

Human Toll

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Chapter I

WHAT was this blocking the tallow-scoop? Boshy, secretly styled 'The Lag,' or 'One Eye,' bent to see. Leisurely he thrust down a groping hand and drew up, but not out, a fatclogged basil-belt. Hastily his other hand clawed it conferringly, then with both he forced it back again into its greasy hidingplace of past long years. Cautiously his one eye went from door to window, then he rolled the fat-can with its mouth to the wall, and, going out, he took a sweeping survey. The sky and plain still drowsed dreamily, and neither the sick Boss's home, nor Nungi the half-caste's hut on the other side of the riversplit plain, showed sign of smoke. The only gleam of life was a breath-misted string of cows filing leisurely but lovingly to their penned calves.

Boshy entered the hut and shut and bolted both door and window, then rolled the precious casket, a rusty nail-keg, before the door, and to further insure his sense of security sat on it. He made no attempt to examine his treasure. He was certain the contents of that gold-lined belt were old Miser Baldy's hoard. For a few moments he sat quivering, gloating greedily. Musingly his one eye roamed all over the hut. Not a splinter in the walls that he, and many others, had not probed as with a tooth-pick, for this coveted 'plant'; not a crack or mortised joint in the roof; not a mouse-hole but had been tunnelled to the bitter end, for tenant above or below. Nor had the search stopped at the hut, for had not a night-ghouling Chinaman, in his hunt for this hoard, gone the dauntless but fruitless length of disinterring and stripping poor old Baldy? And now just by a fluke he had struck it. Could it be true? Was he only dreaming? And again he thrust in a confirming hand. 'Gord A'mighty!' burst from him as his felt certainty electrified him.

When Nungi came in the spring cart an hour later to shift him, all his personal and furnishing belongings were in their accustomed places, except the belt. Though this was now round his waist, he sat shivering beside the fire, and one quick glance at his drawn face showed the half-caste the unusual had happened.

'Tucked up, Boshy? Got the Barcoo?' (a sudden sickness). 'Boss is goin' t' peg out.'

'I'm nut a-goin' t' shift t'-day; nut till t'-morrer.'

'W'y ther blazes did yer le' me 'arness up, then?' asked Nungi resentfully, as he took out the horse, and on it shogged back, leaving the cart to await to-morrow's duty.

Boshy watched his every movement from the window, then with an

effort he roused himself and went after him, but at the river he turned back. Into the frying-pan he hurriedly scraped the fat that earlier he had scooped from the oilcan, and when it melted he carefully poured it into the keg, then speedily crossed to the house.

There was no moon that night, yet he waited till it was well spent, then almost on all fours crept to the graves beneath the myalls close to his hut; with infinite care he tunnelled into the aforesaid desecrated grave till he could feel the end of the coffin, then with all his strength he drove the pick beneath, and upending it, kept it atilt with the pick.

He got up, watched and listened, but though his cautiousness had magnified all sounds, he knew from his distance he was secure. Laboriously he tunnelled for a couple of feet below the coffin, then from two wallets strapped across his back he took out several sealed pickle - bottles and thrust them well into their gruesome nest; then, as before, he listened and watched, and, as before, was assured.

He did not shift camp for a week, by then the earth on the disturbed graves, which day and night he had watched, was again normal, and he again outwardly composed. But often during his duties day or night his one eye sought anxiously the hiding-spot of his treasure, till gradually he realized that it was safe; for from superstitious awe the blacks would not molest the dead, and the whites had long since abandoned hope.

Yellow tongues from the slush lamp-light had spluttered through the gridiron slabs of the Boss's bedroom for several nights. Towards the end of one Boshy drew the pillow from beneath the head and the cover over the face of the man on the bed, scrutinized the child sleeping on the one opposite, then, for him, noiselessly took the lamp into the outer room.

The darkened window was the signal for a prolonged lamentation from an old dog, partially blind and deaf, chained outside.

Then from the black's camp on the fringe of the scrub the lean dogs, dozing beside the meagre dying fire, yelped back a semicivilized echo, and almost simultaneously the blacks ran about their camp, like disturbed, molested ants.

Boshy, coming out to harangue the chained dog, heard the tintin jangling of their billies and pannikins in their hasty, unorganized flight. The gins, burdened with pickaninnies and camp-gear, were whimpering well in the rear, but above all rose the angry, impotent lamentations and execrations of 'Tumbledown Jimmy.' Many wintry moons had almost disabled Jimmy, stiffened his joints and tightened his sinews, bending his body on one side like a boomerang, so his callous kinsmen only too gladly left him as hostage for the dreaded Debbil-debbil now among them.

Boshy's mouth shaped into an ecstatic circle. 'Hor, hor, hor!' he snorted

in lonely mirth. He was tempted to give chase, shouting, 'Ketch 'em, Debbil-debbil! ketch 'em, Debbil-debbil!' but for the sleeping child and a heavy task, awaiting him inside.

Carefully he prised up the table-leaf, greasing the nails with the lamp-fat to prevent creaking. His back was to the door between the two rooms, as noiselessly opening as the gap in the table. Simultaneously and correspondingly wide grew Gin Queeby's eyes watching this door through an outside crack, though, in a nightmare of fear, she stood dumb and motionless.

Through a few inches of door space the little girl squeezed, and, unseen by Boshy, laid her hand on him.

'Ghos' A'mighty!' yelled he, voicing his thoughts and dropping the hammer, and instantly the cry of an ill-used child who sees its mother gushed from Queeby.

'Lovey, Lovey, Queeby wanter come ter yer. Me wanter come ter yer,' wagging her black fingers directly through the cracks.

A silencing clod flung by Nungi hiding between two myall logs, rebounded and struck the chimney, increasing the confusion.

'Oh!' whispered the child, 'you'll all wake me father. Naughty, naughty bad things, all of yous—and you, too, Queeby,' catching sight of the hand still at the crack. 'Stop you, Queeby, an' come in.'

Queeby rushed in noisily tearful, and caught up the child.

'Hish!' with her nightgown wiping Queeby's face, 'don't wake me father, Queeby.'

Queeby had no fear of doing that, but the name of the dead man calmed her.

'Don't wake me father, 'less I'll beat you, Queeby. Oo's been beating you?' threatened and inquired the child.

'Boshy,' said Queeby promptly.

'Well,' said he, aghast, 'if lies would choke yer, yer lyin'——'

But now from her elevation the child looked down on the wrecked table.

'Oh, you bad, bad Boshy, t' break up the table! Me father 'll give it to you!'

'Iden broke up, Lovey. Yer daddy tole me ter make er—er—thingy-me-callum outer ther top.'

'To do w'at with?'

'Eh?' he evaded. 'Wot's ther time, Lovey? Mornin' time, I think.'

Walking to the window, he turned his ear to the well out on the plain, hidden by a band of trees that, in seeming boldness, had left the scrub and stood like sentinel outposts. From one a magpie, partly tamed, flew to the window-ledge on Boshy's blind side, startling him with her discordant

imitation of cock-crow, then squawked for food.

‘Yer bole faggit, a-crowin' in me very face, like a cock! Go an' look fer worms.’

Angrily he attempted to sweep her off, but the magpie flew to the chimney - top, from there crowing arrogantly, till an ambitious cockerel, mistaking hers for his sire's dawn heralding, imitated huskily and incipiently. The magpie derisively mocked, then swooped and beaked its legitimate prey, the early worm. Reascending, it again raised its head, and from bird-throat never issued a more mellifluous grace after meat. Such a requiem should console the worm and justify its Maker.

It was the youth of a plenteous spring, and from the scrub flanking the back of the house came a concerted twittering of newly-awakened birdlings, increasing till the air seemed filled with dewy-throated sky-crickets.

‘Listen to th' birdies,’ said the child, raising her radiant face to the roof, and at the supreme moment accompanying them in perfect mimicry.

‘Sweet-pretty-little-creasures, sweet-pretty-little-creasures. Tha's wot they says all the time. They's been asleep like me,’ yawning, ‘and they's jus' waked up like me now,’ explained Lovey.

‘An' they're arstin' fer their liddle break-fusses,’ supplemented Boshy, taking her in his arms to the window. ‘An', Lovey dear, lis'en to ther poor liddle lambs a-arstin' an' a-beggin' an' a-prayin' fer theirs too, Lovey. Thet lazy wretch ov a Nungi's gorn this long time, an' ain't bin a-nex', nur a-nigh, nur a-near 'em. Isen't 'e a lazy wretch ov a Nungi, Lovey, eh?’

‘Ways 'e?’ she asked.

‘Lord above knows, I don't. Make 'er dress yer, Lovey, an' le's go an' see.’

‘N,’ she agreed, looking at distressed Queeby.

‘Get 'er clo'es an' dress 'er, yer gapin' phil garlic yer!’ said Boshy.

Queeby's tears began afresh.

‘Me father can't see you. 'E's sleepin' little with the clothes over his face,’ Lovey said. Then addressing Boshy: ‘W'a's 'e doin' like that way for?’

‘Cos 'e's better, Lovey.’

‘Is this the day w'en 'e'll get up, then?’

‘No, ter - morrer. Lovey, you get yer clo'es yer own self. This useless animal’ —shaking a warning fist at Queeby—‘is frightened; on'y thet 'er'll wake 'im,’ he added cautiously.

The child tiptoed in and returned with her clothes.

‘Now you bad Boshy, too, as well, too. Ways me going t' be put w'en me father's goin' t' lace up me boots?’ she asked.

The despoiler of the table drew his head from the window.

‘Poor liddle lambs, Lovey! Thet lazy, idle wretch ov a Nungi ain't gi' 'em a sup of water. 'E's been gorn this over an hour, an' ain't bin a-nex', nur a-near, nur a-nigh ther well. Ain't 'e a bad, wicked Nungi, Lovey?’

Lovey nodded.

‘Ways 'e?’

‘Git yer boots an' socks orn now, Lovey, an' le's go an' see.

Queeby, mindful of the dead man's past duty, would have laced the child's boots.

‘No, no, not you,’ Lovey said; ‘me father will. Boshy,’ she said angrily, noticing the boots he was wearing, ‘you jus' take my father's boots on orf of your feet.’

‘E as'ed me to stretch 'em for 'im, Lovey. Poor liddle lambs! a-famishin' an' a-faintin' an' a-perishin' for a drink, Lovey. Come on t' we find Nungi.’

He took down the stockwhip hanging on the wall, and taking the dressed child's hand, went first into the kitchen.

‘Make 'er kin'le a fire.’

‘Not kin'le; light,’ corrected the little girl.

‘Light,’ said he humbly.

He pushed Queeby towards the fireplace, but she followed him out.

‘Go wi' 'er, Lovey dear, an' I'll see kin I fin' Nungi be meself,’ he said, shaking the stockwhip.

There was no need to search, for Nungi, anticipating a betrayal from Queeby, instantly revealed himself, standing between the logs, his arms encircling Tumble-down Jimmy eagle fashion, who, to fit the simile, drooped lamb-like.

‘Somethin' gorn wrong er ther well-wim; water won't come up, Boshy. An' this lazy ole grub-chawrer an' 'oney waterer, ez you call im, won't come an' gi' me a 'and. B—— ole black feller say Debbil-debbil sit down in ther bottom ov ther well-water, dam ole fool!’

Nungi laughed mirthlessly, and kicked the prey he had dropped, who lay with his face on the ground.

Untwirling, thereby entangling the stock-whip, Boshy advanced; but Nungi speedily increased the distance between them.

‘Es Gord 's me Jedge, Nungi,’ declared Boshy, advancing, ‘ef yer don' go this instant minit——’ both hands fumbling longingly to twirl the whip.

Nungi danced in simulated excitement, and, pointing to the raised platform of the house, said:

‘Big feller goanna crawl in onder there, eat all ther 'en eggs, me go in arfter 'im, rip 'im open, take out ther eggs.’ Boshy still advanced. ‘Black feller snake too; pretty quick me catchem, that feller b—— whirroo!’ grabbing an imaginary snake, and twirling it round, as Boshy would have

liked to have handled the stock-whip.

'Yer lie! yer lying dorg! Yer see no snakes an' no go'annas in under ther 'ouse,' said Boshy, weakening his assertiveness by going on his knees and looking under.

'Urgh!' grunted Nungi, now at a safe distance from whip or even missile. 'Fat lot you can see, ole Bungy-Blinkey-eye, ole one-eye! Couldn' see er butterfly nur anythin' else, yur ole blather skyte! 'Oo cares fur you? Nut me!'

This sudden outburst shocked and surprised Boshy into fatal weakening, and he stood for parley.

'N-N-Nungi,' he stammered, 'w'ats come over yer ter go orn like thet? Nungi,' coaxingly, 'look 'ere now, ole man, yer know well w'at I gut ter do ter day. Go orn now an' get ter yer work an' water them yeos an' lambs, like ther w'ite man w'at yer are.

'Not be meself,' said Nungi, but less aggressively, till, turning to take a look at the well, and catching sight of the rising sun, he grew at once savagely and cunningly courageous.

Boshy's discomfiture increased.

'Go on now, Nungi; don't be a slinker on a day like this.'

'Nut fer you nur no one like yer, b—— old blinky Boshy, ole splay-foot! Lars night I collared a bag er yer wool, an' ter smornin' I'll take it into Tambo, sell it, an' git on ther plurry spree, sneak back ter night, plenty matches me,' drawing one from his trouser-pocket and striking it along the bare sole of his foot. 'Budgeree fire that feller, cobbon fire that feller,' pointing to the house. 'See ole plurry one-eye Boshy burnin' like blazes! See old splay-foot runnin' 'ell for leather!'

With an aboriginal yell he bounded into the air, and coming down on his feet reproduced to perfection the stiffened run and general gait of Boshy.

Nungi's noisy revolt had a reviving effect on Tumbledown Jimmy. From his perch now on the logs he ceased food importuning to burst into appreciative laughter. Boshy made a rush for him.

'Ye'd larf at me, would yer? Lemme on'y ketch yer doin' ov it again, an' I'll kick ther beggin' belly out ov yer!'

Jimmy, who had instantly ceased, began to beg and count the moons that had whitened his head; then, as Boshy advanced, he slid from the logs, and burrowing a hip into the ground, resolved into a rapidly revolving four-spoked wheel, his hands and feet actively protecting his threatened hub.

'Blanky ole One-eye, jes' tech 'im!' shouted Nungi, seizing a shank-bone and taking steady aim at Boshy. 'Jes' lay a finger orn 'im, thet's all.'

'Nungi' pleaded Boshy, 'w'at's wrong wi' you? You're a-goin on like az if you've been pea-eatin', or a-swankin' ov ther kerosene, or the pain-killer.

W'at's kranked yer?’

Nungi's reply was another aboriginal bound and yell that brought out the child and Queeby.

‘W'a's the matter?’ asked the child.

‘Oh, Lovey, jes' you 'ear w'at e' sez, ther yellor an' w'ite savage; see w'at 'e's goin' ter do—set fire ter ther 'ouse, an' burn me an' you an' yer 'elpless dead daddy alive. Me an' you too’ repeated Boshy, individually classifying the relative importance of Nungis threats.

‘Would yer, Nungi?’ shouted the disbelieving child, going across to him.

‘No, Lovey’ retracted Nungi. ‘Carn't believe a word thet ole cursed ole liar sez, ole splay-foot!’

‘Nungi wouldn't’ she said, ‘you see’—turning resentfully to Boshy.

‘I see I'm mistook’ thankfully agreed Boshy; ‘but 'e sez 'e won't water ther poor liddle lambs, Lovey, an' them a-dyin' ov——’

‘Yer will water ther ewes an' lambs, won't yer, Nungi?’

‘Nut be me owen self, Lovey—carn't. No one ter watch w'at comes up in ther bucket’ said Nungi, determined not to assist the Debbil-debbil to land even in daylight. ‘No one ter talk ter’ he added, to disguise his cowardice.

‘I'll come, Nungi.’

‘Giandidilliwong!’ delightedly yelled he, bounding high and coming down on all fours. ‘Git on me back, an' I'll carry yer all ther ways, Lovey’ (joyfully) ‘an' arter gi’ yer a ride on Billy all round ther well. An' arter we'll shin inter ther scrub an' git wattle-gum. I know wur ther's a lump ez big ez thet' (a shut fist), ‘an' geebung, an' five-corners. Come on, Lovey’ coaxed he, continuing to buck progressively.

‘Tell me father I'm gone t' water th' ewes an' lambs w'en 'e wakes up for his breakfuss’ she importantly commanded Boshy.

‘Git yer bunnet fust, Lovey’ stipulated Boshy. ‘Nungi’ he said inducively, ‘come beck wi' 'er soon ez yer water 'em.’

‘Urh!’ snorted Nungi, ‘w'at'll yer gimme?’

‘I'll nut say black's ther w'ite ov yer eye.’

‘Urh!’ unappeased. ‘W'at'll yer gimme ter eat?’

‘A box ov sardines.’

‘Ter me own cheek? an' out 'ere nigh ole Jimmy?’

‘In 'ell if yer like’ curtly agreed the vanquished new master.

He watched the half-caste hoist the child on his shoulder and trot briskly away to the well. To govern his kingdom did not appear so easy, and a half-defeated sense irritated him. He shook a clenched fist at the oblivious half-caste.

Tumbledown Jimmy immediately raised his black hand towards his half-caste brother and did the same.

‘Plurry rogue that pfeller Nungi; good pfeller Boshy. Cobbon budgereee pfeller Boshy’ (whining); ‘poor pfeller me, 'ungry poor pfeller ole Jimmy. Plurry long time now, Boss baal gib it black pfeller baccy.’

‘Lie down, yer black dorg yer, lie down, or I'll sen' me foot through yer black beggin' paunch!’

Jimmy again spun round, till Boshy disappeared.

Queeby had returned to the kitchen, where, beside the fireplace, partly shrouded in a cloud of breath-blown ashes and smoke, he found her. Her now vigorous eye-service was obvious and stung him, but his recent defeat disinclined him even for an easy victory. In silence he lifted a nail-keg improvised into a bucket, and slung it on to the lowest crook in the chain over the fire, now blazing through Queeby's lusty efforts. She rose and made way for him. His eye travelled from her black curly hair, powdered white with the myall ashes, to her equally disguised boots, his recent gift. He had intended to ask, ‘Comfor'able?’ as a spurring reminder; instead burst from him:

‘Ghos', w'at a infernal mess ter get them into already!’

Queeby grabbed the kitchen towel and dusted them vigorously, then stood anxiously watching Boshy, her twitching toes, showing through their leather environments, sharing her uneasiness.

‘Better ter weer 'em 'en ter sling 'em onter ther roof for spiders t' lay eggs in, iden it?’ he said, suddenly peaceful.

‘Sling on ther kettle an' set ther breakfuss for all 'an's out 'ere; an' lemme know wen this boils’ pointing to the bucket. ‘We must gi'e 'im’ indicating the dead, ‘a wash.’

‘I ain't be 'arf done a-rootin' an' a-runtin' about in theere yit. Terbaccer b' ther barrerload, an' a 'ole keg ov rum up in ther loft—in under the bed’ he substituted, to lessen detection. ‘On'y let's git our work done, then us'll ev a bust up; so fust, Queeby, put orn ther kittle for breakfuss’ he repeated.

He carried the leaves of the table-top to his tool-house and workshop. Reappearing, tape-measure in hand, he went into the bedroom and took slow and accurate measurements, whistling delightedly to find that his premortem theoretical calculations and postmortem practical measurements hardly varied.

In the workshop he took off his hat, knotted the four corners of his red handkerchief and sized it to his head; then, utterly oblivious to all but his work, he lifted up his voice to the accompaniment of either saw or plane, and sang in tone outside all emotion: ‘Oh say, did yer ever know sorrer liker this?’

Queeby had finished all her appointed tasks, save the information Boshy wanted about the water in the bucket. Remembering its feared purpose, she

ignored his orders, and when, by boiling over, it threatened to put out the fire, she raised it to a crook higher in the chain, then squatted outside by the old dog. She selected the dog, for the brute, though appreciative of her company, would be undemonstrative, save for quivering body and wagging tail; but old Jimmy's begging mania would soon betray her.

Close to the dog she watched for the coming of the child and Nungi, for she knew that by now their labour must have ceased.

The little girl's eye-service had been thorough and earnest. Long before he could sight the filled bucket, she, either sitting or leaning over the dark, cavernous well, would strain her eyes then announce: 'No, nothin' in it, Nungi' which statement, though inaccurate, comforted Nungi. Moreover, should Debbil-debbil be in the bucket, cowardly though it might be, her outpost proximity gave him a sense of security.

Now in gratitude he, with her, was hunting among the wattle-scrub for the promised abnormal lump of gum, atoning for its deficiency with handfuls of geebung and five-corner berries. And from this unexpected quarter, with the flower-decked child on his shoulder, her teeth tightly locked with the gluey wattle-gum, and her arms full of its chenille tassels, he bore down on old Jimmy. Still lock-jawed, the little girl, motioning back Queeby, poured the contents of her pinafore into Jimmy's eager palms; then, with her flowers, went softly in to her father. Child-trouble widened her brown eyes as she turned them on the shrouded figure stiffly outlined by the sheet, now partly screened by the mosquito-net. Noiselessly she laid the clematis and wattle on her bed, then stood near the covered face, and, looking down at her untied bootlaces, sighed an impatient sigh always well known and understood by this now unresponsive father. She waited till she worked her teeth free, then from there listened to Boshy's vocalizing, with intermission for change of tools or to tap the shavings from the plane.

'Wonder Boshy's noise doesn't wake father!' she thought.

'Father' softly, for she was hardly justified in wakening him to lace and tie her boots. 'Father' louder, 'I've been waterin' th' ewes an' lambs, an' one ewe won't 'ave she's little lamb, an' she's lamb's cryin' like anything—poor liddle lamb!' she added, in Boshy's diction and tones.

Neither sound nor movement from the bed. Behind compressed lips she groaned disappointedly.

'It's a long time' she sighed, moving her restless feet; 'you've been a too——'

'Lovey' said hunger-driven Nungi, putting his eye and mouth to a crack near her, 'w'at about me box ov sardines? I feel like's if me throat was cut frum ear ter ear fer a month er Sundees! Arst 'im' taking his hand from his stomach and waving towards the workshop.

‘Boshy, is this the day w'en me father gets up?’

‘W'y, Lovey dear, yer comes a-sneakin' in, an' a-crawlin' in, an' a-creepin' in, an' I never see yer, an' yer frightens ten years' growth out ov me!’

‘W'at you got on you 'ead?’ looking at Boshy's improvised cap, the flap from one corner overhanging his eyeless socket.

‘This's a kep, a kerpinter's kep, Lovey.’

‘It's a long time’ she complained, looking towards the bedroom.

‘W'eere yer bin this long, long time, Lovey?’ said Boshy, alert to distract her.

‘You know’ picking the gum from her teeth.

‘Ah! a-wattle-gum 'untin’.’

‘Yes; an' w'at else?’

‘Geebun's.’

‘Geebungs’ corrected she.

‘An' fi'-corners.’

‘Five-corners’ counting her fingers.

‘Look et yer dear liddle 'ands! They's nut a meal for a merskeeter.’ He stroked them admiringly.

‘Mosquitoes been biting my father, Boshy?’

He knew from this she had been in the dead man's room. He nodded affirmatively, then lowered his voice:

‘Gosh me! w'at a mornin' you've 'ad!’ Then, suddenly earnest, ‘Way's Nungi?’ he asked.

‘Outside, an' wants 'is tin o' sardines.’

‘Wi' Jimmy, is 'e?’

She nodded.

‘Le's all go an' get breakfuss in ther kitchen.’

‘W'at's me father goin't' have for ees breakfuss?’ asked Lovey, looking at the table set for four.

Boshy readjusted his cap divertingly, but the child re-asked.

‘Lovey dear, 'e's 'ad 'is breakfuss.’

‘W'en?’

‘W'en you was gone.’

‘W'at did 'e have?’

‘Eggs an'——’

‘Boiled?’

‘No, fried’ said Boshy, suspecting a pitfall and supplying one.

Looking round the fireplace:

‘Urgh!’ she sniffed incredulously, ‘w'ere's the egg-shells, then?’

‘W'at hell-sheggs?’ transposed Boshy in his agitation, and looking both sides of the fireplace also.

‘Now look 'ere, Lovey dear, me nur Gord won't love you if you keep on a-ketchin' an' a-snarin' an' a-trippin' ov poor ole Boshy up so.’

The child's eyes were fastened on his face:

‘W'y am I?’

‘By allus an' continerally a-astin' ov questions. Arsk no questions, Lovey, an' I'll tell yer no lies’ he bargained, looking at her contritely. ‘Up wi' yer neow, Lovey, inter yer liddle cheer, an' at yer breakfuss yer goes like one o'clock. Yer know thet ole yeller-belly goanner wot's always a-pokin' an' a-prowlin' an' a-poachin' after ther eggs?’

She nodded, the light of new interest in her eyes.

‘Well, w'en 'er’—indicating Queeby, who ceased pouring the tea wonderingly to listen to incidents new to her—‘were gettin' your sop ready, if 'e didn' waller right in 'ere, an' 'as a try ter snatch ther tot out ov 'er 'ands, yer tin tot ov sop.’

‘My tot?’ from Lovey indignantly.

‘Yes, your very tot; but me an' 'er’ frenziedly trying to lessen Queeby's surprise by including her, ‘grabs 'im be ther scruff ov ther neck an' ther tip ov ther tail, makes er whistlin' stock-whip outer 'im, an' slings 'im fair inter ther middle ov nex' week. Cheek ov 'im ter want your breakfuss.’

‘Ern’ Lovey agreed, guarding against a recurrence by quickly gobbling the disliked bread-and-milk sop. ‘But’ she said, wiping her mouth, ‘it's the last time Ill 'ave nasty sop, then 'e wont come after it.’

After breakfast, astride the piebald pony, his long legs nearly touching the ground, Nungi, well fed and docile as a pet cat, rode off to tell and bring help from Cameron, their nearest neighbour.

Boshy went back to his work, and despite Queeby's pleading eyes, the child yielding to his tempting inducements, went with him. He sat her on the corner of the carpenter's bench, and parried or diverted her questions about her father, and the desirability of wakening him by handing her the long curled shavings; and when these palled, he whiled her on by the impossible task of teaching him her version of the ‘Three Golden Balls’ a blankverse poem, but rhythmically intoned, which he had taught her.

‘They wors three girls wot was orlways a-kiddin' an' a-coaxing their fathers ter buy them three goldin balls, an' any of the three of them wot lostes theys goldin balls was to be 'ung——’

‘Like ther mangy pup was’ was an explanatory interruption that cost the narrator her grip.

‘An' then w'at they do?’

‘Begin at the startment over again afore they was 'ung’ advised Boshy, unintentionally furnishing the thread she seized.

‘So one of 'em losed 'er goldin ball, so she was to be 'ung. “Oh, 'angman,

'angman, stop the rope, I think I see me dear mother comin——” ’

‘A-comin’ corrected Boshy.

‘A-comin’ a-with me goldin ball. W’at’s she’s mother says?’

‘No, I ’aven’t gut’ supplied Boshy, incautiously interested.

‘No, I haven’t got yer goldin ball. Nor I haven’t come t’ set yer free. But I ’ave come t’ see yer ’ung upon this iron gallers tree.’

It was a long list, and should have been a lasting lesson on the futility of expecting anything from relations or connections. For all came in Indian file, and sometimes announced by the reciter in the wrong order, but all from morbidity, though of each the girl with the rope round her neck asked the same question.

‘Oh, dear brother’ (or other), ‘’ave yer gut me goldin ball?’ and promptly received the answer, facile from much repetition, therefore delivered with a steep incline: ‘No, — I — ’aven’ — gut — yer — goldin — ball, — nor — I — ’aven’ — come — ter — set — yer — free, — but — I — ’ave — come — ter — see — yer — ’ung — upon — this — iron — gallers — tree.’

However, it was a splendid and seized opportunity for the ‘terue’ lover who turns up at the end of the list. Familiar and oft-repeated as was the legend, the little girl broke it to ask:

‘W’at’s a true lover?’

Boshy’s one eye grew reminiscent with unbidden long-slumbering sentiment.

‘Terue lover? Well, Lovey’ he explained, gruffly reluctant, ‘’e iden a feller wot goes a-smellin’ an’ a-sniffin’ an’ a-sneezin’ roun’ after every rag orn every bush, an’ a-pickin’ an’ a-pluckin’ an’ a-choosin’ ov none.’ And by way of more lucidity, he added: ‘Nor one wot goes all through the woods, an’ then comes out wi’ a crooked stick an’” (contritely) ‘on’y one eye — leastways, one long-sighted eye.’ For to no one did Boshy admit that he could not see with both.

The child was looking at the empty socket.

‘Come here and bend down.’

She stood, and covering his seeing eye with one hand, held the other before the quivering muscle.

‘Count now—how many fingers I got?’

‘Five’ promptly from Boshy.

‘They’s all story liars, ’cause yer can see, Boshy, right enough. But’ she said, slowly shaking a puzzled head at the withered eye, ‘you can see my two eyes, Boshy, but I can on’y see your on’y one eye.’

Boshy looked at the perturbed brow, then chanted:

‘I think I see me terue lover a-comin’ wi me a-goldin ball’ with planing

accompaniment.

‘W'at's a true lover’ re-asked Lovey, ignoring past explanations.

‘Terue lover, Lovey. Well, it's this ways. An' nandsome young feller fancies some good-lookin' young woman; well, then, Lovey, Gord nur ther devil nur no one won't keep 'em apart, an' they never rests till they gets spliced— thet's they ties a knot wi' their tongues wot they can't undo wi' their teeth. Married, thet is, an' then they 'as a liddle girl like you.’

‘Boshy, was my father an' my mother— w'at's gone up to Mr. Gord's 'ouse—married?’

‘Dunno, Lovey’ slowly, ‘an' nut knowin' can't say.’ Then gravely, ‘Lovey, did yer daddy never tell yer, you 'e's own flesh an' blood, w'ether 'e was married or nut?’

‘No’ said she, shaking her head solemnly, ‘not yet, but w'en me father wakes——’

‘Thet's orlright, Lovey, but if 'e wouldn't tell you, Lovey, tain't likely 'e'd a-told me. I reelly can't say, ez neither ov 'em ever said word ov mouth ter me ez they was. I on'y know 'e picked 'er up in some town, w'en 'e went down wi' some sheep, an' w'en they come 'ere I arst no questions, so's they tell me no lies, fer she'd an eye in 'er 'ead thet 'ud coax a duck—a nole duck—off ov the water. I see nothin' wrong wi' 'er frum ther day 'er come to ther day she died, an' I made 'er coffin— same uz 'is’ tapping the boards.

‘Whose?’ said the child sharply.

‘Oh, Lovey dear’ entreated perturbed Boshy, unprepared with a substitute, ‘don't be always a-ketchin' an' a-snarin' an' a-trippin' ov me up wi' yer liddle staggerin' questions w'en I'm a-thinkin' fer yer good.’

‘Wot yer say?’

‘Jes this: Gord in 'eaven 'elp you if they wusn't married, for nut one acre, nur one 'oof orn this 'ere place ken yer claim or touch.’

‘W'at place can't I touch?’

‘This place—Merrigulandri.’

‘Uh!’ she sniffed incredulously.

‘An' even s'posin' they was married, an' you a gal, blest if I think you could touch it.’

‘Uh!’ she sniffed again; but Boshy was deep in the issues of entail, early English, all he had known.

The child with both hands demonstrated her sense and power to touch, while listening to him in silence. He raised his foot on a stool, and, leaning his elbow on his knee, held his head with his palm.

‘W'y can't I touch it?’ asked the child, still working her pliant fingers.

‘Cos bein' a gal.’

‘Who can stop me?’

‘Ther crown ov Englan', weere I come from. Or maybe ther Gov'ment 'ere 'll step in an' claim, az they's ther nex'-in-kin, an' swaller ther 'old damn lot in one gulp—the greedy, guzzelin', plunderin' crew!’ He was greatly excited. ‘Thet it may bust 'em if they do!’

‘Clover busted poor ole Strawberry’ interposed Lovey.

As excited Boshy ignored this one glint of comprehension, she added:

‘I can touch everythin' I want t’ rousing Boshy by verifying this on him.

‘Theys the smallest and ther lovlitest liddle 'an's on this 'ere yearth' kissing them. ‘An' yer the innercentest liddle lamb, too’ stroking her tousled wattle-perfumed hair.

‘I'm a big girl, Boshy.’

‘Yes’ sorrowfully as to the sex; ‘an' fer oncet I wish ter Christ yer wuzn't a girl, Lovey.’

It was too dark a mood to hold the child.

‘Oh, you make your box, Boshy. I’ shaking her head, ‘don't want no more goldin balls. I want me father. 'E's a long time waking up’ fretfully shaping her face for tears, and twisting her body impatiently.

‘Yer gettin' sleepy-tired, Lovey ov mine. Yer bin up long agen daybreak. Come’ sitting swaying his knees like a cradle, ‘to I sing yer ter bye-bye.’

‘An' w'en I go to bye-bye, w'ere'll yer put me t' sleep?’

‘Side ov yer daddy’ promised Boshy, not looking at her.

She came to his arms and instantly shut both eyes. He, looking down at her tightly closed lids and mouth, was not deceived, as tensely still in his arms she lay.

‘don't shet yer eyes a-puppus, Lovey. Keep 'em open’ he pleaded, ‘an' wait to I sing yer ter bye-bye reely.’

‘Sing quick, then, less I will.’

Yielding to the sentimental, he began:

“‘Oh, it wus all in ther month ov May,
When green birds wus swellin',
A young man on his death-bed lay
Fer ther love ov Barbary Ellen,
Fer ther love——” ’

‘No, no, not that one’ she interrupted impatiently.

‘W'at now, Lovey?’

She was thoughtful.

‘Liddle more cider?’ Boshy prompted.

She nodded, and he broke out jauntily:

‘ “A liddle more cider for Miss Dinah,
A liddle more cider too a-hoo,
A liddle more cider for Miss Dinah,
A liddle more cider too a-hoo.” ’

She suffered this for a time, because the motion of his rapidly jerking foot-beats interfered with her speech. However, she stopped him with her hand on his mouth. Boshy looked into her sleepless eyes, with their strange, lonely expression, and began another with equally vigorous foot movement:

“Blow, bellers, blow; blow, bellers, below.
Knock away, boys, for er nour er so,
An' its double shuffle on we the re ro rady oh,
An' its double shuffle on we the re ro ray,
An' its double shuffle on we the re ro rady oh,
An' its double shuffle on we the re ro ray——” ’

Wide-open eyes looked up at him when he paused for breath, and again he returned to the sentimental:

‘ “Oh, me preetty, pretty bird,
An' me well-feathered bird,
Don't crow until it be day,
An' yer comb it shall be of the yeller beaten gold,
An' yer wings of the silver so grey.

‘ “But the bird it was false,
And very, very false,
An' it crowed an hour too soon,
An' she thought it was day,
An' she sent 'er love away,
An' 'twas only the light of the moon.” ’

She seemed too deeply interested for sleep.

‘Sing more again.’

So, changing his programme, behind closed teeth he crooned with insinuating dreaminess his unfailing cat's slumber song:

‘ “Crowin-aogies-gone-t'-Sligie
T'-marry-a-wife-for-Donal'-Magibbie.
Good-e-love-er-good-e-give-er.

Everything-to-chicken-liver.
Blow-high-ye-winds-they'll-live-together.
Blow-low-ye-winds-they'll-live-for-ever.
From-chimbly-tops-ye'll-shift-em-never.
Zoo-morigan-za-morigan-zam-zam-zee.”'

She yawned, and with renewed hope and earnestness Boshy went on, till she suddenly requested:

‘Sing pretty, pretty bird again. No, no! crow, Boshy’ suddenly.

‘Ur, Lovey’ reproachfully; ‘nut crow, Lovey’ disapprovingly, for no sleep that way. ‘Jim Crow, Lovey, d'ye mean?’ hopefully.

‘No, no;’ but stroking his face coaxingly: ‘Crow like nice, good cock-a-doo, what made she's love wake up an' go away.’

‘Ah, Lovey! can't go asleep along ov me a-crowin'. Thet cock-a-doo oughtn't t' 'ave crowed.’

‘Well, you crow, an' I'll go t' sleep then’ she promised.

Boshy gave an incipient crow.

‘Tha's on'y like little cock-a-doo. Stand up’ she said, slipping down between his knees, ‘an' clap yer wings, like w'at they do, an' crow big— *b-i-g*, like big cock-a-doo’ she said breathlessly.

Boshy's best efforts failed to stimulate the roosters, which seemed to him to be the child's desire, for she listened intently for outside sound.

‘Laugh like laughin' jackasses’ she commanded abruptly, changing her tactics, a grim intent about her mouth.

‘Wot oh! you bol' jackasses a-larfin' so loud’ chanted Boshy, uncertain about laughing mimicry. ‘Thet right, Lovey?’

‘Laugh like w'at they do.’

Boshy did nobly.

‘Laugh louder 'n w'at they do’ she exacted.

Boshy tip-toed, raised his head towards the roof, and made a supreme effort. The old dog growled disapprovingly, and dozing Jimmy laughed unintelligently. Boshy grinned at both tributes.

‘Laugh more agen, Boshy; go on, go on!’ said the child, tip-toeing in her eagerness.

Boshy, elated, improvised a series of unbirdlike notes, startlingly loud, and new to all feathered folk.

‘W'at about thet lot, Lovey?’ he asked, hungry for her approval and disappointed, for she had turned towards the door.

She looked back at him, a look on her face new to him.

‘Now, let's see; didn't that wake me father?’

Boshy raised his hands.

‘Oh, Lovey! O Gord A'mighty, Lovey! You to play a trick like thet on

poor me!' gasped he, aghast, undone by her ruse.

Chapter II

FIFTY miles parted the dead man's property and Cameron Cameron, and it was not till the afternoon of the next day that he with his daughter Margaret drove up.

Boshy, with Lovey beside him, was watching for them. Margaret held out her arms for the little orphan, but she shrank from them closer to Boshy, who gripped her hand. Cameron Cameron bared his head, and noiselessly they entered the house. Boshy, leading Lovey, came out a little later to the kitchen and bade Queeby 'take Lovey for a ta-ta in the scrub' while he, Cameron Cameron, and Margaret discussed things inside.

Queeby instead went to Jimmy, still lying or squatting between the myall logs, and greedily begging from an uninterested horse grazing near, for as a food beggar Jimmy was ceaseless; even in his sleep his hands went out.

'Cobban Master (God) spillum flour-bag (frost) las' night on poor Jimmy. Plurry cole' he complained to the child. 'W'ite pfeller frost las' night.'

She understood and covered him with a bag. Laying his hands on his moon-whitened head, he continued:

'Yulegrin (hungry). Poor pfeller me, Tumbledown Jimmy—poor pfeller me!' was a further demand for food. Then angrily: 'That pfeller' pointing out on the plain to Nungi, 'been eatem big pfeller breakfuss; baal gib it poor pfeller Jimmy enny breakfuss!' he squeaked harshly in self-pity, pointing from his mouth to his stomach, whining, 'Yulegrin! yulegrin!'

His hungry importunity was no more to the child than the magpie's, for in that respect the magpie was his superior. The methods of both were strangely alike, and had long since palled on her, and this afternoon she hardly saw him. Leaving Queeby with him, she went noiselessly round to the widest crack in the bedroom and looked through.

Still that silent sleeping father. She put her mouth to a crack and directed a deep sigh to his ear. The net and sheet fluttered, and the child's heart beat audibly.

'Father' she whispered, tremulous with hope; but neither motion nor sound answered her. Child though she was, the sense of the mysterious fell upon her, and her mouth set maturely as she turned away.

'Sweet, pretty little creature' the birds, her old friends, twittered to her. She turned from them and the scrub with its lurking shadows, and looked across the plain. The ewes and lambs were again round the empty troughs surrounding the well. She climbed on the butcher's block near the meat room; from this coign she could see the graves. One end of the palisading was down, and she saw the dirt being flung up under the myall clump by

two of Cameron's men.

