The Project Gutenberg eBook of Plain Living: A Bush Idyll, by Rolf Boldrewood

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: Plain Living: A Bush Idyll

Author: Rolf Boldrewood

Release date: March 8, 2016 [EBook #51404]

Language: English

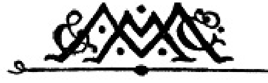
Credits: Produced by KD Weeks, MWS and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net (This file was produced from images generously made available by The Internet Archive/American Libraries.)

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PLAIN LIVING: A BUSH IDYLL ***

Transcriber’s Note:

Minor errors, attributable to the printer, have been corrected. Please see the transcriber’s note at the end of this text for details regarding the handling of any textual issues encountered during its preparation.

PLAIN LIVING
A BUSH IDYLL



PLAIN LIVING

A BUSH IDYLL

BY

ROLF BOLDREWOOD

AUTHOR OF “ROBBERY UNDER ARMS,” “THE MINER’S RIGHT,” ETC.

London

MACMILLAN AND CO., Limited
NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1898

The Right of Translation and Reproduction is Reserved.

Richard Clay and Sons, Limited,
LONDON AND BUNGAY.

PLAIN LIVING

A BUSH IDYLL

CHAPTER I

Mr. Stamford was riding slowly, wearily homeward in the late autumnal twilight along the dusty track which led to the Windāhgil station. The life of a pastoral tenant of the Crown in Australia is, for the most part, free, pleasant, and devoid of the cares which assail so mordantly the heart of modern man in cities.

But striking exceptions to this rule are furnished periodically. “A dry season,” in the bush vernacular, supervenes. In the drear months which follow, “the flower fadeth, the grass withereth” as in the olden Pharaoh days. The waters are “forgotten of the footstep”; the flocks and herds which, in the years of plenty, afford so liberal an income, so untrammelled an existence to their proprietor, are apt to perish if not removed. Prudence and energy may serve to modify such a calamity. No human foresight can avert it.

In such years, a revengeful person could desire his worst enemy to be an Australian squatter. For he would then behold him hardly tried, sorely tormented, a man doomed to watch his most cherished possessions daily fading before his eyes; nightly to lay his head on his pillow with the conviction that he was so much poorer since sunrise. He would mark him day by day, compelled to await the slow-advancing march of ruin—hopeless, irrevocable—which he was alike powerless to hasten or evade.

If he were a husband and a father, his anxieties would be ingeniously heightened and complicated. The privations of poverty, the social indignities which his loved ones might be fated to undergo, would be forever in his thoughts, before his eyes, darkening his melancholy days, disturbing his too scanty rest.

Such was the present position, such were the prospects, of Harold Stamford of Windāhgil. As he rode slowly along on a favourite hackney—blood-like, but palpably low in condition—with bent head and corrugated brow, it needed but little penetration to note that the “iron had entered into his soul.”

Truth to tell, he had that morning received an important letter from his banker in Sydney. Not wholly unexpected; still it had destroyed the remnant of his last hope. Before its arrival he had been manfully struggling against fate. He had hoped against hope. The season might change. How magical an alteration would forty-eight hours of steady rain produce! He might be able to tide over till next shearing. The station was being worked with the strictest economy. How he grudged, indeed, the payment of their wages to the men who performed the unthankful task of cutting down the *Casuarina* and *Acacia pendula*, upon which the starving flocks were now in a great measure kept alive!

But for that abnormal expenditure, he and his boy Hubert, gallant, high-hearted fellow that he was, might make shift to do the station work themselves until next shearing. How they had worked, too, all of them! Had not the girls turned themselves into cooks and laundresses for weeks at a time! Had not his wife (delicate, refined Linda Carisforth—who would have thought to see a broom in those hands?) worn herself well-nigh to death, supplementing the details of household work, when servants were inefficient, or, indeed, not to be procured! And was this to be the end of all? Of the years of patient labour, of ungrudging self-denial, of so much care and forethought, the fruit of which he had seen in the distance, a modest competence, an assured position? A well-improved freehold estate comprising the old homestead, and a portion of the fertile lands of Windāhgil, once the crack station of the district, which Hubert should inherit after him.

