day on it — or a week if they wanted it. When Mac had bought half a dozen likely sorts O'Brien drafted off a fine upstanding brown gelding.

“How did you come to miss that one?” he queried slyly.

Dinny shook his head. “Don't want him, Mick.”

O'Brien exploded. “An' what's the matter with him? The best young horse I've got on the place!”

“Look out he doesn't run you up a tree one of these days!”

“And for why?” O'Brien's moustache quivered with indignation.

“He's blind in one eye, Mick.”

“*What-at!* Git a bridle, Tim, an' I'll show him the liar he is!”

Mac moved closer to Dinny and spoke in an undertone. “His eyes look all right to me.”

Dinny nodded calmly. “They might be ... but I don't like the way he holds his head.”

Tim pursued the brown horse round the yard a few times till he cornered it and slipped the bridle on. O'Brien peered at the frightened

horse's eyes, first one then the other. "Not a spot on them," he declared vehemently. "As good as me own."

Dinny took the bridle and ran a soothing hand up the horse's neck. Then he flicked a finger at the near eye. The horse never flinched. He handed the bridle back to O'Brien and resumed his seat on the rails. "Have a good look at his near eye, Mick. There's no pupil in it!"

O'Brien peered closely, compared it with the other eye, then stood back and slowly rubbed the back of his neck. "I take back all I said, Dinny! An' me galloping him through the scrub an' over gullies these six months. Providence has been kind to me! Here, take him! You can have him or any one you fancy."

Dinny shook his head. "Thanks, Mick, but I don't want him."

"I saw your eye on that bay colt. Will you take him?"

"He'll be a trouble on the road, but he's worth it. Thanks, Mick. I'll call him after you — even if he isn't a chestnut!"

Dinny and Reg carried their saddles to the yard and the others lined the rails. Bill turned to find Eileen climbing up beside him, and Reg, watching from the ground, scowled and shortened his stirrup leathers a hole. Now he would show her who was the better — him or a ginger-headed Pommy.

Dinny saddled a thickset black horse, Bill on the rails watching every movement of horse and man. Yet so quick and effortless was the man in mounting that one moment he was fitting a toe into the near stirrup, the next he was in the saddle. The black whirled and bucked high, spinning and landing in the same small circle all the time. Dinny sat unmoved in the saddle till the black eased up, then at his gesture the gate was thrown open, and he raced the gelding out across the flat, throwing up clods of drying mud all round him, but the black's honour was satisfied and he cantered quietly back.

There was marked contrast between Dinny's quiet methods, and Reg's saddling of a chestnut with a showy blaze. After a lot of loud objurgation and fuss he gained the saddle. The chestnut stood tense and rigid for about three seconds, then shot high in the air and came down with a nasty twist. His first buck threw Reg forward, the next left him gazing down the chestnut's shoulder, another quick twist and he hit the ground. He scrambled furiously to his feet, cornered the chestnut and mounted again. The next minute held a really good show. Reg rode the horse from crupper to ears, but he rode him to a standstill, and the applause from the rails salved his wounded pride.

That last night as they sat in a wide circle in front of the open fireplace, O'Brien produced the demijohn. "If you're leaving in the morning it's the last one we'll have for a while." Bill sitting in a corner with Eileen, fingered the pannikin uncertainly and sought Dinny's eyes. He made no immediate reply but took Bill's mug and poured a mere drop of rum into

it and a generous dash of water. The cook and the horsetailer had no such scruples and made the most of the opportunity.

They rose at length and filed out to their sleeping quarters in the chill night air. Bill, the last to leave, was greeted by a snarl from the horsetailer. "Think you can put it over me, you young bastard!"

MacAndrew, pulling off his boots, looked up as a figure bounded past him. Out in the moonlight stood the horsetailer wearing a thin-lipped provocative sneer. Bill faced him, tense with passion, his eyes glittering and the sensitive nostrils flaring. "*What did you call me?*" he demanded between set teeth.

Reg stuck his face aggressively forward. "I called you a ba——." He staggered back as a right and left landed full in his face. Mac started to his feet to separate them, but Bill was following up with a frenzy of wild blows to face and body. His opponent, too surprised to do more than vaguely guard the rain of punches, kept on retreating till his heel caught an obstacle and he fell in a heap. Bill drew back panting. The man on the ground pulled himself together with a vindictive glare, got suddenly to his feet and charged with a rush. He was Bill's superior in weight, reach, and years, but the youth was in the grip of a fierce concentrated hate that ignored punishment and incited him to persistent attack. His cheek was split and bleeding freely, while one of the horsetailer's eyes was closing rapidly. They drew apart for a few seconds, panting heavily and glaring at one another. Then they closed again in a medley of flying fists and came to the ground, indistinguishably locked together.

One figure scrambled to his feet in the moonlight, glanced at the motionless heap on the ground, then slouched away to the dim corner of the shed where old George sat huddled in his blankets peering stupidly with his one good eye. Mac trickled cold water on the face of the fallen combatant till he stirred, blinked, then with Dinny's help he took him to the water-tank and laved the bruised face.

"You shouldn't take any notice of a man that's got a few drinks in," Mac advised.

Bill gulped. "Drunk or not, I won't stand being called ... what he called me."

Dinny wrinkled his brows in puzzled thought. "But he only called you a bastard ... anyone's likely to do that. Why," he went on reminiscently, "if I had a quid for every time I've been called a bastard, I could retire and live in luxury! What's more, you know just where you are with that sort of bloke — that's more than you can say about some of them smooth, psalm-singing coots you meet in town!"

Bill mopped his face with a blood-stained towel and turned doggedly away. "I don't care! That's one thing they won't call me!"

Dinny meditatively eyed the retreating figure, then looked across at Mac. "I wonder ...?" he began, and stopped.

Mac's broad shoulders shrugged faintly. "What if he is!" he hazarded to the vague but perfectly understood implication. "There's no need to get hot about a little thing like that!"

"It depends," Dinny soliloquized softly. "You don't handle a touchy thoroughbred colt like he was a half-bred draught!"

## Chapter IV

ON the top of the ridge Bill turned in the saddle and looked back. Half a mile away the second mob spread peacefully out among the graceful tracery of boree and the denser sombre gidya. Behind them again the last mob was pouring over a pine ridge like a great white cloud against the new green grass and the dark foliage of the timber.

Bill turned contentedly, and the brown mare picked her way delicately among the stones in the wake of their own sheep. Out on the wing Dinny lay stretched along his horse's neck watching the sheep drift past, nipping at the fresh green shoots, or reaching at a low-hanging bough to relieve the monotony. They were headed on the long southern track that would carry them half-way across one State and part of another, and test them with ever-changing conditions and country, and the endless monotony of day after long day in the saddle, rubbing shoulders with the same people and putting up with the vagaries of ten thousand sheep. Many of these would become familiar enough to be dubbed with distinctive — and probably unprintable — names before the long trip was over.

Although sheep and Chinese may appear indistinguishable in the mass, the outstanding personalities soon obtain recognition. MacAndrew would pass down from the first mob to the last under Tom Dixon, running his experienced eye over them, on the lookout for strangers or sick sheep, then he would range his horse alongside Tom. “Think they're all here, Tom?”

The old man would nod vigorously. “I think so, Mac! Have you seen anything of Melba?” Melba was a ewe with a persistent falsetto bleat.

“She's with Dinny's mob. He was looking for that big long-backed ewe that's always poking out on the wing.”

“She's right! I saw her a while back.”

They had left young Mac behind in Longreach. He had ridden out and camped a night with them as they passed through, helping his father to start the leading mob while the men were breakfasting in the pale dawn, then he solemnly shook hands with Dinny and Bill and turned his pony back to the dreary prospect of school, and the degradation of having to mix with kids of his own age. But he would join them later, he promised. When the school closed for the holidays he would overtake them by coach and be in at the end of the trip.

They had a new cook and horsetailer. The prospect of a big mob of

horses to look after did not appeal to Reg, and he preferred to stay on his own beat where he knew all the girls. Apparently he felt that the moving life of an overlander allowed no time for the fruition of the tedious but somewhat necessary spadework of love-making. With one exception, the remaining new hands were young men in their twenties, and Bill found that although they still regarded him as a newchum, he was no longer raw but entitled to a certain amount of respect. Rain and mud had worn the newness off his clothes, and the fires of many dinner camps had blackened and dented the pristine splendour of his quart-pot, but his still faintly bruised features as a result of the scrap with Reg did more to raise his status than anything else.

Tom Dixon, a reliable old hand and ex-cattleman, made up the team, and in the evenings after supper Dinny and he would foregather, sitting on their heels, blackfellow fashion, with the firelight flickering on their reminiscent expressions and on the sharp eager features of young Bill drinking in every word.

To Bill this trip was invested in an entirely new atmosphere to the last. Although he did not fully realize it, the better season was chiefly responsible. The desert trip had been carried out over bare, drought-stricken country, with weak, impoverished sheep and horses. Things were different now. Water lay in every gully, there was green grass everywhere, and heavy dews at night. Bill's only regret was that the flies were still as troublesome as ever and their persistent probing attacks nearly drove him mad.

His two new horses were also to his liking — a brown mare of O'Brien's with the light mouth and flexibility of the stockhorse, and a taffy chestnut pony. The latter he regarded at first with disfavour; he was still young and inexperienced enough to feel the superiority of sitting on a big horse. But he began to appreciate the kindly nature of the hardy little pony and to take an interest in it. When he picked up his bridle in the morning as the horses were driven on to the camp, he got into the habit of carrying a piece of damper for the little chestnut. Before long he only had to whistle to bring her out of the mob and she would stand still to be bridled and then demand the damper.

Bill added a stockwhip to his equipment in Long-reach, a long tapering thong of plaited kangaroo hide. But in spite of assiduous practice he was still uncertain each time he used it whether the result would be a perfect crack like a rifle-shot or a mix-up with his horse's tail, a flick like a red-hot wire on the ear, or perhaps an ignominious tangle of thong round his neck.

In addition to the showy collie that had started work so inauspiciously on the first trip and which still followed him in a lackadaisical sort of way, he had added a black pup of doubtful breeding to his *ménage*. On the morning of their leaving O'Brien's, Eileen had beckoned him to one

side, and in a secluded corner had wept over his bruises which she insisted in regarding as the wounds of battle waged over herself. Bill, thoroughly embarrassed, found it impossible to enlighten her, but as they were leaving, Eileen reappeared with a well-grown black pup under her arm and presented it to Bill. She could not have hit on a more successful keep-sake.

Dinny regarded the pup with misgivings. "There's a good bit of kelpie in him, I'll admit, but he's got the ears of a retriever and the instincts of a cattle-dog. You'll have to stop him nipping their heels, Bill, and tell him wool-classing is not for the likes of him."

The pup was a cheerful soul and he tried the patience of his owner continuously. He was too young and full of the joy of being alive to trot sedately at any horse's heels. He liked to visit Dinny's old dog, even though he was old and took life seriously, and bowled him over when he got too demonstrative. Without the reminder of the pup Bill would probably have forgotten all about Eileen in a day. He had no particular interest in the girl, he told himself, and he was at an age when the last girl he met was the one that was uppermost in his thoughts. That nice-looking Longreach girl, for instance. He had met her at MacAndrew's, and they went to a concert one evening. He sat between her and Bessie MacAndrew, little Mac's elder sister, but it was the slim girl and he who had leaned toward one another in the darkness of the hall, and whose hot hand he had held until the interval. When the lights went down again her hand had snuggled back into his, and walking home through the unlighted streets his arm slipped round her slim waist. He needed no dog to remind him of her — so far.

Longreach and Barcaldine were far behind. They passed Blackall and ran the Barcoo up to Tambo. Horizons were widening for Bill; towns and creeks and stations whose names were the framework of bush conversation were beginning to mean something more than mere empty names. He could listen to Dinny and old Tom yarning of the past and the present and follow their landmarks with some success now. He even felt a proprietary interest when Tom would break out into his favourite poem, intoning in a jerky sing-song rhythm,

On the outer Barcoo where the churches are few,  
And men of religion are scanty.  
On a road never crossed 'cept by folk that are lost,  
One Michael Magee had a shanty.

And when they passed other mobs coming north, and a drover would ride across with a nod and a casual "G'day," and a keen glance at the brand of the other's horse and the condition of their sheep, Bill could talk back to him in his own language on the all-important topics — the state

of the grass and the waterholes along the route. Then with a nod of farewell and a cheerful "Hooray," they would separate and canter after their mobs, each with some garnered information to pass on, and each still ignorant of the other's identity except that he was "O'Mara's horsetailer" or "with MacAndrew's mob."

As they progressed across open downs or stony scrubby ridges, there was always something new. Gidgee would give way to mulga or to pine. Every day Dinny had to be called upon to identify some fresh species of flora or fauna. A tree was either useful like gidgee that produced the coals beloved of cooks, or leopardwood, whose foliage the sheep liked, or on the other hand there was whitewood which was no good to burn and whose leaves were poisonous to stock at some times of the year.

So Bill gradually absorbed the lore of the bush. There were the big red kangaroos of the downs, the wallaroos of the stony hills, goannas six feet long with snaky heads like prehistoric saurians, and short stumpy death-adders, mobs of emus flouncing curiously past, tall grey-blue native companions performing their weirdly grotesque dances out on the shimmering plains, wild turkeys that looked more like geese, swarming clouds of pretty little green budgerigars, a skyful of galahs showing dove-grey at one moment and rose-pink the next, and those gorgeously painted miniatures that twittered among the mimosa bushes.

Then they reached the prickly-pear country. At first came scattered green plants thrusting grotesquely at all sorts of angles, gradually becoming clumps, then the clumps closed up to form an impassable spiny barrier that reached high among the trees and narrowed the stock-route to a mere lane. Just before they reached the Border Gate the coach pulled up alongside them one day and a sturdy little figure clambered down. Within a few minutes young Mac had his pony saddled and was riding round the mob as though he had never been away. He brought all the latest gossip from Longreach and all the additional titbits he had picked up on the coach. To Bill he brought a special message from the Longreach girl, much to the surprise of the recipient. She had faded from his thoughts shortly after they crossed the Barcoo, but the message brought her to life again, and for the next few days she vied for supremacy in his day-dreams with the fair girl in the store at St George.

They put behind them the long netting fence that marks the Queensland border, and crossed the plains of New South Wales toward the blue foothills. The stock-route narrowed in places to a mere strip and gate succeeded gate at such short intervals that Dinny swore that "Noo South was nothing but a bloody sheep yard!"

Mac buoyed them with the assurance that their destination was at hand, and one day a tall arrogant-looking individual in riding-breeches and a tightly-buttoned coat rode on to the dinner camp on a well-groomed black horse and demanded the presence of MacAndrew the drover. Mac

rose from his lunch in the shade of a box-tree and crossed toward the stranger who surveyed him from his horse.

“Are you MacAndrew?” he queried sharply. “I’m Mr Grimshaw, manager of Camelot. Have you lost many sheep on the way?”

“No, we’ve had a good trip. Where will you take delivery?”

“I want you to have them at the Brigalow yards tomorrow. I’ll send a man to show you the way.”

“I know the road!” Mac paused in thought for a moment. “But that means we’ll have to travel sixteen miles to-morrow with a lot of gates — and these sheep have been on the road over four months.”

The manager frowned down his big beaky nose. “Are you trying to teach me my business? I expect you to be at the yards to-morrow!” He wheeled the black horse and cantered stiffly off.

Mac resumed his seat with a thoughtful expression.

A voice from the background mimicked “*I’m ... Mistah ... Grimshaw ... Haw! Are you ... a drovah? Haw?*” When the laughter died down, Dinny observed casually to MacAndrew. “Ever notice how a bloke that doesn’t know his job is always suspicious that people can see through him!” Then after a pause. “It’s time we got back to Queensland, Mac!”

Mac nodded gloomily. “It’s pretty hard after nursing these sheep to land them here in good nick, to be told to gallop them off their legs at the finish. It’s every bit of sixteen miles to the Brigalow yards, and unless they’ve rebuilt them the yards aren’t big enough to hold this mob.”

Dinny eyed him carelessly. “You seem to know this place pretty well, Mac.”

The drover hesitated a moment. He glanced round and dropped his voice so that only Dinny and Bill heard him. “I ought to! My father owned all this country once and I was born and brought up here. The bank smash of the nineties settled us and killed him. A young fellow just out from England bought the bigger part of the station and called it ‘Camelot.’ And the girl I was going to marry decided she couldn’t be a poor man’s wife ... and married him. Not this Grimshaw — he’s only a manager — but the owner who lives in Sydney or Melbourne, fellow by the name of Atherton. I never met him ... but I wish him luck!”

## Chapter V

THE return trip was a glorious affair in Bill's estimation. The sheep delivered and their responsibilities over, the party broke up; Tom Dixon to look up his seldom-visited family at the coast, and the others with substantial cheques in their pockets, bound for a holiday in the Big Smoke — provided they managed to survive the lure of the nearest pub. Only MacAndrew and little Mac, Dinny, and Bill rode northward.

Mac drove the wagonette with Bob on the box as gate-opener and the dogs riding comfortably on top with plenty of time and opportunity to lick their bruised feet and survey from a safe perch the track they had travelled in different fashion. Bill and Dinny rode behind the score of horses at a long, swinging pace, with an occasional canter to keep up with the trotting wagonette.

After months of crawling slowly behind a mob of sheep, Bill's cramped inclinations revived and gloried again in the comparatively swift progress where a mount walked freely along, drawn by the horses in front, and in one day they covered the distance that had taken them a week to traverse with the sheep. Every morning Bill crept out of his blankets before daylight and followed Dinny, bridle in hand, toward the distant tinkle of the horse-bells. They ranged from the tinny tinkle of his brown mare's, to the deep note of the Condamine on the bay harness-horse, and his initiation into the science of horsetailing commenced. He learned which horses were mates and always fed together, and it was not long before he could walk straight to his chestnut pony in the dark, his "damper trick" as Dinny called it, bearing good fruit. She would come to his whistle with a steady clink-clink-clink of the hobble-chain, then when he had unhobbled her mates, dim, ghostly forms in the dark, he would vault on to her bareback and drive his mob to where Dinny was wrestling with the stiff hobbles of the others.

All accounted for, a warning swing of the whip started the mob for the camp. In those rides in the half dark, his legs clamped round the pony's ribs, darting, twisting, ducking through timber, jumping logs with the pony reeving excitedly, Bill learned more about riding than in all his previous months in the saddle. On the first few mornings he slipped painfully from the pony, feeling as stiff as a clothes-peg, but gradually a new ease and poise translated itself into his seat in the saddle.

MacAndrew, under the total release of responsibility, was a new man,

and his normal unimaginative self was even indulging in a bit of day-dreaming. In the little town near Camelot where he had paid off his men, he discovered that part of his father's old property was shortly to be opened for selection, so he put in an application at once. The others were equally as interested and as hopeful as Mac himself. His prospects afforded an everlasting topic of conversation, and within a few days they had built him a house — a modest one for a start — ring-barked his timber, subdivided the block into smaller paddocks, and even discussed the treatment to be observed toward drovers passing through.

Mac accepted it all cheerfully. "Droving's all right for a young fellow," he would say. "He sees the country, learns what it can carry in all sorts of seasons, and learns more about handling stock than he ever would on a station. But when a man has a wife and a family he wants to see them more than once or twice a year."

"Yes, but look at the money you make!" Dinny hinted.

"And don't we earn every brass penny of it! How much droving is there in a good season when plenty of grass and water make it easy? A dry time comes, people keep on hoping for rain till there isn't a skerrick of grass left on the routes, then there's a rush for agistment country and they all want their stock shifted at once! It's a great life!"

They pulled into the shade of lofty coolabahs fringing a billabong, and Bill attended to the horses while Mac got a fire going and put the billy on for the midday meal. Bill was improving daily in the handling of horses, and as a result of his keenness, practically all the horse-work had gravitated toward Dinny and himself.

Young Mac, scrutinizing an approaching dust-cloud, announced the arrival of the coach and cantered over to pass the time of the day with the driver. The tucker-box had hardly been opened when he came tearing back, his pony switching its tail and laying back its ears in protest at the treatment its ribs were getting from the boy's heels. He pulled up almost on top of them. "Telegram for you, dad!"

MacAndrew frowned. "We can't take on another job till the horses get a spell." He opened the missive with toil-clumsy fingers, steeling himself against the unspoken possibility of bad news from home. Then his face cleared as he read, and he turned to Dinny with shy elation and a surprised "Well ... what d'you know about that!"

"Someone left you a fortune, Mac?"

"No! But they want me to go back to New South for the Land Board."

"The selection?"

MacAndrew nodded. "Looks like I have a chance after all." He sat down and thought hard for a few minutes, then turned to Dinny. "I'll have to go straight back. Will you take the plant on to Longreach?"

"Suits me!"

"Good! I'll take a couple of the freshest horses and Bob can go back

with you.”

The usual leisure of the dinner camp departed in an overhauling of gear and repacking, while Mac passed instructions to Dinny, and young Mac unsuccessfully tried to convince his parent that school could get along without him while he went back across the border, too.

As Mac's preparations neared completion, a stranger rode into the camp, nodded genially and accepted the offer of a meal. He was past middle-age, wiry and active, with a close-cropped greying beard, and he squatted on his heels, bushman fashion, and discussed the standard topics — the season, the prospects of rain, with an occasional question about their trip, while Dinny dragged the tucker-box back from the wagonette and Bill put the billy on for fresh tea.

“On your way to pick up another mob?” he queried.

Mac shook his head. “Horses'll need a spell first, and I've got to get back across the border.”

The old man ate in silence for a while. “I came down with a proposition to offer you. If you can't take it, will you let your men take it on?”

“The horses aren't fit!”

“I'll supply horses and plant. All I want is two or three good men. I just got a wire from my brother who is bringing in a mob of cattle we bought from the Cooper. He's had bad luck. One of his men left him, then his horse came down on him and broke his leg, so he's in the hospital now and the cattle have been let go.” He shot a keen glance at Dinny. “You're a cattleman, aren't you?”

Dinny nodded diffidently.

“If you can get a couple of men, you can have the job of bringing that mob back. You can leave your plant here on good feed till then. Does that suit you?”

Mac and Dinny exchanged hesitant glances. Bill looked forlornly at both of them and wondered what would happen to him if they accepted, while young Mac sat very still with a pleased smile dawning on his face. He might get the trip after all! The stranger rose and pulled out a blackened pipe. “I'll have a look round the waterhole and leave you to have a yarn.”

When he returned, sucking at the short old pipe jutting aggressively from his beard, one swift glance told him that his proposition had been accepted. “How about shifting up to the station and we'll talk things over there? Turnbull's my name — my place is less'n a mile on.” He addressed MacAndrew. “I can let you have a couple of fresh houses for your trip if you want them.”

Bill did not know that the old man's eyes were watching his every move as he passed quietly and deftly among the horses, bridling and harnessing. His own thoughts were in a disturbed state. Mac was going

south, Dinny was going west — what would become of him? He suddenly realized that without Mac he would be, temporarily at least, without a job, but even more would he feel the absence of Dinny; the quick turn of events within the last hour was more than disquieting.

Mac shook out the reins and the wagonette moved off. As the others mounted, the old man ranged alongside Dinny. “What about the young fellow?”

Dinny nodded briefly. “He's all right!”

Turnbull eyed him significantly. “He'll be working for you, remember!”

“He'll do me!”

Bill, joining them at that moment, caught Dinny's words with a premonitory thrill. The old man's eyes switched from Dinny to him. “Do you want to go for the cattle?”

Bill tried hard not to show the commotion that his feelings and thoughts were in. He managed to stammer, “Yes ... I would. Thanks very much!” Then he rode on with shining eyes.

Next day, Dinny, Bill, and old Turnbull set out for the west driving a packhorse and spares. They rode hard, following a faint track through dark scrub, across dry creeks, and over stony ridges, and Bill marvelled at the endurance of the old man. The hardest day left no apparent effect on him and Bill was hard put to it to disguise his own stiffness and saddle-soreness. Nearly a week after they left the station they topped a red ridge and looked over still another dark unbroken sea of dense sombre mulga. Turnbull pointed ahead with his whip. “We're nearly there! We turn off at the next creek.” Bill, bumping along on a fractious brown horse, sent up a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving.

They found the camp on a long narrow waterhole, and from the shelter of a bough shed, a wizened toothless old man and a stoutist young fellow rose at their approach. Turnbull nodded in greeting and introduced himself without further preliminaries. “My name's Turnbull! Were you with my brother when he got hurt?”

The young man brushed the dust off the seat of his trousers. “I'm the horsetailer. Didn't see it happen, but we took him into Toompine. How's he going?”

The wizened old fellow chimed in in a high-pitched voice. “I'm the cook. ... Carr's my name. ... Jimmy Carr. Toothless Jimmy they call me. I'll get you a feed in a minute.”

Sam the horsetailer ran their horses out into the scrub to join the rest of the mob and Bill glanced uneasily at the cook; his appearance did not suggest appetizing meals or even his distant acquaintance with soap and water — still, some of his first impressions had proved so unreliable that he was disposed to be charitable. The cook was fussing around with a greasy old hat on the back of his head, a frowsy dirty shirt, and trousers

that hovered precariously from his narrow hips and hung in concertina folds above his boots. The horsetailer seemed pleasant enough. He had a sleek well-fed appearance, but there was a furtive look about his eyes that decided Bill to suspend judgment for a while.

They turned in soon after supper with the mosquitoes serenading them and, tired though he was, Bill lay in bed and looked pleasurably up at the stars with thoughts of the morrow.

## Chapter VI

THE projected early morning start did not materialize. The only horses Sam could find were the tired little mob the three men had ridden on the previous night, and eventually they had to saddle them up again for the day's mustering. The four men rode up the creek, mustering all the cattle on the western side in toward Turnbull. It was a totally new experience for Bill. He pushed ahead through the scrub on what he reckoned was his course, when the crack of a whip close on his right halted him. There was old Turnbull with a little mob of cattle and the tall green creek timber just beyond him. Bill turned sharply and edged out as quietly as possible without giving himself away.

Suddenly his horse pricked his ears. On the fringe of a little clearing stood a huge white bullock with big spreading horns. For a moment it stared undecidedly, then with an explosive *wumph* it plunged into the thick scrub where a heavy crashing advertised the presence of a hidden mob. The brown horse jumped instinctively in pursuit, and the rider had to clutch at the saddle to save himself from being left behind. There was only the crashing of timber ahead to guide them but it was enough, then Bill caught a glimpse of red and roan through the thinning timber. He jammed his hat down on his head, dug his heels in, and prayed he would not be scraped off on a tree. The horse shot forward, gave a convulsive leap over a fallen trunk, on again, slithered luckily through a rabbit warren, and out into the open.

A dozen bullocks were streaming across the clearing and the brown horse needed no urging. Bill swung his whip as he drew level with the mob. The white leader had almost reached the opposite wall of scrub but the brown horse, responding nobly, closed in on the galloping bullock, throwing his weight against the shoulder. The bullock propped sharply and swung back. The horse propped and swung with it; to Bill, it seemed as if it had simply ducked between his legs and he just managed to grip a handful of mane and hang on, till a lucky swerve brought him back into the saddle. He drew a deep breath of relief and mentally registered a growing respect for his mount with a prayer that no one had witnessed his near departure from him. Anyhow, he had beaten the bullock. His blood tingled with the exhilaration of the chase. This was the life! No more plodding behind sheep for him. He cracked his whip and headed the mob for the creek.

The sun was almost straight overhead when a mob came crashing toward him with Dinny on one wing and the horsetailer *hoy-ing* them on from behind. Bill fell in with them and they joined up with Turnbull on the creek; only about two hundred bullocks for the morning — less than half the mob.

After camping for dinner on a drying waterhole, Bill started the mob back down the creek toward the camp, while the other three combed the scrub on the farther side. At intervals the banging of a whip and crashing of heavy bodies through the scrub heralded the appearance of another mob. They would burst through the leafy screen and halt with surprise and suspicion, then on recognizing their mates they would merge and string off down the creek. Bill had his work cut out to keep his mob together. The leaders evinced a desire to make the pace a fast trot, and they had to be checked continually. Sometimes a bullock would branch out from the main mob and make for the scrub with a retinue of half a dozen others. A touch of the heels and the horse shot out in pursuit. The gentle pace for wheeling sheep was of no use here. Up on them, the whip rose and cracked — sometimes — and the disgruntled bullocks shot back into the mob.

The sun dropped low and finally disappeared over the western tree-tops — an angry red disk in a smoky haze. Darkness came quickly and the musterers rallied on the cattle and pushed them along. Then the camp-fire appeared like a red eye through the timber and the cattle snorted and rolled back on the mob.

Bill rode up the wing and joined Dinny. “What are we going to do with the cattle to-night?”

“Watch 'em.” In the darkness that hid their features, Dinny sensed the look of puzzled interrogation. “We'll hold 'em on that clearing in front of the camp. ... Take it in turns to ride round 'em all night.”

He rode off to steady the lead and cut out the horses they had picked up on the way. Sam the horsetailer followed him to the camp and caught the night-horses while Bill and old Turnbull rode steadily round the cattle. After a few complaining bellows at the curtailment of their freedom, they reluctantly settled down for the night, standing about chewing the cud or letting themselves down to the ground with a deep, contented *whoof*.

Old Turnbull was singing an ancient song with an interminable number of verses in a cracked tuneless voice. They were on opposite sides of the cattle and Bill, who was keeping as quiet as possible, wondered why he should keep on disturbing the mob with his raucous old voice. A horseman rode out from the camp-fire, momentarily blocking its glare, and the cook's squeaky tones hailed them. “All right, boys, your supper's at the fire! *Woh ... bullicks ... woh!* It's only old Toothless Jimmy!”

As Bill waited on Turnbull, the cook broke into a quavering ditty and rode off round the mob. Turnbull glanced at his companion. “Well, it's

been a good day.”

“Yes, I've enjoyed it!”

“Never done much cattle work, have you?”

Bill hesitated a moment, then he replied simply. “No! I haven't.”

“When you're on watch to-night, ride a bit wider of the mob, look out for any beast walking off the camp, and keep on whistling or singing or making a noise of some sort.”

“But doesn't that disturb them?”

“Not on your life! While they hear you, they know you're there!”

Bill did more than justice to the mysterious looking curry old Jimmy had concocted; he was hungry enough to eat anything without question.

Dinny rolling a cigarette in the firelight glanced across at him. “Tired?”

“A bit.”

“You can take first watch and relieve the cook. We'll do two hours each. I'm going out to the mob now and I'll send the cook in, so come out when you're ready.”

He led the spare night-horse out of the shadows and slipped quickly into the saddle. The horse took a few steps, then, without warning, ducked his head and bucked all round the camp. Turnbull jumped to his feet, brandishing a slice of damper. “Nice sort of night-horse that!” he snorted, casting an anxious eye toward the cattle. “Damned good job the right man's on him!”

Bill finished his supper in silence. For some time now he had cherished a secret ambition to try himself out on a buckjumper — an easy, straightahead pigroot for a start, anyhow — but he was quite certain that if he had got on that horse to-night, the first buck would have given him a view of the tree-tops. Dinny must have had an idea that the horse was fresh, and the boy felt dumbly grateful.

Then old Jimmy rode in. Bill lengthened the stirrup leathers and rode out to the mob. Until his eyes recovered from the glare of the fire he could see practically nothing in the darkness. By the wan light of a low crescent moon, a certain fine distinction of light and shadow came slowly into being, then the dark mass of the camping mob loomed before him. On the far side someone was singing “Waltzing Matilda.” It was funny to imagine Dinny singing. Dinny, whose everyday speech was reduced to the irreducible minimum, the soul of brevity, mechanically beefing out a bush ballad in a tuneful but lugubrious voice! Bill wanted to laugh out loud, but compromised with a broad grin into the darkness.

The song shut off abruptly. “Got your whip?”

Bill raised his right arm with the long thong looped over it and Dinny went on, “Well, don't use it unless you've got to. If a beast pokes out, turn him back without stirring up the mob. I don't think they'll rush, but if they do, go like hell to the lead and pour the whip into them till you wheel them.” He handed over a heavy silver watch. “Call me at half-past

eleven. You know where I'm sleeping? Well ... hooroo!"

Bill was alone. He touched the horse with a heel and started his patrol with the mob on his right hand. Most of them were lying down, but a few stood with muzzles slightly raised, and the sound of their cud-chewing was broken by an occasional gusty belch. He racked his memory for something to sing. ... What songs *did* he know? He never sang except in the bath ... but in public ... of course there was "God Save the King." Still ... better not. The bullocks might be patriotically inclined ... His job was to keep them lying down. What was that thing from *The Merry Widow*? ... Or was it *The Quaker Girl*? He started timidly on "Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes," gradually increasing in volume as his first self-consciousness wore off.