Since the coming of Margaret Cameron and her father, Lovey had ceased to ask questions, but had followed their every movement with widely questioning eyes. She went now to the chimney corner, and applied her eye to a well-known crack: Margaret sat beside her father on a stool, and Boshy stood facing them and herself, his left arm extended, his thumb holding down the two middle fingers. His whole hand shook whenever he spoke, but too impartially for emphasis.

‘Her father wrote to me just before he died about taking her—and the child must be schooled’ said Cameron Cameron.

‘Git me the books; I’ll school her. Town’ sniffed Boshy—‘town’s no place fer a chile like ‘er. Nothin’ in ‘em but a lyin’ an’ a-swearin’ an’ a-Sabbath-breakin’ a-drinkin’ an’ a-forgin’ an’ a——’ Boshy looked at Margaret and ceased abruptly. ‘I don’t say sech a awful thing ‘ud ‘appen ter Lovey ez thet. But I see’ —Boshy’s jaw set—‘no good in towns, nur schoolin’ neither’ he said sullenly.

Cameron began, but Boshy stopped him.

‘Mr. Cameron, sur, I knows ter ther full you means well ter Lovey all right. They’ (giving a backward jerk towards the bedroom and uniting it by a handwave with a grave now being lengthened under the myalls) ‘may ‘ave been married or they may nut ‘ave been.’

‘Of course they were, Boshy. I’ve got their marriage lines here with these papers’ said Cameron.

‘Oh! you’ve a-snavelled ‘ees papers, then’ said Boshy suspiciously, who had been too distressfully absorbed watching Margaret pack the child’s clothes to notice this.

Boshy paused, and after a visible struggle went on with a matter even nearer his heart.

‘Well, married or nut, it’ll be all ther same t’ Lovey in ther long run, you understan’.’

Neither did.

‘Well, it’s this way: I’ve bin ‘ere, young man an’ ole—leastways middle age, for though me ‘ead may be a bit greyish outside, it’s noways greyish inside. Serpose you don’t think I’ve bin ‘ere fer ther love ov it, jest stuck ‘ere in this one-eyed country w’ere no one comes, so ther dorgs don’t ‘ave ter bark at strangers, jest for the run ov me knife an’ pannikin.’

‘No?’ remarked Cameron, in tones inviting further confidences.

‘Yer right there; there’s bin bad seasons, and there’s bin good, but I’ve bin asleep with one eye open, good or bad.’

Boshy paused, but his hearers were again bushed as to his drift. He saw this, and in an effort to enlighten them, said slowly:

‘Her'll want for nothin’.’

He put both hands in his pockets, and looked from the nubbly carbuncles there outlined to the two. Still both failed to understand, or no one appeared to; withdrawing his hands impatiently, he reluctantly said slowly, dropping his voice:

‘P'r'aps you 'ave noded they's nut many ole emp'y pickle bottles knockin' about'; then considering this alarmingly explicit, he changed the subject hastily. ‘I sez nothin' about 'er a-goin' wi' this 'ere young woman fer a day or so, t' we gits 'im laid by. Same time, she'd be jest as well, if nut better, in ther scrub 'ere wi' Queeby a berry-huntin' as she is now; an' at ther time w'en all's ready, w'en 'er comes back an' 'er sees 'im gone, I can easy chalk 'er off be tellin' 'er 'e's gone up to Mr. Gord's 'ouse, as 'er calls it, ter see 'er mammy. Trust me fer thet’ said Boshy, grinning egotistically.

But the hearts of his hearers were still cold in his cause. Cameron was for closing the discussion as useless and ununderstandable.

Boshy, mistaking the silence, winked, and looked insinuatingly from one to the other, and in gratitude further entrenched on his secretiveness.

‘An' I may say, furthermore, seein' thet I'm a-talkin' ter w'ite people, thet them ole emp'y pickle bottles is w'eere no crows wi' colds on their chests will mistake them bottles' insides fer yeller cough lozengers’ he went on, without pausing to elucidate the, to him, obviousness of his meaning. ‘Now, w'at d'yer serpose I make out ov a damn one-eyed 'ole like this? Thet is, annerly or yearly, take season wi' season all roun’.’

He paused to look for commercial freemasonry from Cameron.

‘I couldn't say, Boshy. What do you make now?’

‘Yer wouldn't believe me, no, nut if I took me oath.’

‘Try me now’ induced Cameron.

Boshy looked round the room, then under the safe and sofa. Beside them only the cat by the fire. He opened the back door wide enough for the cat's exit, then, taking his cap from his head, he beat her out with it, and closed the door carefully.

Backing into a corner furthest from Margaret, he beckoned to Cameron, who bent, while Boshy, tiptoeing, whispered in his ear.

‘No, it couldn't be done in the time’ incredulously pretended Cameron.

‘I told yer yer'd doubt me word; but Gord may strike me dead if I lie’ challenged and confirmed the testator. He added immediately: ‘But thet confession 'as never been mouthed be me afore, nut even't 'im’ pointing to the bedroom with one hand, and letting in the importuning cat with the other.

All Boshy's past history was pure conjecture; from himself nothing had ever been gleaned, though many had pumped.

‘How did you come out here, Boshy?’ insinuated Cameron, intent on more confidences.

‘That’s neither ‘ere nur theere, an’ yer gut no business ter try t’ git me on ther raw, Mr. Cameron’ said Boshy resentfully.

There was an audible breathing-space between the two men, then Margaret said:

‘Father meant out here, Boshy—Merrigulandri.’

‘Oh’ he said, relieved. ‘Well, I’d ‘ad me bellyfull of towns, so I took a look roun’ fer a careful sort ov mate, an’, be ‘eavens! I gut more then I wanted, fer I struck one as mean as cats’ meat. Pat the Jew, as ‘e was called, soon giv’ ther bush best, an’ I ‘ear now that ‘e is landed proprietor ov the Court ‘Ouse Hotel, and quite the juicy cockroach.’

He paused, and allowed a smile to form and slowly fade at his mental picture of his old mate as a Boniface, and reminiscence hazed his one eye and relaxed his mouth.

‘We camped one evening at Narrangidgery Creek, close b’ a cocky’s ‘umstead. We was clean dead-beat, an’ ‘adn’t tasted a bite ov fresh meat fer some time, an’ w’en we sees a cupple ov wimin a-roundin’ up and a-runnin’ in some cattle, tired as we was, we bucks up and gi’es ‘em an nand. Well, in less ‘an no time, the ole woman she brings out ther gun and pops one off fust go. After thet me an’ Pat rolls in an’ skins an’ dresses it. But, be ‘eavens! the ole woman was a standin’ by, an’ nut even so much as a lick at the blood would ‘er le’ our two dorgs sneak, an’ them as dead-beat as we wuz. By-and-by the two wimin starts a-runnin’ of ther’—looking at Margaret—‘ther—intrils, but the two of ‘em wuz at the same time a-beatin’ and a-beltin’ and a-bashin’ of both dorgs’ back. We tried t’ coax ther skirts an’ liver out ov ‘er. “I gi’e away nothin’,” she said. An’ be ‘eavens! thet wuz all we did git, so we christened the place “Gi’e-away-Nothin’ ‘All.” ’

‘Now’ said Cameron, ‘we must buck up; it’s getting late. Now about the child, Boshy: she must come with us, you see.’

‘I see nuthin’ ov ther sort’ replied Boshy, surprised. ‘Oo’s gut ther best right to ‘er—strangers or them ez weaned ‘er? Yes, s’elp me Gord, weaned ‘er!’ he added fiercely, looking from one to the other. Then, suddenly softening: ‘Mr. Cameron, an’ you, young woman’ his pleading mouth working tremulously, ‘twas I ez weaned ‘er from ‘er mother a’most, an’—red spots glowing on his cheekbones—‘Gord’s me Judge, to kid ‘er even from playin’ wi’ the fowls, I used ter take ‘er inter me workshop an’ turn meself inter a blarsted ole rooster, a-curlin’ ov, an’ a-crowin’ ov, an’ a-clappin’ ov me wings like—like b-beggary!’

Boshy had turned his one eye on Cameron during this confession. Its cost, though it might have missed the man, drew toll from the woman.

‘Kind, kind Boshy! But, you see, it’s for the child’s good. She could not stay now.’

‘She must be schooled—can’t grow up like a wild animal’ interposed Cameron.

‘They’s nut much wile animal about Lovey; an’ if all comes ter all, isen’ ther bush ther proper place for a wile animal? Town’s all very well for a ornery child, but, Mr. Cameron and this young woman ’ere, Lovey ain’t be no means a ornery child. She’s gut ways be no ways ornery. In fac’ ’er were born wi’ em, an’ thet’s w’y ’er’s gut ther ’ole ov them under ’er thumb — Nungi an’ Queeby, an’ ole Jimmy an’ —an’—’after a bashful pause—‘the ’ole damn lot ov us!’

This avowal begot another.

‘S’elp me Gord, sur, ter tell yer the truth, if ’er were took away I’d feel no better nur a ’ole’—after a pause—‘rooster w’at’s lorst ’er one chick!’

Then again brick-red spots glowed on the old man’s high cheek-bones, and his one eye glistened. He cleared his throat shamefacedly, then proceeded, solely addressing Cameron:

‘Mr. Cameron, sur, ’t were I ez poddied’ (spoon-fed) ‘thet child w’en ’er mammy fust weaned ’er. W’y, w’en ’er wuz liddle, an’ they wuz a-tryin’ ter wean ’er, nut bite nor sup could they get inter ’er liddle inside till I tackles ’er like this’—looking round; then, for lack of illustrative matter, improvising with his hands. ‘I grabs up a lot ov bread-an’-milk sop, an’ makes outside wi’ it. “Come along, cock-a-doodle-doo; come along, chooky ’en an’ chicks, eat up all Lovey’s sop,” sez I. “W’at!” sez I, “you greedy chooks, nut leave none fer poor liddle baby Lovey!” sez I, a-spillin’ ov it out, an’ a-gammunin’ az they ’ad gobbled ov it all up out ov me ’ands. Lord Gord! ter see thet liddle child, the spirit ov ’er, the pluck ov ’er, a-fightin’ wi’ ’er liddle, liddle ’ands wi’ them fowls! Game ’er is an’ always wuz, an’ always will be—game az a liddle ant!’

Boshy wiped the admiring moisture from his eye with the red ear of his handkerchief cap hanging conveniently near it, then ventured on further memories connected with the child that he, like Mary, had ‘pondered in his heart.’

‘Oly Ghost!’ said he, inadvertently but appropriately invoking the Pentecostal Bestower of tongues—“Oly Ghost! ’er could talk long afore ’er could walk, an’ plain az you an’ me, too. I’ll allow az ’er were slow about walkin’, an’ ’er is ter this day if ’er can be carried. Now, so ’elp me Gord! this is az true as Gospel. This is the dodge ’er gut me up to t’ try and wake up ’er dead daddy.’

He told of the crowing in his workshop, and he seemed to be gaining his cause, for Cameron’s Bush-worn face had grown fatherly and Margaret

wept; but he suddenly cut him short with:

‘Boshy, we know you have been good and kind to the child, but she must come with us for the time, then go to town to my sister to be educated. Why, my boy Andrew is there’ he added, to reassure Boshy.

‘I’ve more rights ter ther child than any ov you strangers’ said Boshy determinedly. ‘A nice time ‘er’ll give you strangers, or anyone else oo wants to tie ‘er liddle boots even! Nut me, even if I wuz to put me two eyes out on sticks, will ‘er let touch ‘em. “Me father will lace ‘em,” ‘er says continerally. An’ theere ‘er is, a-waitin’ az ‘er is, fer ‘im as’ll wake no more, to wake an’ lace ‘em up.’ He paused dramatically. ‘But soon’s ‘er knows ‘e’s dead an’ gorn it’ll be, “Boshy, you can lace ‘em up,” an’ “Boshy, you can do this, an’ do thet, an’ ther other thing.” To tell yer ther reel truth, I wuz a-thinkin’, az I wuz a-makin’ ov ‘e’s coffin, thet I wouldn’ be surprised if ‘er didn’ take to a-daddyin’ ov me—poor liddle motherless, fatherless lamb thet ‘er is.’

Cameron Cameron moved towards the door.

‘We must take the child’ he said; ‘she must be schooled. Suppose you could do everything else for her, you’ll allow you couldn’t school her, Boshy?’

‘Boshy’ll allow nothin’ at all ov ther sort! Wait’ he earnestly commanded, as Cameron’s hand went to the door, and something in his tones caused the man to obey.

In the pregnant pause the cat rose from the fireplace and stretched in a strained, listening attitude, with its eyes on Boshy.

‘Get out ov this, yer listenin’ tinker yer!’

He aimed a kick at her. and, again opening the door, drove her out.

‘There’s nut one in the ‘ole ov this districk but w’at thinks I come out to this country fer ther good ov me delicate constitootion.’ (Everyone in that district thought differently.)

‘Also az well, thet I can’t write.’

He went slowly to the topless table, and along its dusty frame laboriously traced with his forefinger ‘Hugh Palmer.’ He raised his suddenly shrunken, withered face to Margaret’s, that had as suddenly crimsoned.

‘If so be az I were sent out, an’ altered my name, yer may know, young woman, I’m nut ther on’y one. “Yerhoo Pormer” thet young blade calls ‘isself, but Hug Pal-mer he’s true name is, fer I see a letter as a-cum to ‘im from ‘ome; in fac’, ther mail-boy lef’ it wi’ me ter give it ter ‘im. “This fer you?” sez I. ‘E takes it, looks at it. “Yerhoo Pormer,” ‘e sez, thinkin’ I couldn’t read. “Hug Pal-mer,” sez I to ‘im. An’ if that young man ‘ad a-owned to it there an’ then, an’ w’y ‘e were sent out, to me, I’d a-tole ‘im w’y I come, an’ said no more to one on yearth. There’s more’n me in ther same

boat, yer see, Mr. Cameron an' young woman; an' my name is no more Boshy 'n w'at thet young man is Yerhoo Pormer. "Good ov me 'Ealth" 's my name fer ther cause ov my voy'ge. "Kerlonial Egsperience" is Mr. Yerhoo Pormer's.'

Boshy's attempts at the English drawl of Margaret's lover, together with his wrongly bracketing him with himself as a convict, caused a burst of laughter from her father.

'My word! plenty worse than you out of gaol, Boshy, old man' he said, slapping him on the back.

'An' you know w'eere to find 'em!' said Boshy, stung by his noisy mirth; for it was to him a bitter confession, justifiable only by the greatness of the occasion—one that had induced him to uncover his two most hidden secrets.

Cameron Cameron jerked his head at his daughter, and again went to the door.

'I've no wish to put atween you an' thet young man, miss. Gord knows, a conspriricy sent me 'ere, an' mebbe 'e were sent out fer very liddle. Yes, no doubt so were 'e, an' I'd rather yer didn' name it to 'im, fer I never be word ov mouth spoke about it afore' he said, in agitated uncertainty following close after Margaret.

'I won't, Boshy' she promised, too tender for Boshy's coming trial to enlighten him, even if she could.

To his further dismay, the child met them outside, her eyes unnaturally open, her mouth unusually indrawn, and unnaturally and unusually silent.

Cameron's man harnessed the horses and brought the buggy round to the front-door. Old Jimmy immediately sidled up to the horses' heads, and, in his disability to attract the bipeds, importuned the quadrupeds for bacca and tucker.

Margaret Cameron, with Lovey in her arms, went into the bedroom, turned back the sheet from the brow, and held the child's immovable lips to it, then pressed her own, and went to the buggy. All the household were now round it, as she placed the girl on the seat and got in.

Boshy stood near, palsied, speechless.

The child drew away from Margaret's sheltering arms and shuffled to the seat's edge near Boshy. She placed one foot over the side, and moved it meaningly towards him. He rushed and with trembling fingers laced it, then the other.

'Lovey' he said brokenly, holding both feet firmly, 'Lovey—this—is—a—er—conspriricy—a put-up thing to part us! Jes' yer wait, Lovey ov mine—jes' wait an' see can it be done. Wait, Lovey——'

His lips were disobedient, but his jaw worked strenuously for the love of

his heart.

‘Long ago a—er—conspiricy parted me from me—mother. This is another conspiricy to part us.’

He mouthed silently for some moments.

‘Wait, Lovey—er—mine—an' see can it be done. Jes' wait, Lov——’

‘Poor pfeller me!’ importuned Jimmy as they drove off; ‘poor pfeller me! Poor Tumbledown Jimmy!’ as ever his hand rose and fell.

Chapter III

ALL week long the puffing and panting throat of the flour-mill belched vapour-columned arches, which, telescoping airily, spanned the river from bank to bank, as if purposefully linking the mill with Fireman Foreman's dwelling on the opposite side. Fireman Foreman—a godly member of the Methodist chapel—shrouded by dawn or by vapour, on his way to the mill to get up steam, was therefore seldom seen to cross. Some little ones, superstitiously awed by the mill's funnel belchings, credited him with crossing this waterway by the aerial arches. But now, in the unillusioned light and broody quiet of a Sabbath morn, the cold, silent mill, shorn of its nebulous halo, looked old and worn—an aged actor off the stage. The same unsparing realism foreshortened the river's width, and directed those sentimental children's eyes to the mundane stepping-stones from Foreman's to the mill. On the flat behind the mill, dawn-rising Chinamen shogged with nimble bare feet under their yoke-linked watering-cans. These busy brethren, meeting sometimes on the same narrow track, would pause, ant-like, seemingly to dumbly regard one another and their burdens, then, still ant-like, pass silently to their work.

No schoolboys lingered round Bob Robertson's (yclept Roberson's) blacksmith's shop, for this sleepy day no lusty throat bellowed attention to the flaming tongues fanned from its bloodily blazing teeth; no luminous stars flinted from the clanking anvil. The lips of its wide-mouthed door were closed, and a cruelly prosaic touch were the Scotch twill shirt and moleskin trousers hanging across the fence. Their owner, George, the blacksmith's apprentice, always wore his Sunday suit on Saturday night, while Granny Foreman as regularly sluiced through his week-day gear.

The front doors of Pat the Jew's Courthouse Hotel and its less successful rival, the Royal, were closed. Old Moore the pound-keeper, Dinnie Donahoe the shoemaker, Tambaroora Phil the chemist, Fry the tailor, and other thirsty back-door compatriots, viewed this inhospitable restriction with equanimity.

Inside the National School the dusty emptiness, surrounding the ink-stained, knife-mutilated forms, was eloquent of relaxation. Dickey, the schoolmaster's old pony, roamed in solitary dejection all round the bare school-ground. The untrodden nibblings under the fence were dry and dusty, and from the quest of these he would raise his head, and thrusting it over the bars, eye up and down the empty street, then whinny gregariously—whether for the schoolboys who had surreptitiously plucked every hair from his mane and tail, or for his work-day acquaintances, the

butcher and the baker's old horses, was not clear even perhaps to him.

As she entered the main street, still empty but for her, Eliza Hickson, commonly called 'Lizarixin' milk-girl from 'up the river' crossed her leg and sat genteely sideways on her milk saddle-bags—flour-sacks ingeniously partitioned into pint or half-pint receptacles. When she passed the schoolhouse, Dickey raised his head over the rails and dropped some of his dry gleanings in his whinnied greeting to 'Liza's old horse. But neither 'Liza nor her mount responded. Unguided, he turned round the corner of the school enclosure, to Sergeant Toohey, their first customer, across the river. The hollow resonance of her horse's hoofs crossing the bridge filled the vacuous morning unduly, rousing old Granny Foreman, whose nightcapped head appeared through the small bedroom window.

'Liza dear, do 'ee like a good girl, 'and I in George's clo'es: 'twill save I goin' out.'

But Granny bought no milk, so her double sentiment of hiding the limited extent of her grandson's wardrobe and observing the sanctity of the Sabbath appearance did not appeal to 'Liza. She turned her expressionless eyes on the old woman, and with, 'Oo was yer servant larst year?' went undelayed up the hillside to the gaol. She meant to finish her milk delivery in time to attend morning Sunday-school, for, notwithstanding her double milk duties on the Sabbath, she topped the list for regular and punctual attendance.

Her next service would be the home of Widow Irvine, the well-to-do sister of Cameron Cameron. The house was on the flank of the 'gravelly hill' and as 'Liza topped this, she saw with surprise that apparently all there still slept.

And as Granny McGrath's river-going geese waddled their way through the paddock next to this house, they too paused to joyfully comment on the unusual spectacle of an old and relentless dog foe still on the chain. They were not of the order that take their pleasures silently, so shrill laughter was in their gladsome beaked communings. But it was even more galling to the fettered dog when rank and file came in a united line, and through the space beneath the lower rail, slowly and steadily regarded him. It was a relief when a chorus of triumphant 'Queg, queg, quegs!' burst from them. Now only the fence and the chained dog divided them and the long coveted grass in the home paddock. An old mother goose was for immediate action, but her less martial spouse hung back for a further futile exhibition from the dog to burst his bonds, then, as became a cautious general, he waddled under and led the way, proscribing a safe limit.

Among the dewy grass they zigzagged their destructive bills, and after each swallowing pause they craned their long necks towards the impotent

dog, and the aggressive, arrogant mocking of their 'Queg, queg, quegs!' in varied keys under his very nose was maddening.

To add to his humiliation, old mare Cushla on the other side of the fence ceased licking her newly-foaled offspring to gallop up from the flat. She stretched over the fence her head, with extended pricked ears and questioning eyes. Then she, with equine eloquence, whinnied for an explanation from the dog of his lack of hostility to these despoilers of her foal's domain.

Tightening every sinew and muscle, he gave a silent but violent exhibition of his inability to reach or disconcert these invaders; yet unappeased, she still demanded the same duty. Her want of ordinary horse sense to grasp the situation almost scattered his extraordinary dog sense of Sabbath sanctity. He rose, and, inflating his sides, panted with mortified rage. Yet again he slackened his chain to the last loop, then, with concentrated, soundless energy, he bounded with an impetus that turned him tail end to them. When he reversed, he found that Cushla's eyes had added contempt to complaint, and that Daddy Gander was leading a whole orchestra of amused 'Queg, quegs!' He turned his eyes to his dilatory master's room, and, raising his head to the heavens, sent up a prolonged howl that was utterly free from secularism. The startled geese flew incontinently, a change of expression in their 'Quegs' and their falling feathers showed their imaginations were anticipating.

Neither parsonage nor rectory kept the sanctity of the Sabbath more sacredly than this household, for Mrs. Irvine was a strict Wesleyan. Her home on week-days was often honoured by the presence of the parson, and every Sunday at dinner. Indeed, it seemed to the culprit dog that he and his canine companions had to take on the subdued Sabbath atmosphere with the silence of the mill on Saturday afternoons. His fault now was therefore the more heinous, and guiltily he sent sidelong looks to the room of his master, Jim, man of all work—but thankfully he saw the still closed door.

It was not the contented sense of a week well spent that had prolonged Jim's sleep, but the fact that the night before had been his monthly pay-night. There was no variety in Jim's personal mode of celebrating these occasions, but much in his gifts to Fanny, maid of all work, his fellow-servant, for in the first hour of their meeting Jim's eyes had eagerly sought the third finger on both her work-wealed hands. From their unadorned simplicity he instantly made up his mind to wed her some day, and although passing years, chiefly of an autumnal tend, demanded an undue deciduous toll from Fanny's meagre locks and ample gums, Jim, to his credit, remained faithful.

It was to this home Cameron Cameron's daughter, now Margaret Palmer,

had some weeks back sent the child Lovey to be educated. There was little need for Margaret, tender soul, to write to her brother Andrew to bespeak his care for the orphan girl. Instinctively from the first this silent lad took the brown-eyed Bush-girl in his charge; otherwise it was a cold home for her. For there was little love in the barren widow's buxom body for any child save Andrew, whose silence was his strength, radiating security even to the inexperienced Lovey. Quickly she learned to know that a word from 'Andree' meant more than a speech from the others. The night before, under his tuition, his own savings had been supplemented by Jim, who had pared down his gift to Fanny, to assist Andrew in the purchase of a doll, much coveted by the unsophisticated child, despite its fearful and wonderful shape. There would be a heavy reckoning when Fanny found that instead of four yards of flannel for a petticoat Jim had purchased only two.

Andrew knew this, and dreading her discovery, slept lightly, and consequently was awakened by the dog's howl. Hastily freeing the now repentant brute and impatiently noisy fowls, he took the milk-jug from the kitchen window-ledge and placed it on the gate-post. Lizarixin, ambling down-hill to fill the waiting jug, was almost shocked into a standstill by the dog's howl; but later catching sight of Andrew, she prodded her old Neddy into a hasty jog-trot. Quite unconsciously, this youth had impressed her maiden fancy, and she had a little plan ready for delivery at Sunday-school this very afternoon.

Liza filled the milk-jug, rather ostensibly draining the quart-bottle.

'Good measure, Anderer' she said to him, demonstrating that not one drop dripped from the inverted bottle. Most customers had accused her of a tendency to short measure by retention.

'Yers' he said, hurriedly taking the jug and turning away.

'Anderer' she called.

'Want me?' he asked, looking at her foolishly-grinning mouth; but she only prodded her heels into her horse's ribs. She had meant her plan to mature at Sunday-school that afternoon, but though she realized that this was a more favourable opportunity, it took time for her slow, determined brain to make the transference.

'Know yer lessins, Anderer?'

He nodded.

'Find ther text?'

'Nuh.'

'It's in ther fourth——'

'Mus'n't tell' from him checked her.

'I'm orlways ther first at mornin' an' evenin Sunde-schule, an' ther most

reglerestest' said Liza, making this announcement as an offset to his display of righteousness.

'Better be goin' on now or you'll be late this mornin'' he advised, turning away.

'Anderer' decidedly.

'Wot?' impatiently.

She took from the saddle-pocket a soiled pink wad.

'Ketch' she said, but it hit him on the chest.

He picked it up.

'Thanks' he grunted, unrolling and pocketing the acid-drop, and allowing the sentiment on its kiss-paper covering to flutter away unread, until her strategic—

'Oh, ain't yer goin' ter read wot's on ther kiss-paper? It's about you' appealed to his egotism and he took up the paper and read:

'If I see thy head on another's knee,
Then I'll knock saucepans out of thee';

then ungallantly he put the lolly and its love-proxy on the gatepost.

'I didn' give it ter yer; I throwed it at yer. Know w'y?'

'No.'

'Cause I throwed me rubbish ware I throwed me love' simpered sex-sophisticated Liza, her sunburnt face flooded with a mulberry hue.

'don't be a fool;' and he turned away his disgusted face.

'I ain't.' As a guarantee she called, 'Anderer, you be my sweet'ear, and I'll be yours.'

'Urh you! Get on with yer milk-bags' he snorted, hastening into the haven of Jim's room. Ignoring Jim's hazy invitation 't' give it er name' he sobered Jim's 'shouting' hospitality by drenching him with the contents of the tin jug.

Jim sat up and tried to moisten his palate with his dry tongue.

'W'a's er time?' he asked.

As if in answer, the cracked bell of the little Scotch church, first to begin and last to cease, clanged its 'first bell' announcement.

'That's the last bell; an' aunt's up this hour.' Both were immorally effective statements.

'Oly Ghost! w'y didn' wake me afore?' reproachfully asked Jim, staggering up.

The bells of the rival churches were swift to follow their despised leader, and the combined clamour awoke the little girl.

'Look' said Fanny to Andrew, as he with studied diplomacy went to get the first, therefore the brunt, of her anger. 'Look at them pertaters.'

In this Sabbath-keeping household all Sunday duties possible were performed on the preceding day; therefore Andrew, in consideration for Fanny curling the child's hair, had overnight pared the potatoes for Sunday's dinner. Fanny's observation was very limited, and not till this morning did she find that the whole dish of potatoes so thickly shorn by Andrew in record time, now lay in the bottom of a small dipper. Then in addition she enlarged on her real grievance, her just share expended on Ursie's doll; but her tirade was cut short by an unearthly wail from the child's room.

Ursula felt her curl-carbuncled head; the papers were all in; she got up to look for her doll. Finding in her sleep contortions she had broken off a leg, she gave Rachel's cry which the boy never forgot. Its poignancy startled even Fanny, who went speedily to the room; but her resentment rekindled when she found the cause to be the maimed doll. 'Serves ther both er yer rights' snarled she. But Andrew soon partially assuaged the tearful child's maternal grief; he could easily mend this doll, and later he and Jim would get her a better.

And now the longed-for Sunday had come. Washed, uncurled, and dressed in a grotesquely long black frock, and gloves, which to keep on she had to shut her hands, Ursie was ready for church service at nine o'clock, all but her hat. Her first hat lay in a bandbox in her aunt's room, under the widow's new black bonnet, and the little girl's impatient feet many times went to and from the shut door. Andrew ventured at last to knock, then to intrude his head, and, discreetly augmenting the time, made a demand for the hat. The bandbox was produced, and Ursie was called, and joyfully elevated her eager little face for this large hat, mushroom in shape. Wide strings tied under the chin drew it down till the back brim grazed on the child's shoulders. It was the style of hat worn when the aunt was a child, and though forty years stood between their ages, she saw nothing incongruous about it; and the wilderness had stood between the child and all hats, so she was ignorantly content.

Andrew was sent to invite a visiting minister to dinner, and Ursie commanded to wait on the veranda. The bells had started anew, apparently refreshed by breakfast. Sunday— church—new dress—gloves and hat: Ursula's heart bounded; she would be good on Sunday. A buzzing hornet plied mud-laden between the river and his nest in the chimney corner, above the honeysuckle. Working at his nest on Sunday! She was shocked. Wicked twittering swallows were likewise disregarding and desecrating this holy day. She rather feared the hornet, but she vigorously 'shooed' the naughty swallows till both her gloves fell off; but persisted in her devout efforts till the hornet, apparently disapproving of her interference, circled

above her head, buzzing ominously. Despite the righteousness of her cause, she was vanquished. Retreating, she watched these uninfluenced sinners fly riverwards for more mud; and as the result of the past few weeks' teaching, meditated on the judgment sure to overtake them.

In their garden just beneath her, and separated from her aunt's paddock only by a gully, the Chinamen still laboured. They were bigger than the hornets or birds, therefore wickeder. Her little heart beat faster at the sight of these grown-up Sabbath desecrators, till their offence was absorbed by a greater. Her aunt's fence ran along the river-bank, and on the top rail of this several boys laboriously but adroitly balanced their progress up the river: towels round their necks made clear their purpose. In varied ways all were intent on attracting the Chinamen, for the purpose of demonstrating the superiority of the white over the coloured races. Some shouted offensive orders, others, variegated Chinky-chows or Ching-chongs.' The watching child got her first lesson in the gesticulative boy language of contempt, supplied by thrust-out tongues, 'Bacon that fat' and other indications of scornful disgust, but for her mercifully confined to sight, not sound. However, it seemed all in the day's work to the apparently oblivious gardeners. But the limit to the horrified child's endurance was reached, when she saw these boys make a hasty raid on the unripe peaches of a laden tree growing in the corner between, and overhanging, both gardens.

With a bursting heart she ran to Fanny.

'Fanny' she gasped, 'naughty, wicked boys goin' t' bogey [bathe] on Sunday are stealin' Aunt's peaches!'

Fanny, after making good the quantity of potatoes that Andrew's prodigality of paring necessitated, was now ungraciously preparing a salad—an extra order for the visitor parson.

'Let 'em bogey till they bust!'

'But, Fanny, they're stealin', an' it's Sunday.'

The child was tensely pallid.

'Sunday me eye an' Betty Martin!' retorted Fanny, blinking her eyes, and in tones harmonizing with her radish-scraping.

'W'at Betty Martin?' asked the chilled child, looking at both Fanny's eyes, and hoping for a more sympathetic guide and counsellor in historical Betty Martin.

'Any fool knows!' said equally puzzled Fanny; and at the moment Jim came hastily in with the day's wood, a duty ignored in the excitement of the night before. The sight of him recalled to Ursula her maimed doll.

'Jim' she said, her lips twitching tremulously, 'my doll's leg fall off in the bed last night, an' naughty, wicked boys is stealin' an'— an' going to go bogeyin' on Sunday.'

Sharp and not short was Fanny's lecture to Jim anent the shortage in her flannel length, and emphatic her disbelief in Jim's assertion that 'ole Brooks' the draper had 'took' him in. The price of the doll was the true explanation, and at the child's reference to it Jim agitatedly buried his head in the dipper, and, blind to the potatoes at the bottom, rapidly drained them, then went quickly out.

Disconcerted, Ursie went back to the veranda. Below the front of the house, in the hollow that the boundary fence separated from the Chinese gardens, numberless crickets 'filed their saws' with impartial, unsectarian opposition to the again changing bells. Jim had told her it was sure to rain when these earth-hiding creatures 'cricked' No church for her, then; and, as if in answer to their spiteful request, goose-coloured clouds began to gather in the west. However, across one cloud the end of a rainbow trailed fadingly. Ursula eyed it with a meaning born of the day. 'A little bit of Mrs. God's sash.' But the grey soon covered it. The child's heart was leaden, for it might rain before church. Vague discontent with this holy home stirred her, and indefinitely she longed for some place where there was neither God to offend nor devil to fear.

When Andrew joined her she was wiping her eyes with her gloves.

'Wot's up, Ursie?'

'Andree' she said, in reverent tones, 'just now, up in the sky, I saw a little bit of Mrs. God's sash, but she's gone now.'

He looked down at her, as she thought, in disbelief, so she described it.

'That was a rainbow, Ursie; there's no Mrs. God.'

'Is she dead too, Andree, like my father?'

The boy looked at her wonderingly. It was her father's death that had brought her to this loveless home, but she had not spoken of it before. He led her to the end of the veranda, and pointed to the Sunday-decked folk, then she brightened instantly, putting on her gloves, in a fever to be off that moment.

However, they had not long to wait, for the widow was never late for church. She took a coldly critical survey of the orphan and her clothes—a replica, save for bonnet and gloves, of herself. And for all her Sabbath emotion, the heart of this child of inexperienced Bush years, noted enviously the dangling beads from the bonnet and the tight kid-gloves of her aunt.

The last bell was still changing as they went in. Mr. Civil, the local parson, was a listener to-day, and sat in the widow's pew, next to her. He rose to receive them, and Andrew engineered and followed Ursie to a seat near the end.

The moment the bell ceased a fair, thick-set man adorned the pulpit, sent

a pair of calculating eyes all over the building, then gave out a hymn.

By the strenuous medium of Bella Watson's feet and fingers, the inharmonious harmonium's preliminary was a challenge to cracked bell and saw-filing crickets.

Andrew found the place, and Ursie, standing on the seat, felt a due sense of importance in holding half his hymn-book. If there was individuality in the time and tune of many of the brothers and sisters, none were too critical, church being no place for the critical.

The long prayer following the singing, despite its originality and brogue, was very trying to the kneeling, restless child.

More singing followed, and then came an opportunity of studying the preacher, as he, with suggestive unctuousness and double meaning, read a selection from the various Gospels of Christ's healing the blind, the sick, the lame—every miracle performed by the Saviour but that of raising the dead. There was a deep and double significance in the finishing passage, in which Jesus endows certain of His disciples with the power to likewise heal—a significance accentuated by the preacher's solemn, slow repetition of it as a text to his sermon.

According to a custom instituted by Mr. Civil, the collection should precede the sermon, as many often made the length of his a pretext for leaving, and so dodging the plate. Anticipatory Andrew slipped his usual small coin into Ursie's palm that she might experience the blessedness of giving. Plate-bearers, Brothers Foreman and Weldon, conscious of the dignity of their high office, stiffened into willing readiness. But to-day this visiting brother parson, though duly apprised, ignored the rule in favour of one of his own. Vainly the true shepherd sought to guide the collectors by directing, impatient eyes; for he of the pulpit had been swift of action and had begun his sermon. Both Brothers thereupon relaxed into flabby ordinariness, till the unorthodoxy of the parson held even them. This preacher was rapidly becoming notorious for his compound of soul and body curing, with the emphasis on the body. He was ever most careful to explain that he had been studying for a physician when he received his call to go and labour in the Lord's vineyard. And if the pay for the soul services was generally in the smaller coin, there were whispers in his many and undulychanged circuits, that his body ministrations were much more profitable. This circumstance quickly awoke virtuous resentment in the ranks of the many orthodox, and therefore impecunious, labourers. Complaining reports had been made to headquarters; but though remonstrances had been made, the parson, wherever he got the chance, continued to work his double cure. His sermons were mainly anecdotes of his experiences in this dual capacity, differing only from the advertised

quack cures by suppressed signature and locality. Nothing more definite than, 'I remember w'en I was on the diggings' or 'I wuz sent for-r once to visit a supposed-to-be dying brother-r or sister-r that all the doctors had given up. Well, after-r riding day and night for-r forrty-eight hours I kem to the place.' A graphic description would follow of the body and soul conditions of the patient, the ever-varying complaints breaking the monotony of the never-varying happy endings.

Accidents and diseases had no separate place in Ursie's mind. Her mother she could not remember; neither had she any fixed idea of her father's death. 'He stayed in bed a lot of days, an' then Margret says 'e died, an' then we come away an' left Boshy, an' stayed a long time till I came here.' She found it impossible to localize, or indeed realize, any of these graphic anecdotes, with their miraculous cures by the impassioned preacher. Suddenly she remembered poor old Tumbledown Jimmy, who could walk only a few yards and then fall down, and who was always hungry. Now, if he could be cured! Eagerly she wanted to tell Andrew all about it, but he gave a sidelong look at the aunt and grimaced Ursie into silence.

Her hat limited her view to the pulpit and its immediate surroundings. She sighed heavily and drew up her dangling feet, for even Andrew's hymn-book she was not allowed to play with, not to take off her strange hat, and while nursing it give it closer examination.

She speculated uninterestedly as to the purpose of that little fence round the pulpit, till she suddenly saw the white-spread Communion-table, then swiftly took in the outline of the cloth-crowned 'cruet-stand.' Rather a small table for such a lot of people; but they, so near the front, would be certain to get some dinner. Her gratified heart shone in her eyes and flushed face, as, sidling up to Andrew, she whispered softly, 'Wen's the dinner goin' to be, Andree?'

He took a hasty look at the other end of the pew.

'It's not dinner, Urse' he whispered. She would have climbed to her knees on the seat to be able to show him the convincing cruet but for his restraint. He explained, 'It's not for us, Urse—on'y for big people.'

She made doubly sure.

'Won't we get any?'

He shook his head.

She immediately divined the purpose of that yard round the little table: to keep poor hungry little children, who ate only a mouthful of breakfast, from getting anything to eat. She was on her knees with her arms round Andrew's neck before he could prevent her. Her eyes were tearfully apleam, as, audibly reckless, she sobbed:

'W'y don't all the people go home, Andree? Tell 'im not to talk to 'em any

more.'

Andrew got up to take out the child clinging to him, but the aunt placed a firm hand on her and drew her between the frowning parson and herself.

Subdued and magnetized into submission, Ursula sat turning her tearful eyes from one uncompromising face to the other; but their attention was soon diverted to another weeper.

The parson was recounting a most wonderful cure of a cancer that had eaten half the face, and the complete restoration of the affected part by 'er bottle er medicine' the properties known only to the narrator. Old Granny Foreman's husband, long past the Biblical limit of three score and ten, had died lately of this disease. 'E could a bin saved! 'E were cut off in his prime!' sobbed Granny, her grief an eloquent testimony to the harmony of their half-century of wedlock and to the moving ability of the parson.

Fireman Foreman's loose-lipped mouth widened in a filial grin, dentally interesting. Grabbing his hat, he nudged his weeping and likewise preparing parent; but the reverend story-teller anticipated him.

'Sit still, brother-r and sister-r. You'll not distur-rb me. The tears must flow—the tears must flow. Jesus wept' he added brokenly, as a precedent for shrouding his own twinkling dry orbs.

Like other lawful emotions, licensed grief is generally short-lived. Beside, Granny fully expected and wanted the distinction of being led out. In the critical interval following she was resentfully silent. The wary waresman in the pulpit saw her, as she wiped her eyes, thrust in her consolatory peppermint, pass it from one cheek to the other, then glare at him.

