’POSSUM

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"Then he shot down, head foremost, and again found himself in the grass." (Page 96.)

’POSSUM

BY
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Author of ”Glen Eyre,” ”Mates at Billabong,”
”Norah of Billabong,” ”Jim and Wally,”
etc., etc.

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To
My Mother

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'POSSUM

CHAPTER I
THE "HOUSE BEAUTIFUL"

The trim suburban garden blazed with flowers. Over the porch at the gate mandevillea hung in a curtain of fragrant white, and an archway over the path that wound through the close-shaven lawn was a miracle of Fortune's yellow roses—gold and rose and copper blended gloriously. There were beds aflame with "bonfire" salvia, and others gay with many-hued annuals. Gaudy tulips reared splendid heads near a great clump of arum lilies that fringed a tiny pool where little Garth Macleod's solitary goldfish swam in lonely state. Everywhere there were roses; in standards in the smooth, well-kept beds, or trained along the wide verandas, forming a screen of exquisite blossom. Their sweetness lay like a charm over the garden.

It was a hot spring afternoon. Tom Macleod, digging busily in a corner, pushed his Panama back from his flushed face, and stood erect for a moment to ease his aching back. As he did so a motor whirred to the gate, stopped, and a stout little man hurried up the path, waving a capable hand towards the shirt-sleeved worker across the lawn.

"Hullo, Doctor!" Macleod called.

"See you presently, Tom," was all the doctor vouchsafed him. He disappeared behind the roses on the veranda, and Macleod returned to his work with a furrow between his eyes that had not been there before. From time to time he

cast half-impatient glances towards the house, whence no sound issued. Finally, with a hasty movement, he plunged his spade into the soil, and went with long strides across the grass—meeting, at the step, the doctor, who plunged out of the house like a plump Jack-in-the-box.

"Oh!" said Macleod vaguely. "How's the kid?"

"The kid? why, going on first-rate," said the doctor, laughing. "Can't a man stay five minutes talking to his patient's mother without your making up your mind that the kid must be dying?"

Tom Macleod grinned a little shamefacedly.

"The last three weeks have rather unsettled my nervous system, I believe," he said. "I didn't know I had one until Garth took to trying to die. You needn't be so superior, old man. I believe the little beggar shook up yours, too!"

"Well—it hasn't been too jolly a time," admitted the doctor. "One doesn't like to see a nice kid suffering: and Garth and I are old chums. Anyhow, he's better. Come and sit down; it's an extraordinary thing, but I have time for a cigarette."

He went with quick, short steps towards a bench under a drooping pepper tree, Macleod following with his long, easy stride. No two men could have been a greater contrast: the short, plump doctor, with his humorous, ugly face, which every child loved at the first glance, and the tall, lean Australian, clean-limbed and handsome—almost boyish, but for a certain worn expression, and for the lines of anxiety which his boy's illness had graven round his eyes and mouth. They lit their cigarettes and stared at each other.

"On the rare occasions when you announce that you've time to smoke, I have noticed that you generally have something to communicate—probably unpleasant," said Macleod. "What is it, old man?"

"I wish you weren't so observant," said the doctor; "it's disconcerting. Well, I *have* something. It isn't exactly new: I hinted at it to you six months ago. Now I've got to speak plainly."

"You mean——?"

"I mean that if I had a boy like Garth I wouldn't run the risk of trying to bring him up in a city," the doctor answered. "I haven't been satisfied with the little chap for a long time. His constitution's all right—there's nothing radically the matter. But he doesn't thrive. You've seen that for yourself, Tom."

"Yes—I've seen it," said the father heavily. "Of course, we've kept hoping he would grow stronger. As you say, there seemed nothing really wrong, and he's pretty wiry——"

"If he hadn't been wiry I could not have pulled him through the last three weeks," Dr. Metcalf said. "You may thank your stars he's wiry."

"If he hadn't picked up this unlucky illness——"

"Well—I don't know," said the doctor. "I'm inclined to think you may yet consider it a blessing in disguise. You might have gone on pouring tonics and patent messes into him, and hoping he'd improve. You can't do it now. It's up to you and Aileen to give him every chance, if you want a strong son instead of a weakling."

"That's final?" Macleod asked.

"That's my considered opinion. I know your difficulties, old man. But I know you don't value anything in the world beyond Garth. Take him to the country; let him live out of doors, and run as wild as a rabbit; give him unlimited fresh milk—not the stuff you buy out of a can—country food, and pure air: let him wear old clothes all the time and sleep out of doors—and in a year I'd stake my professional reputation you won't know him. Keep him in a Melbourne suburb, and I won't be answerable for the consequences."

"That's pretty straight, anyhow," said Macleod.

"I mean it to be straight. I haven't known you since you were at school to mince matters with you now. And I'm fond of the kid: I want to see him grow into a decent man, with all the best that is in him given a fair chance."

"We've tried to do that," Macleod said. He looked round the glowing garden. "It's such a jolly home, and he does love it."

"It's one of the jolliest little homes I've ever seen, and it's going to hurt both of you badly to leave it," the doctor rejoined. "The trouble is, it is too jolly. You have made yourself a little Paradise inside the tallest paling fence you could build, and you've shut out all that lies outside that fence—miles on miles of teeming streets, packed and jammed with people. You're in the midst of grass and roses and things, with a sprinkler going on your tulips, or whatever those rainbow affairs are—and you don't think about the street outside, dry and baking, with a hot wind swirling the germ-laden dust about—blowing it probably upon the meat and fruit and milk you'll buy to-morrow. The air comes to you over thousands of houses, clean and dirty, and thousands of people breathe it. You've got to get where there's no second-hand air."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Macleod. "Will you tell me how any children manage to live at all?"

"It's a special dispensation of Providence that most youngsters don't die from germs," said the doctor, laughing. "I'm aware that the infantile population of Melbourne is pretty healthy, but it's always a mystery to me how children in any big city survive their surroundings. After all, Melbourne's cleaner than most places. However, there is only one among its hordes of kids that is interesting you and me at the moment, and that's Garth. You've got to get him out of it, Tom."

"When?"

"As soon as you can make your arrangements. I know you can't do that in a moment, but, of course, he could not be moved just yet. When he is strong enough Aileen could take him somewhere until you were ready. But get him to the country. His poor little head is full of stories and make-believes: let him forget what a book looks like, and introduce him to a pony. By the way, it's going to be enormously good for you and Aileen, too."

"Is it?" Macleod asked, smiling grimly. "I'll worry along somehow, though I know mighty little of anything outside a city. But it's rough on her, poor girl. She just loathes the country—hasn't any use for scrub and bad roads, and discomfort generally. I'll never be able to get her a servant—there aren't any, I believe, once you get more than a mile from a picture theatre. And she has never had to work."

"Don't you worry your head about Aileen," said the little doctor, rising. "She has her head screwed on the right way—and women have a way of doing what they've got to do. She can imagine herself her own grandmother, fresh out from England, and tackling the Bush as all our plucky little grandmothers did. Pity there are not more like them now: we live too softly nowadays, and our backbones don't stiffen. But you'll find Aileen will come out all right. In a year you'll all be blessing me. When you come to think of it, I'm the only one to be pitied. I'm going to miss you badly." There was a twisted smile on his lips as he wrung his friend's hand. "Good-bye: my patients will be calling down maledictions on my head if I don't hurry."

Macleod saw him into his dusty motor and watched it glide down the hot street. Then he turned and went back through the scent of the garden, instinctively making his footsteps noiseless as he crossed the veranda and entered the house.

It was a trim house of one story, with a square hall where tall palms gave an effect of green coolness. An embroidered curtain screened a turn into a passage where, through an open door, could be heard the sound of a low voice reading. A childish call cut across the soft tones.

"Is that you, Daddy?"

"That's me," said Macleod cheerfully, if ungrammatically. "Are you sure you ought not to be asleep?" He entered the room and smiled down at his little son.

"A fellow can't sleep all day," Garth said. "'Sides, I needn't sleep so much now. Doctor says I'm nearly well, Daddy."

"That's good news," said his father heartily. "We'll have you out in the garden soon, and getting fat. The tulips are blossoming, Garth, and your poor old goldfish is awfully lonesome. He says even Bran doesn't go near him now."

"Bran is too busy nursing his master," said Garth's mother, looking at the rough head of the Irish terrier curled up on a chair beside the boy's bed. "We'll

all get out together in a few days, and find out all the beautiful things that have happened in the garden since we were there. Won't it be lovely, Tom?"

She leaned back until her head touched her husband—a tall, pale girl, with lovely features and a mass of fair hair that glinted like Garth's when the sunlight fell on it, and eyes as blue as violets. Her long hands, blue-veined and delicate, lay idly in her lap, one finger keeping open the book from which she had been reading. She was like an exquisite piece of china—fragile, to all outward appearance, and dainty; graceful in every line. Tom Macleod looking down at her, felt as he had felt ten year' ago, before they married, that he must let no wind blow upon her roughly.

Now he had to tell her that they must go away, away from the ordered comfort of city life, which was all that she had ever known, to whatever the country had in store for them. Even for himself, always a townsman, the prospect carried something of dread, as do all unfamiliar prospects. But he knew that, whatever hardships the Bush holds for a man, it is hardest on a woman.

Garth was chattering away, oblivious of his father's grave face.

"Doctor says I can talk as much as I like," he proclaimed happily. "And he says I'll be perflickly well in a little bit, and then Mother can take me down to the sea. And she says she will, didn't you, Mother? And then you can come down for week-ends, Daddy. Or do you think the Office would give you a holiday, like it did the time we went to Black Rock?"

"It might," said his father.

"Do make it," Garth begged. "It would be so lovely, Daddy—and you could teach me to swim." His little thin face, for which the brown eyes were so much too large, was alight with eagerness. "Bran'll come too—he loves going away, doesn't he? D'you know, Daddy, I think Bran was just cut out for a country dog! He's so awful interested when he gets away from the streets."

"I'm not sure that that's not very good taste on Bran's part," said Macleod: and at something in his tone his wife looked up sharply. "What do you think about it yourself, Garth?"

"Oh, I just love the country," Garth answered. "You get so tired with streets—they all look alike, nothing but motors and dust. The Gardens are jolly, of course, and so's Fawkner Park; but they're not the same as the real country. D'you remember the time we went to Gippsland for the holidays? Wasn't it lovely? I always felt when we went out walking that we might meet anything whatever—fairies, or Bunyips, or—or all sorts of things!"

"But you never did, I suppose?"

"N-no," Garth admitted. "But I used to pretend I did, and that was fun. And I truly did see some rabbits and a wallaby, only the people at the farm weren't a bit pleased when I told them about the rabbits. Mr. Brown said he'd rather see

a gorilla on any of *his* land. Isn't it a pity rabbits are such damageous things, Daddy? Anyhow, I used to pretend that all the really bad fairies had got locked up inside rabbits, to do as much mischief as ever they could, until they got good again. But Mr. Brown said that if ever he heard of a rabbit getting good he'd eat his hat."

"Seeing that Brown told me he'd just spent two hundred pounds netting his land against rabbits, you couldn't expect him to love them," Macleod said.

"Two hundred pounds is an awful lot of money, isn't it?" Garth asked innocently. "But you've got heaps more than that, haven't you, Daddy?"

"Not as big a heap as I would like," his father answered. He walked across the room and stood looking out of the window, his eye wandering over the well-kept garden. A lucky legacy had enabled him to buy his home just before his marriage: now he wished with all his heart that he had not spent so much, in the years that followed, in making it nearer and nearer to their hearts' desire. They had built a room here, a veranda there: had installed electric light and cooking power, electric fans and electric irons—had filled the house with every modern device for ease and comfort. His salary was good: there was no need for economy. He had lavished it on the garden they loved, until its high walls enclosed, in truth, a little paradise. Their personal tastes had been expensive: stalls at the theatres, little dinners at the Savoy, races, dances, bridge parties, had all been commonplaces in their happy, careless life. Best of all had he loved to dress Aileen beautifully. "When a fellow has the loveliest wife in Australia, it's up to him to see that she's decently rigged out," he would say, bringing home a fur coat, a costly sunshade, a piece of exquisite lace. He hardly knew how much his own clothes, quietly good, had cost him: Garth had been the best turned out boy in the neighbourhood. Their servants, well-paid and lightly-worked, had kept the household machinery moving silently on oiled wheels. There had seemed not one crumpled petal in the rose-leaves that strewed their path.

The trained nurse entered softly, bearing on a little brass tray Garth's tea-service—dainty china, painted with queer, long-necked cats.

"This is the first day I've felt really int'rested in tea," Garth proclaimed cheerfully, wriggling up on his pillows. His mother moved quickly to help him, slipping a wrap round the thin little shoulders. Then a gong chimed softly from the hall, and she turned to her husband. Her fingers lay on his shoulder for a moment.

"Tea, Tom."

"Oh, all right," he said, and turned from the window. "So long, old son—eat a big tea."

"I'll eat a 'normous one, if Nurse will only give it to me," Garth said, eyeing his tray hungrily. "Mind you do, too, Daddy. And come back soon."

"I will," Macleod said. He smiled at the eager face as he followed his wife from the room.

CHAPTER II
BREAKING BAD NEWS

It was one of Aileen Macleod's whims that she liked to brew her own tea. A copper kettle bubbled busily over a spirit lamp on the tray as they entered the drawing-room, and her husband flung himself into an arm-chair and watched the slim, beautiful hands busy with the silver tea-caddy and the quaint, squat teapot. Neither spoke until she came to his side with his cup.

"I beg your pardon, dear," he said, trying to rise. She kept him back, a hand on his shoulder.

"You've been working: why shouldn't I bring you your tea?" she said, smiling at him.

"Because I ought to be looking after you," he rejoined. He was on his feet with a quick movement, took her by the shoulders laughingly, and put her into a big chair, bringing tea and hot cakes to a tiny table beside her.

"There!" he said. "No: you want another cushion. Now lie back, sweetheart, and rest; you're ever so much more tired than you'll admit, even to yourself."

"Being tired doesn't matter, now," she said. "Nothing matters, now that Garth is safe. But it's nice to be bullied." She smiled at him, with a little restful movement, then took up her cup. Over it she looked at him questioningly.

"Dr. Metcalfe *is* quite satisfied, Tom? What were you and he talking about for so long?"

"Oh, he's quite satisfied with the boy's progress," Macleod answered. "He says you and he can go away quite soon. We—we were just yarning." Something tied his tongue; she looked so tired, and yet so peaceful. He would not tell her just yet.

Aileen opened her lips to speak and then closed them again. They talked idly of the garden, the tulips that were just blossoming, and the new roses, until tea was over and a silent-footed maid had removed the tray. Macleod lit a cigarette, and lay back in his chair.

"Tell me, Tom," she said quietly. "I know there is something more."

He was silent for a moment, looking at her. She was very pale, her breath coming quickly.

"Don't bother about anything now," he said. "We've got the little chap back; and you're dog-tired. You mustn't worry about anything."

"Don't you see—when I don't know, I think it's Garth!" Her voice broke, almost in a cry. "Tell me—quick!"

He was on his knees beside her in a flash.

"What a fool I am!—it's all right, my girl. Garth's quite safe. Only we've got to go away—to leave all this and take him to the Bush. He'll grow strong if we do. But I didn't know how to tell you."

His wife gave a long sigh, and put her face down on his shoulder.

"Oh-h!" she said. "I thought it was something that really mattered!"

"My girl!" said Macleod huskily. For a while they did not move. Then she put him away from her gently, and looked at him with steady eyes.

"I suppose I shall wake up some morning—perhaps to-morrow morning—to realize that it's quite large and important," she said. "But at present it seems the smallest thing, because all that really counts is that Garth is safe. Tell me all about it, Tom."

"Metcalfe won't answer for him if we keep him in town," he said. "If we take him right into the country for a few years he will grow into a strong boy. Therefore, as the Americans say, it's country for ours."

"Of course. What will happen?"

"We'll sell or let this place," he said, watching her face keenly for some sign that the blow was telling. But there was no change in its eager interest, and he went on.

"I must send in my resignation at the office. They'll be nice about it, of course: probably they'd always try to find a berth for me, though it would not be as good as this one. That will leave us with the little bit of private income we have and whatever we get out of the house. We might live on that, after a fashion. But if we've got to go into the country, I'd rather see if we can't make something out of the land."

"But we don't know anything about it."

"Not a thing," Macleod agreed. "But I don't believe it's so awfully complicated: surely a man of reasonable common sense can learn. And look at the alternative—living in some beastly cottage in a township, with not a thing to do. I don't think I could stand it."

"I'm sure I couldn't," said his wife. "Of course you'll learn—look at all the stupid people who do well out of land. Quite stupid people: and your worst enemy can't say you haven't got brains, Tom!"

"I make you my best bow," said her husband solemnly. "You're very encour-

aging, ma'am! I'll try to live up to your high estimate of me. But what seems to matter more is that I think I've got enough muscle."

For the first time a shadow of doubt came into her eyes.

"I don't want you to be worked to death," she said. "Will it be very hard for you, Tom?"

He broke into a short laugh.

"Hard for *me*! Do you think it matters the least little bit about me? But it maddens me to think what it's going to mean for you. Do you realize that it means no more fun, as we've always counted fun? no more outings or gaiety, no pretty clothes? any sort of a home, and mighty little comfort? We—we won't have much money, Aileen."

"We'll have enough to—to *live*, won't we?" she asked. "To buy food, I mean?"

"Oh, there'll be enough for that. But we'll have to scrimp in a hundred ways. I don't know that we can even keep a servant for you, though I don't suppose, for that matter, that there are any to be had in the Bush. I wouldn't mind that so much if I could help you: but I'll have my own work outside, and it will keep me going. I've never let you work, Aileen," he ended wistfully.

"No, you haven't," she said; looking at him gently. "If ever a woman was thoroughly spoilt it's your wife!"

"I couldn't have had the face to marry you, if it had meant that you would have to work," he answered. "How could I, when you'd never done any work in your life?"

"I don't know that that is a very creditable record for a woman," she said reflectively. "I've often thought my life was too soft a one; only you have made it so easy to be lazy, Tom."

"You're not lazy," he defended her hotly. "Look at all you have on hand—your music, the garden, the home—do you think it's only servants that have made us our 'House Beautiful?' You've charities, and Women's Leagues—and Garth. It seems to me you're always busy."

"They're all very pretty things to play at," she said, laughing. "All except Garth: he is a solid reality. Now I'm going to discover ever so many other realities. Don't worry about me, Tom, dear. It's going to be an Awfully Big Adventure, but we'll get through somehow."

She smiled up at him. Something like a great weight lifted from Macleod's heart.

"You aren't afraid?" he asked.

Her face grew grave, and for a moment she did not answer.

"I never knew what fear really meant until Garth was ill," she said, at length. "One says one is afraid of lots of things; but you get right to the terrible depths

of fear when you think your child is dying. And it teaches you that nothing else matters. Now that Garth has come back, and I can hold him again, nothing else even seems serious. I suppose a month ago I might have felt scared at the idea of cooking and scrubbing, but now I feel as if I could do it, and sing. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, I understand," he answered. "It's hard to imagine anything else troubling us, if the kid's safe. But will we feel like that in a year's time? in six months? The sharp edge of thankfulness will have worn off then, but the cooking and scrubbing will remain."

She nodded.

"It isn't easy to say. I suppose I shouldn't make any predictions, since I don't in the least understand all I'll have to tackle. But plenty of other women have done it, and much more—women with half a dozen little children. I'm not going to be afraid." She lifted her chin with a defiant little toss. "I suppose it will be hard, and I'll make ever so many mistakes—so will you, and we'll laugh at each other! Oh, Tom, nothing can be very bad if we keep laughing, and we have Garth!"

"You dear!" he said. "I might have known you'd take it that way. Of course"—he hesitated—"there are other alternatives. You wouldn't care to send Garth to live on a farm for a few years, if we could get hold of the right people? Like the Agnews did with that delicate boy of theirs, you know?"

"The Agnews couldn't help themselves," said Aileen. "*There's* a woman to be pitied, if you like. Mrs. Agnew aged ten years in the first year after she had to part with Harry. We don't do that sort of thing in this family. Next?"

He laughed.

"With my first suggestion badly squashed——"

"You would have squashed it yourself if I hadn't, Tom!"

"Yes, but I knew you would," he said comfortably. "Well, the next is really more feasible." He watched her narrowly. "Suppose I stayed on at the office, and we let this house, and I lived in rooms; there would be money enough to establish you and Garth in some little country place where you wouldn't have to work, and it would be all right for the boy. It would mean separation, of course, but I might be able to run down to see you every few months. It would be far easier for you, dear."

"And for you?"

"Whatever is best for you will be best for me," he said. "You know that, Aileen, don't you? I will be quite satisfied with your choice."

"I wish I knew what you want," she said, watching his face.

"And I won't tell you." He laughed at her.

"Very well," she said, "then I will choose, and it's your own fault if you don't

like it. I think that as a planner you begin well, and then slump dreadfully—at any rate, your last two efforts are simply horrid. Do you think I can take the responsibility of bringing up Garth alone, just when he needs a man's hand? He'd break his heart. I wouldn't dare to tell him we meant to leave you. And if you imagine that a little freedom from work would make up to me for being without you—— Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Tom Macleod?"

He sat down on the arm of her chair and lifted her hand against his face.

"I had to give you your choice," he said. "But you don't know what a blue funk I was in!"

"Then you ought to be more ashamed of yourself than ever!" she retorted. "We're mates, you and Garth and I: nothing matters, so long as we are together."

"Not even scrubbing?"

"No," she said. "Nor ploughing, Tom?"

"Certainly not. Nor cooking?"

"Cooking might be fun. What about milking?"

"I learned to milk in my extreme youth," said he proudly. "That's a detail. But—washing?"

"It's done in the best families," she said. "Counted out. How about clearing land?"

"I will do it with my little hatchet," said her husband. "Washing-up, Aileen?"

"Ugh!" she said. "Even in this uplifted moment I can't pretend I'm going to enjoy greasy dishes. Never mind—they'll get done. We won't think about them. Anything else?"

"Lots, I'm certain. What if the sheep get foot-rot, and the hens develop pip? Or is it the other way round? Could you manage a hen with foot-rot?"

"Just as well as you would handle a sheep with pip. What are they, anyhow?"

"Diseases which have always been happily obscure to me," he said, "Now we'll have to study them."

"We'll study them together, then," said his wife; "then, if they appear we can turn on them our united batteries of knowledge. There must be lots of other diseases, Tom. Is it hens that get glanders?"

"Very probably: it always seemed to me that hens have nasty habits," said he. "Of course, I've only looked at them with a kind of semi-detached eye, but then, I never felt any inclination for close acquaintance with a live fowl. My soul was as a star, and dwelt apart!"

"I think one of the first things you had better do would be to uproot any graceful notions about your soul," said his wife. "We shan't need encumbrances like that for some time. Stout bodies and strong muscles are likely to be more in

our line; don't be surprised or shocked if you find me writhing in odd corners, because it will be only Swedish drill, to develop me—also in odd corners!"

"It will be awfully interesting," he said, laughing. "Couldn't you start it now? I believe there's one lovely exercise that you do at meal-times. Strangers are apt to run to your assistance, thinking you're strangling, but it's only neck-drill, to give you a long, slender throat!"

"I've always faintly hoped mine pleased you," rejoined his wife. "However, it's too late now—it won't matter in the Bush if one has a throat or not. My energies are going to enable me to develop strength enough to throw a bag of wheat over my shoulder, and go whistling down the lea!"

"Why not bring it home? I don't see why you want to throw good wheat about, after I shall probably have had grave trouble in growing it. And what is a lea, anyhow?"

"It's something the lowing herd winds slowly o'er," she said. "You ought to know that."

"I did, but I don't know what it looks like. And I suppose I'll have to know." The laughter died out of his eyes, and he looked at her in silence for a moment. "Aileen—it's all very well to play the fool, but we're two horribly ignorant people. I wonder if we'll do any good at all?"

"Yes—we will," she said stubbornly. "And I don't mean to stop playing the fool: at least I hope I won't have to. Think of poor old Garth, if we grew old and solemn! We'll just back each other up and worry through. We're in a pretty tight place, but we're not going to pull long faces over it. I suppose sometimes things will get bothersome, and we'll be tired, and possibly our tempers may become a bit ragged at the edges. But we'll understand, and not remember it against each other next day."

"Nor next minute, I hope," he said. "Well, a man would be a cur if he were afraid to face things with any one like you."

"Don't you expect too much of me," said his wife. "I'm an ignorant old thing, as you've justly pointed out, and when you have indigestion through my bad cooking you'll dislike me extremely. But I'll improve. Now come and we'll tell Garth all about it."

CHAPTER III
GORDON'S FARM

It was Dr. Metcalfe who found the new home for them.

He came in on Garth's first afternoon in the garden. They were gathered under the pepper tree, and Garth gave a glad little shout at sight of him.

"Oh, there's my doctor! Come along, Doctor, and have tea!"

"This seems a party," said the new-comer, regarding the table beside the boy's couch. "Cakes, as I live! and with pink and white icing! Who said you could have exciting things like that, young man?"

"Mother did—and I b'lieve you told her," said Garth cheerfully. "I'm ever so nearly well. You know you don't have to come and stick that old fernometer in my mouth any more."

"It's evident that it will be needed again to-morrow," said the doctor, regarding the cakes with a lowering brow.

"Never mind—it'll be worth it," Garth rejoined. "Anyhow, I know you're only pulling my leg!"

"The attitude of disrespect shown by one's patients is very distressing," said the doctor, subsiding into a low chair and accepting tea. "Go on, young man: don't blame me when you find the castor-oil bottle looming by your bed of pain! Then you'll wish that you had stuck to good old bread-and-butter, and you'll send for me."

"Well, you'd come," said Garth comfortably.

"I would not. I would send back a stern message—'Double dose of oil.'"

"Then I'd better have a double go of cake," said Garth. "Bettern't I, Dad?"

"Most certainly, I should say," his father answered. "It's a sound rule not to mind paying for your fun." He held the plate for Garth's inspection. "There's one in the corner, with an enormous blob of icing: it looks pretty good."

"It is," said Garth, digging his sharp little teeth into it, with a rapt expression.

"A nice pair, you are!" quoth the doctor, regarding them with a twinkle in his eye. "Not that I can blame the son, seeing what his father is. I pity you, Aileen: you'll have a hard time with them when you get to the Back of Beyond."

"Oh, did you know we were going there?" Garth queried eagerly. "Isn't it lovely, Doctor! I'm going to have a pony, Dad b'lieves. Will you come and see it?"

"It will be my one ambition," the doctor told him gravely. "Have you made any arrangements yet, Tom?"

"I'm trying to find a place," Macleod answered. "The office has been awfully decent: they say I'm to come to them if ever we return to Melbourne, and they'll do their best to take me back. Likewise, they've given me a bonus, which is handy."

"And said the nicest things about him," interpolated his wife. "*He* won't

tell you that, so I must—you can blush unseen, Tom. And the staff, to his great horror, mean to give him a silver salver."

"Very handy in the Bush, I'm sure," said the doctor.

"It's jolly good of them," Tom said; "but I wish they wouldn't. Poor beggars, they have enough to do with their money. The awful part is that I believe they're going to make speeches!"

"And you'll have to make one," said Aileen. "Do you think they would let us come and hear?"

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated her husband. "I haven't made a speech since the burst of eloquence I uttered, at our wedding breakfast."

"I remember well," said the doctor. "It lasted fully ten seconds, and then you collapsed. We all blushed for you. I think I'd like to hear you make another."

"Well, you won't,'" said the victim, with finality. "I wish you'd change the subject: it hurts."

"Certainly," said the doctor. "I've found you a farm."

"You have! Where?"

"Down in the Gippsland Lakes country," said his friend.

"Is it any good?"

"I wouldn't have found it if it were not," said the doctor severely. "As a matter of fact, I believe it is rather a lucky find. It belongs to Jim Gordon, an Englishman who has been out there about fifteen years. He knocked about all over the country for a good while, and then bought this place. Now he has had money left to him, and he's going back to England. But he likes Australia, and he does not mean to stay away for ever, so he won't sell: he's fond of this little place, and he'll take a low rent if he can get a tenant who will look after it. He showed it to one man, who looked at his plunge-bath and remarked, that it would be a good thing to set tomato plants in! It seems to have given Gordon rather a shock."

"It would," said Aileen feelingly. "Did you tell him we were nice people, Doctor?"

"I went as far as I could," said the doctor guardedly.

"I wonder he hasn't already come to call, in that case," said she, laughing.

"Apart from your quite unjustifiable reasoning, he isn't exactly a calling man," the doctor remarked. "I gather that he has lived very much to himself on this place, doing most of his own work, and that he is not at all popular among the settlers near, who, probably regard him as full of unpleasant English pride—which he is. He's one of those stiff-necked people who think their own ways are always best, and so will never learn any new ones. Therefore, he has never made much money. From what he says, there is plenty of work to be done on this place. It's about the acreage you want, and there's a decent little house on

it; and he does seem to have taken some pains with his orchard and garden. But for the most part he appears to have gone fishing, and let the place take care of itself."

"Would there be room on it for a pony?" Garth asked wistfully.

"Yes—and what's more, there's a pony there already!"

"Glory!" said Garth faintly.

"Have we got to take his live stock, too?" asked Macleod.

"It isn't necessary, but I should think it would suit you. There is not much—a pony or two, and a few cows and sheep. You will need all he has had, and, I should think, more: and he'll sell them at a fair valuation. He has two boats, which are let with the house, if the tenant undertakes to keep them in order—he really seems keener about the boats than about anything else. He has a horror of agents and lawyers, and wants to arrange the whole thing privately. If you will consider the place he would like you to go down with him to see it."

"I suppose he would not object to my taking a man down with me? Dawson, who values for our office, knows all about these things: and you know how much I do. The office has offered to lend me Dawson to look at any place."

"Oh, Gordon won't mind—he's really a very fair-minded old chap, and you won't find him hard to deal with. He's not the sort of person to take advantage of the young and innocent: in fact, he'll probably respect you more for taking a tame expert with you."

"It's a long way from town," Macleod said, regarding Aileen with troubled eyes.

"What of that? It's glorious country, and the very place for a small boy," said the doctor, smiling at Garth, who had forgotten cake, and was listening, his eyes shining. "You don't want to be running to town always—that's expensive and unsettling. Cuninghame is quite close, where you can get all your stores: and if you want a bigger town, Sale and Bairnsdale are within easy reach. I've never found out which of them is the capital of Gippsland, but perhaps you'll make the discovery. Did I mention that one of the boats is a motor-launch. You lucky people will be able to explore all the corners of the lakes that mere tourists never see."

"Dad!" came from Garth, in a burst of ecstasy—which somehow checked his father in a remark that busy farmers would not have much time to play about on the lakes. Looking at the delighted face, with the unnaturally large eyes, it seemed better to put that remark away among unborn speeches. He said instead—

"It sounds very jolly. I'll have to teach you to run the motor, old son. By the way, Metcalfe, do you happen to have gathered whether we are likely to make a living out of this highly desirable place?"

"Why, yes, I think you are," the doctor answered. "Gordon has not done so badly, and he's not a hard worker. Given decent seasons and fair luck you ought to get on, though it's not a place to make any fortunes out of. But go down and look at it for yourself."

Which Macleod did, returning a few days later with a cheered expression.

"It's not so bad, Dawson says," he told Aileen, gratefully sipping a cup of coffee, after his long journey. "No fortune in it, as Metcalfe said; but a living, unless we have bad luck. And it's certainly cheap. The house might be much worse—though I'm afraid you will find it bad enough, after this one, my girl."

"Bless you, I'm not expecting a palace," said Aileen cheerily. "I hope it's small: a palace would be somewhat burdensome when one came to scrub it."

"Oh, it's small enough," he said. "We'll fit in, with an extra room or two. There are some things that you don't rind in many bush homes, Dawson says—a decent bathroom, wire window-screens and doors, and a thoroughly good water-supply. They seem awfully ordinary, but I can assure you they're not! And the country is lovely: the view from the front windows will make you forget your old scrubbing-brush!"

"It will be a bad look-out for you if I do!" murmured his wife.

"That's beneath you," he said, laughing. "I don't think a respectable farmeress ought to make bad jokes. There's a good garden, and a fair orchard, and Garth will fall in love with the pony."

"Is the pony safe?" she asked.

"Very unsafe, I think—it's always in danger of going to sleep. I wouldn't like to say how old it is, and I'd hate to ride five miles on it. But Garth will think it a lovely steed. It may make you realize how much past its prime it is when I tell you Gordon wouldn't sell it. He hadn't the face to put a price on it—threw it in with the farm, on condition that it was treated kindly. Well, you couldn't treat anything like that unkindly—not if you had been brought up to reverence age!"

"It sounds a soothing beast," said Aileen—"not likely to harrow my mind by bucking Garth off."

"I'll guarantee it won't. There's another pony, too. I've bought that. Also three cows, twenty-four sheep, some assorted calves, and a lot of fowls. Dawson says they're cheap: I don't know. And I've inherited an orphan boy!"

"Tom! What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. Gordon has a boy on a three-years' lease from an orphanage in Melbourne, and only six months of it have run, so I've taken him over. He's about fourteen, and quite full of wickedness. But one may train him into something."

"Did he—did he look at all clean?"

"He did not. I rather think the training will begin with soap; and it will be

a terrible shock to him, because you'd say from his appearance that he'd never met it. His name is Horace, I suppose, but old Gordon always called him Horrors, and I think we'll stick to it; it's extraordinarily suitable."

"I don't think he sounds nice," said Aileen, wrinkling her pretty nose.

"To tell you the truth," said her husband confidentially, "he isn't. But he'll do a lot of odd jobs. I made inquiries about a servant, but it's as we thought—not a soul to be had. Did you sound Julia about coming?"

"I did," said Aileen. "'Is it me?' said Julia, 'that 'ud be leavin' Melbourne to go to wan of them places I've heard tell of—nowhere to go on your night out, and never a man to see, not if it was even a butcher-boy! I lived in a bog in Ireland all me days till I come to Australia; and 'tis no longer the counthry that I'd work in, but a good town with moving pictures and the grocer callin' every day for orders!' Then she wept at leaving me, and said she loved me as if I was her mother. Annie weeps too, at intervals, but of course she won't leave the young man in the baker's shop. But we couldn't afford them, anyway, Tom, so what's the good of worrying? Stop worrying at once, and tell me more about the farm."

"There's a gorgeous cloth-of-gold rose tumbling all over the veranda," he said obediently, "and lots of nice common flowers in the garden—stocks, and wallflowers, and snapdragons, and honesty, and pinks, and things like that. It's very untidy, but quite pretty. The house is in a sheltered place where anything will grow: he has orange and lemon trees, covered with fruit, and he says the lemons bear all the year round. There are guavas, too: I didn't know they grew in Victoria."

"Glory!" said Aileen, quoting her son. "I'll make guava jelly!"

"Do you know how?"

"No, but I'll learn. What else?"

"Oh—apricots, and peaches, and cherries, and apples, and pears, to say nothing of gooseberries and currants. There's a good strawberry bed, too."

"It sounds lovely," said Aileen. "Think of pies! I've been learning to make pastry, Tom, and Julia says I have a lovely hand for it. She's going to teach me all sorts of things. Do you think we can afford to buy one of those nice American oil-stoves? The ovens have glass doors, and you sit in front in ecstasy, and watch your cakes rise."

"What if they don't rise?"

"Then you go and do something else, and hope for the best. Don't depress me, Tom. They truly are lovely stoves, and you and Horrors wouldn't have nearly as much wood to cut. And they're nice and cool to work at."

"Well, that's quite enough reason," Macleod said. "If any dodge is going to make work easier for you, we'll get it, if I have to pawn my watch. Let's go and buy these fascinating things to-morrow. I've got a list of everything in the

house, and you'll have to go over it, and see what else you'll need." He rose and stretched himself with a great yawn. "Eh, but I'm sleepy! The boy is asleep, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, poor man: he tried to stay awake for you, but I told him you would be too tired to talk. He's desperately anxious to hear about the pony—you must go in to see him as soon as you get up, and tell him about it. He is so happy to be going to the country. It's going to be awfully worth while, Tom."

"Is it?" Then the doubt in his eyes died at the sight of her face. "Yes, I believe it is," he said. "But then you'd make anything worth while!"

CHAPTER IV
INTO THE UNKNOWN

They said good-bye to the "House Beautiful" in the early morning, while the roses on the porch were still wet with dew. One fragrant bud brushed Aileen's shoulder as she went, and she picked it, and tucked it into her coat. If a little shiver ran through her as the door closed behind her, she gave no sign. Their cab rattled off down the familiar suburban street. Neither Tom nor Aileen looked back.

At the big station all was bustle and hurry: and soon they were in the train and slipping through the long miles of grey houses, until the just-awaking city was left far behind, and wide green paddocks and gum trees, tall and stately, surrounded them. Little townships, like beads upon a string, brought them to a halt every few miles: sometimes so close together that there seemed scarcely any break between the outlying homesteads.

"Plenty of settlement here now," Macleod said. "My mother used often to travel this road by coach, and it was a journey in the winter: the road was just a succession of bog-holes. There was one cheery spot known as the Glue-Pot. Passengers used to get out there, in a body; the women and children stood under the trees, often in pouring rain, while the men got their shoulders to the wheels and dragged and pushed the old coach through. It must have been hard on women with babies."

"Ugh!" said Aileen. "Do you know, I think our mothers were made of better stuff than we are."

"I don't," said her husband stoutly. "You aren't called upon to do what they

did—you would do it if you were. But I don't think we men are anything like as good as our fathers: we're brought up softly, and we simply haven't got their muscle and endurance and pluck."

"It's just the same with you—you would do what you had to."

"I suppose we'd try. Honestly, though, we wouldn't get through as much. Every one thinks more nowadays of having a good time: the old people never took holidays, never had luxuries: worked year in and year out; had mighty few clothes, and patched them until they fell to pieces. I suppose that's partly how they made money. No, we're poor specimens compared to our fathers."

"Well, *I* think you're just as good as Grandfather, and a jolly lot better!" said an indignant small voice; and Garth hurled himself tumultuously upon his father.

"It's something to have a champion, isn't it?" said Aileen, laughing. "Sonnie, this is where I tuck you up for a sleep," at which Garth protested that he had never been less tired in his life, but nevertheless submitted to being rolled up in a rug with his head on his mother's knee; where presently sleep came to him, and he lay peacefully while the train raced through the fertile paddocks that were once a desolate swamp, climbed the Haunted Hills laboriously, rattled down the other side, and so came upon wide plains where great bullocks ceased grazing to look lazily at the iron monster that came daily to disturb their solitude.

Half the afternoon had waned when the train came to the end of its long journey, and they emerged from the station into a sleepy street where two-horse cabs waited to rattle them across Bairnsdale to the river. A paddle-steamer, moored to the wharf, was hooting as they approached, and late-comers were hurrying down the hill, fearful of being left behind. Having thus shown her independence by hooting, and every one being safely on board, the steamer decided not to hurry; and it was some time before she woke up to fresh energy, mooring ropes were cast off, and she churned her way into mid-stream.

Garth was wildly excited. Already a big grey horse in a gig had supplied a private circus for his benefit, declining to cross the bridge over the river near the wharf, and showing its utter disapproval of all bridges by dancing wildly on its hind legs, while the girl who was driving beat it in vain. A parting hoot from the steamer's siren concluded the argument, so terrifying the horse that it dropped to all fours and, in desperation, bolted across the bridge, disappearing in mad career towards the town. Already, Garth decided; the country was showing extraordinary attractions: this sort of entertainment never happened in a Toorak street. And now they were slipping down the river, between high banks where pleasant houses perched, surrounded by beautiful gardens. Boat-houses were built at the edge of the water, whence flights of steps ran up the hill: and little boats, tied to stakes, rocked lazily as the steamer approached, and, as she passed

them, executed a frenzied dance as the swish of the water from the paddle-wheels churned into the reeds along the bank. Sometimes a lone fisherman sat in a boat, patiently angling. These sportsmen regarded the steamer as a necessary evil, and dangled their baits in the air until the commotion of her passing should have subsided.

A road wound along the river-bank. It was partly screened from view by trees, but sometimes they caught glimpses of people riding and driving, and once they saw a flock of sheep, driven by two boys, the younger of whom looked about Garth's age. A little later came three or four merry boys and girls, on ponies, racing, with shouts of laughter, along the track. Garth drew a long breath.

"Isn't the country a lovely place for boys, Dad!" he said.

"It seems pretty jolly, old man," his father answered. "How soon do you think you'll be able to ride like that?"

"I expect I'll have to get bucked off a good few times first," said the small boy soberly. "But it doesn't hurt much if you choose a soft spot to fall, Doctor says. He told me no one could ride until he'd been slung off seven times!"

"Well, a good many people couldn't ride if they had been off seventy-seven times," his father answered. "Some people aren't born to be riders."

"Do you think I am?" queried Garth anxiously.

"Can't tell until I see you on a pony. You ought to be all right; there's a good deal in beginning young. You will be all right if you're not afraid," said his father.

Garth's small face set firmly, and instinctively he stiffened his back. In his heart he was not quite sure that he was not a little afraid. But he hoped no one was going to guess it.

Round a bend came a little sea-going steamer, trim and workmanlike. She passed them, so close that a biscuit could have been thrown from deck to deck. The two crews exchanged cheery greetings; the men on the incoming ship were busy getting everything in order as they neared the end of their long voyage from Melbourne.