On his second round, the horse quickened pace and veered away from the mob. Bill checked his song and peered into the darkness ahead. There was something purposeful in the way the horse had taken charge, and memories of the camp-fire reminiscences of Dinny and Tom Dixon on the unerring instinct of night-horses decided him to trust to his mount. He leaned forward and the horse quickened its pace. A moving blur against the shadows ahead stopped, and Bill spotted it for a bullock. The night-horse swung on to it and headed it back to the camp. As it disappeared into the mob, Bill slipped a hand up the smooth neck of the horse and caressed it gratefully. Then he treated the camp to further excerpts from Gilbert and Sullivan.

The night-air was warm and balmy. Bill had not worn a coat for weeks, and as he rode along with shirt-sleeves rolled up, the mosquitoes keened in a cloud around him and gave him a key-note for his song, but several octaves too high. The moon seemed to linger a while on the rim of the horizon before it was quickly pulled down, and for a space the world was strangely dark. Then the sheer brilliance of the stars asserted itself, and in their light the world became a place of mystic inky blackness shot with long pennons and pools of molten silver.

He found himself lapsing into silence between songs. The silences unconsciously lengthened till suddenly recovering with a start he realized that he had fallen asleep in the saddle. The horse was still padding softly round and Bill hastily broke into song again. His eyelids drooped like leaden weights. The realization of his weariness had come on him with a rush, and an acute longing for sleep possessed him. Surely his time was nearly up. He lugged the heavy watch out of his pocket and peered hard at it from all angles. The hands were barely distinguishable but ... his heart bounded ... could that be half-past eleven! He had only to ride in and call Dinny, then bed — glorious bed! He turned the horse toward the low red glow of the fire, simmering with the comforting thought of sleep, when something prompted him to look at the watch again. He peered at it in the firelight. Doubt placed a chill finger on his dreams. That hand

didn't seem quite as close to the top of the watch as it should be. It was *half-past ten*. Another hour to go! Oh, hell!

He rode morosely back to the mob, battling against sleep, and his weary voice took up a refrain that required little concentration and lasted a long time. The bullocks were camping well. Who wouldn't be a bullock and sleep when you want to! One lay well out from the mob and Bill began to use him as a tally-point to count each time he circled the mob. He tried to force himself to think about things, but it was hard to think and sing at the same time.

What about girls? They were easy to contemplate! But now that he thought of it he had been too busy for the subject to occupy his waking thoughts for a long time. The days had been too full of action; by nightfall you had barely energy enough for a meal before you slipped into the blankets and deep dreamless sleep.

Funny things, girls! Not that he had had much to do with them. There was that little girl with the long fair hair, on the ship coming out from England. He had kept aloof from every one for the first week or two, then he found himself watching the girl, thinking covertly about her but never daring to meet her. Then came the night of the fancy-dress ball ... a tropic moon overhead. He had turned away from the dancers and leaned on the rail watching the play of moonlight on the sea when he had felt a warm lithe presence at his side, and a pretty lisping voice, "Aren't you ever going to dance with me?" He had looked down at the pouting mouth and a fierce desire to kiss it hard and long had made his head reel. Then he had laughed shortly. "Sorry, I'm not much of a dancer. Shall we go up to the boat-deck?" Yes, that was a gorgeous night!

It seemed so far away, so long ago, yet it was only a year. Looking back, it was hard to reconcile the reticent, somewhat sullen youth of shipboard to his present self, riding round a mob of bullocks in a starlit clearing — dense black scrub stretching for endless miles around and civilization incredibly remote.

A long-drawn wailing howl holding the quintessence of mournfulness and despair stopped the beating of his heart, froze his blood, and set his hair standing on end. Again it rose and quivered balefully in the night-air as though a port-hole of hell had gaped open to spill a foretaste of demoniacal torture.

Bullocks were getting to their feet; a couple advanced to the edge of the mob, shook their horns, and sniffed significantly. Bill swallowed his fear and pushed the horse on but his song had a quivering note threading it. Dingoes were bad enough to listen to from the heart of a camp with a big fire blazing, but that one sounded too close and too horribly blood-curdling. He wanted to crack his whip, to assert himself, to do something energetic; if he could even see the author of the fiendish howl it would help, but the forbidding black scrub shrouded the mystery and heavens

only knew what other skulking things besides! He shivered and peered at the watch. Surely ... He refused to risk disappointment by trusting to surmise, and deliberately completed the tour of the mob, jogged steadily over to get the light of the camp-fire and peered again. Half-past eleven! Hallelujah!

He turned the horse towards where Dinny lay, when a movement in the shadows there halted him, then Dinny's low voice. "Heard you coming. I'll be out in a minute!" He rode back and made a final triumphant tour of the mob, beefing out at the top of his voice ... "A policeman's life is not a happy one ... *ha-appy one!*"

## Chapter VII

WITH the first hint of dawn, old Turnbull started the mob off camp, the leaders swaying down the creek on the second stage of their journey with long stiff steps, barely pausing in their stride to curl a long tongue round a mouthful of grass or break down a bough with their horns.

Dinny and Bill breakfasted hurriedly and caught fresh horses when Sam arrived with them. The new mounts were a wild lot and hard to catch. Just as Bill finished saddling a bay mare, she whipped the reins out of his hands and rooted all round the camp. The horsetailer caught her and handed the reins back with a sarcastic smile. "You're safe now!" Nevertheless, Bill took no risks. He tightened the near rein, got a good grip of the mane, and slipped quickly into the saddle in imitation of Dinny. The mare stood irresolute a moment, then walked resignedly off, the nervous rigidity of her muscles gradually relaxing as she went.

Dinny's big raking chestnut stood quite still for a few seconds, then his head and tail met underneath him in two high jarring bucks. Suddenly changing his tactics he dived for the timber, and Bill, racing in his wake as fast as he could dodge the low-hanging limbs, expected to see the rider swept off at any moment. He lost sight of him, and only a receding crashing marked the line of the chestnut's flight; then the crashing grew louder again and they reappeared, but in different roles Dinny was boss of the situation now and the bolting chestnut was getting a bit of his own medicine. The doubled whip-thong swung under his dripping flanks; he tossed his head wildly and leaped for the scrub, but this time the man in the saddle was directing.

When they overtook the mob, Turnbull glanced at the heaving flanks of the chestnut, then at the rider. "Did he do much?"

Dinny shook his head casually. "Tore my shirt in the mulga. He'll be all right!"

Turnbull rode back for breakfast with a satisfied smile. This man would do him. At the end of a week he prepared to leave them. For the rest of the trip there would only be Dinny and Bill with the cattle, and the cook would have to stand a regular watch with the others.

To Bill it had been a week of hard but enjoyable work. He hated the thought of going back among sheep again — to revert to the slow monotonous pace and the deadly unresponsiveness of sheep-drovers' horses after this would be worse than going back to school after the

holidays. You could do something with a bullock; he had intelligence and you had to use your wits and those of your horse to beat him. But a sheep! A cranky sheep could do as he liked with a horseman unless he had a good dog. Try and turn a sheep from its path and what did it do? Kept on going ... got amongst your horse's legs, and almost brought it down ... or lay and sulked till you turned your back on it in disgust. ... Then it got up and kept on running.

Sheep-droving was an old man's job. The only good thing about it was that you got a full night's sleep. This business of watching cattle all night was a bit of a drawback but it did not outweigh the advantages, and with the curtailment of sleeping hours, Bill had learned how to get the utmost out of every minute between hitting the pillow and waking. Yes. ... He had definitely decided that his future lay with the reds, whites, and roans — and good horses.

Turnbull turned chaffingly to him one dinner camp as they lay stretched out under a coolabah with hats over their faces to keep the flies off. "What are you going to do with all your money when you get back, Bill?"

There was a short silence, then a muffled voice, thoughtful but decided, came from under Bill's hat. "I'm going to buy a good saddle ... and a good horse. A real good one!"

"And after that ...?" prompted Turnbull.

"I'll look out for a better horse and buy him!"

"Umm ... well, that's better than pushing your cheque across the bar." Turnbull subsided again but Bill's eyes glimmered into the hot dark crown of his hat, and he saw himself riding down Eagle Street in a fine new saddle on a slashing clean-limbed hack; pictured the men looking critically after him and saying: "Good sort of a horse, that! Who owns him?"

"Oh, that's one of Bill Muir's. He's always on something good!"

And the girls ...! At that point an adventurous fly got into his mouth and he sat up spluttering, to find the cattle stringing off the camp in a long line. As he cantered off, Turnbull glanced after him, then retired again beneath his hat murmuring, "Good kid, that!"

From Dinny's hat came the lazy drawled response, "He's not too bad!"

"A bit flash, but he'll get over that. I like a bit of flashness in a young fellow."

On the morning of Turnbull's departure he started the bullocks off camp as usual. When the horses came in, Bill's mare was limping badly, a stake below the shoulder. They removed the mulga splinter and washed the wound, then Bill eyed the horse he had ridden the previous day with misgivings. Sam the horsetailer concealed a furtive smile and suggested a chestnut horse that had not been ridden since they joined the camp. "Who does he belong to?" Bill asked.

“Oh, he's mine, but you can have him for a couple of days — unless you're scared of him!”

“Why, what's wrong with him?”

The horsetailer smiled airily. “Nothing ... nothing. He might do a couple of straightahead pigroots, but if you're scared take the old horse.”

Dinny, glancing up from doctoring the mare's shoulder, glimpsed Bill's clean-cut profile with the eyes narrowed, the nostrils flaring at the challenge, then he looked past him to the chestnut. “Catch him, Bill, and I'll take the rough edge off him!”

Bill's jaw set stubbornly. The horsetailer's derision was no longer concealed — Dinny's last remark had branded him openly as a newchum. He saddled the touchy chestnut in a dogged silence. It fidgeted in a narrow circle round him while he girthed it up, and showed definite hostility when he attempted to slip the crupper over its tail. Twice it lashed savagely at him but in the end he won, and stood back and looked it over.

Dinny was still tending to the puncture in the mare's leg when Bill slipped the reins over the chestnut's ears and tightened them up on the neck. His knees were shaky and he could feel the loud beating of his heart. He had never ridden a buck before, but he was going to start now and do his damndest.

The chestnut stood rigid as he fitted a toe in the stirrup, his right hand crept to the pommel, his body lifted in the quick sliding action he had practised for months.

Dinny looked up sharply at the sudden snort and rush of hoofs. He saw Bill poised in mid air, half-way to the saddle but never destined to reach it. The chestnut swerved like lightning as Bill's weight left the ground, and the quick spinning buck tore his grip from saddle and mane and threw him outwards. As he fell, the chestnut lashed at him, missed by a fraction, and jumped forward. Dinny jumped at the same moment, his eyes grim, fierce-muttered oaths crowding to his lips as the chestnut plunged wildly for the scrub dragging Bill by the foot caught in the stirrup-iron.

The horse lashed wildly at the form bumping along at its side, and the horsetailer turned ghastly white at the sickening thud. Again a smashing blow, and Dinny raced past like a demon in pursuit just as the stirrup leather pulled clear and the chestnut galloped on, leaving a huddled inanimate form half-hidden in the rank grass.

Dinny was off his galloping horse before it checked. He turned the still form carefully over and drew his breath in sharply at the sight. One side of the face was cruelly battered and covered with blood and dirt. He laid the head gently back and rose to his feet with cold fury in his eyes.

The horsetailer following up with fear sagging his slack mouth and whitening his eyes, stopped and fled precipitately to obey the curt

incisive order, "Get Turnbull! *Quick!*"

The old cook came trotting up, and was halted in his tracks. "A couple of blankets ... and hot water. *And get a bloody move on!*"

Things happened quickly; the unloaded buckboard set out, Turnbull driving as fast and as carefully as the rough narrow track would let him, and mentally apologizing at every jar to the grim motionless figure swathed in towels and held in the narrow tray between firmly lashed swags and blankets. Somewhere on ahead Dinny was galloping to a homestead where there ought to be a telephone. The nearest doctor was forty miles away but they had to ensure that he *was* there and ready for the case ... if Bill survived as far as that.

The station owner listened intently to Dinny's terse account, and acted quickly. While his wife telephoned the doctor, he had fresh horses harnessed to a light wagonette and arranged for a relay half-way to the little bush town. He sent two stockmen back to help with the cattle. Dinny found his saddle on a fresh horse, then they drove to the main road and awaited Turnbull. While they transferred Bill's apparently lifeless form to the more commodious wagonette, the woman got to work with hot water and bandages but it was evident that the damage was not merely superficial. She did what she could, then stood back beside her husband and watched the emergency ambulance disappear in a cloud of red dust.

It was nearly three days before Dinny rejoined the cattle. Fifty sleepless hours of hard riding with practically no time to spare for eating, had left their mark on his impassive features. He rode into camp as the horses were being unharnessed and at the sight of the grim, set purpose outcropping through the fatigue, the horsetailer decided to keep out of the way. Dinny turned briefly to the cook. "Get me something to eat, will you!"

The old man paused in his hustle to get the fire going to venture a question. "How's the young fellow?"

"He's alive ... but only just. And if he does get right, *you'll* never know him by his face again!"

To the horsetailer he said curtly, "Catch that chestnut!"

There was a touch of pallor in the full round face and the whites of his eyes were more evident than usual, as after much unnecessary fuss and exertion, the horsetailer caught the chestnut horse and tied the bridle to a tree. All the while Dinny stood still, his cold critical eyes noting every careless movement, the chances he deliberately missed. As the horsetailer walked away, Dinny hailed him. There was a sharp peremptoriness in his tone like the crack of a whip.

"You were given that chestnut to ride by Turnbull's brother?"

The horsetailer moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue without replying, and his shifty eyes avoided the grim stare.

The relentless voice continued: “You were too damned yellow to ride him yourself, and when Turnbull — an old man — got on him, he threw him and broke his leg. Yet you kidded a boy — a newchum — to ride him, and nearly got him killed!” The voice rose, the tones had a hard cutting edge. “*Get on that horse now and ride him!*”

The horsetailer raised his head to reply then dropped it again without a word. He took a few irresolute steps toward the horse, then stopped and turned with a show of defiance. “Damned if I will! Ride him your bloody self!”

He backed away as Dinny stepped toward him, thrusting a slip of paper at him. “Here's your cheque! Roll your swag and get to hell out of this! And if you're still here by the time I've finished with that horse, I'll put my brand on you!”

Dinny led the chestnut clear of the camp and saddled him. There was a grim finality about his movements; an ominous silence as he patiently adjusted the crupper on the fidgeting, side-lashing horse, then he picked up his whip. The chestnut stood rigid showing the whites of its eyes, as the man prepared to mount. The next movement was so swift that neither the horse nor the open-mouthed cook witnessed the transition. He was firm in the saddle, and as the chestnut whirled and bucked, the spurs dug savagely in his shoulders. Round and round, bucking, plunging, whirling, and kicking, grunting and squealing with rage, and all through the vicious struggle, the man on its back spurred it mercilessly and continuously from shoulder to flank.

The chestnut paused with wide red nostrils and dripping flanks. The doubled thong of the whip rose and lapped under its belly and the horse shot off at a headlong gallop down the track. In five minutes they were back, the horse abject and lathered with foam. From the saddle, Dinny glanced over the camp, then looked at the cook.

Toothless Jimmy jerked a thumb toward a fast moving pillar of dust receding up the track. “'E's gone!”

## Chapter VIII

BESSIE MACANDREW noticed the man at the gate as she passed through the bare echoing hall with an armful of things to be packed. There was something familiar about him but for the moment she could not quite place him so she paused, screened by the fly-proof door, and peered out at the figure outlined against the sun glare of the street. The man's hand hesitated on the latch of the white wooden gate; a wide-brimmed felt hat hid his face, then as she waited, the gate was pushed open and the man came slowly through.

As he turned his back to fasten the gate, she remembered ... "*Bill Muir!*" Then as he faced her and walked on to the veranda, indecision and reluctance in each and every step, she backed away, her hand pressed to her lips. She had forgotten the accident.

He could not see her through the gauze screen and as he still hesitated, her eyes searched for a vestige of the features she had known. The left side of the face was much as it had been, but the broken nose ended and distorted the resemblance. The other side of the face did not belong to the Bill Muir of the past. The skin, though pale, was unscarred, but the chin was squarer, the corner of the mouth had a tight, cynical twist, and the eyelid had a permanent droop. She gasped faintly and backed into a darkened doorway. Poor Bill ... He had been so good-looking!

There was a faint knock at the door but she dared not go. Another knock, then the sound of slow retreating footsteps and she forced herself out, almost colliding with Bob in the hall. "*You go!*" She pushed him forward and rushed to the kitchen.

Half-way back to the gate, the caller heard the scrape of the gauze door being pushed open and a friendly young voice called an interrogative "Good day?" As he turned, left side first, young Mac rushed to meet him. "*Bill!*" Then he stopped dead, and his voice was slow and hushed. "Cripes ... Bill ... it ... it must have hurt!"

Bill held out his hand, a twisted smile on his face. "I didn't think you would recognize me. No one else has!"

"Come on in!" Young Mac dragged the door invitingly open but the visitor still hesitated. "Come on. We're just packing up. Dad got the selection and we're all going down to New South Wales."

"I'm glad about that, Mac!" He entered slowly and removed his hat with apparent reluctance.

A woman appeared at the far end of the hall, wiping her hands on her apron. "Who is it, Bob?"

"It's Bill Muir, mum!"

The woman came forward with hands outstretched. "I'm glad to see you, Bill, even if the house is nearly bare. Bob, tell Bessie to make the tea."

"I won't stay, Mrs MacAndrew. I only got back today and thought I would look in to see ... to see if ..."

"I'm glad you did, and I wish Tom was here. What a terrible time you must have had! Dinny told us all about it. Have you heard from him lately?"

He nodded. "I'm on my way to join him now. He's got me a job on a cattle station out west — on the Georgina. He's there now."

Bessie entered with the tea-cups on a tray and he greeted her with a smile. She held out her hand and smiled back. Somehow he looked different when he smiled. It wasn't the Bill Muir of the classic profile. It was someone else ... someone she didn't know ... but felt she wanted to know. And when he looked quietly at you like that and smiled ... the drooping eyelid, the tucked in corner of the mouth, all combined to add a spice of mystery, a hint of sophistication that intrigued. ...

She passed the plate of hastily-buttered biscuits and settled opposite him with an added softness in her glance.

When Bill left MacAndrew's he crossed the deep gutter and walked down the middle of the dusty road trying to sort out the conflicting thoughts that alternately pushed him forward and dragged him back. At the corner, his twisted smile with the puckish quality about it announced that a decision had been reached. He turned abruptly to the right, counting the houses as he went. If his memory still served him, the slim dark girl lived hereabouts. He examined the house with its long varandas behind the parkinsonias.

"I wonder what *she'll* say!"

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## Book II: Lancelot and Elaine

## Chapter IX

YOUNG Mac gave a last look round the camp, banked the fire and climbed heavily into the saddle with, a silent prayer to the providence that had deserted him of late, that the tucker would not be raided by blacks, dingoes, or straying camels before he got back. He had left Boulia only that morning with a couple of men — a cook and a horsetailer — attracted by his promise of a long droving trip. Both men were staging a recovery from the liquidation of their last cheques and both were inclined to be somewhat morbid — especially the cook. By dint of much patient persuasion he had got them at last to the camp down the river and was beginning to congratulate himself that part of his worries were over when the cook, who had not dismounted, looked down at him with bleary bloodshot eyes and poked an accusing finger at the heap of pack-saddles.

“This your camp?” he demanded thickly.

Mac nodded assent.

“Bring a man out to this, would yer!” he snarled. “Expect *me* to cook in a packhorse camp! Not on yer life! C'mon Stan!”

So Mac was faced with a second visit to Boulia in one day and the prospect was not pleasing. The red dust rose under his horse's feet in a thick choking cloud and hung in the motionless hot air, collecting in a deep layer on the clean white shirt he had put on that morning. Nice way to spend a twenty-second birthday, he reflected glumly, and went on to wonder where he was going to pick up any other men. There was already more work offering in the district than men to fill it, and the few left in Boulia showed their consciousness of the situation in a lofty independence. Anyhow, he thought bitterly, those two that turned him down that morning would have spread the news about his meagre equipment and settled his hopes of getting anyone here. Yet he simply must get help — even if he had to pick up a Chinaman.

He tied his horse to the rail in front of the store and entered its dim warmth redolent with the heterogeneous smells of a bush emporium. The store-keeper raised his eyebrows. “Back again?”

Mac assented gloomily. “Those two fellows cleared out. Any idea where I could pick up another man or two?”

The store-keeper shook his head with the emphasis that the occasion demanded. “There's no one else in town I know of. See the sergeant

— he might know — or you could look in at the pub. Some station men rode in an hour ago.”

Mac paused outside the pub and listened uninterestedly to a number of voices raised in argument within. Then came the sounds of a scuffle, the thud of a blow and a woman's stifled scream followed by a momentary silence. He stuck his head cautiously inside the door. The knot of men clustering at one end of the bar parted, and a khaki-clad stockman dragged out a sagging figure by the shoulders, the fallen one's spurred heels dragging limply across the floor. A thin, hard-faced woman darted from behind the bar, and Mac, entering, gave the pair a hand to lay the casualty on a bench against the wall.

Mac stared at the man's features in the dim light with a vague feeling that they had met before. He turned to the man at his side. “What was the row about?”

“Oh, nothing! Bill comes in straight off the grass and gets a few drinks across his chest. Then he picks on Big Harry and gets knocked stiff.”

“But what was the argument?”

“Damned stupid one. Bill here gets mad just because Harry calls him a bastard. Nothing in that to get wild about! Who the hell ain't?”

Mac's memory flashed back to the fight at O'Brien's on that cold starry night; he peered closely at the features of the man on the bench. The head was bare and the fine fair hair with the reddish tinge through it was getting thin above the forehead; both closed eyelids looked alike but the irregular line of the nose clinched the matter — it was Bill all right.

The woman returned with a jug of water and stared suspiciously at Mac. “What do *you* want?”

“He's a mate of mine.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You've never been in with him before. Who are you anyhow?”

Mac ignored her question. Through the doorway a glimpse of a light cart coming up the street decided his plan of action almost as soon as the idea was born. He dashed out and hailed the driver. “How far are you going?”

The thin-lipped youth eyed him coldly. “Down t' the Chow's garden.”

“How about giving my mate a lift? He's shickered and I want to get him back to camp before he sobers up.”

The youth gazed stonily up the street for a few seconds then he grudgingly assented and backed his cart to the pub doorway.

The barmaid looked up with cold hostility in her eyes. “What do you think *you're* going to do?”

“I'm taking him out to the camp.”

“Like hell you are! Bill's stopping with me.” She glared defiantly at Mac, ignoring the growing clamour for drinks from the bar.

“I only want to get him right again. He'll be back as soon as he's

sobered up and had a feed.”

The noisy demands and rapping of glasses on the counter increased and the withering, crudely-painted woman hesitated, then capitulated with a bitter threat, “If he don't, you'd better not show your face in here again.”

Mac got his arms under the still insensible man, staggered to the cart with his burden, and with the boy's help got him aboard. The driver whipped up his horse and rattled off toward the crossing. Mac turning to get his horse felt a tug at his arm; the barmaid poked a flask of whisky into his hands and nodded with grim significance. The other stockman staggered out after him. “Hey! Where you goin' with Bill?”

“It's all right! I'm only taking him out to sober up,” Mac assured him, then as a thought occurred to him he queried, “Where's his horse?”

Round the back. Good sort o' bay with star and white hind foot, branded L8M near shoulder.”

Mac waved his thanks and hurried to the pub yard wondering how it was that some men could get too drunk to remember their own names and still be able to give a minute description of a horse. He had no difficulty in picking it out of the little mob in the yard. A beautifully proportioned bay with a full clear eye sidled away to the extent of the reins at his approach. He led it quickly to the store, mounted his own horse and cantered after the cart with the bay running easily beside him.

Mac glanced anxiously at the man still sprawled in the bottom of the cart, then threw an inquiring look at the driver. “He's all right!” was the casual reply. “He's snorin'.”

If he only remained in his present comatose condition till they reached camp, all would be well. But presently, a dust-grimed face peered over the jolting edge of the cart. The driver looked down unconcernedly at the reviving man. “Aw, git down! You're nearly there.”

“Where are we going?”

“To your camp.”

“You be damned! This isn't the way to my camp. Pull up and let me out!”

Mac rode in close to the cart. “Hang on, Bill. We're nearly there!”

“Who are you ... an' what are you doing with my horse? Here ... !” He pursed his dry lips to whistle but the attempt was a failure and he sat down again in the jolting cart and held his aching head between his palms.

The cart pulled up beside the stacked pack-saddles. Mac quickly unrolled his swag, helped the unsteady man to the ground, and left him sitting with a dazed expression while he scrambled down the steep bank to the waterhole with a billy in his hand. Bill blinked stupidly at the tin dish, then mechanically laved his dusty face and head. As Mac silently handed him a towel, he peered owlishly up at him. “Who was it hit me?”

“A big lump of a chap ... I forget his name.”

The man on the ground tried to scramble to his feet. Mac took his arm and assisted him to the blankets spread out in the shade. "Let me go! I'm going back to clean him up. He can't call me a bastard!"

Mac pressed him down and lied soothingly. "You're too late. He left town before you did. Anyhow, a name can't hurt you."

"*Can't it!*" He struggled vainly to rise again, glaring savagely at Mac. "All right for you to talk! You have a father. ... So have I ... but he doesn't know me! But I'll find him yet ... and then ..." He sank weakly back on the blankets, one hand covering his eyes. Mac watching intently, thought he was asleep and was about to leave when the eyes opened and a thick voice muttered, "Give my horse a drink!"

Bill woke with an ache in his jaw and a bigger ache in his head, and a mouth like the inside of a sun-perished boot. He frowned at the unfamiliar blankets and the cheese-cloth mosquito-net rigged over him, while the tinkle of unknown horse-bells came closer and closer. He rose unsteadily, pulled on his boots and took a good look at the camp — the old stock-saddles, the little old-fashioned pack-saddles, and the tent-fly on the ground near him that had been someone's bed the night before. A feeling of compunction assailed him, but the uneasiness of waking in a strange place with so many missing links in the chain of memory to be forged took precedence at the moment. But his thirst took precedence even over that, and he took it to the waterhole.

The big rough-barked coolabahs, powdered with the ubiquitous red dust, that hung over the steep banks, satisfied him that he was still on the Burke. Yesterday he had ridden into Boulia and had a few drinks with ... who was that fellow ... fencing contractor ... Big Harry. That was it! And there were some of Harry's mates and one or two stockmen from Warena. Then Maisie and he had a yarn at the end of the bar. ... He arranged to see her ...! He stopped and stared at the sun just above the horizon; at the river-bank and the set of the tangle of jetsam in the projecting tree-roots. So the river ran *that* way — when it did run — and according to that the sun was in the east — rising! He had missed that date with Maisie!

He filled a quart-pot from the water-bag that hung from a limb and gulped it greedily. The moderately cool muddy water tasted heavenly. Then the horses trotted in and past him down to the waterhole, his own bay leading the nondescript mob like a guardsman followed by an underfed lot of street loafers. His slightly contemptuous glance took them all in, then he turned moodily away. "Looks like a second-rate drover's plant."

He looked up again as the following horseman rode over to the camp. His glance took in the approaching horse first, from coronet to withers, head, girth, and quarters, without apparent enthusiasm, then he looked at the rider. He was short, thickset, dark-complexioned, and probably in his

early twenties, but the dour cast of his stolid features made him appear older. There was something vaguely familiar about him, about the smiling nod, the quiet, "Hello, Bill," yet he could not quite remember.

"Whoa, boy!" The rider dragged his horse to a standstill and slipped to the ground. Enlightenment came to the other in a flash. "It's young Mac! How are you, boy?" He clasped the outstretched hand in a firm grip. "I didn't know you till you pulled that horse up! Then I remembered Dinny called you a hamhanded young shepherd that would never make a horseman as long as your heels pointed to the ground."

Mac ignored the left-handed compliment and smiled back. "Feeling better, Bill?"

"If I am I must have been pretty onkus before! How did I get here ... and when?"

"Wait till I get the billy on. Will you keep an eye on the horses."

Bill turned a humourless eye on the mob scrambling up the bank. "*Horses* did you say? There's one horse among them and he's got my brand on him. Where in God's name did you pick up this collection of misfits?"

Mac, tending to the fire, winced inwardly but his stolid features never changed. "They're good enough for droving, Bill. I can't afford to pay fancy prices for flash hacks — these horses have to work for their living."

"Yes ... and any poor unfortunate devil that has to ride them will have to work for his! Mac, your old man had some poor horses in his plant but he always had some good ones too." He searched around till he found his saddle and bridle. "Got a bit of old damper?"

"Look in that near pack-bag. Still teaching them tricks?"

"I gave up the exertion of chasing horses across the flat years ago. I'm lazy by nature and not ashamed to admit it. In fact, it's lazy blokes like me who supply the world with labour-saving devices!" He whistled, and the head of the bay horse appeared above the bank. Bill held up the bridle, spread open by his outstretched fingers, and whistled again. The bay horse whinnied softly, walked straight up to the bridle and slipped his head into it, then stuck his nose into the man's hand, nuzzling him gently till he found the damper. Bill let the reins drop to the ground and the horse stood quietly chewing at the tough-cruste mouthful while his boss turned the other horses back to the camp.

He approached a rough-coated brown horse to hobble him; it shied off and trotted away with its head and tail in the air. He cornered it eventually, hobbled it, and several others, then turned to the man at the fire. "How much time and sweat do you waste every day trying to catch these hairy-legged, bumble-footed brumbies of yours? I'll bet a quid you could make a damper in half the time and save yourself a ton of trouble."

Mac straightened his back as he stepped away from the fire and replied

with a sober smile, “How about a bit of breakfast?”

## Chapter X

BILL tipped up the dented black billy for his third pint of tea, pouring it carefully off the tea-leaves that swirled from the bottom of the can. He propped himself against a pack-saddle, fished for cigarette papers and tobacco-tin, and threw an interrogative glance across at Mac. "Smoke?"

Mac shook his head.

"Don't you drink either?"

Again the dark head shook negatively.

"Nor go with the girls?" A long shaft of sunlight pierced the branches and glinted on the hatless head.

Mac's broad shoulders shrugged non-committally and Bill's drooping eyelid augmented his mocking smile. "You're too good to be true, Mac! When you get back to Longreach, look inside the bar at the Commercial and you'll find a notice: 'The man that neither smokes nor drinks has other vices!' But, honestly, what have you been doing for the last ten years?"

"Nothing much. ... Working mostly." Mac seemed anxious to change the subject. "Where's Dinny?"

Bill's face clouded and his eyes seemed to be looking at some distant object out across the river channels — or even a bit beyond. "Dinny's dead. A sniper got him on Gallipoli." He paused for nearly a minute then spoke in slow reminiscent tones. "He was the finest fellow I ever met! Remember the time your old man picked me up in Longreach ... green as grass, and as useless as they make them? It was Dinny who put me on the right track and kept me on it, never laughing at the damn silly things I said and did. That time I got my face smashed he turned down a good job and came back as soon as he delivered the cattle and stayed there with me in that awful one-eyed town. I wouldn't have been game enough to go back among people that had known me if it hadn't been for him. I expected them to laugh at me ... to pity me ... but he made me face it, made me promise to visit everyone I knew in Longreach. Remember how I came back just as you were packing up?"

"He got me a job up here with him and we worked on cattle stations up and down the river from here to the Territory, went droving, breaking in, and when the war started we joined up together. Well ... Dinny's still on Gallipoli. I went through with the Light Horse, and after it was over, came back to the old beat."

“But what are you doing, Bill? Got a place of your own?”

“*Me!*” He leaned back his head and laughed sardonically. “I’m a plain blanky stockman, Mac! I can’t settle down in any one place for long, so when I knock up a cheque, I buy a good colt if I can find what I want, and sometimes I’ll blow in and have a few drinks — as you noticed!” His eyes focused on the man opposite, wandered off to glance over the camp-gear, then back again. “Is your father still alive?”

“Yes ... he’s all right! Still running things down below.”

“What made you leave a good home for this damned droving game, Mac?”

The younger man fidgeted, his eyes on the toes of his boots. “Oh, I don’t know ...” he began slowly, then added with deliberate candour. “I wanted to get away ... to make more money ... for myself!”

He looked defiantly into the other man’s lop-sided smile.

“What is she like, Mac? Is she worth it?”