It was hard--very hard! As he came near the comfortable, roomy cottage, and marked the orchard trees, the tiny vineyard green with trailing streamers in despite of the weary, sickening, cruel drought, his heart swelled nigh to bursting as he thought how soon this ark of their fortunes might be reft from them.

Surely there must be some means of escape! Providence would never be so hard! God’s mercy was above all. In it he would trust until the actual moment of doom. And yet, as he marked the desolate, dusty waste across which the melancholy flocks feebly paced; as he saw on every side the carcases of animals that had succumbed to long remorseless famine; as he watched the red sun sinking below the hard, unclouded sky, a sense of despair fell like lead upon his heart, and he groaned aloud.

“Hallo, governor!” cried out a cheery voice from a clump of timber which he had approached without observing, “you and old Sindbad look pretty well told out! I thought you were going to ride over me and the team, in your very brown study. But joking apart, dear old dad, you look awfully down on it. Times are bad, and it’s never going to rain again, is it? But we can’t afford to have you throwing up the sponge. *Fortuna favet fortibus*, that’s our heraldic motto. Why, there are lots of chances, and any amount of fortunes, going begging yet.”

“Would you point out one or two of them, Master Hubert?” said his father, relaxing his features as he looked with an air of pride on the well-built youngster, who stood with bare throat and sun-bronzed, sinewy arms beside a dray upon which was a high-piled load of firewood.

“Well, let us see! if the worst comes to the worst, you and I must clear out, governor, and take up this new Kimberley country. I’ve got ten years’ work in me right off the reel.” Here the boy raised his head, and stretched his wide, yet graceful shoulders; “and so have you, dad, if you wouldn’t fret so over what can’t be helped. You’d better get home, though, mother’s been expecting you this hour. I’ll be in as soon as I’ve put on this last log. This load ought to keep them in firewood for a month.”

"You're a good boy, Hubert. I'll ride on; don't knock any more skin off your hands than is absolutely necessary, though," pointing to a bleeding patch about half an inch square, from which the cuticle had been recently removed. "A gentleman should consider his hands, even when he is obliged to work. Besides, in this weather there is a little danger of inflammation."

"Oh, that!" said the youngster with the fine carelessness of early manhood. "Scratches don't count in the bush. I wish my clothes would heal of themselves when they get torn. It would save poor mother's everlasting stitch, stitch, a little, and her eyes too, poor dear! Now, you go on, dad, and have your bath, and make yourself comfortable before I come in. A new magazine came by post to-day, and the last *Australasian*. Laura's got such a song too. We're going to have no end of an evening, if you'll only pull yourself together a bit. Now you won't fret about this miserable season, will you? It's bad enough, of course, but it's no use lying down to it—now, is it?"

"Right, my boy; we must all do our best, and trust in God's mercy. He has helped us hitherto. It is cowardly to despair. I thank Him that I have children whom I can be proud of, whether good or ill fortune betide."

Mr. Stamford put spurs to his horse. The leg-weary brute threw up his head gamely, and, true to his blood, made shift to cover the remaining distance from the homestead at a brisk pace. As he rode into the stable yard, a figure clad in a jersey, a pair of trousers, and a bathing towel, which turned out to be an eager lad of twelve, ran up to him.

"Give me Sindbad, father; I'm just going down to the river for a swim, and I'll give him one too. It will freshen him up. I'll scrape him up a bit of lucerne, just a taste; his chaff and corn are in the manger all ready."

"Take him, Dick; but don't stay in too long. It's getting dark, and tea will soon be ready."

The boy sprang into the saddle, and, touching the old horse with his bare heels, started off on a canter over the river meadow, now comparatively cool in the growing twilight, towards a gravelly ford in which the mountain water still ran strong and clear.