"Some day, when we want an adventure, Garth, we'll go round to Melbourne in that boat," Macleod said, watching the steamer's stern as she ploughed her way up the river. "I believe she carries passengers."

"Well, you'll get the adventure if you chance it in rough weather," said a man near them. "I bin round in her an' the ol' *Despatch* too: an' when it's fine it's a jolly good way of gettin' there. But when it's rough, it's a fair cow! One trip, we was four days instead of thirty-six hours, and every one ashore give us up for lost.

"Wrecked?" asked Garth, wide-eyed.

"'M. But we wasn't. We was sheltering in a little inlet, and lucky we was

to get there. We put in at Waratah Bay an' tried to land, but all the ol' boat 'ud do was to try an' climb on the wharf, there was such a sea running: so we got out again. It wasn't no picnic. We hadn't any too much food—not that most of us had big appetites. She was standin' on her head all the time, when she wasn't doin' her best to lie down' on her side an' die, an' we were bruised black an' blue from bein' chucked about. I nearly had me arm broke, from bein' pitched out of me bunk, one night."

"You had a bad time," Tom said.

"It was a fair cow. I guess even one of them big ocean liners might have bin a bit uncomfortable in that storm—and she was about three hundred tons! Anyhow, whatever she was, she could weather a storm better than most of them—there was bigger ships than her went down in that gale. We got to Melbourne all right, if we were a few days late. I guess the owners were pretty relieved when we came up the bay: I know *we* were!"

He laughed, and drew out his pipe. He was an immensely tall man, with broad, stooping shoulders. A straggling beard ornamented a face burnt to the colour of brick-dust, in which twinkled little china-blue eyes. There was something very simple and friendly about him.

"But you have not always had bad trips?" Aileen asked.

"Bless you, no, lady. When it's fine I wouldn't ask no better way of getting about; an' I bin round often when there wasn't hardly a ripple the whole way. There was two young ladies once, travelling round, an' they slept out on deck both nights. Not that I've any fancy that way, meself; gimme a good, air-tight cabin. Oh, you wouldn't ask a nicer boat than the *Wyrallah*—her we passed just now. I had a liking for the poor ol' *Despatch*; but she's gone now."

"Where did she go?" Garth asked.

"Down to the bottom, son. She was tryin' to get into the Lakes' entrance in a heavy gale, with a bad cross-sea running. It's not an easy entrance—very narrow, and a nasty bar. The current took her a bit out of her track, an' she got on to a rock, an' went down. It happened mighty quick. There was lots of people in Gippsland as was sorry for the ol' *Despatch*. She wasn't a beauty, but she'd tramped up and down from Melbourne many a year, and we'd got a liking for her."

He pointed ahead with his pipe-stem.

"We're getting into the lake."

The high banks had changed to flats, across which they could see a broad sheet of water. The land between narrowed to a point; and presently they came out upon the placid waters of a wide lake rippling gently in the evening sunlight. In the reeds near the point great black swans were swimming. They rose as the steamer churned past them and sailed away into the western sky, the clang of

their leader's note coming more and more faintly as they became dots on the blue.

"Some people as calls themselves sportsmen shoot those birds," said their new acquaintance scornfully. "Sportsmen, indeed! I'd as soon go out and shoot canaries, they're that tame. And they're no sort of use when they are shot; you'd have to be mighty hungry before you'd eat one.

[image]

"'Some people as calls themselves sportsmen shoot those birds.'"

"Are they tough?" Aileen inquired.

"Tough—and fishy. The blacks eat 'em, but they aren't white men's food. It's a shame to kill them. But lots of these bright young chaps that come from Melbourne on a holiday reckon that anything with fur or feathers on is made for them to blaze at. I'd teach 'em a thing or two, if I had me way." The china-blue eyes were suddenly fierce. "Y'see, there's lots of things in the Bush that we get fond of, and it makes us a bit savage to have chaps like them rampaging round! I found one of 'em once trying his hardest to shoot bell-birds!"

"Is that very wicked?" Garth asked innocently.

"Well, it's worse than shooting canaries. The bell-birds live in the fern gullies: they're shy little brown things, hard to see, but they've a note just like a little bell chiming away in the tree-tops. You'd think even a Melbourne fine gentleman couldn't help liking them. But there was me gent, with his little gun, looking for scalps; and even a bell-bird's was better to him than none."

"What did you say to him? Did you let him shoot them?" the lad asked.

"I misremember what I said, but he didn't like it, an' he got nasty, and wanted to fight. Lord, you couldn't fight anything like that! So to end it I just gave him a good spanking, and let him go. He went."

Tom burst out laughing.

"You didn't, really?"

"I did, though. What else could you do with him? He reckoned he was grown-up, but he hadn't as much sense as my kid of ten. Spanking's the only thing for that sort—an' I guess he remembers the one I gave him yet. You see, he was rude."

"Are all Melbourne people like that?" Aileen queried, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Bless you, no," said the giant, twinkling in return. "Most of 'em come to fish, and they don't do any harm: an' there's lots that like the Bush, an' wouldn't

hurt anything in it. Some of 'em's that proud of it they even collect all their lunch-papers and burn 'em after a picnic; but you don't meet many as well brought up as that." He knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "Well, I think it's a fair thing to go an' have some tea." He grinned at them, and strolled off along the deck.

"That's an idea," said Tom. "Come on, and we'll have some too."

The little saloon was crowded, so they brought their tea on deck, where nothing, Garth said, was ever so good as bread-and-butter, eaten in the sweet air that blew softly across the lake. Here and there brown-sailed fishing-boats could be seen, and sometimes the steamer slowed down while a boat ran alongside, and the crew pitched empty fish boxes down to the men in blue jerseys, in readiness for the night's haul.

"They'll give them back to us filled in the morning, if they have luck," said the Captain, a long and friendly man who had come down from the upper deck to make acquaintance with his passengers. "Then we ice them, and the fish will be in Melbourne to-morrow night. Not as good as fresh-caught, of course, but then you city people don't know the difference! Wait till you get fish at the hotel, I suppose you're going to Kalimna?"

"No—we're coming down here to live," Tom told him.

"You don't say!" ejaculated the Captain. Light broke upon him. "Is it you who've taken Gordon's place?"

"Yes."

"Wonder how you'll like it." His glance rested for a moment on Aileen, dainty in her well-cut travelling clothes, her delicate face a little pale and tired. "It's not a bad little place, but I'm afraid you'll find it a bit rough. Gordon's a queer stick: hardly ever spoke to a soul. He wasn't what you'd call popular in these parts."

"I hope that won't make people unfriendly towards us," said Aileen, smiling.

"Not much—once they know you're not like Gordon," the Captain answered. "Country people are friendly enough—when they've time—but they can't stand any one being stuck-up, and that was the name Gordon had. He liked the place, too, I believe, but he never would make any friends. He was a lonely old soul. Well, well! And so you're going farming!" Again his eye travelled over them curiously. "Been at it before, might I ask?"

"No—this is our first attempt," said Tom, flushing a little.

"Well, you've got pluck, haven't you? That's all it wants—pluck and hard work. One thing, you've a good neighbour; Nick O'Connor's a nice chap. Didn't you know him?"—as Tom's face showed no response. "That's him you were talking to awhile ago—that big chap."

"Is he our neighbour? Oh, I'm glad, aren't you, Dad?" Garth exclaimed.

"And are you going to be a farmer, too, young man?" queried the Captain.

"I'm going to try," Garth said manfully. "Dad says I can help him."

"I should say so—a big fellow like you. Would you like to come and see the engines?"

"Glory!" said Garth blissfully, and trotted off by his new friend. Half an hour later his father went in search of him, and found him on the upper deck, grasping the wheel with his thin little hands, and trembling with eager delight as the steamer answered his touch. The Captain stood by, laughing at his efforts.

"I'll make a sailor of him, if he finds he doesn't like farming," he said.

"I'll remember," Tom said, laughing. "Which is it going to be, Garth?"

"I like this—awfully!" Garth panted. "But I suppose one might get a bit sick of it. And you can't have a pony on a ship!"

"Not as a rule," said the Captain. "Well, let me know if you change your mind. I might have a vacancy for a first mate any time." He patted Garth on the head as the small boy went off with his father to the warmth of the lower deck and his big overcoat.

The day was dying, and Garth began to feel a little tired: ready to sit down between his father and mother, and watch the lake shores as they glided by. They were in another lake now, the first of the chain of three that stretches inland from the sea; and their course was close to shore, underneath wooded heights and past beautiful little bays. The lake grew darker and darker. It was all very beautiful and peaceful: but, to the three strangers, it was certainly a little lonely, perhaps a little unfriendly. Home—the dear "House Beautiful" seemed very far away.

There came a momentary stoppage at a little jetty under high cliffs, where three or four men with rod cases went ashore and disappeared on a steeply ascending path. Then the steamer ran on, almost under the cliffs, until the lake narrowed, and opened out again; and ahead they could see the lights of a township. On the right hand, dimly visible, a narrow pathway of water ran out, between long grey piers, to an illimitable grey waste of water beyond; and a dull sound that had for some time been audible swelled to a roar; the thunder of the surf pounding on the entrance bar and on the Ninety-Mile Beach. They steamed past the entrance and into what seemed a little land-locked lake: paused for a moment at another jetty, and then made across to the beckoning lights on the further shore. The long journey was at an end.

CHAPTER V
THE HOME-COMING

Weary, a little dazed, the three travellers stood up, collecting rugs and wraps, and moved to the rail, watching the bustle of disembarkation. Most of the township of Cuninghame seemed to have come to meet the boat; the wharf was crowded, fishermen and labourers mingling with gaily-dressed visitors—boys in flannels, and girls in pretty frocks. Across the street from the wharf, light streamed from the open doors of a brightly-lit store, throwing everything else into greater darkness.

Tom Macleod leaned forward, scanning the throng intently.

"I wish I could see my worthy friend, Mr. Smith," he muttered.

"Who's Mr. Smith, Daddy?"

"Mr. Smith is the proud owner of a two-hoss shay he calls an express-wagon: and I hired him to meet us and drive us home, my son," Tom answered. "Thank goodness, there he is!" as a short, thick-set man came into view in the shifting crowd. "Hi! Smith! Stay here, Aileen: I'll go and get the luggage ashore." He disappeared, and they heard his voice again urgently hailing Mr. Smith, who strolled to and fro on the wharf, apparently enjoying the evening, but making no effort to find his temporary employer. Finally, a more insistent call secured his attention, and they lost sight of him.

A long and dreary wait ensued. The decks had emptied; and the steamer lights were being turned out. A keen wind blew from the water: Aileen wrapped Garth in a rug, and they crouched together on a seat, too tired even to talk. The people on the wharf went home, or clustered in groups near the store, gossiping. From time to time they caught sight of Tom and Mr. Smith, crossing and re-crossing towards the street, laden with boxes and trunks. Garth was nearly asleep when at length his father appeared.

"You poor souls!" Tom uttered. "I'm awfully sorry to have kept you such a time, Aileen. But we couldn't get a soul to help us, and Mr. Smith isn't what you'd call a swift mover. Asleep, sonnie? Come on—we'll soon be home."

Garth got to his feet stiffly, and stood, shivering, while his father and mother gathered up the rugs. Then they crossed to the wharf over a narrow gangway. In the street waited Mr. Smith, in a curious vehicle like a single-seated buggy with a very long tail, which tail was piled high with their luggage. The seat was very high, and looked—and was—exceedingly uncomfortable. Two impatient horses were making attempts to start, and Mr. Smith was repressing their energy.

"G'd evenin'," he said. "Back there, Blossom. You're a long way off your paddock yet. Take care how you get up, Mrs. Macleod; the step's a bit high. Afraid the kid'll have to sit on your knee. Bit of a squash, ain't it?"

They settled themselves somehow; the high seat caused Aileen's feet to dangle uncomfortably until Mr. Smith obligingly produced a sack of potatoes

which acted as a footstool and prevented her slipping down. Tom took Garth on his knee, and muffled him in a rug. His head went back thankfully upon his father's shoulder. Mr. Smith clicked encouragingly to the horses, and they trotted up the street, leaving the brightly-lit store behind them. On one side were dim houses, and on the other, behind a low stone wall, the lake glimmered, and the water splashed on the shingle.

They turned inland presently, along a track that was hardly visible to the untrained eyes of the city people, though Mr. Smith and the horses followed it unerringly. It wound like a snake among the dim shapes of gum trees. Soon they were beyond the outlying houses of the township, and only an occasional lit window showed the existence of any inhabitants of this lonely region. Even these disappeared at last, and they drove into what seemed utter blackness.

Afterwards, Aileen Macleod was amazed to find that her new home was only three miles from the township. On that first night, twisting and turning on the dark bush track, with her senses numbed by weariness and homesickness, it was an interminable drive. Garth fell asleep, but the bumping of the express wagon over unseen obstacles awoke him constantly, and he whimpered a little—too tired to be a man, in spite of his seven years.

"Buck up, ol' son," said Mr. Smith. "We're just about there."

They stopped at a white-painted gate, only half visible to the strangers. Tom got down and fumbled with unaccustomed fastenings, while the horses fidgeted at the delay, and Aileen tried hard not to be nervous. At length it was open, and then another pause ensued while it was shut—an operation even more difficult than the opening. Tom swung himself up into the wagon again, with a muttered apology for his slowness.

"There ain't a decent gate on ol' Gordon's place," Mr. Smith said. "You'll have to let your boy come back with me to open it—I'd never hold these brutes once they got their heads pointed for home."

They were trotting through a paddock, where, apparently, no track existed. Bump—bump—bump, they went, over hollow and rise, stick and tussock. The horses swerved and twisted among the grey tree-shapes. Once they shied so violently that Tom had to clutch Aileen to save himself from being thrown out. Something got up with a snort and lumbered off into the darkness.

"A bloomin' cow!" observed Mr. Smith.

"Do cows always lie down on the track at night?" Aileen asked.

"Cert'nly," said Mr. Smith, in some surprise. "The things what don't come here at night, gen'lly-as-a-rule, is horses and buggies!"

A new chill crept over her. The stupid incident seemed to sum up her position. The cow was at home, and she, most emphatically, was not. Would it ever be home to her?

A faint light showed through the trees ahead, and presently they were skirting a rough garden fence, as Mr. Smith announced his intention of taking them round to the back. He pulled up, with a great grinding of brakes, and shouted "Coo-ee!" loudly. Across the yard a door opened, and a boy's squat figure showed against the light.

"There's your man," said Mr. Smith, with something resembling a chuckle. "Come over 'ere, 'Orace, and lend a hand with these things."

The boy moved slowly, hesitatingly, forward. Tom got down, and held out his hands to Garth.

"Come on, sonnie. Be careful, Aileen: the step is high."

He lifted Garth down, and turned to help his wife. She was numbed from her cramped position, and stumbled against him, glad of his arm, for a moment.

"I'm all right, Tom," she said then. "Give me something to carry in."

"You can take the rugs," he said, "and Garth. Don't come out again, dear; just look round the rooms to get the hang of the place. I'll hurry the things in as quickly as I can, and come to help you."

Mother and little son stumbled across the uneven yard, guided by the light from the door. The squat boy brushed against them, evidently afraid. They reached a narrow veranda, across which the light streamed. It came from a kitchen: such a kitchen as Aileen had never seen. She looked into it half-timidly.

It was not a very large room, and it was indescribably filthy. A fire, which seemed the only clean thing, blazed in a rusty-looking stove, which had not known blacklead since its earliest infancy. On the hearth, logs, buckets and dirty boots mingled: a very black kettle and some evil-looking saucepans stood on the stove-top and the hobs. The floor was covered with tattered linoleum, with bare spaces here and there where the ancient covering had worn away, or still lingered in ragged strands. There was a sink in one corner; a large table, the surface of which shone with blackened grease, a dresser, covered with a queer assortment of cracked and stained crockery. The walls had once been whitewashed, but the white had long disappeared beneath a coating of smoke and grime. A black frying-pan hung by the fire-place, with a toasting-fork that had been twisted out of fencing wire. Over all was a reek of vile tobacco smoke, mingled with the smell of dirt and closeness. It was very evidently the sitting-room of Horrors. The mantelpiece held a framed text, its gaudy flowers almost invisible under the speckled and misty glass. It said, "God Bless Our Home."

"Mother!" said Garth, in a whisper. "Is this where we're going to *live*?"

She looked down at the child's white face, and woke from the disgust and horror that had swept over her.

"Well, it is, sonnie," she said. "But it won't look like this long. You wait until we all get busy at it, and you won't know it. Anyway, we'll forget about it

to-night. Come on and explore the rest of the house."

There was only one lamp, and she did not like to take it, since its dim beam was the only guide for the men as they tramped backwards and forwards from the wagon to the veranda. She looked about on the dresser, and found an end of candle stuck into a broken porter bottle, the sides of which were thick with grease. No matches were visible, so she held it to a blazing stick until it was alight. Then they entered their home.

There were four main rooms, with a kind of lobby at the back, off which were bathroom and storeroom. It was a simple cottage, such as you will find in the Bush in hundreds: a big living-room, and three bedrooms of varying sizes, the largest of which would have made a servant's bedroom in the "House Beautiful"—which was, perhaps, a place that gave itself airs. Such rooms they were! The extreme filth of the kitchen had not penetrated indoors; but they were dirty enough, with dust thick in every corner, and an almost unbearable fustiness that cried eloquently for fresh air. After her first sniff of the evil atmosphere Aileen went hastily to each window, flinging them open: all save one, which, apparently, never had been opened, and declined to begin now. She struggled with it for a minute and then gave it up, glancing at her dirt-streaked hands with a little shudder of disgust.

They had sent ahead of them, by steamer, a few articles of furniture, arranging with Mr. Smith to bring them out and unpack the new beds; which stood, gaunt with their naked mattresses, looking painfully clean amid the surrounding squalor. Sheets and blankets were somewhere in the mass of luggage that even now was being flung down on the dark back veranda. The other furniture was rough and untidy, and chiefly home-made: the dressing-tables were old packing-cases draped with dingy cretonne, the washstands were shelves against the wall. Mr. Gordon had evidently been a gentleman with a turn for carpentry: there were chairs made from barrels, and bookshelves composed of old laths from fruit cases, and filled with tattered and dirty books. The walls were boarded and varnished, cobwebs forming their only decoration.

"It's a funny house," Garth said plaintively. "Mother, could I go to bed, do you think?"

"Mother hasn't got a proper bed ready for you," Aileen said. "Never mind, sonnie: I'll fix you up without proper things for a while."

She brought the bundle of rugs, and spread them on the smaller bed: Mr. Smith, with an admirable economy of space, had erected both in one room. Garth was fumbling wearily at his buttons, and she came to his aid quickly.

"We won't take all your clothes off, because your pyjamas, are hiding in one of the boxes," she told him. "But you won't mind that, to-night."

Garth was past minding anything. His heavy head nodded forward as she

picked him up, kneeling on the dirty floor while she unlaced his boots; then she laid him gently back on the uncovered pillow. He was asleep almost as his head touched it. Very gently, she drew the rugs over him, and turned from him, shading the candle with her hand.

Tom Macleod, entering hurriedly, looked from the white face on the pillow to that of his wife, almost as white.

"My poor little girl!" he said.

A lump rose in Aileen's throat. She choked it back with decision.

"If you begin to pity me I might cry, and there doesn't seem time for any diversion like that," she said, smiling bravely. "We're all right. I've put Garth to bed—-the poor man was so tired I wouldn't wait for sheets. But I would like some milk for him, Tom. Do you know if there is any?"

"There should be any amount—I think it's kept in the store-room," he said.

"And a saucepan?"

"Smith says he put the new pots and pans in the store-room, too—and the bread and meat and things we ordered."

"Then we'll all have hot milk and bread before we start unpacking," said his wife with decision. "Would you get the lamp, Tom? I'm so tired of this illumination!" She put down the greasy bottle and looked at the candle-end with disfavour. "I'll leave it, in case Garth wakes."

The store-room was more hopeful, since its window consisted of wire gauze, through which the air came freely. They found milk in what seemed to Aileen enormous quantities, most of it sour; but a bucket held the fresh supply of the evening, and a huge parcel from the store revealed butter as well as bread and groceries. They found another lamp, and while Tom heated milk in a hurriedly-rinsed saucepan, Aileen spread their first meal in the dining-room, using old newspapers for a tablecloth. She woke Garth, and made him drink a cupful of milk, but he was too sleepy to eat.

"Never mind—the milk will do him good," Tom said, watching them. "Now come and have some yourself."

They looked at each other over the paper-spread table, and to each of them came a vision of the "House Beautiful"—was it only last night that they had been in its dainty luxury! Neither spoke of it, however. Tom poured milk into a cracked cup and gave it to her.

"Don't be afraid. I washed the cups!" he said. "There was plenty of hot water, but nothing to dry them with—at least, nothing that you'd have cared about! So they're damp, if clean."

"Bless you!" said his wife. "Did you ever wash a cup before, Tom?"

"Not that I know of," he said, laughing. "But it isn't really difficult, if you have brains! Is the house very awful, dear?"

"Well—I'm inclined to think it's as well I had no stronger light than my candle-end to inspect it," she said, forcing a laugh. "It's—well, just a bit dirty. You ordered a charwoman, didn't you, Tom?"

"Of course I did. At least, one doesn't order them in this part of the world: one begs them humbly. I arranged with a plump lady named O'Brien, and Smith was to bring her out as often as was necessary. But she sent him a message that she had a lady friend from Bairnsdale staying with her, and she wasn't going. There doesn't seem to be any one else; so, since Gordon left, the house has been at the tender mercy of Horrors, not that I think he gets much beyond the kitchen. The kitchen is eloquent of him."

"It is, indeed," said Aileen, with a shudder. "Where is he now?"

"Gone to open the gate for Smith. I told him to come back quickly, but I don't fancy he's strong on being quick. I want him to help me carry things into the lobby—it's the best place to unpack. You know where to put your hands on the things we need to-night, don't you?"

"Oh, yes—bedclothes and sleeping things are all together in the black trunk, and so are our old clothes. They're all handy. But I can't remember where I packed soap and towels."

"They'll turn up," said Tom cheerfully, "especially if you don't worry about them. All you have to think of to-night is bed, even if you go there grubby! I'm afraid you'll have a very hard day to-morrow, my girl."

"It doesn't seem as if anything could be hard if I only had a sleep first," she said. "Have more hot milk, Tom."

Tom drained the saucepan.

"I never knew what a really good thing milk was," he said. "Let's live on it largely: it's cheap, and easy to cook! I feel pounds better."

"Kin I go ter bed?" said a voice at the door.

It was Horrors: a curious, squat boy of fifteen, with a very red face in which small eyes looked dully at the world; with a mop of extremely tight black curls, and an expression of stupidity that proved to be quite genuine. His clothes, tightly buttoned, were of blue dungaree, and had a well-filled look which, later, they found to be due to a habit of wearing other complete suits underneath the top layer, as though prepared at any minute to leave home suddenly. He stood at the door opening from the lobby and repeated his question heavily.

"Kin I go ter bed?"

"You can't, just yet," Tom said. "I want you to help me carry in those boxes."

"Awright," said Horrors sadly.

"Where do you sleep?" Aileen asked nim, studying her new henchman gravely.

"In me room."

"But where? Not in the house?" with a swift fear.

"Over there." He jerked his head towards the outer world. It was characteristic of Horrors that he never used two words where one would do.

"There's a buggy-shed, with a lean-to attached that forms Horrors' sleeping-bower," Tom told his wife. "I told him to clean it out before we came."

"Did," said Horrors.

"H'm," said Tom. "Pity you didn't clean the kitchen, too. Well, we'll get in these boxes."

They carried them in, placing them so that they could be conveniently unpacked. Aileen dragged out bedclothes and garments and made the bed by the light of the candle-end, now nearly exhausted. She was not used to the task: it would not have been considered a well-made bed. But it looked rather like heaven to her when it was finished.

Tom came in, to find her rooting wearily in a trunk.

"I wish I could have helped you," he said anxiously. "What are you looking for, now?"

"Soap," she said, her lip quivering in spite of herself. The hunt for soap had suddenly assumed enormous proportions—she had a vague idea that, if necessary, she must go on searching for it all night.

"Oh, you poor old tired thing!" her husband said. "There's an old bit of yellow in the bathroom, and here's a spare pillow-case—it will make a beautiful towel. I've got hot water in the basin—it was the dirtiest basin you ever saw, by the way. Come along." He lifted her to her feet.

They washed their hands and faces together in the basin, like children, and dried them on the pillow-case. The candle-end had guttered out when Aileen went back to her room, and she undressed by a faint gleam of moonlight that filtered in through the uncurtained window. The smell of the yellow soap was her last waking memory on her first night in the new home.

CHAPTER VI
A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

The sun was streaming through a threadbare yellow blind when Aileen Macleod awoke next morning. For a moment, dazed with sleep, she wondered what had happened—surely Julia was very late in bringing tea! Then memory came to her,

and, with it, the realization that, for the first time in her life, food depended upon her own exertions. Simultaneously came the conviction that never before had she wanted morning tea so much.

She slipped out of bed. Garth and her husband were still sound asleep, but from outside came a clatter of buckets that gave hope that Horrors was astir. The thought of the bath called her. But on examination, the plunge-bath proved to possess an encrusted layer of dirt that defied cold water, and effectually robbed her of any craving to use it. The basin provided minor ablutions—the pillow-case was still damp from its midnight use, but its cleanliness, even though moist, was pleasant. Everywhere that she looked the pitiless daylight revealed dirt which the kindly candle-end had hidden the night before. She drew the skirts of her pretty dressing-gown more closely about her as she went back along the narrow passage towards the locked front door. She threw it open and went out upon the veranda.

[image]

"She drew the skirts of her pretty dressing-gown more closely about her and went out upon the veranda."

Before her was loveliness of which she had not dreamed.

The house stood on a little hill, which sloped gently away at the back, and, in front, shelved more steeply down to where a glimpse of blue water showed. Like a river, it wound away among the hills until it was lost to sight: now narrow, now widening almost to a baby lake. Beyond were hills clothed with gum trees and wattle, stretching to the far distance; but nearer, she looked down into an exquisite fern gully, where splendid tree-ferns flung their fronded crests high into the air, and smaller fern-growths nestled about their stems. The plash of a tiny waterfall told of a stream running through it, to empty itself in the lake. Nearer, the hills were low and rounded, their fresh greenness a delight to tired city eyes.

No other houses were visible. It was as though they owned all the sweet countryside that stretched about the little cottage. On a far rise she could see knots of sheep, like dots of white wool upon the green; but before her no living thing moved, and there was only the still peace of hill and valley and curving lake. There had been fear in her heart—the fear born of inexperience and ignorance, the dread that the task she had shouldered would prove too hard for her. But it died as she looked out across the paddocks. In fancy she saw Garth running on the hills: growing strong and rosy, losing the pinched, tired look, and the blue

circles under his eyes. With that dear vision in her heart, nothing else could matter.

She went back to her room. Garth was sitting up in bed, frankly bewildered.

"Hallo, Mother!" he said. "Did I go to sleep in my clothes?"

"You did," said his mother, beginning to brush her hair with swift strokes. "You were quite too tired last night to worry about pyjamas and sheets, sonnie."

"I don't remember a thing about it," said Garth. "I say, isn't this a queer room?"

"Oh, rooms don't count," Aileen answered. "You won't think about them when you see what a country we have come to. It's just lovely, Garth. Green paddocks—and gullies—and blue water!"

"Glory!" said Garth, and tumbled out of bed: a quaint figure in crumpled shirt and trousers. He ran to the window. "Oh-h, Mother!"

"Are you two discovering Gippsland?" asked a sleepy voice.

"Yes. Get up, lazy one, and discover it too," said Aileen.

"You forget that I explored it before kindly bringing you here," answered her husband, turning more comfortably on his pillow. "Aren't you grateful to me?" He suddenly regarded her with amazement. "Why are you doing your hair in that small, hard bun?"

Aileen skewered the bun in question with a final careful hairpin.

"There is going to be an amount of dust raised in this house to-day that will make up for the years during which it has never seen a spring-cleaning," she answered. "And my hair is clean. So I screw it in a bun, and presently I shall also tie it in one of your largest handkerchiefs. Then I shall sally forth and attack our new home with a broom."

"To do which, you must be fed," said Tom, getting up with a quick movement and disappearing towards the bathroom.

"How he'll *hate* that wet pillow-case!" Aileen murmured. Inspiration came to her, and she dived into a trunk, which, after a moment's rummaging, revealed a large brown towel. Thrust in at the bathroom door, this induced gasping sounds of gratitude.

The newspaper tablecloth of last night did duty for breakfast also; and breakfast was eggs, boiled over a spirit-lamp, and tea, which Tom brewed in the kitchen. Garth, delighted at what he regarded as a huge picnic, trotted here and there, helping and hindering with equal enthusiasm.

"I've made a tour of the house," Aileen said, manipulating an enormous brown tea-pot; "and I want to map out our plan of campaign. What are you going to do?"

"Help you, until the place is clean," said her husband, looking at her. She was an unfamiliar Aileen, in a blue overall, short and workmanlike, and with her

tightly-screwed hair. Tom came to the conclusion that he liked it. "What do we do first?"

"Good housewives, I have always read, begin by setting their kitchen in order," she answered. "But I think I would rather have clean bedrooms first; and I propose to ignore the kitchen. It's dirtier than all the rest of the house put together, and I feel that it will keep. If we could set up the oil-stove in the lobby we could boil kettles and things there. I brought an enormous piece of cooked corned-beef, so we shan't need to cook."

"First-rate idea," said Tom approvingly. "What about the kid? Does he eat corned-beef?"

"There's a cold chicken for him," said his mother. "Also meat jelly, in a jar: I trust it's not broken by that unholy bumping last night of Mr. Smith's express wagon. What does Horrors do to earn his living, Tom?"

"He's supposed to do what he is told; but under Gordon he seems to have done very much what he liked," Tom answered. "He milks three cows, and feeds pigs and calves and fowls; and cuts wood, and draws water—no, he doesn't, there are taps, praise the pigs! He's just an odd-job boy—and quite at your disposal. His not to reason why!"

"He might do some of the rougher work, and the scrubbing," Aileen said. She knitted her brows. "I do feel so stupid—I don't know where to begin!"

"I don't blame you, with a house in what my old nurse used to call a dirty uproar," said her husband. "Let's hurl everything out of one front room on to the veranda and clean things there. Then we'll clean the room, and put the clean things back into it, and then we'll sit down in the clean midst of everything and smirk at the result. We shan't be clean, ourselves, by that time, but that's a detail. If we do that every day for a week you won't know our mansion!"

"It sounds a good plan," said Aileen enthusiastically. "Come on, and we'll begin." She reached the door, and then turned back, laughing.

"I quite forgot that if we didn't clear away the breakfast things, nobody would!" she said. "I must wash up."

"I'll help you, Mother," said Garth eagerly.

"Will you, sweetheart? Well, you can dry the things. And Tom, if you could get Horrors, you and he might begin the hurling-out of the furniture. Where is Horrors, by the way?"

"When I last saw him, he had eaten five eggs, and was beginning a sixth!" said her husband. "If he feels well enough, which seems doubtful, I'll get him at once. I'll fill the kettle for you. Don't go into the kitchen more than you can help, for it is in every sense a place of horrors. I saw fully five thousand cockroaches there last night."

"Ugh!" shuddered Aileen.

"Don't worry. I'm told that it's only at night that 'the rogues come out to play,'" said he. "We'll poison them when we come to attack the kitchen. They must have been great company for that boy in the long evenings—we mustn't grudge him lively society!"

"What's cockroaches?" asked Garth, greatly interested. "I never saw one."

"I trust not," said his mother hastily. "Never mind them—we must get to work, sonnie."

There were evil rags in the kitchen that had done duty as dish-towels, and which Aileen, having sniffed gingerly, lifted on the point of a stick and conveyed to the fire. There was also a dish-pan so encrusted with the remains of many washings that she decided to use a wash-hand basin. There were the shelly remnants of Horrors' breakfast—which it seemed best to leave for his own disposal. Finally, having discovered that when cockroaches are sufficiently tame and prosperous they do not always shun the daylight, she seized the kettle and, shuddering, fled, leaving both doors open, that fresh air might remove some of the more obtrusive odours of Horrors' sitting-room. Later, she found that this plan had led to the intrusion of a large family of fowls and several half-wild cats. In the hope that some of these visitors might care for eating cockroaches, she forebore to disturb them.

It was a strange day for a woman who had never before done an hour's hard work. Throughout her life she had known only ease and dainty comfort; now she found herself plunged into dirt and squalour, with no skilled aid, and handicapped by utter inexperience. It was the inexperience that almost angered her as the hours went on. By nature she was practical enough—it was hurting to her pride to make stupid mistakes that must be paid for by more hard work. She scrubbed a room without thinking of cleaning the walls and ceiling—which, when examined, yielded so much grime that her fastidiousness forthwith scrubbed the defiled floor again. Tom was greatly annoyed with her when he found her on her knees, wielding the scrubbing-brush anew. But at least there was comfort in having done the job thoroughly.

Horrors, as a scrubber, proved an utter failure. Tom said he "took the rough off"; but Aileen, looking at pools of filthy water which seemed to have flung up waves of dirt, decided that his methods were hopeless, and—when Tom was out of the way—went over the work again herself, and made the discovery that scrubbing is not so easy as it looks, and that it carries possibilities of backache undreamed of before. Indeed, as the day wore on, a thousand aches seemed situated in her back, and her shoulders grew so stiff that she could scarcely raise her arms. Like all enthusiastic beginners, she tried to do too much, and paid the penalty.

Yet throughout the hard day she was never unhappy. The work brought

its own reward in the delight of feeling cleanliness about her again; and it was something to be working together, uniting their efforts in making the new home. Garth's happy face, as he appeared from time to time at a window, full of joyful tidings of new discoveries outside, was a never-failing tonic. And Tom was the best of mates; ignorant as herself, and much more unpractical, but full of energy, and with a joke always on his lips. Garth's voice singing, as he roamed in the garden, mingled with his father's, singing also, to the accompaniment of much rattling and banging, as he unpacked and erected the new oil-stove. It made her want to sing herself—only that her back ached too much.

They lunched in a scrappy fashion, very late which was foolish; and, having lunched late, let afternoon tea go altogether, which was more foolish still. They had yet to learn that hard work, without sufficient food, does not pay. Aileen was finishing bed-making, in a room that fairly smelt of cleanliness, when Tom appeared in the doorway.

"Six o'clock; and that's the last stroke of work you do this day," said he firmly. "Come and eat things: I've made an enormous pot of tea, and Garth has laid the table."

"How lovely! and what dears you both are!" she said, turning, and smiling at him. Then suddenly the room began to turn round, slowly at first, and then faster, and she was falling through space.

It seemed a very long while, though it was but a few moments, before she opened her eyes, to find herself on her bed, with Tom bending over her.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "I'm all right, Tom—let me get up." She struggled to rise.

"Lie still, dear," he said anxiously.

"Did I faint?—how silly of me!" she said disgustedly. "I'm so sorry; I must have frightened you."

"I'm glad I caught you," he said. "Isn't there some medicine I could give you? Sal volatile, or something? Tell me where to look."

Colour was coming back to her lips. She began to laugh.

"Oh, I don't want any medicine," she answered. "I haven't got any, either—you know I never faint, Tom. It's too stupid of me to do it now. I was only a little tired—and I think the idea of tea overcame me!"

"Keep quiet, then, and I'll bring you a cup," he said, disappearing. He was back in a moment, cup in hand, and made her lean against him as she drank it.

"That was lovely!" she said, lying back. "Oh, I've such a heavenly feeling of laziness, and of course, I must nip it in the bud! I'm all right now, Tom, and so hungry. Come along."

"Sure you are?" he said, regarding her doubtfully as she got up. "Well, don't go tumbling about like that any more: it scares one." He held her arm as

they went along the narrow passage to the dining-room, and kept a wary eye upon her throughout the meal. Being well aware of this, she forced herself to be extremely merry, despite thee fact that red-hot knives seemed to be running in and out of her shoulders.

"It's just the beautifullest place that ever was!" Garth said, blissfully looking up from his bowl of bread and milk. "There's lovely sheds, and a big bench with tools—they's rustier than *your* tools, Daddy!—and a stable, and such a jolly loft, with hay in it, and rats!"

"It sounds a jolly place," said his father. "Are there more rats than hay, or vice versa?"

"I didn't see any—-any of those things you said," answered Garth, slightly puzzled. "Do they run about?"

"Not as a rule," said Tom gravely. "Never mind; I dare say there are none. But are there many rats?"

"I only saw three, but I heard lots." Garth's tone was hopeful. "And Bran was awful excited. He couldn't get up the ladder, but he raced about down below, and barked like fun. Do you think you could carry him up to-morrow, Daddy? I tried, but it's a very steep ladder, and he wriggled."

"And who said you could climb up steep ladders?" asked his mother.

"But I couldn't have got up into the loft if I hadn't," said her son.

"That seems to settle it," said Tom, beginning to laugh. "We'll have to get used to these things, I suppose."

"I suppose so," Aileen agreed. "We really don't want a prim suburban son now. Only make me one promise, Garth, to keep my old mind easy—don't go near the water until Daddy has time to teach you to swim."

"I did go, to-day," confessed her son, "but I won't again. You'll teach me pretty quick, won't you, Daddy? And can I go near the little creek in the gully? It's the littlest ever—I can jump across it anywhere."

"Oh, we can leave you the gully," Aileen answered. "And we'll make a swimmer of you just as soon as we can. Every one finished? Then we'll go and look at our work."

The house reeked pleasantly of soap and turpentine, and, so far as was possible, it shone. It had been fortunate for the workers that Mr. Gordon's furniture was both simple and scarce, and so had economized cleaning. They had arranged it to more advantage in the bare little rooms, and already they were homelike, though lacking as yet the smallest pretence at adornment. The cretonne petticoats had been ruthlessly torn from the packing-case dressing-tables, the shelves and tops of which were modestly covered, for the present, with newspapers. Gay Indian bedspreads lent a touch of colour to the prevailing dinginess of the brown walls and linoleum-covered floors of the two front rooms.

"Don't you feel a holy glow that we took up those linoleums?" Tom asked.

"When I think of what was under them, I do!" rejoined his wife grimly.

The lobby was still a scene of wild unpacking; but in the third bedroom, a tiny apartment off the dining-room, the American oil-stove stood in all its bravery of black paint and bright blue enamel, the glass door of the oven shining invitingly. A copper kettle simmered over the flame: on nails on the wall hung Aileen's aluminium pots and pans. A rough shelf held an imposing stack of cookery books, flanked by a big pile of dish towels.

"It does look jolly!" Garth said. "When are you going to begin to cook, Mother?"

"As soon as I have a clean house," Aileen answered. "To-morrow we'll have to attack that awful store-room: and I foresee heart-to-heart talks with Horrors on the subject of milk buckets. His look as if they were washed about once a month. Tom, how lovely you've made the bath!"

The tin sides of the bath fairly winked at them as they entered the little bathroom.

"Seeing that I used gallons of boiling water and about half a ton of soda to it, I should think it ought to look lovely," said Tom. "I doubled myself into the thing for so long that when I finally emerged, I thought I'd never straighten myself!" His eyes twinkled. "What a heap there is in housekeeping one never suspected! I've regarded Julia and Annie as quite ordinary people for years, but now they strike me as rather more than human!"

"But is you two people always going to work?" asked a small voice. "Nothin' else at all?"

Garth's father and mother exchanged glances over his head.

"Poor man! He has never seen us do anything but play!" Aileen murmured. She patted his head. "We'll have to work a good deal, sonnie, but there will be time for quite a lot of fun, too. That has simply *got* to be arranged. And to begin with, I think it's high time you showed me things outside. It's disgraceful to have come to a new home and not to have put one's nose out all day. And outside is so much lovelier than inside!"

"It just is—ever so much," Garth cried. "Come along! I wonder will the pigs have gone to bed!"

"Sure you're not too tired?" Tom asked, a little anxiously.

"I will be less tired if I go," she said. "He hasn't had us for a moment all day."

They went out together, but at the door Tom turned back.

"Go on," he said, "I want my pipe: I'll catch you up."

He watched them stray off into the twilight. Then he went to the forgotten tea-table, cleared it, and washed the dishes. He did it very badly, and with a great

deal of mess, never having washed dishes before; but no one who saw him as he worked would have judged the work hardly. Having finished, he wiped up the mess—of which there was a good deal—with a clean towel, surveyed the result with pride, and strode forth to find his family.

"You've been ever so long!" Garth complained. "Whatever have you been doing, Daddy?"

"Just playing round," said Tom. "What a mercy the pigs aren't in bed!"

CHAPTER VII
THE RIDING OF JANE

A week went by—so swiftly that each day slipped away on wings, and yet, when they looked back, it seemed that years had passed since the grey morning when they left the "House Beautiful." It was a week of ceaseless hard work. At the end of it they looked at each other, toil-worn, but cheerful: in their hearts a queer pride in the new home that the "House Beautiful," with all its charm, had never succeeded in waking. There, it had been so easy to take things for granted. But here, only their own hands and their own brains counted; and they had used each to the full.

It had not been an easy week. The only really easy thing, Torn said, was to make mistakes; and of those, they had made enough and to spare. But they very rarely made the same mistake twice.