Mac dropped his eyes again, then in slow, disjointed fashion, the story came away. “When we started at Thalia — that’s what we called the selection — there was a terrible lot of work to be done. But Dad wanted me to go to school although there wasn’t a school within miles of us. Just before this, the owner of Camelot came back to live there with his wife and daughter — she was about my age and she had a governess.

“Dad and Mr Atherton got on well together. He’s an Englishman. ... Used to be in the Army and doesn’t know much about running a station, but I like him.”

“*Atherton*, did you say?”

Mac looked across with mild surprise at the man opposite. “Yes. D’you know him?”

“No. Don’t think so.” Bill appeared to be groping among the distant recesses of his memory and his voice held a steely undertone. “... But I’d like to run across him, some day!”

Mac resumed his yarn. “Although Dad and him got on well, Dad never seemed to hit it with Mrs Atherton.”

A sudden flash of memory brought a smile to hover on Bill’s lips. That yarn old Mac had confided to Dinny when they landed the sheep at Camelot — how the girl had turned down Mac when his father lost his property, and married the moneyed Englishman. And now, circumstances had made them neighbours!

“Anyhow, the governess reckoned it would be better for the girl to learn in company than alone, so I used to ride over every day and another girl came from a neighbour’s place. I didn’t like it much, and her mother didn’t like me much either, but the girl was a good sport and we were cobbbers.

“Then she was sent to school in Sydney. I went back to give Dad a hand on the place but he was still keen on me going on with school. Then

when he proposed sending me to Sydney for a year, I didn't object as much as I did before. So in the end I went. I used to see her now and again down there — at sports meetings, at the boat races, and sometimes at week-ends. When my year was up I came home but she stayed on at school. She used to bring a crowd up for the holidays ...”

He hesitated and the man opposite drawled, with a lazy smile in his half-closed eyes: “And what happened? Did you switch on to another girl, or did she go cold on you?”

“We were just as good pals as ever, but she seemed different. She did the maddest things ... and that flash crowd she was with ... I sort of dropped out. When the war started I was too young to go. Dad was too old, but one day he came back from town and told us he had enlisted and I would have to run the place till he got back.” Mac relapsed into a troubled silence with the thoughts of those years. “She used to spend most of her time in Sydney, but when she came up to the station, although she knew perfectly well I couldn't get away to the war, even at the end when I was old enough to enlist, she used to say things ... talk about the soldiers she wrote to. ... It made me feel mad.

“After dad came back, I went down to Sydney for a holiday and met her there. She was chasing round with a chap in officer's uniform. She had changed a lot. She had a wild, reckless way with her. That fast crowd she went with were to blame. Anyhow I cut in whenever I got the chance, and took her to theatres and so on. She was just as nice as ever when we were on our own — and one day I asked her to marry me.” The set look and clouded eyes made him look ten years older. “She listened for a while, then she started to laugh. ‘Why, Bob,’ she said, ‘you're only a boy, and I want to have a lot of fun before I think of getting married.’

“Next time I went to the house, only her mother was at home. She's one of these women that can smile with everything except their eyes. I forget her exact words but what they amounted to was that I was only the son of a struggling cocky. Her daughter lived in a different world and she wouldn't think of allowing her to marry a poor man.

“Just as I was leaving the house a lot of that chattering, laughing crowd arrived. I went straight through them but the girl ran after me. ‘What's the matter, Bob?’ she asked. ‘Don't be silly about the other day — you know I didn't mean it!’ I just said good-bye. At the corner I looked back. ... She was still standing there alone, but I kept on going.”

“Good little man! Treat 'em rough!” A mischievous light gleamed in the veiled eyes opposite.

“Going back on the train I made up my mind to leave. I wanted to make money ... to make it quick ... and I knew I couldn't do it at home. Dad wasn't keen on me going, but I couldn't stay. I came back to Longreach, picked up a few horses, and started droving. They remembered Dad. He always had a good name. But there isn't much money in the

short trips, so I wrote to the Territory for a mob of cattle ... and got it.”

The raillery that had been mounting in Bill at the forlorn recital, faded suddenly. He sat up and peered at the man opposite with astonishment and disbelief written all over his face. “Mac! Did you say you were on your way to the Territory to lift a mob of *cattle*?”

“Yes!”

“*Cattle!* With this one-eyed, misbegotten collection of freaks!” Bill collapsed weakly against the pack-saddle at his back. “*You — poor — cow!* Go home while you have a chance. ... Marry a barmaid. ... Join the police force. ... Anything for a quiet life, but for the love of Mike don't insult a Territory bullock by showing it these horses!”

Mac eyed him doggedly “They're all right! They're not flash, but I've had them on the road with cattle.”

“Yes!” derisively. “A dozen bulls ... or a mob of milkers! Look here, Mac! Go back and stick to sheep; but I'll warn you now that no station manager would hand over a mob of cattle to a plant like yours. How many cattle are you getting?”

“Twelve hundred.”

“Even if your horses were good, you haven't half enough!”

“I'm going to get more up there.”

“Well, you're optimistic anyhow. But I'll tell you now that the only horses they'll sell at the price you want to pay are old crocks, useless things, or outlaws. And where are your men?”

Mac writhed under the merciless rain of questions that found every chink in his armour. “A couple left on the way up. I got two more in Boulia yesterday ... and they left too.”

Bill shook his head sorrowfully. “Mac, the Babes in the Wood have nothing on you! Most of the Territory mobs are on their way down. You'll be the last to leave. It has been a bad year on the river and what grass there is will be pretty well cleaned up before your mob reaches it.”

“Well, tell me where I can get men!”

“It wouldn't be a damned bit of good. You've got to learn first how to keep a man when you get him. You'll want decent stock-horses in the first place, a good cook, and the best tucker you can get.”

Mac shook his head sullenly. “I can't afford it! I want to make some money out of the trip.”

“How much money will you make if you find yourself left on your own to be cook, horsetailer, and everything else about the place to twelve hundred rushing bullocks? You're mad, man! Go back to Longreach and stick to sheep.”

Again the head shook stubbornly. “I'm going on with it!”

Bill stared moodily at the ground in front of him for a long time. Then he rose slowly to his feet and, still preoccupied, carefully saddled the big bay horse.

Mac emptied the billy, moving heavily around in an aimless sort of way.

“Mac!”

He turned to face Bill standing serious and thoughtful by the bay's shoulder.

“Your old man gave me a start when I knew less about sheep than you do about cattle, and it's for his sake that I'm saying this. ... Do you want me to help you out with this job?”

Mac looked long and earnestly at him. “Do you mean it?”

“I'll come in with my own horses and gear on condition that you let me buy you some decent stock-horses. I'll try and get you men and a cook between here and Camooweal, on condition that you supply the best tucker available for him to cook. I'm not trying to rob you — only to knock some common sense into that thick head of yours!”

Mac swallowed hard and nodded.

Bill swung smoothly to the saddle and turned for a final word. “Get your plant together and get out of this to a decent camp. There's a waterhole on a little creek five miles out there with good grass on it. Stop there for a day or two, or until I turn up. I'm going to see what I can do — not for your sake, but partly for your old man's sake and mostly for the sake of a better man than you and I and all of us could ever hope to be ... and be damned to you!”

Mac watched the receding dust-cloud till it finally disappeared in the big river timber, then he started to pack up with a new briskness. A flock of little green parrots dived into a tree overhead with dramatic suddenness, twittering and scolding. Across the waterhole, a minah answered cheekily back, and made some pertinent remarks on the morals of parrots in general. Mac looked up at the birds with a good-humoured smile. He had not been in a mood to notice them lately.

## Chapter XI

THE circle of coolabahs leaning toward one another across the little waterhole stood isolated — a dark green island set in a wide sea of thick, sunbleached Mitchellgrass. Away to the west the river timber hovered faintly in the mirage that farther north lifted a low belt of scattered trees and held it suspended between land and sky — a fairy island over a shimmering lake.

Mac shielded his eyes against the glare of the bleached grass and peered again to the north. The moving dot had disappeared in the mirage but he kept his eyes fixed on the spot till it showed again — a faint, almost indiscernible movement at the base of the dancing haze. It might be cattle coming in to water, but again, it might be Bill; he ought to be turning up soon. The second day was drawing on and Mac was getting restless and tired of sitting alone in the middle of an empty plain.

When next he looked there was no longer any doubt. The little mob travelled too fast and did not file along like cattle coming to water; they were horses all right — somewhere about a dozen — and the white shirts of two men riding behind glinted in the sunlight. Mac kicked the charred butts together on the fire and put the billy on to boil.

From the shade of a coolabah he watched their steady approach, heads raised and wary eyes searching the timber. Even at that range their apparent quality excited his admiration and a comparison with his own horses yielded reluctant admission to the truth of Bill's scathing remarks.

In the lead a beautiful jet-black horse with a small star on his forehead moved with an effortless rhythmic gait, his head high, mane and tail flowing out. Close behind came the bay horse Bill had ridden on their last meeting, then a beautifully-built brown mare with a richly dappled coat. They were on to him too quickly for him to notice more than the outstanding quality of perhaps half the mob, the sleek, shining coats, clean limbs, and signs of breeding — and the total absence of chestnuts among them. Mac commented on it, later on. Bill shrugged slightly and looked ahead with a twisted enigmatic smile on his lips. "I've had a set on chestnuts ever since one mucked up my dial. I don't mind riding them, but I never buy them."

Mac headed the packhorses while the mob splashed into the waterhole and buried their noses in the yellow water. Bill dismounted, deftly removed his saddle and bridle, and as his horse trotted down to the water

he took a packhorse from Mac. "Well, did you think I wasn't coming?" Without waiting for an answer he beckoned to his companion. "This is Percy, your new horsetailer — and his last boss is looking for me with a gun for taking Percy away from him."

Mac nodded a greeting to the new arrival and studied him covertly. A slight, wiry youth with dark regular features and a ready smile that disclosed even rows of flashing white teeth. He sat the big brown horse as though he had been born in the saddle, and wore broad, short-necked spurs hung low on his heels — cattleman fashion — a clean white shirt and white moleskins, and a red silk handkerchief knotted loosely round his neck added a vivid touch of colour to his appearance. The reins hung loosely from his slender, sensitive brown hands. Something about the hands held Mac's eye. He glanced from them to the vivid red handkerchief and back again to the hands as he unbuckled the surcingle and side-straps, pulled a swag to the ground and unhooked the pack-bags. "You can bring my horses in for a drink now, Percy, and put them all out together."

"Right oh!" The boy smiled with a flash of teeth and swung his horse into an easy canter. Mac peered after him over a pack-saddle. "Looks a good sort of a kid!"

Bill grunted and swung his pack-saddle off to the ground. "We're damned lucky to get him! He's a champion little horseman, a wonderful tracker, and you couldn't shift that smile off his face with a cold chisel!"

"A tracker ...?" Mac's thoughts went back to the slender brown fingers and small wrists. "I say, Bill, is he ...?"

Bill nodded confirmation. "Half-caste. ... But a good one!" He waited while Mac threw a handful of tea on the billy and stood it by the side of the fire. "He can ride two of my horses — that's what *I* think of him — and I'll keep three for myself. We'll use Night, the black horse, and Rodney, the big bay with the black points, as night-horses, and I'll warn you now not to fall asleep on them. If the cattle rush, they'll be off the mark with them, so look out or you'll be left behind. I bought the other half-dozen for you and you'll find them all right." He pointed to the little mob moving out in search of grass apart from his own horses. "They have all been on the road with cattle, in fact, I bought them from an old drover I know, so you needn't worry about them."

Mac ran his eye over the new purchases. Like his father, horses to him were only a means to an end, and he had little interest in them otherwise, but there was a workmanlike look about the six that appealed to him, and although they did not compare with Bill's aristocrats, they were distinctly better than his own. He rejoined Bill picking horse-shoes and tools out of a pack-bag. "No news of a cook, I suppose?"

"No. We'll have to do our own cooking for a while. I've wired to the chap that keeps the pub at Camooweal to try and get a man. We'd better

shoe a few of the new lot and get an early start in the morning.”

In the days that followed, as they pushed steadily up the river, the two men gradually bridged the intervening gap of the years since their last meeting and the old friendship was renewed on a stronger foundation. It took Bill some time to overcome the idea that Mac was no longer a kid in hand-me-downs. He was old beyond his years in some ways, the inherent and acquired qualities of stolid perseverance fitting naturally on his short, thickset frame, but on some subjects his reserve and lack of sophistication were those of a boy. He was quiet as ever, seldom venturing an opinion till he had thrashed out the pros and cons in his mind, and his slow speech had a maturity that contrasted with Bill's light drawling tones.

Bill had changed not only in features but in almost every way. Mac, riding a little way behind and listening to him yarning with Percy, found it difficult to connect this casual, easygoing horseman with the raw, goodlooking newchum of ten years ago. He wondered often to what extent the accident to Bill's face had affected his character. With the loss of the fine, sensitive features, a certain something had passed from his make-up. He had acquired a sophistication heightened by the drooping eyelid, the broken nose, and twisted smile that was more than superficial. His clear English diction had taken on an Australian inflexion, and the old alertness of bearing, although it still flashed out at times, was camouflaged under an easy, unhurried manner that was plainly modelled on Dinny. The reticence and reserve of his youth had been overcome; he would pull up and yabber and laugh with a blackfellow, have a yarn with a passing teamster, a drover or a bagman, and be unquestionably accepted as one of themselves.

But it was as a horseman that he excelled. From a station they passed through they bought a couple of horses, and all hands lined the stockyard rails when Bill rode them. The prices asked seemed ridiculously cheap to Mac but he felt dubious about his bargains when he watched them trying to turn Catherine-wheels with Bill in the saddle. But all other feelings rapidly gave way to sheer admiration. From the moment Bill entered the yard, his quiet confident handling of the horse, the clean swift movement that placed him in the saddle, and his effortless poise as the horse bucked, whirled and tried all the tricks in his repertoire to dislodge the impassive figure on his back, stamped him as a finished horseman. He reminded the watcher of Dinny, and Mac knew that the master would be more than satisfied with his pupil.

Percy, the cheerful little horsetailer, worshipped Bill, and Mac early sensed the reason why the boy had left a comfortable station job to follow him, and also that wherever Bill went Percy would follow regardless of any consideration. That, and the growing realization of the indispensibility of Bill were affording Mac food for serious thought. Bill

owned the pick of the horses and saddlery; he was a good cattleman and knew the river — that long winding track that stages the annual pilgrimages of the big mobs from the Territory. Each day brought to Mac further proof of the hole he would have been in without Bill — of the hopeless proposition that would have faced him but for their chance meeting. The summer rains had been light, the river frontage was almost bare of grass, and the permanent waterholes few and far between.

Mac cantered ahead with Bill one morning, leaving Percy to follow with the horses. The air was fresh and cool, and laden with that indefinable, elusive tang — a whiff of gum-leaves, the dry scent of spinifex, the heavy odour of cattle and of old cattle-camps, all fused in dry baking sunlight and served with the cool dewy breath of dawn. The world held a spaciousness untrammelled by fences or hills. In to the left, the tall river coolabahs thrust gaunt grey limbs skywards and snow-white clouds of screeching corellas wheeled and eddied over and among them. The vast brown floor stretched dusty and bare on either side and away ahead to the clear, morning mirage of trees in the northern sky. Far out to the east the long lines of bush-cattle were coming in to water. Columns of dust marked their distant progress, and in the crystal clarity of the morning air, the colours of the cattle stood out as distinctly as though they were seen through a powerful telescope.

When they dropped from a canter to a long swinging walk, Mac rode in silence for a time, then he cleared his throat somewhat nervously. "I've just been thinking, Bill ..."

The man at his side glanced from under the drooping eyelid. "Is that what's given you the headache for the last day or two? Well, out with it!"

Mac turned in the saddle to face him squarely. "It's just this. You're supplying half of the plant and most of the experience, so how about you and I working the trip in partnership?"

Bill's eyebrows went up. "What's wrong with the way we're working now?"

"A partnership would be only a fair thing and I would rather have it."

"But what about the get-rich-quick scheme and the girl waiting down below?"

Mac's jaw set doggedly. "I mean it Bill!"

They rode in silence for a while then Bill nodded casually. "Right oh, Mac! I'll give it a fly! But remember. No one else touches my special horses, and I'll never insult them by droving sheep. Hallo!" He broke off, gazing ahead. "Looks like a traveller coming this way. .... Packhorse and a spare. Wonder does he want a job?"

As they drew closer, Bill's eyes focused on the horses. "I'll bet he's a racehorse crank! That bay horse is a galloper and the one he's riding isn't too slow either." Mac was more interested in the horseman, a slight, wiry figure in the mid-twenties with sharp features and quick brown eyes. He

pulled up with the usual greeting. "G'day! Going far?"

"Territory!"

"Cattle?"

Bill nodded assent, watching the keen eyes of the stranger appraising his horse.

"Good sort of a horse, that!"

"He's not bad!"

"I'll race you for a fiver! Five furlongs or half a mile."

Bill shook his head with a smile. "He's got a lot of work ahead of him. How's the grass and water up the track?"

"Not much good! Tell you what, I'll race you to that bloodwood for a quid!"

Bill laughed quietly. "Wait till we deliver this mob, and I'll race you to Sydney for your cheque, if you like. Going far?"

"Don't know yet! I've been working up here since I got back from the war, but lately I've been getting sort of cranky — finding meself worrying whether a waterhole will last out, getting wild when I see another fellow riding my hacks. ... Little things like that. So it looked to me like I was getting married to the job and time I moved on. I got me cheque and pulled out this morning." He broke off as the plant drew level to run a quick eye over the horses and their brands. "Bit of a mixed lot there! What do you want for the black horse?"

"Ever hear of a drover selling his best night-horse before a trip?"

"You win, mate! Oh well, I'll push on."

"We're looking for a cook — d'you know of anyone?"

The traveller considered for a moment. "The Desolated Cokernut went up to Camooweal a couple of weeks back to jump his roll across the bar."

Bill pricked up his ears. "Think he's cleaned out by now?"

"Heard he was back at Urandangie! Damned good cook!"

"I know he is! Does he still get his words mixed up?" Bill picked up his reins and smiled inwardly at Mac fidgeting alongside at his apparent omission. He nodded casually to the traveller when an afterthought seemed to occur to him. "We're a man short. How about coming along?"

The traveller looked long and intently to the south. Then he contemplated his two horses. He switched to a survey of Bill's bay horse, glanced at Mac's, and quickly glanced away. Then he raised his stockwhip arm, wheeled his horses back on the track and fell in with Bill and Mac. "I'll come back and see how the Cokernut's doing! Dick West, they call me."

The city of Urandangie came to life on their arrival next day. A mob of goats scurried behind the two cottages which comprised the metropolis, and an old dog barked wheezily. A disconsolate figure seated in the shade of a pepper-tree surveyed them from red-rimmed eyes. He nodded

briefly to West, glanced at Mac, and looked searchingly at Bill. Then he croaked, "Where's Dinny?"

"Dead! Killed at the war. Are you coming with us, Tim?" He paused to let the words sink in, then added, "It's a packhorse plant, and a fifteen-week job."

The blotched face twitched slightly and the man rose unsteadily to his feet. "I'll get me swag." His trembling hand fumbled futilely at a pocket. "Will you get me a bottle of bifurcated magnesia, Bill? It's me indigestion!"

The augmented camp rode northward. On their left hand ran the netting fence that crossed half a continent in one straight span; a man could vault from Queensland to the Northern Territory with ease, reversing and repeating the process till the geographical novelty of it wore off.

The end of a journey was in sight, the beginning of another loomed closer.

## Chapter XII

THE big mob straddled the open downs like a huge hourglass with stockmen, black and white, hovering round the edges, punching the cattle back here or accelerating there. The leaders spread out through the dry, knee-high Mitchell-grass — reds and whites and roans trumpeting their displeasure at the humiliation imposed on them by the curtailment of their liberty. Back where the mob narrowed to a waist, a moving barrier of horsemen regulated the flow of cattle past the counters, and as the front mob grew and spread across the downs, the back mob contracted like the last dwindling grains of sand awaiting their turn in the upper glass.

They were through! The remaining handful swept past in a bunch to join their mates. A big bearded horseman glanced interrogatively at the rider opposite.

“Fifty-two?”

“Correct!” The bearded man turned to the stock-man checking the knots in a greenhide lace. “Ten ... eleven ... *twelve!*”

“Twelve hundred and fifty-two! That suit you, Bill?”

“Right, Harry!” Bill and Mac closed on the bearded head stockman while half a dozen aboriginal musterers chattered and laughed in high-pitched tones in the background at the prospect of a spell, now that the mob was mustered and delivered.

“Well, we’ll get back.” The head stockman held out a hand. “So long ... and good luck!”

The two camps drew apart, the station men and the blacks cantering off to the north while the drovers started the mob on its long walk south. Mac drew a long deep breath and there was an undercurrent of youthful excitement in the glance he threw at Bill. “Well, we’re off!” He felt a new sense of importance under his stolid demeanour. This was the biggest mob of cattle Mac had ever handled and he looked with pride along the sea of sleek backs and horns. Twelve hundred and fifty-two bullocks — eight hundred miles. He worked out in his head what the droving cheque should be and his eyes gleamed at the thought of it — then sobered suddenly. He was a partner now — he had forgotten to halve it!

Strangely enough, Bill’s thoughts worked along more practical lines; of the two, he was usually the more prone to flights of fancy and sudden

ideas. They were bound to lose a fair number, Bill was thinking, the bullocks would get through all right but a lot of those heifers would crack up on a bad track. Yes, he would have to pick up a few more, but he would have to do it quietly. Mac had queer old-fashioned ideas about some things.

Next morning they moved off camp at piccaninny daylight after a restless night, the cattle feeding steadily over the downs with the dark green line of the river timber a mile to their right. Beyond that again, the desert scrub stretched its sombre olive foliage to the horizon.

Bill reined the bay horse alongside his partner. "Mac, I think we lost a few last night!"

"How?" A worried look spread over the stolid features.

"Easiest thing in the world to cut off a few, the way they walked about all night. If you and Tom will keep them moving ..." Tom was the latest member of the camp, a middle-aged taciturn individual — "... Dick and I will go out through the scrub and have a look round."

Mac nodded hesitantly and rode on with a slightly puzzled expression. He trusted Bill — to a point — but some of his intuitions were built on rather airy foundations.

The sun was high overhead when the two men returned driving a mob of about fifty cattle which they merged in the main mob, then rode their sweating horses into the waterhole, stooping from the saddle to scoop up pints of water which they gulped thirstily. As Bill set his quart-pot on the fire, Mac looked up with wrinkled brows. "We didn't lose that many, Bill!"

"Oh well, it's best to be on the safe side."

Mac opened his mouth to say something then changed his mind, but the vague, troublesome feeling remained.

They camped that night on a small plain bounded by dense gidgee scrub, and the cattle, still resentful at being handled, coerced, and torn from home, refused to approach the camp or to settle down. The flicker of the camp-fire was eventually masked with a screen of green boughs, and young Percy rode out to take the first watch, with Tim, the cook, to lend him a hand till the cattle settled down. Bill put his saddle on the spare night-horse and lingered by the fire for a final word with Mac before turning in.

A half-moon rode in the clear starry sky, its wan radiance swamped by the flickering, red glow of the fire. The cattle appeared to be steadying down. They sounded quieter, and over the night-air came the cook's monotonous chanting of a lugubrious bush ballad mingling with young Percy's rendering of a music-hall song as picked up from a gramophone. At the end of his song Percy's thin boyish voice was silent for a while then, cautiously at first, but gaining in strength, it rose again in the high-pitched rhythmic chant of a corroboree. Bill grinned at the boy's lapse to

the aborigine strain in him as he sat on his blankets debating whether it would be wise to undress. The night was warm without a breath of wind, and he was taking the last watch with Tom. Oh, damn it, he would chance it! He placed his boots and stockwhip where he could lay a hand instinctively on them, rolled himself in a blanket, and was asleep in ten seconds.

Mac woke at the soft thudding of the approaching horse's hoofs and shook the sleep from his eyes. He drank a pint of hot coffee from the billy at the fire and mounted the night-horse, while the cook lit his charred old pipe with a glowing coal before rolling into his blankets. Dick West, yawning prodigiously, lounged over to the fire more from force of habit than need of warmth, then followed Mac on the spare night-horse.

Mac crooned his way out to the dim bulk of the mob. His musical repertoire was limited and, under his rendering, one tune sounded much like another. He could never remember the words, either, but bullocks are an uncritical audience and not at all fussy about little things like that. He rode round to intercept Percy who was beefing out "Clementine" from the back of the mob. The boy pulled up as they came abreast and his teeth flashed a smile in the moonlight.

"All right, Percy?"

"Yes, they're all right! Dick coming out?"

"You'll pass him on the way in."

"'Night, Mac!"

The boy's song faded away toward the camp and shortly afterwards, the strains of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" in its full, uncensored A.I.F. version heralded the advent of Dick.

Mac yawned sleepily. Three hours and forty minutes to put in before he could crawl under the blankets again! The horse moved steadily round on its patrol and his formless monotone took its time from the muffled beats of the hoofs. If this were only a mob of sheep, he reflected sadly, they would be safe inside the break now and he would be sound asleep instead of riding round and round a lot of restless cattle. Still, there was more money in this. His jaw tightened determinedly; his own feelings and comfort would receive scant consideration where they interfered with the end he had in view.

He glanced idly over the mob. Most of them were lying down and those still on their feet stood like statues in the waning light of the moon. A heifer dodged through the mob with two or three steers trotting in pursuit, and Mac muttered wrathfully under his breath. On the opposite side of the mob a song broke off suddenly, and Dick's voice rose on an anxious note. "Whoa, bullicks! Whoa, there! Whoa-back, you wandering sods! Who-o-up!"

Mac's horse increased its pace a shade and the rider peered anxiously

ahead. One side of the mob appeared to be on its feet and moving restlessly about. He joined Dick driving back a projecting wing that had started to stray away from the mob, and between them they settled them down again.

“Damned fine horse this!” said Dick. “Wouldn't mind owning him myself. Wonder what Bill paid for him?”

“Don't know, Dick. *Whoa back there, bullock!*”

“Anyway, if they do rush, a man has a chance to wheel 'em before they hit the coast with a decent horse like this!”

Mac left him to steady the restless side and continued his patrol. When he came back, Dick was still addressing the mob with a steady stream of cheerful vituperation. “They're about as hard to settle as the mob we took down from Winardo last year. They rushed every night for damn near six weeks!”

“Did you lose many?”

“Too flamin' right, we did! Left a trail of broken horns all down the Georgina, an' the cook pulled out at Urandangie because the trees were getting scarce an' he wasn't going to get flattened out by no rushing bullocks, he wasn't! Used to pick an easy tree to climb, an' slep' under it every night. ... Soon's the mob went he was up that tree like a goanna in his sleep. That was the trip the pommy bloke got killed.”

“What happened to him?”

“Oh, he reckoned the mob wouldn't rush no more. They were all lying down and him taking it easy with his leg across the pommel of the saddle. Well, they went ... an' so did the night-horse. ... And they picked up what was left of the pommy in the morning.”

They separated again and Mac crooned his way thoughtfully round the mob. Save for an odd beast weaving restlessly about, the cattle lay peacefully asleep. The red half-moon hung low on the horizon and its waning light had almost surrendered to the starlight. It must be near midnight; the biggest part of their watch still lay ahead of them, and he felt as tired as if he hadn't slept for a week.

The moon disappeared and for a time the earth was shrouded in dark mystery and filled with strange shapes that loomed up but failed to materialize. A change came over the mob — a restlessness that brought them slowly to their feet. They walked about, stalked calmly and silently off the camp with a train of eager followers till the two men were forced to canter back and forward nipping the sorties in the bud till at length the restlessness departed and the cattle sank to earth again with deep placid *whoofs*.

Peace reigned over the sleeping mob. Only Mac's monotonous drone, and “Paddy McGinty's Goat” from Dick insulted the stillness of the night.

Mac, glimmering through sleep-heavy eyelids over the quiet scene,

clutched suddenly and wildly at the reins as the horse shot forward. A roaring thunder filled his ears. He was galloping madly through the night alongside a close-packed, hurtling stampede. The transition from perfect peace to pandemonium had been so sudden, so incredibly startling, that he was still unaware of everything but the menacing cataract of cattle thundering at his side, and his instinctive clinging to the saddle.

He jammed his hat down over his eyes, crouched down on the galloping horse, and yelled wildly against the thunder of hoofs and fierce clash of horns. He must wheel them, check the headlong rush. "*Whoa, bullocks, who-ooo!*"

A sudden outbreak of crackling and crashing. Dark formless shapes flew at him out of the dark. They were in the scrub ... gidgee ... hard, unyielding as cast iron. He ducked low on the horse's neck with a hint of hysteria in his shouts.

"*Whoa — bullocks, whoa there!*"

The quick rhythm of the muscles under the saddle suddenly stopped, and the unseen earth yawned sickeningly below them — an awful sensation of falling ... falling. ... A cold sweat broke out on him. His heart was in his throat. Visions of going down under that pounding avalanche flashed before his agonized senses ... trampled flat ... unrecognizable. A muffled anguished bellow burst out and was suddenly stifled in the ominous thunder of hoofs.

Relief! They were galloping again, up a quick incline, through splintering timber, and the gully was left behind in the inky blackness. Was this the lead? He yelled fiercely at the leaders ... again and again. They gave ground, swerving slowly, and the horse veered with them. A shout ahead! "*Whoa there, you bastards! Whoa!*" And the fierce *bang-bang-bang* of a stockwhip wielded with savage intent. Dick must be right in front of the mob — or was this a wing that had shot out behind him? They were steadying, ringing in the dark in a tight, choking maelstrom, churning up a dense cloud of dust that hung like a thick fog.

They stood off the milling mob, yelling at the top of their lungs, ready to dash out at the first offshoot of the tightly packed mass. From somewhere — he knew not where — came the fierce banging of a distant whip and Bill's wild yell. The mob must have split!

The ringing mob expanded, the pace eased, the thunder of hoofs died down, and suddenly the thick, dust-laden night was filled with the bellowing of fear-conscious cattle. The two men redoubled their efforts, imposing a physical, palpable antidote on the mental reaction of the stampede. They battled to hold the demoralized mob together, with whips rising and falling like flails and long-drawn shouts of "*Whoa, bullocks, Whoaa! Whoa back there!*" beating down the continuous bellowing.

A figure loomed out of the dust and yelled, "That you, Mac? How

many have we got?"

Above the din he shouted back. "Don't know, Dick! How far are we off camp?"

"Couldn't say! Over a mile ... maybe two. Christ, this horse can gallop!"

He plunged back to the fray, his loud, triumphant, laughing shout echoing above the turmoil. Even the excitement of the rush could not submerge his ruling passion. Progress was slow and difficult. The cattle stubbornly refused to be driven back toward the camp and little rushes kept swirling back, reclaiming in a few seconds the advance gained in minutes. Mac hailed the man on his left. "Dick!"

"Hallo!"

"It's no use killing the horses to flog them back. We'll try and hold them here till morning! Anyhow, Bill's out there with another mob and we can't get help till daylight!"

A dark wall of gidgee enclosed the clearing on every side. They rode wide of the mob, allowing them to expand and settle, but they positively refused to camp. All night long the cattle walked restlessly about, thrusting defiantly out in ones and twos, and sometimes a little mob would surge out with sullen determination and have to be flogged back.

Mac was dropping with sheer fatigue but the cattle allowed no respite, and ever-present at the back of his mind was the dread of what the morning might reveal. How many bullocks had gone down under the stampede when that gully yawned suddenly underfoot? He felt sick at the recollection of his own sensations in that ghastly second as they dropped through space. The tales he had heard of horses stumbling, riders thrown in front of the maddened horde! A man wouldn't have a chance in the world in that inferno. The sheer miracle of his survival prompted an admiration that amounted almost to reverence for the horse that carried him. He leaned silently forward and pressed a palm on the dank warm neck.

The dark hours dragged slowly on. Stars rose and stars set, constellations climbed the heavens and the Milky Way leaned its bow toward the horizon. All night long they rode ceaselessly round the cattle, Mac forcing a tuneless song with meaningless words from a dry parched throat and marvelling dully at the undaunted repertoire of his mate. Occasionally the faint echo of a shout reached them. Toward morning, the shouts and the crack of a whip drew nearer and they answered in return.

The cattle turned to stare suspiciously toward the disturbance. A bullock bellowed an inquiry — a long-drawn bellow answered it. Then as the eastern stars began to fade, a long string of cattle crashed through the timber to join them, and out of their dust rode an apparition on a black horse — Bill, clad only in boots and shirt, with one side of his face

caked with dried blood. He nodded wearily at the two men. "Are you all right?"

Mac peered at him. "Hurt yourself, Bill?"