With a sigh of relief, his father walked slowly forward through the garden gate and into the broad verandah of the cottage. Dropping listlessly into a great Cingalese cane chair, he looked round with an air of exhaustion and despondency. Below him was a well-grown orchard, with rows of fruit trees, the size and spreading foliage of which showed as well great age as the fertility of the soil. The murmuring sound of the river over the rocky shallows was plainly audible. Dark-shadowed eucalypti marked its winding course. As the wearied man lay motionless on the couch, the night air from the meadow played freshly cool against his temples. Stars arose of wondrous southern brilliancy. Dark blue and cloudless, the sky was undimmed. Strange cries came from the woods. A solemn hush fell over all things. It was an hour unspeakably calm and solemn—restful to the spirit after the long, burdensome, heated day.

"Ah, me!" sighed he; "how many an evening I have enjoyed from this very spot, at this self-same hour! Is it possible that we are to be driven out even from this loved retreat?"

A sweet girlish voice suddenly awoke him from his reverie, as one of the casement windows opened, and a slight, youthful figure stood at his shoulder.

"No wonder you are ashamed, you mean old daddy! Here have mother and I been exerting ourselves this hot afternoon to provide you with a superior entertainment, quite a club dinner in its way; attired ourselves, too, in the most attractive manner—look at me, for instance—and what is our reward? Why, instead of going to dress sensibly, you sit mooning here, and everything will be spoiled."

"My darling! I am ready for my bath, I promise you; but I am tired, and perhaps a little discouraged. I have had a long day, and seen nothing to cheer me either."

"Poor old father! So have we all; so has mother, so has Hubert, so have I and Linda. But it's no use giving in, is it? Now walk off, there's a dear! You're not so very tired, unless your constitution has broken down all of a sudden. It takes a good day to knock you up, that I know. But we must all put a good face on it—mustn't we?—till we're *quite* sure that the battle's lost. The Prussians may come up yet, you know!"

He drew the girl's face over to his own, and kissed her fondly. Laura Stamford was indeed a daughter that a father might proudly look upon, that her mother might trust to be her best aid and comfort, loving in prosperity, lightsome of heart as the bird that sings at dawn, brave in adversity, and strong to suffer for those she loved.

All innocent she of the world's hard ways, its lurid lights, its dread shadows. Proud, pure, unselfish in every thought and feeling, all the strength of her nature went out in fondness for those darlings of her heart, the inmates of that cherished home, wherein they had never as yet known sorrow. The fateful passion which makes or mars all womanhood was for her as yet in the future. What prayers had ascended to Heaven that her choice might be blessed, her happiness assured!

"This is the time for action, no more contemplation," she said, with a mock heroic air; "the shower bath is filled; your evening clothes are ready in the dressing-room; mother is putting the last touch to her cap, Andiamo!"

When the family met at the tea-table—a comprehensive meal which, though not claiming the rank of dinner, furnished most of its requisites—Mr. Stamford owned that life wore a brighter prospect.

His wife and daughters in tasteful, though not ostentatious, evening attire would have graced a more brilliant entertainment. The boys, cool and fresh after their swim in the river, were happy and

cheerful. Hubert, correctly attired, and much benefited by his bath and toilette, had done justice to his manifest good looks.

The well-cooked, neatly served meal, with the aid of a few glasses of sound Australian Reisling, was highly restorative. All these permissible palliatives tended to recreate tone and allay nervous depression. “The banker’s letter notwithstanding, things might not be so very bad,” the squatter thought. He would go to town. He might make other arrangements. It might even rain. If the worst came to the worst, he might be able to change his account. If things altered for the better, there was no use desponding. If, again, all were lost, it were better to confront fate boldly.