Unbalked, the alert showman instantly shifted scene and subject, and though these he varied often, the qualities of his brother in the Lord sitting directly under him had no place in the discourse, neither had church debt nor stipend fund. According to every known precedent, the text of a visiting parson should be the great virtue of the leader of the loaned flock, until, in modest self-deprecation, the recipient of these clerical posters would be forced to shake his bowed head divers times and oft.

It was beyond the local parson to remain passive while this spiritual cuckoo pulled to pieces this little nest of his victim's weary upbuilding. He passed his hand several times over his bald head, cleared his throat, intimating so his disapproval of the unorthodoxy of this sermon. But his palpable restlessness and disapproval had no effect upon the flush-faced orator. The majority were with him, for he knew his book of life, and was adroitly shifting the responsibility of their spiritual shortcomings and bodily ailments to the shoulders of their shepherd.

Suddenly the victim filled the accusatory pause with a violent cough. The

preacher waited in sympathetic silence till his reverend sufferer ceased, then asked, with heavy emphasis, 'But how can a poo-er-r mistaken mortal-I think of your-r immortal-I soul-I, when-n his-s own poor-r body is racked and tormented-d with disease?'

The widow turned her usually unemotional face to the cougher, and the concern on her countenance showed that the innuendo of the reverend alarmist had reached even her. But the organist's pretty eyes had forestalled her, and the glance she sent to the cougher said plainly: 'You want my care and attention.'

Dimly even the child knew. She sat near the object of attention, and upturned her wondering eyes to the sympathized one. He glared back at her; but as she had wasted no sympathy, she looked away unaffected, and clicked her heels to break the monotony. The aunt, now limiting her attention to the pew, laid a reproving hand on her. She sat motionless for, to her, a fearfully long time, with her feet extended stiffly, not daring to allow them to fall in relaxation.

The preacher was nearing the close, and intimating to those sick in body or mind that he might be consulted on both matters at the end of this service.

A stealthy glance before and to right and left revealed to Mr. Civil that to sit tight was legible on the faces of many, who throughout had audibly demonstrated their faith in the cures of the orator by their 'Praise God!' 'Bless God!' The rightful shepherd's countenance grew a grey green, realizing that the concluding sentence of this spiritual physician's exhortation, 'Ho! everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, without money and without price' though only Scripturally figurative, would have a disastrous effect upon the collection surely now to follow.

The word money reminded Ursie of her possession, and she took a hasty peep at the coin in her palm, which did not escape the notice of Mr. Civil.

But now, for the first time in Church history, the collection seemed to have no place in the programme, for the preacher introduced a closing innovation. Before sitting down and without mentioning that 'The usual collection will now be taken up' he gave out the hymn. Both the Brother plate-bearers had been thrown out of routine by the postponement. Collector Brother Weldon's big feet stirred nervously as he looked behind for a cue from Brother Foreman; but he was no leader. It was an agonizing few moments for Mr. Civil, and he spent them in locking and unlocking his fingers. However, the widow, clear-headed and practical, came to the rescue. She drew from her gloved palm her offering and extended it towards Brother Weldon, who with unclerical haste and noise took the office.

The little girl looked round at the Brothers working their way right and left upward, and very quickly she took in the fact that the object of these plates was for giving, not getting, and her hand closed over her coin determinedly. The plate came to their pew, and the parson, with his eyes turned upward, held it under her hat. The widow gave her fat mite, then passed it to Andrew, who made pretence of a donation. Eagerly Mr. Civil again took the plate and again held it down for Ursie's church money. This time he looked at her and she at him, and her mouth tightened in sympathetic tension with her hand. He placed the plate between them on the seat, and seizing the child's hand, forced it open; then into the plate went her only hope and solace for a cruelly long and disappointing morning.

There was a momentary pause, filled with strenuous silence, as with wide, mutinous eyes she looked up at this leader of lambs, looking down at her with the insolence of victory. She raised her face till her hat fell back, then venomously thrust her tongue at him, till her sharp lower teeth sawed the under sinews. Given time she would not have failed to reproduce accurately the 'Long-nose-bacon-that-fat' antics of those naughty boys that very morning, albeit it was her first lesson. Savagely the parson knocked up her chin, and with a snarl akin to Jim's dog she fastened her teeth in his coat-sleeve. But Andrew managed to distract his aunt, with his schoolboy trick of nose-bleeding at critical exam. moments, and with handkerchief to nose, passed the furious child. This immediately bespoke her sympathy. Imagining him to have been the victim of their aunt, she flashed her defiant face on her, and taking his free hand, unopposed went out.

'Andree, Andree, wot'll you do to 'im soon as you grow up a big man?'

In silence the boy looked into her eyes blazing at him. He hated tears, but, for choice, he would have seen her weeping rather than this passionate distortion.

'Tell me wot'll you do to 'im?'

He went through a list of injuries.

'An' will that kill 'im up dead like anything?' savagely asked the bloodthirsty maiden.

He thought there could be no doubt. She laughed exultingly, and the boy felt cold and strangely troubled.

'Won't that serve 'im right?' she gloated; 'won't it, Andree?'

'Let's run home' said he, to lessen the tension of her fingers round his, and to get away from an indefinite sensation.

'Wot d'yer say yer done?' asked incredulous Fanny.

'Poked me tongue out at nasty ole Civil. Didn't I, Andree?'

He confirmed her without enthusiasm, remembering the reckoning.

Fanny grinned slow approval.

‘Good on yer!’ she said admiringly.

Even Jim nodded satisfaction, and so encouraged, the child gave an illustration.

‘An’ look w’ere ‘e made me bite meself’ showing her bitten tongue.

‘Knocked yer chin, chin-chopper?’ inquired Fanny.

The new expression appealed to Ursie, and she nodded ‘Chin-chopper.’

‘Ther crool crawlin’ cur’ said Jim, ‘might tackle someun ‘is own size.’

‘I’ll tell ‘im wot I think ov ‘im’ promised Fanny, who had never been known to even answer back.

‘Get her something to eat’ said the boy.

‘I will, for if she done a thing like that she deserves a real good crockroach’ said Fanny, groping in the sugar-basin for a lump.

Ursula had barely finished when the click of the gate foretold the coming of the judgment.

‘Ursula!’ called her aunt.

Led by Andrew, she went to her trial.

The parson cited his case: Making a noise in God’s house; keeping back His fee; and, yet more heinous, her tongue thrust out at him. But the child, held by the unusual hue of the widow’s stolid face, did not even look at him.

‘Did you poke out your tongue at Mr. Civil?’ demanded the purple-faced woman.

The child nodded her head.

‘Answer me, miss!’ stormed her aunt.

She replied, vigorously nodding her head, influenced by the widow’s vibrating with anger.

‘You wicked, bold girl! You—you——’

‘Limb of the devil’ added the minister.

In the momentous pause the child drew the back of her hand across her forehead, puzzled and perplexed over the different views held by the two women of this house. Remembering Fanny’s indignation over her bitten tongue, she opened her mouth and again thrust it out.

‘An’ ‘e made me go chin-chopper to I bite me tongue to it bleded’ she defended.

‘Hold your tongue!’ said the widow. ‘I don’t know what to do with her’ she said feebly, almost appealingly, to the parson.

‘Punish her severely, then shut her up fasting for the day’ said the shepherd. ‘Flog her severely’ he repeated, noting the effect on Andrew.

‘She won’t be flogged. No one will touch her’ vowed Andrew, moving nearer Ursula.

The widow's surprised eyes had gone mechanically to his face as he spoke.

‘don't you interfere’ snarled the parson. ‘What's it got to do with you?’

For answer the boy's bravely challenging eyes met his blinking vindictively.

‘I think to shut her up for the afternoon alone, and not allow her to go to Sunday-school, will punish her’ the widow said to him.

‘Fasting’ stipulated he eagerly.

She hesitated, for to her fasting would have been the heavier penalty; but her adviser pressed the point.

‘Fasting’ she pronounced, cowardly looking away from the child, whose eyes had not wandered from her face.

The gratified shepherd sat back, made a Gothic arch of his long fingers, and over it looked for distress from the sentenced sinner, yet unmoved, still watching her aunt.

‘No dinner; to be shut up all afternoon by yourself; no Sunday-school, and no nice tickets’ he added. But she would not look at him; nor did her face show any emotion. She had enough service for one day. Andrew would hit anyone who hit her; he also would get her doll for her, so she would not be alone; and thanks to Fanny, she did not want any dinner.

‘Will I go now, aunt?’

‘At once—go at once’ said the widow sternly, for the parson was now appeased.

‘Lock her in, Andrew’ she commanded.

‘And bring the key to your aunt, young impudence’ ordered the parson, shaking the right side of the severed Gothic arch at him.

Her prison was the enclosed end of the veranda, and the boy shut and locked the glass door on the child, who, according to his whispered orders, stood in the centre, watching the skylight above the door till the dinnerbell rang. But the watchful parson, intent on the carrying out of the solitary confinement clause of the sentence, had shadowed the surly Andrew, and made him repeat his Sunday-school lessons while dinner awaited the muchoverdue visiting parson, evidently doing a brisk business. Consequently it was a weary wait for the impatient doll-mother, and at last it was hastily-instructed Jim's towering length that darkened the window; and his long arm dropped the promised doll through the skylight into the waiting hands, then vanished.

The troubled time of the true shepherd of this wayward flock did not end with the morning, though he was now in his stronghold, fortified by an unspoken engagement with its owner. Even here this visiting brother in the Lord was tactful and steady to his purpose of disposing of his stock of

medicine, charging, he said, only for the best drugs, bottles, and corks. Such moderate terms appealed to the widow, who, woman-like, loved a bargain. If she could get a few bottles of medicine that would insure her safety in eating and drinking as much of what she liked at every meal without fear of gouty rheumatism, she would, despite the sniffing, snarling irritability of her customary shepherd. Ordering a good supply, she then demonstrated both frailty and belief by partaking with her comfortable adviser of an equal share of the second quart of porter. In righteous wrath, Mr. Civil left the dinner table to walk off his bottled anger on the front veranda.

‘Down in the swamps of Widgiewa—
‘By-by, baby.

(Awesomely) ‘All the big, bitey, black snakes are—
‘By-by, baby.

(Reassuringly) ‘But our Tom 'll eat off all their heads,
(Revengefully) ‘An' ole Civil's too;
‘An' Andree 'll—’

The parson had sneaked to the door and looked through.

On a box, with her back to the light, sat the swaying singer, with her doll held tightly to her breast. But though he made no sound and stood back to trap her into a finish of Andrew's onslaught, her quick senses had felt his shadow, and she turned quickly round.

She quite understood his vehement finger movements were for her to drop her doll; instead, her hold tightened.

He thrust his jaundiced face round the door of the dining-room.

‘Bring the key and follow me. Only you, please’ with solemn portent he commanded the well-fed widow, guiding her to the prison.

‘This is her repentance’ he said, ‘playing with idols and singing songs on the Sabbath.’

‘Where did you get that from?’ pointing to the doll, asked the surprised aunt.

‘Out of church money. She, like another not very far away, would rob the church’ supplied the clergyman, from his many injustices anxious to kick the nearest dog. ‘Take it from her; pull it from her; make her put it down!’ he gasped.

The childless woman, who had been a doll-less child, took this one from the now unresisting girl. Under the widow's loose hold its sole garment, a towel swaddling it, fell off.

‘A nice play-toy that for a respectable girl’ said the shocked parson, his lean fingers indicating the naked, maimed doll and its unabashed mother.

‘You'll have trouble with her, mark me’ he prophesied; and as he went out his hostess followed and closed the door.

The child stood, when they left her, unnaturally still, her mind skirting mature ideas, unwieldy from her immaturity. Footsteps along the veranda past her prison and the click of the little gate at the side brought her mind to externals. They were going to Sunday-school—Andrew too, and she shut up here.

A hornet had entered with the other despoilers of her peace and pleasure, and, as though it recognised it had been trapped, it buzzed distressfully from skylight to window. She looked round, and with sense of comradeship saw it bunting and bruising itself in futile efforts for freedom. Much as she had feared it that morning, she was fearless now. Evidently the hornet had regarded her as some inanimate object, and her movements in watching it dispelled this illusion, and brought it in a threatening circle over her head. She welcomed without emotion the hostility of this foe, for with its dreadful sting it was one worthy of her mood. Her lower lip relaxed, and the sense of coming battle radiated grimly from her set face, as she picked up the towel that a little before she had draped with loving maternity round her doll.

‘Shut up!’ she commanded, twirling the towel preparatory to making a bring-down onslaught. Majestically showing the advantage of wings, it rose above her reach, and from, for her, an unattainable height it seemed to buzz a taunt at her diminutiveness. Its noise attracted its outside mate, and the child gloried in its buzzing butts to get in.

‘Suizz, suizz!’ she hissed in mad mockery at both. Making a ball of the towel, she flung with an effect that increased with practice, scornfully rejoicing at the cowardly discomfiture of a drowsing blowfly that one of her towel flights had disturbed. Its clumsy attempts to escape seemed to inculcate the same desire in many of the lesser species, which swarmed round it satellite-wise. She hailed any opposing force warmly, but concentrated her fight for the time on the again descending hornet, suffering it to come quite near, then making a vicious, well-calculated slap at it with the towel that sent it partially stunned to the side of the room. For swift victory she could have ended the conflict then, but she allowed it to revive and fly for a breathing spell to the dried bush, acting as a fly refuge, in the centre, rousing it to another attack, destined from its monotony to end the battle. Pinioning its extremities with the edge of the towel, she crushed off its offensive and defensive weapons with a splinter from the wall. The blowfly was her next victim, but an unexciting one. Pulling off its legs, she placed it with the hornet, and both lay side by side unprotestingly.

She brushed back her hair and went from door to window. The insistent 'Kirr, kirr, kirr' of the crickets seemed to be the only sound of life outside, and inside the little flies had settled again, so the room was quiet. Both hornet and fly she had considered completely disabled, but when she turned to them they had disappeared. The hornet had flown to a dark corner, but the fly had unwisely soared again to the light. She captured both, and, sitting down, slowly pulled off their wings.

'Ah! what do yer do that for, Ursie?' was a protest from Andrew, looking through the skylight.

'Cos now I know ware they are'—defiantly. 'I'll make them stay.'

'Poor brutes!'

'I'll kill 'em all up!' she snapped savagely at him.

There was silence till the boy asked:

'Where's your doll, Ursie?'

She softened in a moment.

'Oh, Andree, that nasty ole Civil made er take it from me.'

'Wonder where she put it.'

She shook her head, intimating that she also wondered.

'Where are they?'

'Still in Sunday-school. My nose bled again an' I had to come out. Look out, Urse, an'I'll jump down.'

He opened the skylight, and swinging with one hand on the ledge, dropped into the room.

Hornet and fly, alive, but feigning death, were still in her lap. He took them to the fireplace and killed them outright with his boot.

'Put them out of their misery' he explained.

Ursie's eyes widened and mouth tightened, but she was silent.

Later, when the boy's brow was moist with his earnest efforts to make a satisfactory doll out of a bottle by filing a groove round its neck, she, from a sense of her own shortcomings, began to talk of the failings of others.

With a preliminary sobbing sigh, peculiar to childhood, she began, her hand on his knee:

'Andree, you know wot that Gus Stein done?'

'No, Urse.'

'Pelted a stone at a poor cat, and hitted it' (sigh) 'like anything.'

Andrew expressed a contempt for boys generally, albeit it was he who, just before the advent of this little girl, had been to a boys' party.

'Wuz they any girls there?' asked Jim, an avowed admirer of the sex.

'Girls? girls, Jim, at a respectable place like that?'

'An' Mina, too, know wot she done, too, as well?' for Ursie did not choose to be the sole representative of a cruel sex. 'She took Mary Wood's

poor little doll and swung it roun' an' roun' be the legs till the sawdust all come out. Andree'—with a quavering sigh—'that was worse en—en—en doin' that to them' jerking her head, but not looking at the murdered insects in the fireplace.

Andrew agreed, and contrition was the outcome.

'Did it hurt 'em, Andree?'

'Same as t' pull off your arms and legs, Ursie.'

She put her arms tightly round his neck.

'Andree' she said brokenly, 'I won't do it any, any more' her shaking head burrowing deeply into his neck in emphasis.

Shortly after there was the signalling click of the gate, and the boy was up and out of the skylight instantly. The aunt had both clergymen with her.

These were the days of the sovereignty of Moody and Sankey's hymns, and presently the vigorous voice of the stranger parson sounded meaningly in 'Scatter Seeds of Kindness.'

Mr. Civil was acrimoniously disputing the orthodoxy of this visiting brother's intention to sing this from the pulpit at the close of the evening sermon. In all matters of theological discussion the widow took no part; being a worker, she had little to say, but she listened to both impartially.

Then there was a call for Andrew, and the boy, self-briefed to obtain Ursie's release, was prompt to appear. He was to go to the visitors' quarters for Moody and Sankey's hymn-book. He first made his request in an undertone to his aunt, and it was granted in the same key.

While he, fleet of foot, sped on his message, the child wandered in search of Fanny or Jim. The kitchen looked coldly deserted, for on the Sabbath afternoon Fanny, according to immemorial custom, was out walking with lady friends of like occupation, whose relaxation on their Sundays out was a weekly synopsis of the shortcomings of the various 'shes' they served.

Ursula found Jim, fully dressed in his Sunday best, sound asleep in his little room, near the brick oven, at the back of the kitchen. His red necktie had slipped above his collar, and its knot, twisted under the left ear, looked like a halter that had crimsoned in doing its work. Jim's sleep contortions had left a wide skin margin between the bottom of his trousers and the top of his elastic-sided boots, so the little girl credited his tightly fitting Sunday boots with the feat of having swallowed his socks, after the manner of her own shoes. She left him and wandered disconsolately about.

Frogs from the river now seemed to croak bass to the crickets' shrill orchestra, but otherwise there was a stagnant atmospheric stillness that boded well for the sky's leaden greyness.

But as though they anticipated nothing from the overcast heavens, the Chinese gardeners still laboured. Ursie supposed the boys on their return

from bathing, and she in church, had stripped the peach-tree, and hidden by the gully, she went down to see. A limb covered with unripe fruit bridged the gully over her head. Digging her hands and feet into the crumbling bank, then gripping the branch, she hung on to it with one hand, and stripped off a shower of peaches with the other. From the rosy side of most she took a bite; then, from a sense of mischievous revenge, she repeated the stripping, till the limb snapped in her struggles to reach those on the highest parts. She came down under it, and then the shock begot by her fall increased to terror at the sight of a China-man on the bank of the gully jabbering threats at her, and brandishing a pitchfork. The fruit overhung their ground, and mock them at a safe distance the boys might, yet not one of them had dared openly to touch this limb.

‘Oh, mister man, don't kill me!’ she pleaded. But he thrust at her with the pitchfork, then made as if to jump down. The gully tunnelled through to the river, and she ran in frenzy that way till she came to the mill; creeping behind a pile of firewood, she crouched, almost paralyzed, draining in her terror the cruellest of Nature's cruelties—unreasoning child fear.

The river zigzagged through the little town, and from where she lay presently she heard a woman's voice raised in weird lament.

Rising cautiously, she stood on a billet of wood, and saw old Granny McGrath running along the river-bank. Her feet and head were bare, and her grey hair was straggling in unusual disorder.

‘Arroo’Eney! arroo, arroo!’ she shrieked piercingly as she flung up her arms to the leaden sky, then breathlessly beat her breasts, and the weird cry she seemed to strike from them awed the child indefinitely. Two other old women, with the sympathetic bond of race and creed, were with her, and when their efforts to comfort her failed, they joined her in their national cry:

‘Arroo’Eney! arroo, arroo!’

The child, for protection, ran to them.

‘Poor granny!’ she said, catching her skirt.

‘W'at's the matter, poor granny?’

‘Oh, me bye—me darlint drowned! 'Eney, arroo, arroo!’ beating her breasts. ‘Oh, Mary, Mother o' Christ, pity me!’

A tongue of forked lightning illumined the sullen heavens, and after a swift interval the rumbling thunder followed. As they turned along a bend of the river, men, two abreast, parted from those in the rear by a burden borne on their shoulders, came in view. At the sight of them the women's cries increased.

The men stopped, and, placing the door on the ground, allowed old Granny to take into her arms the dead body of her grandson, Henry, the

light and love of her lonely life. His eyes were wide open, and the tensely-strung child quickly recognised him as one of the boys foremost in trespassing on God and man that morning, trespasses all of which she had committed, but in this boy's case so quickly followed by a righteous revenge. As if to assert omnipotent omnipresence, a flash of lightning splintered a tree on the flat near, and the noise of the thunder terrified the child into immediate flight; but this time she ran homeward.

White and recklessly wild with fear, she ran into the parlour, and with starting eyes looked from the surprise of her aunt to Mr. Civil's unrelenting countenance.

‘Oh, aunt, w'at's that?’ she gasped, for the vibration of a sudden clap of thunder had rattled the crystal pendants of the lustre vases decorating the mantelpiece.

‘The voice of an angry God’ said God's servant, extending his forefinger at her, apparently as an index to his Master.

She was not safe here; frantically she rushed out.

‘Andree, Andree!’ she screamed, catching sight of the boy, who had been seeking her. ‘Andree, Andree, plant me, plant me! God's after me; He's after me! Plant me in the brick oven!’

He ran with her in his arms, and to comfort her let her creep into this refuge; then putting up the lid, stood there till the violence of the deluging rain silenced heaven's flash and fire.

Chapter IV

URSULA'S church experience tempered her expectation of pleasure from school. The aristocratic master and mistress had failed in every other exploit in life, and sad and sour to the childless mistress must have been the elementary teaching of these often ill-kept little ones. Favouritism was so well understood that it provoked no protest: no matter how flagrant the offence, an excuse from the favourites cancelled the penalty, as even the most natural request had to be preferred through them. These were selected ever from the girl ranks of the prosperous, and therefore better dressed. Personal qualities or ability were with the mistress unconsidered ciphers, unless accompanied by the numerals of outward prosperity.

Ursie, weird of face, her diminutive body dressed in misfitting clothes, was from the onset a target. An unconscious smile would be styled an insolent grimace, and as such chastised; the following soberly ordered countenance was a sullenness equally punished, by inexhaustible quince sticks, as an example to the school. Justice or injustice grew into the impotent routine of daily life. But, despite the teacher's inefficiency, omnipotent knowledge sent illuminating shafts through the child's active brain, and rapidly she ripened into a reader. On Saturday nights Andrew usually read to the kitchen audience the 'Multum-in-parvo' column of the local paper, which but for this column might have been called *Cuttings and Clippings*; but instead it blossomed once a week as the *World-wide Advertiser*. Trained so by the vivid personal atmosphere of the 'Multum-in-parvo' column, even the most elementary school fiction took on locality and individuality for Ursula.

'Can it be Pat or Sam?' laboriously spelled by Mary Woods from the primary reading tablet on the wall, referred to the difficulty the short-sighted master felt in knowing which was which of Pat or Sam Toohey. Though when Mina Stein—who had been in the same class for months—glibly droned to an apathetic audience, 'Ned-'as-broke-'es-arm' Ursula was puzzled. The only Ned she knew sat near her industriously designing and drawing a horse freaked generally and with figure fours for hoofs.

Gradually soaring above the limit of the weekly paper, she examined the few books on the parlour table. From familiarity, 'Pilgrim's Progress' she disdained to inspect; Fanny, who could not read a word of it, had been given one for a Sunday-school prize. The 'History of Jerusalem' though in red covers, was heavy and unenticing. The volumes of the Old and New Testaments, standing one on the other in the centre, were uninteresting because of their titles. Shakespeare, coverless and shabby, though not from

much reading, had pictures certainly, but one illustrating Lear as a man convinced her that it was not worth perusal. Leah was a girl's name, for didn't she know Leah Cohen? Such a glaring mistake was the book's condemnation, and she tore out the leaf picture to show it to Leah. The list closed with hymn-books and another little book—'Maria Monk.' Maria! her aunt's name was Maria, and even the preface of this wieldy little book owned that Maria was a girl. Lying on the sloping river-bank, hidden from the house-hold, she spent hours daily absorbing the, to her, absorbable in Maria's ugly story. Summing up her facts and fancies finally, she was convinced that her aunt had been poor Maria, and earnestly she hoped that those in search of her very visible and incautious aunt would never succeed in kidnapping her. Lest they should, from that moment she constituted herself her aunt's bodyguard, and she went home instantly to duty. She found her in the dining-room with Ann Foster, the little dressmaker, who was endeavouring to scissers through the right side of her underlip with her teeth as proof that the compiling of a list of requisites was no tax to her. Ursula noticed that her aunt was standing when she might have sat, and that her eyes were wider open than usual; also she breathed quickly and kept picking up and laying down various of Ann's craft on the table.

The child's face grew grave, but with wonderful patience she stood watching the widow.

'You're to go a message' said her aunt, embarrassed by her steadfast scrutiny, and handing her the list.

It was the first time she had been so trusted, and she felt the importance as she walked swiftly with the commission held securely, to the little store styled the 'Commercial Exchange.' She stood undecided in the middle of the entrance, then advanced and handed the order to the grocer, and he gave it his amused attention, then took it across to the drapery side. After steady perusal the draper remarked to the grocer:

'Things are rather hot for this time of the weather.'

'Bit sultry' agreed the grocer.

'Pleasant morn' this' the draper remarked to the girl to lessen her keen attention.

'Think it will be wet if it rains?' asked the grocer.

She was silent; intuition told her they were mocking because she was little, and their frivolity flattened her sense of importance. Her eyes darkened, but, controlling the will of her lips to tremble, she said:

'I'll tell me aunt you won't give me the message that I came for. Give me that message' she excitedly demanded, reaching up her tiny hand to grasp the paper.

'Sit down, miss' said the grocer, hastily bringing forward a chair, 'an' in

two shakes ov a lamb's tail you'll be served. Presto, pass quick an' begone, sir!' he commanded the draper, who so adjured double vaulted the counters hastily, in his flight striking the grocer across the back with the feather duster.

Again he consulted the list, and producing a box of silk reels, remarked:

'Nice-lookin' young lady that you've got in ther kitchen over there, miss.'

The child knew he was talking to lessen his previous offence, so she only glared at him till his next remark.

'Fine head of hair she must have, to be sure.'

'Who?' she inquired, wonder costing her her silent dignity, for Fanny was nearly bald.

'Miss Fanny' supplied the grocer. 'It's me she comes to see, isn't it, miss—not him?'

'Yuh!' snorted the draper; 'you're no Weserleyan. Was it your book she looked on with the other night? She's a fine scholar, miss, isn't she? Why, she can read my book upside down. Did she write this?' tapping the order.

'No' said Ursie shortly.

'No? Not Mrs. Irvine?'

Ursie shook her head.

'Not aunt.'

'You did then' he guessed, bending his head condescendingly down.

She hesitated; then, not having seen the writing, truth conquered.

'Andrew?' was another wrong venture.

'Not me, an' not Andrew, an' not Jim wrote it, so there now' she said, triumphant in his assumed curious distress, till he, being no artist, overdid it by pretending to faint with bewilderment.

'Give me my message.'

'don't be trifled with, miss' advised the grocer.

'Go on you' ordered the draper, pointing to another customer. 'Give that young gentleman his ha'porth of specked fruit, an' not too many water-melons.'

Not one melon could the little girl see, though she stood on her chair the better to inspect. In angry silence she waited till the parcel and order was handed to her, then she, much disconcerted, went home.

But Fanny's interest in her description of the contents of her first commission was most soothing and gratifying.

'Notice everything was w'ite?' Fanny remarked, winking vigorously.

Ursula promptly assented that it had struck her; then waited for further enlightenment, which, however, came that Saturday night from the 'Multum-in-parvo' columns, which Andrew, as usual, read.

' "They say a certain buxom widow will not be so much longer." '

Without pause or comment, Andrew united it to its suggestive follower: ‘“They say a certain lean shepherd is about to take unto himself a long-haired mate.”’

Fanny instantly called a halt.

‘I know who they mean; see it you?’ she asked Jim exultingly.

‘See w'at?’

‘Certainly not—catch you see anythin' you can't eat.’

‘Well, I'd better eat you, then’ with cannabalistic gallantry offered Jim.

‘Can't you see it’ turning to Andrew, ‘and it stickin' out a foot?’

‘I can see that you are a fool.’ He was suddenly violently angry.

Fanny looked at Ursula.

‘Of course you're too young and senserless to see it, though you done the shoppin' for it this mornin’.’

Ursula flared into precocity under her scorn.

‘I'm not young, and I can see it’ she declared.

‘I dessay you ken’ agreed Fanny. ‘The babe unborn could see it; a suckin' dove could. I see it meself from the very first jump.’

‘So did I too, as well too’ declared the child, her face crimsoning in her efforts to maintain her perspicuity.

‘That'll do fer another lie. You wuzn't 'ere et first’ grunted Fanny.

‘I was. Wasn't I, Andree?’

‘Wuz she 'ere w'en Mr. Civil first come after yer aunt?’ appealed Fanny, enlightening Jim.

Andrew crushed the paper noisily, his face white with disgust and anger.

‘Fanny, shut up! Go to bed, Ursie’ he said curtly—a curtness that for once the child, anxious to escape from her bewildering surroundings, did not resent.

The *World-wide Advertiser's* bald statements were soon verified, but the installation of Mr. Civil as a member of the family made no great change. One night, soon as Andrew had gone out, Jim hinted to Fanny that he and some others were going to tinkettle some pair whose identity puzzled Ursula. When next morning she said her aunt did not want two cups and saucers on her breakfast tray, Fanny turned to Andrew with a slow grin.

‘Remember 'er gamminin' she knew all along.’

‘One good thing, you'll soon get your walking ticket’ said he, in a white heat.

He pointedly avoided his aunt for days, and when Ursie, who watched both, would have told him what she saw, ‘don't, don't, Ursie!’ he pleaded so earnestly that she ceased, and, touched by some subtlety, she refrained from talking about them, even to Fanny.

But ‘Maria Monk’ lay neglected on Fanny's bedroom table, for ‘Ole

Civil' was aunt's guard now, and Ursie regretted her violent sympathy. And the parson, true to the shepherding instincts, soon began to extend his vigilance to every member of his domestic fold. It seemed to Ursie that his mission was to either catch her bootlaces untied or a not untiabie knot in them. She, Fanny, Jim, all but Andrew, submitted and bent under the yoke of his economical reform. Even his wife—tuned to obedience—ate her cold dinner on Sunday without porter.

‘It is not seemly for Andrew and Ursula to be continuously together.’

‘Why?’ challenged the boy, in tones that surprised Ursie and startled her aunt.

‘Nor for James to be in the kitchen with Fanny’ piped the parson, ignoring Andrew.

‘Hur! You to preach propriety’ came like a blast from the boy's throat, and defiant glints of fire sparkled from his clear eyes flashing scornfully on the parson's shifty orbs.

Ursie observed, too, that now Andrew was taller than this guardian of morality. Yes, how tall and strong Andrew had suddenly grown! She felt a sense of security when she looked at him as he, in open disgust, stood towering over the perturbed ex-parson. Then a strange thought troubled her: was Andrew growing away from her? for she assuredly was very little.

That afternoon, when, with Mina Stein, they were coming from school through Stein's paddock, she stood on a log to gauge their heights, but even tiptoeing did not equalize Andrew and her. She lay on the grass, vaguely troubled, for when Mina stood on the log to measure, her head was level with Andrew's.

‘Sit down! get off!’ said Ursula, suddenly storm-swept.

Mina laughed, and in pretence of falling, put her fat arms round Andrew's neck. But her watching mother called her harshly, and in wonder Ursie got up.

‘Ursie, oh, you there, id's allrighd’ said Mrs. Stein, ‘but I want Mina to stdir the pig's bloodt.’

‘We are goin' to kill our pig, and she wants me to stir the blood for the black puddin's. Come and see’ invited Mina.

‘I can't go, and don't you—Ursie, you'd better not’ advised Andrew.

‘I will. I want to’ and in her perversity she went.

Mr. Stein's foot, pressed into the pig's flank, was levering the last blood and breath through its gashed throat into a dish held under it by Mrs. Stein. Gus was attending to the boiler of scalding water.

‘Run, gedt a spoon, Mina’ said her mother.

As she returned with it, ‘Take this’ handing the dish, ‘andt mindt you dondt let it thicken, lazypones.’

The pig to be scalded had to be raised to the trestles, and Ursula was terrified that it might not be dead.

‘Come, Mina!’ all called.

‘You stir while I go’ said Mina, handing Ursie the spoon. Involuntarily Ursie drew back.

‘I couldn't’ she said, with white lips.

Mina let the spoon fall into the dish and ran to help.

When she returned she dived for the disappeared spoon, and went on with her work, alternating the movement from right hand to left, taking the same occasion to slip a lolly into her mouth from her apron pocket.

In sullen discontent Ursie stood, for why should Mina be taller and stronger than she? Her brown eyes darkened and her bloodless lips, though trembling, wealed into a determined line.

‘Now I'll stir’ she offered.

‘Sit here, then, an' min' always ter keep it goin' the one way. See, this way.’

‘I see’ said Ursula, and looking away, took the spoon.

Round and round it went, and when it clicked against the tin dish Ursie felt an electric shock. Her brows, eyelashes, and eyes showed definitely hard on her colourless face. Her nostrils, filled with the steaming odour, dilated ominously.

Soon her movements became spasmodic, and a few splashes stood out like crimson beauty spots on her bleached face. Still round, though slower, went the spoon. Suddenly it dropped, but her hand stirred space, till blindly lurching forward, with an inward heave, she plunged both hands into the warm blood. Partially conscious, she knew someone laid her on her back, and she, a willing sacrifice, turned, so that, like the pig, the blood might be pumped thoroughly from her side. Quite reasonably, she considered the cold water thrown over her useless for scalding her. Ah, but someone was raising her, so they were going to lay her on the trestles, and she not dead. She opened her eyes, took a deep breath, then limply and contritely placed both arms round Andrew's neck.

Chapter V

IN the autumn, that melancholy avenue to the dreaded winter, the subtle shadow of the infinite enthralled this Bush-girl; for the South was in her blood, and she loved the sun, and sighed regretfully as daily it sank earlier to lighten God's fireside. Bravely she did battle against the deciduous fate of her fuchsia, sheltering it in a warm corner where no wind could come. But inexorably the season demanded its toll, till the plant was leafless and bare, then she, with an inward shiver, laid it aside for its frozen, sapless sleep.

In solitary mood she would wander to the gloomy hills. At this season the dismantling wind, in its greedy intent to disrobe the Bush, seemed to have designs even on the impregnable evergreens. She would watch this bluff, invisible shepherd winnow a variegated leaf flock, garner it assiduously, then drive it on before, whither she in sympathy would almost as speedily follow, only to see it, by this capricious captor, cruelly scattered.

Ah, but she knew the wind's master—those hill-set rocks. Let it blow and beat against them as it might, there they stood, unaffected, unafraid. But how she feared them! One, 'The Flat Rock' lay like a vault, and under it, buried in its sudden fall, were said to be a mob of blacks. Suppose they were not killed, and were merely hiding, waiting to catch some unprotected one, preferably a little girl. With ears straining and starting eyes she would hover near it. Her fear peopled and animated even the steep upright rocks, and from their pinnacles and turrets and towers, faces with shaggy brows, hiding malignant eyes, looked down frowningly at hers, turned in magnetic awe up to them. At such times a falling leaf (for the wind in league now was still) meant a lurking human danger to her. A bird's sudden flight signified such discovery, its silence being akin to hers, for since the Sunday of the storm she had met all dangers silently. Even the waving grass betokened the stealthy steal of a snake. Yet often, very often, she braved them—all but one—the noiseless creeping of the cold shadows of winter's sunset: never must that lifeless shroud fall on her. Seeing her fleeing wildly from it, her face, white with fear, turned over her shoulder, watching the pursuing shadow, One galloped swiftly after her, calling reassuringly. She saw and heard, but, undeterred, she fled the faster, as though from double danger in double fear.

'God! to see her run, and from nothing that I could see' he said.

These wintry nights, if she turned from the fire and the beguilement of Jim's songs, to shudderingly look outside at the frosty moonlit world, Andrew's prediction that their waiting pints of water would be all ice in the

morning was often a little consolation. But there were other nights, wild and stormy, when the moon had gone to another town and every star was dark side down, and when the wind, while she slept, had left the she-oaks by the river to moan forebodingly round the house. Waking, she would for comfort light her candle; but it was only a feeble flame, wind-driven in the blustering darkness. Nor could covering her head keep out the sound of the humanly howling tempest. Andrew she wanted, and he, though uncalled, almost as often came, lessening by his presence her fear of the outer violence, and comforting her with the assurance that the deluging rain meant an earlier spring, which prematurely she watched for.

‘Spring 'll soon be 'ere now, Ursie’ one day said Jim, after the consolatory manner of Andrew. ‘I see a cat-an'-dorg flower upon the 'ills to-day.’

‘Where? What hill, Jim?’ she demanded eagerly.

He gave a comprehensive sweep that took in the world's circle. But she, of great faith, sought earnestly, and none were more surprised than he, when, after many days' search, she returned with a precocious specimen of those tiny orchids. Joyfully, yet tenderly, she had gathered this solitary harbinger of spring, well knowing that the cold hillside would in a few weeks be carpeted with them.

With the spring she had brighter moods that carried her to the side of some flower-flecked slope. Among the blossoms she would lie content but for vying with them for the honey kiss of the transitory butterfly, busy garnering the wild-flower seeds for God. Then the distant rock-garrisoned hills became castles—homes for angels. From their breath, the clouds, she peopled the sky—for to hold her there must be a human strain. The bluebell's mission was to summon the flower folk to church; gently swaying it, she would assemble her perfumed flock, and in whispers soft as the breezes tell them of duty Divine. So, imbued and resolute for righteousness, she would go homeward.

One afternoon passing Granny Foreman's cottage, she stopped to watch her thriftily gathering seed from balsam, stock and four-o'clock.

‘The butterflies gather the wild-flower seeds for God, Granny.’

‘Deed they doesn't. They fills their bellies wi' ther 'oney’ bleated Granny blastically.

Partially disillusioned, Ursula stood regarding the prosaic old woman thoughtfully till the intermittent blare of Ashton's circus rumbling down the hilly roads caught her ear. She ran and joined the mob who had turned out to honour its coming. The tinkling cymbal and sounding brass of its itinerant band stirred her strangely. Heedless of everything, she followed with the barefooted, bareheaded children of the street, till it disappeared

into the capacious back-yard of 'Pat the Jew's' livery stable.

'Wait' said Nellie Lewis, the shoemaker's big-mouthed daughter, points of light blinking from her porcine eyes—'wait and yous 'll all see 'em pitchin' their tent over on the flat.'

Obediently Ursie waited, and a gratified thrill widened her eyes and warmed her heart when, among the great actors about to pitch the tent, she recognised Jim. An exalted flush tingled over her body as he, no way puffed up by his artistic employment, recognised and beckoned her with one long, dirty finger to come within whispering distance.

'See Fanny, Ursie, an' tell 'er ter come an' 'ang roun' about 'ere ter-night, an' I'll git 'er in.'

'Me too, Jim?'

'Yerz' promised he.

Never would the girl forget that night, with its tinselled and spangled glories. She had never danced a step in her life, but that experienced girl capering with circus grace in the Highland fling would, she knew, be as nothing to her given such inspiring music. Were she but the daring equestrienne jumping through the flaming hoops, little it would matter to her if her gauzy skirts did catch. Death before the wonder-held eyes of such a throng would be painlessly sweet. She had been astride old Cushla led by Jim, and a mild trot had been an ideal; but she felt that the maddest freaks of those circling horses could not unseat her now, if the band played while she dared. She sighed heavily, for, alas! her wonderful potentialities were known only to herself. Lucky, lucky Kate Ashton to enjoy this triumph, and she so big and tall, yet, as the bill-posters said, only seven. But, of course, living always with such clever people, how could she help being big and clever for seven? Never for a moment could she be sad, with the clown continually saying such funny things or cutting such curious capers.