"No, I'm all right. Have we got them all?" He stood in the stirrups and surveyed the mob in the thin light. "Hard to say, yet. Can you two hang on for a bit? I'll send Tom down to relieve one of you as soon as Percy gets the horses."

Mac struggled hard against the fatigue that dragged at him. "I'll stop for a while. Hadn't we better count them?"

"Percy and I will canter round the tracks first. *Hooroo!*"

In spite of his weariness, the sight of Bill cantering back to the timber with his shirt flapping out behind, and his bare white legs, forced a tired grin to Mac's lips. The light climbed slowly in the eastern sky. He rode on to the mob, started them into action, then leaned forward on his horse's neck watching them feeding their way off camp.

## Chapter XIII

DAY after day and week after week, the mob, losing its bloom and its sleek curves, kept steadily on its way south and east. As they progressed, the grass became shorter and scarcer, until even the dry woody tufts of the Mitchell-grass disappeared and left the wide frontage a bare forlorn waste, scarred by dry desolate gullies dotted with acacia and spidery lignum bushes.

The cattle took on a tucked-up, hunted look; their hip-bones poked sharply out under their dull hides and the weaker beasts gravitated to the tail of the mob and stayed there, barely dragging themselves along. The horses showed signs of the hard times in their appearance and in increasing lassitude. Every day the cook made an extra damper, and when Percy brought the horses in at daylight Bill walked out to meet them; his mounts would press eagerly forward, crowding round him while he broke up the damper and fed it to them, and then they followed him back into the camp for more.

Dick and Tom watched the performance sceptically at first, then one day, Dick surreptitiously caught his racehorse and spent five minutes teaching him to chew a crust. Mac raised objections to what he regarded as waste of good tucker and an unnecessary piling up of expense. In reply, Bill bought an extra bag of flour at Boulia. "Wait till your horses knock up and you'll know all about waste!"

Mac faced Boulia with misgivings about the men, and he unburdened his fears to his partner.

"Well, *I* won't get shickered!" Bill replied. "We'll have to let the others in to get a few things from the store, and none of them are wowsers, thank God, but I don't think they'll get shot or leave us. The Cokernut might ... he's so dry, his skin's cracking. ... But we'll have to chance it. He's a good old bloke!"

Mac agreed cordially with the last statement. As a cook, Tim put up with the disadvantages and short-comings of a packhorse plant without a murmur, and the camp fared extremely well at his hands. The night before they reached Boulia he handed Bill a grimy piece of paper. "That's the stores we'll want. Don't fergit the desecrated cokernut and another bottle of bifurcated magnesia. Me guts ain't the best, yet!" Bill smothered a grin and bent over the almost illegible list.

Next day the plant pulled up in front of the store. Pack-bags were

replenished, bags of flour and sugar strapped on top, and the cavalcade jingled on. As they passed the pub, the cook sat erect on his horse looking neither right nor left. Bill, riding behind, made no comment but mentally put down a bottle of rum to Tim's credit at the end of the trip.

They had seen the last of the Georgina with its deep, winding channels overhung with lofty coolabahs, and its dusty cattle-camps littered with the dried dung of tens of thousands of bullocks whose impending fate was almost as tragic as that of the river. The west is a hard remorseless land — a country of frustrated creeks that sometimes run to fill a waterhole or two before they peter miserably out in some dry rapacious swamp. It tempts the river from the distant Territory tableland with promises of tributaries — that often fail to reach the mother stream, beckons it on for hundreds of miles past a thirsty sterile land, endows it with deep blue waterholes where the baramundi lurks, then heartlessly turns it this way and that, diffuses its gathering force into numberless channels and finally confronts it with a barren waste — leaves it to end ingloriously in the dead heart of the continent. A tragic river that never reaches the sea.

Boulia met them with bad news of the track ahead, and as they pushed on, they found that the news had not been exaggerated. Long dry waterless stages across open plains were followed by day after day without the sight of a blade of grass. The cattle refused to camp at nights. They would move ceaselessly about, lowing in quiet, hopeless tones. Horses plodded along with tucked up flanks and staring ribs. Bill's horses alone showed any life or spirit; he had doubled their ration of damper and they were doing most of the work. Two of Mac's original horses finally knocked up and had to be abandoned. The others could barely keep up with the mob.

They hit Diamantina Gates and headed up the Mayne through stony spinifex hills and a welter of river channels tangled with stunted gidgee. Cold nights added to the general misery, and even the men went silently about their work, infected with the prevailing spirit of depression.

Then the rain caught them. One night as they camped between an arc of rocky hills and the river channels, a terrific thunder-storm rolled up. Since the cattle had ceased rushing at nights, they had reverted to single watches. When Mac relieved Dick West, ominous rumblings and flashes lit the heavy sky, and the cattle moaned restlessly. Between the flashes the darkness was almost palpable, and Mac had to trust implicitly to the horse. The storm drew closer, and the thunder took on an ugly menacing note, rumbling heavily through the hills till the ground trembled. The lightning was ceaseless and terrifying. It lit the quartz hills in vivid flame, enveloped the cattle in blinding flashes and zigzagged across their horns.

As the pandemonium reached its fiendish climax, the storm broke and

the rain descended in a solid sheet. Bill rode out to help quieten the frantic cattle. Their restlessness developed into a general surging movement — now this way, now that — and the rain transformed the ground into a quagmire. They broke with a roar. The two men threw themselves at the lead and headed them to find the cattle splitting and scattering in little mobs all round them.

Bill urged his tiring horse to where Mac vainly tried to block an advancing mob. “Let 'em go, Mac!” he yelled against the storm.

His partner stared, nonplussed, then ranged alongside him. “But we ... we'll lose them!”

“We'll lose them in any case! Let them go in a mob!” He rode back and drove the shivering remnant in the wake of the mob disappearing into the channels. Water streamed from the hills and lay on the flat in sheets. They piled logs on the fire, and built an earthen wall round it to stop the rushing water from putting it out. Then they congregated round the blaze — four taciturn men and the cook, with the rain coursing down their spines and overflowing their sopping, muddy boots. Percy was the only one who slept that night. With the inherited wisdom of his mother's race he had spread his blankets on a high-piled mound of boughs and spinifex, and covered himself with a tarpaulin. He woke at daylight, surrounded by water but rested and refreshed, and diplomatically veiled his cheerful grin from the disconsolate group round the fire.

It rained for two days, and the men sat moodily in camp, marooned in a bog with neither sight nor sound of their cattle. On the third day they ventured out with difficulty. The channels were beginning to run and it was imperative that the cattle be recovered before the river came down and cut them off. They penetrated the tangled maze of the channels, circling outside the tracks, turning in every scattered lot of cattle as they went, and Mac mounted on a bay pack-mare, one of his original string, brought up the rear, picking up the concentrating herd.

The mare was dull and lifeless and could barely drag her feet out of the sucking mud. In a narrow, steep banked channel with six inches of water trickling down it, she finally balked and stubbornly refused to face the bank. The cattle were straying away to the flank and Mac, in desperation, dug the spurs in and drove her at it. She reared ... her weak hind legs slipped from under her, and she fell back on her side with the rider pinned underneath the saddle.

Mac was not hurt by the fall but the mare's feet were up the bank, and all her weight bore down on his imprisoned thigh. She struggled feebly and a new fear seized him that she might roll over and crush him. But the mare seemed too listless to do anything but lie supine. His leg was feeling numb, so was the arm that propped his shoulders out of the water, and the realization of another source of danger forced itself on him — the water was rising rapidly. At this rate, it would not be long before the

mare would be forced to a final effort — which might end finally for him — or alternatively, the swelling stream must soon submerge him. Either way looked hopeless.

He shouted at the top of his voice but the narrow banks threw the sound back at him. He tried to drag his leg from under the mare but only succeeded in slipping deeper into the stream — with the mare still on him. The crashing of a heavy body through the gidgee gave him hope and he shouted again. A bullock burst through the screen, slithered into the channel and stopped, gazing stupidly at the prostrate man. Then with a frightened snort it plunged up the bank and out of sight.

He had to struggle hard to keep his shoulders above the yellow flood. He was too numb and powerless to make another attempt to release his leg. Queer, fantastic thoughts kept flitting through his head. Why was he lying here waiting for death when he might be working comfortably at home? A vision of a high-spirited, wilful girl against a background of supercilious youths and laughing girls suggested an answer, but he stubbornly refused to admit it. It was his own fault. He had wanted to make money ... a lot of money in the shortest possible time. But what good would all the money in the world be to him in a few minutes when he could no longer keep his head above the rising water! The chilly stream laid an icy finger on his bare neck. He summoned all his strength and screamed.

The crack of a whip sounded close at hand. He yelled again, and after what seemed an age came a questing “Hallo there!”

“*Here!*” he screamed. “Here! Quick!”

A horse slithered down the steep bank, the rider glanced sharply downstream, then he turned and stared unbelievably a second. “*Christ!*” His horse bounded forward and the man flew from the saddle to land feet first in the water with a splash. “Dick!” he yelled. “Hi! Dick!”

At the answering shout Bill stooped and slipped an arm under Mac's shoulders. The mare was lifting her head to keep it clear of the water and the situation looked too difficult for one man to tackle on his own. Then a horseman appeared up the bank, gave one swift look, and shot off his horse.

Mac looked down from the bank where they had laid him, and where they were lighting a fire, to his mudslathered mare standing abjectly below. Then he turned his head slowly and painfully toward Bill. “I think I'll stick to sheep after this,” he said.

It was an irony of fate that they should suffer all the discomforts of the rain and reap none of its benefits. When they turned south from the Mayne they faced a stretch of bare scrubland and dry grass where no rain had fallen. Two long dry stages faced the weak, dispirited cattle — over a hundred miles with only one doubtful waterhole on it.

They got through. They faced other difficulties and survived, but on

every camp they left a broken remnant that had once been a sleek, spirited steer or heifer; each day, another and yet another beast fell out and was left behind.

Then one morning Bill rode ahead across red sandhills where camels wandered morosely, and found a stock-camp on the bank of a broad lagoon where squadrons of black and white pelicans sailed and manoeuvred in their hundreds. He returned to the cattle with a return of the old alertness in his bearing. "They're coming to take delivery in the morning!"

And there was no possible doubt about the sincerity of the heartfelt chorus of "Thank God for that!"

They rested themselves and their weary horses by the Pelican Lagoon for a full week before they made for the nearest town. It consisted of half a dozen houses in various states of disrepair — and a pub. And there, with the exception of Mac and Percy, they got gloriously drunk.

## Chapter XIV

THE atmosphere inside the court-house was reminiscent of the cookery-book instructions to “bake in a moderate oven.” The crowd that packed the benches had long since discarded coats and collars — such as wore them — and a general feeling of sympathy went out to the president and officials of the Land Court up on the platform, whose professional decorum still outweighed considerations of personal comfort.

Half the population of Longreach seemed to be present. Those who could not get inside, clustered round doors and windows or, while the uninteresting process of checking the applicants in the land ballot was in progress, drifted across to the pub to discuss their chances over a beer.

The last tray of numbered marbles poured into the ballot box. A stout, elderly man was beckoned forward and the clerk handed him a wand with wire prongs at one end, after exhibiting it to the crowd with the flourishes and gestures of a conjurer inviting the audience to see for themselves that there is nothing up his sleeve except a rabbit, a few billiard-balls, and the ace of diamonds. The hum of conversation dwindled ... died to an oppressive silence, tense with expectancy. A panel in the ballot-box was slipped open and the fat man inserted the business end of the wand. He withdrew it slowly and the audience craned forward in their seats, stared hard, then sat back with gasps of disgust. The prongs were empty.

A hoarse adjuring whisper floated from the platform. “*Harder, man!*” And the fat man with the injured expression of the conjurer who has failed to produce the rabbit from the top-hat, set his heavy jaw and jabbed the stick fiercely into the box. It emerged with a wooden marble in the prongs and the conjurer, smiling smugly, handed the fateful wand to the president who peered hard at the number through his spectacles.

He stood up in the midst of an expectant hush, cleared his throat, and declared in momentous tones that portion 2, parish of Towoonan, 16,756 acres, had been drawn by number eighty-seven. There was a sudden scuffling and rustling of papers to identify the number and the crowd pressed closer, stemming a flood of excited comment with apparent effort. A shirt-sleeved land agent in the front row sat up with added importance and a satisfied smile, and the clerk passed a document to the president.

Heads craned through windows and doorways. The president cleared his throat again. "Number eighty-seven. The successful applicants are MacAndrew and Muir, Longreach!"

The spate of comment broke out in an excited torrent and everyone made for the doorway at once. A big red-faced man panted in from the street. "Who won? Who won?"

"MacAndrew and Muir!"

"Who? The drovers?"

"Yes!"

He clutched the sleeve of a tall, thin man. "Tom! D'you know where they are? I want to get hold of them quick!"

The thin man reflected. "Mac ought to be up about Muttaborra with a mob of sheep, and Bill's due to deliver his cattle out the other side of Corona, day after to-morrow. What d'you want 'em for?"

"Agistment! I'll give 'em sixty pounds a month!"

The agent led him quickly down the street. This was business.

The news penetrated to a café down town, and the blonde behind the counter withdrew unobtrusively through the green curtains. A calculating look crept into her pale blue eyes, then she smiled enigmatically at her reflection in the mirror and proceeded to smack at her heavy features with an overloaded powder-puff. "So Bill had a selection now! Good! That should bring him back to town soon. She must keep her evenings free for the next week. And she would have to get in ahead of that skinny barmaid at the Commercial. Blast her!"

At that moment a slim brunette with just a little too much colour on her cheeks and a glint of suppressed excitement in her sophisticated eyes had deserted the bar for the phone in the hotel office. She bit her lip with vexation and the pointed toe of her shoe tapped impatiently on the floor till a gruff voice barked in the receiver at her ear. "Not there yet, is he? Oh, that's bad! Will you try and get hold of him. It's very important ... and tell him to ring the Commercial and ask for me ... for me, Mr Smith. ... It's Florrie speaking. ... Aw, nothing of the kind! ... You're a nawful man! 'Bye, Mr Smith!"

Mac, heading up the Landsborough with five thousand wethers, idly watched the pillar of dust curling up behind the approaching car, then as it swung off the road and bumped through the grass toward the mob, he rode to meet it. The driver, a lean, bronzed man in shirt-sleeves, hailed him above the rattle of the car. "Good day, Mac! A lot of telegrams for you!"

The furrows gathered on Mac's brow and he set his lips, prepared for bad news. Instead, the driver thrust a brown hand at him. "Congratulations!"

Mac accepted the firm grip with a puzzled expression. What had he done to be congratulated? He never bought lottery tickets — refused

even to invest in a raffle, and had all his life shut his ears to the spruiker's argument, "If you don't speculate, you won't accumulate!" He accepted the half-dozen telegrams with the nearest thing to a poker-face he could muster.

He ripped them open, and as he read, his mystification increased and refused to remain hidden. He examined the addresses again. MacAndrew. ... That was his name ... and the address was near enough.

The driver laughed up at him. "Well ... are you going to shout?"

"But what's it all about? These wires are from agents and people with offers for agistment. What's that got to do with me?"

The bronzed man leaned back in the seat and laughed heartily. "Haven't you heard you drew a block yesterday?"

"Drew a block! Me? But ..." he stared perplexedly at the other. "*I never applied for one!*"

"*Wh-at!*" The man stared back in complete amazement. "You must have! I got it over the phone last night. MacAndrew and Muir!"

A light broke suddenly on Mac. Was this another of Bill's mad schemes! He had never even hinted at applying for a selection, but if he had ... if they had actually drawn one! A rosy light flooded his incoherent thoughts. Here were people offering him money ... big money! His heart leapt at the prospect and he turned to the man in the car. "Will you send a wire to my partner. I want to get him on the phone."

It was late in the evening before the call came through. Over a couple of hundred miles of wire a faint distant voice buzzed at his ear. "Hallo! Who's that? That you, Mac? ... Heard the news? Not bad, is it? We drew the homestead block ... sixteen thousand acres. Well grassed and lashings of water! Have you had any offers for agistment? What's your best? ... Eh ... what's that? Eighty pounds a month? How many months? I've got a better one! MacCulloch rang me up ... he offered eighty pounds a month for six months and he'll complete the fencing for us. That suit you? Right! I'll fix it! What? What d'you say? ... Oh ... didn't I tell you? ... I put in an application for the block last month. Mine? ... Not on your life! ... We're partners, lad ... for better or worse!"

It was not until many months later that Bill entered his new property. As the weary horses topped a rise, he halted his mare with an imperceptible gesture and looked across a fold in the downs at the old rambling homestead with the big square dam on the eastern side and the two gently sloping hills rising from the belt of timber behind. Dick West reined his horse alongside, and presently the pair were joined by Percy, grown to slim manhood. Then with a long-drawn "Whoa!" the wagonette drew up and from the box the Desolated Cokernut blinked critically at the prospect.

"She looks all right!" Bill's casual remark was delivered with the nonchalant air of a millionaire tossing a thousand-dollar bet on a roulette

number.

Dick nodded appreciatively. "I like the look of that flat th'other side of the dam."

"What do you like about it?"

"I reckon there's room for a mile track there ..."

Bill eyed him severely. "Do you ever think of anything but racing the guts out of horses?"

" 'Course I do! I like a drink once in a while, an' if there's any good sorts about ..."

Bill interrupted him and turned to the horsetailer. "What about you, Percy?"

"Looks like a good horse-paddock. ... Not much grass in it, though!"

"No, I suppose Mac's been running his blasted sheep in it!"

"And there's a good round yard ..."

Bill nodded and looked challengingly at the man on the box. "What have you got to say about it, Tim?"

"Wait till I've had a look at the kitchen," returned that individual.

"Oh! Going to settle down, are you?"

"I've had enough of wearing the seat of me pants on this 'ere box for a while. Anyhow," he added sententiously. "I could do with a bit of sedimentary life for a change!"

"Hm-mm!" Bill surveyed the three in turn. "Dick's going to build a race-track. Percy's going to start breaking-in. Tim's going to order a case of decimated coconut and poison the lot of us. Where do I come in? And what I want to know is ... who's boss of this flaming outfit ... and whose selection is it, anyhow?"

Dick stuck his chin forward. "Look! We've put up with you for darn near three year now — God only knows how — for I only worked for one other man for more'n a year at a stretch, and that was when they got me in the army and I couldn't get meself the sack!"

Bill swept the three of them with a happy grin and started his mare down the track. "Come on then, you damned loafers! But don't forget we've a mob of bullocks to lift after the races." He turned thoughtfully toward Dick West. "Do you reckon that black filly will gallop?"

"I wish I was as sure of winning Tatt's!"

"Dick ..." His tone was serious and his eyes fixed contemplatively on the horses ahead. "I would like to get some of my cash back from these bookies in there! The best odds I ever got from them was 3 to 1 against the outsider in a goat race." He switched a keen glance on the man at his side and there was a businesslike ring about his words. "Do you think we can train her ... get her in condition in time for the meeting? We'll leave that rough coat on her, and ride her in an old greenhide bridle. We'll nominate her in the Cokernut's name and go for a skinner. Is it a go?"

"Too flamin' right it is!" Dick banged his fist emphatically on the

pommel, and his horse jumped sideways and threw an aggrieved glance back at him from the corner of an eye.

Bill swung his whip and three cracks echoed like pistol shots and sent the loose horses trotting on. “That's for Mac to put the billy on.” He turned to Percy with mock severity. “You've got to ride that black filly in Longreach. And in the meantime, don't forget to say ‘sir’ when you're talking to the owner of this station! Now canter up and open that blasted gate.”

Percy grinned widely as he slipped away. “Right oh, Bill!”

And Bill watched him with a paternal grin. “He'll be running wild, chopping down bees' nests and hunting witchetty grubs for the next fortnight like any blasted walkabout nigger — and if we don't look out he'll be too fat to ride that filly!”

## Chapter XV

BILL turned in the doorway to wave a cheerful farewell to someone in the bar, then he barged up the broad staircase. The hotel was full to overflowing; the wide upstairs veranda revealed a vista of close-packed rows of beds like an overcrowded hospital ward. A few strangers leaned over the veranda rail, apparently immersed in a study of the scattered lights of the town, but the man Bill wanted was not among them and he swung on his heel and started to investigate the doors opening on the long, dimly-lighted passage. What *was* the number of his room? It should be somewhere hereabouts but he could not be quite sure. He was even less positive by the time he reached the end of the corridor, but he brightened as a possible solution struck him. He faced down the long rows of uncommunicative doorways and bawled: "Hi! Mac!"

Half a dozen doors swung open and as many heads stuck out. Bill rubbed the back of his neck ruminatively and murmured, "Cripes! Is this Longreach or Edinburgh?"

Then a familiar voice hailed him resignedly. "Here you are, Bill!"

Mac looked sharply at him as he plumped on the bed opposite. Bill had had a few drinks — just enough to make him talkative — but that was not the underlying cause of his elation. He ventured a leading question. "Well ... how did you get on with the Ford?"

Bill roused himself and leaned forward with enthusiasm sparkling in his eyes. "Get on? I got on and stopped on! Rode her to a standstill!"

Mac eyed him dubiously. "How many gates did you hit?"

"Oh, one or two. ... Didn't hurt Lizzie, though! I clean forgot all about brakes. Sat back and took a grip of her that'd steady a draught-horse ... and the damn thing kept on going. Good thing the bloke from the garage was with me!" He chuckled reminiscently. "I gave 'em the ride of their lives coming back!"

"Who else was with you?"

"Oh, I took Marie — the fair-haired filly from down the street. The one you don't like."

"Didn't she know you couldn't drive?"

"She never asked. Only too glad to come for a ride. Cripes ... and I clean forgot to take that whisky out to Tim!" He sat back and laughed uproariously. "You should have heard Marie perform when that gate rushed up and hit us! Wanted to get out and walk back ... And the garage

bloke look like he wanted to walk back with her. Anyhow, I gave Lizzie a preliminary canter after the last gate, then I let her out! One thing I've got against motor cars — they can't take a gutter like a horse. And what do you think! I offered to drive Marie to the dance to-night and she turned me down!”

“The Ford's done you one good turn, then.” Mac leaned back against the wall with his hands clasped behind his head. “Bill, why do you run around with those awful women? There's plenty of decent girls about.”

“Huh! Want to see me roped and branded, do you!” What would I do with a wife?”

“We've got a house ... a decent property. We're making good money ... and you're chucking your cash away on a lot of cheap women!”

“Cheap be damned! They cost a damned sight more than your decent ones. Anyhow, can you see me married and leg-roped to a house and furniture and God knows what, and one day some fellow rings up and says, ‘Bill, I want you to take a thousand bullocks down to New South.’ Then I'd have to do like the other married drovers — go and leave the wife on her own for six months, or say ‘No, thanks, old man, you'll have to get someone else.’ And every day for the next six months I would be thinking, ‘They ought to be on the Barcoo by this’ or ‘They'll be camping at Northampton, to-night.’ And I'd go and ring up Blackall and ask what the road's like on to Tambo ... what the grass is like ... how the water's holding. I would be doing every stage of that damned trip and cursing the bad luck that kept me off it.”

“Anyhow ...” he leaned forward with a touch of heat. “What would any decent girl want with me? She would want to know all sorts of questions about my people. ... Could I tell her I never knew my father ... that I'm a bull without a pedigree. ... A damned scrubber!”

Mac rose to pacify him. Bill's secret never came to the surface until he had had a few drinks, but Mac always found him easier to handle then, than when he was cold sober. He threw open the veranda doors and a wave of dance music floated across from the hall. “Don't be stupid, Bill! We're not cattle, and there are millions of people in the world in the same boat as yourself. Anyhow, who can tell by looking at a man whether his parents were married or not? Go and have a dance and forget about yourself.”

Bill rose and stared moodily across to the lighted windows of the hall where crowded couples were weaving around to the strains of a foxtrot like a mob of milling cattle. “Are you coming across?”

“Not me. I can't dance.”

“Come on! Come and put your arm round a flesh and blood woman instead of dreaming about your girl on a pedestal down south.”

Mac shook his head and sat down on his bed again. “I think I'll turn in. Don't make too much row when you come home — if you do come

home.”

Bill turned in the doorway with a short, bitter laugh. “Don't worry ... I'm going to get half-shot before I go across there, and the first girl I meet, I'll ask her to marry me — just to oblige you!” He reflected a moment. “Maybe I'd better get three-parts shot. And if she ever holds it up against me, I'll tell her it was your idea!”

He walked aggressively downstairs to the bar. “The usual, Tom, and don't let me drink with the flies.” He peered suspiciously at a quaintly garbed group of masked men on the opposite side of the bar. “What's this ... the Kelly Gang ... or am I just drunk?”

The barman laughed. “No, they're from the ball. It's fancy-dress ... and you've got to wear a mask till midnight. Aren't you going?”

“Too right ... when I've had a few more drinks. What about a mask ... and where can I get a fancy costume?”

“Aw, go as you are.” The barman leaned forward and surveyed Bill from the heavy, low-slung spurs, fine gabardine trousers, and silk shirt, to the truculent expression on his face. “Anyhow, it's too damned hot to wear a fur coat like a polar bear or a suit of armour. ...”

“Whoa! That'll do me!” Bill thumped the bar and clung to a fleeting inspiration. “Fill 'em up again and get me a mask, then I'm off.”

Armour. That was the idea that crystallized his feelings. He was just in the mood to challenge someone ... anyone. The cantankerous spirit roused by the old argument rankled raw in him and craved an outlet in battle ... the fiercer the better. He stumbled down the dim passage leading to the back of the hotel, turning the idea enthusiastically over in his head. A sheet of galvanized iron would soon provide armour ... a bit hot and heavy, though. The scheme offered all sorts of satisfying possibilities. He would get a horse, ride up the steps into the hall, and challenge the world. Great idea!

In the darkness of the back veranda he failed to notice an obstacle till he fell over it with a resounding clatter. He picked himself up with a savage desire to kick something hard — and found the thing he had fallen over — a shiny new garbage-tin.

He did not assault it immediately. Instead, he picked up the wide, round lid, studied it thoughtfully, then with a chuckle of mischievous joy, let himself into the big, deserted kitchen. He levered at the handle till he could slip a forearm through it, then his roving eyes quested along the shelves till a big new aluminium saucepan caught his attention. He took it down and examined it critically. Instead of a long handle it had two lugs which, he reflected, was all to the good. He fitted it on his head, over his hat. Fine! The costume was progressing.

What was the next item ... arms! He selected a broad-bladed meat-chopper from the cook's array, and balanced it appreciatively in his hand, then laid it down again with a sigh. He was sober enough to realize that if

he hit anyone with that they might fail to see the joke.

As he crossed the yard a sagging clothes-line dislodged his helmet. He grabbed the clothes-prop — a long, slender sapling — to jerk the line to safety, when inspiration stayed his hand. With a joyous chuckle he dragged the clothes-prop clear and shook it aloft. His lance! A sword next. Where could he get a sword! He walked out of the yard into a dark narrow lane. The big, heavy head of the hotel draught-horse drooped sleepily over the opposite gate. The sword was temporarily forgotten. It was only the work of a minute to slip the dilapidated winkers on, to couple a short length of light rope to the bit for reins. He vaulted light-heartedly on to the broad back, rearranged his garbage-tin shield, fitted the saucepan helmet well down on his head, adjusted the black mask over his eyes, picked up the lance, and jabbed the bewildered draught-horse with the spurs. It gave one indignant snort and lumbered sideways into the lane.

The wide, dusty street was bathed in moonlight. The unwilling charger sidled and snorted and reefed past the dark cluster of cars parked in front of the hotel, and found himself swung round the corner, headed for the long line of cars and the garish splash of light that marked the hall. Doors and windows were wide open, and the orchestra's quick, inciting rhythm stirred the blood of the rider.

Damn it, this entrance was too tame ... too undramatic. *Come on, Hairy Heels!* He dug the spurs in, and as the heavy horse bucked forward and broke into a clumsy canter, he brandished his lance and loosed a wild “*Yuck-ai-i!*” that drew the attention of the lounging crowd on the broad veranda above the steps. Another wild yell and the spurs tickled the draught's ribs and goaded him faster. Suddenly a touring car drew out to the middle of the road in front of him, and stopped — almost blocking the course. There were two people in the front seat, apparently in a close embrace. A wild impulse shot through him. He would teach them to make love in the middle of the main street and cramp his entrance. He couched the lance, aimed at the centre of the wind-screen, and as the horse bounded again at a jab of the spurs, the rider let out a wild, long-drawn yell.

He had a momentary vision of the pair in the front seat separating suddenly, staring fear-stricken, then diving precipitately below the dash, and his loud, reckless laugh changed to a wild whoop. He was on them. He jerked up the point of the lance but too late. It missed the glass but hit the front of the hood. Something gave. The hood shot back and upward as the end of the sapling splintered and broke, and the jar nearly dislocated his shoulder. The shock of the collision drove the rider back on the horse's loins. As he swept past the car he caught a glimpse of a figure in white running toward the hall.

Hell! He must have scared the life out of that girl. With sudden

contrition Bill pitched the splintered lance away, swung the astonished draught round the back of the car, and dragged him to an abrupt halt at the steps. The girl arriving at the same moment stopped and shrank back from what appeared to be a colossal horse with a rider in shining helmet and shield charging down on her.

The horseman vaulted to the ground in front of her and as he landed, the saucy helmet tipped over his eyes, completely destroying the effect. “*Damn!*” Bill pushed it fiercely back. “I say, I'm sorry about that! I didn't mean to hit the car ... bad judgment ... but I apologize. ...”

A half-smothered giggle interrupted him. His apologetic glance rose in mute inquiry to meet the girl's laughing eyes, tantalizingly veiled by the black domino.

“It's quite all right!” Her laugh was under control but her amused smile remained. “As a matter of fact, you did me a good turn butting in at that moment. I didn't mind sitting out in the car but going for a drive is a different matter.”

“Good!” Bill drew a long breath and his spirits rose again. A shaft of light from the doorway drew a glint of gold from the auburn hair that curled out from under a fillet. He had been too absorbed in the clear, warm intonation of her speech, the coming and going of the roguish dimple, and the delicate allure of her lips to register more than a fleeting impression of the girl.

She glanced at the ungainly horse puffing at his elbow and back at Bill. “What are you going to do with Rosinante?”

“Who?”

“Aren't you Don Quixote?” She surveyed him from head to foot, her smile dimpling mischievously. “No. ... Something earlier, I think. The Round Table! That's got it. Why, we're of the same period.”

He stepped back a pace and looked at the girl. The moonlight shed a soft radiance on the long, white frock with the sleeves ending in fantastic points far below the hands. She wore it with an air that defied the whimsical changes of fashion. She might have stepped out of any period of history, and the impression remained that she could have stepped back into any period and fitted in — and still remained herself. Her hidden eyes mocked him as she poised like a bird arrested in flight and ready to dart off again at the instant. There was a wild grace about her in the lift of her head, the tilt of her chin.

He stepped closer and shook his head. “I'll give it up. Who are you?”

She dropped a low curtsy. “I am Elaine!”

The man's head went back and something tingled through his memory. “Elaine!” he murmured. “Elaine the Fair ... Elaine the Lovable ... Elaine the Lily Maid of Astolat.”

“Splendid! You're the first man to recognize me to-night. And you, Sir Knight. ... Who are you?”

With a strange tingling in his blood, Bill bowed before her. “My name is Lancelot!”

“Sir Lancelot. ... Well met! Now I must go. Farewell!” And she moved up the broad stairs with a parting smile.

“Elaine!”

She paused, looking inquiringly down at the incongruous figure on the bottom step.

“May I have the next dance?”

She hesitated. “I have a vague remembrance of booking some dances ahead but I'm not certain which. If you care to risk it. ...”

Bill would have risked anything for that smile. He ripped the winkers off the horse with a joyous parting oration. “Go home, Asparagus! And when they put you in the garbage-cart to-morrow, tell them that to-night you were up to the hocks in history!”

He bounded up the steps and joined the girl in white. Masked pierrots, cowboys, swagmen, and *geisha* turned to scrutinize the pair as they passed. Bill unlimbered his shield and helmet. “If my memory is right, your job is to look after my shield. Didn't you sit up in a tower with it or something?”

“Not quite!” She smiled disconcertingly. “*There were two Elaines!* If I were you I'd put it in the cloak-room.”

## Chapter XVI

THE orchestra lowered their instruments and mopped their brows, the pianist flung a handful of minor chords at the lingering couples, and deserted the platform. Bill drew his partner into the main exodus toward the door. It was the end of their second dance and they found themselves jammed in a motley, hilarious crowd of bushrangers, sailors, pierrettes, and cowboys whose costumes were beginning to drift toward a common note as a result of the warm night. On the whole, the women were better off. The feminine idea of fancy-costume expressed itself in two distinct ways. One was a tendency to wear as little as possible or something diaphanous at the most, while the balance favoured male attire. It was rather curious, this hankering to parade in riding-breeches, jodhpurs, white flannels or shorts, while there was no compensating desire among the men to wear skirts.