Now, within and without, the little bush home was spick-and-span. Everything had been scrubbed and re-scrubbed. Light streamed into it from wide-open doors and through brightly-polished windows. The packing-case furniture swaggered in new petticoats of gay colours. From the barrel-chairs the dingy coverings had been ruthlessly stripped, and they, too, rejoiced in fresh clothing. Dainty belongings were scattered here and there: Aileen's piano, having survived the long journey by steamer and bullock-dray, stood in a corner of the sitting-room; and there were books and pictures and fresh flowers. They felt that they had reached a high level of success when Garth sniffed approvingly, and remarked, "This house is beginning to smell like you, Mother!"

The kitchen had suffered a transformation. With the pained assistance of Horrors, it had been emptied and scraped and cleansed. Unceasing warfare had fallen upon the horrified tribe of cockroaches, and now not one was to be seen,

either by night or day. No scrubbing would remove the marks of ancient filth from the walls, and in desperation, Tom had at length given them two coats of whitewash, and had painted the tin sink with white enamel. At the conclusion of the job it was hard to say whether more whitewash had fallen on the walls or the artist; but the general effect was beautiful.

The colonial oven had been so long a stranger to blacklead that the first two coats had merely made it look as if suffering from an attack of black measles: at which a streak of obstinacy in Tom's soul developed strongly, and he brushed it daily, until, at length, it shone with an ebony lustre most uplifting to behold. They had routed from its interior a large collection of socks, in the last stage of decay—the property of Horrors, who had a pleasing habit of drying wet and dirty garments on the warm oven shelves. The gloom which had been settling more and more profoundly on Horrors since their arrival deepened perceptibly when he discovered that this artless practice must in future be denied him; and when, in addition, he was set to scrub the oven with washing-soda and boiling water, despair seized upon him.

"He's got to the depths," Tom said, laughing. "Nothing can make him feel worse now. When I told him that in future he'd have to wipe his boots before coming in, he only uttered a hollow grunt. I think speech was beyond him!"

"He told me everything was a fair cow!" remarked Garth.

"That's not an expression you need pick up," was his father's comment.

"I didn't pick it up—I was only telling you what Horrors said," Garth rejoined, somewhat aggrieved. "And I asked him what was, and he said, 'Soap, an' scrubbin', an' all that rot!' He says Mr. Gordon never bothered him about things like that and he wishes he was back."

"I don't doubt it," said Tom. "Under Gordon Horrors seems to have done little except wax fat!"

"He isn't nearly as fat as he looks," Garth said. "He wears all the clothes he's got at once. He's got three suits on now, and lots of other things as well."

"Good gracious!". said Aileen. "But why?"

"I asked him, and he said 'cause then he knew where they were."

"Which nobody can deny," said Tom. "Now we understand why Horrors isn't what you might term lissom. Do you think you could speak to him like a mother, Aileen?"

"It's almost the only thing I don't feel like when I look at Horrors," she said. "No—I think it would come better from you. Be brave."

"We pay for his clothes, so I suppose we have a right to expect that he doesn't wear them out in batches," remarked Tom. "Did you gather whether he ever takes any of them off, Garth?"

"Only the top layer, if he gets very wet," Garth said. "But he said he fell into

the creek one day before we came, and got soaked right through."

"He must have hated that!"

"Yes, he did. He said, 'Why, me *skin* was wet!'—just as if it hurt him. So he had to take them all off and put them in the oven, and he went to bed till they were dry."

"Well, you have got more interesting information out of Horrors than I should have believed possible," said Tom. "He never does more than grunt when *I* speak to him."

"He only speaks in grunts, any time," said Garth. "Only sometimes, if you listen hard, his grunts seem to mean something."

"You fill me with hope—I'll listen harder in future," said Aileen, laughing. "Sonnie, are my scones done?"

They were sitting in what Garth insisted on calling "the new kitchen"; Aileen darning socks swiftly, while Garth and his father sat on the table—which, having refused to look clean under any scrubbing, was now covered with white oilcloth. Preparations for afternoon tea were upon it, and a pleasant smell of baking filled the air.

Garth hopped down eagerly, and peeped through the glass door of the oven.

"They've risen ever so, and they're turning a lovely brown," he announced. "I'm so hungry, Mother—don't you think they're done?"

"Very nearly, I think," said his mother, coming to join the inspection, while Tom lent an inquiring eye over their shoulders. "They do look pretty good, don't they? Cooking is so exciting; I don't feel as if I would ever learn to feel calm while I turned out a pudding!"

"If you go on as well as you have begun you'll soon cease to worry," said Tom, preparing to make tea.

"I don't know." She shook her head. "Think of the pie the other day!"

They all laughed. The pie had certainly been rather peculiar. No one knew quite what had happened to it, but after sampling it, the family had fallen back on bread and jam. The pie had gone to Horrors, who had eaten it all at a sitting, with the nearest approach to happiness they had yet seen in him; and had afterwards become, as might have been expected, extremely unwell, his complexion for the rest of the day being a delicate green.

"The pie was an accident, but there's nothing accidental about those scones," said Tom, as the scones, light and puffy, emerged from the oven. "Tea is ready, and I'm hungry enough to eat the lot. Sick boys, of course, aren't allowed more than one, are they?"

Garth uttered a howl of protest.

"I'm not sick!"

He did not look sick now. Even a week of Gippsland air had put colour into

his cheeks and brushed away the tired lines from his eyes. He was no longer a city boy. No snow-white collar encircled his neck; his good suits were packed away, and he lived in blue jerseys and extremely brief knickerbockers, beneath which his brown knees were scratched and bruised. From daylight until dark he was in the open air, exploring the country that was so new and so delightful. There were still traces of delicacy from his illness; but already, watching the light in his eyes and the spring in his step, the father and mother knew that the great sacrifice had been worth while.

"He ate two of my tarts yesterday; and as no ill effects followed I'm beginning to think that nothing could hurt him," Aileen said. "It's difficult to think that only a fortnight ago we were tempting him with delicate strips of toast!"

"They wouldn't be much good to me now," Garth uttered, accepting a large buttered scone with thankfulness. "This is the hungriest place I ever was in: and your scones are scrummy, Mother!"

"Hear, hear!" said Tom, and took another.

"You're such satisfactory people to cook for," Aileen said, "you like everything that is at all possible, and when it isn't—like the pie—you make a beautiful joke of it."

"Well, it was a beautiful joke—you ask Horrors!" said Tom, chuckling.

"Poor Horrors! I ought to have given him extra wages, I think, and instead all I gave him was Epsom salts!"

"He needed them more than wages, I should say," Tom said. "No money would have paid for that pain of Horrors'. Well, you didn't ask him to eat the whole of that pie, so I don't think you need worry. More milk, Garth?"

"Please," said Garth, surrendering a large empty mug. "Daddy, I've got the old pony up!"

"Eh?" said his father, starting. "How did you catch her?"

"I've caught her lots of times," said his son, slightly embarrassed. "She isn't any trouble if you take her a milk-thistle. So to-day I took a halter with me, only I didn't know how to put it on, so I just tied it round her neck and led her up. It's funny how difficult a halter is when it's in your hand—it's all twists and knots."

"H'm," said Tom. "Well, you'd better go and get on her if you want to."

"Oh, Tom——!" began Aileen; and then stopped. This was Tom's business.

Garth had flushed, and his eyes were very bright.

"Truly?"

"Certainly—if you like."

"I—I thought you meant to teach me," the boy said.

"Oh, there's not much teaching in getting on a pony," said his father unconcernedly. "You must find out some things for yourself. Take her into the little calf paddock—she can't get away from you there. Of course, I'll come and lift you

up, if you'd rather."

"No, thanks," said Garth, his head well up. "I've finished—can I go, Mother?" She nodded, and he clattered out of the kitchen. The gate of the yard slammed behind him.

"Tom, is it safe?"

"Was I a brute?" he asked, and smiled at her. "I do want the little beggar to be independent—and he can't hurt himself on that old mare, in a little paddock. He'll manage all right, and be twice the boy for it."

"Come into the store-room—we can see him from the window," said Garth's mother. She caught Tom's hand, and they hurried into the store-room.

The window looked out upon a tiny paddock where the grass was green and thick, since its calf inhabitants had long been turned out into a wider run. Garth was leading old Jane, the brown pony, through the gate. Jane, it was evident, had no wish to be led; she hung back obstinately, until the long grass caught her eye. Then she became docile, and went through meekly, beginning to eat at once. Garth shut the gate, and, returning to his steed, looked at her. He wished he could remember how it was that people got on a horse. Finally he made a little run and sprang awkwardly in the direction where he would be.

There was never any sudden movement about Jane. Whether she stepped or swerved aside would have been difficult to say, for it was done unobtrusively; but the fact remained that when Garth was at the top of his spring, she was no longer there, but a yard or two away, eating peacefully. Garth came down on all fours in the grass, and arose, brushing his knees, his colour somewhat heightened. No four-footed beast had ever looked more innocent than Jane.

He twisted the halter round his wrist for his next attempt and clawed wildly at her withers. Jane gave a slow wriggle, and Garth found himself kneeling beside her, caressing his nose, which had bumped rather heavily against her plump side.

"Old beast—you did it on purpose!" they heard him say. He looked around him for means of help.

An old bucket in the corner caught his eye, and he went for it, placing it beside the unruly Jane, who still ate with a peaceful determination not to be worried by small boys. The bucket was rusty and ancient, but Garth was not in the mood to be delayed by trifles. He up-ended it, and hopped up nimbly, catching at the pony's mane.

Jane walked on sleepily, as if looking for another bite of grass. For a moment Garth struggled to hold her back; then the bucket gave way under his boots and he fell through the bottom, standing imprisoned in the rusty tin. His grasp on the halter brought Jane's head round, and they stood looking at each other—the small boy red-faced and angry, the pony with an air of meek surprise.

Tom burst into a fit of silent laughter, and Aileen, after a struggle, joined

him.

"Tom, do you think he can manage it?" she asked.

"If he does, he's going to beat that pony permanently," said his father. "Let's see what his next move will be."

Garth's next move was to extricate himself from the bucket. It smote Aileen's heart to see long, red scratches on his legs, as they emerged—she sought in her memory for the correct treatment of blood-poisoning. The matter did not worry Garth. He stared for a moment at Jane, who cropped the grass placidly. Then he hauled her to the fence, and tied her to a post, bringing her as close to the rails as she would permit. Jane stood meekly until the boy inserted his small person between her and the fence, and mounted the second rail.

"He'll do it now," Aileen breathed.

Jane knew better. Just as he leaned towards her she slued round gently, so that she faced him again. Her nose drooped towards the grass so far as the restraining halter would allow. Garth poised on one foot for a moment; then, losing his balance, dropped off into the grass, his face redder than ever. It is regrettable to record that at this point he administered a hearty kick to Jane, who looked piously surprised, but otherwise took no notice.

"Well!" said Garth. "Of all the old pigs!"

He made a sudden angry rush at the pony, and was on her back before she realized it. Unfortunately he went a little too far. For a moment he lay across her, kicking and clawing to get his balance; then he shot down, head foremost, and again found himself in the grass. Jane stepped carefully away from him, and continued to eat.

"Shocking bad luck!" was Tom's comment. "What next?"

Garth pondered. That he was angrier than they had ever seen him was clear; but there was a set look about his lips that told of determination not to give in. At this point Horrors sauntered up from the milking-yard and put down his bucket joyfully.

"'Llo!" he said. "Give yer a laig up?"

"Hang that boy!" muttered Tom.

"No thanks," they heard Garth's clear little voice. "I want to get up myself."

"Oh, good kid!" Tom's whisper was joyful.

Garth thought deeply, his eye wandering round the little paddock. Once more interrupting Jane's meal, he dragged her to a corner, and tied her so that the fence would prevent her sidling away. Then he stepped back, took a little run, and landed on her back. There was a moment's struggle, bare legs waving in the air, while Jane hugged the fence as closely as possible in the hope of preventing him from getting his foot down on the off side. Unluckily for Jane, her rotund sides were against this plan. Garth struggled to a sitting position triumphantly,

and uttered a whoop. It was echoed—silently—by his parents.

"Bless him, the darling!" breathed Aileen, after the fashion of mothers. "Come on, Tom—let's go and encourage him!"

"Wait a minute," said her husband, restraining her. "I want to see what will happen when he realizes he's tied up."

Garth was just realizing it; and so was Jane. He leaned forward, and, seizing the rope, tried to haul himself and his steed towards the post, that he might untie her; and might as well have tried to haul a mountain down into a plain. Jane stood passively, with no faintest indication of having noticed that any one was on her back. Garth struggled until he was scarlet, and at length gave it up.

A bright thought struck him. It might be dangerous and rash to be on a pony's back without even a halter, but that was better than being ignominiously tied to a post. Even if she wanted to run away, she could not, in so small a paddock, run far; and then, Jane had not shown any inclination to run at all. So he leaned forward again, managed to reach the knot of the halter on her neck, and began to untie it.

Jane moved forward gently—which Garth welcomed, since it allowed the rope to fall slack, and eased the tension on the knot. It seemed that she knew when she was beaten. Her head drooped lower and lower: sleep apparently stole over her. Garth went further and further forward, as her neck declined, his fingers busy with the knot.

There was the slightest upward movement of Jane's hind-quarters. It could hardly have been said that she kicked up; but there certainly was an elevation, and, slight as it was, it was sufficient for Garth. He was already precariously balanced, and he slid over her head, and landed on his back turning a neat somersault. Jane looked at him sadly.

"You—you old *cow*!" they heard him splutter.

He gathered himself up, a vision of red fury. To kick Jane was his first task, to untie the halter from the fence his second. Then he flung himself at her, and for once Jane was not ready. She backed and sidled, but her activities came a thought too late. Garth was already astride of her, gripping her with his legs, more in blind anger than in intention. He brought the end of the halter down on her neck with a resounding thwack.

"Get on, you old pig!" he shouted

Jane moved on slowly. This small insistent person on her back was no longer to be denied. The anger lingered in Garth's face for a moment; then, as he found he was actually riding—*riding*—it died out, and a wide, happy smile took is place. It was a vision of ecstatic triumph that waved gaily to his father and mother as they appeared at the back gate.

"Daddy—I can ride!"

He drummed his heels against Jane's sides and the pony, surprised and indignant, broke into a jog. Garth bumped happily for a little, not knowing that his heels were still assaulting Jane. Then the jog merged to a shambling trot, and he slipped first to one side, then to the other, went further, clutched at her mane to regain his balance, and, missing it, descended abruptly to the grass. Jane instantly stopped, and began to eat.

Garth picked himself up with a wry face. His father and mother were by the fence.

"Isn't she an old pig!" he said, his eyes still dancing. "I don't care—I did ride her right round the paddock, anyhow, didn't I, Dad? Glory, my wrist hurts!"

"Let's see it," his father said quickly.

Garth held up a wrist for inspection, catching his breath as he did so, unable to restrain himself from wincing. It was queerly twisted. Tom gave a short whistle.

"Oh, you poor little kid!" he said. "You've put it out, I believe!"

Aileen, white-faced, was through the gate, her arm round Garth's shoulders.

"Tom! What will we do?"

"There's a doctor staying at the hotel, I know," Tom said quickly. "I'm afraid to tackle it myself—I don't know enough about it. Don't worry old man, we'll have you right in no time. Get ready, Aileen, and put his arm in a sling. I'll run the horses up."

He flung himself on to the amazed Jane, who went out of the gate and across the paddock with more haste than she considered either pleasant or proper. Aileen caught sight of Horrors' gaping face.

"Get the buggy out—quickly!" she told him. "And have the harness ready." She watched him go shambling towards the harness-room before she turned to take Garth indoors.

"Does it hurt you much, little son?"

"A bit," said Garth briefly, with shut lips. "What is 'put it out,' Mother?"

"Oh, twisted a little," she told him. "A doctor will make it all right very quickly; only it will hurt you until we get to him." She looked at the set little face. "Garth dear—don't try not to cry, if it is very bad."

"I would be awful 'shamed if I howled," said Garth steadily. "And Dad would think I was a coward. Dad wouldn't howl."

"Dad is grown-up, and you are only seven," Aileen said. "He wouldn't expect you to be able to stand as much as he can. He will understand, if it's a bit too much for you, dear."

"I'd hate to howl," said Garth. "And howling wouldn't make it better."

"Let me see if this will ease it," she said, her own eyes full of tears. She

folded a silk muffler into a sling, and raised his arm, very gently. Even under the soft mother-hands the child turned white.

"Oh, my little son, I wish I had it!" she said, under her breath.

"I'm ... jolly glad you haven't," panted Garth. His mother put him into a chair, watching him narrowly, lest he should be faint.

"Sure you're all right, sonnie?"

"I'm—pretty right," he said. "You'll come, Mother, won't you?"

"Of course I'm coming." She pinned on her hat quickly, throwing her apron into a corner. "I'll be back in a minute."

Running, she found Tom's flask, and mixed some weak brandy and water in it, slipping it into her pocket. Then there was nothing to be done until a "Coo-ee!" told them that the buggy was ready.

Tom lifted the boy very tenderly to the seat, and they drove out, trying vainly to avoid jolting on the rough track. Garth steadied the injured arm with his free hand, and tightened his lips, uttering no sound; but at an especially severe bump he gave a little sigh, and, half-turning, put his face against his mother's shoulder. She put hers down to him, murmuring broken words.

"I wish you'd howl, or something, old son," said Tom miserably. A muffled "Won't!" came from the hidden face. They drove on slowly bumping and jolting.

"Three miles of it!" Aileen thought, in despair.

"He can't stand it!" She pressed the little face closer to her.

They turned out of the paddock and down the lane, winding in and out among the trees. Presently Tom uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"Cattle! What beastly luck!"

Ahead, a small mob of half-grown calves blocked the narrow lane. A tall man on a brown cob came riding some distance behind them. The calves were feeding lazily, and took very little notice of Tom's angry shouts; nor did their driver hurry himself at first. Presently, however, he seemed to awaken to the fact that his property was in the way, and trotted lazily forward.

"I wish to goodness you'd clear your confounded cattle off this track!" Tom sang out wrathfully.

"One'd think you was in a hurry," said the tall man easily. "Ain't I got as much right to the road as yous?" Then his face changed as he looked at Aileen. "Beg pardon," he said, and they saw that he was their acquaintance of the steamer. "I didn't know it was you, Mr. Macleod. Is the kid hurt?"

"Dislocated wrist," was Tom's brief answer. "Do you happen to know if the doctor is still at the hotel?"

"I know he's not," was the unexpected answer; and Aileen felt Garth shiver. "Went away by this morning's boat."

"And there is no other doctor?" Tom's voice was sharp with anxiety.

"Not nearer than Bairnsdale." The man swung himself to the ground, leaving the reins trailing over the brown cob's head. "Can I have a look, son?"

Aileen slipped away the sling, and Garth held out his wrist mutely.

"H'm," said the man. "Rotten luck, eh, son? Fell down an' trod on it, did you? Think you can trust me to put it right?"

"Oh! can you?" The words came from Aileen in a gasp.

"I'd like a bob for every one I've done," said the new-comer. "Most chaps in the Bush know a bit o' surgery." He nodded to Tom. "Hold him steady."

He took the little wrist in weatherbeateh hands that were wonderfully gentle. "It won't take not half a second, son—just set your teeth."

There was a moment's quick manipulation, while Aileen turned sick: a smothered gasp from Garth, and then a sharp click.

"There!" said the tall man, "all over; and you stood it like a brick, old man. Oh, poor kid—hold him, missus!" For Garth had suddenly grown limp and helpless in her arms.

"On'y fainted—can't blame him, neither," their new friend said. "Give him to me, missus, an' I'll lay him flat."

Garth opened his eyes some minutes later to find himself staring at the sky, with uncomfortable spears of grass tickling the back of his neck. His wrist was tightly bandaged, and there was an extremely unpleasant taste of brandy in his mouth. He felt queer, and very lazy; even though the spears of grass were very uncomfortable, it was far too much trouble to move. Then he saw his mother's face, white and strained as he had learned to know it during his illness, and he smiled at her weakly.

"Hallo, Mother!"

"Dear little son!" she whispered, and a tear fell on his face.

"Had a stiff time, didn't y', ol' chap?" said the tall man, smiling down from a height which seemed to Garth about sixty feet in the air. "Well, you're a man, anyway. I tell you, I've pulled joints in for full-grown men an' heard 'em howl like a dingo over it."

Garth's eyes sought and found his father's.

"Didn't want to cry," he said feebly.

"I'm proud of you, my son," Tom said. They smiled at each other.

"An' you fell off of a pony, they tell me," said the tall man. "Well, we all do that, sometime or other. When are you goin' to ride her again?"

"To-morrow," Garth whispered. "Can I, Dad?"

For the second time that day Aileen checked herself in a quick protest. She looked at Tom.

"Certainly you can," he answered gravely. "We'll tackle her together, old

son."

CHAPTER VIII
RAIN—AND A FRIEND

But it was not to-morrow, nor for a good many to-morrows, as Tom had probably foreseen, that Garth was in a position to apply himself anew to the education of Jane. He passed a restless night, and morning found him feverish and heavy-eyed, his wrist stiff and painful. He had neither appetite nor energy, and did not resist his mother's suggestion that he should stay in bed.

"You can't expect anything else," Tom said sagely. "He's had a nasty shock, poor youngster, and we must remember he isn't really strong yet, even if he *has* got a little colour in his cheeks."

"Indeed, he has none this morning," Aileen said.

"Don't worry; he'll get it back again." Tom was far from feeling as cheerful as his words, but to reassure the tired girl across the breakfast-table seemed necessary. "Just make a baby of him for a few days, and let the other work rip. Don't do any cooking except for the boy."

"And let you starve on tinned things? I don't want both of you ill," responded his wife, laughing. "You give me splendid advice except where you're concerned yourself: and there you are just no good at all. It's a pity, because it shakes my respect in you!"

"You might remember with advantage that I'm the head of the house, and treat me with reverence," he told her severely. "I'll be forced to take steps to make you obey me!"

"I would laugh very much if you did," said his wife, with conviction. "Run away and play in your garden; I'm going to make a pudding as soon as I have fixed up Garth's room, and I really can't be bothered with heads of houses!" She swept him a mock curtsey, and was gone.

When she emerged from Garth's room half an hour later the dining-room was neat and tidy and breakfast cleared away, save for a loaf of bread ornamenting the writing-table—since the best of men is apt to overlook such unconsidered trifles in tidying after a meal. She laughed softly, and restored it to the bread-crock. In the kitchen Tom was just finishing washing dishes.

"Oh, you blessed person!" Aileen said gratefully. "But you shouldn't, really,

Tom!"

"Why shouldn't I?" asked her husband. "You're just jealous, because I wash up so much better than you!" A large fragment of ash from his pipe fell into his dish as he spoke, and clung lovingly to the saucepan he was cleansing.

"H'm!" said his wife. "Well, I don't drop tobacco ashes in, at all events!"

"That's more jealousy, because you can't smoke," said he loftily. "Every one who is well brought up knows that ashes are invaluable, for cleaning saucepans!" He polished vigorously. "There—look at your old porridge-pot!"—waving a wet and gleaming aluminium utensil at her, regardless of a shower of soapy drops.

"It's lovely," said his wife, accepting the saucepan and the shower with meekness. "And you're a dear, though in the interests of your character I generally try to conceal the fact. What vegetables do you intend to present to your starving family to-day?"

Tom fell into the speech of the Chinese gardener who had supplied them in the city.

"Cabbagee, cauliflow', gleen pea an' dly pea, Flench bean, bload bean, spallowglass!" he chanted. "No, not asparagus; but I felt so like old Ah Chee I couldn't stop! Just give your orders, ma'am. Whatever old Gordon didn't do on this place, he certainly left us a good vegetable garden."

"He did indeed," Aileen said. "Now, having dangled all these before my eyes, tell me what ought to be used first."

"Cauliflow'," said Tom promptly. "They're blooming like the rose, only more so."

"I'm so glad—it doesn't have to be shelled!" said his wife. "Peas or beans would have embarrassed me this morning. Where's the cookery book? I never can remember whether it goes into boiling water or cold."

"Does it matter, so long as you leave it there long enough?"

"I believe it matters exceedingly, though I don't see why," said she.

"Mere red tape," said Tom scornfully. "Why not try both ways, and see which comes out best?"

"Think of your feelings on the day when it happened to be wrong," said his wife absently, puckering her brows over her book.

Tom scalded his dish-cloth, wrung it out, and hung it on the rail he had erected for towels.

"There, that's done," he said. "Now I'd better go and catch a cauliflower, since my suggestions only meet with scorn. Want any potatoes?"

"Please," said Aileen. She watched him cross the yard to the shed, and return with his spade, and presently heard him singing as he worked—a gay little snatch of comic opera that was somehow oddly out of place in the Bush.

"He seems happy enough," she said to herself. "I wish I didn't hate it so."

She went out upon the veranda, and stared across the paddocks. The loveliness of the country always helped her—even when the realization was strong upon her that she hated her new life. Not for worlds would she have admitted it to either Tom or Garth; that would not have been playing the game—and to play the game had been instilled into her since her childhood as the one thing worth doing.

She did not always admit it to herself; then it was easier to be cheery for her two boys. She met each day with a laugh and tried to laugh until it ended. But sometimes it was hard. She missed the "House Beautiful," with its dainty comfort and luxuries; the ease of the old days, the little pleasures and excitements, the stir and bustle of city life. The loveliness of the country lay like a weight upon her. Beyond the blue hills her mind saw Melbourne, with its broad streets and great buildings in their setting of gleaming river, and jewelled parks; the huge shops, the gay streets, the "Block," with the familiar faces going up and down. There were all the friends who had helped to make life so merry; here was nothing but silence and green spaces—and work. How she hated the work! the dull repetition of each day's tasks, the grime, the greasy dishes, the hot kitchen, the sight and smell and touch of raw meat! In the first days, while they fought the dirt of the house together, it had been easier, hard as the fight was for her unaccustomed strength. Now she was settling down to a dull routine of daily tasks, and her existence seemed bounded by pots and pans and dish-mops. It was all very small and paltry: but then, life nowadays was made up of small and paltry things, which somehow mounted to a big whole. Perhaps it was because she was tired that morning that it seemed rather too big for her.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I suppose I'll get broken in, in time," she said. "I hope it won't take too long."

Tom came round the corner suddenly, and chaffed her for idling; and she answered him laughingly, until a call came from Garth's room, and, with a cheery, "Coming, sonnie!" she ran to him. Tom finished scorning his vegetables, and shouldered his spade once more.

"Well, it's a queer sort of a life to come to—and not much of a one," he muttered. "But thank goodness, Aileen's as happy as a cricket, so it's all right!"

There were days that followed when Aileen found it harder than ever to play at being happy.

The fine weather deserted them, and for nearly a week rain fell unceasingly. Mud came up to their very doors, so that to keep the house clean was no easy matter. The garden paths were muddy rivers, the flowers sodden with wet. Garth, a prisoner to the house, and with his bandaged arm in a sling, moped for lack of occupation, became as naughty as was possible to his sunny nature, and openly

declared that the country was beastly, and he wanted to go home. Even Tom ceased to sing, and grew bored with long days in the house. The hills and the lake disappeared, blotted out behind a drifting veil of grey rain. The roof developed unsuspected leaks, which all Tom's untaught efforts failed to locate; and, to catch the drips, tubs and basins sat on the floor in the passage—traps for the unwary in the dark. Tradesmen, never very regular callers, ceased coming altogether. Their bread ran short, and Aileen tried her hand at baking, producing loaves that were responsible, through indigestion, for much of the family's low spirits. Tom tramped through the downpour to the township, and returned empty-handed and in disgust—it was the weekly half-holiday, and the baker's shop was shut! So Aileen baked again—this time the soda-bread of Ireland, as taught by Julia; and was more successful. Meat ran out; they would have killed fowls, but no one knew how to prepare them. It was a dreary time. They ate strange dishes made with lentils, and wondered how vegetarians contrived to look cheerful.

The days crawled by slowly, to the ceaseless sound of the drip-drip-drip on the corrugated iron roof. The tanks ran over, and made rivers about the house—-they were as yet too new to the country to be grateful for any sign of a super-abundance of water. All the firewood was wet and sodden, and refused to burn: and the chimneys smoked furiously. Aileen found, to her horror, that there were signs that already her temper was beginning to feel "frayed at the edges"; more than once she caught herself up just in time to prevent herself making a sharp answer to some remark of Tom's. It made her afraid.

"If I'm like that within three weeks, what shall I be in three months?" she asked herself. "Aileen Macleod, you *can't* be a pig! I'll begin praying Mrs. Wiggs' prayer every day—'Lord, keep me from gettin' sour.' It wouldn't do, with two boys to look after."

A cry startled her, and a heavy splash, and the little mother dropped the food she was preparing and fled to the rescue. In the passage, now nearly dark, Garth's boots protruded from the largest of the tubs. There was water everywhere: and Garth, half-choked, and hampered by his slung arm, was endeavouring to struggle out of the tub. To her relief, he was laughing.

"I'm an awful goat!" he said, dripping, but cheerful. "Didn't it serve me jolly well right for being grumpy!"

"Did you hurt your arm?" asked his mother anxiously, helping him to his feet.

"Not a scrap—wasn't it luck! But I'm soaked, Mother." The small boy gave an irrepressible chuckle. "I say, I must have looked funny! Don't you wish you'd seen me!"

Suddenly, to her astonishment and disgust, Aileen found that she was crying. The stupid little accident was the last straw to her endurance: her self-

control slipped from her in the relief of finding Garth unhurt. She struggled in vain to command her voice, and took refuge in silence; but presently a stifled sob made Garth lift his head in amazement, and a tear fell on his upturned face.

"Mother—you're not crying! Oh, Mother, darling, I was a pig—I'm so sorry!"

His arm was round her neck and his cheek pressed to her wet one. The clinging touch helped to calm her.

"I'm all right, sweetheart," she told him. "Don't worry—I was just a bit tired, that's all. You mustn't tell Daddy, or he'd be worried."

"Sure you aren't sick?" Garth asked, greatly alarmed. That mother should cry was sufficiently amazing to mean something very bad indeed.

"No, not a bit. I was only tired, and I was afraid you were hurt. I'm a silly old mother, that's all." She was helping him into dry clothes, handling his stiff arm very gently.

"I've been making you tired—cross beast I am!" said Garth penitently. "I won't be horrid any more, Mother!" He hugged her again violently.

"Poor old man; you've had a horrid week," she said. "Never mind; Daddy says he thinks it is going to clear up, and you may be able to get out to-morrow. Listen, Garth!" She raised her head as the sound of voices came through the thin boarding of the wall. "Daddy has a visitor. How exciting!"

"Who d'you think it is?" Garth asked eagerly. "Why, we haven't had a sign of a visitor since we've been here!"

"It sounds like your friend's voice," said Aileen, wrestling with his buttons.

"That nice man what pulled my arm straight?" Garth said. "I'd like to see him. He did hurt, but he was jolly quick. I was getting sick of that old arm. He's a—a very decent sort of chap, isn't he, Mother?"

"Very decent, I think," she said. "At least, I never was so glad of any one in my life. Let's go and see him, sonnie."

Tom rose as they entered the sitting-room.

"Here's Mr. O'Connor, Aileen."

"Thought it was about time I came to see how my patient was," said the big man. "Hullo, old chap; your Dad says you're nearly all right. Looks a bit washy yet, don't he?"

"I'm quite well," Garth said eagerly. "When can I take my arm out of this old sling?"

Nick O'Connor laughed.

"Seems to think I'm his doctor, don't he? Well, I wouldn't be in a hurry for a few days. You don't want a weak wrist, do you? And when you do take it out, mind you wear a wrist-strap." He turned back to Aileen. "And how d'you like Gippsland, Mrs. Macleod?"

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "I never saw such a lovely country."

"Oh, it's pretty enough. But there's no fortunes to be made here; it's hard scratchin' for a living. I was just askin' your husband what he was thinkin' of doin' with the place."

"I'm hanged if I know," said Tom. "My predecessor didn't do much."

"Queer chap, ol' Gordon," said their guest. "He wasn't the sort of fellow you could talk to at all: lived by himself, and never spoke to no one. Him and that kid Horrors. I wish I'd known you were coming in; some of us would a' done something to the house. Awful dirty, I suppose it was, Mrs. Macleod?"

"It was pretty bad," she said. She caught his eye, and laughed.

"Pretty bad!" said Tom explosively. "Of all the pigsties——!"

"I bet it was a pigsty," said O'Connor, chuckling. "I was on'y here once, about six months ago, lookin' for a stray calf: but then I poked me nose into the kitchen, an' mighty quick took it out again."

"Well, they hadn't washed it since," Tom remarked.

"Not they. Well, it's all very well to laugh, but it was jolly rough on you, Mrs. Macleod. My word, you've got the place nice now! And the garden's a fair credit to you: it was the on'y part of the place where old Gordon did any work. As long as he could go fishin', much he cared for anything else. What was you thinkin' of doin' with the land?"

Tom gave a short laugh.

"I'm blessed if I know," he said. "To tell you the truth, I don't know a thing about it. I've a little stock running on it, so I've just been pegging away at getting things ship-shape before I tackled farming in earnest. What would you advise me to do with it, Mr. O'Connor?"

The big man drew out his pipe.

"Mind me smokin'? Well, it all depends. If you'd bought the place it'd be different; then I'd start clearin' it up a bit, if I was you. But you've on'y got it on a lease, an' so that ain't worth your while. Ol' Gordon'd never appreciate it, if you did clear it for him. No; you might dairy in earnest—an' a dawg's life it is; or you might run sheep an' a few calves. That's easier, an' it pays. Young stock does pretty well on these hills."

"That would suit me better," Tom said. "I'm too old to start dairying, not knowing anything about the game: and labour is too hard to get.

"That's so," agreed O'Connor. "An' when you've got men to milk, ain't you fair under their heel! They're boss, an' they make you know it. Why, I knew one man employin' six milkers: Mr. Beresford, up Lindenow way. Mrs. Beresford was doin' all the cookin' for them, and she wasn't a bit strong, either—a delicate lady, she was, an' awful nice: an' it was hot weather. They *was* beasts. If she sent 'em down a stew they'd put earth in it an' send it back and tell her they wanted

joints; and one day she made 'em a ginger pudding, an' they chose to think it wasn't good enough for them, so they plastered up the cracks in the walls of their hut with it, and sent up word she had to make something else. An' she had to."

"Had to! I'd have seen them shot first!" Tom exclaimed.

"So'd Mr. Beresford. But he couldn't see sixty cows left unmilked. An' those six beauties of his would have walked off like a shot an' left his cows. They've done it on lots of places. Once you start dairyin', you can be as proud as you like on your own account, but you've got to be jolly meek and humble on account of the cows."

"Is Beresford still at it?"

"Not he. He sold all his cows, and went back to sheep; it was a pity, too, 'cause he'd good land an' a lovely herd. But Mrs. Beresford was too delicate, an' he wouldn't have her worked to death. Anyhow, she did die, afterwards, poor thing!"

"Well!" said Tom expressively. "That puts dairying out of the question; one doesn't want to risk experiences of that kind."

"It's all very well if you're brought up to it," said the visitor. "Then you get used to all sorts of things. But you ain't." He looked at them reflectively. "You've both of you got 'city' written all over you, if you don't mind me sayin' so. That bein' so, I couldn't advise you to try cows."

"Well, look here," said Tom. "Say I go in for sheep and young stock, as you said—knowing nothing about them. Is there a reliable man—any settler living near—who would buy them for me—for a commission, of course—and advise me about selling, when they were fit to sell?"

"Bless you, I'd do that, without any ol' commission," said O'Connor cheerfully.

"I couldn't have that. If I take up your time I must pay you."

"Take up my time! Why, you've on'y got to come to sales with me—I'm always 'goin' to them—an' let me give you a word of advice: an' I can come over here now and then, to see how they were doin'. That ain't nothing to be paid for. You'll want to put in a bit of a crop for winter feed, an' I'll lend you my plough an' horses an' 'Possum—you can pay for them, if you like."

"Who is 'Possum?"

"'Possum's me right hand-man," said Nick O'Connor, with a twinkle. "Very useful, too. I can ride over an' help you get the crop in. You'll want to put in potatoes, too, won't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Tom said.

"Oh, there's money in spuds," said the big man. "And in fruit: you ought to make a bit off your orchard. And the hotels will always buy vegetables—likewise

the summer visitors."

Aileen leant forward, a new light in her eyes.

"I can help in that," she said. "And, Mr. O'Connor, I want to go in for fowls—lots of fowls: chickens and ducks and turkeys."

"So you'd ought to. They take mighty little feeding: eat insecks and grasshoppers all the summer, an' they do fine on peas in the winter!"

"D'ly pea," said Tom, laughing at her.

"Yes, dry peas. We'll make him put in some for you, Mrs. Macleod—just a little crop."

"But how will I buy fowls? There are only a dozen or so here."

"Oh, 'Possum's the one to help you there," said the visitor. "What 'Possum don't know about fowls ain't worth finding out. Don't you worry, Mrs. Macleod, we'll fix it up all right."

"But we can't take up your time and 'Possum's without paying you," Tom said. "I know how valuable a man's time is."

Mr. O'Connor exhibited symptoms of impatience.

"Now, look here," he said. "You're neighbours; an' for five years we haven't had not what you could call a neighbour on this place. Nobody's very proud about here, but we do get full up of a man like ol' Gordon, who thinks himself too good to speak to any poor Australian. You ain't that sort, an' we're jolly glad to have you. If I needed advice about buyin' things in the city, wouldn't you give it to me?"

"Like a shot," said Tom. "But——"

"Well, thank goodness, I don't!" said Mr. O'Connor, pursuing his argument. "But I'll come to you when I need a lot of shares, or a swaller-tail coat an' hat, or anything fancy like that. Meanwhile, if you won't let us advise you about things like calves and spuds, where's the fairness come in? I've said I'll let you pay me for the ploughin', 'cause it's cheaper for you to do it that way than to buy an outfit an' start learnin' to use it. But the rest is on'y bein' neighbours. So s'pose we don't say any more about it. Eh, son—would you like to learn to be a farmer?"

"Rather!" said Garth, with shining eyes. "Am I big enough?"

"Oh, you're quite big enough for a start. I'll tell 'Possum to keep an eye on you." He rose, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Well, they'll be waiting tea for me: I must get along home." He shook hands all round. "We'll make good Gippslanders of you in no time," he said. "Jolly nice drop o' rain we've had this last week, isn't it?—good thing for your ploughin', Mr. Macleod. Well, so long!" He was gone.

"Didn't I tell you he was a jolly decent sort of chap?" Garth said. "And he

is, too!"

CHAPTER IX
"MAGGIE OR SOMETHING"

Morning broke clear and fine, with a golden sun smiling over a clean-washed world. Garth greeted it with a merry little shout.

"Hurrah, Mother! No more rain!"

"Not a drop," answered Aileen from the passage, where the steady swish of her broom could be heard. "It's going to be the most beautiful day!"

"Can I get up to breakfast?" Garth demanded. "I'm so sick of breakfast in bed, Mother."

"Oh, yes, I think so. I'll come and help you in a moment."

"I'm all right," Garth responded. "I'll be quite careful of my arm—don't you bother." He capered out into the passage, a cheery figure in pyjamas, flourishing a bath-towel; and disappeared into the bathroom, whence came presently much splashing, mingled with snatches of song.

"Bless him! I'm sure he's better," Aileen murmured. Something of the weight on her heart seemed to be lifted this morning. Perhaps it was the beauty of the day: perhaps an added hope and interest in life since their visitor of the night before. She sang as she swept. That in itself was not unusual, since singing was a cheerful exercise, and she believed in encouraging cheerfulness. "One's mouth can't turn down at the corners if one is singing," she was accustomed to think. But her song was not forced to-day: and Tom, coming up the path, caught the happy note in it, and smiled unconsciously.

"Look here," said he, later, at breakfast. "I want to draw the family attention to a painful fact. It's more than a fortnight since we came here; and for that whole fortnight Mother Aileen has not been outside the house!"

"Why, Tom, I've been——"

"You've been into the garden about three times, and once to the pigsty," he interrupted. "I knew that quite well, but it doesn't count. Does it, Garth?"

"'Course it doesn't," said Garth, his utterance impeded by porridge.

"Not at all. Your only other excursion was when you went to poke your nose into Horrors' room, and nearly fainted at what you saw there!"

"I didn't—though indeed, any one might well have fainted," Aileen defended

herself. "It was like a charnel-house!"

"What's a charnel-house?" queried Garth, much interested.

"Horrors' room," said his father promptly. "At least, it was, until we went through it with fire and sword. Never mind; we're getting off the subject. Does the family think it's the square thing for Mother Aileen never to have been outside her gate?

"No!" from Garth.

"Certainly not!" from Aileen, amiably.

"I'm surprised to find you so sensible," said Tom, grinning at her. "Well, seeing that you have done nothing but scrub, and sweep, and cook, and generally behave like a galley-slave since we left Melbourne, it's time something was done about it. You're getting thin, and you've no colour, and if you're not very careful you'll get the blues; and where would Garth and I be then?"

"You needn't worry: I don't go in for such stupid things," said his wife, laughing. A shade of pink crept into her cheeks; behind the laugh it made her a little afraid, to think how near the surface blues had really been.

"Anyhow, it really won't do, old girl;" he said seriously. "No one could stand it: and this last week of wet weather has been enough to try any one. Therefore, I propose that to-day we leave the house to Horrors and the cats, and go exploring."

"Glory!" ejaculated Garth.

"It sounds nice," said Aileen. "Let me think if I can manage it."

"You're not to think at all. There's cold mutton, isn't there?