Her mind tragically focussed the cruel contrast between the morrow Sabbath's programme for the bespangled circus girl and herself. She, seated between her aunt and Mr. Civil (now retired from the ministry on a pension), listening to the wind (for it was autumn) howling vengefully round the porch; while this envied, bedight girl eating her manifold chocolate gifts, would merrily go forth to further triumphs, laughing at the clown, so philosophically funny, despite the cruel ringmaster's whip cuts. Ah, to be of them! Tears shrouded her sleepless eyes, and her introspection made her oblivious to the fact that the circus arena was emptying of the actors. Jim, seeing and misinterpreting her evident sorrow, remarked that, 'The ole cirkis company is a roguin' lot ov robbers; it's on'y a little after ten, an' 'ere's the b——s pullin' down the tent about our ears, cuttin' it short

because ov its bein' on'y their one night.'

It was even so, for with indecent haste and indifference to the vehemently disapproving, waiting audience, the circus men began to untie the ropes, and amongst the last Ursie went out sorrowfully in the rear of Fanny. But not the circumstances of the unduly ended performance, dismantled pole, nor Jim's loud assertion, 'S'ep me Gord! I've see a better cirkis among the blacks on the Warrego' could take the ambitious taste from Ursie's unsatiated mouth.

Oh, to be one of them, with the clown, merry, smiling, and whip-oblivious, for an uncle, instead of Mr. Civil!

She sighed hopelessly, for difficulties great and unconquerable stood between her and these light-hearted folk of the tinsel and spangles.

At dawn next morning she climbed on her bedroom roof to verify that the glories she saw on the night before had not been dreamed. Like dutiful Lot [unremembered but for his daring wife], she saw a cloudy mist going up to heaven—nothing else! Her mighty had flown, but they had taken her heart with them to that great world beyond these hills and near the sea. Soon as opportunity was hers, she took from the sitting-room shelf a shell, and placing it against her ear, she listened to its sea call to her. The river suited best this mood [for it led to the sea], and thither she went; nor could she be found that morn for church.

Fasting, she crouched, in hiding even from Andrew, beneath the she-oaks bordering the bottomless hole that had trapped Henry Magrath. But the oaks' dirging melody no longer moaned for him; to-day she caught her own sad reflex in their shivering lament. Gratefully she crooned with them, so inimitably that old Christine Inglis, on her way to early Mass, vowed the girl was fey. Hopelessly her eyes flitted from point to point that in brighter days and moods had given her distraction, if not pleasure. To-day, in accord with her, they were suitably, sombrely shrouded. They, of course, would change, but not again could she; henceforth no music for her in the Bush birds' minstrelsy, no pleasure in rivalry with buttercups for the butterflies' kiss. They and the flowers might all go, die, anything, even before their mutually hated winter came; all seasons would now be alike to her widowed heart.

Chapter VI

PAT the Jew, Boshy's first mate, stood with his broad back supported by the bottle shelf. He was smiling, and the satisfaction stretching his thin lips and twinkling from his squinny eyes seemed to illumine the complacency overspreading his broad face. The Quarter Sessions were now on, and His Honour the Judge—'the Jidge' to and from Pat—had, for the first time, put up at the Court House Hotel, thereby justifying its name, and discrediting its older and more select rival, the Royal.

Pat, after parting with Boshy, had drifted back to town possessed of two horses. These and himself he hired to the improvident landlady of the Court House Hotel, and gradually, steadily he worked upward. A driver so careful of beast and vehicle is always to be trusted and tipped, even in his own way.

'I'll pay for a drink for you, Pat.'

'If 'tis orl the same t'yer, sur, I'll take the dry sixpence' begot him 'Pat the Dry Sixpence.'

Slowly but surely he drove his feckless landlady into an inescapable corner, then made a hard loan bargain. Prosperous Paddy's thoughts then turned to matrimony, but not towards the much-curled and beribboned maids of the Court House Hotel.

In all his wanderings he had met but one woman whose thrift matched his own, that was the widow mistress of 'Gi' Away. Nothin' 'All.' With a load of merchandise suitable for the Bush folk Pat started a-wooing, and it was while on this quest his keen business propensities begot his first cognomen, 'Pat the Jew.'

Pat found subject and scene of his wooing unaltered, but all his specious blandishments could not induce the matured matron of 'Gi' Away Nothin' 'All' to join fortunes, though his perseverance would have delighted Bruce's spider. But in the end Pat, acting on the mother's suggestion, had sorrowfully to shift his affections to the red-haired, speckled-faced daughter. With her he came again to the town and opened a livery stable. Shortly after a business announcement came out in the local paper with surprising suddenness—the Court House Hotel was for sale. For a thin cracker of horsehair a schoolboy chalked on the door of Pat the Jew's livery stable, from his dictation, 'Back after the sail'; and when Pat came back he was the proud proprietor of the Court House Hotel.

The townsfolk dwelt long and seriously on the moral aspect of the 'dry sixpence' dodge; but, fortunately for its author, the dryness of the subject was its refutation.

Jim (now styled the Swigger), for the run of his knife and fork and tips from customers, was, he said, groom at the Court House Hotel; but Fanny called him 'Wood-an'-water Joey for Pat the Jew an' 'ees crew.'

Jim, dressed in his 'other clothes' had just driven the well-lunched Judge back uphill to the Court House.

'E' jerking thumb and head toward the Court House, 'e sez t' gim me a wet.'

'Hiz Honour the Jidge?'

'Yerz.'

'Thin I'd 'ave ye min' yer manners, sir, an' be afther namin' 'im so' snarled the landlord, taking up a smeary glass, holding it at long range from the tap, and filling it partially with beer but brimful of froth. Jim would have allowed it visibly to settle but for the 'Now thin!' of the landlord, and in two gulps it was down Jim's throat. While he went back to duty, the landlord, in lettering and figuring absolutely his own, proceeded to chalk up another item to the Judge's score.

Then again he smiled, till a dusty swagsman dumped down his heavy swag beside the bar, and fixed his seeing eye steadfastly on the rotund proprietor, then greeted, 'Day, mate.'

Pat's squinny eyes rested for an unwelcome moment on the wanderer, then he turned his back on him.

'don't yer reckernise me?' inquired Boshy, as his salutation was not returned.

'Yor got the idvantige ov me' distantly replied Boniface, still with his back turned and industriously intent on polishing Jim's tumbler.

'Well I knoo you at once' said Boshy. But still Pat was not affected. 'Reckerlec' Ulundri Creek, an' me an' you a-campin', an' us a doin' of a perish there op'osite "Gi' Away Nothin' 'All'?"

'Noa' said Pat harshly, and noisily rearranging the bottles on the shelf.

'Look at me' almost pleaded Boshy the lonely. 'D'yer mean to tell me that yer carn't reckernise me?'

'Noa' decidedly, but without looking.

'An' yer don't reckerlec' me an' you 'umpin' our Blueys an' Redman's outer this very town, nur our campin' at Pinchgut Creek, op'osite "Gi' Away Nothin' 'All'?" Only angry silence from the landlord. 'Nur ther owed woman an' the girl wi' ther majenter 'air an' ther turkey-egg complexion?' inquired Boshy, eager for comradeship. But the landlord only rattled the bottles on the shelf till the door behind him swung back. For a moment Boshy thought his senses were playing up with him, for there in the door entrance stood the identical girl—the same turkey-egg complexion, stubby nose, and her red hair only changed from unkempt to kempt. 'Squinny eyes

mus' be catchin' thought Boshy, for with increasing wonder he saw that now she possessed a pair like Pat's.

'Pa' she said complainingly.

'Yis, dea-er' replied Pat.

'That Jim won't saddle me pony t' 'e eats 'is dinner, 'e says.'

'Sen' 'im ter me, an' it's me that'll dale wid 'im' promised pa.

Then to Boshy, mouthing in silent wonder:

'Wud yourself be afther shiftin' yerself an' yer swag? The gintleman from ther Coort will be comin' in jis now this minit.'

'Ther Lan' Coort?' asked Boshy, in hopeful adaptation.

'Sure what's ther differ to you anny way what Coort, or ther likes ov yer?'

'My Gord! thet from you to me' said Boshy tragically—'you thet till I took up wi' yer was too slow t' trap maggots.'

In white heat the publican stood glaring with his cross eyes and tasting a dry mouth.

'Git outer this orr——'

A waving bottle finished the sentence. But, as a customer entered, he put it down hastily, and stood glaring through his misleading cross eyes.

'May the Lord look down on me cross-eyed if I can tell w'ich ov us ur you a-lookin' at!' shouted Boshy, covered by the newcomer, and comforted by his grin, dodging out.

The run of Jim's knife and fork was often strategically delayed till two meals ran into one. He came round to the front entrance with the saddled pony, and from him Boshy inquired the whereabouts of Mrs. Irvine, keeper of 'me liddle Lovey.'

Jim's last glass, however small, had risen from his empty stomach into his head, thereby loosening the hinges of his usually rusty tongue.

'Yer'll get nothin' there' advised he. 'She's spliced to a parson chap. If he'd pay me wot's owe to me I could stan' me groun', 'stead er bein' wood-and-water Joey in this 'ungery 'ole' he growled.

'I'm a-wantin', an' awaitin', an' a-wishin' fer nothin' from man ur mortal, thanks be ter Gord Amighty' explained Boshy proudly. 'I've come fer ther chile Lovey.

Jim, with a customary side look, took in the abnormal size of Boshy's bulging swag.

'Bin graftin' long?'

'Forty-seven 'ears' informed Boshy.

'Niver bin lambed down, nur run through, nur dosed?'

'Never' said Boshy, 'an' ain't likely to so be.'

'Be Ghos! if ole yallar lugs the parson gets wind that yer got a sprat 'e'll

try an' work yer' cautioned Jim.

'Think so?' said Boshy, with offensive security.

'Know so' from Jim curtly; 'that's w'y I've got such a 'ell of a down on 'im ther way 'e razzle-dazzled me for all I wuz worth for e's blastid church.'

'Yer doan mean yer bits er savin's?' inquired Boshy sympathetically.

'Yerz, me bits er savin's fer forty-seven years—forty-seven years 'ard graft. That's w'y I can't arst yer ter 'ave a wet, an' no one 'ere won't ast me the way t' my mouth, though I'm d——d well as dry as a emp'y bottle.'

'Fine cheek 'e mus' 'ave; but 'ow did 'e git 'em outer yer?' said Boshy anxiously, ignoring Jim's hint.

'Oh, arst me somethin' easy w'ile yer about it' said Jim irritably, having nothing ready.

The resentment and injury in Jim's tone made Boshy uncomfortable. He listened respectfully, and Jim went on:

'Ow d'e git it outer me? W'y, I know for a reel fac' that a little chap swallowed a thrippence. Orl ther doctors went a-fishin' after it, but 'ad ter giv' it up. "Sen' fur Mr. Civil," says ther boy; " 'e'll soon git it outer me." '

Jim's laugh brought the landlord to the door, but he drew in his head when he saw Boshy.

'Mick' he called to a brother in blue.

Michael came at his bidding and stood in solemn, speechless wonder at the spectacle of the landlord about to shout.

He took the gratuitous glass of swanky, but suspicion conquered.

'What's wrong?' he inquired.

'Down with it, mann' said Pat, swallowing a small dose himself, in token of safety and fellowship.

'D'ye see thon?' he asked, coming straight to the point, as the policeman put down his empty glass.

'Is't they swaggie beyant?'

'Yis, that same.'

'I do; what ov 'im?'

'Thin, Micky, do be afther givin' 'im ther roight about.'

'I'll do that same.'

But when Bobby came out, Boshy, ignoring the foot-bridge across the river, was making a bee-line for Lovey's home.

But now Lovey was indeed lonely, for under the new régime Jim and Fanny had gone, and Andrew was at school in a distant town. All this afternoon Ursula was down by the river feeding her discontent with stories supplied by the new maid. On that same bank 'Maria Monk' first told stumblingly her tragic tale to Ursie. She knew better now, for Fanny's successor was an up-to-date maid, who nightly burned low her tallow

candle reading of lovely Muriels, Daphnes, and Gladys, with their titled, but snubbed suitors. When she came to the scene where the haughty and pedantic Princess Machuski bids the coachman to 'Repair to the equine establishment, dismissing him with an imperious wave of her snowy, shapely hand——' Ursie closed the book. The contrast was too cruel, the matter hopeless. Her aunt's hand, if she ever did wave it, was but a blob of red fat. Nor ever, Ursiefelt sure, could her aunt be got to call their little stable the equine establishment; and if she did, lame Tommy, Jim's successor, would not understand. Sighing sadly, Ursie came up the gully leading from the river to the house, as unlike the coveted castle of the Princess as everything else.

As she neared it she saw a swagsman making for the side-gate, and the multi-coloured patches on his faded clothes reminded her instantly of the clown in Ashton's circus. Nestling close to the screening grape-vine, she waited. Mr. Civil was reclining on the veranda, waiting to insure good measure from Lizarixin; for, like himself, Liza did not allow religion to interfere with profitable business.

The little gate insuring that privacy indicative of a front entrance swung back noisily.

Boshy stood, as he sighted Mr. Civil and—to use his own description—'me 'art began to kick ther wind out ov me w'en I see 'im, a cross between a crow an' a Chinyman.'

The minister's well-trained eyes soon sized the swagsman.

'What are you seeking?' he asked coldly.

'Ur—ur—khur, missis in?' asked Boshy throatily.

'There will be a meeting next week at the schoolroom respecting the relief of the poor. Call there if you are in need of clothes.'

'Me in want!' said Boshy indignantly. 'I like thet. W'y, man alive'—tapping his swag—' thet's orl clo'es 'cep a few 'undred kengeroo an' dingo scalps, an'a couple o' bottles ov goanna ile fer boots. I've saved over fo'teen shillin' in kerridge alone, a-luggin' an' a-lumpin' ov' em down me own self.'

He looked, but there was no surprise from the parson.

'Mebbe me meself ull gi' 'em one or two little things for ther pooer' yielded Boshy coaxingly.

'don't trouble' said the parson distantly, unmoved by the bepatched swagsman's splendid offer.

'Money perhaps more suitabler?' Boshy faltered, and had his reward in a darting gleam of interest from Mr. Civil's close-set eyes.

'Where have you come from?' he asked.

'Merrigulandri' promptly replied Boshy, relieved that his terrible expedient had not been instantly snapped at.

‘Merrigulandri’ repeated Mrs. Civil, emboldened by the familiar name to join the interview.

‘Are you Mrs. Irvine?’

‘I was’ she said.

‘Cameron Cameron's sister?’ asked Boshy eagerly.

‘Yes.’

‘I'm Boshy, jis come from there’ extending his hand. ‘I've come fer Lovey, Mrs. Irvine’ he said, relaxing his intense grip.

‘For Ursula?’ she asked incredulously.

‘Lovey, ther liddle un az you gut from Cameron's six 'ears come nex' November.’

‘What's all this? What's all this?’ broke in the parson impatiently.

‘Ursula’ suggested Mrs. Civil to Boshy.

‘Lovey t' me’ he said grimly, the light of battle on his face.

‘Come, come! stop this fooling, my good man, and get about your business.’

‘Thet's my business, Mr.—Mr.—Wat's-yur-name. Thet's w'at I've padded ther 'oof an' 'umped me swag fer the lars' week fer—fer the chile Lovey.’

Unprecedentedly Mrs. Civil's curiosity conquered her lord and master's attempts to silence her with an acrimonious, ‘Maria, go inside.’

Then the appearance of Ursie aided her distraction to his commands.

Listening Ursie's attuned senses saw but one solution: a clown—not the one familiar, nevertheless welcome—had come for her.

‘You've come for me?’ she asked eagerly, revealing herself, her eyes excitedly blazing, her face crimson. Her fearlessness struck the parson dumb.

‘Nut you’ replied Boshy, slowly swallowing, and regarding this big girl with his troubled, uncertain eye, the empty socket quivering sympathetically.

‘You never see me afore? Yer carn't reckernise me?’ he broke a long silence to ask.

She nodded affirmation diffidently but determinedly.

Then, with trembling lips, ‘Wat's me name?’

‘Boshy’ she answered glibly.

‘You're nut me liddle Lovey, shooly nut? Yur carn't be.’

‘I'm Ursie’ sorrowfully admitted the girl.

Boshy's eye, staring into hers, seemed set.

‘Show me yur 'ands.’

She held out the left—she had the book under her right arm. His eye went from it again to her eyes. Suddenly his face grew ghastly, then shrivelled, and his swag seemed voluntarily to slide from his shrunken

body. Weakly his aimless hands went to his bewildered head, but did not reach it, while his eye never left hers, nor hers his. At the bidding of his beating throat his mouth opened helplessly, but for a time his tongue clicked inarticulately against his dry palate.

‘Christ Gord! yur gut yur mother's eyes’ he gasped, as he fell with his hands outstretched to reach her.

Chapter VII

HUGH PALMER, now husband of Margaret Cameron, came into the town on business soon after the advent of Boshy. In maudlin confidence brewed at the Court House Hotel, he told Mr. Civil that Boshy, in addition to his forty-seven years' 'ard scrapin's' was credited in the Bush with having discovered the dead shepherd's hidden hoard. Thenceforth the tender, patient attention of the ex-parson was at least interesting, and stay with them Boshy must; so Boshy did, and accepted these attentions and all others, paying only by diplomacy. To Ursula he explained that he knew for a real fact that Cameron had paid enough for her keep to feed them both. He effectually dodged all forms of present contributions with hints of big bequests; neither would he borrow nor lend, However narrow the rule, the close study he had made of the borrowing devices of the few men met in the Bush served him in good stead for those in town.

'As fer ez money's concerned, I wudn't trus' me right 'and wi' wot belongs to me left' was his advice to Ursula. But to Mr. Civil, 'On'y wait t' I'm safe in ther arms ov Jeesis.'

'But God bless my soul, Boshy! you are hale and hearty. You may see us all out' was Mr. Civil's remonstrance.

'Ah, that's all you know, ur any ov you. It'll nut be long now. I'll never scratch a grey 'ead' shaking it in a manner suggesting a sinister foreknowledge. 'On'y a few mo-er tri-uls, on'y a few mo-er tee-urs' he disconcertingly bellowed into the keen face, indecently searching his for indications of coming dissolution. There was no way for the ex-parson, but to wait, patiently or otherwise.

Therefrom Boshy's saving propensities, being but the idiosyncrasies of the rich, were mercifully endured and spoken of by Mr. Civil. Even his amazing miserliness was passed over acceptedly, for of such are the kingdom of shepherd millionaires. But one, alone, in that town stood apart from Boshy's coveted acquaintance. The prosperous landlord of the Court House Hotel 'wud 'ave nather thruck nor dale wid 'im at all, at all.' And Boshy, after the manner of all victors, unsatiated with homage, troubled incessantly how to make Pat the Jew, Pat the Dry Sixpence, bow the knee.

'Kerry cows 'ave long 'or-rns and far-r off fiel's do be green' Pat would remark when talk of Boshy's wealth went round the bar-room, Pat, who knew his Bush, would demand: 'Shure now, an' where ud 'e git it? Say now for-r ar-rgimen's sake thet Boshy found an' grabbed ould Baldy's plant: I'd arsk yez 'ow much ud it be—orl himself an' Baldy could put together the whole ov thir nat'ral loives graftin' in ther Bush ? Shure, the Lor-rd help

yez an' your great forchunes. Shure, wouldn' some ov yez git 'im till tell yez, what bank houlds it? Faith, I'm thinkin' 'tis the river-bank.' And Pat's squinny eyes would twinkle time to his harsh laugh.

That was also the ex-parson's perplexity. Where did Boshy keep it? or was it safe in such keeping? In solemn anxiety Mr. Civil sought for this information, likewise, by pressing into his service the lawless element among them to instil fear into Boshy. But Boshy's one eye winked security to friend and foe.

'don't fret, Mr. Civil; me bits ov savin's is weer no crows won't be a-takin' me yaller boys fer cough lozengers, nor me fifty-pun notes fer pocket-'ankerchers' was the nearest location or clue he could get from Boshy.

Vainly the ex-parson preached eloquently on the Hidden Talents, and spoke of profitable interest to be obtained under various speculations; beside, to keep money hidden in a napkin (Boshy would smile) was sinful, wilful waste, and instead, many and varied alluring investments were suggested.

'I'll tell yer w'at' said Boshy one day, after another lengthy investment sermon—' I'll tell yer w'at: I'll buy the Court 'Ouse 'Otel if you'll run it fer me.'

Incongruous it might be; nevertheless, the ex-parson took a week to come to a decision. Even then Boshy considered that he owed his escape to Bella Watson.

Bella's disappointed resentment against the union of the parson and widow Irvine had gradually disappeared. She was now a very frequent visitor at the Civils', though Boshy soon discovered, and said, that she received 'on'y a lopsided welcome.'

'Before you came she used always to come here to dinner on Sundays, then after dinner they'd go into the parlour, and Bella played the harmonium; but aunt went into her room and shut herself up' informed Ursie.

'To be a-snoozin' or a-sulkin?'' questioned Boshy.

'No; it was the porter. She drinks two big bottles on Sunday, and it makes her sleepy. Haven't you noticed?'

'Yes, 'er drinks be 'arf too much porter. You could crack a flea on 'er face, fer she's jus' a-breakin', an' a-bustin', an' a-bulgin'wi nourishment' he said in sudden heat. 'Git 'er ter knock it orf or 'er'll crack up. Tell 'er so, Lovey. 'Er ain't a bad sort for a female.'

Boshy was thoughtful for a few moments. 'Yes, sure's Gord made liddle apples, 'er'll crack up, an' seems ter me thet would soot some people to a nicety. Git 'er t' knock it orf be jinin' ther Band ov 'ope.'

‘Oh, I couldn't! I daren't speak of it to her. It's Mr. Civil's fault. At first when he came he would not let her have any, and now he makes her take more than she wants sometimes’ said Ursula.

‘I see’ said Boshy, Knocking the ashes out of his pipe. ‘An' ther Lord 'elp 'er, fer 'er doesn't wunt much makin'!’

It was Sunday night, but neither Boshy nor Ursie stayed for the prayer-meeting, for Mrs. Civil was sick. Both were sitting outside on a stool in a shadow cast by the house, near the sick woman's bedroom.

‘Rum yarn thet et church t'-night about them couple or more knowin' ole virgins, Lovey.’ Boshy's remark referred to the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.

‘don't you think now, Boshy, that the wise ones might have either wakened, or given a little of their oil to, the other poor late things?’ asked Ursie.

Boshy sent a disparaging grunt through his nose.

‘Nut on'y thet, Lovey, but the way ther greedy beggars crowed over 'em’ was his comment.

In silence his mind went away to ‘Gi' Away Nothin’All’ and as a similar case he told Ursie the story.

‘But Lord, Lovey, 'ow in ther name of Gord them fools over there’ indicating the chapel, ‘can be kidded ter fill up thet money-plate reg'lar beats me. They mus' git it easy—thet's all I gut t' say. Seems you've on'y t' git up in the box an' make out thet on'y for you a-bein' sich a sheep-dorg a-busnackin', an' a-blatherin', an' a-barkin' roun' 'urdles day an' night wi'out meat an' drink an' sleep, thet Gord A'mighty 'ud be a-snoozin’; then like a dingo, ther devil 'ud be over ther 'urdles a-woolin', an' a-worritin, an' a-woundin' ov ther yeos an' lambs. An’—with a laugh—‘s'ep me Gord! ther d—d ole yeos an' wethers seem t' be ther wustest, an' ther frightenest. Right enuff t' go t' 'ave a go at ther songs, same 'uz I do. I enj'y ther songs an' toons.’

Then to his own tune and time he sang some as an example.

For though Boshy was a regular attendant at church services and prayer-meetings, his sole offering was discordantly vocal. Moody and Sankey had sung their way into every dissentient chapel, and Boshy appreciated their words thoroughly, and sang them to a wrong tune incessantly.

‘Ther's no mistake, them songs an' toons of them coves 'as gut me be ther wool proper’ was his excuse for bawling them night and day.

‘Why doesn't aunt tell Bella Watson she doesn't——’

‘Lis'en, Lovey’ Boshy interrupted her. ‘W'at's that they're a-singin' ov now—“Safe in ther arms ov Jeesis”?’

No; “Dare to be a Daniel,” ' Ursie informed him.

‘ “Dare t' be er Den-e-i-al,” ' intoned he softly, mindful of the sick woman. ‘Nut much go in among 'em over there wi'out me’ he broke in to remark. ‘An' moosic seems t' gi'e me twice ther wind. I tell yer w'at, Lovey: you mus' begin t' learn chunes on the memorium. It's a-been on me mind fer some time, but the egspense pulled me up. Learn you must, then us'll 'oist me Lady Bella outer both inside 'eere an' out ov ther church over there. You'll play ther 'ymns, an' I'll start ther singin' meself.’

‘Here they come’ said Lovey, indicating two figures descending the hill. Boshy looked.

‘Arm acrook, too, a-thinkin' thet in ther dark all cats is grey. Sit still t' us sees 'ow they sez their “Gord be wi yer t' us meets agin,” ’ advised he.

But there was no leave-taking between the parson and Bella: Mr. Civil came hastily to the house, leaving her in the shadow of the tree. He would have passed without seeing the pair on the stool but for Boshy solemnly chanting his best attempt at ‘Sound the loud timbrel!’—‘ “Ole P'aro is dead, but I'll never, wot never, no never, go back into Egyp' agin ” ’—to the tune of ‘St. Patrick's Day in the Morning.’

‘Oh, ur, you Boshy?’ blustered Mr. Civil; ‘looking at the moon?’

‘No, a-lookin' at Miss Wetson; 'er seems to 'ave loss somethin’.’

‘Oh no; she's waiting for me to bring out her music-book.’

‘Jis so’ said Boshy, much implied in his tones.

The parson went hurriedly inside, and Bella, who had seen the meeting, came down to Boshy and Ursie.

‘I was thirsty, so Mr. Civil said he would bring me out a drink’ explained Bella.

Neither Ursula nor Boshy commented.

‘Peculiar how thirsty singing makes you.’

‘Very pecoorial’ agreed Boshy.

Mr. Civil appeared with, Ursie perceived, the wrong book.

‘I found your book’ he said, tapping it.

‘I told Boshy and Ursie’ bleated Bella confusedly, ‘I wanted a drink.’

‘Ov Porter—a cupple ov bottles?’ Boshy inquired.

‘No; water’ said Bella lamely.

‘Certainly, certainly; I forgot.’

Mr. Civil went in hurriedly to make good his forgetfulness.

‘ “Ho, everyone w'at thurstieth, come to ther water,” ’ chanted Boshy, to encourage Bella to take more than sacramental sips. ‘W'en Lovey 'ere wus a liddle girl I cured 'er completely ov a-arstin' fer a drink w'en 'er didn' wunt it, be a-makin' ov 'er drink it all up—poor chile!—w'ether or no. It's putty 'ard t' drink w'en yer nut dry. Ain't it, Miss Wetson?’

Bella heroically gulped several mouthfuls; then, handing back the glass

to the silent shepherd, began fumbling for her handkerchief.

‘Strange—igh—you always—igh—want to wipe your mouth after drinking anything; but being so thirsty, I must—igh——Isn't it peculiar?’

‘Very pecoorial’ assented Boshy. ‘An' you've come a long step out ov yur way 'ome fer a drink.’

‘Yes, indeed, and I must be getting back’ she agreed, including Mr. Civil in her farewells.

‘That was not Bella's music-book Mr. Civil had, Boshy. It was aunt's *Sunday at Home*.’

‘Well, it's gorn abroad now, Lovey.’

‘Well, why did he say it was Bella's book, and why did she say she wanted a drink when she didn't?’ asked Ursie.

Boshy's pipe had been out for some time, but he slowly and carefully tested it, then put it into his pocket.

‘Why does she?’ repeated Ursula.

‘It seems t' me, Lovey, that these lambs ov Gord in this towen must play putty well ther same games as ther lambs in ther Bush.’

Chapter VIII

‘LOVEY, no mistake, yer mus' learn t' play ther memorium’ gravely Boshy repeated next morning. ‘Be 'ook or be crook, yer mus' learn t' play. If I could but fine out w'at Cameron Cameron is a-payin' fer yer 'ere I'd know 'ow 't ack; but if I 'ints t' either ov 'em any sich question, both ov 'em buttons their lips thet insten' minute. I mus' git out o' this, for I'm beginnin' t' get full up ov bluffin' ole yellor lugs about a-leavin' 'im me money, an' it's time I was earnin' more. So onct more agen I'll be 'umpin' me Bluey, but afore I go I mus' get on to Andrer w'en 'e comes 'ome t' root in among ther parson's papers, an' fine out wut they gut from Cameron fer you; me an' you keepin' ov 'em on ther string w'ile 'e does ov it.’

‘Oh, Andrew wouldn't touch their papers’ said Ursula.

‘Nut if you wus t' ast 'im?’

She shook her head decisively, and Boshy mumbled disparagingly about Andrew and youth generally, then suddenly broke out:

‘But Lord Gord! yer carn't expec' t' put a nole 'ead on young shoulders. W'y, Lovey, w'en I think ov the chance I 'ad t' root an' a-rummage among yer dead daddy's papers afore Cameron come thet time—w'y, I 'ad all one night, an' best part ov nex' day. Se'p me Gord! I wus so honest thet I never so much ez laid a fing-er on 'em, fer I never giv' it a thort t' I see Cameron 'ad a-snavelled ov 'em.’ The muscles in his maimed eye quivered regretfully. ‘W'en I'm abed an' begins t' think over it, I turns quick on me other side t' distract me 'eart away from sich thoughts, t' think w'at a fool I was. Bought sense is the best of sense if yer don't pay too dear, as ther sayin' is, an' don't lose yer receipt. I allus paid putty dear fer mine.’ He was smilingly silent, then added slowly and softly, ‘Cep' oncet’ and again he paused and pondered, then suddenly: ‘Tech wood, Lovey! tech wood, t' stop bad luck!’ he said excitedly, jumping up and tapping and making her touch the seat. ‘Me a-boastin' an' a-blatherin' like thet, a-knowin' pride goes afore a fall;’ and he grew strangely disturbed and troubled.

Then, under pretence of being reassured by this touch-wood charm, he spoke of a subject that continually appeared to be in his mind—the doings of Pat the Jew; for though Boshy did not again enter the Court House Hotel, some magnetic influence continually caused him to pass the bar. His mood was always indicative of Pat's trade, for if the rapacious publican happened to be in the bar alone, Boshy's one eye would take a steady, disconcerting inside survey. To Lovey he would joyfully prophesy that Pat the Jew's day was done. ‘Nut a soul a-nex', nur a-nigh, nur a-near the place; everyone's a-droppin' down t' 'is terbaccer-juice. I've cooked 'is goose.’ In

justice to Boshy's prediction, this was a culinary kindness that he lost no opportunity of attempting.

Several times Boshy passed and repassed one afternoon, gloatingly nothing that only the discomfited landlord loomed gloomily with his back to the empty fireplace, gnawing his thin moustache, or, as Boshy said, to as many as he could intercept, 'a-champin' an' a-chawrin', an' a-chewin' ov ther terbaccer—us knows wot fer.'

But next time the insatiable Boshy saw that Pat's daughter, named by her admiring parents 'Vi'let' but nicknamed by the Philistines 'The Fuchsia' had joined 'Pa.' They stood each end of the mantelpiece, and between them on it rested a large canvas labelled 'Topical Birds at Home' the lack in etymology being equalled by the ornithology of the subjects, these being seven large tropical parrots 'at home' on a spray of asparagus. Boshy needed no index to the artist, for the knowledge that The Fuchsia was learning to paint pictures was common to the whole town.

'It's a potygrap. I'll take me oath thet's wut it is' he declared to Ursula. Nor was he comforted by her assurance that it could not be a photograph, because of the fragile impossibility of the perch of those gaudy, well-fed perchers.

'Could you paint one, then, wi' them a-roost-in' on a rose-bush, Lovey?' sentimentally he inquired with eagerness.

She, sorrowful for his apparent disappointment, admitted that even The Fuchsia's achievement was beyond her.

'Then don't be jealous, Lovey' he snapped irritably. 'But se'p me Gord! if I gut t' go barefoot you'll go t' learn' he said as he disappeared.

Nothing the ex-parson could say against the expense could dissuade him from this decision. Even the girl's own opposition he beat back, resolutely meeting her unwillingness to part from him with the news that he was about to return to the Bush on important business. Andrew also, by his father's command, was going back to the station.

'I wouldn't leave you 'ere, Lovey, wi'out Anderer.' Waving away the suggestion, 'No, you can't come wi' me this trip, Lovey ov mine' — whispering—'but please Gord you will nex' time. An' us'll take a memorium wi' us. But Lord, us'll stay no time up there.'

Perhaps it was the over-zealous opposition of Mr. Civil that strengthened Boshy's rash resolve, for even when the initial expenses multiplied from pence into shillings and progressed into pounds, he would neither waver nor retreat. Certainly to enforce the shopkeeper's respectful wonder he paid all silver outlays in copper, and pounds in silver, and all with a painfully slow reluctance; yet in the end the girl was, all circumstances considered, fairly equipped for this venture.

The memorable morning found Boshy and Andrew and her beside her boxes on the veranda, awaiting the preliminary horn blast of Jimmy Nancarron's night - journeying coach.

If Boshy's mind had dwelt on the parting, the strenuousness of many other ordeals had suppressed mention. But now as Jimmy's team topped the gravelly hill, he raised his horn, and proudly blew his annunciatory too-tooly-oo-too, too-tooly-oo-too, too-tooly-too-tooly, too, too, too, then he noisily tooled his team to the gate.

It shook the girl distressingly, but she made no sign; only she took one swift look at Andrew, and noted that he had suddenly changed from a boy into a man, with a brave, grave face.

Boshy began to tremble violently.

'Me ole mother called ther ship as I a-sailed in out 'ere *Ther 'Earse*, en now all of a instan' minute I begin t' feel ther same' he said, turning to silent Andrew.

'Boshy, I won't go' said Ursula earnestly.

'My Gord! an' them expensive boxes, an' more'n expensive duds wuts in 'em, a-lyin' orl aroun'. Up wi' yer, Lovey, inter yer gran' box seat' he said in the coaxing tones of her childhood. 'A box seat's egstra egspense, but I wunt all in ther towen t' see yer. I'm orlright, Lovey, so's Anderer' he encouraged, looking at immovable Andrew; 'us is both orlright w'en us thinks on ther picksurs you'll paint and ther toons you'll play when us orl meets again.'

Chapter IX

EVEN in the first little school every lesson subject but reading baffled Ursula, and it was so in this more pretentious establishment. Arithmetic, geography, grammar—strive as ardently as she could, the girl could not get an enlightening glimmer even into their elementary principles. With music, unless she knew the tune, the teacher's efforts were wasted. But on wet days, when the attendance of day scholars was few and the lessons were confined to poetry and history, save for dates, then Ursula shone; and though aided by the ruler she could not draw a straight line, her colour sense was wonderful. Teachers are never students of the scholars, and none of Ursula's gifts were calculated to score in that absolute, but unfortunately not obsolete institution, examinations. Disheartened by continual failure, gradually she made no effort to improve, consoling herself when she reflected on the peculiar protégés that Nature selected, for from the mistress downward these learned spinsters had little of what was lovely to the girl. But when Boshy's ill—spelt, hopeful letters came, her heart charged her unsparingly, though her carefully school-dictated replies to him were destined to contain no hint of failure. Then, one day, came her first letter from Andrew, telling his aunt was very sick; he thought Ursula should come to her. Where, wondered Ursula, had he got all the money he enclosed for her fare? as she excitedly began her preparations for her return journey by train, for during these school years trains had usurped the place of Jimmy Nancarron's coach.

In the early dawn as the train slackened speed she saw Andrew waiting for her on the platform. Despite his added height she knew him instantly, for his steadfast, unchanged eyes shone, and had also sighted her. Eagerly Ursula thrust her hand through the window in greeting to him, but his was by then busy opening the carriage door. Her heart shrank and her face crimsoned as she stepped past him on to the platform; his whitened, and almost in silence they went homeward.

That afternoon they stood at the foot of Mrs. Civil's bed. She was propped up by pillows, and through the little window looking westward the afternoon sun blazed unsparingly on the discoloured face of the sick woman, speechlessly rigid. Ursie stood, her eyes going from her aunt's bloated face to her swollen body, outlined and augmented by the white covering. Andrew, intently watching the girl, saw no understood sign of sorrow. Her mouth had set into a straight line, but her eyes were dry and staring. So she had left them all years ago—Boshy, he, all she knew—dry-eyed and almost silent. A sullen, laboured grief against her seized him, and

as he stood there he felt without analyzing that not years but the world had rolled between him and her.

‘Sit—in—the—light’ said the patient to Ursie that night.

The girl moved, and Andrew raised the lamp to the shelf, so that its rays fell on Ursie's face.

‘You—have—your father's brow—and—chin, and—your—mother's—mouth—and— eyes, but your—grandmother's—hands. They —were—painted—by——. She had fine hands——’

Ursie's eyes, intent on the gravely shaking head, gleamed expectantly, but the woman's face turned to Andrew.

‘Andrew!’

‘Yes, aunt.’

‘Merri—gu—lan—dri.’

‘Now, now’ stormed Mr. Civil, noisily pushing in the door. ‘Is this keeping quiet? Out of this, out of this, both of you.’

‘I—want—to—talk—to them’ said Mrs. Civil, raising her hand imploringly.

‘Another time, when you are better, my dear; plenty of time. Come out—come out, Andrew; come out, you, miss.’

Mrs. Civil's hand fell back heavily, and she closed her eyes.

‘Another—time—Andrew’ she panted.

‘I hear, that before I came’ Andrew told Ursula, ‘if Civil went out, that Bella Watson would come on guard, till one night aunt threw the lamp at her, then took a fit. Bella has not been near her since I came. But he is always upsetting her by taking her death for granted, so I am constantly on the watch. Listen’ whispered Andrew, ‘what's he reading now?’

Both moved close to the patient's window.

‘“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”’

Solemnly the ex-parson read some verses from St. Paul's mournful masterpiece, then, kneeling by the bed, prayed for the soul of one surely in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And like a muffled drum the stertorous breathing of the woman on the bed beat time to the service. Looking through the window, they saw him rise from his knees, raise the lamp, and holding it close to his wife, peer keenly into her face. She lay with her eyes half closed, taking short laboured breaths through her open mouth. He put down the lamp, then harshly partly chanted and intoned—

‘If Thou shouldst call me to resign
What most I prize, it ne'er was mine;
I only yield Thee what was Thine,

Thy will be done.
Thy——'

Andrew's broad hand closed over the vocalist's mouth, the other had him by the neck. Ursie held the door wide open, and before the startled man could openly protest, Andrew had flung him into a corner of Ursula's one-time prison and shot the outside bolt. From some cause the ex-parson accepted this violence in silence. Waiting his opportunity, he tapped at the window as the servant passed, and she, in unquestioning surprise, freed him.

His shadow fell across the window only once during Andrew's and Ursie's nightwatch by the aunt's bed. Baffled by the blind, he crept softly to the closed bedroom door, but hastily as he opened it, Andrew's angry countenance went more than half way to meet his livid visage.

Towards midnight the mill, now working overtime, ceased. After this it seemed to Ursula that the sick woman's pants grew more feeble and irregular. Unblinkingly the girl kept her first vigil. Andrew, looking into those sleepless eyes, thought they alone, through the wonderful change—transfiguring her from gawky girlhood into supple womanhood—had not changed.

The woman on the bed gave no sign of their presence. Her mouth had fallen apart; round it a white weal threw into high relief the stagnant purple hue of the lips and cheeks. Her eyes were partially closed. If only she would wake and close her mouth, mentally prayed the outwardly unflinching girl. Later the doctor came, and sheltered by his presence the sick woman's husband stood in the doorway. Nothing must be done to close that open mouth, but Ursie might, at set times, moisten the breath-dried tongue and throat. Soon after the doctor's departure a woman who 'laid out' came and stood at the bedfoot in steady contemplation. 'About dawn' she said to them, and went out.

They heard her rouse the sleeping servant, and with her enter the kitchen; then the noise of a fire being lighted and the fountain being filled came to the watchers.

The sick woman's breathing became more fitful. Her head fell aside, and the liquid Ursie would have poured down her throat oozed back.

'No more' whispered Andrew, taking the spoon from Ursie. They were each side the bed, watching the sick woman.

Gradually the power of the lamplight appeared to be limited to a blurred circle.