Elaine threw her escort a questioning glance. "Where to?"

"Let's go outside for a bit of fresh air."

The girl hesitated. "Look here, I haven't been with my party for ages."

"Don't go yet," he pleaded. "We haven't had a chance to discuss all the things that have happened since we met ... how many centuries ago?"

She laughed softly. "All right, Lancelot. But I'll have to make my peace with the party. Go ahead and I'll meet you in a couple of minutes."

"On the spot marked X?"

"Ex-actly!"

Bill lit a cigarette and waited impatiently on the lowest step. Every car in sight housed red points of light from cigarettes and low voices that sometimes broke into quick laughter. There was no sign of the car he had tilted at. The memory of that moment when the hood flew up in the air over the heads of the occupants drew a chuckle from him and he wondered lightly who owned the car and what had happened to him. What a lucky coincidence it had been to give him the opportunity to meet Elaine. She danced like a fairy — light as thistledown, yet warm and vibrant in his arms. He inhaled a long, deep breath and smiled up at the inky velvet spaces between the stars. The situation was perfect — the prospects alluring.

But who could she be! He had met or knew by sight most of the girls in the district, and although the town was crowded for the race-meeting with people from a radius of a hundred miles, he was sure that this girl

was a newcomer or a complete stranger.

She came tripping down the steps toward him. "Well, Lancelot. ... What now?"

"A comfortable seat — if we can find an empty car."

"Lead on! I hope you have no ideas of driving off with me like my last partner. The supply of rescuing knights must be running low."

As they drew blank at car after car, Bill turned to her with a rueful expression. "If we don't find an empty car soon we may have to fall back on Lizzie — even if I've got to turn someone out. I hope you don't mind the long walk."

"Carry on! I like this pavement. These holes and gullies in it are delightful, but my slippers ought to last as far as the corner."

"It's just across the road." They had been unsuccessful at every car, and the glowing ends of cigarettes showed even among the cars parked in the shadow of the hotel. Bill halted in front of a battered old Ford. "Here she is! Lizzie, this is Elaine! Elaine the Fair ... Elaine the Lovable ... *Ow!*"

"Shut up, you idiot! Are you trying to introduce me to the whole town!"

Bill rubbed the arm she had pinched then jerked open the door and dusted the seat with a handkerchief. "Will you come into my parlour ..."

"If this dress gets covered with oil and grease, I'll send you the bill!"

"Right! Wait till I collect after the races, to-morrow. Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

Bill studied her features closely in the light of the match but the black domino still masked her with maddening efficiency. Their fingers touched as she bent over the match, lighting up with practised skill. Then in turn she eyed the man as the glow of the match from his cupped hands illumined his features. The damaged side of Bill's face was toward her and she puzzled at the totally new impression she got from the crooked profile and the almost sneering twist of the lips.

He turned and studies her, leaning back in the shadows. "Elaine, who are you? What is your real name?"

He could sense her smile in the darkness. "What's wrong with Elaine? Don't you like it?"

"I do," he replied simply. "For several reasons."

"Now don't tell me your name isn't really Lancelot!"

"I won't, because I have as much right to Lancelot as you have to Elaine. But look here, this mask's the hottest thing I know. Let's take them off!"

She laughed tantalizingly. "Awfully curious, aren't you. It isn't midnight yet."

"I mean it!"

"Well, on one condition — that we remain Lancelot and Elaine to one another ... now and always. It will be ever so much more interesting to be

just ourselves ... without labels to identify us with the rest of the world. We will exist solely on our merits — or lack of them. We will not be judged by the friends we keep. No one will know whether our parents are rich or poor ... or who they are ... or whether we have any. Lancelot and Elaine ... is it a bargain?"

Bill's hand stretched eagerly toward her. "It is!" He gripped the soft, warm hand and held it firmly, his blood tingling, then leaned toward her, fumbling at his mask with the other hand. "Ready?"

"Let's be dramatic about it. One ... two ... three. ... Off!"

He peered eagerly into the dim corner where she leaned. Her domino was off. It lay like a black stain against her white frock but her face remained hidden in the shadows.

"Elaine!" His hands reached out, drawing her gently toward him. She came, scarcely resisting, her head tilted slightly away, and still baffling him. One hand slipped round a white clad shoulder, and his fingers touched the soft velvet of her chin, and turned the face toward him with the enigmatic smile faintly curving the lips. Then his head lowered, his arms tightened, and his lips met the soft allure of hers, and he pressed them hungrily and held them. ...

The girl struggled free and her resolute hands pushed him firmly away. Bill, his blood aflame, stared restlessly at her calmly patting her disordered hair.

"Lancelot, I would like a drink. Can I trust you to get me one?"

He broke the ensuing silence with a short laugh. "I wanted one badly myself a while ago. Now ... I'd rather bust my reputation and turn it down. However ... what will you have? Whisky or ginger ale?"

"Both, please," she announced with cool promptitude. "And remember ... I'm trusting you."

He returned in a few minutes with two amber-filled glasses and a bottle tucked under one arm. "Take your choice," he invited, "and if you don't trust me, I'll drink both."

"No, you won't!" She took a glass and held it toward him with a gay smile. "Here's to us!"

He clinked his glass against hers. "Lancelot and Elaine!" he toasted, and searched her elusive eyes over the top of it, but the dim shadows were on her side and baffled him completely.

"What are you going to do with the bottle?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I promised to take it to my cook this afternoon to keep him from coming to town and getting drunk. He is camped down the river with the plant, and when I forgot to take it this afternoon, I told him I would be back with it later. So he'll get it after the ball is over — if he's lucky."

"The poor chap! It would serve you right if he came to town and got drunk."

Bill frowned. "I hope he doesn't ... not till after the races, anyhow." He glanced at the girl. "Will you be at the meeting to-morrow?"

"That's chiefly why we are in Longreach."

"Like to make some money?"

She leaned eagerly forward. "Lancelot, if you can put me on to a sure thing, I'm your friend for life! Is the delivery of this bottle of whisky connected with it?"

"Quite a lot."

"Then off you go!" She pushed the door open but Bill's hand stretched out and closed it again.

"I wouldn't miss to-night for all the cooks and racemeetings in the world!"

She studied him in silence as though she were debating some knotty problem, then she asked slowly. "Will it take long to get to this camp and back again?"

"No, Lizzie will get there and back in no time."

She eyed him steadily. "Lancelot, you know I object to going for lonely car rides with strange men. ..."

"Do you mean ... you'll come?"

"If you'll promise to bring me safely back as soon as possible."

"It's a bargain! Come on, Lizzie!"

He swung the starting-handle violently, and Lizzie responded with a roar that shattered the romantic effect of moonlight and soft music for every couple in the neighbourhood. Bill scrambled in behind the wheel and fumbled with the controls till he discovered the throttle, then he revved up the engine, let in the clutch, and Lizzie shot forward with a spasmodic bound.

Elaine gasped, clutched at the side for support as they progressed in a series of leaps and bounds, swung sharply round a corner, then gathered speed down the empty main street.

Bill grinned cheerfully. "Bit of the kangaroo about her for a start. She'll be all right!"

"I hope so!" Elaine threw a quick glance to right and left. They were passing the last scattered houses of the town. The squalid row of Japtown showed a furtive light and disappeared, then the Ford bounced high in the air. The girl braced her feet on the floor and took a firm grip with both hands. "Was that a culvert we went over?"

"We didn't go over. Only one wheel missed it!" the driver replied airily. "We'll soon be out of these ruts."

As they bowled along a smoother track, Elaine ventured a question. "What sort of camp is it we are going to?"

"Droving-camp."

"Oh ... are you a drover?"

A gate loomed in the headlights and the car pulled up with a jerk. "You

don't belong to Queensland!"

"How do you know?" she parried.

"You have the down-south attitude to drovers. I have seen your New South drovers. Met an old chap plugging along a road in a sulky behind a couple of hundred sheep. He had half a dozen dogs and he was his own cook, horsetailer, boss, and men combined — didn't even have a spare horse, and the one in the sulky looked ready to lie down and die at the next gate."

He darted a quick appraising glance at her. "Do you like horses?"

Her reply came quick and sincere. "I love them!"

"I'm sorry it isn't daylight or I would show you some of mine. How about coming down to-morrow?"

"I'll see ... I'd like to, but we are only passing through and may go on at any moment. By the by, do we go through this gate or are we waiting till you say 'Open, Sesame!'"

"Sorry!" he laughed, as he scrambled out and threw the gate open. Lizzie bounded through, grazing one post.

At the third gate the girl turned with a worried look. "How much farther on is the camp? The ball must be nearly over."

"Not on your life! It goes on till daylight. But we're nearly there." They continued along the rutted track for half a mile, then Lizzie's nose swung off through the long grass at undiminished speed. "Better hang on. It's a little bit bumpy here!"

"Bumpy ... is right!" Elaine was hanging desperately on through a series of jolts and lurches and jars. "Hadn't you ... better go slower ... through this!"

"No, we'll be right. Camp's just ah. ..." *Bang! Crash!*

Bill felt himself jerked hard over the steering-wheel as the Ford jarred to an abrupt stop. He gasped to regain the wind that had been knocked out of him, then looked quickly round. The girl lay forward in a crumpled white heap on the floor. He called her by name, stretched a hand toward her with fear in his heart.

She lay quite still. He jumped out, lifted the limp figure gently out of the cramped space and looked quickly, anxiously around. They were in a patch of stiff, rank grass, but the camp could not be far away. He took a bearing and started off through the scattered timber with the unconscious girl in his arms.

Just as a glimpse of the white tent-fly through the trees came to hearten him, the girl stirred slightly with a low moan. He strode on, calling breathlessly as the dull glow of the camp-fire showed up. "Tim! ... Percy!"

There was no reply. He staggered to the tent-fly. The wagonette and harness were gone — so were Tim and Percy. The camp was deserted. He lowered the recovering girl gently. Her cheeks were pallid and her

breath came in short, jerky gasps. Bill dragged his swag out and laid the girl on the blankets, making a pillow for her head, then hurried to find a water-bag.

When he returned, Elaine's eyes were open. He dropped on his knees beside her and held a pannikin of water to her lips. She sipped it slowly, never taking her searching eyes from his face, then she lay back on the pillow and signed to him to leave her. Bill withdrew reluctantly. He heaped wood on the fire and had a good look round. There were the tracks where the wagonette had been pulled out and the horses harnessed. The stores and swags were all stacked under the tentfly.

Bill bethought himself of the whisky and hurried back to the Ford. First he kicked the tall grass away and examined the obstacle they had hit. It was a solid little gidgee stump concealed in the grass, and the force of the impact had bent the axle till the front tyres almost touched. His heart sank, not at the thought of the damage but at the realization that they were marooned, without car, without wagonette or conveyance of any kind. The smell of whisky pervaded the atmosphere and foretold the fate of the bottle before he looked inside the car. The bottle was in fragments but a little remained in the broken bottom part and he carried it carefully back to camp.

Elaine was sitting dazedly on the blankets. She regarded him with a vacant, puzzled expression. "What happened?"

"I'm sorry," he answered contritely. "Lizzie's sitting back there with her arms wrapped round a gidgee stump."

Her eyes were troubled. "Does that mean ...?"

"It means that I'll have to find the horses and ride back to town for a car to take you in. The cook and horsetailer have cleared out with the wagonette, so that's the only way."

She sat still, staring ahead with the leaping flames of the fire lighting the troubled features. "Don't go, Lancelot! ... Don't leave me alone."

He knelt beside her with worried eyes. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head slowly. "Just a bump on the head, and all the wind knocked out of me. I'll be all right. ... Just feel weak and sick now. ... Let me rest a while, but don't leave me."

"But your people. ... They'll be worrying!"

"I don't think so. ... I'm travelling with friends. All the hotels were full, so we had to split up. I took a room at the Imperial, then some other people offered to put me up, so each will think I'm with the other."

He studied her with a serious, worried expression, then he rose and rummaged about till he found some aspirin and he spilled some white tablets into her palm. Her expressionless eyes watched him as he gently removed her shoes and spread a blanket over her knees. She lowered herself slowly back to the pillow and he drew the blanket up to her shoulders, took the soft, passive hand that lay on the pillow, and held it

tight in his warm palm while his contrite eyes looked down at the tired features. Then he softly released her hand, and with a husky “Good night, Kid,” rose to his feet and turned away.

The last thing in Elaine's consciousness before sleep claimed her was a picture of the man sitting motionless in front of the fire, gazing into its depths with the red glow on his twisted, Machiavellian features. They were quite alone, yet somehow no thought of fear occurred to her.

## Chapter XVII

ELAINE woke to a musical jangling of bells, mellowed by distance, and lay still and wide-eyed with apprehension at the strangeness of her surroundings. It was quite dark. Beyond the wide inverted V of the tent opening, the stars twinkled with a clear, hard brilliance above the low, red flicker of the fire. Then remembrance came to her. ... The smash ... then an indelible picture of a man sitting staring motionless into a fire whose fitful flames lit a shadowy background of traceried branches.

How long had she slept? She stared into the dim vault of the tent above her in a sudden access of panic, then stilled it as the horses closed on the camp in a trampling, jangling mob of huge, shadowy forms circling the outer radius of the firelight with suspicious snorts before trooping on. And close behind them came a shadowy horseman cautiously urging a spirited horse between the fire and the tent to peer at her as she lay feigning sleep before he moved the horse on — almost on tiptoe, it seemed — in the wake of the others.

She sat up, stiff and aching in every bone, and throwing back the blanket, frowned down at her creased and crumpled frock. The effect was even worse when she rose to her feet. She found her shoes set on top of a neat pile of clothing in front of a hurricane-lamp, its low turned flame shielded by a box. She examined them with hesitant curiosity — a new, white silk shirt and a pair of white moleskin trousers with a soft satiny surface and the shop-ticket still attached. Were they intended for her? She measured the trousers against her — a shade long in the leg perhaps — then she listened intently. A single horse-bell tinkled and with it a sound of splashing water from the distant water-hole. Without further hesitation she slipped out of the white frock and let it flutter to the ground.

When the horses were rounded up again beyond the fire, she was sitting quietly and unobtrusively on the blankets, brushing her hair as best she could with the short-bristled, military hairbrush, and reflecting appreciatively on the thoughtfulness of her host.

The horse and rider appeared so quietly from the shadows that her quick start almost betrayed her presence, but the man never even glanced her way. He slipped noiselessly to the ground, the horse standing where he dropped the reins, then he reappeared beyond the fire holding up another bridle. At his low whistle, a horse detached itself from the others,

came to him with long raking strides and allowed the bridle to slip over its shapely ears. Then it nuzzled at the man, took something from his hand and chewed contentedly. Other horses lounged up, pressing round the man with soft, questing, intimate noises. He looped the reins of the two bridled mounts to a bough, and walked out of the circle of light with half a dozen horses at his heels.

The girl wrinkled her brows thoughtfully with a feeling of impending adjustment to some of her ideas. This was something totally new to her in the handling of horses.

When the man returned, the first thing he noticed was a slim, boyish figure in white shirt and moleskins standing at the fire. She greeted him with a friendly smile. "Hallo, Lancelot! Any idea of the time?"

"It will be daylight in half an hour or so — but how do you feel?" His tone was anxious and he scrutinized her with keen, serious eyes.

"Quite all right, thanks! But do you mean that I've slept practically all night?"

"Most of it, anyhow. Do the clothes fit?"

"Fairly well — but a belt would be useful. Are they yours?"

He shook his head. "They belong to young Percy — the horsetailer. Good job he didn't take the parcel with him. I'll boil the billy, then if you feel up to it we'll make for town. Have you done much riding?"

She smiled demurely at his worried tone. "Just a bit. I'll try not to fall off."

He shifted uneasily on his feet. "I've given you the quietest horse I've got, but he's fairly lively — no vice about him — but he's a stock-horse and not exactly a ladies' hack."

"It's all right, Lancelot. I've lived most of my life in the country — believe it or not — and I won't disgrace you."

They emerged from the scattered timber and hit the rutted track to town, riding side by side in the cool, crisp air. It was the last hour of night when all the faint, elusive bush perfumes steal out to haunt the air with their lingering fragrance before the scorching rays of the sun dessicate the atmosphere again. The world was a dim, mysterious place for flitting shadows and things that materialized threateningly out of the darkness and passed harmlessly by. The night sky was an all-enveloping mantle of deep fathomless indigo out of which the molten stars leaned low and intimate. Vision was limited even after the effects of the firelight had worn off; objects were sensed rather than seen, and the only thing to do was to surrender all trust to the more acute senses of the horses.

The man leaned from the saddle to open a gate. "This is another thing you can't do from a car!"

"True! And horses are not so liable to run into stumps."

"Depends on the driver," he flashed back with a grin. Their spirits were rising again and although Elaine shivered occasionally as the chill that

precedes the dawning struck through the thin silk shirt her blood pulsed strongly with the elation of the moment. She longed for daylight to verify her impressions of the horse she rode. There was no need to urge it along. It strode forward with a long, raking stride, and when they broke into a canter as the false dawn paled the eastern stars, the easy, effortless swing with its hint of unlimited power and flexibility, responding to the merest touch of the reins or sway of the body, roused a glad, happy feeling within her. It gave her a flattering sense of superiority — of being monarch of all she surveyed — which at the moment was limited to a faint glimpse of the track beyond the horse's ears.

The light spread higher in the east, putting the stars out one by one. In the grey light, objects took shape and form — trees and low, scraggy bushes bordering the track, a little mob of sheep huddled together at their approach like pale woolly ghosts and then poured away toward the dim smudge of the creek timber. Then the hidden sun launched a bright javelin across the heavens and followed it with a radiating shower of golden arrows. Cautiously his yellow rim lipped the horizon where it seemed to linger a moment to contemplate the territory abandoned by the fleeing rear-guard of night — and suddenly it was day.

“Have we far to go, Lancelot?”

“Not far, but we'll hit the pace up a bit.”

The track straggled ahead like a white haphazard ribbon, and they cantered along at a faster pace.

“I like your horses, Lancelot!”

He smiled his thanks at the greatest compliment she could have paid him and took advantage of the first daylight view of her to steal a glance at her eyes. Were they brown ... or grey? More like grey, but the dark, curling lashes shielded them too well for certainty.

“Lancelot, is this horse faster than yours?”

“Do you want to fall off and break your neck?”

She swung indignantly on him. “Do you think I can't ride!”

“I know you can, but you don't know that horse. You'd only have to move a fraction in the saddle at a gallop and he'd duck from under you and leave you sitting on the track.”

“Re-ally, how interesting!” In the heat of the argument the pace had unconsciously increased to a fast canter. The faintly-smiling, sardonic features roused the girl to sudden rebellion. She pulled a face at him, an imp of perversity lurking in her defiant eyes. “Well, try and catch me!”

She leaned forward and the horse shot ahead like a suddenly released spring. The girl gasped and clung tightly with her knees. She shortened the reins and leaned out on the horse's neck with strands of the mane whipping her face. She was ablaze with exultation at the glorious sensation of pace, the smooth, effortless running of the horse beneath her and the white track slipping under the drumming hoofs like a rapidly-

drawn carpet.

Suddenly she became aware of an outstretched head and a shiny ring bit creeping up level with her saddle. She threw a defiant side glance at the man sitting slightly forward on the bay horse, his hands low on its neck and a grim smile on the tight line of his lips. The girl crouched down, urging the horse on with her hands, her knees, her whole spirit calling for more speed. The wind whipped the tears from the corners of her eyes; she felt as though a continuous line of tear-drops were streaming back in her wake.

Bill's glance was tinged with admiration. She was riding the big horse all out, leaning forward on him like the graceful figure-head of a ship, with her short auburn hair whipping out behind her head. He looked ahead, then sitting down on the mount, tightened his knees and in a single bound the horses were racing neck and neck. Elaine's features were set with grim determination, her teeth gleaming between the tight-drawn lips. From the corner of an eye she glimpsed the man's mocking smile, then the bay horse drew steadily away from her in spite of her efforts. A length ahead ... two lengths ... and she had to lower her head under the biting rain of grit and pebbles from its heels. A shout from the man in front and he reined back with one hand upraised. "Gully ahead!"

She saw the thin straggle of trees rushing toward her and sat up straight in the saddle, easing the excited, reeving mare, but looked straight ahead till they crossed the dry creek-bed, and the untidy hovels of Japtown threw long shadows across the road. Then she turned with a pose of meekness that contrasted strangely with her dancing eyes, and held a hand toward the man. "I'm sorry, Lancelot. But, oh, it was gorgeous!"

He ranged alongside and gripped her hand tightly, masking his feelings behind a twisted smile but failing to quench the gleam in his eyes. Then, reluctantly, he released her hand and they rode on without a word.

The wide streets were empty. A few early risers were stirring on verandas or sweeping out doorways. They drew rein in front of the hotel and Elaine slipped to the ground. "Cheerio, Lancelot ... and thanks!"

He looked down with a quiet, anxious expression. "You'll be at the races this afternoon?"

"Yes. Oh, what about that certainty?"

"I can't tell you till just before the race. I'll look out for you in front of the tote at the end of every race. Right?"

She nodded brightly, then with a final wave of her hand, disappeared through the doorway.

Mac rubbed his eyes sleepily, and took stock of Bill disrobing against a background of long sunrays slanting across the veranda. "What was the dance like?" he inquired lazily.

"Not bad!"

"Have a good night?"

“Oh ... fair.”

Mac stared at his partner. This preoccupied air was totally new within Mac's experience of him. “What was the girl like?”

Bill dropped on the edge of his bed and fixed gleaming, almost fanatical eyes on the man in pyjamas. “Mac, she's the finest thing I ever struck! She's great! A thoroughbred! She makes the rest of them look like boundary-riders' hacks. And she can ride! Man, you should have seen her sitting down on Comet, going like the hammers of hell!”

Mac dug his elbow into the pillow and stared in amazement. “I say, where *did* you spend the night?”

Bill halted his enthusiastic paean. “Oh, down at the camp. We took the Cokernut's whisky down, and just as we got there, Lizzie hung her front axle round a stump. Tim and Percy had cleared out — not a soul in camp — so we rode back this morning.”

Mac's face was devoid of expression but his tone was deliberate. “Then I suppose she accepted your offer?”

“What offer?” Bill stared nonplussed.

“You left here last night threatening to ask the first girl you met to marry you — and to tell her all your sticky past.”

Bill looked blank. “Hell! I forgot! But I'll ask her next time I see her.”

“And tell her all about yourself?” Mac's voice had a sarcastic edge.

Bill hesitated and his eyes were troubled. “I suppose so,” he replied slowly. Then he picked up a towel and made for the shower, in pensive mood.

## Chapter XVIII

THE sun beat brazenly down on the crowd besieging the tote and the bookmakers, and swarming like ants round the stand. The continuous hum of a thousand voices rose and fell, but was never silent, and through it obtruded the hoarse barking of the layers of odds.

The horses had gone to the post for the second race, caps and colours mingling gaily down the course, when Elaine arrived. She was with a party — a fashionably-dressed woman with a decided, purposeful manner, a thin brunette with a roving, sophisticated eye, and two men — both young. One was patently a city youth, slim and elegant, with an incipient moustache spaced between a long nose and a receding chin; the other was heavily built and sun-tanned, with the forceful characteristics of the elder woman that suggested blood relationship.

Elaine, looking fresh and cool in white silk with a touch of jade at the waist and neck and a shady green hat, chatted with them for what appeared an interminable time to the impatient Bill. As they moved into the stand the starting bell rang, and in the confusion and rush for vantage points, the party separated. The tote was deserted except for one lone figure with a keen, appreciative smile for the girl in white moving in his direction.

“Hallo, Lancelot! How many races have I missed?”

“This is only the second. I lost on the first and this looks like ...” He broke off to peer at the horses battling out the finish to a roar of mingled encouragement and despair. “Fourth again! I hope our luck changes from now on.”

“So do I. I'm relying on you to restore the family fortunes. Which race do we concentrate on?”

“The fourth, but you can have a mild bet on the next if you like.” He pencilled a mark in her race-book.

“Mr R. West's Georgina B. What do you know about Georgina? Is she to be trusted?”

“No more than any other female, but her owner is fairly reliable. We'll go down to the rails and see what he thinks of his chances.”

They found a place near the saddling-paddock gate and Elaine's attention oscillated from her race-book to the parading horses and their numbered saddle-cloths till she identified Georgina B. She glanced critically over the brown mare fidgeting and champing at the bit, then

moved close to the man leaning his elbows on the fence. “Honestly, Lancelot, I’m not impressed with your choice. In fact, I would like to bet she couldn’t have caught me this morning!”

Her companion’s drooping eyelids quivered. “You would lose that bet!”

“How do you know?”

“Well, she’s been tried out against both of them.”

“Oh.” Elaine subsided into silence. The horses started to file on to the course. She watched the brown mare sidling toward the gate with the sun glinting on her arched neck, then her eyes focused on the rider. He sat easily on the rearing, anxious mare, his sharp eyes idly scanning the crowd along the rails. As he came close to them, his roving glance rested a moment on the man at her side and she would have sworn to a flicker in the dark eyes — nothing more. Then he looked at Elaine and sat up quickly in the saddle. He seemed to battle for a second with a desire to exchange a further glance with her escort but discretion carried him on to the course, apparently inspecting the tips of the brown mare’s ears.

They moved back to the betting-ring and she waited amusedly while Lancelot selected a stout, red-faced bookmaker with a raucous voice. “What price Georgina B?”

“Evens to you!”

He looked his disgust at the man on the box. “If I ever hear you offering decent odds on any race, I’ll have a decent bet.”

The red-faced one laughed hoarsely. “How much d’you want?”

“Fiver this time ... Georgina B.”

The bookmaker scribbled something unintelligible on a ticket and as he thrust it at Bill, his other hand went up to the side of his mouth, megaphone fashion, and the odds blared out over their heads. Elaine bought a tote ticket on number 5, then they moved to a spot where they could see the finish. They tacitly avoided the stand.

Elaine peered forward as the field got off to a good start. It was impossible to distinguish any particular horse as they raced with what seemed to her maddening slowness round the back of the track. They were coming round toward the turn, a chestnut in front, the rest of the field bunched behind. At the turn, the chestnut swung out from the rails and a dark head showed behind him, creeping steadily up till they were abreast. A bay raced up on the outside challenging the pair of them, then almost on the post it seemed to the excited girl, the brown nose just poked out in front and she clutched joyfully at the arm of the man near. “We’ve won! We’ve won!”

Bill grinned happily. “Dick nearly left it too late. Are you going to collect now?”

“I really ought to join my party.”

“Wait till after the next race!”

“Is that *our* race?”

He nodded with a hint of mystery under the drooping eyelid.

“Are you going to put on a lot?”

“All I can beg, borrow, or get credit for!”

Her eyes opened wide. “Do you think I might risk five pounds?”

“Wait till you've seen the horse! You'll probably refuse to back it at all, but I think your fiver will be safe. At the worst, it will only go with mine to buy diamond rings for the poor starving bookmakers' wives.”

As the minutes passed in inaction, Elaine worked herself into a fever of impatience and she fretted visibly at her companion's apparent lethargy. Not even when the horses had left the saddling-paddock and were filing past the stand for the preliminary canter did he indicate the horse he intended to back. Instead, he invited her to pick any three she fancied. Elaine watched them carefully and nominated a big chestnut, a bay horse and a brown mare — a slim, satin-skinned animal.

“Which one is ours?” she demanded.

He grinned tantalizingly. “Neither! Which horse do you think will run last?”

Elaine bit her lip with annoyance. Time was fleeing; the horses were on their way to the post, and they still had to get their bets on. She pointed to the last rider moving sedately in the wake of the field. “That one ... the little black horse with the hairy legs.” She glanced quickly at her book. “Here it is ... Number 3 ... Mr T. Brannigan's black filly, ‘Desolated Cokernut.’ What an awful name!”

“Come on and we'll see what odds they're offering.” He led the way to the ring, grinning cheerfully while Elaine stared at him in perplexity. She certainly did not feel inclined to risk five perfectly good notes on that rough-looking thing.

The bookmaker broke off his hoarse chant as they halted before him, and Bill queried calmly. “Any decent odds on this race? I'll give you a chance to get this fiver back.”

“Take yer pick! 2 to 1 bar one. ... Evens Tripedes. ... 'Ere y'are ... Desperated Cokernut 5 to 1.”

“Is that the best you can do? Thirty pounds to five?”

Elaine was almost frantic. Her ears strained for the sound of the starting bell; all around her, the inferno of shouted odds rose to a crescendo, and here was Lancelot calmly arguing.

The bookmaker shook his head. “25 to 5 the Cokernut.”

“You've got a tenner of mine. Can you take that?”

“Double it if you like!”

“Right! 100 to 20 ... and a fiver for the lady! Cash!”

He handed over the notes and received the tickets. A momentary lull had fallen on the ring till a voice took up the chant on a new theme. “2 to 1 bar one ... Dissipated Cokernut 2 to 1.”

In the silence that followed the announcement, came the sharp *dong* of the starting bell, and a chorus of anguished howls went up. Above the turmoil sounded one hoarse, desperate voice. "Even money Methylated Cokernut!"

Elaine dragged impatiently at her partner's arm "Quick! They're off!" The field was bunched together on the far side of the course, and they strained their eyes to pick the black filly and her pink-sleeved rider.

"Why on earth were you so long in betting?" Elaine demanded indignantly, her eyes on the field.

The man at her side chuckled hugely. "Even if we don't win the race we've tricked the books!"

"What do you mean? Oh, look at that chestnut coming up! *Oh, go back!* Where's our horse?"

"I had to place the money with all the books at the same time to get the odds."

"What do you mean? Did you bet more than twenty pounds?"

"I had people backing the filly with every bookmaker who would take it. Didn't you hear the odds jump from 5 to 1 to evens?"

Elaine gasped. The fate of her five pounds faded to insignificance. "O-oh look at that chestnut! He's getting far too far in front!" Although she was shivering with excitement another question clamoured for an answer. "But why couldn't you all have done your betting earlier?"

The man was leaning forward, an eager glint in his eyes, his lips drawn tight across the set teeth, and he answered her almost unconsciously without removing his eyes from the field. "We had to get the jockeys out of the way first ... in case of dirty work. *They* don't know yet that the filly is equal favourite. *Look at her coming up! Go on, you little beauty!*" He started suddenly and ripped off his hat. "*Hell! Get back there! Get out, you mongrel!*" The crowd had risen in a body, yelling fierce oaths and brandishing impotent fists at a dog that had darted out at the horses. The rails were in pandemonium. The dog hurtled on like an arrow straight at the horse in the lead ... the black filly! Someone whistled shrilly. Every man on the course put his fingers to his teeth and the air quivered with the concerted blast. A roar of relief went up. "*He's gone!*" The dog had missed its mark, faltered a second at the thunder of hoofs, then cringing, went down among them.

The black filly was out in front, coming up the straight with a length to spare, and the crowd grew strangely silent. The chestnut made another run, crept up on the quarter of the filly and the crowd shrieked again. The whips were out, falling in desperate staccato strokes, but the filly maintained her lead, drew gradually away, and flashed past the post a length ahead of the field.

For the last few yards Elaine felt that her heart had left her. It was out there with the black filly ... urging it ... goading it on. She was quite

unconscious of the man at her side twisting a perfectly new hat between his hands into a shapeless thing. When the race was won they turned, laughing hysterically, and hugged one another till suddenly conscious of the stares of the people around. Then they dived hurriedly through the crowd, still hand in hand, and laughing joyously.

They pulled up in a quiet corner to repair the external damage wrought in the excitement. Elaine felt weak with the reaction and clung to Bill's sleeve. At last she faced him with a tinge of regret in her eyes. "Lancelot, it has been a perfectly gorgeous day, but I'll have to go back to my party or they'll report me to the police as lost. By the by, when will I return Percy's clothes? No. No. Stop," she interrupted him. "No names ... no addresses. Remember our bargain! Anyhow, who *is* Percy?"

"He was on the black filly!"

"Heavens!" She stared at the smiling enigmatic features with a question burning its way to her lips. "And T. Brannigan? ... Was it his whisky we carried last night?"

"He's my cook ... alias the Desolated Cokernut!"

"One more question, Lancelot. Who is the real owner of the black filly?"

He looked at her with a modest grin. "A fellow about my size!"

She contemplated him seriously for a little while, then said slowly, "I'm afraid I'll have to revise my opinion of drovers!" She held out her hand. "Well, good-bye, Lancelot!"

He took the hand and stared at her with a puzzled frown. "You're not going yet ...?"