“Shall I pull through, after all?” said Mr. Stamford to himself, for the fiftieth time, as he looked over the morning papers at Batty’s Hotel, about a week after the occurrences lately referred to. In a mechanical way, his eyes and a subsection of his brain provided him with the information that, in spite of his misfortunes, the progress of Australian civilisation went on pretty much as usual. Floods in one colony, fires in another. The Messageries steamer *Caledonien* just in. The *Carthage* (P. and O.) just sailed with an aristocratic passenger list. Burglars cleverly captured. Larrikins difficult of extinction. The wheat crop fair, maize only so-so. These important items were registered in the brooding man’s duplex-acting brain after a fashion. But in one corner of that mysterious storehouse, printing machine, signal-station, whatnot, *one thought* was steadily repeating itself with bell-like regularity. “What if the bank’s ultimatum is, no further advance, no further advance, no further ad—-”

After breakfast, sadly resolved, he wended his way to the palace of finance, with the potentate of which he was to undergo so momentous an interview.

Heart-sick and apprehensive as he was, he could not avoid noting with quick appreciation the sights and sounds of civilisation which pressed themselves on his senses as he walked in a leisurely manner towards the Bank of New Guinea. “What wonders and miracles daily pass before one’s eyes in a city,” he said to himself, “when one has been as long away from town as I have! What a gallery of studies to a man, after a quiet bush life, is comprised in the everyday life of a large city! What processions of humanity—what light and colour! What models of art, strength, industry! What endless romances in the faces of the very men and women that pass and repass so ceaselessly! Strange and how wonderful is all this! Glorious, too, the ocean breath that fans the pale faces of the city dwellers! What would I not give for a month’s leisure and a quiet heart in which to enjoy it all!”

The solemn chime of a turret clock struck ten. It aroused Stamford to a sense of the beginning of the commercial day, and his urgent necessity to face the enemy, whose outposts were so dangerously near his fortress.

The ponderously ornate outer door of the Bank of New Guinea had but just swung open as he passed in, preceding but by a second a portly, silk-coated personage, apparently equally anxious for an early interview. He looked disappointed as he saw Stamford make his way to the manager’s room.

For one moment he hesitated, then said: “If your business is not important, sir, perhaps you won’t mind my going in first?”

“I’m sorry to say it *is* important,” he replied, with his customary frankness; “but I will promise you not to take up a minute more of Mr. Merton’s valuable time than I can help.”

The capitalist bowed gravely as Harold Stamford passed into the fateful reception-room, of which the very air seemed to him to be full of impalpable tragedies.

The manager’s manner was pleasant and gentlemanlike. The weather, the state of the country, and the political situation were glanced at conversationally. There was no appearance of haste to approach the purely financial topic which lay so near the thoughts of both. Then the visitor took the initiative.

“I had your letter last week about my account, Mr. Merton. What is the bank going to do in my case? I came down on purpose to see you.”

The banker’s face became grave. It was the crossing of swords, *en garde* as it were. And the financial duel began.

“I trust, Mr. Stamford, that we shall be able to make satisfactory arrangements. You are an old constituent, and one in whom the bank has reposed the fullest confidence; but,” here the banker pushed up his hair, and his face assumed an altered expression, “the directors have drawn my attention to the state of your account, and I feel called upon to speak decidedly. It must be reduced.”

“But how am I to reduce it? You hold all my securities. It is idle to talk thus; pardon me if I am a little brusque, but I must sell Windāhgil—sell the old place, and clear out without a penny if I do not get time—a few months of time—from the bank! You know as well as I do that it is impossible to dispose of stations now at a reasonable price. Why, you can hardly get the value of the sheep! Look at Wharton’s Bundah Creek how it was given away the other day. Fifteen thousand good sheep, run all fenced, good brick house, frontage to a navigable river. What did it bring? Six and threepence a head. Six and threepence! With everything given in, even to his furniture, poor devil! Why, the ewe cost him twelve shillings, five years before. Sale! It was a murder, a mockery! And is Windāhgil to go like that, after all my hard work? Am I and my children to be turned out penniless because the bank refuses me another year’s grace? The seasons are just as sure to change as we are to have a new moon next month. I have always paid up the interest and part of the principal regularly, have I not? I have lived upon so little too! My poor wife and children for these last long years have been so

patient! Is there no mercy, not even ordinary consideration to be shown me?"