There was a long unbroken quiet, seemingly blank from its intensity, till with horrible suddenness a cock crew. The girl and youth had risen, and

their hands simultaneously outstretched met across the body, now limp and motionless.

Dissolution did not beautify Mrs. Civil. Her great body lay shrouded in stiffly bulging outlines, and in deference to an old custom a plate of salt, to arrest swelling, lay with significant immovability on the stomach. Ann Foster's scissors had perforated elaborately a linen face-spread, which rested as still as the salt. The white curtains and blind screening the window hung lifelessly; white drapes and covers and flowers were everywhere; and a stifling scented stillness filled the room with an intolerable odorous heaviness.

As ever an unreality girl and governed the girl's normal senses—surely this bed-scene must be familiar, An indefinable impulse seized her to go outside, find, then softly sigh through, a crack, but low down—she wanted it almost level with the bed.

Dazed, deathly white, but dry-eyed, she followed Andrew outside. There they parted without a word, he going swiftly up the hill, anywhere away to lose sight of her, she purposelessly watching him.

She felt that he had failed her, why and how was not clear, nor how much it mattered. How tall and strong he had grown, but she would not think about him, so mentally she fell apart from her old mate. Thank God, she was sure of Boshy.

From the kitchen came the smell and clatter of food being prepared for breakfast. Mercy! how could any one eat? She went to her room.

In the afternoon the maid came saying somebody wanted her. Outside, partly screened by the paling fence, Ursula found Fanny, who anxiously inquired the whereabouts of Mr. Civil. Ursula assured her that he was in his room, and it was quite safe for her to come in. But another purpose also kept her outside, waiting for Jim, who had promised to bring her some flowers to decorate the dead woman. Jim came downhill hastily to them, a few flowers of many hues in one hand, the other holding something under his coat. Fanny instantly complained of the colour and paucity of the blossoms displayed, whereupon Jim produced from beneath his coat a dilapidated porcelain wreath, which Fanny scorned, declaring that she knew it well—that it was off old Shiel's grave; but Jim swore that he had bought them at great expense. Then they bandied:

‘Grave-robber! Pat the Jew's loplolly boy!’

‘Old raddle-cheeks! ‘Oppy-go-fetch-it.’

Till the grotesquely angry scene was interrupted by the arrival of Mina, who came asking for Andrew. With her, from a sense of duty, Ursie went again into the silence with its sickening scents.

‘Can I see her?’ asked Mina, with orthodox interest and intent, groping

for her handkerchief. Ann Foster was in charge, and ostentatiously withdrew her work of art facecover. Mina bent and kissed the partly open mouth.

‘Poor Mrs. Civil, don't she look peaceful an' nice?’ she whimpered, dabbing her dry eyes.

‘Very’ agreed Anne, replacing the facecover, then resuming her seat with an ordered, solemn countenance.

Andrew continually disappeared, on pretext of duty, and Mr. Civil, as became a disconsolate mourner, kept himself and his grief in his room. Mina stayed for tea, and with disconcerting wonder Ursula watched the food pass through the lips that had so lately kissed the dead woman's, for to Ursula even here the cold presence of death seemed to penetrate.

‘Why don't you eat? Isn't Andrew gone?’ asked Mina suspiciously.

‘Come outside’ ordered Ursula, with scant ceremony rising and forcing out her unsatisfied guest. There in the twilight they sat on a seat that Boshy had built in the recess facing the hill. From the trees crowning it, magnified, pinnacled shadows fell towards them. Below in the river valley a belated bird called plaintively to its mate. Ursula listened to it for a moment, then her eyes again sought the impelling shadows.

Down the hillside came two men bearing the last solemn symbol on their shoulders. Ursula rose, then stood in a line with the bearers, motionless as though waiting for inexorable fate. She suffered the grotesquely and inhumanly lengthened shadow from the men and their burden to fall on her.

‘Mina, Mina! Oh, God!’

Ursula's arms went round her irresponsive friend, and her surprised tears deluged and embarrassed her.

‘Lord, Urs, what's the matter with you?’

‘Mina, Mina!’ She sank on her knees, then she fell face downward, blind with tears and grief for an undefinable sorrow.

It was nothing to her that in the ghastly details of the following days Mina seemed to have usurped her place. A waiting quiet possessed her, but she felt alone, though even this was, or appeared to be, of her choice.

Lessons in life are seldom as moral as they should be, and Mrs. Civil's will left all her personal and real estate to her dear husband. Her beloved nephew Andrew Cameron of Cameron and her ward Ursula Ewart were unnamed in it. Boshy had hoped otherwise, but Ursula had given it no thought, even when she wrote to him—her only friend.

After due delay Boshy wrote saying he was ‘a-comin' down at once’ and for Andrew to wait till he came. With veiled hostility to Andrew, the widower suffered him to await Boshy's coming. Ursula saw that now Bella

Watson's chance meetings with him had to be strategically and singly planned by Bella, whose wifely attentions to the bereaved man were markedly meaning. But those prophets of the past were surprised by the coldness and palpable annoyance of the recipient. Even in the first week his manner to Ursula, without being fatherly, had changed to the tender solicitude of a watchful guardian. He consulted her continuously on all subjects, not even excepting the indelicacy of Bella's unwelcome visits, discountenanced by him now, because of Ursula's and his adored dead wife's dislike to her. Ursula felt like a trapped animal forced to feed from her hated captor's hand. But till Boshy came she would keep her mind in abeyance. Again and again the girl wrote, earnestly importuning his speedy return, but unaccountably he still tarried. Andrew, man-like, saw only Ursula's discontent from being with them, and a moody constraint was always upon and between them. Mina, after the manner of her sex, saw much, but, unlike them, said nothing. She came very often, considering that her parents had now added 'accommodation' to their wine business.

Weeks, leaden for Ursula, went by, bringing only messages from Boshy, still on his way down. Mr. Civil's kindness daily increased to her, and but for Andrew's open hostilities would have reached him.

Then widower Hugh Palmer came down from Merrigulandri, his wife Margaret having paid the toll of motherhood; and from him Ursula heard that Boshy had been camped on a far-away creek, waiting for the season of the birdling Galahs.

'He told me to tell you that he is up to his eyes a-ketchin' an' a-snarin' an' a-takin' of 'em into Coolabadarin, an' a-sellin' of 'em, but that he would soon be down now.'

Andrew was now to go back in Hugh Palmer's place, and Mina began to crochet a red-and-purple necktie as a parting gift. Hugh Palmer commented privately to Ursula on the harmonious blend, but said openly with mimic tragedy that it would cause bloodshed between Andrew and him.

The outward and visible signs of moral ethics likewise were strong points with this learned Englishman. To him, despite the housekeeper, there was an impropriety in Ursula, the elderly ex-parson, and Andrew living under the one roof—a matter that, for all his aforetime vigilance, had escaped Mr. Civil.

Mina's mother agreed emphatically with Palmer, too emphatically for her English.

'She gan goom mit you, Misdar Pommer; dare is room in Mina's room for doo bets.'

'For doo bedts plendee room' was emphasis to an inaudible objection from Mr. Stein, who, as Palmer disappeared, added:

‘But vot erpout Mina? Keep off der krass, den, for Mina ant Pommer.’
Mrs. Stein's mouth pursed scornfully.

‘Oh, ant so is to-morrow’ she said with an air of finality.

‘Vaid, den, ant ve shall see’ prophesied Mr. Stein.

‘Always you growel, or yap-yap “Vaid— vaid.” I go do my vork’ she said meaningly, pinning up her skirts and taking up a broom.

‘Orh, a damt lodd you do, dond you? You ant your vork. Ven somesbodies——’

‘Orh, somesbodies will dare ees shirt’ sneered Mrs. Stein.

‘Urzler's nod so kreen as hers kabbidge lookin'. It vill be all up for Mina mit Pommer. Then you mit a long mout’.

‘Shust you get vork’ said Mina's mother, slamming the door.

But Ursula would make no movement without Boshy, though she longed earnestly to lose the attention of her self-constituted guardian.

On her solitary bush wanderings one afternoon she had come to a felled wild apple-tree. There it lay, denuded by time of leaf and branch and even bark; yet still clinging with parasitical tenacity was the bunch of mistletoe that had brought about its downfall years ago, because its impregnable fruit and height had taunted her. Jim, importuned, had come with his axe and at her wish had felled it with the fruited but unripe mistletoe. She recalled everything as she stood there. Mr. Civil, warned and guided by distant axe-whangs, had found them, and had been unsparing in his condemnation of Jim's stupid waste of time in coming an unnecessary mile to chop down a tree uselessly far away.

‘She kidded me to’ was Jim's defence, and she recollected that then she had none. Nor could she now define her motive.

Thoughtfully she went over all old haunts that had tempted and terrified her childhood. But they begot little of the old emotion, even when from the coign of a precipitous rock she surveyed the whole of this little town that, to her —bush-born—had once seemed so boundlessly vast. It had been the arena for all she read from ‘Maria Monk’ to ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ On the hill to her left was the convent, and above it, topping its fellows, stood Mount Murrillo—the exceeding high mountain where Satan had led Christ, to tempt Him with the kingdoms of the earth, such surely for Christ and Satan, as for her then, had been this great town, though now so cruelly shrunken and changed.

The river-flat facing the principal street still kept an encircled space for the crude glories of the passing circus show. But not for a moment even now could she dwell upon that mocking epoch, and she came down hastily.

In a fertile hollow between river and hills were the remains of an aforetime vine-garden, full of old-world fruit and flowers. In its centre still

flourished, in native independence, a gigantic tree. Near it a forgotten family vault, gaping and mouldering: as if to hide its neglect, a tangle of rank creepers climbed over and about it. This had been her childhood's Garden of Gethsemane, and this the tree beneath which Christ, lonely, had wept. Today, through the fulness of years, she stood possessed with the right time and place, still she hallowed the old memories. From the garden a track led along the river to the two graveyards—creed-separated, but only by a stone's-throw; she followed it to them. Every turn and twist, every she-oak and shrub she passed, was reminiscent of some callow illusion that touched her even now. The 'snaggy hole' that had been the death-trap of Granny Magrath's darling and of many others, was as treacherously quiet and still; seemingly its only duty was to reflect the heavens. As unchanged were the Chinamen, too, and as mechanically labouring, but their gardens, dotted along the river-flats, had surely shrunken, and all landmarks, even the hills, had come nearer town.

Her aunt was now numbered among these silent sleepers, and in the misty twilight her white headstone gleamed with ghostly effect.

Here, on the tomb of one who had been done to death, and lay still unavenged, was a verse that to her had always read as a threat:

'Before the morning light I'll come, with Magdalen to find,
With tears and sighs to Jesus' tomb, and there refresh my mind.'

Leavened by the old influence, she saw, in the grey dawn of a long-dead day, the tomb from which Christ had risen, and Mary, that picturesque sinner, coming with spices and sweet perfume to the tomb—empty, for Christ had gone. In the ages that had passed there had been no sympathy for Mary—Mary, not His mother, but another Mary, who had waited through the long night, then 'very early, while yet it was dark' had come; and He, though knowing, was gone.

'Ursula' came like an echo to her, then a well-known 'Coo-ee.' Instinctively, she fled back into the garden across the river, and from it again to the hills. And not till the darkness governed her mood did she suffer Andrew and Mina to find her.

'Oh, w'at a one you are for sulkin'! We've been 'untin' for you all over the place' complained Mina. 'Let's sit down: I'm knocked up.'

'Andrew's goin' next week, an' you're to come and stay with us till Boshy comes. Then what are you goin' to do, Ursie?'

'Write a book' she said shortly.

It was a statement that took her by surprise, for till she spoke, her future plans had not been within her mental focus.

Andrew was silent; Mina laughed mockingly.

'I'm sure—I suppose just because you've been down the country to school you've got that in your 'ead. Bah! Boshy's got no money to keep you writin' books.'

This also was a new aspect for Ursula.

'Ursula has money of her own, or will have' said Andrew.

'I know, I know' said Mina, resuming her old manner.

'Yuh whur! w'at's bitin' me? Arnts, arnts! We're sittin' on an arnts' bed' she yelled, grabbing her thighs.

Both she and Andrew had an active few minutes, but Ursula stood apparently unmolested.

'None on you?' inquired Mina, after much crushing defeat of her invisible foes.

'No.'

'Not one?' Mina reasked in surprise.

'No' again stormed Ursula, fiercely and unreasonably angry.

'Well, don't bite me 'ead off. They must be sugar arnts, Andrew, to tackle on'y me and you. Yah! there's another. Grab 'im, Andrew, and squeeze him. He's down me back.'

As they came down the hillside, they met the full moon rising. By its light Andrew, who had been keenly watching Ursula, saw, among many ants, one crawl towards her ear. He tore it off hastily.

'Let's run downhill' he said; and taking her hand, they speedily outdistanced Mina.

Chapter X

WHEN Ursula woke next morning, the once familiar sound of someone's personal washing, outside on Jim's old stool, caused her to peep through the window. For many minutes she stood silently watching Boshy making his morning toilet.

He, with everything else, was cruelly altered. The sparse grey locks he combed were fewer and greyer: and though the accustomed mouth circle was as obdurately set as of old, his head waggled purposelessly: and his hands fumbled stiffly as he folded and replaced his pocket comb. As of old, he took down his portable glass hanging on a nail, and carefully wiping it, replaced it in its case. But instead of sending the water from the basin with a broad, well-directed swirl over the grass, he now poured it carefully into the drain.

The girl, only half dressed, rushed out to him.

'Lovey'—he looked at her steadily—'either you growed up or I've growed down; w'ich is it?' With his eye set on her face, his trembling hands sought hers. 'Your dear liddle 'ands. Thenk Gord, your liddle 'an's an' feet's same az ever. Oh, Lovey, but I'm glad t' see you; an' we'll part no more. "We meet t' paart no mo-ur," ' he sang joyfully.

Now, at the wrong time, she could have wept—wept with the violence of a winter's sudden storm. She drove her tongue to the roof of her mouth, and set her teeth and trembling lips, as she helped the bowed old man put on his coat.

'Learn plenty et schule, Lovey? S'pose you can make the nole memorandum in theer all but talk?'

'Boshy' she said, eager to divert him, 'everyone says I can't stay here now aunt's dead—everyone but Mr. Civil.'

'Weer t' go t', then, Lovey, do they say?'

'To Mina's. Mrs. Stein says I'll be quite welcome.'

'Lovey, theys a nole sayin', an' a terue one, thet fish an' frien'ship stinks in twenty-fower howers. The ole man in theer'es ole enough to be yer gran'father, an' it ud be all right t' you if 'e wasn't. It's ther cracked crockery yer mus' take keer on, nut ther sound, and there's a good many in this yeer same townen is ser busy a-lookin' after others people's char-acters thet they let their owen go t' blazes. I can un'er'stan' becus ov 'em, thet young ez you are, an' ole ez w'at 'e is, yer couldn' stay 'ere on yer lonesome. But now I'm 'ere——'

'My good Boshy! When did you come? What an unexpected pleasure!'

'Las' night' said Boshy, smiling grimly and taking the widower's

outstretched hand. 'Sorry t' 'ear ov yer terouble. But we've all got t' face ther same moosic. Funny, though, but I s'pose it's becus it's a sich dead certin thet we don't waste no time a-thinkin' about it.'

The widower wiped his little eyes with a black-bordered perfumed handkerchief, and shook his head as one impressed.

'Ear about 'er a-goin' t' go t' Steins's?' asked Boshy at the breakfast table. Mr. Civil's side jerked.

'No, I did not' he answered. 'There's no necessity for Ursula to leave here. Mrs. Stein is a deep, designing woman.'

'For onct I agree wi' yer, parson: there's nut ther slightest needcesity' said Boshy with blunt honesty. 'Ole mother Stein didn't come down in ther last shower.' He shook his head impressively. 'Though 'er's gut a 'ard inside, 'er knows wut side to bite a bun. W'y, w'en they kep' ther wine-shanty at Widgiewa there wuz a sayin' thet 'er could dose any man till 'e ud be deaf an' dumb an' blin' fer a month ov Sundees. An' Lord! 'er ud skin a flea fer its 'ide an' taller—nut thet thet's anythin' ag'inst 'er fer bein' savin'.'

'She's still a deep, designing woman' repeated Mr. Civil fiercely.

'Well, let 'er be deep an'—ther other thing. I think me an' you's 'er match, don't you?' inquired Boshy jocularly.

Mr. Civil did not appear so sanguine; but with the coming of Boshy Mrs. Stein stayed her hand.

At first it seemed sufficient for Boshy to be near his Lovey, but gradually he began to probe for her accomplishments. Chiefest to him was her music, and in this, of all, she shone least. The grief proprieties in connection with her aunt's death helped Ursula to stave Boshy's knowledge of this inefficiency; but though she clambered through the Sundayschool window to practise, it came. Sore was his disappointment to find that after three—to quote him—'abnormous egspensie 'ears' Ursie could not play nearly as well as Bella Watson.

'Lord, Lovey! I thart ez yer'd a licked 'er inter a cockt 'at in less en no time. Lovey'—gravely—'yer mus' a bin a-spongin' and a-slungin' ov yer time, fer yer gut more brains 'n any of 'em, an' yer liddle 'an's nut a-stretchin' far enough is on'y a egscuse.'

He would listen in sad silence to her slow, laboured efforts to play even a simple hymn.

'Lord! ther way I been a-blowin' an' a-boastin' an' a-blatherin' about yer moosic. Oh Lord! rattle into it, Lovey, and makes believe es w'at yer wuz on'y a-gammonin' ez yer couldn't.'

'Then the notes would be wrong, Boshy' she said brokenly, for she felt his disappointment keenly.

'I wouldn't know, no more would none ov 'em know, if they wuz wrong,

Lovey, if yer could make a bellerin', thundrin' n'ise' he assured her.

To console him she set her mouth, and battered from the wheezy old organ a spirited effect of discords.

'Christ! if they wuz on'y right w'at 'd I give' was his fervent comment. But his daily request for a repetition of her improvisation filled her with a nauseating dread. Yet he met any hostile remark about her loyally with 'How can yer expec' 'er, wi' 'er liddle 'an's, t' kick up ther same row ez you wi' your lanky triantelopes? W'y, look at 'er 'an's—no more 'en a muskeeter meal' was his offensive defence to Mina. 'I never trus' a woman wi' long 'an's'—looking at hers—'and a liddle mouth full ov teeth like a cross-cut saw. I find they're jist about as warm'-earted.'

Daily Ursula would hear him muttering the sum total of her school cost that Cameron and he had sent. Then he took to morning rambles in the Bush by himself, coming back at irregular hours, always weary, but in varying moods.

'Nothin' t' be gut er made in this one-eyed 'ole' with a smokeless afternoon, displayed one mood. 'Things isen ez good ez they might be; still'—between pipe-puffs—'they could be wurser 'n w'at they is' was the other.

The girl instinctively felt that he told as much as he cared to, and forbode to question. She filled in every moment of his absence with strenuous, determined efforts at the organ in the Sunday-school.

'Come and listen, Boshy.'

It was one of his self-denial afternoons.

'Listen to w'at?' he asked sulkily, for he had long ceased to ask her for music.

'Come on.'

Taking him by the arm coaxingly, she led him into the sitting-room and gave him a time—varied rendering of one of his old favourite hymns; then, to her own setting, 'My pretty, pretty bird.'

'But that's nut correc', out ov yer book' was his despondent comment. 'I mean the 'ymn chunes ain't.'

'Yes, they are, every note of the hymn, and I made the other tune.'

He sat down heavily.

'Oh, Lord Gord! but I'm thenkful' he said solemnly. 'Lovey, I'll 'unt no mo-ore fer shenk—bones, nur 'orse'air, nur 'orns, nur nothin'. I've bin a-goin' ov, an' a-getherin' ov, an' a-gittin' ov 'em fer months past, ter sen' yer back t' learn proper; fer it's a abnormous egspense, and I brought but a few poun's wi' me, a-thinkin' as 'er would 'ave lef' us both somethin'. Se'p me Gord, Lovey! I'd ruther then a fi'-pun note thet you ken play proper. Ho! ho! I gut ther larf ov 'em now. Shooly t' goodness I hev. Lovey ov mine,

ye'll break out yet; I allus knowed yer would. Gi' me me pipe t' I smoke off me shakes. Gi' me me pipe; I'm all o' a shake. See'—holding out his trembling hands—'but it's in real downright j'y' he explained, as she soothingly held and stroked them, and it meant as much to her that he was content.

Then passed a period in the girl's life when the present held in abeyance all thought for her future. The high-flown love scenes of her precocious reading had grafted into her mind certain ideals of both sexes, fortunately lifeless in law, though still alive in literature. Comparing those about her with such highfaluting heroines, she thought the only emotion she possessed was pity. She had this even for a snake being done to death, but immeasurably for this old man who loved her only.

For Boshy was daily becoming more bent and breathless, and occasionally he had vacant intervals. Always after these he ignored the years that had passed, and would startle her by wild, ambitious plans for their future—when she would be grown up. Then he would take her to London.

'Lunnon's ther on'y place fer your brains, Lovey. Yer nut a—goin' t' be no potwolloper, Lovey ov mine, fer none ov 'em. No! no! nut be long chinks. But us must wait t' yer grow up—yer on'y a liddle girl yet, Lovey.'

He would lie back, muttering his plans for her brilliant future, then doze till roused by his falling pipe. She learned to watch and at the right moment catch it, but the dread of its setting fire to him or the surroundings, some time in her absence, used to fill her with sickening fear. Was it this same dread, she wondered, that caused his heart to beat with such violent breathlessness when he woke from his momentary slumbers? and why did he lift his arms above his head so often? To get her breath she had to raise hers even while wondering.

'Are you sick, Boshy?'

'Me, Lovey? Wut's put thet nonsense inter yer liddle 'ed—yer preddy liddle 'ed? Never wuz better in me life nur stronger, but fer a liddle bit ov cole on me ches'.'

He paused breathlessly, and she, watching keenly and uneasily, noted the fluttering pulsations from the hollows of his sunken throat.

'O Lord, Lovey! w'at a nole woman yer wanter turn me inter, wi' yer a-rubbin' and a-rootin' and a-runtin' ther tuppentine inter me ole ches' like this 'ere way. It wouldn' take much t' rub them liddle mouses of 'an's away. An', Lovey, from wen yur wus in long clo'es you've ed a breath like ther smell ov ther scenty stock flowers w'at used t' grow in me old granny's garden at Englan'. Some used t' call 'em gilly-flowers' he explained, 'but sweet-senty stocks wuz the right name. Now, don't rub off them liddle

'an's.'

But he opposed her treatment mildly, for he loved the feel of her hands.

'They's no mistake, Lovey ov mine, but yer take some beatin', take yer all roun'' he said, looking with fatuous eye at the glow on her face from this exertion. 'None ov 'em 'ere can see your dust, Lovey; an' there's no mistake, but I'm ridiculous fond ov yer, an' allus was, an' allus will be. W'en I wuz young, wi' two eyes in me 'ead for a likely gel, fust I'd look at 'er feet, then 'er 'an's, then 'er ears—an' I mus' say at 'ome or abroad I never see the ekal ov yourn—then, by 'ook or by crook, I'd menage t' git a sniff ov 'er breath. But' —after a pause—'w'at's Andrer say about yer?'

'Nothing, Boshy.'

'Nothin'?' incredulously.

'No.'

'Nut even about yer 'an's?'

'No.'

'Ur! 'im ther idjut. W'at's it matter? W'en us goes t' London, us'll see who ye'll get. Anderer!'—scornfully—'Anderer! 'e's in no pursition t' marry, w'ich ever way it goes. One comfort, yer'll want fer nothin', thenk Gord.'

He was now breathlessly angry and lay back panting, yet vowing disgusted threats against Andrew for a few days.

After a short time she scarcely left him except for sleep, and even then she took on some of his conditions, and the smothered beating of her own overtaxed heart would waken her again and again through the night. Softly stealing to him, she would often find him, if awake, muttering some pleasant plans for their future; but always first they had to go back, for some obscure purpose, to the Bush.

Then one night she found him wandering about in terrible agitation, moist with an agony of fear, straining with eye and ear to discover someone outside with pick and shovel that he heard. For a time she could not soothe nor convince him that it was fancy. He was off that moment to protect something far away in danger.

'Oh, my Gord, Lovey!' he would gasp, 'if anyone finds it an' snavels it, w'at would you do? w'at would become ov you? It'd soon cook me, but w'at would become ov you? No, no, you must not stop me; I must be off.'

'Why? Would you leave me alone?'

'No'—weakly—'I wouldn't leave yer, Lovey. Mee-et t' paa-art no mo-ore, he droned, diverted, tremulously clutching her. But he would not go back to bed, and again his fear returned. To convince she led him to the window, and together they looked out on the tranquil, empty night. He thrust his head forward, listening fearfully.

'Try—can you 'ear anyone?' he pleaded.

To humour him she obeyed, and her face grew ghastly, for above the thuds of his excited heart audibly pounding into the night's stillness, she heard footsteps guardedly enter the house.

'W'at's it, Lovey?' confidingly.

How could she tell him? For answer she put her arms round him and drew him back, then spoke hopefully of Andrew to him till he slept.

But gradually his sleep day or night was fear-haunted by a near enemy with a pick and shovel. He muttered guardedly about this dread at first, but sometimes he shrieked it in uncontrollable agony.

'Lovey, w'at woke you? Was it the n'ise ov someun wi' a pick and shovel?'

All night she had sat outside his door listening to him moaning or muttering or coughing.

'No, Boshy. You coughed.'

'Certain sure it wuzn't nothin' else? Yer wouldn't deceive me?'

She was quite sure, kissing his moist brow, and she wouldn't deceive him.

'No, thenk Gord, I can trus' you' he said, relieved.

He was feverishly excited, but after a while he yielded, and to please her lay down.

'Go you ter bed, Lovey ov mine' stroking her face with his shaking hands. 'Go and git yer beauty sleep. Lovey, go w'en I tell yer' imperiously; and, as ever, she obeyed his old command.

Her rest had been broken for weeks, but now she felt no inclination to sleep. Wide awake, she was lying on her bed, when distinctly she heard the front door stealthily opened. Boshy had not stirred, she knew, for his harsh cough now, though it disturbed, did not break his sleep of exhaustion. Again she heard the noise from outside, also footsteps. She sat up and listened breathlessly. 'Clank, clank' metallicly came from outside the wall near Boshy's bunk-head. She rushed into his room. He was sitting up, his eyes protruding and his mouth helplessly open. He raised his arms above his head, then they fell uselessly by his side; but instantly she had hers round him, and wildly as his heart beat her own dulled his.

'Lovey' he panted.

'Hush, Boshy dear! Wait till you are better' she coaxed evasively.

'You 'eerd—thet—time—don't deny—it' he pressed, for she was silent. 'You—'eerd? Lovey, own up.'

'Yes.'

'W'at?' he gasped, eagerly.

'I don't know, Boshy; perhaps it was some stray dog or cat.'

'No dorgs or cats 'ere, Lovey.'

‘You keep still, Boshy, and I’ll look out.’

She opened the window. There by the wall near his head lay a pick and shovel. She instantly closed the window, and, conquering her horror, said calmly:

‘There’s nobody, Boshy, not a soul; and it’s nearly morning.’

‘Yes, theer’s ther cocks a-crowin’ he agreed, ‘an’ I’m fair winded’ he panted, lying down, for the dawn seemed to reassure him. ‘An’, Lovey, us’ll ‘ave some breakfuss, an’ thet’ll pick us up. Soon as I pick up a bit we’ll be out ov this. Thet sort ov thing’s been a-goin’ on fer some time.’ Again he listened for outside sounds. ‘Our name ‘ll soon be Walker, won’t it?’

‘Very soon’ she soothingly assured him. ‘Sleep now, while I get your breakfast’ she suggested, straightening his bed, and bathing his worn face that showed his unfitness to rise. When he dozed she went into the kitchen to make tea for him, going first to where she had seen the pick and shovel—but they were gone.

Later he made several brave attempts to rise and walk about, and when overcome by breathlessness made light of the cause.

He wanted no doctor’s medicine. ‘Every dose is a nail in yur coffin an’, wut’s worse, a pound in the doctor’s pocket.’ This view he shared in common with the ex-parson, who daily recounted instances of speedy and inexpensive recoveries, without skilled aid and the reverse with it. Against both the girl’s gentle demands were powerless; besides, the fears of the young lift easily, and Ursula knew nothing of sickness.

Gradually, and not without a great fight, Boshy gave up his pipe. But he instructed her to put his tobacco carefully into his pickle bottle, with a cut potato to keep it from undue dryness—‘agin’ I git meself again, Lovey.’

Shaving that morning he had gashed his cheek with the razor.

‘Somethin’ bumped me elbow’ he said. ‘Come, now’ reassuringly, ‘you look an’ see, Lovey: me ‘an’s as stiddy as th’ Rock o’ Ages.’ He made a brave but futile effort to steady his extended hand. ‘It’s not as stiddy ‘s it might be’ he sadly admitted, as she took the razor from his shaking, uncertain hand.

‘Drink this. It will do you good, Boshy.’

But his hands seemed scarcely able to hold the cup.

‘Nut yet—I’m nut thirsty—but by-and-by, w’en I stiddy up a bit’ he promised, turning his face away, wishful to hide its trouble and his disability.

‘Boshy, let me feed you, like you used to feed me long ago’ she coaxed, understanding.

He smiled with grim bravery, and thinking to humour her, gave her the spoon.

When she had finished, ‘S’ep me goodness, Lovey’ kissing her hands, ‘but yer a-poddyin’ ov me, an’ me a full-tooth weaner’ he bantered, adding with a flicker of his old manner: ‘I allus knowed them liddle lambs wuz well able ter feed ‘emselves, but they jis wanted t’ ‘ave someun az they was fond ov a-foolin’ roun’, an’ (after a cough) in that respec’ I’m no better un them.’

He was silent for a while, with an introspective aloofness on his face, which seemed grey and drawn when he spoke.

‘Lovey, ez true ez Gord, I’ve see an’ known a wile dingo act ther tame dorg, t’ ‘e fooled ther rest ov ther dorgs an’ me; then all of a sudden one night, my Gord! ter see ther way ‘e mangled them poor unfort’nit lambs. Nex’ mornin’ t’ see ther way them poor ole mother yeos looked et me, much ez t’ say, “If they’d bin yer owen flesh an’ blood, yer wouldn’ a-risked it.” Fer frum fust t’ last they never trusted ther dingo, an’ I know now in me ‘art I never trusted ‘im neither.’

He was very excited and exhausted, and the perspiration gathered and ran on his forehead.

‘Lovey, I often see yer mother’s eyes a-lookin’ et me ther same.’

Ursula laid her cheek on his tremulous mouth.

‘Oh, Boshy! My mother could not—she could not. You have been mother and father to me—both, both’ she said brokenly.

‘I dunno, Lovey, but I oughter tell yer all I know, an’ I will some day, please God, I will, an’ thet afore long.’

This resolution soothed him, and he went to sleep.

Next day, after a breakfast which Boshy made a determined but vain attempt to eat, the two were sitting silently in his room when Mr. Civil came in. His manner to Ursula of late had undergone an indeterminate change: courtesy had almost become familiarity. His ‘my dear’ gave her a convulsive shiver; still, she made no spoken sign of aversion, for already she was experiencing the inequality of her struggle to alter the thing that is. But though she acknowledged the personality of his ‘my dear’ she never looked at him. To-day when he left the room, she followed him.

‘Boshy is very ill;’ and now she looked at him steadily as she spoke.

‘Not worse than usual, I hope?’

He didn’t look at her.

‘Much worse. What about a doctor? I’ll go across and tell him.’

There was a challenge in her tones.

‘I’ll go myself—I’ll go at once’ he promised, and a little later she saw him leave.

When she went back, Boshy was again lying down.

‘Lovey, yer ortn’t t’ go a-giddin’ an’ a-gaddin’ about wen I want yer’ he

complained huskily.

She covered his gnarled blue hands, then wiped the tears of lonely grief from his cheeks, kissing him again and again, till in penitence he said:

‘S’ep me goodness! if yer out ov me sight fer a moment, I think yer bin gone fer hours an’ hours, an’ thet I’ll never see yer agen.’

‘I’m going to stay with you all day, Boshy.’

‘That’s ther talk, but git yer stitchin’, Lovey, an’ doan be a-idlin’ of yer time. But I forgot: yer not one ov ther stitchin’ sort, are yer, Lovey? An’ them dear liddle ‘an’s wur never made fer work; but’ condolingly, ‘never mind, I’m kintent wi’ yer. They’s none ov ‘em, wi’ all their fancy stitchin’, I’d a swop or change yer fer. W’at’s Anderer say about ‘em, Lovey? —I mean ther liddleness ov yer ‘ands.’

‘Nothing, Boshy.’

He grew irritable at once.

‘Well, ‘e’s gut no money, ennyways. No, ‘e’s gut no money.’

He ceased speaking, but Ursula saw that he was distressfully deep in thought.

‘But, Lovey, make no mistake. Anderer’s gut no money now, but ‘e will ev it—‘e’s (cough) old man Cameron Cameron’s cunninger then any dingo. ‘E gut off wi’ yur daddy’s papers, an’ no doubt all ‘is money thet time’ (cough) ‘w’en ‘e cum fer you. But, Lovey, wait t’ yer comes’ ov age an’ us’ll show ‘im us——’

He lay back panting and coughing.

After a painful effort he swallowed a mouthful that she held to his lips, and, despite her entreaties, began again:

‘W’at does Anderer tork t’ yer about?’

‘He hardly speaks to me, Boshy.’

‘Ah, Lovey, yer oughtn’t ter tell me wut’s nut true. I often see ‘im a-lookin’ at yer; ‘e would if yer encouraged ‘im. Yer know, ‘e’s nut ther torkin’ sort.’

He was bitterly disappointed, but he waved her into silence when she sought to explain.

‘Yer see (cough), I carn’t expec’ t’ live fer yever an’ yever, an’ surposin’ I wur gorn, w’at then?’

Again he motioned her not to interrupt.

‘I’m ‘ale an’ ‘earty at present, but, Lovey ov mine, I’m a good ten ‘ears older en w’at any ov ‘em knows. S’pose, fer argimen’s sake, anythin’ ‘appened t’ me?’ Gasping mortally, he repeated: ‘W’at then, Lovey?’

For answer she bowed her head beside him, so that he could not see her stricken face, then laid her head on his, but only for a moment; even there his heart seemed to be throbbing.

‘For my sake, sleep, Boshy’ she pleaded, then stroked his brow till he slept, though lightly, and with an ease that almost disarmed her, till he began, as ever, to mutter about a pick and shovel. Waking suddenly, he asked:

‘Lovey, ever 'ear tell of Scrammy 'And?’ then irrelevantly, ‘I gut plenty t' do up there, Lovey; soon ez I git roun' a bit we mus' be orf. There's plenty fer you t' know, an' I'll take yer and show of yer the very exac' spot. W'at'ave I been a-tellin' yer?’ he said abruptly, with a return to his old secretiveness.

‘Only about us going away.’

He seemed relieved.

‘Sooner er later yer mus' know; but, Lovey, nut one word out ov yer lips t' no one. Remember, a still tongue makes a wise 'ead.’

She promised.

‘Didn' I tell yer about Scrammy 'And a-frightin' the ole shep'e'd t' death fer his money?’

‘No.’

‘Well, can yer reckerlec a-'earin' anythin' ov it up et Cameron Cameron's?’

‘No, Boshy.’

‘Good Gord! then s'posin' I should some day be a cooker, yer don't know nothin', nor weer an napenny is to be foun'. Lord above me!’ raising up his hands, ‘w'at em I a-goin' t' do wi' yer, if so be as I shouldn' pull roun'?’

‘don't, Boshy, don't worry; I'm all right.’

‘O Lord! yer know no more'n suckin' dove w'at's afore yer.’

Breathless and weary, he lay back, but staggered up, and with sudden determination began preparations for their journey on the morrow. The futility of it stung her keenly, yet to humour him she made pretence of help; but he was soon exhausted.

‘O Lord! me ole 'eart seems all of a skewwif’ he panted complainingly, lying down; but from his bed he directed her: ‘Me boots, Lovey—don't forget 'em, Lovey; but'— anxiously—‘w'at about a-wearin' ov them?’

For days his swollen feet had worn only socks.

‘Cut them and let them out, Boshy’ she suggested humouringly.

‘By 'eavens! them good boots.’ He was indignant at her proposal. ‘Leeches 'll do ther trick, Lovey, an' take down me feet. I'd soon git sandy blight in me 'eels a-wearin' an' a-walkin' in boots now.’

He dosed, and again woke to ask the same question about Scrammy 'And.

‘Reckerlec all erbout Scrammy 'And, Lovey?’

She nodded.

‘An’ shaking a warning finger at her, ‘an' thet a still tongue makes a wise

'ead, an' thet a dorg ez brings a bone 'll kerry one back, so lis'en to no yarns nur tell none.'

She would be careful.

'Oh yes' querulously, 'w'ile I'm a-nex' an' a-near an' a-nigh yer.'

She tried to stroke the trouble from his brow, but he moved his head for her to cease.

'Nut now, nut now; you lis'en t' w'at I say. I'm a-goin' t' tell yer.'

He sat up, but she caught and held his swaying body, and gradually the effort to concentrate weakened him into forgetfulness. With half-closed eyes and open mouth he slept for a few moments.

'W'at erbout a pick and shovel?' he asked, sitting up the moment he waked.

She said she could soon get them.

'Nut out there, Lovey. In the name ov Gord, nut out there, or Civil 'll drop down;' 'e's a-watchin'.'

'Not out there' she promised.

He then kept waiting for her to unfold her alternative.

'Weer else can yer git 'em, then?'

'Get what, Boshy?'

'Oh, my Lord!' he moaned, 'theer yer are: yer fergit everythin'; yer won't try t' reckerlec a thing.' He thrust out his hands and frantically fastened his fingers in his hair. 'I've lef' it too late. W'at will she do? w'at will she do?'

Loosening his hands and wiping away his tears, she begged him to be calm and trust her. She remembered everything he had ever told her—every word, everything, she emphasized.

'Now let's see w'at yer do know, then' he said suspiciously.

'Begin with Scrammy 'And?' she stipulated anxiously.

'Right yer are' he encouraged.

She went on: 'Who frightened the old shepherd to death for his money.'

'Lovey, talk liddle' he whispered, drawing her face down to him. 'Lovey, think Scrammy gut the ole shep'e'd's money?'

'Yes' taking her cue intuitively.

'Stick to thet, Lovey ov mine' joyfully. 'Think the'e wuz much?' eagerly.

She thought so.

'Ah yes' complainingly; then sagely, 'Remember w'at comes over the divil's back goes under 'is belly; an' a narrer getherin' often gits a wide scatterin'—reckerlec thet. Now go on.'

Her face was crimson and her breathing as strenuous as his own, but, strive as she would, she could not, mentally even, stumble along with the desired description.

'Come, now, weer d' yer think Scrammy' dropping his voice, 'or me a-

planted it? Speak liddle, ez you used t' say.'

'Rest now' she coaxed.

'Rest! Me rest!' he repeated angrily—'rest, an' you nut knowin' nuthin'? Come now, Lovey, don't be lazy: weer d'ye think ther money wuz planted?'

'I don't know' she wailed.

'Oh, my Gord! w'at 'll I do? W'at 'll I do?'

In a frenzy of purpose he stood up. Ursula, facing him, rose also.

'Go back t' wen yer wuz liddle' he commanded. 'Can't yer see Nungi and Queeby, an' yer father, afore 'e wuz buried, an' ther yeos and lambs and ther wattle flow-wers, an' you a-chewin' and a-chawin' of ther wattle gum, an' a-getherin' of ther fi'-corners.'

'Five-corners' corrected she, going back.

'Go orn!' he implored, suddenly breathless. 'Go orn, Lovey!'

Her visualizing eyes were fastened on his hypnotic face. Hers grew ghastly with intensity.

'I can see a little river.'

'Creek, Lovey.'

But, unheeding, she went on: 'I can see a little river. On the other side there's a hut with no door, and the roof nearly off.'