She nodded. "We're going on to-morrow."

"What are you doing to-night?"

"Someone's giving us a party. I forget their name."

"Must you go?"

She nodded firmly but her eyes were kind. "I'll leave Percy's things at the hotel office addressed to ... let me see ... to 'Mr Lance.' "

He acquiesced abstractedly. All the exhilaration and intoxication of the day seemed to have suddenly ebbed, leaving him painfully sober. "When are you leaving, Elaine?"

"Sometime to-morrow."

"If I bring the horses round, will you come for a ride before breakfast?"

She hesitated, her eyes gleaming as she considered the invitation, then she turned quickly. "Right oh, Lancelot! But not too early. Say about nine! Cheerio!" She raised a slim gloved hand in farewell, then disappeared in the crowd.

## Chapter XIX

BILL rose early after a night of roseate dreams through which danced a slim, laughing damsel with auburn hair nestling close round her head, and grey eyes that smiled tantalizingly from under long dark eyelashes. It was a beautiful morning, and he hummed light-heartedly as he groomed the two horses and saddled them with extra care.

He rode round to Elaine's hotel at about quarter to nine, lit a cigarette, and tried to curb his impatience. After the third cigarette he led the horses across to the opposite side of the street in full view of the upper veranda, and waited there. At half-past nine he mounted and rode to the corner and back several times with a growing consciousness of the number of curious glances directed at him.

At ten o'clock he could wait no longer. He thrust his way into the bar and beckoned the barman to one side. "Mick, do you know if there's a visitor upstairs ... girl of about twenty-five ... short, dark red hair ..." He hesitated there; no use telling him the colour of her eyes or describing the delicious, sensitive curl of her short upper lip.

The barman scratched his head. "There's about twenty red-haired wimmen stoppin' here, but wait an' I'll ask at the office."

Bill read from his expression as he returned that he had drawn a blank. He was at a loss to know what to do. He couldn't tramp through the hotel calling "Elaine," or investigating every room. What could have kept her!

Another thought presented itself. He turned cold at the idea but it had to be faced. He presented himself at the office. "Is there a parcel here for Mr Lance?"

The girl dived an arm under the table and pushed a paper parcel at him. "From Mrs Barlow ... that right?"

"Mrs Barlow ...?" he echoed faintly. "What does she look like?"

"I only saw her when she paid her bill this morning. Young woman ... short auburn hair ... nice teeth ... dressed in a ..."

"Thanks ... that would be right." He turned the parcel over and found an envelope pinned to it. He ripped it open and scanned the few lines penned in a large bold hand.

LANCELOT.

We are leaving early in the morning so I'll probably miss you. It has been a gorgeous time.

Good-bye,

ELAINE.

He stuffed the letter clumsily into his pocket, looked dully about at the people hurrying to and fro, preparatory to returning to their homes, and at the loungers in the doorway. There was a dull ache inside him. "Mrs Barlow ...!" So that was why she insisted on remaining Elaine!

His lips tightened savagely. Well, he wasn't going to make a fool of himself because a girl had had a bit of fun at his expense. Not on your life! There were lots of other girls in the world that he could soon square the account with. No more of this sentimental stuff for him.

He strode roughly through the loungers, slipped into the saddle, and went up the street at a brisk canter. He would start out immediately and pick up that mob of cattle. A bit of work would do him good.

To hell with all women, anyhow!

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## Book III: Camelot

## Chapter XX

IT was very peaceful on the dark veranda. The night-air was warm and heavy, and the only regular sound that impinged on the velvety silence was the shrill keening of the mosquitoes. At intervals the slow gruff voice of Mac speaking on the telephone floated out, muffled and indistinct. From the dam a sheep bleated with a throaty quaver, and one of Mac's dogs at the back of the house rattled his chain and whined plaintively as he scratched himself. Bill, in shirt-sleeves, lay back half-asleep in a long canvas chair, indistinct in the darkness save for the ghostly white blur of his shirt and the intermittent glow of his cigarette. It was very peaceful.

The voice at the telephone ceased. The wavering beam of a lamp preceded the sound of heavy footsteps, then the fly-proof door squeaked open and slammed shut again. Mac deposited the hurricane lamp on a small table and subsided heavily into a chair. He had grown thicker with the years. There was no surplus flesh on his short-necked square body, and his weather-beaten features had a set mature look that gave him the appearance of being years older than Bill.

Except for a thinning of Bill's fine reddish hair and portents of its receding from the temples, he had changed very little.

Mac broke the five minutes' silence that followed his return. "That was Morrison."

A sleepy grunt from the man opposite. "What's he want? Sell more sheep?"

"No! Wants to know if he can bring out a buyer."

"What sort of buyer. ... Sheep? ... Horses? Tell'm I got no horses for sale."

"No! This fellow wants to look at the property!"

"*Hey!*" Bill sat bolt upright in his chair and stared at his partner. "What did you tell him?"

"Told him I would have a yarn with you about it and let him know."

"Mm-mm. ..." Bill sank slowly back into his chair and relapsed into a thoughtful silence. Mac watched him steadily for a while, then cleared his throat warningly. "Well, what do you think?"

The man opposite stirred slightly. "Don't know yet! It would matter more to you than to me. I spend most of my time on the road and only use the place to spell my horses and have a bit of a lay-off myself.

You've done all the work. Managed the place, improved it, bought sheep and bred them, and all I've done is to supply a bit of cash or draw a cheque when I feel like celebrating.”

Mac parried the shifting of responsibility with a question. “Well, what do you think of our prospects? We've made a lot of money. Seasons have been only fair, but we've been lucky, and sheep and wool are booming to-day. But what about to-morrow, and the next day?”

“That's what I'm trying to work out. Personally, I reckon the price they're paying us for our wool is too high to last. A few years ago we were glad to get eight pence a pound for it, and now they're paying around forty pence. And look at the price of sheep!” He shifted aggrievedly in his chair. “When a man offers you as much for a stupid woolly wether as for a good sort of a steer, there's something wrong somewhere!”

A faint smile hovered in Mac's deepset eyes. “Then you think this is a good time to sell?”

Bill hesitated before the direct question. “We-ell, if we could find anyone mad enough to buy at present values, we would be damned fools to hang on. But make certain that the cash is right! We don't want to hand things over for a stack of mortgages. What do *you* think about the proposition?”

Mac considered in silence, his lips pressed tightly together, then he delivered his verdict. “I'm willing to sell!” After a few moments he went on. “I didn't come to Queensland to settle down. Mind you, I like the place but ... well, I want to go south again ... not for a holiday this time, but for good.”

The dim light veiled Bill's mischievous smile but not the bantering note in his voice. “Going down to plank your bank-book in front of the girl and say ... *Now then ... what about it?* ” He chuckled softly. “And you've only seen her twice in the last six years! She must be a marvel to have waited all that time for you!”

Mac wriggled uneasily. “It isn't just that,” he answered doggedly. “It's the old man. He's pretty sick and I don't think he'll last long.”

“Sorry, Mac. I didn't know.”

Mac's eyes looked unseeingly out into the night, and he voiced his drifting thoughts in slow, hesitant phrases. “Our place down there is a bit small. I'll sell, and buy a bigger place. It's good, sound country. They have their droughts, but not like we get them up here — for years at a stretch.” He shifted his gaze back to the man in the chair opposite and hesitated a moment, as though diffident of approaching the subject. “What about our partnership, Bill? Will we keep it going in New South Wales?”

Bill shook his head slowly. “I don't want to break the partnership, Mac, and if you need the cash you can have it, but I'm sticking to Queensland.

I don't like New South. There's something about it, and about the people. You can tell the difference as soon as you cross the border. Remember that manager, the time we delivered that big mob of sheep down your old man and Dinny and ourselves?" Bill mimicked, "*Are you the drovah?*"

"That was nearly twenty years ago. He's been gone a long time."

"There's plenty more like him. Maybe it's because they're mostly sheepmen. No, it can't be that, for they're different from the sheepmen in Queensland. And look at the horses down there!" His head moved dejectedly from side to side. "You can tell a man by his horse. I suppose they'd reckon I'm a flash coot — that my horses are only fit to put in a show, and are no good for work. But there's something else, Mac. I don't know what it is about some of the people down there — not all of them, I'll admit. A sort of meanness — a snobbishness. They look down their noses at you as if you had no right to be alive. They count every blade of grass in their damned little paddocks and threaten to play hell if a man puts his horses in for a night."

"You're talking about the cockies — the small man struggling to make a living on a thousand acres. He has got to stock the place up to the hilt, and if a traveller comes along and sticks thirty horses in his paddock, you can't blame him for feeling sore!"

"Well, maybe. But if it's a crime for a man to own thirty horses in New South Wales, I'm stopping in Queensland."

"But are you going to keep on droving all your life? Why don't you buy a place here and settle down?"

"I know ... and get a wife ... and be respectable. Thanks, Mac," he added dryly. "I nearly took your advice once. And anyhow, I'm starting off next week with a mob of bullocks for your New South blasted Wales — if the mob isn't sold before we get there."

"What *did* happen to that girl? Did she turn you down?"

"No! She was just out for a good time ... and she happened to be married already!"

"Mmm, was that it! So you went back to the easy stuff!"

"Well, you know where you are with them, anyhow, though it's a bit monotonous at times."

"You're getting old, Bill!"

"I suppose I am! You're not getting any younger either. Yet look at the difference between us. It isn't years that make a man old, Mac. When I was young I could walk down the street and pick out dozens of girls I would have married on the spot. Now I can only see the hundreds of women that I would hate to marry at any price!"

"You're suffering from alcoholic remorse. It's time you were back on the road again!"

"I daresay a bit of work won't do me any harm. Any woman looks good

after a few weeks of corned beef and damper, and scenery that's made up of grass and gibbers and gidgee, and a view that's limited to the south ends of a thousand bullocks!"

He produced his tobacco-tin and rolled a final cigarette. Mac looked speculatively across at him. "Never hear any more of the married woman ... the red-haired one?"

Bill bending over a lighted match shook his head faintly.

"Pity!" Mac soliloquized. "She's the only one I ever heard you really enthusiastic over. Still. ... It may be a good thing. You always were unlucky with chestnuts!"

Bill rose to his feet and stepped off the veranda. From the dim limit of visibility he turned his head. "You go to hell!" he remarked curtly, then the darkness swallowed him.

## Chapter XXI

A COOL breeze swept down the wide empty street, pushing a swirling cloud of dust and papers in front of it, and leaving little eddies in every lane and vacant allotment in its wake. Although it was early spring, the raw breath of winter still dominated the morning air. In an hour or so, the heat of the sun might bring the butcher's dog out to his favourite camping-ground in the middle of the footpath, and the housewives of the little country town with long coats shrouding their dishabille would hurry from the baker's to the butcher's and on to Williams's Cash Store at the bottom of the town or to the more pretentious establishment of Horton and Young at the other end.

At the moment, however, it would have been possible to have carried out machine-gun practice the length of the main street without endangering a single life, and even if the battered, hoodless tourer parked outside the garage had been riddled, the loss would not have mattered.

The man slumped on the bench in a sheltered corner of the pub veranda, gazed moodily across the street at the War Memorial — a German machine-gun mounted on a rough block of concrete set in a patch of rank, dusty grass. From his seat it was just possible to decipher from the signboard a little farther along, that the dilapidated, weather-board building with the crooked veranda was the headquarters of a buyer of wool and skins. The bank next door stood back from the street, but at this early hour its gauze-screened windows looked bleakly on the scene of inactivity, and even the office of the local builder who signified his further profession of undertaker by exhibiting an artificial wreath under a glass dome in his one fly-specked window, looked as though depression had forced the builder through lack of trade to inter himself underneath it.

Bill was just debating whether to enter the empty bar and have another drink when a telephone bell woke the funereal silence of the pub. In the doorway he almost collided with the publican. "Your call coming through, Mr Muir."

He propped himself against the wall, opposite a coloured print of last year's Melbourne Cup winner, and hello-ed into the instrument till a distant voice murmured wearily, "Here y'are!" Then a clear voice. "Hallo. ... Who's speaking? Oh, it's you, Bill. ... How are you? No, it's Bessie here ... Bessie MacAndrew. You got Bob's letter? Yes, he got

home just before Dad died, and he's been terribly busy ever since. Isn't it awful, the fall in the wool market. I don't know what we'll do this year. And sheep aren't worth selling. What were you saying? Oh, about Bob ...? He wants you to come down and look at the property he has in mind. Leave it to him? But he wants you specially! Where is he? Oh, I forgot to tell you, he's down with scarlet fever. What's that? Oh no, it would be no good coming here. I'm nursing him and we'll be isolated for nearly a month yet. But they want you to stay at Camelot. The homestead's only two miles from us. Oh ... won't you? Wait a minute till I see Bob!"

Bill relaxed with an expression of utter chagrin. Bessie's tidings were in keeping with the bleak depression of the outside street. Mac's letter reached him just before the end of the trip, and after delivering the bullocks, he had ridden on alone. Mac wanted his financial help in buying Camelot, but for some obscure reason, he particularly wanted his presence.

The receiver crackled again and a deep, well-known voice came out of it. "That you, Bill? Mac here. I know I shouldn't, but Bessie said you weren't keen on coming. Look here, Bill, I want you to come! There's a lot of dirty work going on here. I was just getting on to it when the fever knocked me. I suspect the fellow who was overseer at Camelot. He's been robbing them right and left. We're all working short handed here — this 'flu epidemic. Come and help us out till I can take over again. ... You will? ... Good man! ... No ... hold on exchange!"

Through the troubled indecision hazing his mind, two names were emerging and clamouring for recognition. "Atherton. ... Camelot. ... Atherton. ... Camelot." Then he recalled the last time he had heard them — under the big river coolabahs at distant Boulia where he had met Mac and his nondescript plant. "Atherton ...!" His eyes glinted darkly as the name woke a deep hidden memory. Yes, he decided, he would like to meet this Atherton, just to satisfy his curiosity on one particular point.

Bob's voice took up the running again. "No, it wouldn't be safe for you to come here, Bill. Camp on the creek? ... Not on your life! ... They're expecting you at Camelot. The old man's a fine fellow, a real gentleman. Too easygoing, though. Won't believe wrong of anyone. That's been his downfall. He's pretty sick, but tries to carry on. Game as they make 'em! You're riding, are you? Well, take the Bridle Track. ... Yes, the way we went back. After you cross Middle Creek ... about fifteen miles ... turn down the creek half a mile. Then follow the Bridle Track across the hills. It's rough, but it cuts off five miles. So long, Bill!"

It was mid-afternoon when Bill topped the last ridge and looked on Camelot. The narrow path meandered down the cleared slope to join a straight well-defined track at a white wooden gate. A mile away, on the banks of a small creek fringed with oaks and an occasional gum, stood the homestead, its red-painted roof nestling among the green foliage of

orchard and garden with a dark barrier of tall pines beyond. Behind the garden stood the station buildings and yards, and a wind-mill turned industriously. From its elevated position on the last gradual slope of the foothills the homestead looked out across a wide tract of undulating country, judiciously ring-barked and cleared till it resembled rolling park land, extending toward the haze of the western plains.

He stopped to water his horses at the creek, then rode on to the homestead with the packhorse following behind, stopping to nibble at an occasional tuft of grass, then trotting along to make up the lost time. Bill turned off between the homestead and the outbuildings, skirting the tall, silver-grey saltbush hedge that surrounded the garden. Half a dozen dogs broke into a frenzy of barking, then a man's head emerged cautiously from a doorway and watched the horseman approach. His slow gaze shifted wonderingly from the rider to the clean-limbed, upstanding packhorse following of its own volition.

He accepted the horseman's "Good day" without altering his expression, merely keeping his eyes on the stranger in invitation of a further disclosure of his business.

"This Camelot?"

"It is!"

"Where'll I find the boss?"

A thumb indicated the homestead. "He might be on the veranda."

Bill eyed the reluctant donor of information dispassionately, then rode back to the main gate and dismounted. A broad carriage-drive swept past the front of the house, and between the gate and the wide stone steps his eye noted the evidence of neglect here and there. Only the strip of garden bordering the veranda showed signs of recent care — the rest had been allowed to run wild.

As he hesitated on the edge of the veranda, a pleasant voice called, "Come in! Would you mind coming round here, please!"

Bill walked to the corner of the veranda, his spurs clinking musically at each step. The cultured voice hailed him again, "Are you Mr Muir? We've been expecting you."

The visitor saw an elderly man with a clipped grey moustache, and his head quite bald except for a fringe of grey hair round the sides. He wore a dressing-gown and sat, propped up by pillows, a rug covering his knees, in a long chair. His skin had a strange yellowish pallor, and the hand he stretched toward the visitor was thin and shrunken. But the genial warmth of his welcoming smile emphasized the sincerity of his speech.

Bill released the thin hand. "I must apologize for butting-in on you, but Mac insisted, and I couldn't go on there."

"We're very pleased to have you, and I hope you'll make yourself at home. I really must apologize for having no one here to meet you, but we

are rather short-staffed at the moment and we find it impossible to get further help with this influenza epidemic raging.”

“I'll be all right, thanks!” Bill glanced toward the gate and hesitated.

The elder man read his gesture. “You would like to look after your horses? You'll find the gate to the horse-paddock just behind the yard. Did you see anything of Tom?”

“The old fellow?”

“Yes. He'll show you the paddock and the saddle-room.” He leaned sideways on one elbow and peered in the direction of the gate, then he dropped weakly back into the chair and looked up with a faint apologetic smile. “Excuse me, but I was trying to get a look at your horses. You see, I've heard all about them. Bob has told us so much about you and your horses that I can't look on you as a stranger.”

Bill's constraint ebbed before a wave of sympathy. His early stiffness thawed at the discovery of a common bond. “Would you like me to bring them inside after I pull the saddles off?”

The clear-cut features lighted eagerly. “Will you? I would appreciate it very much. I can't get about to see things for myself, nowadays, and I must confess to a weakness for horses!”

Bill nodded silently and turned away with a lump in his throat. As he led the two horses to the outbuildings, a thought suddenly froze his mind. “Suppose I was lying there, weak and helpless, in a little world bounded by a saltbush hedge ... cut off from my own world ... the company of men ... a life of action ... and horses! It would be hell!”

The invalid leaned forward against the arm of the chair, his avid eyes concentrated on the two horses striding smoothly at Bill's shoulder. One was a deep-girthed, broad-chested bay with wide forehead and clear intelligent eye, clean-boned and hard-muscled, a perfect model of speed and stamina. The other bay horse was richer in colour, with a running star on its forehead and white hind feet. There was breeding in every line — in the tired but still spirited carriage of the shapely head, in the full, undaunted eye and the rich satiny coat with the veins standing out through the dust and dried sweat of travel.

Bill dropped the reins and the horses stood calm and fearless in the broad drive in front of the veranda. The old man leaned forward in the chair to his full extent, his eyes burning with a strange happy light, his nostrils greedily inhaling the warm horse-smell that woke the nostalgia deep in his heart, his thin fingers itching with the desire to run their sensitive tips up the neck, across the sloping shoulder, then down the forearm and the flat cannon-bones to the clean round fetlocks.

“They're not looking their best.” Bill was mildly apologetic. “They're tired and leg weary after four months on the road with cattle. Coronet, the bay nearest you, is a picture when he's in condition.”

The old man lifted a protesting hand. “I'm seeing them at their best! Fat

may cover a lot of faults on a horse. Hard work brings out the blemishes.” He sank wearily back into the pillows, his eyes still feasting on the animals, and he shook his head sadly. “I thought I was quite resigned to ... things, but you make me long for my youth again.”

When Bill picked up the trailing reins and started off to the paddock, the old eyes followed the departing horses out of sight, delighting in the clean, easy action, and reflecting warmly on the confidence existing between the horses and the man. Gradually the exhaustion succeeding the unwonted expenditure of energy flowed over him. A happy contented smile lingered on the wasted features for a little while, then slowly faded as the insidious, stabbing pain deep down inside re-awoke and racked him once again.

## Chapter XXII

CORONET rose to his feet with a vigorous grunt of contentment, shook the dust off in a thick cloud, and followed his mate up the paddock with a long-drawn snore at the prospect of unhobbled freedom. Bill leaned on the gate watching them with a fellow-feeling — sharing their pleasure. It worried him more when seasons were bad to know that his horses were short-hobbled on poor feed than to go hungry himself. His perfect contentment demanded as a foundation the knowledge that his horses were comfortable. Then he could go ahead and enjoy life.

He had almost completed the disposal of his saddlery in the dim harness-room when a torrent of barking heralded the approach of someone. The uproar died away to an occasional yelp of pleasure, so he concluded that the latest arrival belonged to Camelot, and went on with the job of hanging the pack-bags out of reach of the rats.

A black kelpie pup bounced into the doorway and greeted the intruder with a falsetto *woof* of challenge and an expression that betokened doubt as to what to do next, coupled with instant preparedness to do it. Bill glanced down at it with an encouraging “Hallo, pup,” and it immediately switched on the broad disarming smile that belongs solely to puppyhood and wagged its tail and its entire spine with it, to show how pleased it was to meet him and to beg to be excused for its stupidity in not recognizing him at once.

A businesslike beat of hoofs approached the saddle-room and Bill slung his stockwhip over one shoulder and emerged into the glare of the sunlight, calmly ignoring the fawning puppy at his feet. His first glance took in the mount — a quick, general impression of the well-bred mare, then a keen glance at the legs, at the shoulder, and at the head. Then he glanced casually at the rider — a girl in riding-breeches, tan boots, and a fawn coat — and his casualness vanished in a flash. He stood rooted to the spot, staring incredulously at her.

“Hallo, Lancelot! So it really *is* you!”

“*Elaine!*” His lips framed the word reluctantly, as though afraid to believe and find himself mistaken. He could only stand and stare at the laughing, animated face with the dark auburn hair curling softly from under her hat.

The girl dismounted and approached with outstretched hand. “I’m not a ghost! Aren’t you going to shake hands?”

He gripped not only one but both her hands, and their firm warm contact loosened the spell on his tongue. "Elaine! What are *you* doing here?"

She smiled serenely back. "I live here!"

"But what *is* your name ... your real name?" he demanded.

"Elaine! It really is! Elaine Atherton."

"*Atherton!*" he echoed. "Not Barlow? Aren't you Mrs Barlow?"

She threw her head back and laughed a long rippling laugh. "No, of course not! What makes you think that?"

"That time you were in Longreach ... at the hotel. ... They told me you were Mrs Barlow."

The girl continued to simmer with merriment. "Good heavens, no! I was travelling with Mrs Barlow and the room was booked in her name. That's probably how it happened." She threw an accusing look at him. "*You* are the base deceiver! Lancelot ... *alias* Bill Muir!"

Bill blinked. "How do you know? Who told you my name?"

"No one gave away your secret. But when Bob Mac-Andrew told us about his partner and his mania for horses, my innocent questions brought a close description of Lancelot. Quite simple, isn't it?"

But Bill did not join in her infectious merriment. He was suddenly and deadly serious, confronted by a disturbing conviction that must be settled one way or the other. "Then you ... you must be the girl ..."

"*The* girl?" she queried mockingly. "Lancelot, that's a leading question!"

"The one that Mac ..." Bill stammered and was tongue-tied, then plunged desperately on. "Didn't you and Mac go to school together ... I mean ..."

"We had the same governess when we were kids, if that's what you mean."

"Then ..." he began, and stopped hopelessly. An icy-cold stream was pouring in on his muddled thoughts, quenching the gathering conflagration inside him and putting out the fire in his eyes as the situation slowly dawned on him. He released the girl's hands and took the reins of the impatient mare. "I'll let your horse go," he said quietly, and busied himself releasing buckles with hands that moved mechanically without need of help from his numbed brain.

Elaine watched him in a perturbed silence. The injured side of his face was toward her, the drooping lid and twisted corner of the mouth shielding his thoughts and feelings like a mask. The change in his manner had been so complete ... so sudden. What was the reason for his insistent questions about her and Bob? Then the tension of her features slowly relaxed in a faint smile. So that was it!

She fell into step beside him as he led the unsaddled horse to the paddock and plied him with questions about his trip, about the cattle,

then adroitly switched on to the subject of his horses. Gradually the brief replies lengthened and began to lose their flat, mechanical tone. How many horses had he brought to Camelot? Only two! Why hadn't he brought all his plant and given them a good spell?

He threw her a searching glance from the corner of an eye and there was more than a hint of sarcasm in his reply. "If I brought thirty horses down through this State they'd reckon it was a travelling circus. Anyhow," he added casually, "it wouldn't be much of a spell. I'll be going back in a day or two!"

She leaned against the paddock-gate and looked levelly at him for a moment, then she asked seriously, "Did Bob give any reasons for asking you to come here?"

"Nothing definite! I don't see how I can help him. It's hard luck that he's laid up, but he could find dozens of better men than me ... I'm not a sheepman."

"Wait a minute!" Her expression was serious. The last hint of flippancy had left her, and tiny crow's-feet gathered at the corners of her eyes. Somehow, Bill was beginning to realize that this girl was different from the Elaine of Longreach. The old gay spirit had bubbled up at their first meeting, but now he was finding a depth to her character, a maturity that enhanced rather than detracted from his original impression of the girl.

"Did Bob mention anything about Camelot? Our financial position, or anything connected with it?" Seeing him hesitate she went on. "I may as well tell you frankly that our position is ... well, it's serious! It took me a long time to realize it. We always seemed to have plenty of money to spend, and even when we gave up our home in Sydney and settled here, I did not understand the real reason. Even after Mother died, it was a long time before Daddy took me into his confidence and gave me an inkling of things. Poor old Daddy! He's an idealist. ... Always wanted to have the best sheep ... the best horses ... and all his life he has been so unbusinesslike that really we're lucky to be still here. He has been fleeced by his managers. He always seems to have bought sheep when prices were high, and sold them when they were low. For the last few years I have tried to steady things a bit but our bad luck still clings to us. Remember that big fire some years ago when a city wool-store was burned to the ground? We lost all our wool in that!

"The rise in wool prices helped a bit, but for years our sheep have been disappearing — we don't know how. Bob thought he had discovered a clue, and he worked day and night on his own place and helping me here. Then he got sick. Since then, more sheep have gone. When Bob found he would be shut up for six weeks he sent for you. And that's the position," she concluded simply.

Bill considered a while in silence, then he asked, "Do you suspect anyone in particular?"

The girl shook her head slowly. "I really couldn't say. Old Mr MacAndrew blamed the overseer we had, but after Mr Williams left, the losses still went on."

"Did he go to another job?"

"No. He bought a small place about fifty miles away. I thought he was quite all right. He was a good man with sheep and his dogs were wonderful."

Bill nodded abstractedly. He would have to get Mac's version. As they walked slowly back to the homestead, Elaine asked quietly, "Have you seen Daddy?"

"Yes, when I arrived. He was anxious to see the horses."

"Yes. He's awfully keen on good horses. We have one or two quite good ones here — in spite of the fact that we don't live in Queensland!"

He smiled at the sly dig as he held open the gate for her. She gestured despairingly at the neglected garden. "Isn't this wilderness a depressing sight! I'm afraid we'll have to let the horses in to keep it down. We used to keep a gardener once, but now ...!" She shrugged eloquently, then her manner changed and the grey eyes sparkled mischievously under the long eyelashes. "I suppose I'll have to call you Bill, now! Or perhaps I'd better stick to Mr Muir!"

"Please yourself ... Miss Atherton!"

She advanced threateningly on him. "Lancelot, if you ever call me Miss Atherton in that tone of voice — or in any other — I'll slay you on the spot! I'm going to call you Bill to avoid complications ... if I can remember not to call you Lancelot! By the by, did you ever tell Bob ... or anyone ... about our meeting in Longreach?"

"I told Bob what happened to the car that night, but mentioned no names. He drew his own conclusions, and I didn't trouble to argue with him. I knew he wouldn't believe me."

"Bob *is* a bit Victorian in his ideas about women, although if I admitted to anyone at all that I spent the night at your camp ... in your bed ... it would be very hard to convince them that I'm not a fallen woman!" She chuckled softly. "Bob was quite upset at missing me. I didn't let him know I was arriving; in fact, we didn't expect to stop in Longreach ... and I really tried to get him on the telephone from the hotel but couldn't raise him."

"No wonder! He was in town at the time himself. I tried to get him to come to the dance, but he wouldn't. He stayed away from the races. Has no interest in horses and he never bets, although I did my best to get him to come in on the black filly that time we made the clean-up." He stopped, then added thoughtfully. "I wonder if things would have turned out differently if he had met you then!"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know." He answered off-handedly, and they continued along

the path in silence.

Alone in his room Bill leaned back in a chair and let his divided attention wander between an inspection of his new quarters and an attempt to sort out the tangle of his thoughts and feelings. It was a big, high-ceiled room, tastefully furnished, and opening on to a wide veranda that looked out toward the eastern hills. Bill decided to sleep on the veranda where he could see the stars when he woke at his usual hour for going on watch, and enjoy the luxury of turning over and going to sleep again till daylight.

The sound of a fast-moving car grew louder, and he stepped out on the veranda as the engine stopped. A stoutish, middle-aged man in a white dust-coat got out and walked straight toward the house like one who was well acquainted with it, and Bill returned to his room. Two incidents stood out in his mind above all others — two that he would not previously have thought could have affected him in the slightest. First, the shock of meeting Elaine again, and then the discovery that she was the girl for whom Mac worked, of whom he had dreamed since he was a boy. His first inclination had been to saddle up and ride back to Queensland where Percy was waiting with the horses. Only the recollection of Mac's urgent appeal for help had momentarily stayed him, then Elaine's frank statement had caused him to postpone the impulse, but he knew he could not stay on here under the same roof.

He would spend a few days riding round the property, starting out at daylight and returning at dark, and he could always plead weariness to evade the possibility of social contact in the evenings; then if he found that the job was beyond him, he could say so and go north again.

There was a tap at the door, then Elaine's voice, "Can you spare a moment, Bill?"

He opened the door and followed her in silence, thinking how strangely subdued she was. She paused at the end of the hall and looked steadily at him. There was the faintest tremor in her quiet tones. "Bill, I want you to do something for me! I hate to ask you, but ... the doctor will tell you!"

She ushered him into a large, dim room. "This is Mr Muir, Dr Anderson. I'll leave you for a few minutes, if you'll excuse me!"

The doctor and Bill took mutual stock of one another. Bill saw the tired, lined faced of a man of about fifty, the eyes bloodshot, with heavy pouches underneath, and the grey suit sagged on him as though it had been made for a bigger man.

The doctor's eyes travelled rapidly over the man before him. The clear deeply-tanned skin, the easy athletic poise, and the firm hand-grip told their own tale. The eyes were reserved but clear, and met him steadily, and his professional eye lingered on the injured side of Bill's face. "How did that happen?" he asked.

"Horse kicked me," Bill replied laconically.

“Before the war?”

Bill nodded.

“Thought so!” The doctor desisted from his scrutiny and glanced keenly at him. “Ever use a hypodermic needle?”

“I've inoculated a few thousand cattle,” was the casual reply.

“Never used it on a human being?”

Bill shook his head, vaguely wondering why there should be any difference between sticking a needle into a human being or into a bullock. A man would be easier to handle ... no need to yard him and run him into a crush.

The doctor produced a small plated box. “I'll show you how to do it.” He fitted the syringe together and bared his forearm for Bill to experiment on.

“That'll do! You'll manage it.” He handed over a thin brown tube. “That's the morphine — one tablet at a time.”

Bill looked up with a slightly bewildered expression. “I haven't quite got the idea yet. Who do you expect me to use this on?”

“Didn't Miss Atherton explain? Oh, I'm sorry! It's her father. ... The pain's growing too severe, and he'll need this to get any rest. Miss Atherton will nurse him. I'm afraid he's too weak to leave his bed again, unless he's lifted bodily. But she can't stand the idea of giving him the needle. Lots of people are like that where their own family is concerned. Will you take it on?”

Bill frowned. “But I can't stay here for long! Who's going to do it then?”

“I'm trying my hardest to get a nurse ... two nurses if possible. But so far, I've had no luck. This damned 'flu has filled all the hospitals, and there doesn't seem to be a nurse available in the eastern States, but I'm still trying.”

“When will you be out again, doctor?”

The grey head shook gloomily. “God only knows! I'm going night and day in there. Ring me up if there's anything you want to know. I've got to get back, so good-bye ... and good luck!”

He passed through the doorway, leaving Bill staring at the shining instrument and the deadly little tube, seeing in them further links in the chain that bound him against his will, curtailed his freedom and the saving instinct to get out while the going was good.