"Lots."

"Anything else?

"Cold odds and ends of pudding. And Garth's broth."

"There you are—what more do you want? That's supper, all ready. We can take out bread-and-butter and hard-boiled eggs, and make billy-tea: and that's lunch. We'll all hurry up, and finish the housework, so that you can go out without having awful thoughts of coming back to find the piano undusted!"

"I can do heaps with one hand," said Garth eagerly. "Oh, do say yes! Mother!"

"What a horrid mother I'd be if I didn't," she said, smiling at them both. "I think it would be perfectly lovely. Mind you eat a good breakfast, both of you, for it will be the only hot meal you'll get to-day."

"The same applies to you," said Tom, placing another slice of bacon on her plate. "No, you needn't dodge!—you know you haven't been eating enough lately to support a fly. Garth and I decline to have you swooning by the wayside from hunger."

"I wish you would be nice enough to forget the only occasion in my life when I did 'swoon,' as you call it," she said. "I truly won't do it again—I'm too

ashamed of it. By the way, isn't that man of Mr. O'Connor's coming over to-day?"

"The chap he calls 'Possum? I'm not sure," Tom answered. "We won't stay at home on the chance of his coming, at any rate; we can tell Horrors to let him know what direction we take, and he wouldn't mind riding after us. After all, we can't go far. But even a little way will be better than nothing. I do want you to forget cooking-pots for a day."

It was still quite early when they left the house. The long grass was wet, but overhead fleecy white clouds swam in a sky of perfect blue, and were mirrored in the blue of the lake below. Just the day for a holiday, Garth said, capering ahead of his father and mother, while Bran raced in pursuit of skimming swallows, having been recalled sternly from the more hopeful pastime of chasing cows. The spirit of the morning had even entered into the elderly Jane, who was seen to kick up her heels and gallop across a hill-side, in stiff-legged imitation of the more youthful Roany. Everything was glad of the rain—especially now that the rain had ceased.

"Rain is like med'cine," Garth said sagely—"simply beastly when you're taking it, but it makes you feel better."

They followed the track leading down to the lake, skirting the fern gully, where the tiny creek had become a most excitable stream, leaping downward in a series of baby waterfalls, with all the ferns on its banks awash. The great tree-ferns overhead dripped steadily, but the sunlight lay upon their spreading fronds, turning the dewdrops into jewels. Far above them, bell-birds, hidden in the branches of a gum tree, chimed as if they could not be busy enough in ringing to welcome the glory of the morning.

The lake itself lay clear and blue, broken now and then by the splash of a leaping fish. Just below their land it turned, widening to a great pool: but they saw now that it was only an arm of the larger lake, and, beyond, it narrowed until it was like a river. A footpath led along its shores, and they followed it in single file. Sometimes the cleared paddocks came down to the water's edge, bare of timber: sometimes they passed through belts of forest where shy Bush creatures slipped noiselessly away through the undergrowth as they approached. They caught a glimpse of a wallaby hopping off to shelter; and once they came upon a native bear, sitting in a little gum tree, very still and solemn. Garth uttered a shout of delight.

"Oh, isn't he jolly, Daddy! What is he?"

"His book name is Koala, but we used to call him just 'monkey-bear' when I was your size," Tom answered. "He's a nice old chap, isn't he?"

"He just is!" breathed Garth, looking at the soft, grey, furry thing with its chubby body and wide, innocent face. "Daddy, do you think I could take him

home and tame him?"

The monkey-bear looked with extreme disfavour at Bran, who was barking frantically at the foot of his tree and making ineffectual leaps towards him.

"Bran wouldn't agree," said Tom, laughing. "And anyhow, the old bear's no good as a pet. He's pretty, enough, but he's awfully stupid. The fact is, he's practically blind in the daytime—he can only see at night, and even then he hasn't much brain-power. Anything he meets—you, or a gate-post, or a house—he wants to climb up immediately, thinking it's a tree. He's really uninteresting; and he can scratch like fury!"

"What a pity!" Aileen said. "He looks such a dear."

"I don't think he means to be savage," Tom said. "He only claws in self-defence, if he's touched."

"Why shouldn't he?" said Garth. "Does he growl, or roar, or anything, Dad?"

"He may coo to his young, for all I know," said his father, laughing. "But he's generally considered a silent beggar; only if he's hurt or badly frightened, he cries exactly like a child. The blacks have a yarn that he was really a child, ages ago. I once saw some dogs attack an unlucky little fellow that was trying to get to a tree, and the way he cried made me shiver."

"Poor little chap!" Aileen said pityingly. "Does he ever get tame in captivity?"

"I don't think so: he's too stupid to be really tamed. You couldn't make a pet of him."

"Then it's really a pity he looks so jolly," was Garth's verdict; "'cause it only excites your hopes for nothing. I vote we go on; he doesn't look as if he'd move if we stopped here all day."

"He won't," said his father. "I always think he'd make an excellent heathen god, for he looks so wise, and it wouldn't matter in the least that he hasn't any brains at all. His great ability is for sitting still, and that's quite a desirable quality for a god."

They went on, through scrub that grew so closely that the path they followed became a mere sheep-track, and the bushes brushed their shoulders. Overhead a laughing-jackass broke into a peal of wild laughter, and was answered by another some distance off: and presently they saw one of the big brown birds alight on a bough, turning up his broad tail with a jerk as he came to rest, and then laughing as if the world were one huge joke.

"I'd like to see one of those fellows catch a snake," Tom said.

"Do they, truly, Daddy?"

"Nothing they like better, I believe. They drop on him like a stone, catch him in that big powerful beak, and take him up into a tree, where they batter

him to death against a limb, and then eat him. I should think Mr. Snake must shudder, wherever he is, at the sound of a jackass's laugh."

"That's a nice, useful kind of a bird," Aileen said. "I would like to encourage a dozen or so to live round the house. I've never seen a snake, and I know I should run if I did."

"Not you," said Tom. "You'd try to kill it."

"Indeed, I would not. Snakes make me creepy all over," said his wife.

"I killed them as a boy, but I haven't seen any since, except in the Zoo," Tom said. "I suppose there are plenty in this district, so we shall have to make up our minds to meet them."

"Don't you try to attack them, Garth," said his mother anxiously. "If you meet one, get out of its way and let it pursue its business in peace."

"But if it came after me?"

"Run," said Tom. "But they don't, as a rule: they are only too anxious to avoid you. A tiger-snake may show fight, but not often: the others are of a retiring frame of mind, unless you happen to tread on them."

"Horrors found one in his boot," said Garth.

"How like Horrors!" remarked his father. "What did he do?"

"Oh, it was in the dark—he had put on one boot and was looking about for the other with his foot. But he couldn't find it, so he got matches and lit a candle. And there was his boot with a big snake in it!"

"Did he kill it?"

"No; he says he can't kill snakes 'cause it gives him the cold shudders. But he yelled, and Mr. Gordon came and killed it. And another time Mr. Gordon found one in his bed!"

"Ugh!" shuddered Aileen.

"He was going to bed, and he thought it looked lumpy, so he turned down the clothes, and there was old Mr. Snake coiled up, as happy as possible. Wouldn't he have felt funny if he'd gone to bed as usual and put his toes on him? I bet he'd have hopped!"

But the vision of the hopping Mr. Gordon was too much for Aileen, who declined to talk of snakes any more—much to the disappointment of her son, who had evidently learned many more stories from Horrors, and burned to impart them.

"I don't see why you don't like talking about snakes," he said, aggrieved. "*I* think they're jolly things to talk about. And so does Horrors. I wonder who that is?"

They were crossing a paddock towards a little lane that ran down to the water's edge; and riding along this, with reins loose on the neck of an old grey horse, was a girl. As they drew nearer she stopped, looking at them curiously—

a curiosity which their glances echoed, for they had never before seen any one quite like her.

She was a tall, angular girl of about sixteen, dressed in faded blue dungaree—the thick, strong cotton material of which men's working clothes are made in the Bush. Her blouse was a man's jumper, the collar sagging open, showing her brown throat: her skirt, home-made, and ornamented with patches of varying size and different shades of blue, was short enough to reveal lean legs, and feet shod with men's blucher boots. On her head was a battered old black felt hat, from holes in which short wisps of yellow hair protruded oddly. Garth remarked later that you couldn't see much of her face for freckles: but somehow, when you had looked at her face you did not trouble about her clothes. For it was a pleasant face, shrewd and merry, if not at all beautiful. She had a wide mouth, showing perfect white teeth; a snub nose; and twinkling little grey eyes that were very cheery and friendly. The powdering of freckles, covered her brown skin as far as could be seen; but when she pushed her hat back, her brow was startlingly white, and without a stain. She greeted them with a cheery smile, as they came up to the fence, though her manner had a touch of shyness.

"Hullo!" she said: and then, looking at Aileen: "You're Mrs. Macleod, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Aileen, smiling in return. They looked at each other across the fence.

"Me Dad sent me over," said the stranger. "I went to your place, an' your boy Horrors told me you'd gone this way. I thought I might cut you off at this lane, if I had luck."

"It was very nice of you to come," Aileen said, faintly puzzled, not knowing whether to regard this business-like young person as a caller. She certainly did not look like an ordinary caller: but to Aileen all things were possible in the Bush. "Will you tell me your name?"

"Me?" said the girl. "Oh, I'm 'Possum."

"'Possum? But——"

"Me Dad always calls me that, so it's kind of stuck," said the owner of the name. "I b'lieve I got another, but it never seems to matter: it's Maggie or something." The puzzled faces before her seemed to demand further explanation. "Mr. O'Connor's me Dad," she added.

[image]

"'Mr. O'Connor's me dad,' she added."

Aileen began to laugh, and Tom followed suit.

"I'm sorry we were so stupid," Aileen said. "But from the way your father spoke we quite thought you were a man!"

"Blessed if I don't think he thinks so, most times," said 'Possum, her eyes twinkling. "It's a way Dad's got. An' I got to be a man, most times, so I s'pose he gets accustomed to it." She grinned at Garth. "How's the arm?"

"Better, thanks," Garth answered. "Did Mr. O'Connor tell you he cured it?"

"Said he pulled it straight. Hurts, don't it? I had mine put out when I was a kid." She grinned at him again; and from that moment Garth and 'Possum were friends. "You just knew," said Garth afterwards, "that she was a real decent sort."

"I'm so sorry you had the trouble of coming after us," Aileen said, "We were going for a day in the Bush: the rain has kept us indoors for a week. Won't you come, too?"

'Possum shook her head.

"Sorry," she said. "Me Dad's left me some sheep to bring home from Nelson's, an' it'll be a bit of a job, 'cause they're leavin' young lambs, an' drivin' 'em 'll be a caution. A mercy it ain't dusty an' hot; if it was they'd simply sit down in the road an' look at me. But it'll take me all me time, as it is. I just wanted to ask about that bit of ploughin' you wanted done."

Tom laughed.

"Hasn't your father told you how ignorant I am, Miss O'Connor? I don't know a thing about it."

There was a twinkle, polite, but irrepressible, in 'Possum's eye.

"Well, he did say you'd need a bit of coaching," she answered. "Him an' me had a yarn about your place last night, an' we reckoned that the little paddock where your calves are running now 'ud be about the best for cultivation. How about puttin' oats into the highest part, an' then some field-peas? An' maize ought to do real well on that low-lyin' strip goin' down to the creek. That 'ud give you about all the feed you'll need. And there's a corner beyond the creek I've had me eye on this long while. I'd like to try lucerne in it." She paused for breath, looking at him eagerly.

"It sounds attractive—but large," said Tom, hesitating. "I don't know that I can take all that on, Miss O'Connor."

"Why, it ain't much—the whole paddock's not that big," said 'Possum. "I'll get it ploughed in no time with our disc-plough. An' Dad'll come an' help us get the crops in. Then there's potatoes—I s'pose you'll put them in in Mr. Gordon's little potato paddock?"

"Yes, I thought so," he said. "Look here, I'm not proposing to stand by with my hands in my pockets while you and your father do my work. Can you teach me to take a hand? I mean"—he flushed—"will I be too much of a new chum to

learn to be decently useful?"

"Why, we'll teach you as easy as wink," she said. "There ain't nothing difficult about it, if you ain't afraid of work. I only know what me Dad's taught me—you'll beat me in no time. We"—she paused, and for the first time looked embarrassed—"we think it's jolly rough on you people comin' into a place like this, not bein' used to anything. If there's anything we can do, you just let us know."

"It seems to me we're casting ourselves on your mercy," he said: at which 'Possum looked blank, and murmured something unintelligible. Aileen broke in.

"We're terribly ignorant people, but we do want to learn," she said. "What about me, Miss O'Connor? Can you teach me how to make an enormous fortune out of fowls?"

'Possum grinned.

"Well, I ain't learned that meself, yet. But there is a bit to be made out of 'em, if you go the right way about it, an' have decent luck. We'll try, Mrs. Macleod. Me Dad said you wanted to buy some?"

"Yes."

"Well, ol' Mother Coffey, up the lake, has plenty to sell. She's givin' up keepin' a lot—gettin' too rheumaticky. But if you don't mind me sayin' so, she'll raise the price on you if she thinks it's a new chum buyin'. Say you let me do the buyin'? I bet I'll get 'em pretty cheap."

"I'd be delighted," Aileen answered gratefully.

"Well now, look here," 'Possum said. "I'll come over to-morrow with the plough on the dray, an' then we can settle about the crops so's I can get straight ahead with the ploughin' next day. Then I'll jog on with the dray to ol' Mother Coffey's an' buy them chooks, an' bring 'em back. That gives us a good start. Got any setty hens?"

"There are three who sit on their nest—it's the same nest—all the time, and use very bad language if any one goes near them," Aileen said, laughing. "Is that being setty?"

"That's it," said 'Possum, grinning. "Well, wouldn't you like to start 'em on some aigs? Nothin' like rearin' chicks for yourself—-it's cheaper by a long way than buyin' other people's."

"It sounds tempting," said Aileen. "Can I learn how?"

"Bless you, yes," said 'Possum, startled by a depth of ignorance of which she had not dreamed, "I'll show you." She turned her friendly glance upon Garth. "We'll put you on that job—shall we?"

"Oh—could I!" exclaimed Garth, and capered. "I'd love to."

"Me little brother Joe always helps rear ours," said 'Possum. "An' he's only six." She gathered up her reins. "Well, I must be goin', if I want to get them old

ewes home before dark. I'll be over to-morrow, Mrs. Macleod. So long." She dug her heel into the old grey horse, and wheeled round. Suddenly she looked over her shoulder.

"If you wouldn't mind just callin' me 'Possum," she said. She flushed hotly, and cantered away. They saw that she rode on a man's saddle, sitting easily sideways, with her leg crooked over the pommel.

Tom sat down on a log and stared at his family.

"Well, of all the amazing young women!" he said slowly. "Do you think there are any more at home like her?"

"I think she's ripping!" said Garth.

"I'm not sure that I don't agree with you," his father answered. "But.... Oh, my stars, Aileen, I never felt so small in mv life! She can't be seventeen—and I'm a baby beside her in everything that matters!"

"Well, so am I," said his wife, laughing. "But after all, it's in the bringing-up. We must just be grateful for having neighbours who are willing to take pity on our ignorance. And we're going to learn, Tom."

"There is certainly plenty to learn," he said, grimly. "However, we'll try. They're bricks, anyhow. Now I think it's time we found a good camping-place, and boiled the billy—and the first thing I've to learn is how to make a fire out of damp wood!"

They wandered home towards evening, tired, but content. Something of the homesickness that had lain like a cloud on Aileen's mind had passed away. Life did not seem so much a thing bounded by the four walls of a kitchen. Whether the long, peaceful day in the Bush had helped, or the tonic of 'Possum's cheery, practical voice, she did not know. But she felt better.

As she came through the yard a low snarl greeted her from a box. The three "setty" hens resented any one's passing by their seclusion.

"Hopeful old souls, those," said Tom, laughing. "They're sitting on a half-brick and a hard clod, and I think they expect to hatch out a half-acre allotment and a town hall. Goodness knows how long they have been doing it. No wonder they're bad-tempered."

"Well, we mean to give them eggs to sit on to-morrow," was Aileen's response. "I suppose 'Possum knows how to move them—I should have thought it as much as one's life was worth. Do hens bite deep, Tom?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I guess you'll know to-morrow!"

Meanwhile, Miss Maggie (or something) O'Connor, known as 'Possum, had collected her ewes and driven them slowly homeward through a long afternoon, during which they endeavoured unceasingly to return to their lambs, and bleated

woe at being denied. It was dusk when the last entered the home paddock, leaping high in the gateway after the idiotic manner of sheep. 'Possum rode slowly down the hill to her home.

As she took the saddle off the old grey horse, her father came up.

"Well?" he said. "Ewes all right?"

"Yes. Travelled jolly badly."

"Sure to. See the Macleods?"

"'M." 'Possum nodded. "Goin' to take the plough over to-morrow."

"That's right. Nice people, aren't they?"

"Yes, they're nice." She moved towards the house, and then stopped. "But, Lor!—who ever let 'em out!" she said.

CHAPTER X

'POSSUM TAKES HOLD

'Possum arrived next morning with the old grey horse in a dray which contained, besides herself, a small, silent brother, a plough, and a box of eggs.

"They're me best Wyandottes' aigs," she explained. "Oh, yes, you can pay me for 'em. Will we set the hens now, Mrs. Macleod?"

They went off to the shed, the invariable storehouse of Bush lumber—containing much rubbish and many treasures. Among the latter were three small empty cases upon which 'Possum pounced.

"Do first-rate," she said.

She found her way, as if by instinct, to the tool-shed: and Garth and Aileen watched her as she split an old fruit-case into laths, nailing them on the open sides of her boxes, an inch apart. Larger pieces she reserved for doors, hanging them in position by short strips of leather cut from an old boot.

"Just you keep old boots like that," she said, tenderly regarding the green and mouldy relic she had disinterred from a rubbish-heap. "Never know when you won't want a bit of leather on a farm: and gen'lly-as-a-rule, when you most want it, it ain't there. Now that's all right. Any straw?"

Garth knew where there was straw, and fled for it delightedly: and 'Possum made a nest in each box, securing the straw from escaping by keeping it in place with bits of brick. It was all done very quickly. She carried a box to a quiet corner of the fowl-yard—and turned to remonstrate at finding Aileen bearing the second

in the rear.

"I say—you oughtn't to do that!"

"Yes, I ought. It's my job," said Aileen, panting, but smiling.

"But you ain't used to it," said 'Possum unhappily.

"Then the sooner I get used to it, the better!" Aileen returned for the third box, but, being easily beaten by her determined assistant, had to content herself by bringing the eggs in her wake.

"Thirteen to each," said 'Possum, disposing the eggs swiftly in the nests. "There—look nice, don't they? Always makes me feel almost like setting myself. Now for them old hens. D'you want to learn to handle 'em, Missus?" It was clear that she abandoned "Mrs. Macleod" with relief.

Never had Aileen wanted anything less. The infuriated old hens filled her with such forebodings as might be felt on approaching an angry hyena.

"Yes, please," she said, with an effort.

"Then you get a pair of old gloves. Got any leather gardening gloves?"

"Oh, yes—run for them, Garth."

"Gives you great pluck, to have gloves on," remarked 'Possum. "Not that they'll peck you, if you're quick—but sometimes you ain't quick enough. Now, you watch."

She stooped before the box where the three hens clustered angrily, greeting her with hisses and snarls. For a moment she watched, then her hand shot out swiftly and grasped the nearest hen by the neck. Quick as she was, the second hen was quicker—a red mark showed on the brown hand as she rose with the struggling captive.

"Got me," she said cheerfully. "But it don't hurt. See, Missus—I just slip me hand under her, but I don't let go her neck. Then she travels nice an' easy, but she can't use her old beak. Come an' we'll put her on the aigs."

Snarling and struggling, the hen was gently deposited upon the nest, and the door secured. 'Possum covered the box with an old sack.

"There:—she'll get quiet enough when she can't see. Some people swears by settin' 'em at night, but it don't matter when they're as setty as these fellers. Like to try your hand with the next one, Missus?"

Aileen did her best. She plunged her hand at the second hen, but missed it, thanks to warlike action on its part; and the hen arose, bestowing a hearty peck on her glove as it passed, and fled into the open, uttering loud squawks. 'Possum grabbed the third as it was about to follow.

"That's the worst of catchin' 'em in daylight," she remarked. "They see too much of what you're after. Well, we'll have to leave her, Missus. She'll go back after awhile. D'you think you could get her to-night?"

"Yes, if it takes me all night!" said 'Aileen sturdily. Her attempt had failed,

[image]

"The hen arose, and fled into the open, uttering loud squawks."

but it had taught her that the task held no especial terrors. "My husband will help me."

"Oh, you'll be all right," said 'Possum, securing her captive, and draping a sack over her wrathful protests. "Sit on them aigs, now, you silly old cuckoo, an' get busy! Well, that's that. Now, about buyin' them fowls?"

They discussed ways and means, and 'Possum made brief notes on the back of an old envelope—a laborious task.

"I'll get 'em," she said at length. "An' I must get along. I seen the Boss in the paddock as I come down, an' fixed up about them crops. Ploughin' to-morrow. So long, Missus—I'll be back this afternoon with them fowls. Come along, Joe."

"But your dinner—won't you stay?" Aileen protested.

"Got it in the cart," said 'Possum, indicating a newspaper parcel. "Catch young Joe starting out without his dinner! Thanks very much, all the same." She clicked to the grey horse, and he shambled off reluctantly.

It was some hours later when she returned, her arrival heralded by the voices of many birds. Ducks added their quackings to the notes of the hens; and a turkey's long neck protruded from a hole in a box, gazing on the scene with meek bewilderment. Aileen and Garth met the cart at the yard gate.

"You did get them!" said Aileen delightedly.

"You bet," said 'Possum briefly. "And they're good, too: you'll make plenty out of those chaps, 'cause I got 'em real cheap. Ol' Mother Coffey's anxious to get 'em off her hands: she's stiff as a poker with rheumatics. Them turkeys is a real bargain. They had her beat altogether, 'cause turkeys stray most awful, an' she couldn't get across the flats to yard 'em in." The simple joy of Miss O'Connor in the affliction of Mrs. Coffey was touching to behold.

"Well, let them go—and come and have some tea," Aileen said. "You must need it."

"I could do with a go of tea, but I can't let these fellers go without cuttin' a wing of each," said 'Possum. "Mother Coffey ain't got no garden to keep 'em out of, but 'you wouldn't care to have them rampagin' over yours. Got a strong pair o' scissors?".

They watched little Joe hold each bird while his sister deftly cut one wing as short as possible.

"Why not two wings?" Garth asked.

"'Cause they can fly as well as anything if you leave 'em both the same. They can balance, then. But you watch that chap."

"That chap" was a handsome young pullet, apparently maddened by her trials. She stared wildly for a moment when released: then, perceiving a quince tree, decided that safety lay in its branches, and endeavoured to fly thither. Her spring carried her a little way into the air: then, lacking one wing, she overbalanced and fell sideways, with terrified squawks. Reaching the ground, she bolted for shelter into Bran's kennel: and, being greeted with an amazed and indignant yap from Bran, who was already there, fluttered backwards in a state of horrified panic, and, shrieking her woes, fled down the hill-side and was lost to sight. The onlookers gave themselves up to laughter.

"Will she ever come back, do you think?"

"Oh, she'll come back all right when she feels a bit lonely," 'Possum rejoined. "Why, she ain't goin' to keep away from a place where she's had all that fun!"

Tom came up as the last of the fowls was released. Under 'Possum's advice he had spent the day in the cultivation paddock, with Roany harnessed to a sledge, picking up logs and roots which, would be in the way of the plough.

"That paddock looked quite clear: but I've a stack of wood that will last us for a fortnight, and an appetite to match it," he said. "That's a great lot of fowls! Are they what the fortune is to be made out of, 'Possum?"

"Some of it," said 'Possum. "The rest's coming out of that lucerne crop."

They went in to tea—and for the first time they saw 'Possum awkward. Outside, in the saddle, driving the heavy dray, or dealing with tools and fowls, she was simple, capable, and thoroughly at home; but the sitting-room, with its pleasant litter of books and papers and the music open on the piano, was evidently a strange world to her, and she became silent and ill at ease. The patched and faded blue dungaree, and the rough men's boots, which had fitted into the working scene, were suddenly all wrong: she looked at Aileen's dainty print frock, and felt the difference she could not put into words. It was in Aileen as well. Outside, she had been shy and awkward, ashamed of her own ignorance and helplessness: here, she was on her own ground, as she had been in the drawing-room of the "House Beautiful"; the perfect hostess, courteous and sweet-mannered. But all her tact failed, for a while, to loosen the mantle of shyness in which the unhappy 'Possum was wrapped.

Help came through little Joe. Nothing on earth could make Joe shy, though he was a gentleman of few words. Here, however, was tea, which he needed: with large fresh scones and a big cake which Mr. Macleod—a man of understanding, evidently—was cutting into generous, plummy slices. Cake did not often come in little Joe's way, and he greeted it with a wide smile.

"Ain't that scrummy, 'Poss?" he said, indicating the cake with a grubby

finger.

"Be quiet!" said 'Possum in an agonized whisper. "Behave yourself!"

Joe's mouth drooped at the corners.

"Can't I have some?"

"But of course you can: and it is scrummy!" said Tom cheerfully. "I know, because I helped to make it! Don't you mind 'Possum, Joe: she can boss us when it comes to ploughing, but not when it's eating cake." He smiled at the girl over the small boy's head. "Have a scone, 'Possum."

'Possum accepted a scone unhappily, and held it as if doubtful of how to eat it, sitting miserably on the extreme edge of her chair, and grasping her cup with a clutch born of despair. Visions of flight stole across her: she wondered if it would look queer if she said that the old grey horse would not stand, and so might escape for home. But the grey was certainly asleep, with his nose against a post: and little Joe was sitting up to the table, eating scones and cake together with perfect contentment. Wild horses—let alone the old grey—would have found it difficult to move little Joe.

"Can't 'Poss come an' sit at the table too?" queried Joe suddenly, with his mouth full. "It's comf't'fler: an' she'll spill her tea, to a dead cert., if she sits over there!"

"Joe!" burst from his sister. "Haven't you any manners?"

"Well, you always say you like sittin' up to a table," Joe defended himself. "Come along."

Aileen laughed delightedly.

"It's not a bit of good to hope that small brothers will behave the way one expects them to, 'Possum," she said, pitying the girl's scarlet face. "Never mind, he's full of good sense. Come, and we will all sit up to the table; it is comf't'fler."

"I always told you it was," Tom said, drawing up his chair with joy. "I never could see why people should be condemned to do circus performances, balancing cups and plates, when there was a good sound table near. Good man, Joe. Pass him the scones, Garth."

'Possum's hot flush died away. These people were comprehending, even if their room was "sweller" than any room she had ever seen: and now that she was at the table her blucher boots and patched skirt were hidden, and that was a comfort. She wondered if she ought to have removed her hat: but the certainty that her short yellow hair would be standing on end—it always did—made her feel safe in having kept it on. She decided that she might as well eat, and bit into her scone gingerly. It was a good scone, and the tea was good, but very hot—and she was thirsty. She poured some into her saucer and blew upon it to cool it—and then turned a hotter scarlet than ever, finding Garth's eyes on her curiously, and realizing that she was the only one so employed.

"Cake, Garth?" said Tom. He secured his son's attention to his plate, giving him a warning glance. "Aileen, you've made this tea awfully hot."

"More milk?" queried Aileen.

"No, thanks: it's very good." He poured some deliberately into his saucer, and blew upon it—and gave inward thanks that 'Possum did not perceive Garth's glance of utter bewilderment. Over the saucer he met the girl's eyes calmly. "How long do you think it will take to plough that paddock, 'Possum?"

"Oh, a few days," 'Possum answered. "The rain will have made it easier work: the ground was jolly hard before that." She had regained her calmness; the trick of the useful saucer was evidently familiar to Melbourne tea-tables.

"And can you plough it all?"

"Well, I sh'd hope so," 'Possum said. "I bin ploughing since I was thirteen—you've only to sit on the seat and keep the horses straight. It's a bit hard on hills, but it's easy as wink on plain ground."

"'Possum ploughs straighter furrers than Dad!" volunteered Joe. "You ask any one!"

"Keep quiet!" said his sister.

"Well, you do." He turned to Tom, secure of a sympathetic hearing. "An' 'Poss never does what Dad did—he was ploughin' on the side of a hill, an' he let the ol' plough topple over, and him an' the plough went rollin' down like fun. You orter seen him!" The memory induced deep chuckles. "C'n I have some more cake?"

"Joe, you ain't got no manners!" said his sister miserably.

"I got cake," said Joe, with great cheerfulness.

Tom and Aileen burst out laughing.

"Don't worry about him, 'Possum," said Aileen. "Do have another cup. And I want to know how many of you there are at home."

"Well, there's Dad," said 'Possum, bestowing a glance of great scorn on her brother. "Mother died when Joe was a baby. Joe's six, even if he ain't got no manners, an' Polly's seven, an' Bill's ten, and Bertha's twelve. The twins 'ud be fourteen, on'y they died on us when they were kids."

"And who looks after the children?"

"Why, I do—on'y mostly they looks after themselves."

"But who cooks and looks after the house?"

"Me an' Bertha. I used to do it all till Bertha lef' school: she's quick, an' she passed all her exams., an' got her certif'cate last year. Now she helps, an' I will say she's as handy as a pocket in a shirt. Never saw a kid take to cookin' like Bert. That's all she cares about—as long as she can dodge round in the kitchen she never wants to put her nose outside."

"But you did it all until last year?" Aileen asked in amazement. "And

brought up the children?"

"With a bit of ploughing thrown in!" came from Tom.

'Possum flushed. She was not quite sure that they were not laughing at her. But their faces were very kind.

"Well, y' see, there wasn't any one else," she said. "Dad was too busy on the place. He got a woman at first, but she was always drunk, an' stole things, an' hit us, an' bossed us round. I tol' Dad I'd run the house if he'd send her away, so he did. My word, we was glad! She never passed any of the kids without givin' them a clip on the ear for luck!" Her head went up. "An' they're good kids, mind y'—'cept Joe!"

Joe grinned happily.

"But how did you manage everything?"

"Oh, I dunno. It wasn't hard. Kids in the Bush look after themselves a lot, y' know. They get handy in no time. Bill's cut all the wood for me since he was seven, an' he an' Bert milked before they wont to school. Bill an' Polly's goin' still, of course. I had to leave school when Mother died, an' I was on'y eleven then, so I hadn't learned much. I was always a fool, too!"

"A fool!" said Tom. "Good Heavens!"

"Oh, I was—true. I never could make head or tail of books. More I tried, the stupider I got. Sums, too: ain't they silly things? But I used to wish I'd had time to learn a bit more, 'cause I did want to bring the kids up decent. Mother was very partic'lar. But I jolly well seen to it that *they* went to school reg'lar. Joe's goin' next year. I s'pose I oughter sent him this year, but he was the baby, so he's got a bit spoilt."

The queer, disjointed speech stopped, and 'Possum disappeared behind her tea-cup.

"And what does your father do?"

"Dad? Oh, he looks after the place, an' goes to sales, an' does a bit of dealin'. Dad's a great judge of stock," said 'Possum proudly. "He does a lot of odd jobs of shearin' too—he used to be ringer in a shed on the Murray before he married Mother. He makes the place pay, all right—lucky he does, with all of us to buy clothes and tucker for! An' he potters round an' talks to men over the back gate. Men always have a heap to talk about, don't they?"

"They do," said Aileen promptly, sending a laughing glance at Tom. "It is their nature to."

"Well, you can't blame 'em," said 'Possum. "But I do think it's a good thing women aren't like that."

"But they are!" wailed Tom.

"Not in the Bush, anyhow. They simply wouldn't have time. It's a funny thing—no matter how busy a man is, he's always got time to prop up a gate an'

yarn if any other man comes along. But a woman just can't—she'd think of the dinner not cooked, an' the spuds not dug, an' the washin' up not done, an' like as not no wood for the fire if she didn't cut it herself, an' the kids' pants not patched. An' they're all things that can't be left, 'cause men expects to be fed, an' if you leave pants when they begin to need patchin', there's mighty soon no pants to patch. Joe's pants, anyhow—an' Bill's."

"Did you do all the sewing, 'Possum?"

"Most of it," said 'Possum—"'cept what I just couldn't do, an' Dad had to buy those at the store. Then when Bert an' Polly started goin' to school I made him buy their dresses—I couldn't have 'em laughed at for being howlin' frights! There's always something very bad about the clothes I make: y' see, I never learned how, prop'ly. I just clamp 'em together somehow. It don't matter so much when no one ever sees them."

She flushed a little.

"I make all me own," she said. "It don't matter about me—an' I'd wear out anything but dungaree with the rough work outside. Dad's away a good bit, y' see, so then I have to run the place; an' when you're doin' odd bits of ploughin' or fencin' or scrub-cuttin', you can't bother about clothes. I know mine are pretty rum."

"I think you manage them wonderfully," said Aileen, her eyes suddenly dim. "You make me ashamed of doing so little."

"Lor', we all think this is awful rough on you!" exclaimed 'Possum. "You ain't used to it—an' I know this place was a fair pigsty. I saw it once, an' it was a disgrace." Her eyes wandered to the door.

"Would you like to see how I have arranged it?" Aileen asked, fathoming the glance.

"My word, wouldn't I!" 'Possum jumped up eagerly. "I think this is the nicest room I ever saw! Would it be botherin' you, Missus?"

"I'd like to," said Aileen. She led the way out of the sitting-room.

It smote her heart to see the girl's frank delight in the little rooms. To her, fresh from the "House Beautiful," they seemed unutterably small and poky: but to 'Possum they were visions of bewildering splendour. Most of all, to Aileen's astonishment, she admired the bright new bedsteads.

"They *are* pretty," she said. "There ain't one in our house that ain't home-made, mattresses and all. Dad made 'em out of packin'-cases. I taught the kids some of their letters off 'Johnson's Whiskey' brand on the end o' mine. An' you have such pretty things on 'em." She touched the Indian coverlets lightly. "Fancy a tiny little chap with a grand bed like this! Do all the people in Melbourne have this kind, Missus?"

"A good many, I think," Aileen said. "But I dare say they are not one bit

more comfortable than yours, 'Possum."

"No, but they're awful pretty!" 'Possum said. "You must feel so jolly nice when you wake up in 'em. An' everything is just as pretty as the beds." Her glance travelled over the fresh curtains, the pretty cretonnes on the box-tables, and the pictures on the walls. "It's the loveliest house I ever was in, since you came."

"Don't you know any of the houses in the township, 'Possum?"

'Possum shook her head.

"Never go there, 'nless I can't help meself. It's five miles from us, y' see, an' I'm too busy, gen'lly-as-a-rule: an' I don't like goin'. They laugh at me, 'cause me clothes are queer, an' me hair's short. Well, I just hadn't time to keep it tidy, so I got Dad to cut it. But Bert's and Polly's is awful pretty hair. Polly's is that curly you couldn't think. So they can laugh. I got to go in the summer, when there's veg'tables an' things to sell, but I just get me business done an' cut straight home again. I say, I must be gettin' home now: it's gettin' awful late."

A sudden thought struck Aileen as she followed the girl out to the yard.

"Are you coming every day to plough, 'Possum? Then, wouldn't you like to sleep here and save yourself the trouble of going home each night?"

'Possum's shyness returned in full blast.

"'Fraid I couldn't," she said, her voice abrupt. "I got me own work at home, an' some one must keep an eye on the kids. Thanks awfully." Then her face grew suddenly wistful. "Not but I'd like ever so to sleep in one of them lovely beds!" she added. "Well, I'll just fix up that third ol' setty hen for you, while I'm thinkin' of it, an' then I'll make tracks for home."

She fell upon the hen swiftly, and transferred it to the eggs. Joe, recalled with difficulty from the hay-loft, appeared with his person largely concealed under straw, and had to submit to a vigorous brushing-down by his sister. Then they jogged off together in the twilight.

CHAPTER XI
FARMERS IN EARNEST

Two months passed, and spring deepened into summer. The gold of the wattle, which had covered the hills when the strangers came to Gippsland, faded; its tiny yellow balls floated down on the surface of the river, carpeting it with a rippling

sheet of gold, until the current took them away to sea. The hot winds breathed upon the creamy tangles of clematis, and turned them to hanging masses of dull brown. The tiny orchids in the gullies sighed for the wet spring, drooped, and died. But the convolvulus and the purple sarsaparilla went on blossoming bravely, climbing through the densest masses of the scrub; and the tiny eucalyptus capsules burst, flinging their wee caps afar, and releasing bunches of perfumed stamens, so that all the air was filled with sweetness. Out on the hills the grass turned yellow and the ground was hard. But the gullies were always cool, their rich earth moist under the great green tree-ferns, about whose roots the little streams gurgled, winding away to the lake.

Garth loved the gullies. Now that Mother and Daddy were so busy all day there was much time on his hands. A small boy of seven cannot always help, no matter how willing he may be; there were times when all his jobs—and they were many—were done, and he was free to wander off into the paddocks, where the cool fern-glades were storehouses of wonder for the little city lad. Books were forbidden him nowadays; but his brain held old stories of fairies and elves and gnomes, and it was easy to people this new country with them all.

Best of all he loved the days when 'Possum worked upon the little farm. 'Possum never was too busy for a small boy. Her day's work was a generous one, for she came early—rising at no one knew what unearthly hour to finish her home-tasks first—and stayed late, riding away in the dusk with her blue skirt flapping against the side of the old grey; and she was a swift, tireless worker, with a rare ability for using her head as well as her hands, so that she never made two strokes where one would suffice. But she managed to include Garth in most things. If she were ploughing, he knew that by waiting at the end of the furrow he could have a few words with her as he watched the fascinating business of turning the big disc-plough; and if the going were good, there might even be the wild joy of sitting in its curved iron seat, and holding the reins while 'Possum turned the horses. Always at the end of the day he was there to help her take them out of the plough; and then, each mounted on a broad bare back, with the harness jingling, they would jog home together to the stable, and he would help to rub down the horses and feed them. 'Possum always let him help. It was one of the things Garth liked best about her.

He was fast turning into a country boy. All the dull business of putting in the crops was a gloriously interesting matter to him—partly because it was so interesting to Daddy, and because Daddy was learning, even as he was. They watched together for the first shoots of the oats, the tiny tender leaves of the field-peas, and the slender spears of the maize; and Garth was a proud boy because it was he who first found the potatoes sending green messages above the brown soil he had helped to prepare. Later, 'Possum showed them how to "hill" them,

so as to protect the tender stems: just as she taught them the points of the new calves that were now running in the paddocks, turning from good veal into better beef, and of the sheep that dotted the rises. Her father showed Tom how to buy them: or rather, he bought them while Tom looked on, vainly trying to see why a beast should be good value at 30*s*., and another, looking—to him—very like the first, should be ruination at 35*s*. Nick O'Connor, for all his kindliness, was not good at explaining. But 'Possum knew almost as much as her father about stock, and her knowledge was always at their disposal: so that light gradually broke upon Tom, and with it an added interest in his new work. Garth listened with all his ears, and picked up crumbs of information. Already he knew a Hereford from a Shorthorn, and could tell you which was likely to turn into the best beef.

But there were times when 'Possum laid aside business, and became simply the best mate imaginable. Sometimes it would be when she had come especially early, and so could squeeze a spare hour out of the tail of the day: sometimes on a Sunday afternoon she would appear, and take possession of Garth, and they would vanish into the Bush. 'Possum taught him all her own learning: how to find all manner of birds' nests, for which she would climb like a monkey; where the wallaby and wombat hid by day, and which were the holes that might hide her namesakes, the 'possums. She had queer stories of the Bush fairies, and taught him to recognize the rings their dancing left in the grass, where mushrooms would come up in the autumn. They came back from these rambles laden with treasures: yams, dug with sharp sticks, which 'Possum cooked in the fashion of the blacks; clumps of rare fern; strange fungi; cool mosses; birds' eggs of delicate hues. 'Possum would never take more than one egg from a nest. "Don't you reckon a bird's got feelin's, same's you?" she would ask the abashed Garth.

She was always a little shy of Tom, even while she taught him his new trade of farmer. There was a twinkle in his eye that was disconcerting moreover, his manners were so good, and his politeness so invariable, that she never got over an uneasy feeling that he might be laughing at her. She liked him very much, and referred to him in her own mind as "a real gent." But the shyness was always there.

She worshipped Aileen frankly. Something in the dainty sweetness of Garth's mother appealed to the Bush girl who had never known daintiness. Not a line of the slender body in the fresh print frocks was lost upon her: not a ripple of the smooth, shining hair. Even in the midst of hard country work Aileen's well-groomed look never left her—partly because of the extreme simplicity of her dress; and it was this quality of fresh neatness that captivated 'Possum most. It never occurred to her that it would be possible to imitate it. Torn and shapeless dungaree frocks were her portion in life, and though she hated them she regarded them as inevitable.