'Twuz, but nut now. Someun 'as a-burnt most on it' Boshy interrupted, but almost under his breath.

'Over away from it' waving her hand indicatively, 'there are some trees.'

'Them's ther myalls, Lovey.'

'Under them I' straining her head forward, 'can see two graves.'

'Yer mother an' father's; an' ther ole shep'e'd's.'

'The palings are down and some men are there. They' doubtfully till she tip-toed— 'yes, they have picks and shovels. They, they' stumblingly, but Boshy was speechless —'yes, they are throwing up the dirt. They are opening the grave——'

A choking squeal from Boshy silenced her.

'Christ! Gord! Me money—they've foun' me mo——'

In the old helpless manner he threw up his arms. She staggered, but caught his swaying body, and slid with it to the ground. Then, though she loosened his neck, his laboured breath reached only half-way up his throat; as though spent, it sighed in a thwarted throttle. Aided, it rose again successively in a seething gurgle that forced his mouth apart. She caught and rested his helpless head against her shoulder and listened—but he was still; then she wiped the blood from his nose and mouth. Drops had fallen on her hands and wrists, but they were left.

Mina, coming in later, could not distinguish the living from the dead.

Chapter XI

BOSHY'S will was duly produced from an unexpected quarter, for with his usual cunning he had gone by a detour to the lawyer's private residence. Meeting there the wife, he told her much of his perplexities and anxieties for his Lovey's future. Her sympathy begot his confidence, and with her he had deposited his will, which, from beginning to end, contained but one beneficiary, Ursula Ewart, who was sole legatee to seventeen hundred and eighty-four pounds (£1,784), hidden—where Ursula knew, he testified. Despite her protestations, many agreed that of a surety the girl must know, and searches for Boshy's money—as thorough and as unavailing as those for the old shepherd's—raged for weeks in Boshy's room, Ursula's, all over the house, and for an unreasonable space around.

Recalling his Bush ramblings, the ex-parson wandered many times and oft; aided by his walking-stick, all hollow logs and stumps were explored. At length this gave place to personal espionage of Ursula's every movement.

Less than Boshy's savings would gain the legatee the goodwill of any small town. Besides, many argued, that was merely the sum stored by Boshy; who could tell what he had with him when he died? Sufficient only to bury him was found; but he had been notably cunning and sly, and had trained this girl, whose tragic brown eyes now seemed to hold some mystery. Was she not deep, going about pretending that she didn't know where the money was? What an actress she would have made! Still, each vied in outward kindly attention.

Mina stayed almost nightly with her, because, despite Mrs. Stein's importunity, Mr. Civil constituted himself the girl's guardian, giving the substance of a conversation with Boshy as his warrant. None outdid him in considerate attention.

'Trust none of them my de-ear' he advised, his small eyes agleam with double meaning. 'They are all self-seekers—every one.'

He saw this heiress one day assiduously repairing her well-worn clothes.

'That's right, my de-ear, save your money; don't waste it on things that perish' he commended.

She looked at him. She had told him so often that she had none; but she had told all who questioned her the same, yet all agreed she would have made a fine actress. And she understood them.

'Do you mean my father's money, Cameron Cameron told Boshy he had sent to aunt to keep for me?'

'No, no; there was no money sent to your aunt, my dear—Boshy's

money. don't touch it yet—too many Paul Prys; by-and-by, you understand.'

One night his stealthy footfall woke her, even before his gentle tapping. She put on her dressing-gown and slippers; and, opening her door, candle in hand, went past him; then she faced him, her raised candle level with his eyes.

'What?' she demanded.

He was fully dressed, though the hour was late, and the sleek blackness of his freshly-dyed hair and brows threw out his sallow pallor.

'What?' again she challenged.

Twice his long hand went to his throat, but, though his lips parted, his tongue only clicked with a dumb dryness. To gain time he made a hand motion for silence, making a pretence of listening for some sounds; but his ears were not helped by his eyes. These smouldering lasciviously under his raised, dye-clogged eyebrows, were set as though fed by those of the girl, blazing with a tigerish hate into his.

'Good time to—er—'r find his money, my dear—your money' he said, between breaths.

He waited for her to speak, but her set mouth seemed frozen.

'No—rather not, my dear? Well, another night' he said, hastily translating her speechlessness. 'Say good-night to me' thrusting out his face.

He advanced to her, misled by her passiveness.

She aimed a heavy blow at his leering face with the candlestick, but he dodged it, and, terrified of a noisy scene, he rushed to his room.

As he lay fully dressed on his bed he heard her movements for some time; then came a stillness that he, with all his cunning, misunderstood.

On the afternoon of the next day, after many long hours' wanderings, she sat by the river, concealed by some briar-bushes. Andrew and Hugh Palmer were expected, and long since, she had seen the dust of travelling sheep. Mina, soon after dinner, had walked to The Range to meet and welcome the drovers, and Ursula saw her now walking beside Andrew, both leading his horse. Hugh Palmer was not in sight, but after Andrew and Mina and the dog-driven sheep had crossed, he came along at a brisk canter. Catching sight of the bareheaded girl, who had mounted a flood-jettisoned log, and was absorbed in watching the two passing, he guided his horse to her; but when she saw him she shrank again among the briars.

'You, Ursie! What's up?' he asked, quickly dismounting.

She rose; her sun-scorched face was deathly, but she seemed calm.

'Mr. Civil came to my room last night, Mr. Palmer.'

The orphaned look in her eyes struck the best in him.

‘Curse him, the dog! Never mind, Ursula, you’ll be all right now we’re here. No hat?’ he asked divertingly, looking at her sunburnt face.

She shook her head.

‘I came away in the night.’

He took a partially emptied flask from his pocket and poured some brandy into its tin shield. She took it, strangely obedient, meaning to drink it; but the smell nauseated her, though she knew he was reeking with it.

‘Wait’ he said, ‘and I’ll water it for you.’

With manly tenderness he would have placed her on his horse, but she resisted.

‘Give me your little hand, then.’

So hand-in-hand they went in the twilight to Stein’s.

‘Fust der ‘anddt, den der ‘ardt’ Mrs. Stein observed to watching Andrew.

One afternoon a few days later, Palmer and Ursula were sitting on a stool outside, where they had spent many hours since their coming to Stein’s. Palmer, with wine-begot sentiment, found a wavering pleasure in trying to probe the depth of her elusive mind; its elusiveness fascinated and enthralled him. He knew from the papers that Cameron Cameron had taken, and Boshy so much regretted, that her origin on her father’s side threw back to the Spanish invasion. There was little in Cameron’s possession that had escaped his son-in-law. He took a side look at the girl beside him. No particular beauty distinguished her face, but the dainty harmony of it and her body, appealed irresistibly to him. His dead wife had brought him a home but no money, and though he knew from her father’s will that Ursula some day would have money despite Cameron’s intrigues, yet there would be first a tussle; and he loathed all exertion, mental or bodily. Full fed, with a satisfied stomach, and no duty but inclination, which was now to sit watching her— this for the time seemed to fulfil all desire. For the ease with which he could ring-bark and sap the crude tastes begot by the readings of her callow days was an unending marvel and solace to him.

Ancestry, he thought gloatingly—but instinctively he kept this knowledge jealously. Quickly he realized that to meet her noonday reason a tale must be possible and logical. But he liked best when her twilight mood saw only the poetical; then her soul shone through her face like a star, joyfully radiant or mystically shrouded. This afternoon, in accord with it and her, he began with Ulysses and Penelope. Then next, to watch how at his bidding he could radiate joy or grief from her mood-flecked face, he took Charon and his mystic river and silent freight. Then the beast in him stirred, and he for, the first time, tested her with voluptuous scenes between Anthony and Cleopatra. Vainly did he feelingly paint the perfumed love

passages of the passionate pair. The Puritan strain from her mother asserted itself, and this girl beside him saw nothing but lawlessness in the lotus—loving queen's infatuation for another woman's husband, and unfaithfulness in Anthony. Impatiently Palmer got up, and, most unusual for him, walked briskly away. When some time later he returned, she was still sitting there. He noticed the spiritual aloofness of her face, and though he shifted the disinfecting clove in his mouth, he forebore to speak. It was early autumn, and like a regretful sigh, the warm mist about them was floating to the valley of the shadow below.

‘See’ she said, sighing and pointing to the mist, ‘the summer's passionate essences float to a mirage ocean where Charon waits.’

‘River, Ursula’ he corrected, holding out his hand for hers, which she, absorbed, withheld.

But this action dispelled her mood, and abruptly she said:

‘I want to work for my living; tell me how?’

‘So you want to work, do you?’ he asked, to quell his disquiet. ‘Oh Lord! work!’ and he grimaced in disgust, for to work even for himself was appalling.

Almost earnestly for him he wished for a few hundred pounds a year with this girl; then the reformation he had so often promised himself would be possible, but now how impossible and far off! Who but she cared for the Latin or Greek classics with which he had dazzled her? Hand and body work was what others wanted, and horse sense. As an object-lesson to ear and eye, he turned from inward to outward contemplation.

Below them from the cultivation paddock came the sound of Mrs. Stein's mustering incantation to the turkeys. ‘Cri-li-lati-turii-didi-wit-wom-wom.’

‘Tom—tom!’ echoed the empty tin dish she drummed.

‘Gool-gool, gool, dee-ri’ responded the gulled turkeys, flocking to her decoy.

In the paddock below them Peter Stein, Mina's uncle, bent and twisted by undue labour, staggered stiffly and unwillingly behind a jolting plough. Peter's one vice accounted for his outdoor task: he was trusted with any work but wine-making or bottling. There was a saying that two men and a boy could not watch nor keep him sober in the wine-season.

Principally to avoid the labour, Mina copied his vice, and several times practised it with such success that, her mother, though giving no reason, often barred her going on this duty in the wine season.

But other likes or dislikes were nothing to Mrs. Stein, and Mina, though she would have shirked it, was now sand-scouring the milk buckets. Gus was away on his afternoon milk delivery, but Mr. Stein was still in sight, driving the cows to their night's grazing. When he came back, if no moon,

he would light the swinging lanterns in the milking yard; then he and Peter would clean up the yard and bails for a morrow that would begin long before dawn, for all in this busy household.

‘For how much?’ Palmer asked himself, his eyes going from Mrs. Stein’s work-worn face to the bandaged, swollen leg showing beneath her tucked-up skirts; ‘for what purpose or pleasure is she labouring?’ Then aloud:

‘Ursula, here comes Mrs. Neal. Ha! ha! Look at her trying to squeeze through the fence. I’ll bet she doesn’t.’

The fat proprietress of the Shearers’ Rest could not pass, and Peter, though he saw, did little without being told, so waited for her shrill summons to come and let out another panel. Mrs. Stein, who expected her, had now, with the aid of the empty dish, deluded her brood to the drying-green near Ursie and Hugh Palmer, and stood with them awaiting the bi-yearly, waddling coming of her customer. It was an open and audible transaction; volubility of the untoward influence of friendship on business, was the foil of the landlady of the Shearers’ Rest; firmness and brevity was Mrs. Stein’s.

Mrs. Neal, according to her statement, had been besieged by poultry vendors, yet, from habit and motives of silly sentiment, had come to Mrs. Stein. But she couldn’t dream of giving as much for this lot as she did for the last, every one of which died disappointingly poor. Neighbourliness was all very well, but she had a duty to herself; besides, the bad times didn’t, rightly speaking, allow for poultry on the table. Still, she took, and was acceded, great pride and credit in and for her table; and as Mrs. Stein had reared these; and for the sake of friendship for an old neighbour and many other circumstances—well, now how much would Mrs. Stein take?

‘Same prize’ was Mrs. Stein’s laconic answer. Through minding her brood she must have missed much of her customer’s speech, yet when the crux ‘How much?’ came, her ‘Same prize’ was readily forthcoming.

Throughout the whole interview, her watchful eyes found work for her hands and guidance for her tongue.

‘Go t’ sleep, Peder, choost do! Yor ged a goot supper thad way’ she bawled; and Peter, thirsty soul, who was eagerly awaiting the order to drive the feathered flock to the Shearers’ Rest, grabbed the plough handles and went on, knowing this command would come later, although there seemed no prospect of a deal coming off. For Mrs. Neal apparently had abandoned all negotiations, but appeared fully compensated for her unusual exercise by the beauty of her surroundings, seemingly, from her appreciation, seen now for the first time.

Bending painfully by reason of her bad leg, Mrs. Stein had industriously filled the decoy dish to overflowing with chickweed, weeded from the

vegetable beds; at the same time keeping at bay her clamorous brood, and replying, when necessary, to her sentimental friend's discourse.

‘Goom on, Peder; chook yurself about ant pud dese turkeys der bed.’

Victoriously she turned away, cutting short with ‘Goot day’ Mrs. Neal's vivid praises given even to the seedy turnips.

Peter's horse, like himself, always awaited moving orders. It was safe to leave him stationary while Peter helped his sister-in-law drive the still expectant turkeys into an unaccustomed pen—a task that brought Ursula to their assistance. The chickens burst unitedly into a hungry clamour, as Mrs. Stein, with the full dish in her hands, leant over the yard to count them. They were all there. She turned away, and emptied the dish into another pen.

‘Are you going to feed them?’ Ursula anxiously asked Peter.

He stopped and, looking at Mrs. Stein, inquired, ‘Veedt 'em?’

‘No; they are soldt.’

Chapter XII

‘GOOD to be you two’ Mina said to Ursula and Palmer.

‘Better to be another two I know.’ Hugh Palmer’s eyes held more than his words. Mina, standing on the bench, laughed, then, shading her eyes, looked townward.

‘See anyone you like better than yourself?’ His double meaning was keyed this time for Ursula, but Mina half understood.

‘Yes—Ursie.’

Ursula for the first time noticed that Mina’s eyes, looking down into hers, were the colour of green grapes, and that her little teeth were pointed like Jim’s cross-cut saw.

‘Andrer’s goin’ to call for my dress for the party. We’re goin’ to have a little party.’

‘For two?’ chaffed Palmer.

‘When?’ asked Ursula.

‘To-night. Didn’t I tell you long ago? Ole Falkenmeyer’s comin’ to play. Here’s Andrer.’

Mina went off with showy delight to meet him, and to avoid them Ursula went to her room.

Standing by her bedroom window, she wondered why she stayed in a household where even Andrew, the friend of her childhood, now kept purposely out of her life, and her out of his. She wanted nothing but advice from him or anyone. Long ago Boshy had sewn a five-pound note in the flap of her winter coat ‘for a rainy day.’ To-morrow she would pay Mrs. Stein for her week’s keep, then——

‘W’at are you goin’ t’ wear?’ Mina burst in—she never knocked.

‘I’m not going’ said Ursula, without looking at her.

‘Course not,—sulk in your room an’ tell Andrer and Mr. Palmer I never told you. I know you’ said Mina bitterly.

Ursula rose.

‘I’m not like you, any way.’

‘Me? W’at ‘ave I done? W’at’s wrong with me?’

‘Urgh!’ said Ursula, in strong disgust.

Mina’s mouth opened and her lower lip fell. She looked inquiringly at Ursula, who, watching her, thought her unduly agitated.

‘Oh, that’s me gentleman, is it?’ Then between short breaths: ‘You, you! W’at are you? an’ ole Boshy an’ ole Civil, an’ Andrer even, if ther truth was known?’

‘You’re mad’ said Ursie, wondering at her sudden outburst. The sound

from outside of the well bucket rapidly descending broke the hostile pause.

‘Shut up! there's Andrer’ said Mina, drawing back hastily from the window till he passed with a bucket of water, then she went after him.

The hungry discontent of the unfed turkeys distracted Ursula from herself. From her seat at the window she went into the kitchen, where all were busy preparing for the supperparty. Old Mrs. Falkenmeyer had cut off the crusts of several loaves before slicing them for sandwiches.

‘Ach! I'af'ardt to vurk’ she complained to Ursula; ‘always, always I 'af'ardt to vurk.’

Ursula gave willing help, piling up huge plates of substantial sandwiches, then into a dish she swept the loaf crusts.

‘Keeb all crus' for der fowl’ admonished the old woman.

‘Yes, oh yes’ gladly agreed Ursula.

Making a détour she went, sheltered by the rows of decadent scarlet-runners, to the turkey-pen; then noiselessly scattered her gleanings among them, huddled in an unaccustomed corner. Disappointed that none attempted to eat, she crept round to them, meaning by disturbing to entice them. The sound of Mina's voice held her.

‘don't be a fool; she doesn't.’ That was Hugh Palmer.

‘I tell you she does know. She——’

Ursula stood straight, and rattled the dish against the pen, looking into it.

Palmer alone came over to her.

‘That you, Ursula?’

‘Yes’ said Ursula simply, ignoring the obvious.

‘Mina's in a great state of agitation; she had planned a surprise to-night, and she thinks you and I know about it.’

‘I don't, then.’

‘No, nor——’

The late moon was level with the wide, child-like eyes looking up at him. He looked away from them, for their sincerity challenged his insincerity into silence.

‘They'll not eat at night’ he said, with abrupt irrelevance.

Then he looked at her, and his eyes and mouth took a new light and shape as placing a trembling hot hand on hers, he asked:

‘Ursula, will you marry me?’

She was quite unembarrassed.

‘No, oh no; if I can't be an actress, I'm going to write a book.’

Her manner snapped his intensity, and he laughed.

‘That's right, little woman, you'll do something yet; there's stuff in you.’

Despite his coppery breath, she stretched out to him the hand that a moment back she had withdrawn.

‘Mr. Palmer, you really think so?’

She seemed part of the radiant moonlight in her exultation.

‘By God, I do!’ he said solemnly. ‘You have all the instincts; you want only experience, but’—looking at her tenderly—‘you must fall in love first.’

Old Falkenmeyer drew the bow along his fiddle critically.

‘Come on’ said Palmer, ‘you’ll be late.’

‘I’m not going, Mr. Palmer; I’m in black for Boshy.’

‘You needn’t dance. don’t dance with any of them, they’re either colts or fools. We’ll sit in a corner and talk’ he said, leading her inside.

Now old Falkenmeyer’s fiddle feelingly quavered a few notes, then sonorously heralded the preliminary bass of the first set. Daddy Stein, standing in the middle of the room, clapped his hands for attention.

‘Laddties andt gentlemens, chooss your pardners for der—der——’

‘Firsd sed er kiddrills’ Mrs. Stein rasped.

The numerous guests surprised Ursula. All had made some brave attempt at festive finery, but she, in her present exultation, felt not of them, and would have gone back but for Palmer.

‘What do you care for these cattle?’

And feeling that she did not, she went into an angle. Hugh Palmer brought her a seat and stood behind her, she watching the gathering, he watching her.

Andrew led the much-bedecked Mina to the top; then followed Jam Toohey with his selection, Pat the Jew’s gorgeous daughter, and duly others, till top and bottom and both sides of the first set were formed. Talking between Ursula and Palmer was impossible, nor had either wish to speak. To the experienced man, the boorish gaucheries of these countrymen and maids in their methods of pleasuring, but accentuated his own failure and fall; he looked down at the girl near him. It was unwise, for many reasons, to keep markedly near her, but he felt he must, if only for a time. Her face was a puzzle; it reflected neither disgust nor anger. The music had sent her mentally triumphing over a glorious future, if not conceived, then quickened by Ashton’s circus. She saw neither room nor dancers, but a vast theatre filled with homage tributers, and for her, though for what rare attribute was not clear.

A half-audible oath from Hugh Palmer, and her chair being drawn further into the corner, recalled her. The first set was ending in a mad gallop; its guerdon, tiring each other down. All sense of pleasure had gone; nearly all faces had exchanged the weak smirk of gratified distinction in participating in the very first set for one of giddy but grim determination to outdo and be last. Gradually the couples decreased till only three remained—Mina and

Andrew; Sergeant Toohey's son with the Fuchsia; Widow Neal's daughter and Percy Snade, a local bank clerk. He, a Captain of the Volunteer Regiment, to show his contempt for the company, or his knowledge of military etiquette, kept on his spurs. From various signs, Ursula could see Andrew was for ceasing; but Mina, fiercely determined, forced him on.

‘Mina vill vin! Vell don, Mina! Go id, Mina!’ shouted old Stein encouragingly.

Hugh Palmer noted with an indescribable feeling of impotence, tempered by relief, that the glow had gone from Ursula's face. She was quite oblivious to him and very silent and still, moving only when Mina's intentioned incursions right into her corner made it necessary to shrink closer to the wall.

Suddenly there was a shriek as Percy Snade swished past Mina, with the best part of her muslin-flounced skirt entangled on his spurrowels. Instantly the music ceased and the parties disengaged, while Mina, in unconquerable passion, blurted:

‘Yer beast! yer brute beast! yer duffer brute!’ advancing to him with hands clenching and unclenching like claws.

‘Now den, Mina, dond looze yer 'ed’ said her father, holding her back so that she could only claw at Snade's laughing partner, to whom, womanlike, she had shifted the blame.

‘How green her eyes are!’ thought Ursula, and more than ever her teeth seemed saw-edged.

‘No good der cry aboud spilled milk. Pud on yer green’ said Mrs. Stein, who had left her occupation of serving drinks to see what caused the commotion. ‘Andt, young mans, if you wandt der dance again any mores, dake off yous spurs.’

‘A dastardly action’ Jam Toohey remarked to Palmer, ‘coming into a ballroom with spurs on.’

Some of the girls gathered round Mina, offering pins and advice in the restoration of her skirt; but it was beyond this, and she disappeared to change. There was a meaning pause, broken by old Stein again clapping his hands.

‘Ladtties and gentlemens, once more, der nex' dance vill pe a song.’

‘Goot on yer, ole sour crouts’ encouraged Teddy Neale, the dissolute droving son of the proprietress of the Shearers' Rest, who had come too late for the first set and had already sought and swallowed a pint of consolation, though Mrs. Stein said afterwards that he was ‘haff drung wen 'e koms.’

‘Now then, toon up again’ he bawled, having selected his partner.

‘Silence’ weakly demanded Jam Toohey in his father's official manner.

‘Was that fur me, Jam?’ asked Teddy, threateningly advancing.

‘No, certainly not, Teddy’ Jam denied, edging closer to Palmer.

‘Generally a sign er rain w'en frogs croaks, ain't it, Mr. Palmer?’ said Teddy, retiring to his seat beside his sweetheart, gentle, trembling Teresa, Jam's sister.

‘Now then, let 'im go, Golligah. Give it lip!’ he shouted, but the silence continued. ‘Waitin' for me, I suppose, t' give you a leg up. Well, here goes for a start’ he said, standing up.

‘The Cobar Road is a beggar of a road,
For on it there's neither grass nor water;
I met an ole gin with her 'ead caved in,
And she wanted me to marry 'er daughter.’

‘Chorus’ he bawled, but instead gave them a few minutes' brisk step-dancing.

Before its echoes had ceased, a stout woman, Babyfinder Thompson, rose and stood beside her husband, seated with a concertina poised on his knee. But Teddy had his plans.

‘Now then, Teresa, giv' 'em me old favourite, “Bole Maryann,” an' gi' yer Sergeant Daddy a tap.’

‘Sing “Jewnita,” Teresa’ advised Pat the Jew's daughter Fuchsia, thereby currying Jam's favour.

‘Sing w'at I tell yer, Tressy’ ordered Teddy.

Weakly obedient to him, she, in a voice in utter variance with the theme and rollicking tune, began:

‘The Bobbies they run after me
To catch me if they can,
But there's none of them smart enough
For bold Maryann.

Chorus: Fry the Bobbies in the pan,
Fry the Bobbies in the pan.’

As a filial protest Jam walked outside, but though Teresa looked appealingly at her sweetheart Teddy, he insisted on its finish. Then with much ostentation the Babyfinder's husband rose and dexterously sent angling through the room some congested chords. His wife had risen before the finish of the last song; she coughed, cleared her throat, sniffed, smoothed the front of her best dress, then in a long-distance range began:

‘Ther bibee wors sleepin’, eets mother wors weepin’,
Eets father wors ploughin’ ther deep ragin’ sea.’

She sang it through, and before the weak applause had ceased, forestalled an encore by starting another. The virtue we lack is the one we covet or assume; therefore, despite her vigorous interpretation and execution, the following song was a tribute to ‘Gentil Hannie Lisle.’

‘Wave willers, murmur waters,
Goldin sunbeams smile;
Hearthly music cannot wakin
Gentil Hannie Lisle.’

However, at its conclusion, and apparently to test the earthly futility to rouse ‘gentil Hannie’ her spouse rose to his feet and made a daringly gymnastic musical display, producing at the same time the tune unbrokenly. Beginning at arm's length above his head, travelling an incredible distance down his spine to within jumping range from back to front, then from the front to the starting-point above his head. Like his bigger half, not waiting for encouraging plaudits, with startling abruptness he began a vocal and instrumental duet:

‘I went ter T-O-W-N’—

he sang, and spelled T-O-W-N, as did the concertina—

‘Me name was B-R-O-W-N;
They took me D-O-W-N
When I went to T-O-W-N.’

It was a long song independent of the instrumental repetitions, but rollicking Neddy Neale, who had again drenched his troublesome throat, soon interrupted.

‘Damn it now for a fair thing; better go down an’ ‘ire ther School o’ Arts. Give someone else a show. Toon up, ole buck, an’ give us a polka’ he ordered old Falkenmeyer, and dragged drooping Teresa into the middle of the floor.

When Mina, more composed, returned, she came over to Ursula, and Palmer directly asked Mina to dance. As they turned away she looked back at Ursula in malignant triumph. Andrew had disappeared, but Gus Stein, standing near, immediately came into Palmer's place, while Daddy Stein from the middle of the room loudly besought Ursula to ‘Come ouder yer corner, siddin’ there likge a liddle ‘Orner, andt dance.’

‘Come on, Ursie’ begged Gus Stein, taking her by the arm.

‘I won't dance to-night, Gus.’

‘That's because 'e didn't ask you’ pointing to Palmer.

‘He did’ she asserted. ‘He—it's got nothing to do with you who asked me.’

‘You needn't tell me what I know’ he said bitterly.

He sat beside her, nervously biting his incipient fair moustache, and early as it was she could smell the wine on his breath and felt sorry.

‘Gus, why do you take wine?’ she asked.

‘Oh Lord! I like that from you, I do. You that won't look at a man unless he does.’

‘I don't know what you mean’ she said.

‘Well, ask Andrew, then. Ursula, look 'ere, now’ he was boyishly eager.

‘Say I swear off, will you give me a show? I'm dead nuts on you.’

She did not answer him, for the nature of his words outdistanced his personality. ‘That's twice to-night I've been asked to marry’ was the gratifying circumstance that held her. Certainly neither was her ideal, but, later, when she had done some great thing, there would be a possibility even of her ideals. She took refuge now from Gus's importunity, in the noisy, colliding movement of the dancers. Palmer had been swift to drop out, Jam Toohey, too, soon followed, and came to her importuning for a dance. His sister, too, would have been glad to stop, but her boisterous admirer was still twirling her round and round, for the polka had given place to a valse. Andrew joined Gus.

‘Are you not dancing?’ he asked Ursula.

She shook her head.

Then someone called him, and he replied with such surprising jocularly and recklessness that wonderingly she looked at him. His hair was cut close, showing a white margin all round his head; his eyes blazed excitedly, and his face was flushed unduly. He was unusually confident, and seemed altogether strangely alien and changed.

‘Not dancing, Ursie?’ he said again.

As before, she shook her head.

‘Why?’

‘Oh, ask 'im’ said Gus Stein, pointing to Hugh Palmer, now talking to Mina—‘ask my grandaddy, and 'e'll tell you why.’

He laughed discordantly.

She looked up at Andrew, half expecting to see her resentment reflected in his face. For a moment his dilated eyes unmeaningly met hers; then she turned away from their unsympathetic glitter, feeling desolately alone.

‘We've no show, old feller’—Gus Stein brought his hand resoundingly

down on Andrew's back—‘no show against——’ He threw his body forward, and sank his neck into his upraised shoulders, in forcible imitation of Hugh Palmer. ‘By Christ! 'e's like—like —wot's 'e like, Andrew?’

‘The bull on Keen's mustard’ added Andrew, applauding Gus's graphic mimicry with a loud, reckless laugh.

Looking at Palmer shudderingly, Ursula saw the awful resemblance which Gus had demonstrated and Andrew had avowed.

‘You've hit it, Andrew, old boy—the bull on the mustard-tin. After you with the mustard, please, miss’ Gus said mockingly to Ursula; then again his and Andrew's laugh rang out.

‘What's the joke?’ asked Palmer, coming to them.

‘Too sultry for you’ answered Gus, in offensive tones.

‘Mr. Palmer, will you come out to the veranda?’ asked Ursie, in purposeful attention.

‘Certainly.’

He bowed and gave his arm.

‘Hook yer mutton, Andy, for ther next spin’ advised Ned Neale, noisily bearing down on them with his partner, as Palmer and Ursula left.

Ursula was silent. Even by the night-light Palmer thought she was very pale, but he was in no mood to sympathize. Her open preference was rather disconcerting, and he was half afraid of his previous impulsiveness, though mingled with it was a subtle sense of satisfaction in this triumph over Andrew and Gus. She was ashen, though burning with bitterness and anger against Andrew, yet coldly a-quiver with an indefinable sense of loneliness, loss, and resentment. Revolting to her as he was tonight, had Palmer asked her to marry him then, she would have said ‘Yes.’ He, as though her mood radiated to himself, felt the danger and was silent, even definitely drawing her back to the door to watch the ever-increasing frenzy of these revellers. The noise was deafening, again and again, in obedience to their clamorous demand, old Falkenmeyer had changed tune and time, till, beaten and exhausted, he ceased. Then Neddy Neale, dragging his dazed partner, swished past where Palmer and Ursula stood. Gus Stein, with Pat the Jew's daughter and Andrew with Mina, still kept the floor, but now to the rat-tat-tat accompaniment knuckled from the bottom of a tin dish by Dave Heely, Neale's drover mate, till, tired out, even he ceased.

Then the dancing husband of the singer, importuned, momentarily disengaged his partner to grab his concertina, and with this resting on the girl's back, he kept the dancers going, till also he, though much encouraged, wearied. Dry-throated and panting, some of the wine-maddened performers tried to hoarsely bellow independent tunes, which in turn yielded to impotent yells. Vainly Daddy Stein objected; but, though

Mrs. Stein came from time to time to the doorway, she was grimly silent; nor was she knitting, Ursula noted. Never before had she seen Mrs. Stein's hands idle.

'God, they're crazy!' muttered Palmer.

Ursula's face shrank grimly, her mouth contracted into a set line. Palmer felt his remoteness from her, and consistently felt relieved and angry.

'Look out for your mundooeys' yelled Ned Neale.

Ursula stepped nearer Palmer, and at that moment Andrew and Mina violently collided with her, sending her reeling into Palmer's arms. She fought free of his crushing clasp, pushing him from her with open disgust for his breath and body.

'She's only throwin' 'er rubbish w'ere she throws her love' laughed Mina, breathlessly, to Andrew, but intently watching them.

Looking at Ursula's terrible little face, Hugh Palmer thought there was little to choose between the suppressed tempest of Ursie's now and Mina's unsuppressed passion earlier. Andrew had disappeared, but Mina, fanning herself, was coming towards him.

'Good-night, Mr. Palmer' Ursula said perfunctorily; but now even he seemed to be waiting for Mina.

Sleep Ursula could not, for the noise of their maddened cries penetrated even into her little room. She was utterly powerless, she knew, to stop it; and from time to time she rose and restlessly looked into the night. The hungry are supposed to sleep soundly; but it was not so with the stupidly fasting turkeys, though now their complainings seemed a trifle that could find no place in her mind. She turned her ears from their metallic piping to sounds from the front of the house. From there she heard someone come stumbling through the back passage leading to the wine-cellar—Peter, she guessed. It took some time for him to find what he sought; but at length she, listening intently, heard his glug, glug. It was Peter drinking out of a bottle, too gratified and intent to hear the swift steps that meant the coming of Mrs. Stein. Crash came the bottle to the stone floor, followed by the sound of Mrs. Stein in a subdued, concentrated fury, pounding Peter and cursing, as she always did when excited, in German. Peter, already half stupefied, was dully complaining, quite impersonal in his resistance. Ursula heard him slide to the floor, and Mrs. Stein, when she went, left him there. Later, when Ursula tried to reach the heavily sighing and groaning creature, she found the door locked and the key gone.

Gradually she, too, slept, and when she woke the spring dawn was dewily ascending, heralded by the twittered delight of bush-birds and the loud arrogance of the still perched roosters. A vivid sense of past and coming trouble gripped her, blended with a far-away but subtle feeling of

familiarity. Before, somewhere and time ungraspable, blurred and beset with bewildering details, she had lain alone in bed, listening to gladsome bird voices, mingled with a sense of distressed humanity. Then came the scene she had described to Boshy, but now that stood out boldly and clearly. She could not—must not—dwell on Boshy's tragic end, and for distraction she looked round.

In the far corner stood Mina's bed undisturbed.

'They have kept it up all night' thought Ursula. Was it late, she wondered? While wondering, she could distinguish a confusion of angry voices—Mrs. Stein's, Daddy's, Palmer's. Mina was noisily crying, but, in effect, it seemed to Ursula to be as impersonal as Peter's moans. Many times she heard Andrew's name, but not his voice, in denunciation of some act he had done. She did not speculate as to the cause of this disturbance. Of a sudden a thought took possession of her, that some time to-day she would go quietly away and never see Andrew nor any of them again. Those tiresome turkeys could now see and were eating the food she had found for them; so, tranquillized, she noiselessly drew down the window-blind and again slept.

Some hours later she was sitting outside under the group of willow-trees near the well. Below her in the house paddock, Gus Stein, rounding up the horses, was bawling for Peter to come and help him. Looking about for the invisible Peter, Ursula saw Mr. Civil going along a footpath back to town. Before coming to the slip-rails, she saw him turn and also look in all directions. Instinctively she felt that it was for her, and a trembling fear shook her; and, cowering, she hid till this black bird of ill omen was out of sight.

Then from the house came a group to her— Mrs. Stein, Daddy, Mina, Palmer, and Andrew. Her mouth set frozenly; this very day she meant, with neither stinging words nor reproaches, to part for ever from Andrew.

When Mrs. Stein stated her case, she waited as if in expectation of speech from Ursula. All seemed to have chosen Ursula for judge, or she arrogated that function to herself.

'He must marry her' was her verdict.

Mr. Stein, unperceived, had slipped away while his wife made her charge against Andrew.

'Yes' agreed Mina's mother, 'thad is righd enoff, andt 'e aff marry 'er allreedy, andt wod den?'

Her English was not so good as usual, and her face was almost flushed. She looked at Mina disapprovingly, who had raised her drooping head to shoot a triumphant glare into Ursula's eyes, wide with horror.

Andrew, Mina's husband! Ursula turned from her to him. The veins in his

forehead stood out stagnantly; his blood-red eyes looked mournfully, helplessly at Ursula's, filling swiftly with maternal solicitude. His purple lips were moving, but speechlessly, and tremblingly his great hands went to and from his bare, pulsating throat. Water that had been poured over his dazed head dripped from it still.

'Andree, Andree!' screamed Ursula, rushing to him. 'What's the matter? What have they done to you?'

Again he tried to speak, but not to her, and his hands clutched his throat to free the speech stuck in it.

'Have a drink, Andrew' aimlessly invited Palmer.

Ursula decided in a swift look that he was little less composed than Andrew. Her eyes, fastened questioningly upon Palmer, visibly increased his agitation. He dropped his head and kicked at a tuft of grass.

'You get him one!' she demanded sternly.

'Ged warder, no more wine; 'e haf dring doo much wine' commanded Mrs. Stein.

Palmer brought out a dipper and cup, and, filling the cup, handed it to Andrew without looking at him.

'Sit down, Andrew' said Ursula, hoping that his unsteady hand, holding the water, would then reach his mouth.

'Now then, dring up ther warder, then shuck yerself aboud. Wod's goin' t' be don'?' said Mrs. Stein.

'You leave him alone. What more do you want, if he has married her?' demanded Ursula fiercely.

'When'—Andrew cleared his throat—'did I—marry her? Catch me marrying her!' he gasped huskily.

'Misdre Palmer, you widness id. Listen to 'im torg. I dell you, sir, id wass marry 'er or de lockup andt der jail andt der 'ang-rope.'

Andrew drew the back of an invoking hand across his brow. So spurred, he recalled a recent scene as one coming to, after falling from a great height, might recollect the sight of those watching the tragedy.

'Were you there, Ursie? No' he decided before she spoke. 'But you were'—indicating Palmer—'and old Civil and Gus. No, not Gus.' He turned his head away from Mina to her mother. 'You dosed me. Talk about the hang-rope, if I had been in my senses, before I'd marry you'—pointing to Mina, with his head turned away—'I'd hang a week.'

Gus Stein, with face deathly, rushed to them.

'Mother! Mina! poor old Peter's dead!'

'So iz Queen Ann' said the unmoved mother. For in the light of this living tragedy the sudden death of drunken Peter lost all importance. Andrew, deaf and oblivious to Ursula's tender pleading, was battling

impotently with a torrent of angry declamation. Again his virile blood seethed, purpling and distending neck and face and brow. Again his hands fought for words to denounce this plot and plotters, till Ursula caught them, calming him instantly.

‘Ursie! Your dear little hands!’

His bloodshot eyes looked hopelessly into hers, aching yet ashine with sympathy; then the tempestuous blood spurted from his mouth and nose. Palmer brought out his handkerchief.

‘Not yours, not yours!’ Andrew shouted.

Chapter XIII

THE tilt hooding the spring-cart was insecure—even the jolt from the down-and-up curving river bend near the house had brought it down twice. This was the third start. Peter had been an adept with tilts, as old Stein had said so often that morning, while he, Palmer, and Gus, had dubiously laboured at this elusive task. But Peter would rig no more tilts, and primitively old Stein and Gus lamented this, as they missed his services. Mrs. Stein cut short all such comments by an over-vehement list of his failings; and finally it was her secure fingers that gave the requisite binding pass, and firm twitch, that had withstood the crucial descent and ascent of the river-bank. Mrs. Stein's well-trained fingers could work without her eyes, else, though anxious, she would not have watched.

Mina, forced from home by her mother, was on the way to the husband, who, after recrimination and repudiation, had secretly gone to his Bush home. Ursula, urged by Mrs. Stein constantly, and spurred by an indefinable impulse, had consented to go also.

‘Vell, dat vas vod I call a glean sweep, Mina, Pomer, Urzie, and’—turning to where Peter lay—‘poor oldt Peter’ said Peter's brother.

He waved his hat in token of Ursie's hand seen through the back of the tilt, then followed his wife dutifully to the back of the house. In addition to his regular duties he now had Peter's—Mrs. Stein had Mina's. When this was discussed as a difficulty by Mina's father, ‘Oh, Lordt! Mina vork!’ Mina's mother said, and actually ceased pinning back and up her skirts to raise her brow and hands. ‘Oh, Lordt!’ The repetition finished the sentence eloquently.

Mina's father, too, raised his hand, and beginning at the point where Peter lay, he circuited to the now hidden travellers.

‘Vell, anyvays, id's a clean sweep’ he repeated.

Mrs. Stein now was swiftly but surely removing the egg-trays from the incubator. In mild surprise old Stein watched her.

‘Goin' ter schange 'em?’—indicating the eggs.

‘Give a 'andt’ was her reply, and together they pushed the incubator into Mina's room.

‘S'posin' Andrew clear oudt agen oncet more from up there, vere vill Mina sleeb ven she come back?’

‘She comes back 'eres no more’ she said decisively.

‘Budt s'posin' 'e clears oudt.’

‘Less rubbish more room, andt Mina comes back no more’ she reiterated.

When he, fagged by his double duties, was returning that afternoon, he

saw smoke ascending from outside.

‘Vot game now she play?’ he asked himself, as he distinguished his wife near one of the pig-scalding coppers. Doubt and even fear dwelt in his eyes, travelling from her tucked-up skirts down to her bare feet. But they rested without emotion on the bandages emphasizing her swollen leg.

‘Chrise! Peder's best 'at on yous 'eadt. You lose no dime’ burst from him.