"My dear Mr. Stamford," said the manager kindly, "do not permit yourself to be excited prematurely. Whatever happens you have my fullest sympathy. If any one receives consideration from the bank, you will do so. You have done everything that an energetic, honourable man could have done. I wish I could say the same of all our constituents. But the seasons have been against you, and you must understand that, although personally I would run any fair mercantile risk for your sake, even to the extent of straining my relations with the directors, I have not the power; I must obey orders, and these are precise. If a certain policy is decided upon by those who guide the affairs of this company, I must simply carry out instructions. Yours is a hard case, a *very* hard case; but you are not alone, I can tell you in confidence."

"Is there nothing I can do?" pleaded the ruined man, instinctively beholding the last plank slipping from beneath his feet.

"Don't give in yet," said Merton kindly. "Get one of these newly-started Mortgage and Agency Companies to take up your account. They have been organised chiefly, I am informed, with a view to get a share of the pastoral loan business, which is now assuming such gigantic proportions. They are enabled to make easier terms than we can afford to do; though, after all, this station pawn business is not legitimate banking. If you have any friend who would join in the security it would, perhaps, smooth the way."

"I will try," said Stamford, a ray of hope, slender but still definite, illumining the darkness of his soul. "There may be a chance, and I thank you, Mr. Merton, for the suggestion, and your wish to aid me. Good morning!" He took his hat and passed through the waiting-room, somewhat sternly regarded by the capitalist, who promptly arose as the inner door opened. But Harold Stamford heeded him not, and threading the thronged atrium, re-entered once more the city pageant, novel and attractive to him in spite of his misery. To-day he mechanically took the seaward direction, walking far and fast until he found himself among the smaller shops and unmistakable "waterside characters" of Lower George Street. Here he remembered that there were stone stairs at which, in his boyhood's days, he had so often watched the boats return or depart on their tiny voyages. A low stone wall defended the street on that side, while permitting a view of the buildings and operations of a wharf. Beyond lay the harbour alive with sail and steam. In his face blew freshly the salt odours of the deep, the murmuring voice of the sea wave was in his ears, the magic of the ocean stole once more into his being.

In his youth he had delighted in boating, and many a day of careless, unclouded joy could he recall, passed amid the very scenes and sounds that now lay around him. Long, happy days spent in fishing when the fair wind carried the boy sailors far away through the outer bays or even through the grand portals where the sandstone pillars have borne the fret of the South Pacific deep for uncounted centuries. The long beat back against the wind, the joyous return, the pleasant evening, the dreamless slumber. He remembered it all. What a heaven of bliss, had he but known it; and what an inferno of debt, ruin, and despair seemed yawning before him now!

He leaned over the old stone wall and watched mechanically the shadow of a passing squall deepen the colour of the blue waters of the bay. After a while, his spirits rose insensibly. He even took comfort from the fact that after the sudden tempest had brooded ominously over the darkening water, the clouds suddenly opened—the blue sky spread itself like an azure mantle over the rejoicing firmament—the golden sun reappeared, and Nature assumed the smile that is rarely far from her brow in the bright lands of the South.

"I may have another chance yet," Stamford said to himself. "Why should I despair? Many a man now overladen with wealth has passed into a bank on such an errand as mine, uncertain whether he should return (financially) alive. Are not there Hobson, Walters, Adamson—ever so many others—who have gone through that fiery trial? I must fight the battle to the end. My Waterloo is not yet lost. 'The Prussians may come up,' as darling Laura said."

Although receiving the advice of Mr. Merton, whom he personally knew and respected, mainly in good faith, he was sufficiently experienced in the ways of the world to mingle distrust with his expectations. It was not such an unknown thing with bankers to "shunt" a doubtful or unprofitable constituent upon a less wary student of finance. Might it not be so in this case? Or would not the manager of the agency company indicated regard him in that light? How hard it was to decide! However, he would try his fortune. He could do himself no more harm.