Already Aileen's poultry farm was flourishing. The three bad-tempered hens had applied themselves to their duties with such concentration that three dozen half-fledged chicks now followed them about. Others had been set to rear turkeys and ducks, and these, too, flourished; although the unpleasant propensity of young turkeys for expiring without warning had done much to age Garth, who fed them once an hour with clockwork regularity. The fowls purchased from Mother Coffey had done well. Garth knew all their nests which was saying something, as the Bush fowl changes her nest frequently, in the hope of finding a corner sufficiently well concealed to prevent prying humans from robbing her of her eggs. In the store-room kerosene tins in steadily increasing numbers held eggs, put by in waterglass to sell in the winter; and meanwhile the hotels and stores, and the summer visitors, demanded all that could be spared, and paid good prices for vegetables, at which Tom and Aileen worked early and late. 'Possum did the marketing, with her own goods, unwillingly accepting a small commission. "I won't let you do it unless we pay you," Aileen had said. "And think of the wretched prices I should get! I should never have courage to ask half the money you make people pay!"

"I'm gettin' more meself than I ever did," 'Possum had answered. "Look how you've learnt me to get things up dossy, to sell—strawb'ries an' gooseb'ries in little nests of leaves, an' veg'tables lookin' pretty enough to put in vawses in a parlour! I used to dump me things in anyhow. It's no wonder they fall over themselves to buy things like you send 'em in. Flowers, too; it never even entered me head that summer visitors 'ud like 'em—an' they rush me for 'em! I do think I was a silly ass all these years!"

Melbourne seemed to have faded away. Sometimes, even yet, a pang of homesickness swept over Aileen; but for the most part she was too busy and too interested in her new rife to spare time for hankering after vanished fleshpots. Outside occupations had taught her the folly of cooping herself too much in the house. Work, too, had grown easier as method developed; she was just as "house-proud" as ever, and the little cottage shone throughout, but it no longer claimed all her time. Garth was an excellent helper, and Tom always willing to lend a hand; and a woman had been found to give a day weekly to washing and scrubbing. Even Horrors was responding to training which had demanded the patience of Job, and could be trusted to wash dishes and scour saucepans, getting himself extremely wet in the process, but arriving, in the fullness of time, at cleanliness. Cooking was simple, for they lived mainly on their own produce, and had appetites that required no tempting. They took many meals in the open: grilling chops over a fire in the Bush, boiling the billy, and making the most ordinary meal into a picnic. "Saves a heap of washing-up, and it's healthy," said Tom.

It was certainly healthy. Already the simple life had set its seal on them all. Garth had grown and broadened, and his brown face and clear eyes were sufficient proof of the wisdom of Dr. Metcalfe's advice. Aileen, Tom declared, grew younger and prettier every day, and was herself astonished at her muscular development; while Tom, lean and bronzed, and hard as nails, showed the perfect physical condition of a young colt. They rose early, and went to bed early: worked hard, lived in the open air, and had appetites that would have alarmed the Julia of old days. Interests which had meant much to them once upon a time were now small matters beside the rain that came when the crops were just needing it, the price of eggs and vegetables, or the calf that strayed away into the scrub and remained lost for three days. It was Garth who found it, at last, and his pride was all but sinful—not that he had found it, but because he managed to follow its tracks along the bed of a creek!

Life on the whole was very happy. There were bad days, of course; days when the oil for the stove failed, and all the firewood was wet and declined to burn—or when there was none at all, and Tom and Horrors were away in the paddocks, so that there was nothing for Aileen to do but take the axe and go for some herself. She developed a queer fondness for using the axe, and preferred it to any other form of exercise; it was so interesting, she said, to see how seldom you could hit twice in the same place! Days came, too, when, everything went wrong: when cooking was a failure, and ironing only scorched the clothes, and the baker failed to come and the milk turned sour for no apparent reason; and worse days still, when, perhaps, a headache or a bad night made the world go awry, and everything seemed to conspire to irritate; when Garth might be provoking or Tom be so busy in the paddocks as to forget dinner-time, arriving in a leisurely fashion half an hour late. Those were days when sharp words sprang to the lips unbidden, and had to be fought back. It was sometimes necessary to pray very hard at her quaint little supplication—"Lord, keep me from gettin' sour!"

She helped herself by contrasting her lot with that of hundreds of women whose life was so much harder—who had half a dozen little children about therr busy feet, and perhaps half a dozen rough men for whom to cook and clean. She knew what therr homes were like—comfortless, rough, and bare, with neither daintiness nor convenience. She had every labour-saving device that Tom could procure her: they had nothing but such primitive arrangements as their grandmothers had had when the country was new. They worked early and late and grew old and worn-out long before their time; but still, they worried along, and reared their swarm of babies into tall men and women, a credit to their country: and they were happy, and would not change their lot, so long as the babies lived, and the husband was kind. She felt herself a butterfly beside them—even when she looked at her roughened hands, stained with earth, and contrasted them with

the memory of the pink nails she used to manicure in the "House Beautiful."

Life was not all work. They took long drives into the country, jogging behind Roany along lanes where the narrow track wound in and out among clumps of tea-tree and stunted gums, skirting fallen logs and ancient stumps. Aileen and Garth learned to drive, as well as to harness Roany and get the buggy ready. Tom laughed at her for insisting on the last, but Aileen stuck to her point—a woman in the Bush could not be too independent, she said. Garth's education in riding had gone ahead as soon as his wrist was strong enough; and now he and Jane had fought many a tussle together until Jane unwillingly admitted that the small boy was master, and submitted with meekness, if not with enjoyment, to being galloped round the paddocks barebacked. Best of all was the motor-boat—no new thing to them, since in the old days they had often made excursions in one up and down the Yarra and into the great, placid expanse of Port Phillip Bay. But boating near the city was a different matter to exploring the by-ways of the lakes, away from the track of steamers and fishing-boats, finding little hidden bays and islands, and coming home brown and hungry, and laden with fish. On the hot days they bathed in these quiet corners: or sometimes, landing on the farther shore, climbed the hummocks until they came in sight of the Southern Ocean, pounding on the narrow strip of land which holds it back from the lakes. Then came the most glorious bathes of all—when they ran down the sand-hills and into the sea, each holding a hand of Garth's—and the great rollers came curling in and took them and buffeted and battered them, until they were swept far up on the smooth beach, breathless and laughing, and ready to run back and dive into the next breaker. Then, when they were too breathless to fight the rollers any more, it was good to dress quickly in nooks in the hot sand; to climb back to a sheltered hollow in the hummocks, where the sea-breeze could not scatter the ashes of their fire, and boil the billy and grill fish over driftwood embers—fish that had been swimming in the lake an hour before.

Once or twice they made a day's excursion to Bairnsdale—going up by the early steamer through the morning freshness of lake and river, spending a few hours in the pleasant town on the bank of the Mitchell, and returning in the afternoon—no longer the tired strangers that had made the first journey in the spring, but worthy settlers happily coming home. The peach orchards had flung a dress of palest pink over the sunny Bairnsdale hillsides when they first came: now they were densely green, with splendid fruit turning rosy under the leaves; and the flats along the backwater were bearing stately crops of maize. It was pleasant to be in a town again; to wander about the wide streets and trim gardens, and to see new faces; and to dine at an hotel was a real excitement—not to know, as Aileen said joyfully, what the pudding would be, nor to care who would wash up afterwards! But there was happiness in going home to the little house on the hill,

where the bright sitting-room smiled a welcome, and even Horrors' stolid face would expand into a grin as they approached. Nothing would ever make Horrors intelligent. But kindness and cleanliness had had a softening effect upon him, and he had developed a queer, dog-like affection for them all.

The farm showed signs of paying. Fruit and vegetables brought in a small but steady income, and as fast as one crop was exhausted another was sown. Ignorance and brains combined do not make a bad working outfit. Tom Macleod knew his limitations, and was thankful for Nick O'Connor's guidance and 'Possum's helping hand; but in addition he read widely on farming matters, studied his land, and sent samples of the different soils to Melbourne for analysis. Expert advice as to manures came back; and since his business training had taught him what many farmers never learn—that it is wise to spend money in order to gather it—he bought artificial fertilizers for his land and food for his calves, and already had some reward in the promise of heavy crops and in sleek, quickly-growing animals. It left them with very little money to spend. But then, it was comforting that there was not much chance of spending. The farm gave them butter and milk and cream, fresh eggs and chickens, fruit and vegetables and honey. One pig had already been converted into pork and bacon, under the direction of Mr. O'Connor; another promised a further supply for the winter. The lake was close at hand, swarming with fish; occasionally a rabbit fell to Tom's gun, and there were visions of duck-shooting ahead. Garth and Aileen scarcely ate meat at all: Tom ate less than he had ever done, and felt all the better for his change of food. Except for their modest supply of groceries, there was little need to spend.

Meanwhile, their coming meant wealth to 'Possum. When she worked for them, using her father's horses, she carefully handed half her day's pay to Nick; but on the days when she jogged over on her own old grey and used only her own muscles, the money went to swell her little account in the Savings Bank—the only building in the township that she was supposed to enter with pleasure. The account had grown but slowly before the Macleods came; now it was swelling in the most delightful fashion.

"What are you going to do with it, 'Possum?" Aileen asked her.

"Oh, I d'no," 'Possum answered. "You never know when you'll want a bit of money. Me Dad's all right about payin' for boots an' things, so long as we don't come it too strong; but he'd never understand some ways of spendin' money."

"What ways? Tell me, 'Possum."

"Well, there's the kids. Bill may want to go to Melbourne for the Show some day, or to the Cup; an' Bert an' Polly'll be gettin' bigger, an' p'raps there'll be parties an' darnces comin' along, an' they got to have decent clothes. Dad 'ud never understand; he'd think they could go all right in whatever they happened to have on. But they got ideas. They been with other girls at the school, y' see.

I couldn't have 'em cut out by a parcel of kids not half as good-lookin' as they are. I'm goin' to get them dresses for the regatta on New Year's Day. All Sale an' Bairnsdale comes down then, an' my kids got to look as well as any of 'em."

"What about yourself, 'Possum?" Aileen asked. "Don't you ever want to go to regattas and dances and jollifications?"

"Me?" said 'Possum, with blank amazement. "Oh, I'm too old—an' I ain't got no time." She stuck out a roughly-booted foot and looked at it critically; then gave an irrepressible little chuckle. "Wouldn't I be a rummy spectacle at a darnce, now, Missus?" But the laugh did not last long, and Aileen thought it was followed by a sigh.

CHAPTER XII
SAILING

"Christmas is coming!" announced Garth at the tea-table. "Isn't it scrummy?"

"Very scrummy," said his father; "but then, Christmas always is. Still, I'm a little worried about old Santa Claus."

"Why, Dad?" Garth's tone showed swift alarm. Santa Claus was absolutely real to him, and his visit was one of the very greatest events of the year.

"Well, it was all right in Melbourne, of course," Tom answered gravely. "He knew his way about there; and then, it's very easy to get about, in decent streets—don't you remember how you thought you heard the feet of his reindeer trotting along Orrong Road? But it's a very different matter to be here in the Bush, where there are mostly no tracks at all. I don't believe reindeer could haul his sleigh round here. Why, Nick O'Connor couldn't manage a sledge with a team of bullocks the other day—it simply rolled over on the hill-sides. Santa Claus' sleigh is much more lightly built than a sledge, I should think."

Tom ceased, and retired behind his tea-cup. Garth's face had lengthened.

"I never thought of that, but I suppose it *would* be hard for him," said the small boy dolefully. "And of course, he doesn't know we've moved! It's—it's pretty hard luck, isn't it?" He tried to make his tone unconcerned, and Aileen's mother-heart rebelled.

"*I* think you're two very foolish people, and you don't deserve to have Santa Claus come at all, for not trusting him!" she remarked. "Do you suppose he neglects all the little children in the Bush?"

"Well, Joe's never heard of him," said Garth; which was something of a poser, but Aileen rose to it manfully.

"I believe he does miss out some people who have never believed in him," she said. "But he very seldom forgets any one he has been good to. I wouldn't worry, if I were you, sonnie. I think he'll come."

Garth still looked doubtful.

"But how about his reindeer? It is bad country for them, isn't it?"

Aileen pondered.

"I don't believe he has reindeer at all in rough country," she said. "I believe he has a team of big black swans, and his sleigh will float; and when he comes to the lake, or to a river, the swans just swim and pull the sleigh along the water, but when he has to cross mountains or rough parts of the Bush they mount into the air, and fly over with him. Don't you think that would be a really sensible plan for him, in Australia?"

Garth bounded in his seat.

"Oh, that's a ripping idea, Mother! Of course he must do it!"

"Well, we know he must be a sensible old chap, or he never could get through all the jobs he has on Christmas Eve," said his mother. "I've often thought he must have a wonderful head for business. So it's only natural to think that he accommodates himself to different countries. I dare say he uses elephants in India, and camels in the desert of Gobi."

"Or whales in the Red Sea!" suggested Tom dreamily.

"Certainly not—he has Pharaoh's chariots there, all handy!" rejoined Aileen. "At all events, he won't neglect his jobs for little difficulties about transport. So I would just not worry if I were you, Garth."

"You're an awful comfort, Mother!" said Garth gratefully. "I've finished—can I go, please?"

"Where are you off to?" asked his father.

"Got to shut up the young turkeys. 'Possum said she heard a fox last night, so we can't be too careful." They heard him race through the back yard, whistling for Bran, then the bang of the gate in his wake.

"Isn't he getting a man?" Aileen said, laughing. "Why do you torment the poor soul?"

"Just to give you a chance of smoothing away his difficulties," he said, and smiled at her. "Isn't that what you're for?"

She smiled in return, and then grew thoughtful.

"I've been thinking about Christmas, Tom," she said. "Have we any money?"

"Not a heap, when I've paid for the last lot of fertilizer," he said. "Not enough to give you a diamond necklace, I'm afraid—I'm sorry!"

"It would be so handy to me here that it seems a pity," she rejoined. "The spectacle of Mrs. Macleod hoeing turnips in a diamond necklace would be interesting, to say the least of it!"

"It would," he agreed. "But, apart from diamonds, I can give you a little money, dear. How much do you want?"

"Oh, a very little," she answered. "We'll plan Garth's presents together, of course; but I want to do something for 'Possum, Tom. 'Possum has been very good to us."

"I quite agree—she has done a great deal more than she has been paid for," Tom said heartily. "What do you want to give her?"

"I want to give her a pretty, dainty print frock," said Aileen, leaning her elbows on the table, and speaking rapidly, with shining eyes. "Not blue—she never wears anything but blue dungaree: pink, I think, with a little white collar and cuffs. And some simple pretty under-things and a petticoat to wear with it, and a pair of nice stockings and neat shoes, and a simple, pretty hat. Is that too much, Tom?"

"If you mentioned how much these glories would cost——" he began, laughing.

"Oh, very little. I'll make all the things myself, and the material will cost hardly anything. I have a hat that will do—she has never seen it: and the shoes and stockings will be very plain. Would about a pound for the whole be too much?"

"I'll give you thirty shillings," he said. "Then you can buy yourself chocolates with what is left. How about fitting her?"

"Oh, I can guess about the dress," Aileen answered. "And she can wear my size shoes, though you would never guess it to see her feet in those enormous boots. I made her put on one of my slippers the other day when she lost a boot in the creek, and we had to dry it after we had fished it up. And I saw her looking at her foot in my slipper with a kind of hungry expression in her eyes. She does love pretty things, Tom; I think one reason why she likes coming here is because I have them."

Tom laughed.

"She likes coming here because she has fallen badly in love with you and Garth," he said. "But she's a good sort, and I'm grateful for all she has taught me. Do you know, I think she tries to imitate you. She looks cleaner, somehow—and I'll swear she brushes that queer short mop of hers more than she used."

"I know she does," Aileen said. "I've seen a difference ever since I told her casually that I gave mine at least a hundred strokes with the brush every night. And she has a tub regularly—she told Garth so—and I know she scrubs her hands. But her terrible clothes don't give her a chance; and, of course, she spends nearly

all her spare time on the children."

"She's a queer mixture," Tom said.

"Isn't she? She has mothered those babies, kept house, cooked and washed, cut scrub, fenced and drained paddocks, put in crops, and broken in horses; and she can hardly sew on a button—decently, I mean; she 'clamps 'em on,' she says; she has never made a pudding or a cake, never been to Church, and never ten miles from her home. She told me all the religion she had. 'Mother learnt me to say prayers, so I says 'em; and I learnt the kids. Father, he don't care. The kids goes to school, so they picked up more'n me; but I keep 'em up to the mark. Mother said you say prayers to God, so that's how I know He's there, an' that's all there is about it—there'd have to be Some One somewhere, wouldn't there—no get-out of that!"

"Poor little soul! Well, she's straight enough, whatever her religion may be, and she's bringing up those kids uncommonly well," Tom said. "A man was telling me that young Bill stole some apples, and told a lie about it; 'Possum found it out, and dragged him five miles to the owner of the fruit to own up and ask for a thrashing! Said she couldn't look their mother in the face if they grew up liars and thieves. I believe young Bill has been extremely reliable since!"

"It's like her," Aileen said.

"The same man told me that she can swim like a fish, and handle a boat as well as any fisherman on the lakes. Her father used to own part of a fishing-boat, and she has been out with him on the wildest nights. Yes, you'd certainly call our 'Possum a young lady of mixed accomplishments. But I suppose one would find a good many like her, if one went hunting in the Bush districts. She's just what her upbringing has made her."

"I don't think you'd find many with 'Possum's straight, clean soul," Aileen said slowly. She went to the doorway, and stood looking out across the paddocks to the blue glimpse of the lake, where 'Possum, had she known it, was at the moment fighting one of the toughest battles of her life.

It was at breakfast that morning that Nick O'Connor had announced his intention of taking his small sailing-boat and crossing Lake King to a settler's farm on the farther shore. There were pigs to be looked at: if he approved of them he might even bring a couple home in the boat. Therefore he would need help.

"Suppose you can come, 'Poss?" he said.

"Oh, I s'pose so," 'Possum answered. "I was goin' over to the Macleods' to look how their lucerne's comin' on, but I guess that'll keep till to-morrow. Bertha'll look after the kids."

Bertha nodded. She was a small stout person of few words, who had been born old, and had never become young.

"Right," said her father. "You get in wood, Bill, an' milk in good-time if I'm not back; an' don't you forget them pigs an' calves."

Bill nodded also. He was deeply engaged with his third plate of porridge, and relieved, on the whole, that no more tasks had come his way.

"Then we'll hurry up, 'Poss," said Nick. He got up from the table, his great form seeming to fill the little kitchen. "When'll you be ready?"

"Oh, as soon as you get the boat, I expect," she said. "Just give a coo-ee when you're ready to start."

"Right," said her father. He gathered up pipe, tobacco and matches, and strode from the house, and 'Possum disappeared in the direction of the shed. There was a sick calf to be tended, and instructions to be given to Bertha and young Bill as to its feeding during the day, with a dozen other jobs that needed her before she could leave the house with an easy mind. She was not, indeed, finished when she heard her father's coo-ee, after which there was a wild rush, which did not include time to make any additions to her toilet. Not that it mattered, she reflected; the Simpsons would not be likely to know whether she had a dress on or not. Blue dungaree was good enough for them.

Nick O'Connor, for a wonder, looked at his daughter, when they had pushed out from shore and were gliding gently down the arm of the lake to the broader water beyond.

"That ol' dress of yours has seen its best days, hasn't it?" he said. "Seems to me it's more patch than dress."

"It is so," 'Possum answered. "Can't make 'em last for ever. Anyhow, dungaree lasts twice as long as anything else."

"What else 've you got?" inquired her father.

"Why, I ain't got nothin' else but dungaree, except me oilskin, an' me old thick skirt," 'Possum answered, in some astonishment. "It's the most useful; an' I never have time to put on other clothes. I got three of these—enough to get 'em washed when they want it."

"H'm," said her father thoughtfully. "Well, it looks a bit rum. You'd better get a new one, I think, an' give that ol' rag a rest: it looks about fit to make good floorcloths."

"Right," said 'Possum cheerfully. Even of dungaree, a new dress was a pleasant, almost exciting experience: albeit dungaree when new is more like petrified wood-pulp than anything else, and only ceases to scratch the wearer severely after many washings. She wondered, would she depart from her usual custom of buying a man's jumper for the blouse, and, instead, try to make it a little like some of Mrs. Macleod's working dresses Then, with a shrug, she gave up the idea. She knew she could not fashion the harsh, unyielding material into anything pretty—even if she could sew well enough. "An' you jolly well can't,"

she told herself. "You ain't the kind to wear pretty things, anyhow."

They had reached the lake, and were running along half a mile from the shore. It was a hot day, with a fitful wind coming in puffs off the land, where, probably, it was scorching things considerably; but here, tempered by their swift motion, and by its path over the water, it was only cool and refreshing, and made their journey an easy matter. 'Possum had done a hard week's work: it was pleasant to sit idly in the boat, watching the water cream away from the bow, and the waves sparkle under the sun's rays. They passed fishing boats, hurrying in to hand over their catch to the Bairnsdale steamer; and one or two motor-launches from the hotels, crammed with gaily-dressed summer visitors bent on a long day's picnic, crossed their bows, the occupants glancing curiously at the unkempt girl in the sailing boat, who drew her battered felt hat over her brows, and concealed herself after the fashion of the ostrich. 'Possum disliked all summer visitors. They were a useful species, in providing a market for eggs and vegetables, but nothing could have induced her to believe that they did not laugh at her.

They reached their destination in good time, and received the usual Bush welcome from Mr. Simpson, a lean and silent settler, and Mrs. Simpson, who was also lean, but not at all silent, as well as from a large horde of little Simpsons, to whom visitors were an infrequent and glorious excitement. Nick disappeared with his host in the direction of the pigsty, while 'Possum remained in the kitchen and nursed the last baby and the last but one, between whom there seemed but a slight difference in point of age. In the intervals of this employment she peeled potatoes, washed cabbages, and gave slices of bread and treacle to any little Simpson who demanded them—which occurred with extraordinary frequency; and later, finding her hostess' bed still unmade, rectified this, and swept the room. Mrs. Simpson was grateful.

"There's some people comes into the house and they wouldn't lift a finger to do a hand's turn for you," she remarked. "But I do say you're not like that, 'Possum O'Connor. I never seen your equal for findin' out things to be done. It's a comfort to see how that baby takes to you, like. She ain't been well, an' she howls the whole blessed night an' most of the day. Makes you fair tired. Not as what you ain't always tired, with seven of 'em under your feet all day. But a woman's born to be tired, so it ain't no use to grumble. Delia O'Hea, across the lake, she grumbles, an' her husband he up an' hit her the other day. Said he was full up. I wouldn't blame him, neither. Well, thank goodness, Jim ain't never lifted a hand to me yet. I wouldn't advise him to, neither—he's smaller'n me. Well, ain't you got any news, 'Possum? Might as well be in the Equator for all the news we get here."

"No, I don't think there's any," 'Possum answered, dancing the last baby

until it roared with joy. "I never go anywhere, except to sell aigs an' veg'tables. Sellin' flowers, too, this year. Mrs. Macleod put me up to that."

"Oh, tell us about the Macleods," Mrs. Simpson begged, pausing, rolling-pin in hand, in smoothing out dough. "Jim, he saw Mr. Macleod at the sales one day with your father, an' he said there was none of old Gordon's style about him. Said he was a toff, all right, but none o' your stand-off toffs. Jolly, too, Jim said, an' didn't mind sayin' straight out that he didn't know a thing about calves. Nor he didn't neither, Jim said."

"Well, you wouldn't expect him to," 'Possum said. "And it don't matter not to know anything, if you know you don't know. It's when you think you do that you fall in."

"That's right," agreed Mrs. Simpson, falling anew upon the dough. "Tell us about Mrs. Macleod, 'Poss. I s'pose she's a toff, too. Does she dress very swell?"

"Yes, she's a toff," 'Possum said slowly. "But she dresses as plain as you or me, almost. Just print things, an' not one scrap of trimmin'."

"No trimmin'! But I s'pose she has lace collars an' things?"

"No, she hasn't. I never see her with a bit of lace on. Just plain white collars. Washes an' irons 'em herself, too—leastways, she did till she got ol' Mrs. Todd to do the washin'. But she irons 'em. I seen her."

"Fancy her dressin' like that, an' comin' straight from Melbun," said Mrs. Simpson, marvelling on such misuse of opportunities. "But what's she wear when she goes out, 'Poss?"

"Well, sometimes she just wears her old prints. If it's cold she puts on a coat an' skirt—made most awful plain."

"An' a trimmed hat?" said her hostess eagerly.

"No. Her hats is plain, too."

"Well, I never! She must look queer!"

"No, she don't," said 'Possum hotly. "She—she'd look lovely, no matter what she had on. An' even if her clothes is plain, they're just right. You'd say so, if you saw 'em on her."

"Is that so? Well, I s'pose I would, if you say so, but I must say I do like a bit of trimmin'," said Mrs. Simpson. "I seen a picksher of a dress in a paper Jim brought home the other day: marone, it was, with a vest an' collar of tartan silk, an' some cawffee lace on it, an' big pearl buttons. My, it did look a treat! You'd think any one comin' from those big shops in Melbun 'ud have lots of dresses that sort. But is she as pretty as all that, really, 'Poss?"

"She's awful pretty," 'Possum said. "Very tall, an' yeller hair, an' blue eyes. An' whatever she puts on seems just like it ought to be."

"Go on!" said Mrs. Simpson, greatly interested. "Fancy, now! An' she's doin' her own work?"

"My word, she is. Inside an' outside, too—an' she's got that place a picksher," said 'Possum. "An' the veg'tables she grows! you'd ought to seen them. Works in the garden like a cart-horse. An' fowls, an' all sorts. They're goin' to make money off that place, you take my word!"

"Lor'!" said Mrs. Simpson. "Jim was sayin' you've been workin' there, 'Poss?"

"I been doin' a bit o' ploughin' an' odd jobs."

"An' they do treat you nice?"

"Couldn't treat me nicer, not if I was a member of Parliament!"

"Go on! Well, that sort is real toffs, an' no mistake! An' what about the kid?"

"He's a darlin'," 'Possum said. "I never seen a boy with such nice manners. Well, you'd hardly believe it, but that boy's seven, an' I ain't seen 'im rude to any one yet!"

"Well, I never!" said her hostess feebly.

"No. An' he looks after his mother as if she was a bit of china an' might break. He'd look after me, too, if I'd let him. Many's the time when I've been workin' there on a hot day he come down the paddock to me with a billy of tea or a bottle of lemon syrup. An' they'd no more let me go without havin' me afternoon tea than they'd fly!"

"Brings it out to you?"

"Not they; they come an' haul me into their sittin'-room. My word, you ought to see it—all pickshers, an' books, an' flowers, an' a lovely pianner. An' she plays a fair treat."

"But aren't they awful well off?"

"No, they ain't. They got jolly little money. They had plenty in Melbourne, but he had to give up his billet there when they come here. An' they say they don't care a button, 'cause the kid's gettin' strong, an' he nearly died in Melbourne."

"Don't s'pose they would," said Mrs. Simpson, rescuing the last-but-one baby from the wood-box, and bestowing it outside the door, with a spank and a kiss, both of which it received without emotion. "Oh, lor'! here's your dad an' Jim, an' I'll bet the potatoes ain't cooked!"

Dinner at the Simpsons', being complicated by the seven little Simpsons, was a long and stormy affair, from which 'Possum and her father escaped before it had raged its way to a close. Nick O'Connor had bought a pig, and was anxious to get home. Mr. Simpson conveyed it to the water's edge in a wheelbarrow, tied in a sack, through a hole in which its head protruded, while it emitted the agonized shrieks peculiar to pigs. It redoubled these on being dumped into the boat, having, apparently, an aversion to a sea-faring life; and under cover of its

wails 'Possum and Nick screamed their farewells to their host, and pushed off.

The breeze was still choppy, and they made but slow progress, tacking frequently. On land, it had been very hot, and the Simpsons' crowded kitchen had been stifling. Even on the lake, when the breeze fell, the sun was hot enough to make Nick throw off his coat. They zigzagged backwards and forwards across the lake; the boat went sluggishly, and both her passengers were sleepy. The only wakeful individual was the pig, who had ceased to yell, more from lack of breath than from any pleasant inclination, and was steadily employed in widening the hole cut for its head.

A sharp puff of wind came off the land. Simultaneously, the pig freed himself from the sack, and started for home, oblivious of the fact that his hind legs were still tied together—a fact which checked its first leap, and sent it rolling, with an ear-splitting yell, against Nick's legs. That gentleman awoke with a start, and instinctively put the helm over, just at the wrong moment. The gust of wind struck them suddenly, and the boat heeled over, too far to right itself. The sail struck the water, and in an instant Nick, 'Possum and the pig were struggling together in the waves.

The pig's troubles were quickly over. The rope round its hind legs, knotted by the capable Mr. Simpson, held firmly, and the water soon choked its cries as it sank for the last time. 'Possum and her father swam to the boat, which lay on its side, and clung to it, looking at each other.

"Well, of all the born fools!" spluttered Mr. O'Connor, a vision of soaked wrath. "I oughtn't to be let out. D'you know what happened?"

"I don't—I was asleep," 'Possum admitted. "First thing I knew, I was swimmin'."

"Well, you'd a right to go to sleep, but I hadn't," said Nick furiously. "That darned pig got loose, an' barged into me just as the wind struck us. Now we're in a lovely fix, an' I've lost a jolly good pig, an' it hardly paid for an hour. And me hat. Well, I ought to be kicked for a careless fool!"

"Can't be helped," said 'Possum cheerfully. "It was awful easy to go to sleep, sittin' still after havin' dinner in that hot kitchen."

"All very well for you to talk—you ain't got to pay for the pig!" said her father morosely. "I say, you climb up on the boat."

'Possum scrambled upon the boat, which lay on its side, held in position by the sail under the water. Then her father tried to follow her example; but the little craft ducked so ominously under his great weight that he slipped back into the lake.

"That'll never do—she won't hold both of us," he said.

"Then I'll get off," said 'Possum. "I can easy hold on."

"You will not," said her father decidedly. "Sit where you are, an' behave

yourself. Tell you what—I'll work round an' stand on the mast: that'll be some support, an' it'll divide the weight better."

He made his way round the bow until he could feel the mast with his feet, and gingerly stood on it. It creaked, and the boat swayed over; and for a moment Nick prepared to jump off again. Then, however, as the boat showed no further sign of sinking, he sighed with relief.

"You wouldn't call it exactly comf'table, but it's better than hangin' on in the water," he said. "Can you see any sign of bein' picked up?"

'Possum scanned the lake.

"Not any one in sight," she said. "We're a bit off the usual track, aren't we? Do you reckon we'll drift into shore? It ain't far away."

"I don't," said Nick. "We're out o' the way o' currents, as well as boats. Still, you never can tell where people'll cut across the lake; an' them hotel launches ought to be comin' home about this way. Well, we just got to stick it out. I'd give a dollar if me matches an' baccy hadn't got wet!"

The slow hours of the afternoon crept on. No one came near the castaways. Once or twice their hopes rose high, as a fishing-boat or a launch crossed the lake; but they were not seen, and their shouts died unheeded on the water. It seemed extraordinary that they should not be perceived, for the shore was not a mile away, and houses looked peacefully down upon them; it was maddening to see the cheery smoke curling upward from the chimneys, and to realize how near lay deliverance.

They changed places after a while. Nick's great height made his position on the mast unbearably cramped, and when he had slipped off twice, 'Possum became firm.

"It's silly," she said. "I can stand on that stick quite easy; it's different for you, an' you six feet four. Why, it doubles you up something cruel." She descended into the water, and occupied the position on the mast before the cramped man could regain it.

"I b'lieve the boat'll hold you all right, if you get up gently," said she. "Go on—you're about due for a rest."

Nick scrambled to her former seat, the boat merely swaying beneath him. He looked at her gratefully.

"My word, it's good to sit down!" he said. "That place is a fair terror, 'Poss; I ain't goin' to let you stay there long. Hot above an' cold below, it is—your feet an' legs is near froze, an' on top you're gettin' sunstroke. You just tell me when you want a spell."

"Oh, I'll stick it all right," said 'Possum. "I had a mighty long spell already." They relapsed into silence. There was nothing to talk about.

They shouted, from time to time, until they were hoarse and weary; but no

one heard them, and at last they ceased. Nick was growing very weary. Once he slipped off, half asleep, and 'Possum had to swim after him and bring him back to the boat. He seemed half-dazed, and a sick fear came over her that the heat of the sun on his bare head had been too much for him. She splashed water over his face, and he became more alive.

"Thought I might swim ashore," he said thickly. "But I s'pose I'd better get back." He climbed laboriously upon the boat once more, and 'Possum returned to her perch on the submerged mast.

The sun went down slowly, a red ball of fire, into the lake. It was a relief to be without its fierce rays; but as the short Australian twilight deepened into dusk the wind blew coldly on their soaked garments, and they shivered. O'Connor opened his heavy eyes, and looked at his daughter.

"I dunno how you can keep on there," he said. "I'm near done, an' I'm twice as comf't'ble up here. Well, if you come out of it an' I don't, 'Poss, there's a sort of a will in the drawer where I keep the strychnine for the foxes. It'll fix up all about the farm."

"I say, chuck it, Dad!" 'Possum said unsteadily. "You ain't goin' to give in."

"Not if I can help it," he said. "But I'm not far off done."

There came across the water the dull beat of a screw and a red light showed faintly through the dusk. It was the Bairnsdale boat hurrying down to her night's rest; and the sight galvanized the weary castaways into fresh efforts. But the steamer passed them half a mile away, deaf to their shouts. Her gleaming lights fell across them as in mockery before she throbbed away towards the Entrance.

"Well, that does me," O'Connor said, after a long, silent pause. "I'll drop off soon, 'Poss. Then you come an' perch up here."

"I won't," 'Possum said, with a sob. "You ain't goin' to give in, Dad. Think of the kids—I can't manage them boys."

"I'm near done, 'Poss."

"No, you're not. The Sale boat'll be along in less than an hour now. She'll pick us up, I bet you."

"It'd be a miracle if she did," Nick said. "What with the row of her engines, an' her passengers all talkin', how on earth's any one to hear us in the dark? It's no good, my girl. I'll drop off."

"If you do, I'll only come in after you, an' finish the way you do," said 'Possum between her teeth. "It ain't like you, Dad, to be such a jolly old coward. You *got* to hang on, for the kids' sake."

"I'll try a bit longer," said her father meekly. "But I'm dead beat, 'Poss."

They fell silent again, save for the water lapping gently against their poor place of refuge. Unbearable pains were beginning to torment 'Possum; her feet, from standing on the narrow mast, were swollen and agonizingly painful, and

pains like red-hot wires shot up her legs. Sometimes she let herself go into the water altogether, holding to the boat; but she was too weak to cling for long, and soon she was forced to climb back to her place of torture. Her father no longer spoke. She could see him dimly, leaning forward astride of the boat, and breathing heavily.

Somehow the hour dragged by, and again the low throb came across the lake. 'Possum strained her eyes. At first the gloom was too thick to pierce, but presently she made out a dull glow from the steamer's lights, and could see the red gleam of the lantern at her mast. 'Possum cried to her father.

"Dad! It's the Sale boat. Yell!"

[image]

"'Dad! It's the Sale Boat. Yell!'"

O'Connor grunted heavily, half asleep, and utterly exhausted. She could get nothing more from him; and as the steamer drew nearer, she left the half-conscious man alone and uttered cry upon cry for help. Nearer and nearer yet the gleaming lights rushed upon her. She spent all her strength in a last cry, which ended in a sob as the steamer passed on.

"They've gone!" she gasped. "Well, we're done, anyhow!"

A bell clanged sharply, and with it a shout.

"Coo-ee! Who's there?"

She screamed in answer. The steamer was slackening speed, coming round in a half-circle; she could hear each clang of her telegraph. Voices came loudly.

"Who's there?"

"Any one in trouble?"

"Want help?"

But 'Possum had no words. She could only utter broken cries, that grew fainter and fainter. Her feet were slipping from the mast: she clung to the side of the boat with nerveless fingers that slipped and clawed for a fresh hold, and slipped again. Then, very dimly, it seemed, she heard the clash of oars in rowlocks, and a deep voice close to her. And then—nothing more.

She woke in a little cabin. There was a faint light. Her feet and legs were full of pain, but she was wrapped in blankets, and even the pain could not keep her from feeling gloriously warm and comfortable. A kind-faced woman came forward.

"Where's 'Dad?" 'Possum asked feebly.

"He's all right—asleep in a cabin."

"Where am I?"

"You're in the ladies' cabin on the *Omeo*," said the woman. "And I'm the stewardess, and we're tied up at Cuninghame, and you're not to worry about anything, you poor child. Drink this."

'Possum did not know what it was: but it was hot and pleasant and soothing, and the woman's kind voice was like music. There did not seem anything to worry about; she might as well go to sleep—and did so.

CHAPTER XIII
AMATEUR SURGERY

"Aileen! Aileen! Are you there?"

It was very early on a hot December morning. Tom Macleod came up the yard hurriedly. His wife appeared at the back door, broom in hand.

"What is it, Tom?"

"It's a poor beggar of a scrub-cutter," Tom said hurriedly. "You know there are two men working up the Lake? Well, one has just been down to borrow a pony. He says his mate has broken his leg—the limb of a tree fell on him: and he's gone to bring him in here: we're the nearest people. I say, you studied first aid, didn't you?"

Aileen's heart turned to water.

"I did—but it's ages ago," she said. "And I have never had any practical experience. I would be afraid to touch him."

"Well, something ought to be done," Tom said, obviously disappointed. "Don't you remember anything about it?"

Aileen racked her memory.

"I could try, of course," she said slowly. "But I should be terrified of making it worse."

"I think any sort of bandaging is better than leaving it altogether," said Tom. "Let's try, at all events. It's the lower part of the leg that's broken."

"That's easier than the thigh, at all events. Come on. I'll leave you to chop out splints while I run for an old sheet for bandages." She ran towards the wood-heap, but paused on the way to pick up an old paling. "That will do, I think," she said, and knitted her brows, striving to think of long-forgotten instructions. "I can't be perfectly certain of the lengths, but if you will cut it here—and here—it

should be about right."

She came back in a few moments, and together they tore and rolled bandages swiftly.

"It's the worst of luck that the motor has gone wrong, and I can't take the poor chap down in the launch," Tom said. "It would have been such easy travelling. Now we'll have to lay him flat in the buggy, and you know what the jolting of that road is."

Aileen thought a moment.

"There's a better way than letting him lie down," she said. "I read of it the other day. You lash a padded board, stretching across from the seat to the splashboard, and let the patient sit up in the ordinary way—the good leg hanging down, and the broken one strapped to the board. The paper said the patient would hardly feel a jolt."

"Well, I know the lying-down position is simply torture, so we'll try your way," Tom said. "With luck, we may catch the Bairnsdale boat with him—it doesn't go until nine, and it's only seven o'clock now. I hope they won't be long. The fellow who came in said he could manage to get him here on the pony, so I thought it was better for me to wait and get things ready here. I'll fix that board, if you will find something to pad it. Is Garth up?"

"He's in his bath, I think."

"You might tell him to hurry and run the horses up as soon as he's dressed. I'll get the buggy out. I expect the poor beggar will want some nourishment—and a drink."

"We'll give him brandy before I touch the leg; and I have some strong soup I can 'hot up' for him to take afterwards."

"That's good," Tom said approvingly. "If time is short, you could drive him in, couldn't you? and I'd ride ahead and try to hold the steamer back. I'm sure the captain would wait, under the circumstances."

"Splendid idea! I'm certain he would wait. But perhaps we won't need to," Aileen said. "I'll go and get everything ready, and fix up some breakfast for Garth."

"Get something to eat yourself," Tom called after her. She shook her head, smiling, as she hurried in: breakfast for herself was the last thing to be thought of. But Tom came after her with long strides.

"Be sensible, dear," he said. "It may be an ugly job; and you don't want to turn faint or have unsteady hands, for the poor chap's sake."

"That's true," Aileen admitted. "Aren't you sensible! Well, I will eat something." She smiled into his eyes, and was gone.

Garth, half-dressed, went flying down the paddock, and was soon urging the horses up the hill, with shrill shouts, to the stockyard. In a few minutes

the buggy was ready, with the padded board in position. Just as Tom tied up the horses Roany whinneyed; and turning, he saw Jane, led by the scrub-cutter, coming up the hill, the injured man riding. A "Coo-ee!" brought Aileen hurrying out. She ran to the gate.

The patient was little more than a boy. He was crouched on the pony, leaning forward: one hand steadying himself on Jane's withers, the other under his knee, supporting the broken leg. As he saw Aileen his white face twisted into a smile, and he freed the hand under his knee that he might lift his hat. The leg sagged downwards. A cry broke from her.

"Oh, please, don't! Take care of your leg!"

The effort was almost the finishing touch to the long agony of the ride. The boy went forward helplessly, and, abandoning Jane, Tom and his mate lifted him off and laid him on the grass under the quince-tree. A little colour came back to his lips, and he gasped, "Sorry!" Tom slipped a hand under his head, holding brandy to his lips.

"Cow of a trip!" said the other scrub-cutter. "Had to carry him downhill and across the creek on me back, an' you know what the scrub is there! I fell twice with him. Mighty good luck the bone ain't through the skin, but it ain't. It's broke in two places, though."

Aileen was on her knees on the grass, feeling the leg gently. Before, she had been sick with nervousness; but in the presence of the boy's agony, every thought but one fled from her—to help him. She was perfectly cool.

"I'm afraid I've got to hurt you," she said. "I'll be as quick as I can."

She ran her hands up and down the leg, feeling, with an involuntary shudder, the bones grate under the skin, She must get it straight, she knew. Gently, but firmly, she pulled it into position. Once she heard him gasp, but her hands did not falter. It was straight at last, and she signed to Tom. "Hold it—just like that."