## Chapter XXIII

THE first sleepy note of a magpie brought Bill out of bed before the dawn, and as he dressed in quiet haste, the rest of the magpie clan in the dark pine-trees joined in the morning hymn in one and twos, their limpid, clear, rounded notes tumbling over one another in a cascade of lavish melody. A kookaburra chuckled sardonically at sight of the man striding up the horse-paddock in the misty grey-blue light with a whip and a bridle slung over one shoulder. Bill was back at the yard with the half-dozen horses the paddock yielded by the time the sun had heaved himself over the hilly skyline, and his expression as he glanced over the station hacks was anything but flattering to them.

As he passed through the kitchen, the woman cook, fat and frowsy, answered his "Good morning" perfunctorily, with a faintly hostile look as though she resented the fact that anyone should usurp the cook's prerogative of being up first. In the hall he almost collided with Elaine wrapped in a kimono, her auburn hair in glorious disarray. She threw him a sleepy smile. "I'm not used to visitors who get up before the magpies. Go in and have a yarn with Daddy till I get dressed."

The old man smiled wanly as Bill entered the room and perched cautiously on the edge of the bed.

"Had a good night?"

"Quite good ... till the effect of the morphine wore off. You were up very early. Didn't you sleep well?"

"Very well, thanks. I feel like the Digger who reckoned he'd hire a bugler to play reveille every morning just for the pleasure of telling him to go to hell, and going to sleep again. When you've been on the road watching cattle every night, you get into the habit of waking regularly when you're due to go on watch. It's great to know you don't have to roll out in the cold and ride round the mob for a couple of hours in the dark."

The sunken eyes warmed as they watched him. "Did I hear you getting the horses in?"

"Habit again, I'm afraid. I hope I'm not doing someone out of a job!"

"Tom won't mind. He would only be starting out now, in any case. By the by, we'll have to get you something to ride. Your own horses must have a rest."

Bill hesitated. He certainly wanted his pair to have a spell, but he could not foresee much pleasure in riding anything else in the yard. Elaine's

brown mare was all right, but still, it belonged to her. Atherton seemed to divine his thoughts. "I have one or two quite good horses in another paddock, although some of them haven't been ridden for a long time. It's so hard nowadays to get men who will get on a horse unless they think he's perfectly quiet."

"I know!" Bill studied the patient thoughtfully. He was beginning to realize the depth of suffering that the man had striven to conceal, and his admiration went out to the spirit behind the wasted frame. "You should have had another needle last night!" he told him. "Do you mind if I bring my bed along the veranda near your door?"

"You mustn't worry about me — and you're certainly not going to lose your sleep on my account."

"I won't!" Bill assured him. "I'll come in and have a look at you when it's time to go on watch. I say ..." He pondered a moment, groping for the words. "Just exactly what is the trouble? Don't tell me if you'd rather not!"

The face on the pillow wore a thin smile. He glanced cautiously toward the door of Elaine's room, then he whispered one word.

Bill's face grew grave. "But can't the doctors do anything?"

"Too late!" the low voice answered. "I went down to Sydney not very long ago, and consulted a specialist. He decided to operate immediately." He paused with another significant glance at the door. "They did. ... But it was too late ... so I came home."

"You mean ...?"

The head on the pillow nodded quietly. "They gave me a month ... perhaps two!"

Bill walked slowly to the veranda doorway and looked out through eyes that did not see the neglected garden or the winding line of the creek timber, but seemed to focus on something far beyond in the distant invisible land of the plains. Then he moved back to his seat near the foot of the bed and his steady eyes carried a message of assurance to the man lying there. "I want you to let me know whenever I can help you!"

The head nodded dumbly, and Bill went on to unfold an idea that had occurred to him. "Do you mind if I send for one of my men? I would like to have young Percy handy. He's a fine horseman ... a half-caste, but miles ahead of a lot of white men."

Atherton hesitated. "I would be very glad, but ..."

"It's only to help me out. As soon as this 'flu passes there will be plenty of men looking for jobs, then we can move on." He was more than pleased when Elaine entered the room, bright and cheerful, and created a welcome diversion to a conversation that was becoming rather involved.

The girl rode out with him after breakfast to muster the horses out of a two-thousand-acre paddock that ran up into the flat-topped hills. They had traversed more than half of it when Bill drew rein and pointed

silently ahead. On the crest of a hill a horse stood silhouetted against the sky, head held fearlessly aloft, mane and tail floating out in the light breeze. It lingered for a space of seconds, the epitome of glorious, untrammelled freedom, beauty in every splendid line — then suddenly it was gone.

Bill jammed his hat down on his head as Coronet shot forward like a rocket with the girl galloping hard in the rear in a vain endeavour to catch up. Bill eased his horse on the bouldered slope, steering a diagonal course through the timber that would bring him out on the flank of the mob. The picture of the horse on the hilltop had fired him, stirred his blood to a fierce, joyful anticipation. It was evident that Coronet realized equally what was afoot, and the rider was forced to steady him all the way up the steep slope. The summit rose in an abrupt rocky wall, and in the momentary pause, Bill remembered the girl. He walked his horse stealthily along under the barrier, searching for a gap till Elaine burst through the trees, flushed with excitement, her eyes sparkling, and the brown mare blowing and already edging the saddle-cloth with a creamy lather.

He cautioned her to silence, and the horses scrambled up a narrow break in the rocks and gained the fringe of wind-blown timber of the summit. The flat top of the hill was covered with bushes and a few scattered trees. A quarter of a mile away an iron-grey head and shoulders appeared suddenly above the bushes in a tense listening attitude then, apparently satisfied, the horse went on feeding.

“We'll get as close to them as we can!” Bill told her in a low voice. “I'll get round them and turn them down to the flat. You keep them from breaking out behind me — send them along as hard as you can. We'll tie a knot in them down below!”

Bill rode slightly ahead, his horse questing eagerly with pricked ears and on its toes with the tension that flowed to it from the rider. Elaine impatiently urging her slower walking horse along in the rear, just caught a glimpse of a horse's head lifting suspiciously from the scrub, heard the shrill snort of warning as it disappeared, and the sudden clatter of many hoofs. She saw Bill on Coronet, lengths ahead, going through the timber like a streak, racing out to head the horses careering across the plateau with manes and tails streaming in the wind.

A stockwhip banged somewhere ahead. She dashed through the scattered timber to find herself on the sheer brink of the hill, and with a frantic effort swerved the mare on the crumbling edge and galloped along it till she hit a sharp declivity scored with the hoof-marks of the mob. Away down the rocky hillside she saw them streaming with a rider out on the flank. She did not pause to think of the danger. Her blood was up, and if Bill could gallop down there, she was going to follow. The mare needed no urging, and with teeth set and the wind whipping her hair

straight back from her head and the tears from the corners of her eyes, she plunged headlong down the rough slope.

The hill was flattening out ... the boulders were getting fewer ... and the trees were bigger and statelier. The brown mare floundered as a rabbit burrow gave way under her, but the girl pulled her to her feet and they sped on.

The timber thinned and the mob lay ahead of her, hoofs drumming in the light screen of dust. She saw the bay horse race up and challenge the brown mare leading the mob. They swerved with the rider still holding the lead ... yelling at them ... his whip swinging. They stopped, bunched together, and just then Elaine arrived.

Coronet was streaming with sweat, and the gleam of battle was in his rider's eye. As she rode up, he shouted, "You go ahead! Ride on to the gate and steady the lead. Keep going till we hit the yard!"

Elaine cantered off, looking round to watch Bill starting the mob in her wake. They came on, the brown leader drawing level, challenging her position, till she drove it back. A faint track led from the gate across that paddock and the next, till the station buildings and the yard hove in sight and she sensed the mob checking distrustfully behind her. She reined her mare and looked round. Bill's whip swung menacingly, urging the suspicious horses. Then he looked up and yelled, "Go on! Don't stop!" And she moved ahead through the high gateway of the yard with the mob trampling and jostling at her heels.

Bill stood at the gate with an encouraging smile for her as she rode her dripping horse outside. Now that the excitement of the chase was over, reaction flooded over her in a wave of sheer exhaustion. She still felt elated at the memory of that wild ride down the hillside — a thing she would never have tackled in the maddest moment of a harum-scarum youth, and when she joined Bill looking over the circling horses in the yard, although her knees were weak and shaky, the feeling of triumph carried her on.

"What do you think of them?" she demanded.

"They're good! How many are broken in?" She pointed out six, including the iron-grey mare, then turned to find the man's eyes focused on the brown mare, the leader that had first shown herself so dramatically on the hilltop.

"How old is the brown mare?" he asked, his eyes following every movement of the animal.

"She must be five years."

He turned a speculative eye. "Do you think your father would sell her?"

Elaine shook her head smilingly. "I don't think he would. She happens to belong to me!"

Bill shrugged his shoulders and turned away again toward the horses.

The girl watched him with an enigmatic smile. "Do you think Percy would break her in for me?"

He shook his head without turning. "I don't think so!"

"Why not?"

His head came round slowly till he looked at her from under the drooping lid. "Because I want to handle her myself!"

## Chapter XXIV

BILL spent two days riding the boundary of Camelot, carefully examining every gateway and gully, every strainer and join in the wires without discovering a single clue to the avenue by which the stolen sheep had been removed. The entire property was enclosed by a rabbit-netting fence topped with a barbed wire, all in a good state of repair, and the situation had him frankly puzzled.

He did not disclose his real mission to Sam Haynes, the boundary-rider at Shanty Creek. Sam had charge of the hilly paddocks at the back of Camelot where most of the sheep had been lost. He was a garrulous individual, ready to discuss any subject under the sun, from the probable winner of the next Melbourne Cup to the spiciest extracts from *Truth*, but as he was not only willing but anxious to do all the talking, Bill let him babble on, and remained to all intents and purposes the new horse-breaker. However, Sam had to furnish Elaine with a strict tally of the sheep in each paddock under his care, and old Tom found himself busier than he had been for a long time looking after the sheep in the lower paddocks.

Camelot was only lightly stocked, and as a result of his inquiries regarding the sheep losses, the approximate dates when the losses had been discovered, and the paddocks that had chiefly suffered, Bill felt inclined to advise the removal of all the stock to the lower paddocks although the feed was shorter there.

However, in the end he decided to leave things as they were, and one afternoon he drove into the little town in the station car with Elaine at the wheel. There were a few cars and sulkies along the main street; in fact, compared to Bill's last sight of the town, it was seething with life. After making some saddlery purchases at the store, he walked down to the police station and spent a profitable half-hour with the mounted constable. Strolling thoughtfully back, he almost collided with a bulky figure that got abruptly out of a car and slammed the door behind him. It was the doctor, looking more tired and haggard than ever. His naturally brusque manner was accentuated by the strain of overwork till his questions sounded like demands and his terse sentences snapped out with an autocratic ring.

"How's Mr Atherton getting on? Hm-mm. ... Oh well, let him have it oftener, but not less than two hours between each. And for God's sake

don't ask when I'll be out! The hospital's full to overflowing ... half the staff have got 'flu. ... More than half the town is down with it. ... I can't get a nurse anywhere for love nor money, and I've had a total of four hours' sleep in the last two days. Good-bye, and if any of your kids ever want to join the medical profession, strangle them quietly while they're young!"

A tall, slim figure detached itself from a verandapost as Bill passed the pub, and followed him unobtrusively round the corner. "Hallo, Percy! Got your gear all ready? Well, listen. A grey car will back down this lane soon. Have everything ready to hop in behind as quietly as you can. I don't want anyone in this town to see you with us."

Bill and Percy rode out from the homestead early next morning, and Elaine gained the veranda just in time to see the end of a buckjumping exhibition with Percy sitting easily on the pitching grey mare, laughing cheerfully at her efforts to get rid of him. They made for the eastern end of the run where the boundary fence spanned deep, rocky gullies and climbed the steep, broken slopes of hills — rough scrubby country with big grey kangaroos flitting like ghosts through the timber, and rabbits scuttling in all directions.

They seemed to ride to no apparent plan, following the fence closely for half a mile, then one of them would circle wide. Neither spoke much although Percy contributed the greater part of the conversation while his dark-brown eyes covered the terrain with the inherited skill of his mother's people, allied to the intelligence and reasoning powers of his white progenitor.

Bill's interest was beginning to flag under the apparent hopelessness of the quest when Percy halted the grey well out from the fence and sat very still, his eyes bent on the ground. They had descended the steep side of a hill; a little farther on a timbered creek crossed the boundary at right angles. Percy mechanically soothed the fidgeting grey, his eyes flickering from the few scattered trees to a minute inspection of the quartz pebbles that littered the ground. He swung to the ground, picked up something, then mounted again and rode close to the fence, scrutinizing the ground on the other side and studying the winding course of the creek.

Then he beckoned to Bill. The two rode back to the spot where he had first halted and Percy handed over the object he had picked up — a short length of cheap rope. He pointed to various trees. "There's been a rope break or a wing tied along here ... same along that side ... coming in narrow toward the fence. See the sheep tracks ... stones turned up everywhere with the underside up!"

Bill could only discern an occasional tree with the roughness worn off the bark in an encircling ring, but the sheep tracks were plain enough. He followed them to where they ended abruptly, some distance out from the

fence. No wonder he had missed them on his first inspection! But having got the sheep so far, how had they got them away? The fence was uncut ... undisturbed in any way. Then the solution dawned on him and he swung on the smiling Percy who had already reconstructed the entire business in his mind.

“Well, I'll be damned! The tarpaulin trick!”

They clambered over the fence, and Percy walking ahead pointed to a line of pebbles pressed firmly into the ground, then to a short, sharp-edged mark. “Long wide planks, I think!” He stuck a twig into the ground, then some distance ahead put in another and measured the space between with his stockwhip. He measured a similar distance ahead from the second twig and pointed to another sharp line on the ground beside the embedded pebbles with a glint of triumph in his eye. “Big lorry, I think. Backed him against this side of fence!”

“And built a ramp with tarpaulins and ropes from the tailboard to the yard on our side. Picked a dark night and shone lamps on the ramp! He picked a nice sheltered spot too, where his lights would never be seen. Then put planks under his tyres — that must have been a slow job. I wonder how far he took the sheep. Must have landed them before daylight!”

“Pity we haven't done any droving about this country,” Percy remarked regretfully. “We'd know all the brands and earmarks ... and all the crooks!”

“It might have been a butcher, but I don't know. ... This fellow must have known the paddock ... and the sheep. ... He always took young ewes ... and he must have had good, quiet dogs. I think Mac's about right!” he added significantly.

They followed the tracks round the base of the hill. In places the driver of the truck had slipped off the planks or had got careless, and the faint pattern of his tyres still showed on the dry ground. Then they joined a well-beaten track through the timber where the tyre marks were almost obliterated by the passage of cars and carts and sheep winding along the dusty grey depressions.

On their return to the homestead they rode on to Mac-Andrew's selection and interviewed the convalescent Mac over an intervening barrier of garden. Bessie appeared first and greeted Bill warmly. He had not seen her since the family left Longreach and was hardly prepared for the big buxom woman that chattered laughingly from her enforced isolation among the flowers. Mac listened keenly to their discoveries which promised to supply the proofs to his theories, then Bill propounded a plan.

When they left, Bill was leading the grey mare while Percy followed uncertainly on a bicycle. Next morning Percy and the bike disappeared from Camelot.

If Elaine had not been more than fully occupied with the tasks of housekeeping and the nursing of an invalid, Bill's attitude since his arrival might have affected her more. In the daytime he seldom appeared at the homestead, and in the evenings he seemed deliberately to avoid her company. The only consoling feature was the attachment that had grown between Bill and her father. Their mutual bond and chief topic of conversation was naturally horses, but in addition to that there was no mistaking the sincerity of the younger man's friendship, while the older man reciprocated by taking Bill into his confidence more than anyone Elaine could ever remember. In fact, there were times when she herself felt somewhat piqued at being excluded from some of the discussions.

Bill's friendship with Atherton had developed from his early appreciation of the man's uncomplaining stoicism, his ceaseless endeavours to show a brave face to his daughter and to the world. He had arrived filled with suspicion, even prepared to hate, but the courtly charm of the elder man, his invincible optimism regarding affairs and a quality that had almost ruined him financially — and his serene philosophy of life, made the younger man look forward with increasing pleasure to the evenings and their talks in the warm lamplight. Within a week of their meeting the two men had reached an intimacy that could not have been surpassed had they been father and son.

Away at the back of his mind lay another, a deeper motive for cultivating the confidence of the invalid — the pursuit of a quest that had once figured importantly in his life but that the passing years had almost relegated to the dim recesses with his boyhood memories. Sometimes when Atherton had dropped quietly into morphined oblivion, the young man would sit still and study the fine, wasted features, trying hard to picture him as he had been at his own age, and even younger. There was one subject that he intended to bring up for discussion. He looked forward to it with a grim interest and wondered what the verdict would be.

Elaine, watching them unobserved, would bite her lip at the contrariness of Bill. Why could he not behave toward her as unaffectedly as he did toward her father! There was always present that feeling of studied reserve in his manner — a hedge that shut her off much as Mac and Bessie were barred from the world by a strip of garden. She tried hard to stir him into a return of the old nonsensical gaiety of their Longreach days, but the most she got was a tolerant smile that turned the injured side of his face to a sardonic mask which baffled her beyond measure.

On one or two occasions she succeeded in penetrating his armour and getting a glimpse of the carefree Lancelot she had known. That day they mustered the horses stood out in her memory. Bill had appreciated her then. The admiration in his eyes when they got the horses to the yard was

honest, unforced, and something she treasured. Although she was virtually the boss — they were on her property, mustering her horses — she had obeyed his curt, shouted orders without question and enjoyed doing it.

Then later, when Bill started to break in the brown mare she had slipped across to the yard unobserved and watched his quiet, patient methods gradually overcoming the rebellious mare. Imagining himself alone, he had relapsed into the easy, colourful language that is the natural inheritance of all who handle fractious horses and cattle, and some of the drawled remarks anent the mare's ancestry as he dodged a vicious strike of her hoof, made it hard for Elaine to keep from giggling aloud.

One morning Bill led the mare across to the homestead and paraded her before the veranda for the benefit of the invalid. The old man's eyes lit at the sight of her. He had not seen the animal for over a year and then it had only been a distant glimpse of a wild thing dashing for the safety of the hills. The mare glanced nervously from side to side at her strange surroundings, fidgeted around the man and once gave him an impatient push with her nose, but Atherton noticed that wherever the man moved she moved with him, close as his shadow. Although only a few days ago she had run wild and untouched, she never showed the slightest inclination to revolt. She had learned the first part of her lesson and learned it well.

“When are you going to ride her, Bill?” he queried.

“This evening, I think.”

The old man peered regretfully at the distant yard, then his glance came back to the mare, her virgin back smooth and unmarked, then finally it lingered, full of a vague longing, on the man. A slow smile gathered on Bill's features as he read the unspoken thought. “I'll carry you over to the yard if you like, provided Elaine doesn't mind. She may have to carry you back if the mare scores a win over me!”

Afternoon tea over, they made Atherton comfortable in his long chair just outside the horse-yard where he lay back with eyes glinting with anticipation under half-closed lids. The mare, already saddled, eyed the little group of spectators with nervous foreboding, champing incessantly at the unaccustomed feeling of the bit in her mouth, and ever and anon glancing back from the corner of an eye at the saddle on her back as though dreading its purport.

She eyed Bill distrustfully despite his soothing hands as he slipped the reins over her ears and took a shortened grip of the glossy mane. At the feel of the toe in the stirrup and the increasing pull on the saddle, the mare crouched slowly back on her haunches like a dog preparing to spring, and Elaine, peering through the rails, felt a return of the desire to make Bill hurry, to make him drop that irritating casualness, to warn him of the impending danger.

Then she got a shock. Her worried frown changed to startled wonder as Bill suddenly appeared seated in the saddle with both feet in the stirrup-irons. The lightning movement had apparently confounded the mare as well. She held herself tense, rigid, leaning back on sloping legs with every muscle standing out in bold relief under the velvet skin, then with one swift bound she whirled and plunged high in the air.

Elaine stepped quickly back from the rails, her hand at her throat as the mare hit the ground stiff-legged with a shock like a pile driver, and no sooner had she landed than she was up again, whirling as she went.

The invalid gripped the arms of the chair in his thin hands, dragging his wasted frame forward, his thin nostrils dilated with excitement, his glittering eyes concentrated on the battle and missing never a move. He held his breath as the mare changed her tactics and bucked savagely backwards, her head high, twisting viciously in mid-air, but the rider was with her all the way, sitting confidently in the saddle and holding the loose reins by the buckle in one hand, the other thrown clear as though balancing an imaginary stockwhip.

The mare bucked with a silent, savage intensity. No callow two-year-old this, but a fully matured animal with an inheritance of five years' freedom to maintain. There were three rapid swerving bucks, dipping till the stirrup-irons hit the ground, soaring high in the air till the wide-eyed girl clinging to the rails saw daylight show under the girths, but never between the man and the saddle. A thick, choking dust rose and hung in the windless air, powdering the unconscious spectators and veiling the battle with a yellow haze.

Suddenly the mare reared high in the air, striking stiffly with her forefeet as she stood almost upright. Elaine's heart stopped beating. She pressed a crumpled handkerchief to her lips to suppress the desire to scream as the mare poised on the very verge of balance for an unconscionable age, with the rider leaning forward on its neck grasping a handful of mane. Then it dropped forward like a bullet and before the forefeet reached the ground, the hind legs kicked high in the air.

Again it reared, and this time the spectators were not left in doubt. It soared to the zenith of balance ... passed it, and toppled backwards and sideways on the rider. The old man saw them disappear in a cloud of dust. Only the white faced girl sensed rather than saw the quick movement that freed the rider. The mare hit the ground with a thud that made her grunt and knocked the wind out of her, but the man landed clear with the reins still in his hand, and as the mare scrambled convulsively to her feet, the man was back in the saddle. She stood still, dripping with sweat, one side encrusted with dust. Then the tension ebbed from her corded muscles and she shook her head in reluctant admission of defeat.

That night Bill and the invalid talked horse undisturbed. Elaine passed

noiselessly through the room just once, leaving them barely conscious of her presence. But alone in the sanctity of her darkened room she sat staring wide-eyed through the doorway into the warm black night, grappling with the problem that was becoming unbearable.

## Chapter XXV

BILL hung up the receiver and paused by the telephone in the darkening hall, doing some quick thinking. Then he crossed to his room, changed back into the working-clothes he had worn all day, and slipped quietly out to the horse-paddock. The sun had set behind a dark bank of clouds that was fast extending across the sky, and there was every indication of a storm before morning. Over in the pines the magpies were settling down for the night with a final burst of song to uphold their reputation for being last home and first out in the morning.

It was quite dark when Bill returned, and as he stepped on to the veranda, a figure rose from a deckchair. "Is that you, Bill?"

"Hallo, Elaine! Sorry I'm late. Do you mind if I come to dinner without changing?"

"Of course not!" She peered curiously at him in the khaki shirt and moleskins, indistinct in the darkness. "I thought I saw you changed for dinner a long time ago!"

"I was, as a matter of fact. ..." He hesitated and glanced carefully along the dark veranda as though afraid of being overheard. "But I've got to go out again after dinner."

"Do you want the car?"

"No, I've got a couple of horses in the yard, and I don't know when I'll be back."

"A couple of horses! Are you taking someone with you?" She stared at the indistinct blur of his features, then perplexity gave way to a surge of indignation. "Bill, what *is* all the mystery about? Why am I being kept in the dark?"

"I'm sorry, Elaine! We expect a raid to-night and I'm taking the policeman out to the back paddock. He's on his way from town by car now. I didn't want to worry you till the job was cleared up and finished."

"*I see!*" she blazed out, and the man started at the bitter tone. The weeks of overwork and worry had momentarily broken down the girl's resistance and all her repressed, scarcely acknowledged thoughts came crowding to the surface. "All you're interested in is putting someone in prison for stealing *our* sheep so that you'll be able to ride back to your *wonderful* Queensland and your *marvellous* horses! Well, you needn't let our affairs trouble you any more! I'm very sorry you've been detained here against your will. And as far as the sale of Camelot is concerned,

you may consider it off. So you're are liberty to leave as soon as you like!"

She plunged hurriedly toward her room, leaving Bill staring thunder-struck after her. He walked slowly to his own room and sat heavily on the edge of the bed where he remained deep in gloomy thought till the hum of a distant car reminded him of the business on hand. It occurred to him that he had eaten nothing since mid-day, but his hunger had faded in the face of this latest complication. He opened a drawer and took out a heavy .45 Webley revolver, contemplated it grimly for a few seconds, then thrust it back and shut the drawer with a muttered curse. The policeman could use his if it were needed; all Bill wanted was to get his bare hands on someone and work off the fierce conflicting emotions that he felt he could repress no longer.

To hell with all women!

He strode across to the yards as the headlights of the approaching car turned the corner of the homestead and cut a white swathe in the night. As the mounted constable got out of the car, a grim-faced horseman leading a spare horse circled the path of the lights, urging the frightened horses toward him. Within a few minutes the rhythmic beat of the horses' hoofs died away in the darkness.

The rain started shortly after midnight — lightly at first in scattered drops that gradually increased to a steady downpour. Elaine peered anxiously into the opacity beyond the veranda for the hundredth time, and was on the point of turning back in desperation to the lighted room when a dog barked resentfully. She threw a quick glance at the clock on the dressing-table — only ten past three! She seemed to have been alone for ages. Then she hurried to the kitchen to put more wood on the fire before returning to her patient.

Bill stepped cautiously on to the veranda where a hurricane lamp stood lighted at the door of his room. His sodden shirt was plastered flat on his chest and stained with blood that still trickled from a gash on one cheek-bone. He stopped to remove his squelching boots, the spurs hidden under the accumulation of clinging mud, and emptied the water out of them. He stiffened alertly at the sound of hurrying footsteps, and next instant Elaine appeared, hastening toward him. He stared in amazement, tinged with fear and foreboding. Her features were drawn, and her eyes desperate as she grasped his mud-spattered arm.

"Come quick, Bill," she implored. "Daddy's awfully ill."

Bill followed with an access of remorse. In his haste he had forgotten to give the dose of morphine before he left. He threw a swift, contrite glance at the patient shifting restlessly in the grip of delirium, and hastened to the brown tube of pellets and the little plated case on the dressing-table. He motioned to Elaine, anxiously soothing the restless figure, and she set her lips tightly and held the thin, emaciated arm for

him, her eyes avoiding the shining needle.

Slowly but steadily the drug took effect; the fevered lips ceased their meaningless babble and the wasted yellow features relaxed in sleep. The girl's face was lined with exhaustion. There were dark shadows under the heavy-lidded eyes, and her disordered hair looked dull and lifeless, without a hint of the soft golden sheen that usually radiated from it. Her head lifted with apparent effort, and her tired eyes opened wide as they took in the unkempt figure opposite. She rose unsteadily to her feet and faltered. "Bill. ... Oh, Bill ... you're hurt!"

She came round to him and cautiously touched the gashed cheek, at the same time realizing that he was soaked to the skin. Bill raised his hand to his cheek and stared stupidly at the blood on it. "It's all right," he mumbled. "I'll put some iodine on it."

Elaine mustered the remnants of her ebbing strength and faced him with a show of firmness. "I'm going to get some hot water to bathe it, then you'll get out of those wet clothes and get some sleep!"

"I'll bathe it. You are going to get some sleep right away!"

She dissented desperately. "I'm going to stay here and watch."

"You'll do nothing of the kind! I'll stay. He may want the needle again."

Her head drooped, and she swayed with fatigue and mental strain. She couldn't argue. The words would not come, but she made a last stubborn appeal. "Will you promise to call me in two hours?"

"I'll call you when you're needed," he answered gruffly, turning aside before he succumbed to the desire to put his arms round the tired shoulders and comfort her.

She rested a hand on his arm with a wan, beseeching smile. "Bill ... I didn't mean what I said to-night! I do need you. We couldn't do without you. I don't want you to go. Will you forgive me?"

He nodded desperately, holding himself rigid against the surging impulse, and a flood of incoherent words crowded to his tight-pressed lips. She paused in the doorway, clinging to the side for support, and smiled happily.

"Good night, Lancelot!"

He could only nod, grim-lipped.

When she had gone he stood motionless for a long time, then he drew a long, deep breath and a wild defiant gleam lit his eyes. What if she *were* Mac's girl! They were not engaged. She hardly ever mentioned his name. Anyhow, Mac had had plenty of time to win her if he had only gone about it properly. Why should *he* stand back and crush his own feelings in the dust! All's fair in love and war!

He became suddenly aware of the pools of moisture dripping from his clothes to the carpet, and with a final glance at the sleeping patient he moved softly to his room to change.

The first long, slanting beam of the morning sun crept through the window of the sick-room like a sword challenging the garish yellow lamplight that still lingered like a forsaken spirit of the night. Bill forced his reluctant eyelids open, afraid to move in the big arm-chair because of the multitude of aches that cramped his limbs. The rain had gone, and the sky was clear, the air clean and laden with the warm, heavy scents offered up by a grateful earth, while the magpies voiced their appreciation of the morning in glorious cascades of liquid notes against the hilarious crescendo of the kooka-burras.

Bill glanced keenly at the patient and his face turned grave. He had had to repeat the morphine, but it was evident from the twitching nerves that it was losing its effect. There was something about the sick man, too, that he had never noticed before. Great, sunken hollows showed above the temples, the nostrils were pinched and thin, and the skin had a transparent, ethereal quality that brought Bill to his feet to peer more closely, fear in his eyes. Atherton lived ... but in a world of pain. Bill sat down and gave way to a flood of dark, rebellious thoughts.

The patient was doomed. He knew it himself, and the doctors knew it, yet they must still allow him to linger on in increasing agony till the rapacious fingers of the gnawing monster within him reached a vital spot and ended the chapter. And this was civilization! Why, even a blackfellow was more humane! Man took upon himself the right to put ailing and diseased animals quickly out of their misery, and called it a humane act. Yet he persisted in keeping his doomed fellow humans alive to the bitter end, torturing not only the victim but all who loved him and who were forced to suffer every spasm of the drawn-out, hopeless struggle.

A surge of passionate revolt swept over Bill, and he rose to his feet imbued with a grim resolve to go to town and drag the doctor out by force if necessary.

He was seated alone at breakfast when Elaine came in. Her eyes were heavy with fatigue, both physical and mental, but she threw him an accusing smile. "Bill, why did you let me sleep so long?"

"I slept most of the time myself."

"I don't believe you!" She became serious again. "How do you think he is this morning?"

"I don't know. I'm going in to see the doctor."

"I'm glad! I rang and rang to try and get him last night, but I couldn't even raise the exchange. It was awful!"

"You poor kid!" He spoke softly. Elaine looked swiftly at him and the haunted look faded from her eyes and was replaced by a soft, diffused light. Then she dropped her eyes to her plate and spoke hurriedly. "I don't know what the road will be like after the rain. You'll probably need chains. Do you think you'll be all right?"

“I'll try not to hit any stumps this time!”

She laughed with a tinge of the old gaiety. “I'm sorry, Lancelot, I didn't mean that. But hadn't you better take someone. You have all those gates to open, and you may get stuck.”

“I'm taking Percy. He's over telling Mac about last night.”

She leaned across with a quickening of interest. “Oh, tell me what happened! I was so worried last night I quite forgot to ask.”

“We got him!”

“Who was it?”

“Williams!”

She gasped incredulously. “Mr Williams ... who was overseer here! But how ... I mean how did you know he would come last night?”

“Well, to start at the beginning, Mac suspected him first, then when I could find no tracks to show where the sheep had been taken away, I got Percy down. He's the best tracker I ever met. As soon as we got out to the back of that rough paddock, he dropped on to things straightaway, and we could see that whoever did the job knew more than a little about sheep — and sheep-stealing!”

“But how *did* he steal them?” she interrupted impatiently.

“In a big lorry fitted with two decks like a sheep-truck. He drove in off the main road through Kelly's selection, and turned off it to your boundary fence, driving along the foot of the hills. It isn't far and he laid down wide planks to drive over and cover his tracks. The lorry was backed against the boundary fence with the tailboard resting on the fence posts, then he built a long, sloping ramp of planks from the tailboard to a horizontal bar lashed between two small trees, and more planks from there to the ground. He spread a big tarpaulin there and strung a rope fence from tree to tree like a drover's sheep-break, with wings running out at the back. After we had found how they went, we had to discover where they were taken to and how they were disposed of. Percy tracked the lorry out to the main road but lost it there. However, we knew from the size of the tyres that it was a big truck, and the police tried to trace it through the district registrations but with no luck. Anyhow, I decided to take a long shot, so Percy turned up at William's place pushing a bike. Williams was shearing at the time and Percy got a job, mustering and doing odd jobs round the shearing-shed.