‘Vell, vill 'e anymores vant id? Gus vill nod veer id, 'e say, andt you karnt. Vill I leave id to rodt?’ She pressed it firmly on her head for answer.

She had Mina's bed and bedding outside as a finality.

He angrily looked at her, but she was engrossed in active examination of the mortised crevices of the bedposts. Stooping, he picked up the two she specified for him to carry.

‘Nise mother you are, I mus' say’ he fired at her.

‘Andt you 'ave a nise dotter, I mus' say’ she retorted.

‘Mine. Chrise! Ain't she yous dotter, doo?’

‘No’—shortly. Then challengingly: ‘Am I der man cat? Vos I ever got about?’—most excellently she mewed.

‘Vell, 'oo vas? Nod me’ he defended.

‘Yous sister.’

‘Ach, Brenda!’ he breathed in relief.

‘Yes, an' ven she leafe I dake down 'er pedt; andt id, too, vass crawlin’.’ Her English suffered when she was angry.

From the crevices of the last post she withdrew a chocolate speck, squirming on the point of a long pin.

‘This von vos nod borned into der world yesterday. Bud if Mina vos 'ere she say so. Egscuses, egscuses—alwavs dat. Ach! she go to 'ell bud she comes 'ere no more.’

As they jolted along, in the creaking old cart, Ursie daily watched Mina for signs of uneasiness. If Mina felt any misgivings she betrayed none on the journey. With her head on a bag of seasoning herbs, given by Daddy Stein, she slept the best part of the day, waking refreshed and hungry when the cart stopped for their midday or evening meals.

Ursula either walked or sat well forward, trying to escape from the nauseating smell of the herbs. Dizzy with an effort to distract her thoughts, she would try to search for Boshy's landmarks, so often described. Besides, she too had travelled along them, though, to her, ages ago. Boshy had told her that he had wandered off the track last time. At dark he had camped, taking for his pillow a little rise that he thought was a deserted antheap; next morning he discovered it was a grave. Maybe that little mound was it—or that beyond, for there were many. Rarely they sighted some isolated boundary rider's hut, and early one morning they passed ‘Gi' Away Nothin'

'All.' Palmer pointed it out. Twice they had struck a wine shanty, but it was not the shearing season, consequently neither had its staple commodity—a circumstance, in the first instance, unimportant to Palmer, who then, with characteristic generosity, produced his well-supplied barrel. But though equally importuned, he had none to spare for the last.

What would Mina do if Andrew would not have her? had troubled Daddy Stein, who had secretly discussed it with Ursula; for Andrew had sworn that he would never live with Mina. Night and day now it haunted Ursula, yet there lay his wife, seemingly unthinking of the alternative, and certainly unafraid and unconcerned—'And' thought the overwrought girl, 'she is puffing breaths of the aggressive seasoning in my face.'

'Stop; let me get down and walk.'

Then she would walk for hours, and though she had often to do so, Palmer would uncomplainingly draw rein, and slacken the horses' speed to her pace. Generally such halts would waken Mina, who welcomed them only if they meant meal-time, waiting to alight till Palmer had prepared the fire, and Ursula spread the food. Mina had ears and smiles for his jokes, and understanding for many an innuendo mystic to Ursula. That Ursula should dislike the smell of the seasoning herbs in the cart, or the pungent pennyroyal at intervals surrounding them, amused her. Surreptitiously she inserted a sprig of it into Ursula's pint of steaming tea. Its violent result convulsed her with merriment.

'Still, as mother 'ud say, "Sick after supper saves no meat," ' she laughed, though her merriment instantly vanished when concerned Palmer forced Ursula to swallow some brandy.

'We'll sight the homestead to-morrow, Ursula' one day he encouraged, for her worn, white face touched him.

With that day her heart shrank, and instinctively she turned to look at Mina, but Mina was outwardly unconcerned.

'Pine Point.' He indicated a sweeping curve of giant primeval pines, the extreme point of which had screened a semicircle of river-split plain. The cart stopped, and Ursula, overborne by a strong but trembling impulse, steadied herself by the tilt, and stood up on the shaft. Immediately, under the glare of actuality, the mist of her ever-recurring subconsciousness dissolved. Every detail that met her eyes was familiar, and always had been, dreaming or waking; of a truth, she might have told Boshy that she remembered. There was the old hut: the door faced the river, but she could plainly see the gap in the broken roof. This side of the river, though dwarfed by distance, still mouldering, were the myalls, scantier maybe, but there. Beneath them she knew what, though none now laboured as in her memory. On the other side, outlined by the sentinel pines, was the home of

her childhood; beside it the paddocks. From them she turned to where the well and troughs used to be. The sheep were all round both, and she could see the wim ascending and descending—worked by whom?

Breathlessly she sat down, and yoked by mutual agitation she turned to Palmer. A purple hue had overspread his face, and the guilty grimness about his mouth quietened her different emotion. He made no reply to Mina, who, to manifest her careless freedom, talked louder and smiled continuously, but with her mouth only, Ursula noted.

As they neared the well Ursula saw the wim cease; so did Palmer, and again his face changed, but he continued to drive till they crossed the river. Without a word he handed the reins to Mina, then slid down and disappeared under the river-bank.

Instantly Mina ceased to smile.

‘Has he gone to tell Andrew?’ asked Ursula.

‘Ow do I know where 'e's gone to?’ she said, lashing the horses. But Ursula, though she watched for his appearance at the well, noticed that Mina's eyes went the other way.

Involuntarily Ursula looked for the myall logs; both, unchanged, were there. Tumbledown Jimmy was dead, she knew, for Boshy had told her how the blacks had buried him alive.

In front of the house the horses stopped, but both women kept their seats, their eyes fixed on the closed door, as though waiting for it to open to welcome them.

‘Jhust you git down and open the door’ said Mina, assuming authority to cover the trepidation that her ‘jhust’ betrayed.

Ursula struggled down, and Mina followed; then both stood aimlessly before the front-door.

‘Open it! Open it!’ Mina's hands worked in harmony with her command. Both women tried, but neither could open it.

Overborne by a sense of familiarity, Ursula went round to the back-door, slipped her hand through the opening showing, and slid back the bolt.

‘What will we do with the horses?’ before entering she asked.

Mina nodded towards the river.

‘E'll see to them w'en 'e comes. Quick! let's get in; 'e's comin'.’

Hastily they both entered.

Near the top of the back-door was an almost unused, rusty bolt, which Mina forced across. Ursula saw her spring high to reach it, and heard its harsh creak, then stood with her back against the table, despoiled of its original top, long ago, by Boshy. Her hands grasped the one replacing it. Mina sat on the sofa on the other side.

The noise of galloping hoofs: the scrunch of a hasty foot sliding from the

stirrup along the sand: then an authoritative rap and shake at the front-door. A sense of her deceit struck and sickened Ursula, as she saw a hand thrust through the back-door, as hers had been. It was bolted above; he did not know, but she did, yet she was powerless to speak and say so. Above the emotional din in her ears she could hear someone demanding the door to be opened. Intently she watched how the outside force widened a crack from the bottom, till, with a splintering crash, it burst open.

Through a mist, caused apparently to her, by her own breath, she saw Andrew—saw him look at her, and realized that the horror and agony on his face was caused by her gasping breath. She saw him tower, then shrink, yet she could not spare him. It was fate that he should suffer, and, great God, pity him! for how he must be suffering, and again he might burst a bloodvessel. She groaned and her hands went out to him, then dropped; he was Mina's husband.

Oh, that terrible smell of blood! Yet she must stir it, or it would be ruined. Virtuously her hand went out, circling in a vain endeavour to keep away Mina's husband.

Chapter XIV

FOR Ursula's sake, there was no word spoken by Andrew of the home-coming of Mina, who gave no grateful sign. With Andrew in sight, she made pretence of performing some household duty, ceasing with it half through when he disappeared.

Queeby was dead, and Nungi had taken for wife a young gin, but his merciless marital reign died with Queeby. So it was all tasks heavy and unpleasant were left to Ursula, for Gin Woonna closely copied Mina in eye services, the difference being Woonna's were practised for Mina, as Mina's were for Andrew.

Andrew now slept in Boshy's old workshop, Mina in the bedroom, and Ursula on the sofa in the front room.

Palmer at rare intervals called, carefully stating that his business was with Andrew, and going to him wherever he was to be found.

The long days were empty of all but household work; still here, as ever, Ursula was spellbound with a compelling sense of waiting, Andrew and she scarcely spoke. If he by chance saw her carrying or lifting a heavy burden, he was swift to relieve her; but it was an unusual happening, for Mina did one thing thoroughly, and that was watch. Helpful action from her always signified to Ursula that Andrew was in sight.

The whole thing must end, the girl said to herself every day, and she must get away. When and how, though, always belonged to to-morrow.

'It's in my blood. What has come to me? Why have I changed? What am I doing here? Why is it always to-morrow?' she moaned. Then her mouth drew into a thin line. 'I will make it to-day' she decided; 'I must tell him.'

But it was night before he came home, so again she shrank from what she knew would be a shock to him. She would wait for a time when he would not look so tragically weary. Then, when she had gone to meet him with this to say, the divining wild fear in his eyes had silenced her. Mina, as ever, watching, only saw her pass him without speech, and go swiftly towards the river.

Still, Ursula's inner consciousness comforted her that the time was only deferred. Then, consoled and sustained by such human complexity, she decided to immediately act; and, looking across the sheep-yards, she saw Andrew coming; it was an unusual hour, but he wanted a branding-iron. She went to meet him, and when he stopped she saw the old look of fear dart into his eyes, but she was resolved nothing must prevent her.

'Andrew—I——'

'I know, Ursula. Wait till I come back. It will be better—things, I mean.'

I'm going to Queensland in a day or two; the station there is my own. You must have money, plenty of money, then you can go where you like. Go to London, Ursie, and write your book' he said, smiling grimly.

She was silent, for she knew when he had spoken that she really had never meant to go.

Together they turned to the house. Mina was standing by the table; she had a hood on, and had pulled it well over her eyes, but Ursula saw how wicked her mouth was.

'Andrew is going to Queensland, Mina.'

'You, too?' asked Mina viciously.

It was midnight before he went to his room that night. Then Ursula wondered, did he sleep? she did not. As he, dry-mouthed, tried to eat breakfast next morning, she saw how a few hours had changed him.

All day he, with Nungi and his black boy, were busy with the sheep; then night again found him, till the small hours, busy in his bedroom and office.

'Why do you work so hard lately?' Ursula had ceased to call him by any name.

He looked at her with the old boyish light of their free days.

'Putting my house in order' he quoted.

'Will you be long away?' burned on her tremulous lips. Certainly she might ask this, and explain that she did not wish to remain here; but as she thought it she felt that any tangible desire was dead.

A 'hand' from Cameron Cameron's was coming to manage the place, in pleased confidence Mina told her; Nungi and his gin were to remain as they were. Rain had replenished the river, so that the wim and the well rested; food in abundance was everywhere, encroaching even on the trodden track to the river and the sand patch before the house. It was well with beast and bird, and the musical callings of both were good to hear. Management under such conditions would be easy. Mina said Palmer would find it so.

'Palmer! Is *he* coming?' asked Ursula.

'Part of this place belongs to him as well as to Andrew' was Mina's evasive retort.

'Boshy used to say it was mine' rose to Ursula's lips. She restrained herself from taunting, not even saying:

'In Queensland Eulari is Andrew's own.'

Mina, over-eager to trip her, waited, but she was silent.

All that day Ursula took refuge from herself in ceaseless work. In the dusk she saw the black boy yard some horses, then overhaul the pack-saddles—so to-morrow would be the day.

She knew to a moment when Mina's sleep began, and waited always for

the sign, then she felt free to think; and this night it seemed to Ursula that Mina, too, must be wakeful. Andrew did not make even a pretence of going to bed, for late though it might be before Mina slept, even then he had not gone to his room. Leisurely the long hours ticked into nothingness, yet there was no sound from him. Would he go in the night, as he did before from Stein's, without a word? Ursula's heart quickened agonizingly, though she lay still, tingling with the thought. Suddenly, an uncontrollable impulse mastered her; she rose and, shrouded with the counterpane, passed barefooted, without sound, into the night.

The moon had almost sunk to a level with the stockyard, where her eyes turned. Standing near the old myall logs, she saw Andrew. He was bareheaded, but otherwise ready for his journey. He stood motionless, though he had seen and known her first, but from his eyes came beams of light as though to guide and draw her to him.

At the head of his shadow she stopped, her eyes fixed on his, and blazing as though fed by the same flame. All about her fell the dazzling moonlight, greedily enveloping her lest his shade, stretching towards her, should dull its gleaming power on her face, throat, and bare feet. Her hands were outstretched to him, his to her, yet both were motionless, for about them was a stillness, stagnant and omnipotent as death—and it was Death's moment, thought, and desired the girl—when suddenly, from a far point in the river, with the solemnity and clarity of Gabriel's trumpet, came that Bush-call, which few, even of its chosen, are privileged or fated to hear. In a span of sound it floated high over them, mournfully dying as it sank towards the lagoon, miles away in the scrub.

Both had followed the sound with their eyes, but the light had died in Ursula's when they again sought Andrew's, and his shadow had conquered the moonlight. She raised her fallen hand in voiceless farewell, and in the same way his went out to her.

Did Mina know Andrew was gone? Though he had not come to breakfast, she had not remarked, and a new sensation kept Ursula from speaking his name. Guiltily, from time to time, she took swift inquiring looks at Mina, who was dressed more carefully, and had fresh plaited her hair. Many times she went to the front, and, shading her eyes, took a steady survey of the working centres on the plain beyond.

'Set for three' she said to Ursula, who had prepared the dinner-table for Mina and herself.

The girl trembled violently. She must tell her Andrew was gone.

'Andrew' she forced from her dry lips— 'Andrew——'

'Palmer' snapped Mina; 'ow sly you are, w'en you know Andrew's gone. Didn't you see 'im off.'

But though they waited till long past the usual hour, Palmer did not come, and as night did not bring him, Mina went down to Nungi's hut for news. Palmer had camped for the night at One Tree Hut, the half-caste told Mina.

‘W'y?’ she angrily demanded.

Nungi, hungry and weary, had come to a fireless and supperless hut, and, after firemaking, was busy preparing supper for himself and Woonaa—she sitting calmly watching him.

‘W'y didn't he come home?’ re-asked Mina.

Nungi was too hungrily cross to be respectful.

‘Oh, missus, arst me somethin' easy. Palmer's all right; 'e's got plenty tucker an' blankets, an' Dildoo ter wait on 'im, so 'e won't catch cole, nur go 'ungry t' sleep. I wish ter Gord I stayed there meself stead ov comin' 'ere.’ Going on his knees, alternately with mouth and hat he fanned the smouldering fire into a blaze. ‘If I never come 'ome she'd never make no fire’ he complained, indicating the unmoved Woonaa. Weariness had made him reckless, but he hastily and pacifically added: ‘An' then you'd go 'ungry t' bed, yer see, an' feel orl over alike t'morrer, wouldn't yer, Woonaa?’

But she, tyrannical in her youth, only glared at him.

‘She ain't strong, an' don't eat much’ was his loud excuse to Mina, unamiably watching both, and disappointed at Nungi's giving in.

‘Isn't she? Tur! she's strong as a horse, an' 'as 'ad her tea up at the house long ago’ enlightened Mina, as she went out.

When a few paces outside, she paused to listen to the virulent abuse of the now tongueloosened Woonaa. There was only the distinction of sex between the well-qualified nouns that Woonaa impartially divided between Mina and Nungi. Nor had he any defence for himself nor for his mistress.

When Mina went in again, Woonaa was still squatted among the ashes; she was silent as Mina entered, but her black eyes rolled defiantly and her lower lip fell snarlingly.

‘You low, black brute!’ stormed Mina; ‘I 'eard all you said. Nungi, get your whip and thrash 'er. Go on—go on this minute.’

Nungi moved back from his wrathful mistress towards Woonaa.

‘She's got no dam sense’ he cried, in excuse of his gin; ‘dunno wot she's torkin' about—no more savvey 'en a suckin' dove. Queeby——’

Mina picked up a stool.

‘Then I'll teach the black cow’—raising it threateningly.

‘Come, now, none er that, missus’ almost coaxed Nungi, getting out of line of the missile's target—Woonaa. ‘You——’

Mina faced him.

‘You take it, then!’—hurling it at him.

He ducked dexterously, and the stool crashed to its own detriment against the wall.

Unnoticed, Woonna had seized a stick from the fire-place; she took deliberate aim, and sent it straight at Mina, striking her with staggering force across the face. In distressed horror Nungi's eyes rolled from one woman to the other. Expecting an attack Woonna had another stick in readiness. She was muttering in her native tongue, and her whole attitude was a defiant challenge to Mina, now intently regarding her.

‘Better go 'ome, missus’ Nungi broke the pause to advise.

Mina, breathing heavily, passed her hand before her eyes to brush away the stars floating before them. Woonna gave her weapon a defensive flourish.

‘Go 'ome, missus, or she'll 'it yur again. I can't stop 'er’ pleaded Nungi—‘no good ov me tryin’; on'y get it meself.’

‘Shut up, you!’ said Mina. ‘Tell me the truth, Woonna, an' I won't touch you.’

‘Huh!’ sneered unafraid Woonna, till Mina suggested—

‘Woonna, 'oo told yer t' 'it me? Was it Ursula?’

‘Tole meself’ replied Woonna promptly.

Nungi had made a personal disclaimer as soon as he grasped the nature of the question.

‘No one tole 'er, missus; she done it 'erself. She's got no more sense——’

‘Shut up!’ again commanded Mina. ‘Now, look 'ere, Woonna; if you'll tell me true 'oo tole yer to 'it me, I'll give yer something. Upon me soul an' body, I will!’

‘Tell'er yu'll gi' 'er a bottle ov rum, missus’ insinuated Nungi interestedly.

Woonna's mind had worked only in self-defence, and instinctively feeling there was no more need she lowered her improvised waddy, and looked at Nungi in a way that made Nungi uneasy though he was guiltless.

‘Missis, if you was t' cut 'ome like blazes, and clap a bit er raw meat on your eyes, they wouldn' go black nur bungy. That's wot I do w'en she 'its me.’

‘Will they go black?’ Mina asked in alarm.

‘Black as 'ell’ was his emphatic confirmation.

On the door-threshold Mina turned, and her eyes fastened on Woonna in concentrated malignity.

‘I'll pay you out, me black strumpit, if I got t' wait a year. See if I don't.’

There was a light from Andrew's room, and she went hastily but quietly to the side furthest from the door and peeped in. Hugh Palmer was rolling blankets and pillow into a swag. She waited, watching till he had finished, and came out carrying it. Then she, standing in the shadow, asked, ‘What

er you doin'?'

He almost dropped the swag in his surprise, and for a few seconds stood disconcertedly silent.

'It's better for me to camp over there'—jerking his head towards the plain across the river.

She, too, was silent, but only for a moment. Then she threw out her short, thick arms impatiently.

'Well, I didn't know you was such a cur.'

'Think what you like' and he reshouldered his swag.

Without any attempt to alter her opinion, he would have passed on to his horse fastened to a tree in the scrub, but she followed him determinedly.

Worn out, Ursula had gone to bed, and of the early night, beyond that Mina had gone to the hut, she knew nothing, waking only by Mina coming to the room. Had she been crying? Ursula wondered, as she watched her bathing her eyes; and was it for Andrew?

'Mina, what's the matter?' she called sympathetically.

'I fell over a log' replied Mina, in a voice free from tears.

'Did Mr. Palmer come home, Mina?'

'I dunno' she answered.

'Yer see, miss' said Nungi to Ursula next day, as they met on the river track, 'if ther missus 'ad cut 'ome at oncet and clapped on a bit ov raw meat over 'er eyes, none of yous 'ud 'av knowed she was 'it. But no, she mus' go meeorkin' roun' wi' Boss Palmer till all hours. That's the worst of Woonna, she alwers goes fur a poor b——'s eyes. But, Lord, she's got no more sense 'en a fool! Now, Queeby——'

He looked at the girl, ashen and trembling before him.

'Miss, don't you be a cocktail. One thing, 'ooever she tackles, Woonna 'd never tetch you' he reassured.

But, leaving her bucket of water, Ursula sped home.

'Mina!' she almost shrieked, 'Mina, where are you?'

Mina had hastily hidden in the chimney recess outside—from what danger she was not sure—and there Ursula, almost beside herself, found her with her back to the wall, and instinctively on the defence with hands and feet.

'don't come a-nigh me, Ursie! If you're bit, there's no cure for snake-bite!'

'I will—I will!' stormed Ursula. 'I will never leave you out of my sight, day and night. You are Andrew's wife, Mina; remember, Mina, you're Andrew's wife!'

This was the beginning of an espionage by Ursula that bespoke the mettle of martyrdom.

'You are Andrew's wife, Mina' was her only explanation to Mina's stinging taunts.

Then Palmer added his veiled suggestions regarding Ursula's born capacity in filling the rôle of private detective, and afterwards Mina continually addressed her as 'detector.' 'Lookin' for me, detector?' or 'Ere I am, detector.'

'Oo are you doin' yer dirty work for?' she asked one day. 'One thing, you'll never ketch me!'

Ursula looked into the green eyes with their baleful gleam, and a sense of sickening horror almost overcame her.

'Faint, do; but I wouldn't if I was you, 'cause ther's no one 'ere t' pick you up' provoked Mina.

'I'll leave here the first chance I get' Ursula vowed solemnly.

It was a sudden resolution, but it ripened; and though Mina received it with indifference, not so Palmer, who instantly ceased tormenting.

Meeting her one day as she came from the river, he noted the change from girlhood to womanhood.

'The bush is ageing you' he said.

'The bush?' she asked.

He flinched.

'Have you begun your book yet, Ursula?'

'How could I here?'

'By God! no one ever had a finer chance. Two women and one man, with the Bush for a background!' He laughed mirthlessly. 'Ah, you'll have to marry first, Ursula' and he sighed. 'O Lord! if I had met you ten years earlier, and I were ten years younger and you ten years older, things would have been different.'

'Not so far as I'm concerned' she answered proudly, passing him.

'Wouldn't they? I've ten times Andrew's personality' he sent after her, watching with a grim satisfaction how his shaft quickened her pace.

She had written to Cameron Cameron, telling only of her wish to return to town; but Andrew's marriage had alienated his father, and the weeks dragged on—no reply came. Occasionally a dealer's cart would penetrate to their remoteness, and once, soon after they had first come, a dealer had brought his wife. If such occurred again, she would go back with them; and for this she waited.

In the long, empty days and lonely nights she struggled against her nature, and in the end conquered herself. It was a mental feat that kept all introspection and retrospection, if not at bay, quiescent. A quiet sadness settled on her; she scarcely spoke unless in guidance to Woonah, who now was more obedient and, in a stumbling way, more thoughtful of Ursula.

She was sitting one afternoon outside on the myall log, and inside Mina slept, so all was peaceful. Ursula's relaxed eyes were on the wide plain, on which the domed sky rested securely, and in an assertive flash the great sweeping circle recalled Ashton's circus. Her heart bounded.

‘Good God! what a life here!’ she groaned, and covered her eyes.

Unrestrained mentally she faced the reality—instead of world-wide fame—‘Mina's keeper’ ‘detector’ visualizing the attitude of intense hatred of the sometimes thwarted and baffled Mina.

Intolerable! Oh God! she must not think, and, rising, she fixed her eyes and mind again on the plain.

Pyramids of clouds now fringed its edge, and the centre had hazed into a sandy mist. From the further side, quicksilver lakes of sheep formed into momentary circles that split into streams, then, dividing, trickled into single file and made for the river. There was a brooding stillness and sadness indefinitely suggestive of town Sabbath; for the bark of the dogs, anxious to pilot the unwilling flock to the wim instead of the river, was spent in the distance. From habit the sheep would head for the river, but, though it was early spring, the winter had been droughty, and the river was only a string of dangerous water-holes. The dogs, as ever, conquered, and the sheep, against their will, were driven to the troughs round the wim.

After the governed mob had passed, Ursula thought she could hear a faint call, and the crows, keener and quicker than she, were already circling in a preparatory swoop. They guided her to the dried saggs at the river's edge, where she found a lamb newly dropped, and deserted, maybe willy-nilly, by the ewe.

As she, with the ungainly creature in her arms, was making for home, Nungi on horseback overtook her. He had strapped before him a sheep for killing, which hung in an unresisting, listless bow across the saddle—limp, it seemed to Ursula, with the fore-knowledge of its doom. Her arms tightened on the lamb she was carrying, such would not be its fate, she determined.

‘Ell ov a trouble t' poddy, miss, them lambs, but Queeby used t' poddy any Gord's quantity’ remarked Nungi.

Ursula watched his eyes glazing reminiscently.

‘Lord! Queeby used t' poddy ez many ez fifty or sixty every lambin’.

‘What did she do with them?’

‘Oh, ther boss 'e'd buy 'em, an' I used t' snavel ther rino. S'elp me Bob, I've been for a fortnight at a stretch at Tambo on the spree, an' dam well never see daylight the 'ole time!’

Again his eyes became regretfully reminiscient.

‘No chance ov them times now. Ketch Woono poddy one lamb—not

even get up orf ov 'er unkers! I got t' dam well light the fire and poddy 'er meself, an' not so much ez thenk yer for it. She gimme a bit ov er spree? No dam fear ov Woonna—— But, Lord! I can't expect 'er t' knock 'erself about, for she's got no more sense un a lamb 'erself.'

'Think she'll show me how to poddy this one?'

'Like rain' was Nungi's confirmation. 'She'll do any morsel thing for you, miss—clean gone on you; like Queeby there, ain't she?'

Nearer the house Palmer joined her.

'What? Have you found your treasure-trove, Ursula?' he asked banteringly, but looking with envious interest at the instinctive maternity of her sheltering arms.

Then, as she scornfully moved onward, he, to delay her, asked:

'Did you know old Civil half guessed where Boshy's money was planted?'

She said 'No.'

'Do you know, Ursula?' he asked earnestly.

'You know I don't' she answered curtly, and moved on, anxious to find her lamb.

There is no animal more devoid of affection than a sheep. Ursula was quick to see this, but the very helplessness of this small creature, and its dependence on her for its life, begot her tenderness. Besides, she welcomed anything that gave interest to her empty days. Gradually they were becoming more so, for now Mina seemed to sleep all day, and Palmer left at dawn after a breakfast prepared and laid overnight, also eaten alone, and it was often dark when he returned. Even then, apparently, office work claimed his attention directly after his meal.

Both wine and spirits had been among the waggon-load of supplies that had been sent for the coming shearing. The wine was placed in a loft over the carefully locked storeroom, Mina keeping the keys. Several times Palmer had asked for them lately, and once to Ursula's surprise Mina had refused to give them. Uneasily Ursula watched both, then a sudden intuition explained Mina's frequent visits to the storeroom and her long sleeps, followed by her uncritical apathy when awake.

'Give them to him, Mina. Take them, Mr. Palmer' besought Ursula frantically.

He was gravely silent, but Mina laughed.

'Im'—pointing to Palmer—'im mindin' the keys!—pot callin' the pan black' said Mina.

That night Ursula's violently beating heart unaccountably woke her. Had Mina called? She rushed to Mina's bedroom door, but it had a barrier. She called 'Mina!' and while she waited she heard the hide-hung window

shutter strike the outside wall noisily and flap to. A footstep on the sand outside gave a dulled slide: her pet lamb bleated in sudden agony: and someone lurched against the wall, then went hastily into Palmer's room. Ursula forced back the barring stool, and entered Mina's room, which was reeking with spirits. Mina, though not snoring, was apparently sound asleep.

‘Mina!’ she called, shaking her roughly.

Again the lamb bleated.

Ursula thrust her head through the window. Beneath it, with its back close to the wall, and its feet stretched out stiffly, lay the lamb. Hastily she bent and lifted it, but the crushed creature instantly died in her arms. Carrying it into the front-room, she laid it in the fire-place, and without her usual careful thought for the sleeper, she washed the lamb's blood from her hands, then, dressing herself, lay on her bed awaiting daylight.

At dawn she began to collect and pack her possessions, and Woonah, as usual, came and lighted the kitchen fire. When the breakfast hour was past, and none appeared, Ursula venturing inside for an explanation, found Mina's bedroom door again closed. Ursula wondered how, for she had left it open, and all therein ever since had been silent.

Later, Nungi, wild-eyed and strangely excited, came ostensibly for the day's orders. Then Ursula found that Palmer also had kept his room, and Nungi intimated that, though he had tried, he could not waken him. With cabalistic signs Woonah accused Nungi of having done something wrong, and, with the same silent subtlety, Nungi intimated that this unspoken charge should be laid against Palmer instead of him.

‘Wot's t' be done, miss, 'bout them yeos an' lambs in ther draftin'-yard?’ he asked Ursula, with a show of anxiety to be at his duty.

‘Better ask Mr. Palmer’ she advised.

‘E's asleep, miss; I tell yer I been tryin' t' wake 'im till I'm wore out. 'E's regler blin', an' deaf, an' dumb. Wish I 'ad a drop ov ther same pizen for these damn cramps’ he added, rubbing his stomach and bending double in a feigned distress, that his expectant eyes and watering mouth contradicted.

Ursula knocked at Mina's door, then turned the handle: to her surprise it was again secured, and equally so was the window. So also she found Palmer's, but Nungi, deceived as to her intentions and because of his personal interest, invited her to look through the cracks as he had done. Across the bed, partly dressed, lay Palmer, and one of his stockinged feet hanging out of the bed was blood-spattered—the position of both bespeaking his drunken stupefaction.

‘Busted yer poor little lamb wi' 'is big foot’ said Nungi. Then he earnestly assured her that the black bottle on the table was empty, and

Woonna resentfully drew her attention to a hollow reed that Nungi was standing on in an endeavour to hide it. It was long enough to reach the bottle inside, and cunningly bent to enter its neck.

Tamely Nungi picked it up and broke it, volubly reaffirming that there was not a drop in the bottle, nor had there been 'fust thing ters mornin'; an' spit me death, miss, if I 'ad a toothful' he said to Ursula.

'Nungi, you must go down for Mr. Cameron.'

'Not on Shanks's pony' he said sullenly.

'Ride what you like, but you must go.'

Woonna added her command, and, thwarted, he went sullenly to 'unt up a norse.'

When Woonna, hours after, returned to their hut, he was there.

'Nungi knows better, w'erever 'e learnt it, not t' go down alonger Camerons. Christ! let 'im'—jerking his head towards Palmer—'ketch me at it, an' I'd think a tree fall on me. Nungi's got ernuff sense t' come in out o' ther rain long afore a t'underbolt 'its 'im.'

Woonna took him literally.

'No rain' she said.

'Be Gord, no!' he agreed, 'an' no signs ov any. An' I'll see Palmer, ther boosy b—furdermore, afore I water all them yeos an' lambs meself. Plenty t' do in 'ere, ain't there, Woonna?' he remarked to conciliate her. 'No good ov you, and me bustin' ourselves. Yer git none ther more thanks in ther long run.'

He hid all that day, but late in the afternoon of the next day, when Ursula was returning from burying her lamb, she surprised Nungi lying under a shelving bank. He rose up, suggesting by his simulated air of stiffness that he had accomplished a long riding journey. Boss Cameron, he told her, was out when he got there, so he had left Ursula's letter for him. 'An' as no one there ask't me ther way to me mouth, I turns roun' an' come straight back.' Then hastily to discourage her searching gaze he added, 'Dam shame about yer poor liddle lamb, Miss.'

'Nungi, did you disturb old Baldy and my father's graves?' she asked accusingly.

'Spit me death, miss, if I tetch em. W'y, 'Oly Ghos' he truthfully said, 'I wouldn' go 'ithin cooey of em for all you'd gi'e me. Me rouse up ther debbil-debbil' and looking at his fear-charged eyes, she knew he spoke the truth.

She had gone that morning to unyard the ewes and lambs, and coming back had paid her good-bye visit to the little enclosure, and found that the graves had been opened by careless hands that had left convincing proof.

Inside the mouldering skeleton of the old hut she found several broken

pickle-bottles. Their tops sealed by sheep basil, preserved with a tan of pitch had been broken hastily, and lying among them were many scraps of age-discoloured paper with Boshy's characteristically rude writing and figures. She had no time for thought, and had only hastily gathered them together and hidden them.

Ursula knew that Palmer had been astir at dawn, but not to attend to his usual duties, for she pityingly had freed the thirsty, uncared for sheep; many of these were now bogged in the various water-holes along the river.

As Ursula entered Mina was sitting on the table drumming on it with a vibrant knife-handle.

‘Been for a constitootion, Urse?’ she remarked defiantly.

It was all so hopeless that Ursula was silent, and she passed into the kitchen, where Woon, in sullen obedience to Mina's command, was resentfully busy, frying slices of salt beef in a pan of water.

‘She wants me t' go 'untin' fer boggabri down on ther billabongs’ she complained to Ursula. Then, as her complaint met with no response, remarked, ‘Been buryin' yer liddle lamb?’

Ursula nodded.

‘Teddy, ther mail-boy, went by jus' now, 'e say wot 'e bin gibbit letter b'longin' you, to Boss Palmer.’

‘Where is he?’ asked Ursula excitedly.

‘Boss Palmer's gone down alonga river.’

Ursula rushed out, and though she searched up and down the river he was not there; but later she saw him yard a horse, then come in to await supper. Ursula deferred her question and kept her eyes from his face, but she was conscious that intentionally his manner, assumed or otherwise, reeked with reckless defiance, even to a complete disregard of the watchful Mina. As he sat at the head of the table, instinctively Ursula's eyes rested on his trembling hands, till a sudden discovery that the edges of two shirts were showing at his wrists, sent her eyes with swift inquiry to his. The effect was an influence that shattered his self-control. He replaced his cup with a noisy clatter. ‘What are you staring at? Do I owe you anything?’ he asked, his face purpling in his futile attempt to meet her eyes fearlessly, and before she could reply he scrunched his chair back against the wall and went out.

Gratification at his hostility kept Mina gloatingly voiceless, but her sodden eyes gleamed at Ursula exultingly, and unaffected by Palmer's practically untouched plate, she went on with her meal, swallowing huge mouthfuls with noisy relish. Almost as harshly Ursula freed herself from her chair, and went out by the same door, meaning to ask him had there been a letter for her. It was useless to knock, his room-door was wide open

and his horse was gone from the yard.

Mina had followed her, so almost together they went round to the front; this commanded a view of the roadway, along which hastily rode Palmer. Down the river-bank he disappeared for some time; when he reappeared on the other side he was leading a pack-horse.

A lower lip of blood-hued haze lay along the horizon, and from the sun sinking in it a flaming tongue protruded across the plain, till it caught man and horse, in a fine effect, as he drew rein and looked back at the house. Seeing both women he turned his horse to face them, and standing in his stirrups took off his hat, flourishing it in a sweeping circle that included both. With elaborate precision he singled out Ursula, and sending her a shower of kisses, he gave a farewell flourish and galloped onward.

Ursula heard a dry click catch Mina in the throat. Ursula's eyes were now on her. Dismay had conquered her caution; she stood in utter abandonment, with both hands raised to shield her eyes from the sun.

Ursula, leaning against the wall, pressed down her bursting heart. Into her eyes came the look of one who, spellbound, stands beneath a falling mountain. Her dilating pupils perfectly reflected the pregnant woman, still standing in the same attitude, watching the rapidly disappearing horseman.

Chapter XV

IN a night stormy but only with wind and dust, about a month after Palmer's departure, Ursula went for Woonna. All gins are skilled midwives, and under her auspices the child was born. It was weirdly shrivelled and small, as the child of a big womb usually is. With Woonna's aid Ursula had washed and dressed it in the clothes that had done service for all Mrs. Stein's family—her sole wedding endowment to her daughter.

If the helplessness of the motherless lamb had appealed to Ursula what was the lamb compared to this tiny creature, by reason of its humanity, more helpless? When Ursula handled this atom, its shrivelled hands, as if for protection, would clutch and hold her with a grim tenacity peculiar to infancy. But of infants and their ways what should Ursula know, though she speedily interpreted every movement of this one? Kissing the tendril fingers—at first because Mina, its mother, did not—but later with a rapture begot by its breath on her breast. The beat of its wee heart held against her own, sent her intense maternity surging like the spring sap in a young tree. Mina's keen eyes were watchful as ever, and instinctively Ursula strenuously endeavoured to disguise her love, finding that it endangered the infant. When she woke in the night thinking of it she smiled. 'If only it were mine!' she longed, then turned her face in hiding to the wall.

Now it was sick, Mina said, and in swift alarm Ursula bent over it as it slept, her ear to its mouth. She turned her face the other way, for the sinister look on Mina's, watching her, broke her concentration. She laid a testing finger in the little one's palm, and though it slept, as ever its hand closed round it. It was safer for both, she knew, that Mina could not see her face. Shaking a negative head, she said it was not sick; but, unconvinced, Mina moved away, and that night for the first time demanded the care of it.

Then it seemed to Ursula that only her body slept, for the slightest sound or movement from the woman and child in the next room woke and drew her in. Then Mina began closing the door between them, so Ursula redoubled her vigilance. What was that to-night? She sat up instantly, and a sound of smothered fluttering sent her in swift alarm to the door. It was barred, and the inside was in darkness. 'Mina, Mina!' she screamed, beating against it, 'let me in, let me in!' In the waiting moment she heard the muffled fluttering increase. She rushed out, calling piercingly, 'Woonna, Woonna!' and round to the bedroom window, and with the strength of two wrenched the shutter from its hide hinges; then, bounding through, stripped the bedclothes covering the face of the mother and child. Mina's arm was resting heavily across the little one's mouth when Ursula freed it. It was

gasping feebly, and as she raised it she heard its breathless struggle and felt its stiffened body and clenched hands.

‘What's the matter?’ asked Mina, though also panting breathlessly, making a pretence of being rudely awakened.

Without replying, Ursula, holding the child, lighted Mina's lamp. A strange fear silenced Ursula, for she knew intuitively did she but license the speech scorching and shaking her, this would license action in the unnatural, desperate woman watching her with those terrible, inhuman eyes. Even now uncontrollably her powerful, hairy arms and hands were twitching murderously.

‘Wot are yer doin' in 'ere?’ she challenged.

‘In your sleep, Mina, you nearly smothered the baby.’

Watching her as one watches a springing snake, Ursula, with the child, backed into the next room, and took up a position where she could see but not be seen. So screened, she saw Mina's hand steal out and her fingers suddenly snuff out the lamp wick, after the manner of old Daddy Stein. The lightened creak of Mina's bed was further warning, and Ursula's hold on the child tightened, as she noiselessly made for the door; but even from there came the outside sound of bare feet, then a whisper:

‘Missy, missy!’

It was Woonas voice. Thankfully Ursula let her in.

‘Baby very sick, Woonas’ she said loudly, shivering with relief. ‘Light the lamp, and make big fella fire out there’ pointing to the kitchen. ‘We'll bogey [bath] it.’

When by the lamplight Woonas saw the pallid terror of Ursula's face, alarmed, she asked:

‘On'y that fella baby, you bin bogey Missy?’

‘Only baby, Woonas.’

‘Mine think it you sick, too’ said Woonas.

Together they went into the kitchen, and from inside it Ursula made a silent sign for Woonas to listen. Mina, though equally cautious, was again betrayed by the lightened spring of the creaking bed. Since she was astir, better and safer for them to be where they could watch.

‘Bring the water inside, Woonas’ said Ursula, and with it they went back.

Now the bedroom door was closed, but Woonas sent a suspicious survey into all likely and unlikely corners of this room; then, radiating her relief, went briskly on with her work.

Gradually the little one's breathing had become more regular. Ursula, swift to know, felt its strained body relax in composure. God was good! but never for a moment, day or night, would she leave it out of her arms or sight. Now, while she bathed it, Woonas held low the lamp, so that its full

light fell on the infant's face. Suddenly Woonna, with a native word, held it even lower, pointing excitedly to bruises on the swollen nose, and from them to the discoloured finger-prints on one cheek. Again she spoke excitedly, and again in her own tongue; then raising her head, she faced her hut, and sent a cooe that echoed and re-echoed. Instantly the bedroom door opened and Mina entered. She was whiter than Ursula, who, snatching up the infant, stood at bay facing her. Even in her agitation the flattened space between Mina's brows struck Ursula more vividly than the green malignity of her venomous eyes.