She laid the splints in position, and bandaged them tightly, forgotten deftness coming back to her. Round and round the firm hands went steadily, until the leg, swathed like a mummy, stuck out stiffly before her. Then she sat back on her heels.

"That's all I can do," she said, finding her lips stiff and dry. The voice was not like her own. "Look carefully, Tom, and tell me if you think it is straight."

"As far as I can see—perfectly," Tom said, peering at the leg.

"I guess it's straight," said the patient cheerfully, "'cause it don't hurt now, hardly a bit. An' it was a fair caution before you touched it. Where'd you learn how, mum?"

But Aileen had no power to answer. She found herself suddenly shuddering, and drenched in perspiration. Tom put his hand on her shoulders, and made

her drink a little brandy.

"Oh, I was so afraid!" she whispered, "so dreadfully afraid! Are you sure it's straight?"

"It must be," he said gently, "or he wouldn't be out of pain. Pull yourself together, dear—remember we haven't much time. And he must have the soup."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I'm all right, Tom; don't worry. Will you two get him into the buggy while I bring the soup?" She hurried away.

When she came back, with the steaming cup in her hand, the patient was sitting up in the buggy, wearing a wide smile, while Tom strapped the leg to the board above the knee and at the foot. Garth stood sentry-fashion at the horse's head, his eyes shining with excitement.

"By Jove, that's good!" said the broken-legged one, tasting the soup. "And I'd hardly know me ol' laig was broke, I'm that comfortable. You're a great doctor, ain't you now, Mrs. Macleod?"

"I hope I didn't hurt you much," she said, smiling at him faintly. She was still trembling.

"Not you. That ol' pony hurt like fury, an' it was a fair caution when Bill fell down with me. Twice, he did; Bill's a great hand at fallin'." He grinned at Bill.

"Thank y'r lucky stars I was big enough to carry y'r great carcase," said that worthy, not at all abashed. "Might as well be decently grateful: I can tell you, you ain't no luxury to carry!"

"Finished?" Tom asked, handing the empty cup to Garth. "Get the place tidy, son; mother's going to drive in. We'll be back soon." He helped Aileen to the driver's seat, handing her the reins. "You haven't too much time. I'll go ahead and try to hold the boat. Jump up behind"—to the mate. "I'll leave the gates open as I go, and you can shut them." He swung himself upon the pony, and trotted down the hill.

It was with a shiver of dread that Aileen felt the first severe jolt as they jogged over the rough paddock track. She glanced anxiously at her patient.

"Did that hurt you much?"

"'Ardly felt it," said he. "This dodge of yours is the best ever I see. Every one else puts a man full length on a mattress, an' crikey! don't it hurt! Every little jolt'll make a man howl. But this is like bein' in an armchair, and the jolts don't seem to worry you at all." They bumped heavily over a tussock, and his calmness bore out the truth of his words.

She was thankful for it, for there was no time to waste. Her patient, smoking and chattering, was apparently indifferent as to whether he caught the steamer. "I don't reckon any ol' doctor is goin' to make a better job of this laig than you done," he said, carelessly. But to Aileen it was unthinkable that they should not catch it. She had no belief in her own ability to set a broken leg prop-

erly. That the boy should be cheerful, and almost out of pain, was a kind of pleasant miracle, but she could not realize that her unskilled hands could possibly have caused it. She would not have been surprised if, at any moment, he had broken down again in shivering agony. The dread lest she should have made some mistake almost choked her—how could she ever face him in the future if the leg she had doctored were crooked, or shorter than the other? He was such a boy! She could not bear to think that he might be crippled, and because of her.

"I say!" said the patient, suddenly alert. "There's a snake! Do stop, Mrs. Macleod, and let Bill kill the brute."

"Not for fifty snakes!" said Aileen firmly. She brought down the whip with emphasis on Roany's back. The snake, a big brown one, slid away into a patch of bracken.

"I don't believe in letting snakes go," said the patient severely. "You never can tell where it's going to turn up again. It's like leavin' poison lyin' about loose where there's kids. You wouldn't like your own kid to meet that chap if he was runnin' about in the scrub, not thinkin'."

Aileen had a feeling of having been put in the corner by a small boy.

"I know," she said meekly. "And I truly would not leave it, if we had time. But this is a lonely part, and there are no children—and it is very important to get you to a doctor quickly. If we miss the boat, you know, it means waiting a whole day."

"Ah, doctors!" said the boy scornfully. "I knew one once in South Gippsland where a chap broke his laig, same as me, and some one set it, and got him pretty right for the time bein'. They took him home an' wired for a doctor to a place ten mile away, tellin' him what was the matter, so's he'd bring the proper fixin's. He come along after a bit, took off the setting an' looked at the laig, an' said it was set all right, an' he'd left the splints an' things at the hotel, an' he must go an' get them. So he left that laig with nothin' on it but a blanket, an' went off; an' he didn't come back for seven hours!"

"But why?"

"Why? 'Cause he was playin' billiards an' havin' a good time. That's why. They sent ever so many messages to him, an' the poor chap lay there, with his laig swellin' something cruel. Then the doctor come back at last, an' if you'll believe me he'd never brought a thing with him! He took them old bandages an' rough bits of wood they'd used for splints—the things he'd taken off an' chucked aside in the morning—an' put 'em on the laig again: all dirty, they was, from bein' against his ol' workin' pants."

"But why did he not bring the proper things?"

"Nobody never knew. He didn't, anyhow. When that laig was set first, by the chap as did it in the Bush, it was as straight and comft'ble as anything

could be. But when that beautiful doctor done it, it wasn't straight. He put on the things quite loose and careless. The man's mate was there, an' said so, an' the doctor flared up like & packet of crackers. 'Do you think I don't know me business?' says he. 'I'm blooming well sure you don't,' says the mate."

"What did he say to that?" Aileen asked.

"Not a thing. You couldn't insult him—he hadn't no decent pride. He just finished tyin' up the poor bloke's laig, an' went off, sayin' he'd come back in three days an' look at him. But the chap suffered very bitter in his heel all night, an' next morning his foot was stickin' out turned half-ways round. They sent five mile into the Bush for the man that had set it first, to come an' straighten it an' set it again."

"Did he?"

"No, he had sense. He said he couldn't take the responsibility of touching it. So they packed the poor chap an' his laig up on a stretcher, with the laig just as the doctor had left it, an' sent him up to the Melbourne Hospital. They said it was the laughin'-stock of the whole place—they asked was it a doctor as had done it, or a goanna?"

"I never heard of such a thing!" Aileen breathed. "Did he—was he lame afterwards?"

"Well, he wasn't, but it was luck. And it was ages before he was better, an' him out of work all the time. So that's why I ain't in any hurry to get to any ol' doctors. Me laig's comft'ble now, an' I'd like it to stay so."

"But all doctors aren't like that, thank goodness," Aileen said. "I know one who saved my boy's life. And when he comes into a house where there is sickness, you feel as if he had suddenly shouldered all your troubles."

"Oh, I suppose there's good and bad in all trades!" her patient admitted handsomely. "Only that fool Englishman in South Gippsland was the only one I ever met very intimate, so to speak. But I've heard they're good in Bairnsdale."

"I know they are," Aileen assured him. "And there's a big, comfortable hospital where you'll be splendidly looked after. You see, it's all very well now, when you haven't had time to get tired; but you will be glad enough to be in bed after a while."

"I s'pose I will; but I never was in bed a day in me life," he said ruefully. "Oh, well, if I'm fool enough to let a limb hit me, I got to pay for it."

They were approaching the outskirts of the township. Scattered houses came in view, and the roar of the surf grew plainer as they drew near to the narrow lagoon that lies between Cuninghame and the sand hummocks of the Ninety Mile Beach. Above it came three long discordant hoots.

"My word, that's the steamer!" said the man at the back. "Can you get a bit more out of that ol' pony, mum?"

Aileen was already plying the whip, much to Roany's disgust. He shook his head angrily from side to side, and finally broke into a lurching canter. Tom came in view, riding to meet them.

"Hurry all you can!" he said briefly. "The captain has kept the steamer almost as long as he dares; you see, he carries the mail from some places. I'll tell him you're coming."

They turned into the esplanade, and rocked down past the houses and the stores. Near the wharf a knot of people waited, gazing curiously at them. The paddle-steamer was at the wharf, smoke pouring from her funnel. Aileen could see the tall figure of the captain leaning over the railing. He shouted something she could not hear. She pulled up near the wharf, with a sigh of relief.

There were plenty of willing hands to help to carry the patient to the steamer. The captain had offered his cabin, but the boy begged to be left on deck.

"I'll be inside four walls long enough, I expect," he said. "Let's stop out here." So they propped him up where he could look across the lake, with his bandaged leg sticking stiffly out in front of him. He looked at it with a wry smile.

"A nice object, you are!" he said. He held out his hand to Aileen. "Thanks, Mrs. Macleod. If I've ever the luck to be able to do a good turn for you, I'll do it."

"But you would do that if you'd never hurt your leg," she said, laughing. "I think all Gippslanders are ready to do good turns! Take care of yourself, and good luck!" She turned to his mate. "You'll let us know how he gets on?"

"My word, yes," said Bill. He also shook hands vigorously. "Great bit of luck we struck you, mum, anyhow!"

The steamer gave an agonized hoot, and Tom and Aileen sought the wharf hurriedly. They stood, watching, while the big, top-heavy-looking, boat moved slowly out from the wharf, with great churnings of her paddles, and set off down the lagoon towards the lake opening out ahead. Aileen suddenly realized that she was very tired.

"And the washing-up not done!" she said. "It's very bad management to begin the day with such dissipation! Come home, Tom."

"Right-oh!" Tom answered. "I'll lead Jane, and come with you in the buggy." He helped her in, and they jogged back along the esplanade. "Are you very done up, my girl?"

"Oh, a little bit tired," she said. "I think it's more from fear than anything else."

"Well, you had no reason to be afraid," he said. "Your job was all right. I was proud of you! But it wasn't an easy thing to tackle. However, none of us need worry now when we break an odd limb or two: all we have to do is to get as comfortable as possible, light a pipe, and wait for you!"

"If you dare——!" said his wife, laughing.

"Why not? But apart from joking, Aileen, our 'Possum has been having adventures. They told me about it when I was waiting for you at the wharf." He told her the story of the wrecked boat.

"And where is she now?" Aileen asked anxiously. "Is she ill?"

"Her feet and legs are pretty painful, they said. But she wouldn't see a doctor, or stay in Cuninghame; and her father was better, so he took her home yesterday."

"I must go over and see if I can do anything," Aileen said decidedly.

"Well, I thought you'd like to. But are you fit for it, dear?"

"I shall be quite all right, especially when I have some tea!" she said. "Tea is the one thing my soul craves for."

"I'll brew the largest teapot in the house directly we get home," Tom said. "And you will just keep quiet and take things easy. You won't need to do any cooking, will you?"

"I should like to take a basket of things over to the O'Connors," she said. "But I won't do much, really, Tom. I'll starve my poor family on 'Possum's account!"

"If I believed that you would, I'd be contented," he said. "But I know you better. When shall we go over?"

"Oh, after dinner. We'll take Garth—the poor man has had a horrid morning."

Garth did not consider that he had had a horrid morning at all. It was not every day that the thrilling excitement of a broken leg came his way; and later, he had found enormous satisfaction in dusting and tidying the house, and in spurring Horrors to amazing efforts in the kitchen. The housework was done by the time the buggy drew up at the back gate—if the corners were not above reproach, Aileen knew better than to look at them. She looked instead at her little son's glowing face, and kissed him, with moist eyes; and Tom's deep "Well done, old man!" sent Garth into the seventh heaven.

There was a big basket stowed in the back of the buggy when they set off early in the afternoon: such things as might relieve the anxieties of a crippled housekeeper and of a cook of twelve. A big piece of cooked mutton; a crisp, brown loaf of soda bread, and a bundle of scones tied up in a fresh, white cloth; a big cake of the kind that invites hungry people to cut and come again, and, in a special corner, a glass of jelly and a sponge cake, warm yet, and light and puffy: things to tempt an invalid.

"Won't it be 'strordinary to see 'Possum in bed?" Garth chattered. "Do you think she has dungaree nighties, mother?"

O'Connor's farm lay two miles away, in a dark valley between hills covered

with gum trees. There was no gate leading into it: only heavy slip-rails, fitting into rusty horse shoes nailed to posts on either side. Like their own farm, it had scarcely any homestead track: they bumped over tussocks and rough ground, and wriggled a tortuous way round logs and clumps of scrub. 'Possum and her father nearly always rode; and the children walked two miles across the paddocks to the little Bush school. There were few wheel-marks on O'Connor's land.

Little Joe was playing on the wood-heap near the door as the Macleods drove up. He greeted Garth with a grin of joy, and Garth's father and mother with shy pleasure.

"How is 'Possum, Joe?" asked Aileen, descending. "Is she asleep?"

"'Poss? Asleep? Gwacious, no!" said 'Possum's brother, in amazement. "She's feeding the calf. Come on down to the shed."

He led the way across the untidy yard. The shed was a half-open place, tenanted by a dray, two ploughs, a harrow, sundry old iron, and a calf. The calf was tied to the wheel of the dray, and at the moment was strenuously objecting to take nourishment, which 'Possum, seated on a wheelbarrow, was endeavouring to administer by means of a baby's bottle. The efforts of the calf to withdraw were frustrated by the combined muscles of Bertha, young Bill and little Polly, who held it firmly in position and talked to it in good plain terms. The calf, however, was obdurate, and at last 'Possum gave up the attempt.

"Oh, let him go!" she said, without noticing the new-comers. "I wouldn't mind if it was on'y his feed, but it's his med'cine as well. We'll hot it up after a bit, Bill, an' try him again."

"Might as well try 'n' pour milk into a gate-post!" said young Bill, disgustedly, prodding, with a bare toe, the calf, which had lain down thankfully on its straw. "Brute! I dunno how Daisy come to have such a mis'rable little runt of a thing!"

"Jolly careless of her," said 'Possum. "Now you just turn me round, an' wheel me up easy, Bert. Don't go an' pitch me out, like you near did comin' down!"

"Let me help," said Tom, stepping forward. Every one jumped, and 'Possum turned a lively pink.

"Sorry," she said gruffly, looking at her bandaged feet, which were thrust over the edge of the wheelbarrow, "I'm lame, like the silly ass I am, so the kids have to wheel me round—that fool of a calf won't drink for Bill, but he gen'lly-as-a-rule will for me. Don't you bother, Mr. Macleod; Bert can get me up all right."

"I don't believe Bertha's half as good in the shafts of a barrow as I am!" Tom retorted. "I've been broken in ever so much longer than she has; I wouldn't trust her not to kick!" Which pleasantry reduced Bertha to suppressed giggles, until

she grew alarmingly red in the face.

Tom wheeled the barrow up the steep yard, and paused at the kitchen door. It was a dark, low room, lit only by one small window; but it was spotlessly neat and clean. A rough home-made sofa, from which a coarse rug had been flung back, stood under the window.

"Is that your camp?" Tom asked, indicating the sofa. 'Possum nodded, looking more wretchedly uncomfortable than before.

"If—if you'n' missus 'ud go into the front room, I can get to it," she muttered, crimsoning.

"You can't walk, 'Possum?" Aileen put a hand on her shoulder.

"No, but I can manage." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Please do take the boss away!"

"I say!" said Tom unhappily. "It isn't fair to shunt me like that, 'Possum." He turned to the silent children. "How did she get to the barrow, Bill?"

"Crawled 'n' rolled," said young Bill briefly. "An' it hurt her like fury."

"Well, you aren't going to crawl and roll this time," said Tom, with decision. "And you can't sit in that barrow all day. Now you just behave yourself, 'Possum; I'm going to make believe you're Garth. You've no idea how handy I got as a nurse when he was ill."

Without giving her time to make any further protest he lifted her gently and carried her across to the sofa, putting her down as easily as though she had been a featherweight, and arranging the rug across her knees. He talked fluently all the time, without looking at her.

"This is a sort of hospital day for us," he said. "You've been trying to drown yourself and fill the lake with cold pork, and the Missus has been setting broken legs until her brain reeled. And Garth has been cook and bottle-washer, and what the family would have done without him I tremble to think. He even made Horrors hurry, and I guess you know what sort of a job *that* would be, 'Possum! Horrors showed signs of swooning from overwork and brain-fag by the time Garth had finished with him. The missus will tell you all about it. Now I'm off to talk to that calf, with Bill. Come along, Bill. I don't think the calf likes a crowd any more than I do when I've medicine to take." He took the calf's rejected bottle, to which 'Possum had clung instinctively, and went out, Bill at his heels.

"Jus' fancy him carryin' me like that!" 'Possum uttered, her eyes shining. "Ain't he the limit! Oh, you were good to come, Missus!"

"Of course we had to come," Aileen said, shaking up a cushion, and putting her back upon it gently. "Wasn't our station-manager ill!"

'Possum's pale face expanded in a delighted grin.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "Leastways, nearly! Me laigs'll be on strike for a few days, they say."

"No chill?" Aileen asked. "Are you truly all right, 'Possum, dear?"

It was not often that a word of endearment came in 'Possum's way. Her eyes, as she raised them to the tall girl bending over her, had something of the utter devotion of a dog.

"Lor, I dunno how to be ill!" she answered. "Don't you bother about me, Missus. If it wasn't for me silly old laigs I'd be as right as pie. I was a bit tired, but I slep' in this morning—never opened an eye till eight o'clock! Nice state the place 'ud get into if I was to do that often."

"And your father?"

"Oh, he's pretty right. Looks a bit washed out, but he's gone off to Coffey's to try an' get another pig. Did they tell you 'about it? Wasn't it rotten luck losin' that other one? He was a real good pig, too!"

"We might have lost you," Aileen said. She bent and kissed the girl lightly on the forehead. A swift wave of colour dyed 'Possum's face, and she caught Aileen's hand and held it tightly for a moment.

"Now we're going to have tea with you, and I'm going to help Bertha get it," said Aileen cheerfully.

"It ain't fit for you—we on'y got enamel cups," said 'Possum unhappily. "An' goodness on'y knows what there is to eat. To-day's bakin' day, by rights, but of course nothin's got done. Have we got any butter, Bert?"

"You've probably pounds and pounds, but I brought some over, just because I was so painfully proud of its colour!" said Aileen, beginning to unpack her basket swiftly. "It wouldn't 'come' last night; I churned it until my arm wouldn't churn any more, and then I hung it in the well all night, and attacked it again at six o'clock this morning. Then it came quite meekly. It's the only way to deal with it in summer, isn't it?" The butter emerged, firm and yellow, from a wrapping of wet cloths and cabbage leaves. "Put that meat in the safe, Bertha, like a good girl—it's a great day for flies. Polly, that's cake; you unwrap it, and if you don't say it's a good cake, I won't be friends with you. Now we'll have scones to try my butter. What have you eaten to-day, 'Possum?"

"Well, I ain't had much feelin' of fancyin' anything," 'Possum admitted. "I tried me porridge, but it was too hot; this ain't much of a day for hot things, is it? You can't eat much on a blazin' day like this."

"She won't eat nothin'," said Bertha, in a high, miserable voice. "I tried an' tried, an' fried her an aig, an' it wasn't any good. Leastways, the aig was good, but she wouldn't eat it. I dunno what to do with her."

"We brought you some of my jelly, and you've just got to eat it," said Garth happily. The jelly glass came from its jar of wet salt, with its contents clear and golden and quivering. 'Possum's eyes rested on it hungrily.

"Now!" said Garth. He demanded a teaspoon of Bertha, and advanced upon

the sofa, jelly in hand, and looking ridiculously like his father. "Just you behave yourself, and eat this!"

"It's lovely!" 'Possum whispered to him gratefully.

Aileen, after the first glance, did not look at the sofa. 'Possum never liked eating with an audience—but Garth did not count. He leaned against her, chattering in his eager little voice; and the jelly was disappearing. So Aileen busied herself with Bertha and Polly, making tea and buttering scones. Everything was ready when Tom loomed in the doorway, with young Bill at his heels.

"Bill and I think you people don't understand calves," Tom announced. "You don't take them properly. That fellow leaned up against us, and kissed us, and drank his bottle like any other nice, well-behaved baby. Now Bill and I want ours—don't we, Bill?"

Bill chuckled deeply, casting adoring glances at this cheerful person, who might be "a gent," but nevertheless treated him as a man and a brother. Garth brought the jelly-glass triumphantly to the table.

"She's eaten every bit!" he cried.

"That's lovely!" said Aileen, and smiled at her. "Now she's going to eat my sponge cake and tell me if it isn't good." She took it to 'Possum's side, with a cup of tea, and turned an empty box into a bedside table; and they were all very merry, and ate enormously, while 'Possum nibbled her cake and watched Aileen's smallest movement, and sighed now and then with a content that not even bandaged, aching feet could take away.

"You will take care of yourself, won't you, 'Possum?" Aileen said, when the time came for good-byes. They had all washed up together, and Tom had insisted on sweeping the kitchen, to the great anguish of mind of the sisters O'Connor. "Don't try to walk too soon; and promise to get Bertha to rub you twice a day. You will, Bertha, won't you?"

"My oath!" said Bertha, firmly. "No matter what she says!"

"That's quite right," said Aileen, laughing. "And hide her clothes, Bertha, if she tries to get about before she should!"

"I'll plant 'er boots," said Bertha. "That'll fix 'er!"

Young Bill had helped Tom to put in Roany, and the buggy waited, with the O'Connor family in extended order to bid them good-bye: 'Possum watching from her window, while Bertha helped to stow the empty basket under the seat and tuck in the dust-rug; and Polly was at the gate of the yard, her curls shining in the sun, and ahead, Bill, on a bare-backed pony, careered across the paddock to let down the sliprails. It was something like a Royal Progress; and from the

shed came a loud "Ma-a-a-a!" as though in farewell. It was the calf!

CHAPTER XIV
A BOATING HOLIDAY

"Dad!"

"Yes?" Tom Macleod paused in his task of staking peas, and looked inquiringly at his little son.

"It's a lovely day," Garth said, conversationally. "Isn't it?"

"It is. Did you come out to tell me that?"

"Well, not exactly," Garth hesitated. "Only, it *is* a nice day. And mother and I were thinking we hadn't had any fish for ages. And we thought it wouldn't be any wonder if the motor got indigestion again, through not being used!"

Macleod grinned.

"You and mother are a pair of old conspirators, and I am your unhappy victim!" he said. "This means, I suppose, that I am to stop earning both your livings and play about in a silly motor-boat all day!"

"You know it isn't a silly boat—it's a beauty!" Garth protested. "And it isn't waste of time, 'cause we'll catch such a lot of fish that it'll save the butcher's bill no end. And there's meat-pies to take out for lunch: mother made 'em yesterday, and they're lovely!"

"I never heard a more convincing set of reasons," Tom said. "Well, if I don't come I suppose you and mother will go off by your wild lones, and eat all the pies, so I suppose I'd better be meek. I say, though, what about bait?"

"'Possum and I caught a lovely lot of shrimps yesterday," said his son demurely.

"Oh, did you? I'd like to know was it the sight of your shrimps that made mother make the pies, or the sight of the pies that sent you after shrimps?"

"It wasn't neither, truly," Garth answered. "She made 'em while I was away. She says it was a brain-wave!"

"I have noticed mother have that species of brain-wave before," said Tom, staking vigorously. "Well, I'll come; but I must finish this row first. Even to catch fish and eat pies I won't leave my precious peas to trail in the dust. Peas are money, young Garth!"

"I'll help you," Garth said eagerly. "If I hand you stakes you'll get on ever

so quicker."

"True for you," said his father. They worked together until they came to the end of the row, and Tom stood up, glad to stretch his aching back.

"People with long cheap backs like mine ought never to be asked to double them up," he remarked.

A grey horse and a flapping blue skirt came into view, mounting the hill towards the house.

"There's 'Possum!" Garth-cried. "I wonder would she come with us? May I ask her, Dad?"

"Yes, of course," Tom answered. Garth shot across to the garden gate, and he followed more slowly.

'Possum had lost all outward traces of her accident, except that she walked a little stiffly, and was not yet capable of any hard work. She did as much as possible in the saddle; but for the most part her father had suddenly put down his foot where work for her was concerned—the result of a conversation with Aileen—and the girl was experiencing a most unusual holiday. It almost troubled her: leisure had so little come her way. Now, her father performed all her rough tasks; and Bertha and young Bill gathered the fruit and vegetables, and prepared them for market, while Polly and little Joe tended the fowls, fed the broods of baby chickens, and gathered the eggs. As a kind of favour, 'Possum was permitted to market her produce—with Bill or Bertha as attendant, to jump in and out of the cart and carry the loads into the houses. 'Possum did not enjoy it. "I ain't used to being a lady," she said.

She fell back thankfully on the Macleods; and there were few days when she did not ride up to the cottage on the hill—to potter about the farm with Tom and Garth, and look at the crops and the stock, or to watch Aileen as she worked in the garden or in the house. Aileen was busy with a good deal of sewing in those days, most of which she was careful to conceal when she heard 'Possum's step. One day 'Possum surprised her in the act of working at some pale pink print, and laid her hand gently on the stuff. "Your things is always so pretty," she said wistfully. Whereat Aileen smiled, and remarked vaguely that pink was a good washing colour.

To-day 'Possum professed herself as very willing to join the fishing party: and they set off happily, laden with baskets and quart-pot, to the boat-shed, where Tom dealt mysteriously with the motor. The launch was only a tiny one, fitted up by Mr. Gordon for his fishing expeditions: five or six people filled it comfortably, and it drew so little water that it could be run into the shallowest of bays and creeks. Tom settled 'Possum and Aileen comfortably in the stern, and Garth took up his usual position, as far out of the bow as he could hang his small person with safety. Bran whined distressfully on the shore. Ordinary boating-trips were

permitted him; but to bring leaping fish into the boat upset all his calmness, and sent him into such paroxysms of barking that when fishing was part of the programme he had been condemned to remain at home. Garth sorrowed over it, and talked severely to him on the subject of gaining more sense: orations which Bran heard with respect, but which had so far produced no effect.

"Orders, please, ma'am," Tom said, looking up from the digestive apparatus of the little engine. "Where do you want to go?"

"I want to explore this arm of the lake," Aileen replied promptly. "You know, we have never been up to the end, and we've always planned to do so. We might get some fishing in the pools, 'Possum says; and if we don't, we could go down to the lake itself after lunch and fish in earnest. Does that meet with your worshipful approval?"

"Sounds very jolly," Tom said. "All right, then, we'll go exploring first. Ready?"

They slid away from the little jetty, and turned up the arm of the lake. It was like a river pushing itself in among the hills. Near its outlet it was wide, and on stormy days there was a choppy sea at its mouth; but as it wound its sinuous course inland it grew smooth and tranquil and even narrower, save that now and then at a sudden turn it broadened into a deep and quiet pool. Then it would wind away again, each time seeming the last, until at length it narrowed to nothing, and the blue water vanished in a tangle of driftwood and rubbish brought by the slow tide to the end of its tortuous journey.

They swung round bend after bend. Gum and wattle trees bordered the water: and sometimes they came to a little clearing, where a settler's cottage stood, trim and neat in its setting of orchard and garden, with fowls pecking contentedly near the homestead fences, and perhaps barefooted children running about. One such clearing led to 'Possum's home, though the trees hid the house; they passed the little jetty where lay the sailing boat which had so nearly cost two lives—little the worse apparently for its long immersion. Two fishermen had towed it in next day and righted it—empty of all spare gear, but without damage. 'Possum gave a little shudder as she looked at it.

"No more sailing for me just yet awhile!" she uttered. "I seem to have lost me taste for it!"

They went on and on, winding and twisting through the forest, which grew thicker and thicker. Often it seemed certain that they had come to the end, as they entered a pool with no apparent outlet; but, as they glided farther, the water opened before them in another bend, and yet another, and another. Deep fern gullies came down to the water's edge, dark and beautiful, and full of the chiming of bell-birds: and sometimes they heard the quick swish and crack of the stockwhip bird. They landed in one gully, where 'Possum said she had twice

seen lyre-birds: and by great good luck, and patiently sitting on a log for twenty minutes, they actually caught a glimpse of a pair of the queer, shy birds, dancing solemnly on a mound, uttering strange sounds.

"They're copyin'—they're just born mimics," 'Possum whispered. "Listen—they've heard a sawmill somewhere!" And indeed the sounds were nothing but the harsh rip of a saw through timber. They changed in a moment to the yap of a dog: which so enchanted Garth that he fell bodily off the log, and the lyre-birds promptly disappeared.

"Well, you are a goat!" said Tom.

"I just am," Garth admitted penitently: "I don't know what made me overbalance. I'm sorry."

"Well, you hadn't much log to lie on," Tom said, relenting as he looked at the tiny limb where the small boy had been perched. "Can't be helped, at all events."

"You had jolly good luck to see 'em at all," 'Possum said. "I been about the Bush all me life, an' I haven't seen 'em half a dozen times. But that gully's always a haunt for birds—nobody hardly ever goes there. Look—there's a blue wren."

"Oh!—the lovely thing!" Aileen breathed.

He was certainly a lovely thing—a proud little person of black and enamel-blue, with a blue cap and a deep-blue tail nearly as long as his whole body. He was very busy, strutting happily about the ground or fluttering from twig to twig with a rapid flight that made him look like a glancing jewel. Finally he perched on a bough and broke into a little song as exquisite as himself: and then dashed off in a great hurry to find his mate.

"What a jolly little chap!" Garth uttered.

"He's a dear, ain't he?" 'Possum said. "An' his little mate's as plain as he's pretty, but she's a dear, too. Look—there's a couple of honey-eaters!" She pointed out a pair of dainty black and yellow birds, hanging head downwards under a patch of eucalyptus blossom. They had long, curved, slender beaks, in and out of which darted busy tongues ending in little brushes that swept the honey from the flowers.

"But they're exquisite!" Aileen uttered. "I didn't know we had anything so lovely."

"There's dozens of different sorts of honey-eaters, an' they're all lovely," 'Possum said. "Some day we'll go out, will we, Missus, an' spend a whole day watchin' birds?"

"I would love to," Aileen said.

"Bert came home from school once, an' said they'd been reading a bit o' poitry by some bloke that said Australian birds hadn't any songs," 'Possum said, with disgust. "Well, I s'pose a bloke has to be clever to write poitry, but I don't

reckon he knew much about Australia. I wouldn't ask anything better than our own of magpie singin' in the early morning, or the thrush, or that little blue wren, or any of the warblers—an' there's dozens an' dozens of others.. Even the ol' butcher-bird can sing a fair treat. I reckon he was a silly bloke, don't you?"

Aileen ventured a mild defence of the poet.

"I don't think he meant that we have no songbirds," she said. "I think he only tried to say that some of our handsomest birds were songless."

'Possum tilted her nose.

"Well, people that make up poitry have a right to be careful," she said severely. "Kids in schools pay an awful lot of attention to what they say, an' it's up to them not to lead 'em wrong!" After which Aileen defended no more.

They went back to the boat, and journeyed on, presently coming on a new sight for the Macleods. A blacks' camp stood on a natural clearing near a creek that ran down into the lake-arm: a rough "wurley," built of interlaced boughs, with a bit of sacking hanging down for a door. Hot as the day was, a little fire smouldered between two big stones. The only person visible, at first, was a tiny black baby, tumbling about on the ground without a rag of clothing; but as Tom stopped the engine, the sacking over the door was lifted, and a man and a woman came out. They were young, and the woman was not bad-looking, and her dress was fairly neat; but the man was an evil-looking creature, ragged and slouching, with a furtive, unpleasant gaze.

The woman picked up the baby, and they came down to the water's edge, looking curiously at the boat and its occupants. The man held out a rough boomerang he was making, and offered it for sale.

[image]

"The man held out a rough boomerang he was making, and offered it for sale."

"I've no money with me," Tom said. "Would you like it, Garth? I can tell him to come to the house to be paid, if you would."

"Don't you!" said 'Possum, in a quick whisper. "It ain't worth buyin'—those fellers don't know how to make a decent boomerang. They're on'y sham things, made to catch silly visitors——" She pulled herself up, and turned scarlet. Tom laughed.

"Bless you, 'Possum, I always get truth from you," he said. He shook his head at the man. "No, thanks," he said; and the black fellow looked surlier than ever. The woman uttered a quick jabber of words that included something about

"bacca."

"Oh, they can have that," Tom said. He took a piece of tobacco from his pocket and tossed it to the man, who caught it deftly, his heavy face lightening for a moment. Then the boat chugged her way onward, and they lost sight of the little clearing.

"'Fraid I was a bit rude that time," said 'Possum. "But if you once let one of those fellers come to your house, you're never free of them. They'll turn up at any hour and want tucker and baccy; an' what's more, they'll tell their friends, and you'll have them callin' too. And they'd steal the very clothes off your back. Nothin's safe from them—the washin' out on the line, an' the chickens, an' the things in the shed. They're a caution when they take to hangin' round a place."

"But won't they come in any case?" asked Aileen.

"Oh, they may, of course. But they're queer people; if once they're told to call at a place they seem to think they've got a hold on it for keeps, an' they'll come back for years an' years."

"Where do they live, 'Possum?"

"Those people have most likely been in one of the settlements—Ramahyuck or Lake Tyers. The woman's dress looks like it: she'd never be as neat as that if she hadn't been in a mission station. They treat 'em jolly well there—give 'em decent little cottages to live in, an' just enough work to keep 'em going. But they always break out now an' then, an' one or two'll clear out to the Bush an' camp for a while. They'll go back when the cold weather comes—or before that, if they aren't pickin' up enough food. An' they don't much mind where an' how they pick it up, I can tell you."

"Why wouldn't you let Dad buy the boomerang, 'Poss?" asked Garth.

"I'd make you a better one meself," 'Possum answered. "It's really only the old men who know much about either makin' or throwin' boomerangs: none of these young ones'll bother themselves. You could throw that affair he was makin' into the air, same as you could any old stick, but it wouldn't return to you. Most people don't know the difference"—she grinned at Tom shamefacedly—"an' they get a sale for all sorts of rubbishy stuff among the summer visitors. But it's no more real black's stuff than I am. That gets harder to buy every year, because the old men who used to make the things are dying out."

They had been gliding along gently, the water growing steadily shallower. Suddenly, they came upon the end of the arm—a pool like hundreds of other pools through which they had passed, save that in each of the others there had been an outlet, and here there was none. The water ended. All round them the trees frowned down upon the still surface, where leaves and sticks floated idly, never to get away: doomed to wash into the rubbish along the shore, or to become water-logged, and finally to sink to the muddy bottom. There was something

unnaturally eerie and still about the place. Even the birds had deserted it: there was no longer the happy sound of their singing and twittering. Far overhead a fish-hawk sailed lazily.

"Ugh!" said Aileen, shivering a little. "I don't like this place. Let us turn back."

So they turned and drifted into wholesome blue water, passing the blacks' little camp and the gullies and clearings that led back to the country they knew. In one gully they moored the boat and made their fire, eating their luncheon among the limbs of a fine old tree that had fallen and lay upon its side, its gnarled-boughs making splendid natural arm-chairs. The birds were very tame: one little brown honey-eater came hopping near them for crumbs, and finally perched on the toe of Tom's boot, where it remained in a quaint attitude of alert attention. Then they fished the pools, with varying success, and at last gave it up and travelled swiftly down the arm until they reached the lake itself. For the last half-mile there was little need for the engine. The current had been steadily growing in power; at length it whisked them round bend after band, until it brought them out into the open water, and set swiftly towards the Entrance, where the great grey piers guarded the lane of water that led out to the breakers.

"You wouldn't have much chance if you drifted out here without oars," 'Possum remarked. "The current joins the one that sweeps down the lakes from ever so far up, an' don't they just race out to sea! There was a party of girls in a boat—visitors—got into that current last year, an' went bobbin' along towards the Entrance. They'd been told it was risky, so they lost their heads an' dropped an oar, an' then, of course, they had no chance at all."

"Were they taken out?" Aileen asked.

"No, but it was luck they weren't. They were mighty close to the Entrance when some people in a motor-boat saw 'em an' chased 'em—just managed to stop 'em in time. They'd have been in the surf in three minutes, an' no boat could live there unless it was jolly well handled. You'll see the fishing-boats comin' in sometimes, when they've been out with the nets after a shoal of salmon, and it just is exciting! Even with four good men pullin', it's risky enough to bring a big boat through those breakers. Dad seen one turned clean over one day, an' one man was caught underneath it an' killed. An' that was a great big sea-goin' fishin'-boat, not the sort of little cockle-shell thing that people pull round on the lakes."

"Poor chap! I did not know that the fishermen went outside the entrance: I thought they only fished in the lakes," Tom remarked.

"They fish wherever they can earn a livin'," said 'Possum drily.

They came out upon the wide surface of the lake, and ran across to a bay that nearly always held fish. To-day it lived up to its reputation, and soon they

were hauling out whiting and big pink schnapper, whose sides were like live opal as they came out of the water. Tom fished scientifically, with a rod that was the pride of his heart: the others bobbed cheerfully with hand lines and sinkers, and were filled with joy because their results were as good. Their basket was full when they turned homewards in the evening.

"Tell about the time when Joe got bushed, 'Possum," Garth pleaded.

"That ain't anything to tell about," said 'Possum reprovingly. "And besides, you know already."

"Yes, but I like to hear it again," Garth begged.

"We haven't heard, at all events," Tom said. "Go on, 'Possum."

"Well, it's nothin' much," 'Possum said, reluctantly: to tell Garth stories was one thing, but it was quite another to be forced to retail them to Garth's parents. "Joe went off on his own into the Bush one afternoon—on'y four, he was—an' next thing I knew was, it was near dark, an' no Joe. Dad was out in the boat that night, so I left word for him, an' put all the other kids to bed an' made the fire safe, an' started off."

"Into the Bush?"

"Yes, of course. That's where Joe was. Well, I pounded through the jolly old scrub all night—no luck, an' I was pretty worried, 'cause Joe wasn't no more'n four. An' all me clothes got tore, an' I was scratched near to bits, an' I kept thinkin', if that was all the fun I was gettin' out of it, an' me past fourteen, how about poor old Joe?"

"But you found him, 'Possum?" Garth cried eagerly.

"Just about daybreak, I did—in an old hollow stump. Crawled in, he had, an' there he was, lyin' asleep, happy as Larry. Not any trouble for Joe. He woke up, an' I was the first thing he saw, an' he laughed all over his dear old dirty face. 'Where's me porridge, 'Poss?' he says. He always was just about the limit!"

"What about your father?" Aileen asked.

"Oh, he got home about two o'clock, an' seen the note I left, but he reckoned if I couldn't find Joe he couldn't, so he turned in. Dad never worries about things. He says everything'll come out in the wash, if you leave it long enough."

They reached the jetty, and ran gently alongside. 'Possum hopped out nimbly, in spite of her sore feet, and helped to steady the boat while Aileen followed more carefully with the fish and the empty luncheon baskets. They left Tom to put the engine to bed, aided by Garth, and went slowly up the hill.

"Christmas will be in three days," Aileen said.

"I suppose so," 'Possum answered. "It don't make much difference to us. I'll have to kill a turkey for the kids' dinner, I suppose." She paused at the gate. "I won't come in, Missus: it's late, an' I better be gettin' home."

"You must take some fish," said Aileen, quickly halving the catch and plac-

ing 'Possum's share in an old sugar-bag. "No, that's not too much at all: there are more of you to eat it. And you know Polly loves fish!" They exchanged a fishy hand-grip. "Oh, and, 'Possum, come over to see us on Christmas afternoon, won't you?"

"Seems to me I come most days," said 'Possum, laughing.

"But we want you on Christmas Day. Will you come?"

"Why, yes, I'll come—thanks," said the girl, laughing. "Catch me stayin' away, when you'll be bothered with me. Well, so long!" She limped off to where her old horse slept peacefully under the quince tree.

CHAPTER XV
SANTA CLAUS AND CLOTHES

Garth woke to a blissful Christmas morning.

The end of his bed gave ample proof that his father's dismal forebodings about Santa Claus had not been needed: a bulky stocking, with strange hollows and protuberances, ornamented one post and yielded such treasures as a new bridle, a pair of leather leggings, and a stockwhip, with other offerings showing clearly that the saint fully realized that this particular boy had moved from the city. That was good: and good it was, on his way to his bath, to meet Bran, resplendent in a new collar. But when an enormous bundle on his chair at breakfast-time revealed the very desire of his heart, a dainty, light saddle, Garth was speechless. He could only hug his father and mother again and again, and feel the saddle lovingly, and smile at them in a silence that they quite understood.

Aileen was smiling, too, at what she found on her plate: books and music, a very new aluminium saucepan, a soap-saver for the kitchen, and, tucked away under the rest, a little brooch within which a black opal gleamed mysteriously, full of dark fire. Aileen loved black opals: but she regarded them as belonging to the old times when evening dress and balls and theatres were as common as working overalls and fowl-rearing and hoeing now. She shook her head at Tom.

"You shouldn't—bless you!"

"Oh, I had to!" he said; "I couldn't help it. I haven't altogether forgotten the girl who liked pretty things."

"She's very contented to have put them away," said Aileen.

"I know. But I wanted to see her in one," he said obstinately. Whereupon

Aileen, to please him, pinned the brooch in her overall, and found herself greatly enjoying it as she prepared dinner.