“He used to ring me up fairly often, and one of his first discoveries was that William's sheep had the same earmark as Camelot's, but he used a different tar brand. Yours is a U. His brand is a square with a dot in it, and it is the easiest thing in the world to fake that. I thought we had him till I discovered some of the queer stock laws you have in this State. I found that Williams was fully entitled to that registered earmark. His property is in a different pastoral district, so Williams must have discovered the fact that it was the same earmark as Camelot's and bought

the place while he was here. He's clever, all right!

“Then one day Percy picked up the track of a big lorry — the same tracks that he had seen here — and he followed them to a sort of outstation at the back of William's place. A boundary-rider lived there, and Percy found that he used to work here in William's time. This chap told him Williams had bought the big lorry from a carrier who went broke, and he only used it occasionally on the place. It was not registered. Yesterday evening I had a ring from Percy to say that the lorry had arrived at the homestead and was being fitted with high sides. You'll remember it was a dark night with rain threatening, so if they could only get the job done in time, their tracks would be washed out and no one would be any the wiser.

“I got the local policeman on the phone and he came out straightaway. The sergeant and another policeman picked up Percy in their car, and he brought them along in the tracks of the lorry. When Jones and I got to the hill above the creek, the lorry was in position and one man was fixing up the ramp. We waited till another man arrived with a mob of sheep, the man walking in front and the dog bringing the sheep along behind him, covering his tracks.” Bill paused reflectively. “I wonder how it is that fellows who go in for sheep-stealing or cattle-duffing always have champion dogs or horses. They seem to have a special gift for training them — and they're nearly all fine fellows to meet!”

Elaine eyed him blandly. “You must have picked up a few cattle belonging to other people in your time, Bill!”

His drooping eyelid flickered slightly. “I'm a drover,” he replied dryly.

“Hm-mm!” There was a twinkle in her eye. “Droving in Queensland appears to be rather a comprehensive business! But what happened when the sheep arrived?”

“They switched a spotlight on the ramp — sheep will always travel toward a light at night — and started to run them up into the lorry. We took advantage of the noise to creep down close, and I circled round to the other side. I was scared that dog would spot me, but he was too busy with the sheep. Then when I was ready we just bailed them up. There were only the two of them — Williams and his boundary-rider. Then the other car turned up and they took them away, and Percy and I rode home in the rain.”

She looked thoughtfully across the corner of the table at the man casually rolling a cigarette. “Bill ..” she said slowly, “I'm not going to try and thank you formally for all you've done for us, because anything I could say wouldn't express half of what I feel.”

“It's quite all right,” he broke in diffidently. “I don't like putting a man behind the bars, but in this case, if I hadn't he might have tried to pinch my sheep — well, Mac's sheep!” He corrected himself hurriedly as though he resented the connexion of his name with sheep.

“Bill, I would like to do something for Percy. Can you suggest anything I could give him — anything he would like?”

He brushed aside the idea. “Percy enjoyed it as much as I did. If you offered to pay him, he'd be insulted. He'd most likely think you looked on him as a policeman!”

“But I mean it, Bill,” she protested firmly. “Not necessarily money, but a gift of some sort.”

He studied her a moment. “I'll tell you what he would like,” he ventured. “You know that good sort of a grey mare he rode ...”

“If Percy will accept her, she's his!”

“He'll be the happiest man this side of Borroloola!”

She was rising from the table when a thought stayed her and she scrutinized the strip of plaster on the man's cheek with a puzzled air. “Bill,” she queried, “did those two men give in without a struggle, last night?”

He looked sharply at her. “Why, what makes you think ...?”

“How did you get that cut on your face?”

He hesitated, then with a casual, apologetic look he replied, “Oh, Williams made a bit of a rush. ... Tried to get away in the dark, and I tackled him. He got a bit wild, and ...” he peered out of the window, his eyes darkening, “well, he called me ... something I don't take from anyone, and had a crack at me, and I tore into him till the policeman hopped over and stopped it. Then we slung him into the car.”

“I'm sorry, Bill! Better let the doctor have a look at it.” She walked through to the sick-room, thinking deeply over the sudden transformation in the man's expression. It seemed ludicrous to imagine Bill's getting worked up merely because someone abused him in a heated moment. Still, there it was.

## Chapter XXVI

ON the way to town Bill had little opportunity for letting his thoughts dwell on his personal problems. The task of keeping the car on the soft slippery road called for the full concentration of his faculties, and he pulled up in front of the doctor's residence feeling absolutely frazzled. The doctor was out, but might be back at any moment, so Bill took the opportunity to walk down to the pub for a much-needed drink.

The handful of men in the bar were avidly discussing the news that had put the little town in the headlines, and when someone recognized Bill, a hush fell on the group and all eyes turned on him. He signed to Percy and they finished their drinks and returned to the street with a feeling that if he read local sympathies correctly, no jury in this town would ever convict Williams. Bill was not worrying about Williams — now that the matter had been cleared up, he would have been just as pleased if Williams had been set free — but the looks that had been cast on him in the bar riled him. They seemed to regard him as a police pimp.

The doctor's car was drawn up behind their mud-spattered vehicle, and he met them in the hall, looking more weary and haggard than ever. He seemed to have shrunk to such an extent that his clothes looked as though they had been made for someone twice his weight. His bloodshot eyes glared at the plaster on his visitor's cheek.

“Are you a patient or have you come to waste more of my time?” he demanded, pushing Bill into the surgery. “Let's have a look at it!” Without further warning he flicked the plaster off, and before Bill had recovered from his surprise, was poking at the cut with a pudgy finger. “I'll put a stitch in that. ... See that you keep it clean! How's Mr Atherton?”

“Pretty bad! Can you come?”

The doctor interrupted gruffly. “I can't come to see him so don't waste your breath asking me! Even if he lived across the street instead of half a day's journey away, I couldn't help him. As it is, practically the entire town and district has 'flu ... the hospital is jammed full with only two tired-out probationers left to run the place. And now the other doctor has gone down with it and I'm left to carry the lot. I would give my entire hopes of the hereafter for a decent night's sleep! Keep your head still, will you!”

“But can't you do anything, man! He's suffering hell, and the morphine

doesn't seem to act any longer!”

The doctor opened a little drawer in a cabinet, picked out a thin brown tube and examined it carefully before handing it over. “Use these, then! They're twice as strong as the others. One of these ...” he threw him a significant glance, “... would be enough to kill the average man!”

Bill looked dumbly at the tube in his hand, then he looked at the doctor with a steely glint in his eye. “If I ever get what Atherton's suffering from and haven't the strength to put a bullet into myself where it'll do most good, I hope I'll find a mate to do it for me! Then I suppose you will call it murder and want to hang him! Why haven't you doctors the guts to put a man out of misery instead of trying one thing after another to keep him alive when life is only a burden to him!”

“I suppose you think you're the first man to get that wonderfully original idea! Damn it, man, that subject has been discussed by every quack since Aesculapius!”

“And you're just as far from a solution now as he ever was! We pride ourselves on our civilization — and let men doomed to certain death linger on till the pain wrecks them physically, then wrecks their intellect, and robs fine, decent men of a respectable death. If we ordinary bushwhackers find a horse or a bullock hopelessly crippled, we cut its throat or put a bullet into it, and know it's only a fair thing. Can't you come out and see Atherton and do something ... *anything?*”

The doctor eyed him grimly. “If you're quite finished you can get into your car and drive home — it will save me backing my car out from behind you. And listen! *This is final!*” He spoke with slow, incisive deliberation, letting each word sink in with its intended significance. “There's only one more thing I can do for Mr Atherton — that is to sign his death certificate! And I'll do that as soon as you give me the hour and date. I've got the rest of it all filled in ready — cause of death ... all complete! *There will be no postmortem!* Now, get out of my surgery ... and good-bye!”

Bill drove silently back to Camelot. Percy talked light-heartedly for a while, but getting no response, he closed down and felt glad when he had to get out and open a gate. Bill hardly saw the road. Only a special dispensation of providence and the fact that it had dried a lot since he went in, kept him on it. His faculties were numbed ... distant ... controlled not by himself but by a grisly spectre that hovered above and around him, suggesting nameless things that froze his brain.

A cheerful Elaine in a bright-coloured frock awaited him on the veranda with good news of the patient, and during lunch, Bill's load of depression lightened appreciably. He told her briefly that it was impossible for the doctor to leave town on account of the 'flu epidemic, but that he had been given fresh instructions which, they hoped, would help the patient considerably. The girl listened with a preoccupied air and

made no comment.

As they moved out to the veranda, Elaine mentioned casually, "Bob rang up this morning! His isolation period is nearly finished."

Bill nipped the end off his cigarette preparatory to lighting it, and observed just as casually, "He must be breaking his neck to get back to work again. Good fellow, Mac!" Then he eyed her critically. "Why are you so keen on selling Camelot?"

She shrugged non-committally. "There's Daddy ... and all our bad luck ... and I suppose the responsibilities are getting me down. Isn't it quite natural that I should want to leave? You and Bob sold your place in Queensland!"

"That was different! We never had any intention of making a home of it. Mac only came to Queensland to make money and he sort of dragged me into it. That was bad enough, but I jibbed when he wanted me to pick a nice, fat comfortable wife and settle down. Settle down!" He gave a snort of disgust.

Elaine laughed softly. "Would it be quite impossible for you to settle down?" she asked.

He looked up quickly, then deliberately studied the end of his cigarette. "It depends! That's what I reckoned then, anyhow." He raised his head slowly and surveyed her from under the drooping lid. "Do you remember that first night we met in Longreach?"

She smiled reminiscently. "Verily, Sir Lancelot!"

"Well, Mac had been worrying me that night." His features wore the grim look that betokened a distasteful task that had to be faced. "It wasn't that I was a woman hater — not by a long chalk — but he didn't approve of my girl friends and we had a bit of an argument. Anyhow, I pulled out and told him I was going to get a few drinks into me, go over to the dance, and ask the first girl I met to marry me!"

"And was I the first?" she demanded with mock affront. "Oh, Lancelot ... and you never asked me! Why didn't you?"

"Well ... when I knocked the top off that car, it put it out of my mind for the moment. Then ... when I got to know you better ... the last thing I wanted to do was to insult you."

"Lancelot! *That* isn't the way to insult us! We poor girls look on it as an honour! A very rare one, these hard times!" She rose with a laugh. "I must go and see how Daddy is."

The man sat still, gazing dully out over the rank, grass-grown garden. He still had not accomplished the task he had set himself. Well, he would put it to the old man. It would be much easier.

But he had to admit it was Elaine's opinion that mattered, and much as he dreaded broaching the subject, he desperately wanted it settled. For he knew that until then, he would have no peace of mind. He was no longer in doubt — no longer afraid to acknowledge the fact that the future, his

life, and his hopes of happiness, hinged on her reply. He wanted to laugh out loud at his futile imaginings — that he was no one woman's man ... that he was a wanderer, a chronic lone-hander who could not settle down ... did not want a home. He knew now that where Elaine was, there lay his happiness. Away from her, the world was a barren, empty place, an endless dry stage where one could only go on and on in a great weariness till the crows drew gradually nearer to mock, and tell that the end was near.

Damn it, why did his thoughts always end on a funereal note! He rose abruptly and walked round to the sick-room.

The invalid greeted him cheerfully and motioned him to a chair. His eyes were bright and alert, and everything about him suggested that he had obtained a new lease of life. Bill marvelled at the display of vitality after last night's collapse, and wondered if the doctor were really if there were absolutely no hope of recovery.

He managed to persuade Elaine to rest while the patient was so well. He himself intended to share the night nursing from now on, but he did not tell her so in the meantime. When she left the room, he drew his chair close to the bed where he could face the sick man, and commented on his changed appearance.

"I feel wonderful," Atherton replied. "Tell me all about last night. I'm sorry you got hurt. Elaine told me all she knew, but I gathered there was quite a lot left unsaid."

Bill repeated the story of the tracking and capture of Williams from the very beginning. When he had finished, the old man lay quiet for a time. "I'm sorry about Williams ... I liked him, and found him a very capable man. But I must also thank you for all you have done for us. I cannot fail to realize how fortunate we are in having you here. In fact, my only regret is that we did not meet years before. Still, for your sake it was better to have your life shaped by men like MacAndrew and ... what was his name ... Dinny! I would like to have met that man! I'm afraid my influence would not have helped you." He fixed his bright eyes intently on the younger man. "What made you leave your home in England and come out to Australia?"

Bill stared out through the window with narrowed eyes before he turned with apparent reluctance. "I have never mentioned this to anyone, but I would like to tell you. I was expelled from school for giving an awful hiding to another boy — I nearly killed him, in fact — for spreading a rumour that I was ... a bastard. When I arrived home I found my mother very ill ... heart trouble ... and she died shortly afterwards. When I went through her papers with the lawyer, I found that what they had said was true. My mother had been deserted by ... by my father, and she had brought me up in a district where she was unknown. After the funeral I booked a passage to Australia. I wanted to get clean away from

everyone I knew ... to start afresh.”

The head on the pillow nodded sympathetically. “And it still hurts to be reminded of the ... birth-stain — even by accident!”

Bill nodded.

“Very foolish, Bill! What does it matter, anyhow, and who is to know how we are born unless we advertise the fact ourselves? You'll excuse my bluntness, but really, you have magnified a trifle far beyond its true significance, and the aspect you take is based entirely on snobbishness.”

“That's all very well!” Bill's tone was bitter. “But if you had suffered ...

„  
“Wait a minute! Supposing I had ... would I be entitled to speak?”

Bill stared at the enigmatic smile. “What do you mean?”

“Only that I too am ... a bastard!”

“*You!*”

The old man smiled on. “I came out to Australia under a similar set of circumstances, except that perhaps my case was even more involved than yours, but our feelings were the same. Hate toward the parent responsible for our misfortune, and a desire to escape the eyes of all our acquaintances goaded me. We were both guilty of snobbishness. We had acquired the habit partly through our super-sensitiveness, and our inability to rise mentally above our social environment. We praised or damned a man for circumstances over which he had no control. A man should be judged by what he makes of his life — the hand is dealt him but he must play it. He may be born in the slums and attain to wealth and honour, or he may be born to the purple and end in the gutter. These are the things that count! We made the mistake of accepting a false sense of superiority — we allowed ourselves to be placed on a pedestal, and when cold truth knocked that pedestal from under us, well ... the higher the pedestal, the greater the crash! We were very foolish, Bill.”

Bill could only sit and stare and listen dazedly, letting the waves of the old man's philosophy lap soothingly among his thoughts. After a short pause, Atherton began to speak again in slow reminiscent tones. “Since you have given me your confidence, Bill, I'm going to tell you something I have never mentioned to anyone ... not even to Elaine or to my wife. It goes a long way back ... long before your time ... but it has all come to me very clearly, as I lie here. ...

“It happened just after my regiment returned from the East and we were experiencing the joys of civilization, and making the most of all that the old Scottish town where our headquarters were, could give us. I was young and I rather fancied myself ... a uniform in those days *was* a uniform! None of your drab khaki, but red and blue and gold and tartan ... enough to turn the head of any girl, no matter who was inside it. However, there was one girl who remained obdurate. A fellow in the local Yeomanry, a lawyer by profession, had been making the running

till I arrived on the scene. I had great hopes of the Garrison Ball turning the tide in my favour. The Yeomanry would look well in their blue and gold, but a Scots Fusilier in full dress was irresistible. At least, we all thought so, and there was evidence in plenty to prove our contention. We had tartan trews, a scarlet doublet with blue facings and gold lace, wide crimson silk sash, and white buff sword-belt across the chest with a frosted gilt breast-plate — and a grand, silver, basket-hilted claymore by our side. The girl who was proof against being seen in that company was hard indeed. And McCansh, the Yeomanry man, was thinking that too.

“It was a great night! The scene in the ball-room was wonderful ... magnificent! Gorgeous uniforms ... beautiful women, beautifully dressed. ... I like to think I'm broad-minded, Bill, but when I compare a modern ball-room packed with languid couples clinging closely to one another as they drift aimlessly about, to the spectacle of a ball of forty to fifty years ago ... I must confess to a preference for the old days!

“Elaine looked charming that night. She was slim and fair, and the fashion of that day showed off her beautiful arms and shoulders. We were slipping out through an ante-room at the end of a dance when we were surrounded by a crowd of our own and some Yeomanry officers — McCansh was one of them, and they were all fairly merry. One of them addressed us, ‘We have here Captain Kirk, Mr Bell, Mr Sexton, Mr Parsons ... all the essentials of a church and a wedding — except the bride and bridegroom. Will you oblige us?’ I looked at Elaine and she, entering into the spirit of it, smiled back, so we allowed them to lead us to one end of the room. Then they took some old pikes from the walls and Elaine and I advanced under an arch of steel to the other end where Captain Kirk waited. He conducted the mock ceremony and Elaine and I pledged one another. I placed my ring on her finger, then everyone insisted on kissing the bride. That rather annoyed me — especially as McCansh was among them. However, they brought in more punch and toasted us, then someone brought an old woman in from the street — a gipsy — to tell our fortunes.

“I was not at all keen. In fact I was longing to slip away with Elaine, but they insisted. Elaine held out her palm first and the gipsy looked at it and shook her head gravely. All she would say was, ‘Ye're a braw, braw lassie!’ Then she added a couple of lines from Burns:

Ye'll hae misfortunes great an' sma'  
But aye a heart abune them a'.

Elaine was a little frightened, and I wanted to end the thing but Murray, one of our youngest subalterns, went next. The gipsy peered at his palm. ‘You will lead your regiment in battle, and see your son slain before you,’ she said.

“McCansh pushed forward but she hardly looked at him. ‘Ye’ll live and prosper by the misfortunes o’ others,’ was all she would tell him. I saw that if I wanted to get away I would have to go through with it, so I went next. She mumbled a while before raising her voice. ‘It’s the high pride I see, and low will it bring the wearer before he reaches peace. Ye’ll go to a far country an’ ne’er come back ... Aye, and ye’ll die at the hand of your son ... an’ be glad of it!’

“I laughed at her. It seemed the most fantastic and improbable prediction anyone could imagine, but I felt Elaine shiver as she clung to my arm. Anyhow, we escaped from the crowd and soon forgot all about the gipsy and the rest of the world too!”

The reminiscent smile faded, the eyes closed, and the thin hands tightened their grip on the sheets as the pain began to reassert itself. He did not see the man crouched tensely forward in his chair as though he had seen a ghost, his hands gripping the sides till the knuckles showed white under the tightened skin.

The spasm passed, but the man lay for a long time with eyes closed, till the watcher imagined he must have fallen asleep. At length the lips moved, inaudibly at first, then an apologetic ... “You must excuse me. Rather long-winded, wasn’t I!” He lay musing for a little longer, then took up the tale again. “A few weeks after the ball the crash came. McCansh had ferreted out the evidence and the news reached me in a roundabout way. It was being noised about that I, the dashing young subaltern of a crack regiment, proud of my birth and social prestige ... was a fake ... an illegitimate son!

“I searched for McCansh till I met him in the High Street. He repeated the charge, sneeringly. I challenged him ... and he refused. I was mad at the moment ... raving mad ... and I nearly killed him before they separated us. There was a tremendous row. ... I went home and demanded the truth ... and got it! I sent in my papers immediately, dropped the surname I felt I had no right to use, and took a passage on the first ship leaving England. It happened to be bound for Australia. I didn’t care where it might take me.

“I cut myself clean adrift from everything connected with the old world and the old life — family, friends ... even Elaine! That is something I have never ceased to regret. I wonder what became of her!” He fell silent for a space. “I was so selfish, so thoroughly knocked out by the pricking of the bubble that was myself at that time that I had no thoughts, no room for pity for the suffering I was inflicting on others. When that came later, I was far away, and drink drowned my remorse.

“I had plenty of money of my own and would probably have stayed in Melbourne and drunk myself to death if a friend I had made on board ship had not taken charge of me. He induced me to stay with him in the country, and when I began to take an interest in life again, advised me to

buy this property. Land was cheap then. It was after the smash, and the banks owned most of it. I renamed it Camelot. Sentiment, I suppose. I married ... and when my daughter was born, I named her Elaine. Her mother could not understand. I told her it was a family name ... and that seemed to satisfy her ... Elaine the Fair ... Elaine the Lovable ...” The voice tailed off as another spasm of pain contorted the features.

The man in the chair relaxed slowly. As the tenseness ebbed, he leaned dazedly back. Then with a returning sense of responsibility he rose heavily and began to fit together the shining hypodermic syringe.

## Chapter XXVII

ELAINE appeared at dinner looking bright and refreshed, but her smile gradually faded before the other's nonresponsive mood, and gave way to a look of concern. "What is it, Bill?" Fear clouded her face. "Is it Dad?"

He shook his head. "No. ... It's all right. ... I'll turn in soon if you don't mind."

Elaine was not satisfied. She looked at him intently, and her voice was subdued and vibrant. "What is it, Bill? Can I help you?"

He avoided her eyes and forced a twisted smile. "No ... I'll have to work it out myself. Don't worry!"

"Bill! What did the doctor say? I mean ... how long?" He looked up startled at the sudden change in the girl facing him across the table. There was a calmness in her attitude that astounded him, a sense of forearmed knowledge, a spirit prepared to meet the inevitable with staunch, unyielding courage.

"It's impossible to say. It all depends, Elaine!"

Her face clouded. She abandoned the pretence of eating and sat forward, her elbows on the table supporting her chin in her palms. Then after a while she spoke in low, tense tones as though the words were being wrung from her lips. "Bill ... how long are they going to let him go on suffering?"

The man stared fixedly at her, but she avoided his eyes, looking straight ahead, with a trembling, hysterical note invading her rising voice. "Can't they do anything? It isn't fair ... this terrible suffering ... and waiting." Suddenly she faced him, her fingers tightened on his arm. "*Bill ... must we let it go on like this! Can't something be done to help him? Bill ... please!*"

He turned pale under the wildly beseeching eyes that held him inexorably, demanding an answer. Then he slipped a hand over hers and held it in a fierce grip while his eyes answered her plea.

Bill retired to bed but, tired as he was, sleep came only in troubled snatches that failed to withstand for long the turmoil of his thoughts. He smoked cigarette after cigarette. Finally he rose, haggard eyed and nervy, and made his way quietly to the bath where he stood under the shower with the water pelting down on him. But even with the temporary relief that afforded, sleep was impossible.

Elaine's beseeching tear-dimmed eyes haunted him. The responsibility

had centred more and more on him till he felt he could not escape. The doctor's bloodshot orbs saying plainly what his lips refused to utter — Atherton's sunken, weary eyes imploring him for release ... and now ... Elaine.

Yet first he must hear more from the sick man's lips. He must get an answer to his question. He was suddenly seized with dread that Atherton might die without regaining consciousness. At the thought he rose and dressed, casting aside all idea of sleep until he could set his mind at rest. Before leaving the room he drew his tarpaulin-covered swag from a corner, and searched carefully through the contents of a gaudy, aboriginal dilly-bag till he found what he wanted — a gold signet ring with an exquisitely-cut heraldic seal. He slipped it into a pocket and stepped noiselessly on to the veranda.

The night air was soft and warm, and the only sounds that intruded on the velvet stillness were the cautious chirping of some nocturnal insect and the plaintive, dreary call of a mopoke from the oaks on the creek. Then the querulous yapping bark of a fox, far down in the open country, tore a ragged rent in the silence. Down at the kennels a dog growled a sleepy reply, his chain rattling as he scratched himself. Then quiet descended again.

Elaine was seated in a big arm-chair beside the shaded table lamp. A book lay open on her knees, but her eyes looked far into space and the road they travelled was long and rough and beset with many troubles. The brave mask she showed to the world was laid aside. She was alone with her thoughts, facing the eventualities of a grim, cheerless future, and steeling herself for the impending sorrow.

From the shadows beyond the door Bill watched with tenderness the troubled eyes, the quivering mouth. He yearned to step quietly in, draw the lonely girl to him, and bury his face in the rich, red gold of her hair. But he was numb, powerless. He could not tell Elaine the things he wanted to, did not dare show her what he struggled to keep from his eyes. Her own eyes told him all he wanted to know — more than that — and the knowledge that should have made him feel a god, beat him to his knees like a remorseless flail.

So far he could not be certain, but Atherton's confession had so strengthened the early suspicions he had brought to Camelot that his lips must remain sealed until the matter could be settled beyond all doubt. It was just another grim trick of fate, and one beside which past reverses, momentous as they had seemed, faded into insignificance.

He admitted to himself that his primary reason in coming to Camelot was to obtain such a confession from Atherton as he had voluntarily made last night, and although there still remained some definite points to be cleared up, the result was almost a certainty. But instead of satisfaction at his success he was conscious only of a dark foreboding

and a heartfelt wish that he had never disinterred the dark memory of the past or allowed it to shape the thoughts and confidences that had led to the confession.

Just when he had overcome what appeared to be the final obstacle that lay between Elaine and himself and had laid aside the lifelong bogey of his legitimacy, a greater insuperable barrier had raised itself between them, and so far, only he was aware of it. For a moment, he felt tempted to leave things as they were — to withhold his evidence from the unsuspecting Atherton. Elaine herself would never dream, never guess at the secret.

But he knew it was useless, impossible to leave things as they were. So far, what had happened was hard enough to credit; what remained to be done was even more so — it was fantastic. The task he had set himself early in life was almost accomplished. The end of the quest was in sight. It was too late to turn back now however much he might desire it. He must go on.

He waited with bowed head, composing himself, then shuffled softly on the boards till he attracted her attention. She looked up with a fleeting glance of fear, a look that persisted even when he moved quietly across to her chair.

“I'm going on watch!” he whispered. “Go and get some sleep!”

She shook her head vehemently. “I'm all right! You need it more than I do!”

“I've had plenty,” he lied.

“You haven't! You had none last night and now you've been smoking cigarettes all this night. I heard you lighting matches!” She rose and stretched her cramped limbs. “Wait here, Bill, and I'll make a cup of tea!”

When she left he approached the bed and peered cautiously at the patient. The skin had recovered that fine transparency that had appeared so disquieting before, and Bill turned away with a gloomy face.

Elaine was equally serious when he joined her in the lamp-lit dining-room, but each kept his fears to himself. He succeeded in convincing her that he intended to stay up for the rest of the night, and she reluctantly consented to go. As she turned to leave, her tired eyes gave him a warm smile. “You'll call me if ... if I'm wanted!” Then at his reassuring nod. “Lancelot ... you're a darling!”

She stood quite still, her eyes on him, and there was that in their frank, soft depths that made his head whirl, his heart pound suffocatingly. He wrenched his eyes away, waited till she turned, and the sound of her slow, wondering footsteps died away before he raised his tense, drawn face.

Atherton began to show signs of returning consciousness, but when his eyes did open slowly, they were clouded and expressionless, and it was

some time before he recognized Bill. He signed for a drink and Bill supported the thin shoulders and held the glass to the pallid lips, then laid him gently back. He lay with eyes closed for a long time, then Bill turned to find them fixed beckoningly on him, and moved closer. The voice, at first a thin whisper, gained strength as it continued, and the young man listened avidly.

“Something ... I want to tell you. It sounds almost ... melodramatic. You remember the mock wedding ceremony ... I told you about? Captain Kirk ... met him in Sydney. ... He was Colonel Kirk then. Recognized me ... in spite of my different name. Kirk told me it was real. ... He was qualified. ... It was regular ceremony ... under Scottish law. So Elaine and I ... legally married!”

Bill collapsed into his chair. Above the wild whirl of thoughts in his frenzied brain, one fact was dawning with an intensity that threatened to swamp everything else ... to give life a new aspect ... if it were not too late. Then the other side presented itself with staggering force. If the first marriage were legal, what of the other? Was he to gain his birthright at the expense of Elaine! He bent quickly forward as the lips moved again.

Atherton looked up with the ghost of a smile. “I don't mind death ... but dying is a painful business!” After a pause, he continued. “Remember the gipsy's prophesies? Some of them came true! Murray commanded his battalion in the war. His son ... one of his own officers ... was killed in action! Part of mine came true ... pride and ... the long journey. But I only had a daughter. ... The gipsy was wrong ... no son. I wish I had ... to fulfil the prophesy!”

A spasm of pain crossed his features. Bill fumbled frantically in his pockets. Something still remained — something that had to be done.

When the sunken eyes opened again and remained clear, he leaned earnestly forward and held the ring before them with the heraldic seal in front, and asked in low, clear tones, “Do you recognize this?”

The invalid looked puzzled, then stared anxiously from the ring to the face of the man bending over him. “Where did you get it?”

“Was it yours?”

The burning eyes searched his frantically. “Is there a name inside?”

Bill nodded, turned the ring to the light and read ... “*Lancelot Atherton* ...”

“*That's enough!* Never mind the rest! It's my ring ... the one I gave to Elaine ... when we were married. *Where did you get it?*”

“From my mother!” Bill hesitated as he met the fevered eyes. All his life he had rehearsed this moment. The scathing words he would use. ... The hot surging satisfaction of revenge he had lived a hundred times. But now that the moment had arrived he had no use for heroics. Here was a man — a simple, straightforward gentleman — ignorant of any wrong he may have committed, yet eagerly anxious to atone for the consequence.

A parent he could honour and be glad to acknowledge. There was no bitterness but a ring of quiet pride in his voice. "Her name was Elaine Muir! And mine ..." he paused significantly, " ... *is Lancelot Atherton Muir!*"

His hand covered the thin wasted one of the old man in a firm possessive grip, and he smiled tenderly into the sunken eyes where hopeless bewilderment battled and alternated with flashes of incredulity and joy.

The thin lips moved as in prayer. "*Elaine! Elaine!*" Then a troubling thought awoke him from the slow enveloping haze and Bill bent low to catch the whisper. ... "Elaine ... my daughter. Tell her!"

Bill shook his head slowly. He had thought that out already, made his decision, and a queer sad smile twisted his features. "We won't tell her! I'll take care of her ... *like a brother!*"

Neither of the men engrossed in the momentous turn of events was conscious of the tense figure of the girl framed dimly in the shadows of the doorway, taking in the scene with wide incredulous eyes. Not even when Bill's grim distinct words reached her ears, each one sounding the knell of all her hopes, each one a blow from which she flinched and would have fallen but for the frantic fingers gripping the door frame, until she stumbled blindly away to the sanctuary of her room. It was all clear now — but the clarity was that of a searing lightning flash that had wrecked the smiling valley of her happiness and left an aching tortured waste.

The old man lay silent, his eyes tightly closed. Then they opened and searched the other's face with an intent, beseeching look. The whisper was broken — almost inaudible. "*The gipsy ... my son! I'll be ... glad of it!*"

And the younger man looked down, struggling to control his surging emotion, and nodded slowly and reassuringly before the tired eyes closed.

Then he turned to the thin brown tube and the shining plated box on the dressing-table for the last time.

## Chapter XXVIII

THEY walked together from the homestead along the straight wide track. Elaine, calm and subdued, wore a soft, grey silk frock, and her eyes looked beyond far horizons. On her left, Bob MacAndrew, four-square and solid, looked ahead at the green sweep of the paddocks to the hills, the tiny white dots of lambs among the grazing ewes, and along the wide, dusty road with its twin, parallel depressions patterned with car tracks.

On Elaine's right, with the long, supple thong of the stockwhip over the shoulder of his open-necked white shirt, Bill walked slim and straight, apparently watching two splendid bay horses, one carrying a pack-saddle with two swags, followed by Percy on a grey mare. Close at Bill's shoulder moved a beautiful brown mare whose eyes were also on the little cavalcade half-way up the narrow, winding track on the face of the hills.

At the white gate where the road crossed the creek and continued straight and broad on the other side to where a narrow winding track meandered off toward the rugged hills they halted, and turned toward one another.

Elaine broke the silence. "Are you sure you won't stay for another day, Bill? I'll take you on in the car to-morrow. We can easily catch up on Percy and the horses!"

He shook his head with slow deliberation. "No, thanks. I'll keep going, Elaine!"

He stretched a brown hand toward the other man. "So long, Mac ... good luck!"

"So long, Bill!" Then Mac turned and looked steadily out to the distant shimmer of the plains, and continued to gaze there.

"Good-bye, Lancelot!" The girl held out her hands to the horseman and he looked deep down into the dewy, grey eyes under the long lashes. And Elaine, looking past the twisted mask, saw nothing sardonic, nothing mocking under the drooping eyelid — only a great tenderness. And she slipped into his arms, gave her quivering lips to his, and closed her eyes tightly against the tide of tears she could not stay.

Two people stood silently at the white gate, watching the horseman ascending the final twist of the Bridle Track. He reached the summit, halted there a moment, the brown mare outlined against the sky,

unconsciously paying farewell to the land of her freedom. The horseman looked back at the figures at the gate, raised an arm in farewell, and the summit was empty.

The girl and the man turned back toward the homestead, walking very slowly.

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