So he turned wearily from the dancing waters and the breezy bay, and retracing his steps through the crowded thoroughfare, sought the imposing freestone mansion in which were located the offices of the Austral Agency Company.

"How these money-changing establishments house themselves!" he said. "And we borrowers pay for it with our heart's blood," he added, bitterly. "Here goes, however!"

He was not doomed on this occasion to any lingering preparatory torture, for in that light he had come to regard all ante-chamber detentions. He accepted it as a good omen that he was informed on sending in his card, that Mr. Barrington Hope was disengaged, and would be found in his private room.

CHAPTER II

Mr. Stamford was at once strongly prepossessed in favour of the man before whom he had come prepared to make a full statement of his affairs, and to request—to all but implore—temporary accommodation. Bah! how bald a sound it had! How unpleasant the formula! And yet Harold Stamford knew that the security was sound, the interest and principal nearly as certain to be paid in full as anything can be in this uncertain world of ours. Still, such was the condition of the money market that he could not help feeling like a beggar. His pride rebelled against the attitude which he felt forced to take. Nevertheless, for the sake of the sweet, careworn face at home, the tender flowerets he loved so well, he braced himself for the ordeal.

Mr. Barrington Hope’s appearance, not less than his manner, was reassuring. A tall, commanding figure of the true Anglo-Saxon type, his was a countenance in which opposing qualities seemed struggling for the mastery.

In the glint of the grey eyes, in the sympathetic smile, in the deep, soft voice there was a wealth of generosity, while the firm mouth and strongly set jaw betokened a sternness of purpose which boded ill for the adversary in any of the modern forms of the duello—personal or otherwise.

“Mr. Stamford,” he said, “I have heard your name mentioned by friends. What can I do for you? But if it be not a waste of time in your case—though you squatters are not so hard-worked in town as we slaves of the desk—we might as well lunch first, if you will give me the pleasure of your company at the Excelsior. What do you say?”

Mr. Stamford, in his misery, had taken scant heed of the hours. He was astonished to find that the morning had fled. He felt minded to decline, but in the kindly face of his possible entertainer he saw the marks of continuous mental exertion, mingled with the easily-recognised imprints of anxious responsibility. A feeling of sadness came over him, as he looked again—of pity for the ceaseless toil to which it seemed hard that a man in the flower of his prime should be doomed—that unending mental grind, of which he, in common with most men who have lived away from cities, had so cordial an abhorrence. “Poor fellow!” he said to himself, “he is not more than ten years older than Hubert, and yet what an eternity of thought seems engraven in his face. I should be sorry to see them change places, poor as we are, and may be.” He thought this in the moment which he passed in fixing his eyes on the countenance of Barrington Hope. What he said, was: “I shall have much pleasure; I really did not know it was so late. My time in town, however, is scarcely so valuable as yours. So we may as well devote half an hour to the repairing of the tissue.”

Mr. Stamford’s wanderings in Lower George Street and the unfamiliar surroundings of the metropolis had so far overcome the poignancy of his woe as to provide him with a reasonable appetite. The *cuisine* of the Excelsior, and the flavour of a bottle of extremely sound Dalwood claret, did not appeal to his senses in vain. The well-cooked, well-served repast concluded, he felt like another man; and though distrusting his present sensations as being artificially rose-coloured, he yet regarded the possibility of life more hopefully.

“It has done me good,” he said in his heart; “and it can’t have done him any harm. I feel better able to stand up to hard Fate and her shrewd blows than before.”

They chatted pleasantly till the return to the office, when Mr. Hope hung up his hat, and apparently removed a portion of his amiability of expression at the same time. He motioned his visitor to a chair, produced a box of cigars, which, with a grotesque mediæval matchbox, he pushed towards him. Lighting one for himself, he leaned back in his chair and said “Now then for business!”