'Shut up, you black dingo!' she hissed at Woonna, though her eyes were fastened on Ursula. 'Wot are you doin' to it?'

Without replying, but watching her, Ursula rolled a blanket round the child. Woonna was about to cooe again, when her keen ears heard the coming of Nungi. Instead she called to him that the front door where he was knocking was unbarred.

'Is it?' sneered Mina. But the back one was, and Nungi, swifter than she, had entered.

Woonna gave him a warm welcome, then in native language told him something that sent his eyes uneasily rolling from the infant's face to Mina's right hand, clenched in impotent frenzy, then to her distorted face.

'Christ, missis! you do look snake-'eaded. Git yer neck stretched playin' that game' pointing to the child's face, he said, friendly advice in his tones; and as Mina only panted breathlessly, he took her speechlessness as a tribute to his advice. Turning from her to Ursula, he touched the little one's discoloured cheek. 'Dam shime t' 'urt ther poor little b——, jus' as it was jus' beginnin' to know yer, too, missy.'

'Hush, Nungi! the baby's sleeping; she's better now. It was an accident. Go back to bed, Mina' said Ursula.

'Give it to me.'

Mina extended her arms authoritatively. Ursula, raising her head, looked unflinchingly into Mina's shifty eyes.

'It was an accident' she meaningly repeated and emphasized. 'Sit down, Woonna and Nungi, and you go back to bed, Mina.'

Mina went into the bedroom, and closed the door. For hours the three sat round the fire, each in a position to watch the bedroom door; for each knew that, although Mina had closed it, she only did so as a shield for her scrutiny, unequally distressful, but as barren for her as for them. When the receiving creak of her bed, and soon after her reassuring snores, told them it was over, at a sign from Ursula, Woonna noiselessly rebuilt the fire; then shortly after her head fell affectionately on Nungi's shoulder, and she, too, slept. His head gradually took a reposeful lean-to against the wall, then

Ursula was the only watcher. Occasionally a convulsive sob would shake the little one, but the arms it already knew would tighten round it. Its groping, fearing fingers met Ursula's; its face nestled in her neck; so soothed and comforted, it would quiveringly sigh its reassurance and content. And every sigh that quivered to Ursula's bending ear, every breath breathed on her bared breast, quickened and nourished this resolve—to shield and shelter it with her life.

At dawn she aroused Woonna and Nungi to duty, for before and since the birth of the child she had tried to look after everything outside and in. Palmer had been gone nearly two months, and though she had time and again written to Cameron, none had replaced him. By Nungi, Palmer had sent her father's will, and a note saying where she would find some money hidden. Andrew, he said, was coming soon. Tremblingly she wondered when, and went to reread Palmer's letter, but though she had hidden it with her father's unread will, both were gone.

She followed Woonna into the kitchen, where already beneath the ashes smouldered a pile of glowing coals, that was soon, under Woonna's skill, a roaring fire. Before it Ursula held the child, while Woonna heated some milk; but the little one's lips were so rigidly compressed that Ursula could scarcely coax the spoon between them, and then she saw despairingly that it could not swallow. Motioning Woonna to watch for Mina's coming, she went to the back of the kitchen, to think out some plan to protect this child. She would go to Mina, and ask her to renounce it to her; with it she would go away, and none need ever know that it was not hers. When Andrew should return,—though her face flamed at the thought, she did not flinch—when Andrew should return, Mina could tell him the child was hers (Ursula's); and this very day she would start for Camerons. So resolved, she went to seek and tell Mina, and guided by Woonna, she went to a familiar crack.

A pair of freckled, scaly hands, groping along the beams of the bedroom, utterly unnerved her, and for a moment fear paralyzed her, then she crept closer. She saw those long fingers, that Boshy loathed, feel gropingly for something. Ah! what was it, that they had found? As though she, too, was not sure, Mina brushed the dust from it, and examined further by look and smell. It was what she sought; for, satisfied, she placed it in her bosom and went on dressing.

Woonna had silently and swiftly backed away; and her ebon face, Ursula saw, had changed into leaden flabbiness with some horrible fear. There is no colour line in love, and though a-quiver with ungovernable fright, for Ursula's sake black Woonna went graphically through the final death contortions of the poisoned mangy pup. Then with the speed of a wild

animal, she made for the scrub, where Nungi was supposed to be scrub-cutting for the starving sheep; and, despite her burden, Ursula, equally terrified, instantly followed. But, though she turned the child's face across her shoulder, she found that the wind as she ran, caught the little one's breath, and she felt it strain and stiffen. Stopping for a moment, and screened by a tree, she looked back at the house. At that moment she saw Mina mount the butcher's block, with intent to locate the fugitives; then came a lusty cooe from Woonna to Nungi, which, Mina hearing, instantly acted upon. To add to Ursula's terror, she saw that this breathing respite had not tranquillized the child, yet she dared not stand still, with its unnatural mother on her track. Again Woonna cooeed resoundingly, and this time another look showed Mina running from the house towards the sound. Bending low, Ursula went swiftly as she dared to where Mina might pass wide of her; then, again hidden, she waited in breathless anxiety, that was increased to distracting horror when she saw the sun blaze and reflect on and about the axe's head that Mina had snatched from the wood heap. Suppressing a horrified shriek, Ursula sped away from her, back to the house; past this she fled across the river; passing her father's grave, she ran along the track to Pine Point. Looking back once, she thought that she was safe, for Mina was not to be seen; encouraged, onwards she ran to the myalls near, and stopped to examine the child, now struggling more strenuously, though only at intervals. It was ill, surely; yet what could she do to save it—she flying with it from that terrible woman? O God! there Mina was; she had only been hidden by the river-bank. Where were Woonna and Nungi? She must get to them.

With a mind to try and double back so as to find them, when she reached Pine Point, she entered that part of the trackless scrub. Stumbling through the thick undergrowth with her precious burden, she pushed onward. Fearful of her pursuer, she dared not stop even to look at the ailing one, or to listen, knowing she had only her start against this murderous woman, with twice her strength, unburdened, and with that deadly weapon. Once, when the undergrowth gripped her, she drew breath and looked at the now twitching child. At the moment an internal spasm stiffened it, though no moan came from its cruelly indrawn lips. She raised her face, but heaven was hidden by the interlocking trees; so she bent her head to listen, but there seemed no following sound. Maybe Mina had passed while she had waited, still, what would she do with this stricken child? Dread drove her back, while she thought, but not far, for paroxysm after paroxysm, each swifter and more violent, seemed to wrestle for the soul that the locked lips of this wee one refused to surrender. Fearless now of her enemy, Ursula sank for the moment, intent only on saving the child. With her own dried

tongue, she bent to moisten into relaxation its indrawn blue lips, and breathing on the clenched, congested hands, tried as unavailingly to lessen their terrible tension. Fiercer and fiercer grew the unequal fight, till gradually Ursula saw that all effort failed to still or soothe one quiver. Then the mighty King of Terrors wrestled but with one. Where had she read that only the old die easily? Her lamb had; but this lamb—Ah! now it was over: though its lips were still closed and its hands clenched, it was still. She laid it along her cradling body, then she, too, was motionless and as emotionless as their surroundings, for not a leaf stirred: sun-sleep was upon the scrub. So she had held Boshy, only then her back rested against the wall, now against a tree. She was thankful for one thing—there was no blood, for of all the nauseating things on earth, none were so appalling as blood to her. Mina had come when Boshy died; if only she would come now! Where was she? Rising, she called, ‘Mina, Mina!’ Then, without waiting for a reply, with the child in her arms, she went on; but not for long, for even in this dense scrub the heat of the sun penetrated scorchingly, and surely her burden had grown heavier. She was only partially dressed—that was well—but, without looking, she covered the little one's head and discoloured face with her skirt. Strange that she did not want to kiss it. She would bury it beside her father, she decided, not out here. The lamb she had laid at his feet, but this dear thing in her arms—she quivered chokingly, then conquering her emotion, she looked at the dead child. It might even yet recover if only she could reach Woonna, and they together get hot water.

This purpose possessing her, hopefully she pushed onward swiftly, fighting the dense tangle of undergrowth which caught her at every step. Had she passed through it in her first flight? she now wondered. Oh, how could she know, with so little to guide her? For, looking back, the vines and leaves, as if to baffle her, had closed over even her last steps. One blessing, the sun here was less powerful, for the branches locked and entwined overhead, as did the brush of undergrowth.

She let fall her skirt, that was sheltering the head of the child. How calm and collected she was, fearing nothing now, free even from her haunting terror of snakes—those silent, creeping horrors! Yet how she had dreaded them up to this time! And now, looking at the child, she feared not Mina—no, not even Mina. Still, it was better not to think of her, but try to get out of this scrub; but when and how?

Perhaps if she laid the little one down for a few moments, and climbed (Andrew had taught her) to the top of one of these trees, she might be able to see her way out to the plain. She hesitated, then she carefully laid the baby down, first making sure that no creeping, venomous foe was near;

and selecting one tree, she began its ascent, her eyes fixed on the child. Supposing Mina crouched hiding, waiting to snatch it?

Recklessly she jumped down, and, with a mingled cry of love and fear, caught up the child and again stumbled along. With an effort at composure, she tried to delude herself by the thought that the beloved little one might not be dead—it was very strong. But once she knew definitely it was, she would bury it somewhere—not here—then find Mina and kill her! Yes, if the child was dead she would kill Mina; that was just. Even the Bible said, ‘Blood for blood.’ Shudderingly she thought she could smell blood. Now for the present she must banish such thoughts, for the one great thing to do was to get back again.

Stopping, she tried to get the bearings. If only she knew what way she had come! But she could not decide. However, she must be wrong, or by this she would see the plain. She turned another way, and by degrees many others, determinedly keeping at bay the distracting consciousness that she was bushed.

About noon, exhausted and painfully thirsty, after long scrutiny, she decided the baby must be dead. For a long time she sat, and through her dry mouth tried to breathe into its nostrils; nothing could pass through its locked lips, nor could the tip of her little finger worm its way into the sealed palms. Perhaps it would be as well to bury it for a time only, till she found Woono or Nungi; but where? Laying it down tenderly, she groped beneath the matted vines, but felt only hot shifting sand. Beside a large pine-tree was a bare, loose heap; carrying the body to this spot, she laboriously scraped a hole long and deep enough. Then again, with it across her knees, and for a longer time, she went through all methods of reanimation known to or invented by her. It was dead, so she laid it in its cot of sand, with its pain-distorted face to the hidden skies; then slowly began covering it, feet upwards. Tearing a strip from her skirt, she shrouded its face, and, looking away, blindly pushed over it the sand; still without looking, she turned and walked back a few paces, but marked the spot, so that she would know where to guide someone. She tore up vines and broke twigs, and covered it lightly, then rested awhile, stretching her stiffened arms. How weary she was, and how thirsty! But now, without her burden, she would get on quicker and get back—she must before dark. Making landmarks to guide her return, slowly she went on—not far—only a few paces, for, oh God! how could she leave it alone? Sobbing tearlessly, she rushed back, disinterred the child, then with it for hours distressfully stumbled onward.

Australian daylight dies with short shrift, and in this mighty scrub the pall of darkness fell with startling abruptness. She knew it would be

madness to seek home, so, selecting a sparse spot, she shrouded the dead and laid it beside her. She sat with her aching back resting against a tree, realizing that were it light, and she for sure on the right track, her weary limbs could have gone no further. If dew fell—and it might in this clearing—it would moisten her dry tongue and mouth, and in this prayer her tongue clicked, dry and sore, against her swollen palate. This still night was not chilly, and, even if it were, could not matter to the dead child, yet she covered it with her skirt. She was not hungry, though she had eaten nothing all day; but she was very, very thirsty and weary. Still, dew might fall. And now, till dawn, she must rest—to sleep would be best, but she knew she could not sleep. The little body, so still and quiet, was growing cold. So her aunt and Boshy had been; she also must be, for she was shivering. Well, better cold than heat for thirst, and in the dawn she would again go in search of home. Could she leave this little one, carefully hidden?—looking at the shrouded form. But need she think of that till the morning? Yet better to think of anything or anyone, if it held in check her thirsty misery. Mentally she selected many intimate past incidents, resolutely discarding the obtrusive present. Long ago, when she was little, she had strayed too far and got lost till nearly dark, but then she had called and called Andrew, and he had found her and carried her home.

Andrew—for a long time in that past she forgot the present, till the bitter reality recalled her with a shock the more cruel from being suspended. Not again would she dwell on him; instead, on her cruel thirst—oh, when would the dew fall? But just this she might debate, since she was on the forbidden subject—should she, if Andrew were to come now, claim this dead child as her own—hers and Palmer's? for that was what such avowal meant. No, she decided; there was now no need. Would she rather have the child dead than face Andrew with it as her own? The tender clasp of its fingers round hers; its breath upon her as it lay the night before in her arms, and with infant instinct groped for her breast—no, no, no! The child—the child, even with dishonour!

Taking it in her arms, she held its stiffening body to her sore heart, till a trembling agony seized her. Then, as she placed it again beside her, she determined not to touch, nor even think of, it till the morrow. How long would the dawn be in coming? Yet if she rose to walk about to still her mind, she must uncover the child. She tried vainly, by various devices, to divert her thoughts; then, drawing off her skirt, swathed the body, walking afterwards round and round it, with her dry mouth upturned for the desired dew. How slow it was in falling! Perhaps those tree-tops, almost shutting out the sky, caught and kept it. For a moment the desire to climb to their tops and rob them possessed her; but there was the child—some stalking

wild beast might seize or molest it. She must not.

Oh, but was ever night so long? Though lately there had been many that had tried her sorely, yet the night when that dear dead thing had come, and she, for a time alone and uninstructed, had been forced to minister to its unnatural mother, even that night had not seemed so long; and others since had been spent in anxious vigil. Ah! but all circumstances had been different, and the child had been nestling and warm, and she herself neither shivering nor thirsty. Still, she must keep a firm grip on herself and conquer all emotion, for her task on the long-deferred morrow would be neither easy, nor, because of her dead burden, light. She would again rest and try to calmly consider some guiding feature, passed in her flight, that in retracing she might recognise, and so be guided; but all that she could visualize was the path to the crossing over the river—it and the track to Pine Point. Still, now that her fear was gone and she reasonable, outlets to any of these might be possible in the daylight, but with it the first thing she would seek would be water.

When would dawn come? This awful stillness was stifling her. Oh for any sound that would break it! Even that solemn night-call that none but Andrew and she could interpret, would she welcome. Why were birds and beasts so voiceless? Surely here must be their haunts and lairs. Yet she, in walking round, was careful, mindful to move softly, lest she set even the leaves whispering, which was worse, for such might be a signal to shoals of stealthy foes covertly watching her. Should she for distraction go through her child-life? Immediately Ashton's circus sprang from the past, mocking the present intolerably. It served her need, for it took time to conquer her disquiet.

Day dawn was as stealthily swift as its death. When the boom of a brooding emu heralded it, Ursula went on her knees in voiceless prayer; then, burdened by the stiffened, cold child, went towards the sound. Her rustling approach betrayed her to the watching male bird. With a sonorous warning to his hatching mate, he fled, and later Ursula saw the sitting bird rise suddenly from her nest and run swiftly, though not to join her cowardly mate, but at a discreet distance to watch, even as Miriam, thought Ursula. She found in the nest thirteen eggs, warm to her cold hand. She would take one: it might moisten her parched mouth and so ease her burning throat; but a small one would do. Replacing the egg she held, she selected the smallest, yet it was smoother and more delicately tinted than the others; it might one day be a beautiful bird, and faithful like its prospective mother—she would not take that one. From so many, one could make little difference, and thirteen was an unlucky number. Her thirst and the terrible task before her surely justified her—yet she hesitated.

The hen bird still watched, and bravely had ventured to come nearer its nest. Ursula would take an egg right away before she broke it, and perhaps the emu might not miss it. Selecting one, she moved away. What a contrast, the deadly cold of the child to the blood warmth of the egg! she believed it was making her feel sick and faint. Ah! and the robbed bird was standing disconsolately over, not on, its nest. Thank God! it was not too late. Hurrying back, and calling her intention encouragingly to the again fleeing bird, she restored the egg.

The sun-bleached bones of some animal were the next objects that she saw. Ah! why had it wandered from its fellows, and how had it perished? she wondered. Thirst, she decided.

And, merciful God! how dreadfully dry her own mouth and throat were! What would she do if she did not soon find water, or what would become of her? She took a critical survey of her surroundings. A cobweb, nightspun, hung in an insidious circle from branch to branch, facing her. Early as it was, its first victim struggled in its gummy meshes. Fascinated, she stood shaken ungovernably by its horrible suggestiveness, while above and about her the trees shivered meaningly. Yes, here in the Bush, Nature was frankly brutal, and meant her to know that she, too, was trapped hopelessly, as the poor fly. In her haste to free it, one of its wings broke off. This recalled that Sunday afternoon, long ago, when she had wantonly crippled the hornet and flies. How could she upbraid Nature? Sorrowing acutely for her earlier sin, she moved onward, till the necessity for some plan for her movements stopped her. Across her tangled track a tree, uprooted, as though top-heavy, rested slantwise against its fellows. Carrying the child, she crawled along it, aided by the branches and vines, hoping from its highest point to see the plain. She could not, for there was a slight rise, and trees higher shut out all but the sky. Nor was there any dew nor moisture even on their tenderest tips. Still, from this height she might take her bearings from the sky, for the brighter glow would mean the east—their house on the plain's edge faced that way. But how distractedly her head buzzed in the effort to determine its locality. Perhaps this dizzy height was making her giddy. She descended to think better below. But even here, visualizing as strenuously as she could, and after a long struggle, no way seemed certain, for as she invoked tracks from her hot head, the tragical incidents of her flight dispelled them.

Then, abruptly as the dark and light changes came the heat. The sun, though hidden, sent piercing tongue-shafts, till even the tough trailing vegetation drooped, showing the hot sand beneath. The blood seethed scorchingly in the girl's veins; hot wave-wings quivered before her strained eyes, and buzzed about her ears and temples. The child alone was

unaffected, as she stumbled wearily along, penalized by its dead, cold, unresponsive weight, she knew that, and was definitely thankful. Were it alive, it too must suffer, and was ever agony greater than this? Surely her head would burst. Was it swollen?—feeling it. Not much, thank God! she decided, but she must rest and again try to think of a way to water—then out to the plain.

Now, those emus—why had she left them? for they must be within a reasonable distance of water. Besides, if all else failed, and this awful torturing thirst continued, she would be forced to take one egg; but could she find the way back to the nest? it was just before she reached this rise. She would try, and vaguely she wandered about, but not for long—mind and body began to claim and force rest. Would she try to find the emu's eggs first? No, go on; try to get out to the plain. But was not that the cobweb which she had wrecked? Had she without knowing turned back, or was it another web? Calmly, and again undismayed, the spider was industriously respinning in repair. It was the same. Yet she thought that she had gone forward; she must mind, for never had she been good at locality. Jim used to say that she would get lost in the house paddock.

Jim, Fanny, her aunt, Mr. Civil—and mentally twist and turn as she would, yes, Andrew—there they all were: but because of her strenuous repression, Andrew was multiplied. Quirr, quirr! her hot head buzzed, and her dry mouth opened chokingly, and she called him till she was dumb, till she could neither hear nor see. Yet above all a sense of her own lawlessness was uppermost. Oh, God! how hopeless and bewildering everything was! From then every moment seemed to weaken her, and add to the weight she bore in her stiff arms; and her thirst—her thirst! No way seemed clear, nor which way to turn. But if she began to think of herself she would not keep calm. Now she seemed to be ascending, and uphill was ever weary work; rest a little she must.

Was it late in the day? she wondered. She hoped, then feared it was; another night spent like the last, would, she knew, unhinge her mentally. No; such thoughts were foolish and distressing. Just now she had exaggerated the distance she had walked, till the spider and web had convinced her, and it was so with the time. It could not be late, though it was burning hot, and a long, long time since she had even tasted water; and she— Oh, mercy! mercy! where could she, would she find water! Where? Where? What was the use of groping in the sand at her feet for water; she had put down the dead baby, and had been talking to herself. That was a bad sign. Was she going mad? No, it was her head—her hot head—was that swelling, and buzzing from weariness, weakness, and thirst. When before had she laid down the child?—she could not remember

so doing, but now it rested her. In future when she rested she would lay it down beside her. But supposing she forgot it—her head was not always quite clear. Oh!—snatching it up and stumbling along—she would not, could not, should not. She knew this last fear was a fancy, and she closed her eyes to shut it out. But now of a surety there was blood. Oh, thank God! no—only a streak of sunset. But this red flash had sent such a drougthy blast into her open mouth. Oh! she must go on—go on and find water. She would turn this way: it was less entangling. But after a few wearying minutes she began to think it worse, still she stumbled on, for at least she was going in a fresh direction.

But was that not again the same spider and web? Of a certainty, yes.

Should she kill this magnetic spider, and so end its baleful influence? Incentively the trees hissed ‘Yes, yes.’ Motioning for them to be silent, she steadily watched the insidious spinner, now as if divining her purpose, merely an indrawn inert black speck but acutely watching her. Its attitude instantly recalled that long-past Sunday. What right had she to expect mercy, and she still with the same cruel instincts? Turning away, she went onward, mindful only that she did not again go near the spider.

What sound was that?

‘Andrew!’ burst impulsively from her. She listened, but there was no reply. Yes, yes; she distinctly heard a voice say ‘Israelites.’ Then her heart gave a suffocating bound, for, God have mercy, she had mistaken her own voice, as aloud she had been praying that she might be God-guided out of this wilderness, as were the Israelites. The shock nerved her, and she ran aimlessly till she fell, and for a time lay, but making a barrier of her arms, that the child should not be crushed.

Somewhat strengthened, she rose and moved on, but without a plan. If only Andrew——But determinedly she beat back that predominant wish, for it was worse than her insistent thirst—worse, for it was wickeder. To get away from it she walked again, anywhere, anywhere.

Now, perhaps, she would get out again to the plain. Was there any sign of it yet? She could see if there was, for her head was clearer. Now, too, she had made good progress, and the dreaded spider trap was behind her. That was well. Thankfully she moved on. Oh the cruelty of it! She was back—there it was! there it was! Sobbing, she sank down to hide it from her despairing eyes. Was she losing her senses completely? Was it not her fancy? Let her try to think calmly and clearly as a test. This dead child that she carried, and whose face she had not seen for hours; yes, that was right. The baby was Mina's, and Mina—wait a moment—was Andrew's wife. But no—she would not think of that. Oh, God forgive her! not Andrew. Yes, she was perfectly sane, but till she got out of this she had better not

think of anyone. No, for her head was again bursting. How like the sound of that hornet beating against the skylight! No; the sound of the emu it was, only hers was a double beat that sprang from both temples and increased her tiredness and unendurable thirst. Oh for just one small mouthful! Now if she had a cupful, first she would drink a little, then wet her temples. What a waste of time to sit there thinking of these things! Was it late? She closed her eyes to rest them, that they should when open the better determine if there was a change, but a scorching red flame flared through her closed lids, and, screaming, she rose, and, without the child, ran stumblingly. Coward, coward, that she was—she went back to it, and waited till her heart stilled. Ah! now, indeed, she was becoming disorganized, for certainly for hours—indeed, all day—she had been wandering about, without a plan.

At length, repassing the empty grave that she had hollowed for her chilly burden, the cobweb, the leaning tree, and other objects, convinced her that she was walking in a circle. She might as well sit still. It was getting late, but, thank God! cooler, but if night were coming a fire would be better than the thick darkness and awful quiet of the one past. Yet no, not a fire: it would only increase her thirst. Besides, if she dozed, it might creep up and set her alight. Again she ran, till barred by fatigue. Was ever agony so great as this thirst? Why, even Christ on the cross could not endure thirst and loneliness, though He suffered all other agonies uncomplainingly. But when He said, ‘I thirst, I thirst’ a sponge dipped in vinegar was held to His lips. Vividly the scene stood out. Why did she hold up her lips? Who was there to wet hers? One thing was certain, if instead of going on she stood there thinking about herself, she would perish—die of thirst. Die! that was the word; she had kept it at bay before, but now it was useless to try, dangerous also, for fear of death must spur her on. But she went a few paces only; then again saw the leaning tree.

What a most peculiar thing that was, the leaning tree which earlier she had passed—oh, surely long ago—days and weeks ago; and why did she pass it? Why? she wondered, and her enfeebled mind rested in this futile query. Oh—screaming—she knew why. She was lost in the Bush, and, as long ago, she called, ‘Andree, Andree!’ Now, now, she was growing like a child. A child! Worse, for when a child she had conquered herself, and had governed her desire to scream after that Sunday, standing out even now as a force that shaped her destiny. She thought coherently about it for a few minutes. Would she now like to be Henry McGrath, dead, drowned; no thirst, no pain—no Andree? No, no; thank God! no: she was alive, and but for her aching head and burning thirst— Oh, why did she think of that? — she walked rapidly. The sand here was surely deeper and hotter. Yes,

for some storm long past, alas! had felled almost a pathway in this wilderness, and there were blazed trees bordering it. Who had barked them? And why? Where would it lead? she wondered. It seemed like a track, and she went along it hopefully till a new danger threatened—a snake, coiled reposefully; she was very close before she saw it, for its colour scheme was a tribute to its environment. Noiselessly it raised its head, and steadily its green eyes watched this invader, and when convinced that she was a menace, a forked tongue protruded from its head, swinging to and fro pendulously. Keeping her eyes upon it, fearfully she backed away for some distance, and as it did not pursue, she turned and ran a few paces. But was she between it and its nest? If so, it would catch her, no matter how swiftly she ran. Besides, she must go back and do battle with it. One thing, she had not screamed and had felt little fear; that was well, to conquer the emotion of fear. Now she would go back and fight it, for never could she feel safe with such a fatal foe at large. She went back, or she thought so, but there was no snake. She was too late. All her life she had done this thing to everyone—to herself—even to Andrew. Surely there could be no harm in thinking of him when it was in self-condemnation. How long had he been away? Could she remember? Thirteen months exactly, and this dead child was a month old. The fright had done her good, and now, while her head was clear, she must make her way out. While she was counting, let her reckon how long it was since she last drank? Oh, it was such a ridiculously long time that she laughed. That was best, to laugh! She would do that whenever she thought of it—laugh; but the Bible, the bitter, mirthless Bible, said tears were better than laughter. She could not cry, even though this little one she loved lay dead in her arms.

She walked backwards and forwards, as though to soothe her lifeless burden, till, tripped by the vines, she fell. She lay still, till suddenly she recalled the snake. Stifling a scream, she rose and rushed along heedlessly till exhausted. ‘Mercy! mercy! Water! water!’ she called, then waited, but there was neither.

Now, again, she would make her greatest effort to be calm, and think and plan. What she wanted to find was—— [visualizing giddily]. Where was the dead plain split by the empty river? Ah! all the plain was trackless now, lying dead, with its many sun-sucked open lips, dry as her own, turned to the relentless sky. Yet she had seen on it the green grass, undulating like a sea. How clear her mind was—the sea! looking steadily before her. Oh, oh! for her heart-beats nearly smothered her. Nonsense! she could not see the sea nor plain, and, beside, the sea was salt and the plain bare. No movement now on it but balls of roley-poley, hurled along by dusty whirlwinds. Even the noisy galahs that nested in the trees along the river-

bank were gone. But—trembling violently—not the snakes. Often, how often, she had crept out in the night, and, quivering with the brooding silence, looked across the great stretch of land, and from it turned to the sleeping house. And that night of nights when he left—ah! that was her shame and this her just punishment! She struck her dry mouth, hungry even now, and sobbed fiercely.

Thank God! if she had wept then, it had been when the lights were out. God! was that a snake! No; only a trailing coil of sarsaparilla, but very snake-like. And why should she torture herself? Those lustrous things (regarding them earnestly) were glittering leaves and not rain-drops. There was no water, nor snakes, only vines; but there was no need to stand still tempting them. She ran till her nervously throbbing heart nearly suffocated her. Now! Now! She was becoming disorganized; running made her open her mouth — her hot mouth, dry as the plains. And the weight of this dead baby, but—she ground her teeth and clenched her hands—she would carry it to the end. No fancies now; she remembered everything. She was lost, or Bushed—no, had just missed her way, and would find it by-and-by. There were no snakes but that one back there, which, looking back, she did not fear. First, she must find water, even before the plain or river. Still, even that had water-holes—filthy, evil-smelling, and studded with dead sheep — yet the water, the green, slimy water-holes, swam before her temptingly. Resolutely she closed her eyes. It was only burning sand, not water; nevertheless, her hands met it. She steadied herself by a sapling. She was not mad, only light-headed, and unable to think safely. The glare this way was dazzling her. She faced another way and laid the child down, then with her uncertain hands she pressed hot circlets round her hotter head. She believed it was swelling, and very soon it would burst. Now, where was the plain? To the east, where the sun rose. Well, there was the sun; but though it was past noon, she did not remember, and, taking up her burden, she went westward.

Again, and by degrees oftener, she fought and conquered her frenzies, She was not on fire, but her skirt nearly caught that blazing streak along that creeper. A little while back and she would have thought it a snake on fire. Was it? was it? She gathered her skirt tightly round her. No use that, for there was another burning snake and yet another. Breathlessly she flung her skirt off, and, demoralized by the blood-red, she stripped off, all but one, to swathe and uphold the child.

She stood and looked in terror at those coiling creepers; after all, they might be sleeping snakes. One thing, snakes were supposed to be deaf; giddily and laboriously she tried to step free and not disturb them. What if her noisy boots should wake them! She drew them off. Ah! that was wise,

for they had not moved nor wakened; but the burning heat of that blistering sand on her feet—oh, she must get back to water! She shrieked, and a wild disorder mastered her. She ran, calling, ‘Water! water!’ Then for a merciful interval all faculties became suspended, and she fell and lay with her head on the child.

Had she found water? Surely something cool—feeling the cold body—then groping beyond, she hoped that when she touched the water it would not seethe and boil. She crept forward—yes, she must crawl along the plank carefully, and not rush into it and get bogged, like those eyeless sheep.

Oh, those awful crows. The crows! They were there, and had been for some time, circling round her. She shut her eyes, and threw out her burdened arms, beating back those black brutes. Getting up, she ran till she fell; then, lying face downwards, with one arm and hand she held the baby's closed eyes protectingly to her bosom, with the other hand preserving her own precious eyes.

Water, water, everywhere water, and not a mouthful to drink, because she dare not open her eyes, so near were those crows' cawing hoarsely, ‘I'll 'ave 'er eyes out! I'll 'ave 'er eyes out!’ She would creep with her eyes so close to the ground, so close that they—— Ah! again the snake, its head and tongue hidden, but betrayed by flaming flashes of crimson along its sinewy length. Down with the dead baby, till her burning hands uprooted and tore it apart; then—regarding her victim—there was no blood either. Of course not: snakes were bloodless. How strong she was to be able to tear it to pieces, and she gloated for a while, and alone went onward; but remembering the child, she went back, guided to it by her fibre victim. She strangled many tough-throated enemies afterwards, but her greatest she could not banish—the crows; yet even they, though circling and cawing insistently, were, because of her increasing weakness, sometimes ignored.

Oh, if only it would rain and fall into her parched, upraised mouth! God of heaven!—no, God of earth!—send rain, and let it fall on her hot head and thirsty mouth. She waited expectantly, but only the ‘I'll 'ave 'er eyes out!’ of the crows answered her. Ah!—bitterly—when would God hear or answer her? When had He ever? To Him she would pray no more. What was that up there descending from that tree? (watching a gohanna). The devil? Yes, surely. She could not pray to him, but might tell him of her fearful need. She began, but at the sound of her voice the reptile deftly reversed his head and tail, and crawled nigher heaven. She waited till he had stopped, and, with his head turned over his shoulder, looked down on her. Now, if he would listen, she would confess, since now she did not love Andrew. No, all that was past. Ah, how foolish she was! What did sin

matter to the devil, for, as though in disbelief and derision, his scaly majesty had thrust out his tongue at her, and climbed higher.

His unbelief and thrust-out tongue gave tone to her savagery. No matter how high he climbed, she would make him hear.

But it was only for 'Water, water, water!' that she called, till her dry throat throttled her words, and she fell, and so lay in giddy stupefaction, then suddenly became possessed of a peculiar knowledge.

Ah! now she was in hell, and could see the flames of hell shooting round her. However, she felt she must put them out; but throughout her rain of dust and brambles, she shouted defiance at the devil, again watching her, till speech died and she again fell, and lay so long that the crows ceased cawing, but circled lower.

Then instantly and marvellously the burning sand changed to water. Water, water! She had been calling and praying for water, and she in a bath—not cold, certainly, but water. Gloating silently, she laved handfuls of hot sand over her, her mind alternating sanely and insanely. Not so much, or she would drown—no, smother. Now, now, what about that dead creature? Where was it? Into this bath with it. Where was it?—feeling about. Then she again forgot it. Ah! this was tasteless, unsatisfying water, and blinded her aching eyes without cooling her hot mouth; still, she must drink it. No, she must struggle up—staggering to her feet—for she would neither like to drown nor smother.

Oh, the horrible droughty dust! the wretched sheep must be rushing the water.

'Back! back! you thirsty, eyeless brutes, raising such stifling clouds of dust. Back! back! or by the Lord I will grab one of you by the throat and—and——' No! no! never; she would not drink blood. Poor frightened wretches! Come on! come on! she must make way for them, but she must make haste and get away. What was she groping for? What had she lost? Ah! the child—the dead child. God be praised! there it was, and unhurt by the crows, perched quite close to it. She had baffled them, but she could not go far while the earth rocked so, nor could she see. Great God! what was wrong with her eyes?—feeling them. Had the crows—— 'Haw, haw!' they cawed mockingly, as they ascended, but only a few feet. No, only the dust from those sheep had filled her eyes and her mouth. Dry! dry! wiping it out—drier and hotter than the brick oven where long ago she had hidden from God, and now God was hiding from her. Huskily and hoarsely she called Him, then waited, watching the sky. But there was neither sign nor sound till the crows cawed, 'Cor-pus Chris-ti! Cor-pus Chris-ti!' 'Body of Christ!' she invoked. Yes, there, on that tree, begotten of what Bush-mother, hung the crucified Christ—eyeless, with a tangle of wild hair and

beard, His white arms extended crosswise, and His bare body glistening bloodlessly, save for the red blood that had trickled and clotted from His wounded side.*

She laid the child between them and knelt: appeal in her upraised hands: in the strained eyes sympathetic, reverent awe; but her droughty mouth was dumb. As from emotion, the drooping spearheads of the sentinel leaves quivered, she also, but Christ kept silent and still; she lowered her eyes. Along His glittering bare skin a bulldog ant crawled intently toward the speared side. Her heart bounded indignantly. How dare it? With trembling tenderness for Him, she drew it off. It stung her—no matter; but had it stung Christ? And she laid her burnt swollen lips where its hold had been on Him, then again raised her eyes to His. But He could not see with those sightless eyes. Ah! the awful crows! They were there, hovering over her head, had not lost sight of her since she fell first. Ever and ever should she stay by Him and keep them off. And the flies! Oh, horrible! horrible!—watching intently those eyeless sockets. Had she, like poor Mary, come too late? Hastily she broke off a bough to beat back those buzzing horrors.

In the greatness of her work she forgot her droughty pain. Always and always she would stay beside Him. None should touch Him. No soldier dare again thrust a spear in His side. Stay—His side! What flowed? Blood—and—water—flowed—water! Her mouth gaped. Blood—and—water! Water! Violently her heart beat; stealthily she took a step nearer the wounded side, mouthing something. Back a step, then again forward. Maddeningly fierce was the struggle. No, no, dear Christ; fear not, for she would not drink His precious blood. Sobbing, she fell at His feet. She was thirsty, dear Christ—how thirsty!—and tears were salt, feeling her dry eyelids, and involuntarily placing her fingers on her tongue. How swollen it was—more swollen and painful than her stung hand! Ah! that bond between them; and she rejoiced that she had dared that for Him: now forgiveness. Never such a face as hers, imploringly upturned to Him.

From above His head a strip of bark descended—a sword. Submissively she bowed her guilty head, but it fell clear. Still she waited, her lips voicelessly twitching. How merciful He was! and mercy ever begot her penitence. But—but though He knew her need, He moved no hand to hold a sponge, dipped even in vinegar, to her burnt lips. Ah! how could she forget? He also thirsted for water. ‘I thirst’; and they gave Him a sponge dipped in vinegar, but He could not drink that. Dear crucified Saviour! she would bring water. But first, where was the sponge (groping for it), because how else could she carry it? And if her own lips were only cooler, she would find water quicker. Fumblingly she groped and groped, till the burning blood gushed from her nose and mouth; then, mercifully, her tired

senses swooned, and she fell with her head resting on the tree.

Her mind was clearer when she recovered, but she woke to the same holy purpose. In this tender Shepherd's care she would leave this lifeless lamb till she found water; then in her palms, hollowing them, she would carry it to Him.

Exalted with this divine mission, she went downhill, her soothed senses unnaturally acute, keenest of all sight. The blazed trees, along the track instinctively selected, held no meaning for her. No thought now for whether she were going right. Swiftly down Mount Calvary Hill slope she went; nor had she wonder when, in the hollow beneath, she saw the lagoon. Only she turned round to cry to Him that she had found it, and would return speedily. Stay, let her first be sure, lest she deceive Him, for what could be worse than her past fancies? No, this was no fancy. Water, water, water! Knee-deep she went into it, clutching it greedily, then clenching her hands determinedly, for her swollen tongue kept apart her teeth. Not one drop would she drink till He first drank, then bade her! Down, down dropped her burning head and desiring, droughty mouth to it, yet resolutely she fought. Out went her hollowed palms—full, nay, they were overflowing; then, surely, she might stoop and drink the drips. Oh, shame on her—she that would cheat Christ! Listen—yes, He was calling her name!

‘My Christ, I come—I come!’ she called back.

No heed how to find Him, and speedily as her palms, cradling the precious water, permitted, she went on. Oh, sad that she dared not run, but she——

Why had those crows so suddenly uprisen? What prey had they found to mutilate here? What great swollen creature was that lying there, blocking her way? Was it one of the Marys? No; none of the Marys had red hair. See, here on the ground lay a tuft of it, and the woman's clenched hands were full of it. She was fearful, but she must go closer. She looked intently at the distorted face. The eyes were gone—but the familiar pointed teeth were showing in the widely gaping mouth.

For a second she resolutely battled to beat back her sense of recognition; then she wrestled with her sense of duty. This water she had so carefully carried was for the thirsty, waiting Christ, not for this woman, her enemy, whom she had hated. How cruelly bitter was this battle!—bitter from uncertainty. ‘For inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these——’

‘Mina—poor Mina!’ who had not been guided to the water as had she. Pityingly, into that open mouth trickled every drop she held.

Alas! even now she had not done right. She had only wasted the water, for Mina was dead, and the deceived Christ was again calling her name.

Who were these carrying the dead child coming from Him towards her? Two soldiers? No; one was a centurion. She thought the tall one was like—like—— Why, even the soldier, the dark one, with the dead child, was like, so like—— But if the women of Jerusalem were dark, so must the men be. But this other, bearded, was fair and merely burnt with the sun. Surely he was only—— No! no! she—she closed her eyes.

Oh, of all the bitter cruelties that her fancy had played on her, surely this was the cruellest! But she would not be deceived; they were merely the soldiers come for the body of this woman. She must not betray Mina, or they would cast her dead body to the dogs, like Jezebel's.

‘Soldier’—speaking to the dark man, then slowly turning to the other—‘and centurion, I will come to Christ next. This poor woman—this’—watching intently the tears raining from the centurion's eyes—‘I—I’—moving back from his outstretched arms—‘I——’

‘Ursie!’

A great sob broke from her; then—

‘Andree!——’

THE END

* ‘Christ on the Cross’ is frequently to be found on trees in the Australian Bush—a tangle of shredded bark for hair and beard surrounding an eyeless face. The white-armed boughs stretch cross-like, and even the wounded side is represented by the crimson congealed gum.