They jogged to church behind Roany, and exchanged greetings with a few people they knew and with many to whom they were strangers—except that every one knew that they were "the new, hard-working lot that's come to Gordon's farm," and being simple, kindly-minded Gippsland settlers, saw no reason why they should wait to be formally introduced. Then they came home to a happy Christmas dinner—everything cold, and therefore as it should be, with the thermometer at 95°—after which, by mere force of habit, Aileen was about to go to work in the garden, but was restrained by Tom, who remarked that there were some things not done in decent families, and placed her forcibly in a long chair on the veranda with a new book.

'Possum came through the house presently. A feeling that something was due to a day which evidently meant far more to the Macleods than it had ever done to her, had induced her to put on her new dungaree dress, and she was stiffly uncomfortable. Dungaree obligingly fades as soon as it is washed: when new it is a rather deep hard blue, and the wearer looked hot and red-faced, and crackled as she walked. She stood in the doorway looking down at Aileen, who had put on a white frock in honour of Christmas, and, with her shining hair against the pale green canvas of her long chair, was like the spirit of spring and coolness. She put up a slim hand and took 'Possum's work-roughened one.

"I'm too lazy to get up, 'Possum," she said. "Come and sit down."

"It ain't often one sees you lazy," 'Possum answered, leaning back in a chair, and promptly sitting up again, since the position brought her great boots too baldly into view.

"I have been bullied shamefully," Aileen said, casting a severe glance at Tom, who bore it with cheerfulness. "Goodness knows my broad beans are calling for me, but I'm not allowed to go near them. What have you been doing, 'Possum?"

"Oh, the usual thing. Dad's away shearin', so I've got to be pretty busy again: and anyhow, it's about time I was; my feet are all right, an' I'm full-up of loafin'. Seems to me," said 'Possum, "that loafin's all very well for a bit, an' then it gets on your nerves. The kids have been jolly good, an' I pretend not to see a lot o' things they do or they don't do; but there's lots o' times I'd give me ears to be doin' the work myself."

"That is pride, which is a thing all you women suffer from," Tom said. "She"—indicating Aileen—"has violent attacks of it whenever I wash up, or sweep a room, or do any of the things she imagines she does better than I do. Of course, it's only a delusion on her part, because I'm really a first-class housemaid: but there it is. It's a pity, because otherwise she has rather a nice character!"

'Possum grinned. She was beginning to understand what she called Tom's

"foolin'," and was no longer bewildered and slightly alarmed when he chaffed her. Nevertheless, she had not yet come to the point of chaffing in return, and so she thought it more prudent to change the subject.

"Where's Garth?" she asked.

"Garth is careering over the hills and far away on a brand-new saddle—and Jane," said Tom. "There is also a new bridle, and he has new leggings—the latter must be exceedingly uncomfortable on a day like this, but he insisted on putting them on. He's awfully pleased with himself. I don't think it's much of a Christmas for Jane; she probably prefers him bare back."

"My word, he must be proud!" 'Possum uttered. "He told me the other day he was goin' to save up for a saddle, 'cause he couldn't go askin' you to get it, with you buyin' so much fertilizer: an' he wanted to know how long it would take him. Said he'd got ninepence. I didn't know what to say to the poor little kid."

"Well, he has the saddle now, and I sincerely trust I won't have so many pairs of knickerbockers to mend," Aileen remarked. "Bare back riding may be fun for a boy, but it's destruction to his trousers!"

"Yes, ain't it?" 'Possum agreed. "I'm always preachin' to Bill, but of course he don't take any notice—you wouldn't expect him to!"

"You wouldn't let young Bill hear you say that," Tom remarked.

"Not much I wouldn't," 'Possum grinned. "Bill's too much inclined to kick over the traces as it is, without me givin' him any encouragement. I reckon I'll have me hands full with him yet."

"Poor old Bill! I see storms ahead for him," said Tom, rising and stretching his long form. "This is a hard country for men since women got the vote! I think I'll go and find Garth, and we'll compare notes on our troubles."

"Don't be late for tea, or 'Possum and I will eat all the Christmas cake!" Aileen called after him. "You'll feel that more than anything I can do with my old vote!" He flung a laughing rejoinder at her, and vanished round the corner of the veranda.

For a few minutes after his footsteps died away Aileen was silent. She was wondering how to make her gifts to 'Possum without hurting the girl's feelings. Underneath the queer, abrupt exterior she knew there lay a sensitiveness so easily wounded that only the most delicate handling would succeed—and 'Possum's independence was a sturdy growth. She might resent the presents altogether: for a moment Aileen grew almost sorry that she had prepared them, now that the time came for them to be given.

"I believe I've got stage-fright," she thought.

'Possum opened the way herself.

"I wish we bothered more about Christmas—the way you do," she said. "It'd

be nice for the kids. I remember we used to keep it up before Mother died. But now we never bother."

"I love Christmas," said Aileen, "especially since I had Garth. He makes a great difference, because he believes in every bit of it, particularly Santa Claus! And it's such fun, preparing presents, even if you spend very little on them: it's the doing it that is the fun." She hesitated. "I wanted you to be in our Christmas, Possum."

"Jolly good of you," said 'Possum gruffly. "But I'm not much good to any one."

"That isn't for you to say," Aileen rejoined. "Come into my room, 'Possum." She led the way.

"I say!" said 'Possum, entering. "Oh, ain't that pretty!"

There was a dainty pink frock on the bed, with white cuffs and collar: very simply and plainly made, but well cut in every line. Near it was underwear: plain also, but good, and beautifully ironed. A pair of black shoes accompanied neat black stockings: a straw hat, swathed with palest pink muslin, lay on the pillow. There was even a pretty handkerchief on the frock. Nothing had been forgotten.

"Do you like it?"

"Like it! Why, it's like the inside of a shell! I never seen such a lovely colour. But you do always have pretty things, Missus."

"I'm glad you like it," Aileen said. "Because it isn't mine, 'Possum. I made it for you."

'Possum flushed to the roots of her hair, staring at her.

"Me!" she said at last. "I say, you're gammoning, aren't you, Missus?"

"No, I'm not," Aileen said. "I've had terrible work keeping those things out of your sight—and it has been such fun making them!" She watched the flushed face uneasily. "You're not cross with me, 'Possum?"

"Cross with you!" 'Possum uttered. "Well, I *would* be a beast. But I'd rather not take them, thank you very much, all the same."

"But why?" Aileen flushed in her turn.

There was a pause.

"I'm not the sort as wears those sort of clothes," 'Possum burst out at last. "I'm just a workin' hand, same as a man: this old dungaree's my style, not lovely things like that. It's no good me thinkin' I could pretend I was a lady—an' them's only a lady's things." Her voice broke, and she stood staring at her rough boots.

"Aren't you just a dear old stupid!" Aileen said softly. "We're all working-hands, and we wear old clothes at our work because any other things would be silly. But you haven't been just a working-hand to us: you've been more like a godsend. You put heart into me, when I hadn't any. I didn't love making those things because you had helped us, but because you're my friend."

'Possum's eyes glowed suddenly.

"Me your friend!" she said. "I'd sooner be that than any blessed thing on earth. But I ain't fit."

"You might let me pick my own friends without sitting on me!" Aileen said, laughing. "Ah, 'Possum dear, don't be a duffer! You can't refuse to be friends, for if you do I shall go over and sit in your kitchen, and talk to you, and be extremely in the way; and you simply won't be able to shake me off. 'Possum, be nice to me: I do want to see you in those clothes!"

'Possum gave a long sigh. It was the sigh of capitulation. She picked up the dress and held it against her cheek.

"It's just the loveliest ever!" she said. "And I just can't say thank you, but I reckon you know. Will I put them on an' come over to-morrow, Missus?"

"No—I can't wait for to-morrow!" Aileen cried. "You're going to look so nice that I've got to see you at once! I'll go and get tea, 'Possum, and you can put them on."

"What—now!" 'Possum's tone was doubtful, but her eyes were eager.

"Yes. Hurry!"

"I wouldn't put them lovely things on unless I had just had a bath," 'Possum declared. "I had one last night, but that's not the same. I reckon it 'ud be a sin to put 'em on after these hot ol' things. New dungaree's such smelly stuff, an' these just smell of freshness, the way all your things do!"

"Well, there's the bathroom," Aileen said, laughing. "I'll leave a towel in there. Run along!" She gathered up the new things in her arms. "Don't forget the shoes, 'Possum!" she cried, and hurried off.

It was half an hour later that Tom Macleod, coming in from the paddocks with Garth at his heels, stopped abruptly at the sight of two figures standing near the window. A stranger had called, he reflected; he looked hard at the tall girl in pink standing by his wife, wondering who she was. Then she turned, and he saw that it was 'Possum.

But a new 'Possum. The pink dress fell in soft folds, hiding the angularities that the dungaree horrors always accentuated. Its extra length made her yet more tall and slender, and the colour was reflected in her cheeks, while the light in her eyes had never been there before. The white collar fell away from a neck that was brown, but very shapely. Her fair hair was parted a little at the side, and brushed until it shone like Aileen's. Now that the old felt hat was removed, it showed a crisp little wave that made amends for its shortness.

For a moment Tom forgot his manners, and stared. Then, as a hot wave of colour surged into 'Possum's face, he recovered himself, and came into the room, making a casual remark upon the lucerne crop—even as he spoke, it seemed incredible that the pink vision before him and the girl who had ploughed the

ground and helped to put in the crop were the same person. He tried to make the remark sound ordinary, but Garth interrupted him. Garth, as his parents afterwards remarked, had small occasion for tact.

"I say, 'Possum, I didn't know you!" cried the small boy. "Isn't she swagger! Mother, doesn't she look ripping! 'Possum, weren't you awfully s'prised?"

"I just was," said 'Possum. Even her voice seemed different: it was somehow softer. When she smiled down at Garth she was very winning.

"Well, as these matters have been mentioned so boldly, I don't see why I should stand out," said Tom. "I won't, either! 'Possum, you look nicer than nice, and pink's your colour. Isn't it, Aileen? Carried unanimously. Is tea ready?"

Tea was ready, and they made it a merry meal—longer than usual, because no work was to be done on Christmas Day, save by the luckless Horrors, who could be heard, bucket-laden, clanking his way towards the cow-yard. 'Possum did not talk much. But her face was so happy that words did not matter!

She went with Aileen into her room when it was time to change into the old dungaree and go home: poor little Cinderella! Aileen thought, wondering if she had done well to be fairy godmother. There seemed no prospect of any Prince waiting for the Cinderella of the Bush.

"I was wonderin'," said 'Possum, and hesitated—"if you'd very much mind me leavin' these things here. You see, if I take 'em home I'll never wear 'em, an' they'll get grubby an' crushed. But if I could put 'em on sometimes when I come over—not to feel such a pig when you make me come into tea, say. Then they'd be a terrible comfort to me! I do love 'em so, but it's here I want to wear 'em. If I take 'em home I'd take 'em out every day an' look at 'em, but I'd never put 'em on, for fear of spoilin' 'em."

"But, 'Possum, it's only cheap print," Aileen protested. "It will wash beautifully. Why should you be so particular about it?"

"Well, you see, it's all I got," 'Possum returned. "Oh, I simply couldn't bear to spoil 'em, Missus!"

Aileen pondered.

"Of course you can leave them here," she said. "That's quite easy. But, 'Possum, why should it be your only pretty dress? Can't you buy some print, and bring it to me, and we will make it together? You've no idea how easy it is, with a few lessons. Then you could keep your dungarees for work, but put on fresh frocks in the evening, or when you went out."

"Print costs money," said 'Possum.

"But your father——"

"Dad 'ud take a fit if I asked him for any," said the girl. "He thought he was doin' a tremenjous thing when he give me this dungaree the other day."

"Well, you have your own money. You earn it thoroughly enough. Surely

you could spend a few shillings of that."

'Possum drew a long breath. Then she put the temptation from her.

"I don't reckon it's mine: it's the kids'," she said. ("It was as though she had said, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!'" said Aileen to Tom later on.) "I couldn't touch it. That bit o' money's a big comfort to me."

"Bill is twelve, and you can't let him go to the Cup by himself until he's grown-up—and you're saving for it now!" said Aileen. "Oh, 'Possum, be sensible!"

"I reckon I am," said 'Possum firmly. "There's other, things besides Cups. I couldn't do it." There was a hint of a sob in her voice. "Please don't ask me, Missus; you're a brick to say you'd help me, an' you don't know how I want them dresses. But I got to go without. Don't you worry about me—you been awful good to me already."

"Now I wonder would O'Connor mind?" Tom reflected, when they discussed the matter after Garth had gone to bed. "I don't believe he's close-fisted—and, though he probably wouldn't admit it, he's very proud of 'Possum. Do you know, I think a lot of women are afraid to ask their men-folk for money, when there's really no need to be afraid? Most men like to see their daughters decently turned out."

"Then I'll ask Mr. O'Connor myself!" said Aileen decidedly.

She did so some days later, meeting the big man on the road to Cuninghame, where she was hunting for strayed turkeys; and, having explained the matter, had the satisfaction of seeing Nick flare up, as his daughter would have said, "like a packet of crackers."

"'Possum's got no need to be badly dressed!" he said angrily, quite ignoring the fact that it was his own talk about money that kept the girl from asking him for an unnecessary sixpence. "I was on'y the other day talkin' to her about her clothes. I'll tell her she ought to have more sense than to talk to you like that."

"Please don't," Aileen said quickly. "I felt sure it was just that you didn't understand; but 'Possum hates to ask you for anything for herself. She will ask for things for Bertha and Polly, but she doesn't realize that she has also an example to set them of turning out neatly."

"That's right," the big man agreed. "Well, what am I to do, if you won't let me talk to her, Mrs. Macleod?"

"If you would give me the money, I would buy the materials, and then teach 'Possum to make them," said Aileen. "Then, if you show her that you notice and approve when she goes home in a new frock, it will do more good than a great deal of talking now. And you will be surprised to find what a good-looking daughter you have, Mr. O'Connor!"

"She used to be an awful jolly little kid—before her mother died," Nick said.

"I'm afraid she's had a tough time ever since. She's just too useful—that's what's the matter with 'Possum!" He put some money into, her hand. "Will that do?"

"It is too much," Aileen said.

"Oh, you'll use it up soon enough. Tell me when you want more. And thank you, Mrs. Macleod. You've made a mighty lot of difference to 'Poss. I reckon the day you came here was a lucky day for her!"

Thus it was that 'Possum, summoned by Aileen, beheld dress-lengths of material of divers colours, and learned, to her utter amazement, that they were hers.

"Dad give you the money!" she gasped. "*Dad*? Well, that just beats everything!"

"Of course he gave it to me," Aileen said.

"An' never made a fuss?".

"No—why should he. I don't think you're quite fair to your father, 'Possum. You have made him think you care for nothing but work. Doesn't it ever occur to you that he would like to see his eldest daughter nicely dressed?"

"No, it don't," said 'Possum firmly. "I think he'd a jolly sight sooner see me on top of a plough!" Which view held so much truth that Aileen was compelled to laugh. Nevertheless, she held to her point.

"If he does, it's your own doing," she said. "Men are queer creatures: they always think what a woman encourages them to think. You have let him imagine that dungaree was the only thing to dress in. But once he sees you in something prettier, he won't be satisfied with the old dresses any more, except just for working."

"Well, I'd like to believe it," 'Possum said, drawing a long breath. "But I've known Dad a long time!"

"You'll know him much better when you have accustomed him to a well-turned-out daughter. And think of the children, 'Possum. How do you expect Bertha and Polly to be dainty and fresh if you don't set them the example?"

"Well, I seem to have been making a mighty lot of mistakes," 'Possum said ruefully. "I thought I was doin' the best for those kids, but I suppose I'm all wrong."

"I think you're wrong in one or two things, and just a wonder in everything else," said Aileen warmly. "And they love you just as if you were their mother, 'Possum. Now you have got to make them very proud of you."

So they worked at the new frocks together: Aileen patient in explaining, and swift at planning, while 'Possum grasped her needle as if it were a bradawl, and drove it through the stuff with much muscular effort, producing stitches of a size truly majestic. "Blest if I can handle the silly little thing!" said she, laboriously unpicking: "ploughin's a jolly sight easier!" But in time her natural deftness came

to her aid, and when Aileen had succeeded in making her forget the methods by which she had "clamped" together the garments of her family, and inducing her to use a needle less thick than a skewer, she arrived at creditable results. The finished pile of dresses contained plenty of her work, and she gloated over them proudly, though most of her pride was reserved for the frocks for the little girls, and the cool suits for the boys, that had been "managed" out of the stock of material.

"We put 'em all on for tea," she told Aileen on the day following the great occasion of the finishing of the work. "I had the kitchen very dossy, an' a vawse o' flowers on the table, an' there we were when Dad came in. He just looked at us careless-like, an' then he seemed to take notice, an' he stared an' stared. An' of course the kids giggled. Then he said, 'Well!' just like that, an' stopped, like as if he hadn't any more ideas. An' he kep' on starin'. At last he says, 'I suppose this is Mrs. Macleod's doin'?' An' I says, 'Yes.' 'Who made 'em all?' he says. An' I told him. An' he says, 'Well, I'm proud of you, 'Poss—an' all my kids!' An' he got up an' went out. An' presently he come back—an' if you'll b'lieve me, Missus, he'd acshally gorn an' put on a clean shirt!"

CHAPTER XVI
A LITTLE BOY

"What are you going to do with the old boat, Dad?"

"Why, I really don't know that she's worth bothering about," Torn Macleod answered, looking up from the dinghy he was examining. "She's very ancient and leaky: I suppose Gordon used her before he got the new skiff. He was apparently quite satisfied to let her go to pieces, and I don't think I'll interfere with his intentions."

"Oh!" said Garth, somewhat disappointed. "I thought you were going to mend her; and it would be such an int'rusting job."

Tom laughed.

"Well, that was rather what I was thinking myself," he answered. "If I had nothing else to do I would like nothing better than to patch up the old thing. But then I have about fifty-seven other jobs waiting for me, most of them not nearly so interesting, but all more important. So I'm afraid the old dinghy must stand aside, son. Perhaps, if work is slack in the winter, I may get at her."

"I wish you would," Garth said. "I love helping you with carpent'ring jobs."

"Well, we'll see," said Tom. "But really, I'm afraid she's too rotten." He hauled the dinghy to the end of the jetty and moored her to a post, returning to his task of cleaning the skiff and the motor-launch. It was an idle morning, and to overhaul the contents of the boathouse had been a good way of using a few hours.

February had come, with a last burst of heat, after a cool January; and February heat has a vicious quality all its own, perhaps because it comes when people are beginning to hope that summer is over. Therefore, it induces much slackness, and makes a toil of work that in ordinary weather is only pastime.

The little household of Gordon's Farm had felt the influence of the weather. Garth's ability for work and play had slackened, and Aileen had begun to administer a tonic: herself white and heavy-eyed, and with little inclination for work. The cottage was stifling in the long, hot days; luckily, the nights helped them, for they all slept on the veranda, as they had done throughout the summer, and the fresh night breeze from the lake never failed. Tom watched his wife carefully, knowing that her spirit would keep her going long after her tired body needed rest. His own work in the paddocks was lessening as the season advanced; he had more time to give to the house, and spent many days ostensibly in the garden, but, in reality, ready to lend a hand at a hundred tasks. It was the constant thought, even more than the actual help, that carried Aileen on from day to day.

'Possum helped, too. There was little outside work for her, but she rode over often, and delighted in forcibly compelling Aileen to rest while she made light of housework and cooking. To cook with Aileen's patent stove was always a peculiar joy to her, and no inducement would draw her from the glass-fronted oven while she could watch her scones or pastry developing from dough to crisp perfection. To Aileen's remonstrances at being forced to be idle she turned a deaf ear.

"Just you don't worry," she would say. "You got to remember you've had a hard summer—workin' like a carthorse, an' you never used to work in your life before. It's bound to tell, 'specially with this beastly heat. You'll be all right once we get the autumn."

She came over early to-day, and hearing from Aileen that Tom was working at the boats, rode down to the jetty with a message. Nick O'Connor was going to a farm at Metung to look at store calves, which they both needed: he proposed to ride over presently and ask Tom to accompany him, making the journey in Tom's motor-launch. Macleod assented heartily.

"Nothing I'd like better," he said. "I was wondering where I could get hold of some young stock." His face clouded a little. "My wife isn't looking very fit to-day—I had planned to take her out this afternoon on the lake. Still, it's business,

and she won't mind."

"Not she," said 'Possum. "I say, though, I haven't got anything special to do to-day: how'd it be if I was to stay and do a few odd jobs about the house, an' then take her an' Garth out in the skiff when it gets cooler? We could drift down to the lake, an' then just mooch along until we met you comin' home from Metung; an' you could bring us home in the launch an' tow the skiff."

"That's as brilliant as most of your ideas, 'Possum," Tom exclaimed. "I would be very glad to think Aileen had your company to-day, and she'll get her outing after all. It won't be hard work for you, either, for the current will take you down to the lake, and if you don't start until it's cool we ought to meet you soon after."

"Oh, that'll be all right," 'Possum answered. "Goodness knows, I'm used to pullin', an' that skiff of yours is just a beauty to pull—she's diff'rent from our old tub. Well, I'll get along, an' let me horse go."

It was an unusually stifling day, and Aileen was tired enough to be meek when 'Possum bullied her into subsiding into a long chair. She had risen at five o'clock, having found that the only way to work comfortably in such weather was to do so before the sun had time to grow vicious: therefore, the housework was done, and lunch prepared. 'Possum was slightly disgusted. "I came hopin' to be useful," she said, arranging Aileen's feet comfortably.

"You're always useful," Aileen said, smiling up at her. "Come and sit down, too, and we'll sew."

'Possum shook her head.

"No good *me* tryin' to sew in this weather," she said. "The jolly old needle simply sticks in the stuff, like as if you'd rubbed glue on it. It's a marvel to me how you manage it, Missus. Never mind; I'll go on makin' the cage for that parrot we're goin' to catch for Garth some day. I won't make much mess, an' I'll sweep it up." She busied herself with tools deftly, while Garth watched and tried to help.

No one wanted much lunch: it was too hot to eat. They made what pretence they could, and soon went back to the veranda. At their feet Bran panted, open-mouthed; outside the fences they could see the fowls, with gaping beaks, standing about under the trees.

"I say," said Garth suddenly, "what about a bathe?"

"Isn't it too hot?" Aileen said.

"It's too hot, here, but it would be lovely down there," Garth answered wisely. "Do come, mother; we'd all feel heaps better."

"I believe it's sound advice," Aileen said. "Come on, 'Possum."

They put on their bathing-dresses in the house and, with sand-shoes on bare feet, went down the slope to the lake. There was a tiny sand-bank near the jetty, shelving gently under the water: a good place for Garth to splash and paddle

when he was tired of swimming. He had not been a very apt pupil in the water—perhaps because his swimming lessons were somewhat haphazard, given when either Tom or Aileen had time. To swim half a dozen strokes was an achievement for him, and he accomplished it to-day with much puffing and blowing. Then he returned to the shallows and played with Bran, while 'Possum dived off a log into a deep pool, and Aileen swam about lazily—she was not a strong swimmer, and the day was not one for exertion, even in the water. However, they were all refreshed, when at length Garth clamoured that he was hungry, and the three dripping figures climbed the hill to the house.

It was tea-time when they were dressed, and after tea they made ready to start. The sun was hotter than ever, it seemed: a mist that had hung over the sky all day had cleared away, and had left blazing heat behind it.

"I don't think I would go, if we had not said we would," Aileen said. "But I suppose Tom might be anxious if we didn't appear."

"Afraid he would," 'Possum agreed. "They might go lookin' for us, too, thinkin' they'd missed us. Oh, you'll feel better on the water, Missus; an' ten to one we'll get a breeze when we come out on the lake."

"Yes, perhaps we will," Aileen said. "I really think it's wiser to go—one shouldn't let hot days make one too lazy."

"You ain't got a lazy bone in your body," 'Possum averred stoutly.

"Indeed, I don't feel as if I had a bone at all, on days like these," Aileen said. "It worries me that I should feel so useless, 'Possum. I haven't time to be useless!"

"Ah, you—useless! Not much you ain't!" said 'Possum. "Every one feels beastly weather like this—unless it's Garth. *He* don't seem to be sufferin' from loss of energy, just now at all events."

She nodded at the small boy, who was racing ahead—a gallant little figure in white shirt and brief knickerbockers, with a wide felt hat. He took a flying leap upon the jetty, where the water swished softly on the pebbles, and capered beside the old dinghy that Tom had left moored near the skiff.

"Come on!" he shouted. "You're too slow. I'm going off to meet Daddy by myself!"

As he spoke, he planted one foot gingerly in the old boat. It rocked and swayed, and he almost overbalanced. 'Possum sprang forward with a quick catch of her breath, but the little fellow righted himself with a mighty wriggle, and sat down abruptly in the dinghy. 'Possum turned to Aileen with a relieved, half-shamefaced laugh.

"He jolly near sat down in the water that time," she said. "It give me a start—lucky he managed to hit the boat." She raised her voice. "Keep still, Garth; let me steady her while you get out."

There came a queer little cry from Garth.

"But it's going away with me!"

Aileen saw, and screamed, and ran. She was too far away. The sudden jerk had parted the rotten strands of the old rope that held the boat, and slowly, yet all too quickly for 'Possum's wild rush, the dinghy swung out into the stream. The tide was running out, and the current was very swift. It seemed in but a second; while they cried out and ran, that the current caught the old boat and whisked it swiftly away.

"Come on," 'Possum said, "quick! Don't worry, Missus, we'll catch him."

She leapt upon the jetty. Aileen followed, and flung herself into the skiff, thrusting the oars into the rowlocks. 'Possum tugged at the painter, and abused Tom's knots under her breath. They yielded at last, and she sprang in, pushing off with a force that sent the boat spinning down-stream. 'Possum grasped the oars, Aileen was already at the tiller—staring ahead in utter silence, seeing nothing but the little blue and white figure. It swung round a bend, and was out of sight.

"Keep her out in the middle, where the tide's swiftest, Missus," 'Possum said. "Don't look like that—it's all right—we'll get him."

She was rowing desperately, with sharp, quick strokes under which the boat flew through the water. They rounded the turn, and ahead—but how far ahead!—was the dinghy, with Garth sitting upright and very still. Faster and faster, as they neared the mouth, the current set out to sea.

"It's very light, you know," 'Possum said, between strokes, in answer to Aileen's look. "An' it got a good start. We're gainin', though, you notice." She was flinging quick looks backward as she rowed. "Ain't he sittin' still—my word, he's good! He's got sense enough for ten!"

Garth's clear little voice came back to them over the dancing water. They could not hear his words, but there was no fear in the tone. Aileen felt almost ashamed of her own sick terror, hearing that brave, childish voice: but the stories of the danger of the current echoed in her mind, and if once the dinghy gained the lake before them she knew that hope was slight. And he was such a little, little boy!

The high banks seemed to fly past. Afterwards, in her dreams, she saw them always: flickering visions of yellow banks and dark green masses of wattle-trees. But at the moment she saw only what lay ahead: glancing water, and swift oars flashing, and 'Possum's flushed, strained face; and the boat that rocked and fled from them with its tiny burden.

But they gained. As they swung round turn after turn, they crept nearer and nearer to the dinghy. Surely they must win! And yet, 'Possum was afraid—looking at her, with senses sharpened by terror, the mother saw the fear in her eyes. She met Aileen's glance with a forced smile, but it could not hide her fear. Her arms never ceased their rapid, mechanical strokes—under the thin blouse her

muscles rose and fell as she opened her shoulders with long, powerful swings.

"Can you stand it?" Aileen whispered. "Oh, why can't I row decently!"

"You're ... far more use steerin'," 'Possum gasped. "I'm all right. See how we're gainin'."

"Then why are you afraid?" Aileen cried.

'Possum shook her head, and forced a smile—a smile that brought no conviction. Then Garth cried out again, something about "water," and "wet," and 'Possum's anxious look grew sharper. Her voice was shrill and strained as she called back to the child.

"I know, dearie—sit still!"

"What is it?" Aileen gasped: and suddenly knew. They were gaining rapidly now, but the dinghy was settling down in the water. The leaks! the wonder was that it had floated so long. Now the water rippled almost level with its edge. For an instant Aileen lost her head in her agony of terror. She screamed, starting half up.

"Sit down!" 'Possum's voice, stern in its anxiety, brought her to her senses. She flung a backward glance. "Near down," she gasped; "I knew, when we gained so quick."

Garth's voice came again, and this time with a sob of fear. The dinghy was almost sinking. For another moment the skiff spun through the water, rounding a bend, and there, ahead, lay the open water of the lake. 'Possum shipped the oars with a sudden jerk.

"Try 'n' keep her straight"—she flung the words at Aileen. "There's one chance——"

Ahead, the dinghy seemed to stop. There was a slow, sickening swirl, and, even as 'Possum screamed to Garth to jump, the water closed over the little boat. There was a cry—a cry that choked suddenly. Then the skiff quivered and stopped as 'Possum dived into the stream.

The water lay blank and desolate before the woman who sat staring in the skiff—blank but for the widening ripples that spread across the pathway of the current. So it lay for a dragging moment that was years, and then 'Possum's head broke it, and, but farther away, Garth's upturned face. They disappeared again.

When she saw them once more, they were together—'Possum gripping the boy tightly, and keeping afloat with one hand. The skiff was drifting down towards them. Aileen grasped an oar and tried to bring it closer, loathing the helpless ignorance that made her efforts awkward. Close—closer, but still too far. She thrust the oar towards them, leaning over the side. It was too short.

The current whisked her away—still stretching vainly towards the two faces in the water, crying to them, calling to God. Then she flung herself into the water, striving, with desperate helpless strokes, against the racing tide.

[image]

"Then she flung herself into the water."

A motor-launch came swiftly round from the lake, the two men in her talking and smoking. They saw the empty boat first, and the words died upon their lips.

"My goodness!" said Tom Macleod, and sprang to his engine. The launch leaped like a live thing, tearing through the water. The skiff danced past them, rocking upon the waves.

"Can you see them?" he asked, between his teeth.

"One of 'em's close," Nick said. "Steady—starboard a little. Be ready to back if I miss." He hung over the side and clutched at the fair head near the boat. "Ah—got her. It's your wife." His great shoulders quivered as he dragged her in, looking wildly ahead as he did so. A cry broke from him.

"There's my girl—she's got your kid. Hold on, 'Poss! Get on with you, man—starboard, starboard!"

He flung Aileen into the boat, and turned again swiftly. 'Possum was paddling feebly with one hand, almost done. She met his eyes and her lips parted.

"Take the kid," she gasped. But he took both, catching them with his great arms, and holding them out of the water until Tom could get to his side. He caught his boy from 'Possum's tired hands and laid him in the boat beside his mother, while Nick O'Connor dragged at the girl.

"I believe we're too late," Tom said in a terrible voice. "Aileen! Aileen!"

Her eyes opened, and in them was an agony of fear. She tried to speak, but only a whisper would come.

"Garth!" And Garth half turned and cuddled in to her with a little sleepy sigh.

* * * * *

The current fled onward, and on its breast the empty skiff danced as though the little waves were playfellows that had come to greet it and to carry it away to join their game. They rocked it gently until it neared the lake; then they grew choppy, and the skiff bobbed and swayed until it was drawn out upon the bosom of the water. It was calm there; but still the tide set seawards, carrying the skiff away and away—over the lake, hurrying, hurrying, until the great grey piers loomed ahead, with the grey waste of the sea dark between them. The roar of

the breakers boomed, rising and falling. The lane of water between the piers was smooth: there were no waves; but under the surface were deep eddies, and the skiff spun and quivered over them, still drawn onward and outward towards the bar that leaped and thundered beyond the end of the piers. It reached the bar, and the breakers took it and played with it, flinging it up and down. Their curling crests tossed their spray into it; and still the little boat rode bravely, now in the hollow trough of a wave, now rising on a great curving wall of green water, and dashing forward with the tide out to sea. So, by some strange chance it passed the bar into the long, smooth ocean swells, and drifted to the horizon.

But when, in the night, the tide turned, it brought the little boat back. The pale moon that smiled over the Bush cottage where Garth lay, sleeping calmly, saw it also: a tiny thing on the great waste of waters, desolate and alone. Slowly it drifted landwards until the roar of the surf sounded near, and then it was hurried forward, towards the forsaken beach west of the piers, until a mighty roller caught it on its crest and bore it, mounting ever higher, at racing speed to the shore. It was high in the air when the great wave crashed downwards, and when its hundreds of tons of green water thundered to the sand, the skiff, bottom upwards, was dashed ashore in a swirl of white surf. Once the undertow caught it, dragging it back, but another roller flung itself down, and when its wild rush along the beach had spent itself, the little boat, battered and broken, lay half buried in the sand. The tide ebbed out, leaving it there; and a seabird, screaming by, saw it and perched upon it, calling to its mate.

In the little cottage, Garth slept on: and beside him his mother knelt, one arm flung across the warm, childish body, listening to his soft breathing: dumb with thankfulness.

CHAPTER XVII

'POSSUM BECOMES A PUPIL

"If you *could* spare a day or two," said Tom Macleod, and looked anxiously at 'Possum. "I think it's fairly rough on you to have to save my son's life one day, and nurse his mother the next, but a woman about the place would be a tremendous comfort, and Aileen would rather have you than any one she knows. She can't lift her head."

"Well, you didn't need to drive over yourself," 'Possum said. "You had no

right to leave her! If you'd sent that kid Horrors with a bit of a note, you might a' known I'd be there as quick as old Greystones 'ud bring me. How on earth is she managin', with you traipsin' over here?"

"She was asleep, and Garth is sitting with her," Tom said meekly. "She can't bear him out of her sight; and you know he's pretty handy. Then you'll come back with me, 'Possum?"

"My gracious, yes!" 'Possum answered. "I won't be five minutes—just wait till I sling some clothes into a basket. You go an' tell Dad I'm goin', will you, Mr. Macleod?" She hurried out of the room, and he heard her calling Bertha urgently.

Nick O'Connor never thought of questioning 'Possum's movements. If she said she was going anywhere, well, she was going, and that was all there was about it. Bertha was an able lieutenant to leave in charge, and it was certain that food would appear upon the table at the usual hours, which, after all, was the only thing that mattered.

Even if it had been uncertain, or dependent on his own efforts, it would have been unthinkable that 'Possum should not go to a neighbour in distress. He would; in that case, have said, "Git along; I'll look after the kids," and would have done so to the best of his ability, though the staple diet of the said kids and himself would probably have been corned beef.

"Just you keep her as long as ever the missus wants her," he said, packing 'Possum's basket into the back of the buggy. "An' if you want more help, send over for me. I could run your place all right if you want to be in the house." He brushed aside Tom's grateful disclaimer, of needing more aid with, "Well, you know where to find me if you want me." The buggy bumped away over the paddock while he watched it, Bertha silent beside him. When it turned out of sight round a clump of tea-trees, he looked down at her from his great height.

"Sure you can manage things?"

"My word!" said Bertha. "I like it. On'y you tell Bill to cut me stove-wood." She marched into the kitchen with high enterprise in her heart.

Aileen was still asleep when they reached the farm. Tom peeped into her room, and saw Garth sitting by her bedside, very upright and alert. He shook his head frantically at his father, and Tom took the hint, and withdrew.

"Well, I'll just get things straightened up," said 'Possum, receiving his report. "Then she'll be glad of a cup o' tea when she wakes."

"Don't do too much," Tom said. "Remember you had a pretty tough time yesterday."

"Me?" said 'Possum, wide-eyed. "Bless you, it was on'y another bathe for me!" She disappeared into the spare room.

So it was that Aileen, waking from a troubled sleep that was full of sinking boats and dancing water, found Garth beside her, his tremulous little smile wel-

coming her back to consciousness; and presently, after an unseen hurried glance and withdrawal, 'Possum came in, bearing a little tray with tea and dainty strips of golden-brown toast; and in one corner of the tray an exquisite rosebud, nodding in a vase.

"Oh, 'Possum!" she said, "'Possum!" The tears choked her.

"I say, don't look like that, Missus, dear—please don't!" said poor 'Possum miserably. She put her tray on a table and caught Aileen's hand in hers, and Aileen drew the rough hand against her cheek and held it there.

"Now you ain't goin' to talk of it, nor to think of it, neither," 'Possum said presently. "You ain't got nothin' to worry about, 'cause it's all over, an' there's old Garth grinnin' at you, an jus' as right as pie. An' all you got to do is to get well, 'cause the Boss is that bothered about you he's right off his feed. I think if you was to let me help you sit up, you could have this." She raised her gently; and somewhat to her surprise Aileen could eat and drink a little.

"If only I weren't so stupidly tired," Aileen whispered, lying down. "And my head buzzes—it buzzed all night as if an engine were let loose inside it."

"Course it would," said 'Possum soothingly. "But it's goin' to be all right now."

"You're sure Garth is well?"

"Now, look here, Missus," said the girl decidedly. "If I wasn't sure, you might just jolly well know I wouldn't have him up, even to let you see him—he'd be in bed with a hot bottle, an' a jolly good go of med'cine. But you'd never think he'd had a duckin' at all. Bless you, what's an extra duckin' to a boy? Our kids is in an' out of the lake all day long."

Something in the rough, homely words soothed the mother more than a hundred more polished speeches. She nestled into her pillow sleepily with a little smile, her eyes never wandering from Garth for more than a moment. But presently the heavy lids drooped, and sleep came to her: deep, refreshing sleep, this time, unbroken by the weary maze of dreams that had tortured her before. She did not stir when 'Possum and Garth tip-toed from the room.

"Bettern't I stay with her?" the small boy asked anxiously.

"No; you go out, old son. She's goin' to sleep for a long while, this time, an' what's more, she's goin' to be better when she wakes."

"Sure, 'Poss?" he asked eagerly.

"Dead certain. An' it'll be miles nicer for her to see you with a bit of colour in your washy old cheeks than lookin' white from sittin' all day in her room. You go an' find your dad, an' tell him not to worry about her, an' give him a hand in the garden. I'll be on the listen, an' I'll call you the d'reckly minute she wakes." She watched the little fellow catch his felt hat from its peg and run out with his news.

"My word, he's a dear kid!" she muttered.

For all her brave words to Tom, she was very tired. The shock of the child's danger had told on her: her arms and shoulders ached cruelly from the long, hard pull, and from the wild struggle to keep afloat, with Garth a dead weight upon her and the current tearing at them, sucking them away from the shore she had tried so vainly to reach. She, too, had had her dreams of horror—in which she had fought wildly to land on a shore that had continually slipped away, and had felt choking waters rising over her head. She shivered now, as the thought of them came over her, and then fought it back resolutely.

"Don't you be a silly ass, 'Possum O'Connor!" she told herself. "A little bit o' work's what *you* want." Thus dealing with herself, she seized a broom, and made a furious onslaught upon the kitchen; and having valiantly routed seven hens that had come uninvited into the back yard, felt considerably better.

It was afternoon when Aileen awoke—this time with light in her eyes and colour in her cheeks:—able to take the soup that 'Possum brought her, and to smile at Garth and Tom as they perched on her bed and entertained her with news of the estate, as Tom gravely called it. There was always so much to tell of the estate each day; news of garden, or fowl-run, or pigsty; fresh flowers blossoming, a panel of fencing broken down by a cow with a thirst for exploring, or a raid after calves that had escaped through the gap and distributed themselves up the most scrub-grown gully they could find. To-day the pigs had taken advantage of Horrors having opened the gate of their sty and then fallen to dreaming; with the result that Garth and his father had had a long hunt, and were considerably heated.

"But we got them back, all right," Garth said triumphantly. "Daddy let me go pig-sticking with a long bit of tea-tree, and you should have seen them run! It was awful fun, but I never got near them!"

"I don't reckon you would—much!" said 'Possum. "Now, how about tea?"

"Ah, do have it in here!" Aileen begged. "If you don't mind, that is?" A supposition which induced mirth on the part of her hearers.

So they nursed her back to quietness of mind, which brought healing to her tired body, filling her days with laughter and the interests of the farm, until the dreams left her and she ceased to look at Garth with a shudder of remembrance. They kept her busy, as soon as she could sit up, finding urgent requirements of patches and buttons, and a hundred little things that only she could understand and arrange. "Best thing for her," said 'Possum, and they saw that her words were true.

Messengers came from 'Possum's home very often—Bill or little Joe riding over with news of the farm and inquiries for the Missus. Bertha was doin' fine, they said. "Never puts her nose outside the kitchen, an' my word! she cooks a

treat!" was Bill's verdict. "Yes, the house looks all right—why wouldn't it? Dad was busy all day harvestin' at Mackenzie's, but he came home at night. An' the wool was sold, an' Dad said to tell Mr. Macleod it was the best price he'd had for years, so Mr. Macleod's wool, bein' along with it, must have brought him luck." After which recitals Bill and Joe would consume enormous quantities of tea and cake and reluctantly take the track for home. They confided to Garth that Bert was a pretty good cook, an' all that, but it wasn't like havin' 'Poss.

In a few days Aileen was able to get up—too weak to work, but glad to be about once more, even if being "about" meant only sitting still. Then came 'Possum to her, with a request.

"If you wouldn't mind," she said, and flushed scarlet, "I thought it 'ud be such a chance for me, when I was knockin' about here, an' you not busy, if you'd put me up to a few things."

"What sort of things, 'Possum?" Aileen asked.

"Oh, just odd things. You know—like the way you have the house. I don't know a thing, except how to cook, after a fashion, and land what I've cooked on the table; an' that's after a fashion, too. You have everything so pretty an' nice: I'd like to learn how."