The squatter offered a tabulated statement, originally prepared for the bank, setting forth the exact number of the livestock on Windāhgil, their sexes and ages, the position and area of the run, the number of acres bought, controlled or secured; the amount of debt for which the bank held mortgage, the probable value of the whole property at current rates. Of all of which particulars Mr. Hope took heed closely and carefully. Mr. Stamford became suddenly silent, and indeed broke down at one stage of the affair, in which he was describing the value of the improvements, and mentioning a comfortable cottage, standing amid a well-grown orchard on the bank of a river, with out-buildings of a superior nature grouped around.

Then Mr. Hope interposed. “You propose to me to take up your account, which you will remove from the Bank of New Guinea. You are aware that there is considerable risk.”

(“Hang it!” Mr. Stamford told himself; “I have heard that surely before. I know what you are going to say now. But why do you all, you financiers, like to keep an unlucky devil so on the tenter-hooks?”)

Mr. Hope went on quietly and rather sonorously. “Yes! there has been a large amount of forced realisation going on of late. Banks are tightening fast. The rainfall of the interior has been exceptionally bad. I think it probable that the Bank of New Guinea has none too good an opinion of your account. But I always back my own theory in finance. I have great reason to believe, Mr. Stamford, that heavy rain will fall within the next month or two. I have watched the weather signs carefully of late years. I am taking—during this season, at any rate—a strong lead in wool and stock, which I expect to rise. Everything is extremely low at present—ruinously so, the season disastrously dry. But from these very dry seasons I foretell a change which must be for the better. I have much pleasure in stating that the Austral Agency Company will take up your account, Mr. Stamford, and carry you on for two years at the same rate of interest you have been paying.”

Mr. Stamford made a commencement of thanking him, or at least of expressing his entire satisfaction with the new arrangement; but, curious to relate, he could not speak. The mental strain

had been too great. The uncertain footing to which he had so long been clinging between ruin and comparative safety had rendered his brain dizzy.

He had been afraid to picture the next scene of the tragedy, when the fatal fiat of the Bank Autocrat should have gone forth,—the wrench of parting from the dear old place they had all loved so well. The unpretending, but still commodious dwelling to which he had brought his fond, true wife, while yet a young mother. The garden in which they had planted so many a tree, so many a flower together. The unchecked freedom of station life, with its general tone of abundance and liberality. All these surroundings and comforts were to be exchanged—if things were not arranged—for what? For a small house in town, for a lower—how much lower!—standard of life and society, perhaps even for poverty and privation, which it would cut him to the heart to see shared by those patient exiles from their pastoral Eden.

When Mr. Stamford had sufficiently recovered himself he thanked Mr. Hope with somewhat unaccustomed fervour, for he was an undemonstrative man, reserved as to his deeper feelings. But the manager of the Austral Agency Company would not accept thanks. “It may wear the appearance of a kindness, but it is not so in reality,” he said. “Do not mistake me. It is a hard thing to say, but if it seemed such to me, it would be my duty not to do it. It is the merest matter of calculation. I am glad, of course, if it falls in with your convenience.”

Here he looked kindly at his client—for such he had become—as if he fain would have convinced him of his stern utilitarian temperament. But, as he had remarked before, Mr. Hope’s eyes and his sentiments contradicted one another.

“You have saved my home, the valued outcome of many a year’s hard work—it may be my life also. That is all. And I’m not to thank you? Do not talk in so cold-blooded a manner; I cannot bear it.”

“My dear sir,” said Mr. Hope, with calm, half-pitying expression, “I am afraid you are not a particularly good man of business. It is as unfair to praise me now for ‘carrying you on’ for another year or two, as it will be to blame me for selling you up some fine day, if I am compelled to do so.”

“Anyhow, it is a reprieve from execution. When shall I call again?”

“To-morrow morning, before twelve, let us say. I shall want you to sign a mortgage—a necessary evil; and if you bring me an exact amount of your indebtedness to the Bank of New Guinea, I will give you a cheque for it.”