"You would be just the easiest person to teach." Aileen told her.

"Would I?" 'Possum's face was eager. "I'd try not to be too much of a duffer. It's like me old dungarees. Before you come, I thought they were all right; now I can't stand 'em, except just for rough work. I think it 'ud be nice if I could get like that about other things—if I could feel as if I couldn't stand food slung on the table anyhow, or rooms all messy an' hideous. Then I could teach the kids."

"But once you feel like that, it leaves very little for me to teach you," she said. "Your mind is dainty in itself, so you like everything about you to be dainty."

'Possum drew a long breath.

"That's the nicest thing ever I had said to me in me life," she said softly. "I *will* try, Missus—like fury. An' there's another thing; on'y it's givin' you a lot of bother——"

"Rubbish!" said Aileen, laughing. "What is it, 'Possum, dear?"

But this was harder to say. 'Possum made several false starts before the words came at last.

"It's—well, you know, I know I speak jolly rough. Since you come I have tried to keep me voice softer——"

"I know," Aileen said.

"Did you? I'm so glad. But I make awful mistakes, I know. Even the kids tell me that—they've had more schoolin'. But the trouble is, they pick up things from me. If you could just drop on me now an' then when I say anything all wrong? I know I ain't got enough grammar to keep meself warm. But I'd try an'

get better. I truly would."

"And you wouldn't mind being told little things? They're *such* little things, really, 'Possum."

"Mind?" said 'Possum. "Oh, I'd give me ears if you'd teach me. Like as if I was Garth I've heard you tell him when he pernounced a word skew-whiff!"

"Then I will tell you," Aileen said. "I know you'll make it easy for me—because I will be dreadfully afraid of hurting you, 'Possum."

"Lor'!" said 'Possum. "You couldn't hurt me, not if you tried with a meat-axe!"

Aileen laughed.

"Very well. Then we'll cut out 'Lor'!' for the future, 'Possum, shall We?"

'Possum stared.

"Ain't I a silly chump?" she said. "I might a known it was wrong, 'cause you never say it. Right-oh, Missus!" And it said something for her determination that no one ever heard her say it again.

It was speech that was the only stumbling-block. Little daintinesses of living came to her naturally, with only a hint, just as daintiness of person had come. Her eye for colour was sure, and she had a natural instinct for arranging flowers and for brightening a room that developed daily under Aileen's gentle tuition. Beginning with perfect cleanliness as the basis of perfection, it was easy to work up and up, learning a little more each day—and 'Possum never had to be told a thing twice. But her unchecked speech was a harder matter, and often the cheeks of both girls burned, until the idea came to Aileen to make a joke of it, when they got on much better. Tom, privately consulted, suggested making 'Possum read aloud, for which she proved to have a natural aptitude, and the exercise taught her more than many lessons.

"You know," she said, one day, "Mother wasn't rough. I was only a bit of a nipper when she died——"

She pulled up, observing Aileen's face.

"Kid, I suppose I should say," she said, grinning broadly. Aileen burst out laughing.

"Try, 'little girl,'" she suggested.

"H'm," said 'Possum critically. "Doesn't sound very satisfyin', does it? Well, I was, anyhow; but I remember a lot about her, an' I know she always had the house dossy——"

Pause.

"Pretty, I mean; an' things more like you have 'em—*them*, an' her voice was soft an' gentle. But I was only eleven, an' there was a good lot to do, an' I got careless, 'specially with her not there to tell me anything. All the same, I knew things weren't the way she'd like to have them, and it worried me, when I had

time to think of it. I'm afraid," she added, honestly, "that that got to be not very often. When you're always wonderin' how you're goin' to get all your jobs done, you can't worry an awful lot over things like that."

"Indeed, you can't. I often wonder how you managed everything—and you such a wee thing," Aileen said. "I think your mother knew and was pleased, 'Possum."

"Do you, truly?" 'Possum asked wistfully. "I used to wonder if she did. I never could feel that she'd got far away, 'cause she didn't want to go. But once I said that to the woman Dad got to look after us, an' she hit me a clip on the ear, an' said I was a wicked little wretch to talk like that."

Aileen's eyes blazed.

"Oh, it was she who was wicked!" she cried. "How could she!"

"If you'd known her, you wouldn't have asked how," 'Possum said grimly. "She was a fair terror, she was. At least"—she stopped and pondered, searching in her mind for an expression at once forcible and refined—"she was a very ... disagreeable person!"

Aileen fell into peals of laughter.

"Oh, it won't do, 'Possum—do say 'a fair terror!'" she begged.

"Well, I guess I'll have to," 'Possum grinned. "Somehow, when you say things, they sound just what you want 'em to say. But unless I make my remarks pretty strong they sound as silly as a wet hen!" With which pearl of speech the conversation came to an abrupt conclusion.

CHAPTER XVIII
THE REGATTA

Cuninghame wore an air of unwonted festivity. There were flags flying from the stores and hotels, and from many of the private houses; little pennons fluttering at the mastheads of the sailing-boats that were dotted all along the shore. All over the lagoon could be seen other boats, arriving: yachts, motor-launches, smart skiffs, skiffs that were not smart, and ancient tubs bound from every little lake settlement or lonely farm. For this was the day on which Cuninghame burst into clouds of glory, and drew unto itself crowds that turned it into something between a whirlpool and an excited ant-heap. It is only on one day in the year that Cuninghame holds its regatta, and the occasion is one to be treated with

respect.

New Year's Day had been fixed originally for the great event: but the Clerk of the Weather had been singularly tactless, and had ushered in the New Year with such deluges of rain that hurried telegrams had been sent to Sale and Bairnsdale and other district towns, postponing the regatta; and hundreds of would-be excursionists had unpacked their luncheon-baskets and remained at home. But to-day was to make amends for all disappointments. Rain had fallen, just enough to clear the air and secure the very perfection of autumn weather, while laying the dust on the roads for the folk who rode and drove. The sands were dry and firm: the hummocks shone white against the sky, across the lagoon. There was just enough breeze for sailing—enough to dot the lake with tiny wavelets, gleaming and dancing in the sun. Just to look at that blue, restless surface was enough to set the heart dancing, too.

The Macleods came early, since Garth's impatience was a thing not to be gainsaid. He had never seen a regatta, and the stories told him by the young O'Connors had set him dreaming of nothing else for weeks past. Soon after breakfast he arrayed himself, emerging from his room shining and speckless in white duck, with white sand-shoes and bare brown legs, and a white felt hat held in readiness. After which, his attitude began with sublime patience, which collapsed after a time and merged into trenchant inquiries as to why people couldn't be ready as soon as he was, and lugubrious certainty that they were missing all the best of the fun. Eventually they found themselves driving into the township quite an hour earlier than they had thought of starting, while Horrors, on Jane, jogged in the rear, and wondered how soon he might begin to eat the enormous packet of lunch with which he had been provided.

Early as they were, the O'Connors were before them. It was a day of which no young O'Connor was willing to miss a minute. What was it to them that the regatta itself did not really begin—save for a few sailing races, which nobody noticed—until one o'clock? Was there not all the unusual stir and bustle of the town to see?—the gay shops, decked for the occasion with brave displays of fruit and sweets and cakes, to tempt hungry picnickers; the gallant array of boats, glistening with new paint and varnish, and as bright as "elbow-grease" would make them: the crowds arriving from all the countryside by land and water—people they knew, to greet and by whom to be greeted—schoolfellows, curiously unfamiliar in their best clothes—school teachers, even more curiously human and approachable, and not at all suggesting the week-day discipline of desk and ruler? Not a yard of the esplanade was without its excitements. There were the summer visitors from the houses that were shuttered and gloomy all the winter, and from the tiny cottages under the hummocks across the lagoon, owned by people from Sale and Bairnsdale, who lived a camping existence from Christmas

until Easter, with the breakers pounding almost at their back doors. These considered themselves part and parcel of the place, as indeed they were, and looked with something of disparagement at the folk from Melbourne and Sydney who filled the hotels, and who might never come again, and who, at the best, lived a luxurious and pampered life, and did not know the joys of a picnic existence, with no servants and no worries—every one working in the same way, and every one ready for every kind of fun, from big surf-bathing parties or moonlight swims in the lake, to rushing over the hummocks in a body to lend a hand with the hauling of a shoal of salmon brought in through the breakers. Then there were other visitors—blacks from the Lake Tyers Mission Station; principally lithe young men keen on taking part in the regatta, with a sprinkling of older men, and a few young women and boys. They moved here and there among the crowd on noiseless bare feet.

Never had the O'Connor family looked so resplendent. Nick, to begin with, was a majestic figure in his best suit, with a "boiled" shirt, and a tartan tie which appeared only on great occasions. Bertha and Polly were in fresh washing frocks, and the boys in suits of blue-striped galatea, very smart and summer-like. But 'Possum, in Aileen's Christmas gift of the dress that was like the inside of a shell, tall and slender, her face half-eager and half-shy, was an unfamiliar figure at whom many people turned to glance. Never before had 'Possum been to a regatta, and her inward excitement was almost as keen as Garth's. "The kids always went," she had told Aileen. "I didn't. The old dungarees didn't seem to fit in."

To-day no one "fitted in" better than 'Possum: and Nick O'Connor found himself casting glances of pride at his brood, while mothers from "up the lake" gazed upon the O'Connor tribe with blank amazement, and came to the conclusion that Nick must have found a gold-mine on the farm. "Not that the whole lot of them dresses ain't cheaper than my Albert's plush," said one matron, regarding her son's green sailor suit of that opulent material, with its lace collar. "But it ain't exactly that—on'y they look like toffs!"

They all lunched together at the buggies, in the shade of some gum trees—hurriedly, for the children wanted to see the steamers come in from Sale and Bairnsdale, with their big crowds of excursionists. The first far-off hoot came just as they had finished, and they hurried to the packed wharf. Across the lagoon, at the Entrance wharf, the steamer was discharging a throng of the people to whom regattas are nothing, but the open sea and the Ninety-Mile Beach everything—townsfolk, weary of the long summer, and longing for the sands and the clean breeze from the ocean. They pressed up the steps leading to the hummocks, a black swarm. Then the steamer came slowly across the little strip of water to Cuninghame, her decks still dark with people. She was gaily decked with flags, and on her bows could be seen girls in light summer frocks, like a

fluttering garden. Faint at first, but gradually growing louder and louder, a band was playing a swinging waltz: the music chimed in with the plash of the water as the boat slackened speed and churned her way to the wharf. Impatient boys sprang ashore without waiting for the gangway to be lowered; then the great plank came down and the excursionists trooped across it, gay and chattering; some laden with rugs and luncheon-hampers, while others had prudently saved time by lunching on board during the long trip through the lakes—a plan fraught with danger, since people were crowded like sardines in a tin, and an unwary movement of a neighbour was apt to send tea-cups flying. But then no one ever minded such insignificant occurrences on a lake excursion. When you rise at six o'clock, drive some miles to a boat that starts at eight, with a five hours' water-journey each way, for the sake of three hours on the beach,—what is a spilt tea-cup?

The regatta went along merrily, after the manner of regattas: wildly interesting to those directly concerned, and of mild excitement to outsiders. There were yacht races, in which the boats departed into the horizon, and were promptly forgotten by the spectators; fishermen's boat-races, which drew a crowd at the finish; and skiff-races, which, being shorter, held the attention all the time, and evoked great cheering from the backers of the competitors. Tom entered for one of the latter combats, but was ignominiously defeated by a young fisherman and a black fellow from Lake Tyers, behind whom he paddled in meekly, much to Garth's disgust.

"I don't believe they played fair!" said the small boy gloomily.

"Don't you say that!" said his father sharply, and then relented at the amazed face.

"It doesn't do, old man," Tom continued. "When a fellow is beaten, he takes his gruel like a decent chap; and he doesn't abuse the other fellow. Do you imagine, too, that your old city-bred father had any chance against men who have been on the lakes all their lives?"

"Well, you used to be in the eight at Trinity College," said Garth sadly.

"When I was young. And pulling in a racing-shell isn't the same as in one of these tubs—as you will find out later on. Cheer up, old chap; there's a small boy's foot-race coming off, I hear."

There was, and Garth, being a long-legged person of great fleetness, won it: and was immediately stricken with remorse at having beaten little Joe, to whom he apologized for the year's seniority that gave him the victory. Joe was philosophic, and forgot races and defeat altogether when Garth suggested that they should adjourn to one of the stores and find out what sweets those emporiums stocked. They reappeared later with bulging cheeks and impeded utterance, and took up positions as spectators with renewed joy.

Two sides were playing water-polo—scrambling in ten feet of water for a gaily-painted bladder, which ducked and bobbed in the waves like a live thing. It was an exciting game, and caused helpless mirth among the spectators, when a confident player, racing with the ball for goal, found his leg grasped by an opponent who had dived below him, and was dragged, spluttering and furious, under the surface; or when the assailant, rising triumphant with the ball, felt another leap bodily upon him, so that they disappeared together, while the ball rocked gaily away. Luck and pluck counted almost equally in it, and the victory was apt to go to those who had swallowed least salt water. Then came a race for men mounted astride on barrels, who propelled them through the water with their hands and feet; which was easy enough when the movements were careful, but the excitement of the finish caused the riders to paddle frantically, whereupon their steeds rolled over promptly, and there were wild scenes of catching and remounting, while a boy, who had prudently gone slowly, paddled in alone as the winner—unnoticed by the other competitors, who continued to scramble and tussle for their slippery steeds, filling the air with the tumult of their remarks, while the spectators rocked with laughter. Finally it was brought home to them, through the gentle medium of a megaphone, that the race had been over for some time, when they dispersed, much crestfallen. The crowd, very happy, sought further diversion.

"You've got to go in for the umbrella race, 'Possum," said Tom.

"Not me!" said 'Possum firmly.

"You must," Tom rejoined. "I've borrowed the lightest little dinghy you ever saw for you, and the biggest umbrella. It belongs to old Pa Smith, and it's like a tent."

"I say!" ejaculated 'Possum, staring. Pa Smith was known to disapprove of borrowing or of lending. He was a dour old man, farming a good piece of land near the township; and no person in the district was less likely to do another a favour. Hence 'Possum's amazement.

"How ever did you manage it?" she gasped.

"Bless you, he never raised an objection," said Tom cheerfully. "Take Pa Smith the right way, and he'll eat out of your hand."

"You will have to race now, 'Possum," Aileen said, laughing. "Do!"

"I wouldn't win," said 'Possum, after the manner of bashful young ladies.

"I suppose you wouldn't, if any one beat you; but they mightn't," said Tom. "Here's Polly, longing to cox you. You can't refuse, 'Possum—it isn't decent, when I've risked all I have for you in getting that umbrella!"

"All right," said 'Possum, capitulating, while Garth uttered "Hooray!" "Thanks, awfully, Mr. Macleod. When does it start?"

"Pretty soon," Tom answered. "You might as well get into the dinghy and

practise, as those girls are doing." He nodded towards some small boats out on the lake, in which fair maidens, apparently at the mercy of wind and tide, were endeavouring to use large umbrellas as sails, with varying success. Small boys in boats hovered near, cheering and jeering their efforts in a manner which filled the umbrella-maidens with embarrassment and wrath. Their threats of vengeance floated across to the onlookers.

'Possum established Polly at the tiller, and paddled away from the wharf. The dinghy was certainly light, and the umbrella, rolled and laid along a thwart, looked huge; but she found, on approaching the others, that they were just as well equipped; and Flossie Parker, who had a great reputation in this branch of sport, had a dinghy that was considerably lighter. 'Possum sighed, and hoped faintly that her umbrella was smaller.

She shipped her oars, and unfurled Pa Smith's property. It was a majestic umbrella, with an ivory crutch-handle that made it easy to hold, and lessened the chance of having it wrenched by a puff of wind from her grasp. Again, a spasm of wonder floated across her mind, that Pa Smith should ever have parted, even temporarily, with his well-loved possession. It was so unlike Pa Smith. However, it was merely another instance of Mr. Macleod's remarkable power of getting what he wanted; and 'Possum had ceased to wonder at that. So she said, "Now, look where you're goin', Polly, 'cause you can be quite sure that a lot of other people won't!" and spread her umbrella to catch the wind.

It was a fitful breeze, that occasionally sent them spinning along, and sometimes dropped altogether, leaving them to wallow on the water unaided. At such moments Polly's anguish was painful to behold.

"What'll we do if it does that in the race, 'Poss?" she wailed.

"Why, bless you, if it does, won't every one be in the same box?" 'Possum answered. But Polly looked unconvinced and anxious, and her brow only cleared when a fresh puff sent them gaily on.

There were only five competitors altogether. Two others arrived on the scene, but on comparing their heavy boats and small umbrellas with those of the other girls, they prudently withdrew, much to 'Possum's relief: the lagoon was not wide enough for a large number of starters. They dodged about here and there, occasionally colliding, and apologizing with much forced politeness, while under their breath they reviled their coxswains. Most of these latter were small girls chosen for their light weight rather than for their ability; but Flossie Parker's was of proved skill, and had steered her to victory in many a hard-fought contest. Flossie's umbrella was red, and of a mighty size. "Still, I'm blessed if I think it has the acreage of Pa Smith's!" thought 'Possum, comparing them.

A shout from the starter's boat brought them into line near the head of the lagoon.

"The finish is the line between those two boats ahead—near the far jetty," said the starter, who looked careworn. "Shut your umbrellas. When I fire the pistol, you open 'em and get along. Any one touching her oars is disqualified. First over the line wins. Bumping not allowed. Now then, are you all ready? Right-oh. Go!"

The pistol's sharp crack cut across the sudden silence. It was followed by five simultaneous snaps, as the umbrellas shot into the air and were unfurled. They spread wide to catch the breeze.

Nothing occurred. There was, at the moment, no breeze. The five competitors wriggled and jerked their sails, and held them at various angles to woo the difficult zephyr, but the zephyr obstinately remained away. The boats began to drift out of line. Loud cheers arose from the shore, with pleasant shouts of encouragement, under which the cheeks of the fair starters burned.

"Mighty funny, I don't think!" snapped Flossie Parker. "I suppose they fancy they're jolly clever. Blow the old wind!" a pious remark which was made on general principles, since, at the moment, there was no wind to blow.

"Push 'er, Flossie! Get out an' push, why don't yer?" The cheering words floated across from the wharf; and Flossie screamed an angry answer.

"I say, Poll, be ready," said 'Possum, in a low tone. "The breeze is coming." She had glanced over her shoulder, seeing a ruffle on the surface of the lake.

No one else saw it quite as quickly, and when the puff struck them it found some of the competitors not ready. Two boats promptly collided, and disentangled themselves with difficulty. It is not the easiest matter to guide a boat describing an erratic course in the water under a wobbly umbrella, especially when coxswains of tender years lose their heads; and the two boats in question lost much ground, and never quite made it up. The other three went away gallantly, 'Possum a length ahead. Miss Parker had been taken by surprise, but her natural instinct was quick, and she was speedily in pursuit. The third competitor, a stout girl with a green umbrella and a very light dinghy, kept level with her. Loud howls came from the shore, over which could be distinctly heard the shrill pipe of little Joe, who threw his head back and vociferated, "Go it, 'Poss!" without ceasing for an instant. Afterwards it was doubtful whether little Joe had seen all of the race, but it was quite certain that he had never ceased to yell!

The breeze died away, but with the strange perversity of summer breezes it gave a tiny last flicker which seemed especially for the benefit of Miss Parker. "It was that small she caught it all in her umbrella!" said Possum, afterwards. It took her ahead, while the two other leading boats were motionless; to the anguish of Polly, she floated slowly past them. The smile of the runner who sees victory flickered about her mouth. "When I get me nose in front, they don't often see more than me heels again," was her reflection.

Again the little wind ruffled the lake and quivered towards them. Polly, rigid, with her hand on the tiller, was as ready as 'Possum. The three boats slipped forward, coming nearer and nearer to the line across the water that marked the goal. There was a steady roar from the shore—cheers, laughter, and advice, mingled inextricably.

"'Possum's beat," said Nick O'Connor sadly. "Bother that Parker girl!"

The breeze dropped again to short puffs. 'Possum rose to her feet suddenly, holding the umbrella high over her tall head, at a cunning angle; and suddenly her boat shot forward. She was level with Flossie before the latter's boat began to move, then she drew ahead slowly, and inch by inch they crept on, while the howls from the shore grew more and more frantic. Miss Parker tried every trick of umbrella generalship that she knew, but she could not quite make up the distance. 'Possum's boat touched the line half a length ahead.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Flossie sourly. "I don't know how you managed that!"

"No more do I," 'Possum answered. "Just luck. Now then, Polly, you behave yourself." For Polly, given wholly up to triumph, was threatening to turn somersaults in the stern.

"H'm," said Flossie, regarding the ecstatic Polly. "How old's she?"

"Seven," 'Possum answered.

"Oh!" Flossie shrugged her shoulders. "Mine's near twice as old, an' weighs twice as much."

"Pity she doesn't steer twice as well, isn't it?" remarked 'Possum composedly. Sourness to herself might be borne patiently, but when it touched Polly it was another matter. Polly, however, having no fine scruples, did not hesitate to fight her own battles.

"An' your dinghy only weighs half what ours does!" she shrilled. "Beat yer—smarty!"

"Be quiet, Polly!" 'Possum said sharply. She took the paddles and turned the boat towards the shore. Polly, utterly unabashed, glared angrily at Miss Parker as they drew away, but was reduced to a lamentable state of mind by the conduct of Flossie's coxswain, who put but her tongue at her with gestures of scorn and derision. Polly would gladly have retaliated in kind but for wholesome fear of her sister, who had been known to fall severely on such natural exhibitions of distaste for a foe. She endeavoured to content herself by tilting her nose in the air as far as Nature would permit; but it was an unsatisfying reprisal, and cast a gloom over her until they neared the shore and caught sight of little Joe's face of ecstasy.

"Knew you'd win, 'Poss! Knew you'd win!" he shouted, capering up and down. 'Possum looked sheepish.

"Behave, Joe, can't you?" she said.

"Good girl, 'Possum—we're proud to know you," Tom said, mooring the dinghy to a ring on the wharf. "Just give me that umbrella, will you?"

He took the umbrella and turned to pass through the crowd. But a new event was beginning, and he found it impossible to get through, for the wharf was already thronged, and fresh people were endeavouring to arrive at a point where they could see. Tom gave up the attempt, and turned to his party.

"Better stay where we are," he said. "It's the greasy pole: and the natural savagery of all good people is bringing every one to gloat over the sufferings of their fellow-men. Can you see, Aileen?"

"Beautifully, thanks," said Aileen cheerfully. "I'm glad we're not going to miss this."

"Your character's deteriorating," said Tom, with gloom. "Here, Garth, hop up on my shoulder." He swung the small boy up and turned to the edge of the wharf.

A long sapling had been lashed to the wharf, projecting out over the water. Its smooth surface shone from a liberal allowance of soft soap, and a small flag was thrust into a hole bored in its far end. As they watched, the first competitor appeared—a tall boy, in an old shirt and trousers. He started gingerly along the pole, and made excellent progress until he was half-way. Then his feet suddenly slid from under him, and he sat down abruptly, the pole quivering and bounding under his weight. He clawed wildly at the slippery surface. Then the water received him kindly.

He rose to the surface amid the shrieks of the delighted populace, and struck out for the steps, as the next competitor, a Melbourne schoolboy in a bathing-suit, appeared on the pole. Unfortunately, his career was even shorter. His first step was rash, his second even wilder: he slid for a moment, and then the end came quickly. Just below him the first lad was swimming. The Melbourne boy fell on him bodily, and they disappeared together in a whirlpool of spray. Those of the onlookers who had room at this point sat down on the wharf and held their aching sides.

The fun grew fast and furious as, one after another, valiant men and boys started along the pole, and, sooner or later, plunged, gasping and struggling, into, the depths. Some got as far as half-way, others succumbed in the first three steps, but all alike went down, and the various methods of their falling were sufficient to keep the spectators in roars of laughter. Finally a black boy achieved a meteoric progress, shuffling sideways along the pole so swiftly that it seemed he gave his feet no time to slip until almost at the very end, where the pole narrowed in what Tom termed an inhuman fashion. Then he shot into space: but, even in falling, he grasped the flag, and brought it proudly with him from the bottom of the lake.

"Oh, wasn't it lovely!" Garth gasped. His peals of laughter had rung out even above the joyful shouts all round him. "Oh, I wish they'd do it all over again!"

"Do you!" said a wet and greasy competitor, striding wrathfully past in search of his clothes. Then he met the dancing eyes and grinned in friendly fashion, and disappeared among the crowd.

Tom put his son down, and tucked the handle of Pa Smith's umbrella under his arm, holding it against his side.

"I'll see you presently," he said to Aileen. "Must go and return this." He moved away with the throng.

Where the goods store blocked part of the end of the wharf, a wrathful voice fell on his ear.

"If the Gov'n'ment 'ud give us a policeman or two in this township it 'ud be better for honest people! Thieves! the place is full of them!"

"Aw, I wouldn't say that, Mr. Smith," said the soothing voice of Nick O'Connor.

"You mightn't, but I would. An' so'd you, if you had your property lifted as soon as you turned your back!"

"Go on, now!" said Nick sympathetically. "You don't mean——"

"I mean there's a pack o' thieves here. Me good umbrella that I left in the trap——"

"It ain't gone, surely?"

"Yes it is. My word, if I could lay me hands on whoever took it! I've had that umbrella these fifteen years."

"Mighty good luck it didn't split with 'Possum," said Tom to himself. He grinned, flattening his body against the wall of the shed.

"You don't say!" Nick was murmuring. "I wouldn't have thought any one 'ud go stealin' an umbrella. But with all these blacks about, you never can tell."

"Me father used to shoot blacks for stealin'," boomed Mr. Smith. "I dunno why they'd object if you did that now. A pack of idle, useless, thievin'——"

"Well, you don't know for certain it was them," said Nick. "Look here, now—are you sure you didn't leave it at home?"

"Do you take me for a fool?" demanded the wrathful Mr. Smith.

"Not me. But the best of us is careless sometimes. Well, are you sure you hunted all over the trap?"

"It wasn't on the seat, where I left it. It wouldn't have walked underneath, would it?"

"You never can tell," Nick said wisely. His mild eye, travelling round, encountered Tom's, and, struck by something in his child-like expression, examined him yet further. The end of an ivory crutch-handle, tucked tightly under Tom's

arm, caught and held his glance, and for a moment he looked unutterable things. Then he bestowed his attention anew upon Pa Smith, moving a little so as to interpose his person between him and Tom. He felt a grateful dig as Tom slipped past him.

"It's funny how almost any one'll make mistakes," he said. Out of the tail of his eye he beheld a tall figure hurrying down the street towards the tree where Pa Smith's buggy stood in a patch of shade. "Say we go an' look in your buggy again for that little parrysole of yours, Mr. Smith. Then, if it ain't there, we'll go on up to the hotel an' get a little something to console you."

On the way to the buggy they met Tom sauntering back, apparently at peace with all men. He grinned at Nick cheerfully as they passed—Nick's gentle voice acting as accompaniment to the loud wailing of the bereaved Mr. Smith. It changed to blank amazement as they, neared the buggy, where an ivory-handle lay conspicuously protruding from under the seat.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Mr. Smith.

"Didn't I tell you the best of us makes mistakes?" murmured Nick.

"It was great luck winning that race," said 'Possum next day, "But the one thing I never will understand to me dying moment is how you managed to make old Pa Smith lend you that umbrella, Mr. Macleod. An' he never raised a single objection, you said?"

"Not one," Tom answered. He paused. "I wonder," he said reflectively, "if that might be because I never asked him!"

CHAPTER XIX
THE ORDER OF RELEASE

"Don't you think it's time Garth was home?"

Aileen Macleod was standing by the garden gate, shading her eyes as she looked across the paddocks. Her husband, who had come upon her unexpectedly, laughed a little.

"Oh, hen with one chick!" he said, "will you ever learn to let that boy out of your sight for an hour?"

"Indeed, I think I'm very good," Aileen defended herself. "I let him go all over the country, which you know very well, and climb enormous trees, and go swimming with the O'Connor boys, and use an axe, and do all sorts of things that

would have filled us both with horror six months ago. And I take hold of myself with both hands and say, 'Aileen Macleod, you're not going to be nervous and make a poodle of your son!' But this is the first day he has ridden Roany to the township, Tom: and, you know, Roany isn't old Jane!"

"No, thank goodness!" said Tom with fervour. "But you needn't worry, really, dear: he manages Roany quite well, and the pony is perfectly safe. And you *are* good, and so am I, because often I'm just as nervous about the blessed kid as you are—so there!" They smiled at each other. "Anyhow, here he comes. The little beggar's racing, too!"

Garth came into sight, sitting very straight, with his hands well down, and with Roany going at his best hand-gallop. He took the shortest cut across the paddock, which included a fair-sized log, over which the pony hopped gaily, while both parents gasped.

"I didn't know Garth could sit that!"

"Neither did I," said Tom, with a grin. "Oh, he's developing! I wonder what's making him hurry so."

"*I* wonder where are his bundles," said the lady of the house, with some concern. "I provided him with two sugar-bags, and he was to bring bread and meat, and all sorts of oddments, and to come home slowly. Can anything be wrong?"

"He doesn't look as if there were," Tom said.

He did not. As he caught sight of the two who waited for him at the gate, he took off his hat and whirled it round his head with a mighty shout, digging his heels into Roany, who shot up the hill in response. They pulled up.

"What's your hurry, old son? And where are your bundles?"

"You don't know who's coming!" Garth cried, with dancing eyes.

"'Possum?"

"No! 'Possum can come any old day. This is a most awfully special visitor. Hurry up and guess!"

"The only person who would be that," said Tom slowly, "is old Metcalfe——"

Garth gave a little shout of joy.

"Good old Daddy! I knew you'd guess!"

"I say, it isn't really, Garth?"

"Yes, it is. He's coming out now, too."

"Now! But when did he come?"

"He came by last night's boat. He wrote, and sent you a telegram, too, but of course we haven't sent in for the mail for three days—I 'specs they're both in this bundle," said Garth, hauling a packet of letters from his pocket. "So when he got here and found no one to meet him he wouldn't come out last night, and he stayed at the hotel. I met him just starting out in a buggy." Garth gave an irrepressible

chuckle. "He didn't know me from Adam. I rode up, and said, 'Hallo, doctor!' and he said, 'Who are you, young man?' and looked at me as if I was a wombat."

"What did you say?" asked his mother.

"I just laughed and laughed, it was so funny. And then he suddenly said, 'By Jove, it's Garth!' and he jumped out of the buggy and came and felt me all over, to see how fat I'd got. So I gave him all the bundles, and I raced on ahead to tell you. He'll be here in two jiffs."

"Then, this is where I hurry," said Aileen. "Thank goodness, I turned out the spare room two days ago! It must have been a brain-wave!"

"Come and we'll help," Tom said to Garth. "Let your pony go."

They flung themselves at what remained of the morning's housework with such good will that preparations for dinner were well established, and every room shining, when the hotel buggy drove up, and they all trooped to the gate.

"Well!" said Dr. Metcalfe, pausing on the veranda. "Let me look at you all."

He looked from one to the other, until Aileen complained that the look was becoming a stare. Perhaps it was upon her that it dwelt longest. Garth and his father had filled out and broadened beyond belief: they were deeply tanned and clear-eyed, and in each was a curious look of resoluteness that the doctor had never seen before. But the change in Aileen was deeper. The fragile, willowy girl of Toorak had gone: in her place was a woman with lines about her eyes, yet a new beauty in her face. A gracious woman, with perfect health on her brown cheek, and in her eyes perfect happiness. He looked at her hands: in the old days they had been like the inner petals of a rose, as soft and smooth, and delicately pink. Now they were still smooth and well-kept, but hard, and bronzed. She held them out to him with a quaint little gesture.

"You needn't look at my hands—I told you I was a working-woman!"

He took the slim hands in his, and bent over them.

"I find them extremely good hands," he said "And all of you make a tonic for tired eyes. I haven't seen three such visions of health for years, and the curious part of it is that though you're lone exiles you don't look unhappy!"

"I'm afraid we've given up the 'exile' stand-point," Tom said, laughing. "It was pathetic, of course; but it grew so ludicrously incorrect that we had to abandon it for the sake of our own self-respect. Come in, old man, and get your coat off."

"You must bring him to the kitchen when he's ready," Aileen declared. "If I don't cook the dinner there won't be any, and you needn't think I'm going to miss any of his visit!"

"We'll come and help cook," the doctor said.

He watched them, later—Aileen, with her sleeves rolled above her elbows, compounding pastry, while Tom prepared vegetables, and Garth scrubbed pota-

toes.

"Do you always manage this way?"

"Mercy, no!" said Tom. "She won't let us. She's proud, and haughty, and insists on doing everything herself, and she hunts us out into the paddocks to toil in the heat—doesn't she, Garth?"

"And then they come in, and bully me outrageously, and turn me out of my own kitchen!" said Aileen, laughing. "Isn't it a nice one, doctor?"

"It is," said the little doctor, looking round the white kitchen, with its gleaming tins and bright stove. "I never saw such a companionable place. Do you mind if I spend most of my time here?"

"Not a bit," said Aileen. "We do, ourselves." She peeped through the oven, door at tartlets that were becoming puffy and brown. "But you must see all the estate. Tom will take you after dinner."

"You must come, too," said Tom.

"If I can."

"H'm," said Tom reflectively. He nodded presently to Garth, and they slipped away.

"Just ride over to 'Possum," Tom said. "Tell her we've got a visitor, and ask her can we borrow her for a bit. Mother mustn't be too much tied for the few days the doctor can spare."

Garth nodded, and fled to the stable for his bridle; and thus it was that, just as dinner was over and Aileen was experiencing the momentary inward pang that comes before tackling clearing away and washing-up, 'Possum rode up.

"Got a free afternoon," she said, having greeted the stranger shyly. "There's not much doing on the farm just now. Thought I might do a few odd jobs."

She fell upon the remains of the meal and removed them to the kitchen, Aileen following, protesting.

"Now, look here, Missus," said 'Possum, "ain't you got a visitor?—I mean, *haven't* you? And here am I with not enough to do to keep meself warm. Just you all go out an' show him the place, an' I'll clear up an' get tea."

"Oh, 'Possum, you are a dear!" said Aileen gratefully.

"Poof!" said 'Possum. "An' I'm comin' to-morrow, an' every day while he's here. Not often I get a chance to use that little stove!" She looked affectionately at the glass door of the oven, and then removed Aileen gently but firmly from the kitchen.

They wandered over the estate throughout the afternoon, pointing out to their visitor beauties of sheep and calves, whereat he was politely unappreciative, and beauties of fern gullies, and lake, and hillside, which made him as enthusiastic as the most exacting proprietor could desire. They showed him where the crops had been, and where the lucerne defied the approach of winter and still grew

green and strong; and they quoted for him prices of cattle, and sheep, and pigs, of fowls, and eggs, and vegetables, until his brain reeled. They dragged him up the ladder into the loft, full of fragrant hay ready for the winter; they took him to the racks where golden maize-cobs were drying, and to the shed where sacks of peas stood. "Thrashed them myself, with a flail," said Tom proudly. They introduced him to the fat Berkshire piglings in the sty, and to the incubator which was to hatch enormous broods of chickens and make Aileen's fortune; they showed him sheds and stables, tool-room and garden implements, and crops of root vegetables and winter cabbage, until he gaped with awe. And at last they brought him into the front garden, where masses of bronze Japanese chrysanthemums blazed in the warm sunshine of late autumn; and on the veranda 'Possum had long chairs ready and a tea-table, brave with bright silver and china, with tea-cakes smoking in a hot dish over a spirit-lamp, and a copper kettle bubbling. The weary visitor sat down thankfully.

"Eh, but this is the most comfortable place I've seen for a long time!" he said. "The very look of this veranda would make a man hungry, Miss O'Connor!" At which 'Possum blushed hotly, and thanked Providence once more that the tea-cakes had turned out like feathers.

She rode away after leaving the supper-table ready. They watched her cantering across the paddock. To-day she rode a fiery young mare of her father's, sitting it as though she were part of the animal. It shied violently at a bunch of dead leaves, and the little doctor gasped, but apparently 'Possum had not noticed any movement. A clump of trees hid her.

"So that's the right-hand man?" the doctor said thoughtfully.

"That's the godsend," Tom answered.

"That's the dearest, best-hearted——" Words did not come easily to Aileen. But she looked after 'Possum with a smile.

"Well, I knew from your letters that she was an extraordinarily good farm-hand," said the doctor. "But you didn't prepare me for finding an uncommon nice girl as well."

"That's Aileen's doing," said Tom.

"Indeed it's not," Aileen said quickly. "I have only put on a little polish. But 'Possum is her own dear, honest self. She has taught me more than I could ever teach her; and not only work, but things that matter more." But she would not say what those things were.

Dr. Metcalfe came from Garth's bedroom that evening with a very contented face.

"Well?" said Tom and Aileen together.

"I've overhauled every inch of your son," said the doctor, sitting down. "And I would not have thought that eight months could make such a difference. There

is absolutely no sign of the old delicacy. He's just a great, hardy young ruffian, and if you weren't growing into a bigger edition of the same thing yourself, Tom, I should advise you to be polite to him, in case he handled you roughly! Seriously, I'm enormously pleased. You must have had a hard time, but it has paid you well."

"Garth is the main thing, of course," Tom said. "But it has paid in other ways, too. Of course, we have had luck. We struck a wonderful season, and we had no trouble with drought or bush-fires, or anything else. We haven't made a fortune. But there's money in it—not enough to get excited over, but enough to make one feel easy about the future. What with the stock, the wool, the crops, and the fowl-yard and vegetable-garden, we've had a very decent season, haven't we, Aileen?"

"Yes," said Aileen solemnly. "I'm going to have a new hat!"

"You can have the best hat in Melbourne," said her husband.

"Thank you, but I won't bother," said she. "It's at Barke's, and it's three-and-elevenpence. I shall get it next time I drive in."

The doctor looked from one to another, his eyes very kindly.

"Well," he said, and paused; "I hunted you away from Melbourne, to make your boy into a strong fellow. And you've done it. I don't want to make rash promises or raise false hopes. But Garth has improved so wonderfully that I cannot see that there is any real reason for you to bury yourselves down here for ever. If you gave him, say, another year of Gippsland, I think you might with perfect safety take him back to Melbourne. You'd have to watch him, of course. But, with an occasional holiday in the country, he would get on quite well."

Tom looked at Aileen, and she at him.

"What do you say?" said each.

The doctor laughed.

"I'm going out to smoke a pipe," he said. "You can talk it over together. But it would be safe to come."

He went out.

"You'd like to go back, dear," Tom said. "You've been most awfully plucky, but I know it hasn't been easy. I'm glad it isn't a life-sentence for you. I was afraid it meant that."

"I don't think I'd be afraid," she said.

"You're never afraid of anything," said Tom.

"I am still afraid, and I always will be, whenever I turn out a pudding!" Aileen said quaintly. "There is always in me a lurking horror that it will be sodden in the middle! And I will be afraid of snakes until I die. But I have given up being afraid of the estate. I like it."

Something in her tone made him look at her steadily.

"You mean——?" he said.

"I wish I knew what you wanted," she said suddenly. "Are you keen to go back, Tom? You did like it all, you know—Melbourne, and races, and dinners, and golf, and theatres, and all the old life. You never would say you missed it, but I knew you did."

"I did: for a month," he said. "Then it just faded. I would have gone on missing it, I think, if you hadn't been so content. I don't know how you managed it. But it used to make a fellow ashamed of himself for feeling blue, with your happy face always about ... and to hear you singing."

She drew a long breath.

"Then—don't you want to go back? Ah, tell me, Tom!"

Tom Macleod laughed.

"I'll go back to-morrow, if you like," he said. "But otherwise—well, I think there are plenty of people in Melbourne without me."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she cried. "Tom, I don't want to go back!"

"Are you certain?" he asked. "It's a hard life for you, my girl."

"Indeed, it isn't. I'm alive, now—and I don't think I ever was in Melbourne. I thought I was happy there, and indeed I was. But this is different, somehow. One has so many interests. I feel part of the world now, not just a drone."

"Just raising chickens and vegetables?"

"Some one has to do it," she said. "And I didn't raise anything before—except one small boy, and even that job was nearly spoilt! Now I'm part of the world's work. Oh, I like it, Tom! You do, too, don't you?"

"My tastes have become altogether common," he said, laughing. "I'm enormously interested in the crops we've planned out for next season, and I'm going to put in Tasmanian potatoes that will make Cuninghame open its eyes! And I'm going to sow onions, and make an enormous fortune——"

"And I strawberries," Aileen said eagerly. "Think of the summer visitors, all eating them, and my bank-book swelling!"

"And there's money in those calves we bought at Metung," he said. "With that lucerne, and all the winter feed we've got, we'll have something worth looking at in the spring!"

They looked at each other, and laughed.

"So the end of it is, we say, 'Thank you very much, kind sir, but we don't want to go back from the land'—and we turn into old farmers," Aileen said. "Won't Garth rejoice!"

"And 'Possum?" Tom said.

"Oh—'Possum!" Her face grew very soft. "I told you I would always be afraid of some things, Tom. I should never have been brave enough to tell 'Possum I was going away!"

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A LITTLE BUSH MAID
TIMOTHY IN BUSHLAND
MATES AT BILLABONG
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON
GLEN EYRE
NORAH OF BILLABONG
GRAY'S HOLLOW

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