“A cheque for it!” How magnificent was the sound. Mr. Stamford had drawn some tolerably large cheques in his time, which had been duly honoured, but of late years the cheque-drawing method had fallen much into abeyance.

Nevertheless, he felt like Aladdin, suddenly gifted with the wonderful lamp. The sense of security and the guarantee of funds, for even their moderate and necessary expenses, appeared to open to him vistas of wealth and power verging on Oriental luxury.

He lost no time; indeed he just managed to gain his bank before its enormous embossed outer door was closed, when he marched into the manager’s room with so radiant a countenance that the experienced centurion of finance saw plainly what had happened.

“Don’t trouble yourself to speak,” he said. “It’s all written on your forehead. We bankers can decipher hieroglyphs invisible to other men. ‘Want my account made up—securities ready to be delivered—release—cheque for amount in full.’ Who is the reckless *entrepreneur*?”

“The Austral Agency Company,” he replied, feeling rather cooled down by this very accurate mind-reading; “but you seem to know so much, you ought to know that too.”

“My dear fellow, I congratulate you!” Mr. Merton said, getting up and shaking him warmly by the hand. “I beg your pardon; but really, any child could see that you had been successful; and I began to think that it must have been one of Barrington Hope’s long shots. A very fine fellow, young but talented; in finance operates boldly. I don’t say he’s wrong, mind you, but rather bold. Everything will be ready for you to-morrow morning. Look in just before ten—by the private door.”

Mr. Stamford did look in. How many times had he walked to those same bank doors with an aching heart, in which the dull throb of conscious care was rarely stilled! Many times had he quitted that building with a sense of temporary relief; many times with a more acutely heightened sense of misery, and a conviction that Fate had done her worst. But never, perhaps, before had he passed those fateful portals with so marked a sense of independence and freedom as on the present occasion.

He had cast away the burden of care, at any rate for two years—two whole years! It was an eternity in his present state of overwrought feeling. He felt like a man who in old days had been bound on the rack—had counted the dread contrivances for tearing muscles and straining sinews—who had endured the first preliminary wrench, and then, at a word, was suddenly loosed.

Such was now his joyous relief from inward agony, from the internal throbs which rend the heart and strain to bursting the wondrous tissue which connects soul and sense. The man who had decreed all this was to him a king—nay, as a god. And in his prayer that night, after he had entreated humbly for the welfare of wife and children in his absence, and for his own safe return to their love and tenderness, Barrington Hope came after those beloved names, included in a petition for mercy at the hands of the All-wise.

It was not a long business that clearing of scores with the Bank of New Guinea under these exceptional circumstances. Such and such was the debit balance, a sufficiently grave one in a season when it had not rained, “to signify,” for about three years, when stock was unsalable, when

money was unprecedentedly tight, but not, perhaps amounting to more than one-third of the real value of the property. Here were the mortgages. One secured upon the freehold, the other upon stock and station, furniture and effects.

“Yes!” admitted Mr. Stamford, looking over it. “It is a comprehensive document; it includes everything on the place—the house and all that therein is, every hoof of stock, hacks and harness horses, saddles and bridles—only excepting the clothes on our backs. Good God! if we had lost all! And who knows whether we may not have to give them up yet.”

“My dear Stamford,” said the banker, “you’re almost too sentimental to be a squatter, though I grant you it requires a man of no ordinary power of imagination to look forward from your dusty pastures and dying sheep (as I am informed) to a season of waving grass and fat stock. Why only this morning, I see that on Modlah, North Queensland, they have lost eighty thousand sheep already!”

“That means they’ll have a flood in three months,” answered Stamford, forcing a laugh. “We *must* have rain. This awfully sultry weather is sure to bring it on sooner or later.”

“Ah! but when?” said Mr. Merton, corrugating his brow, as he mentally ran over the list of heavily-weighted station accounts to which this simple natural phenomenon would make so stupendous a difference. “If you or I could tell whether it would fall in torrents this year or next, it would be like —--”

“Like spotting the winner of the Melbourne Cup before the odds began to shorten—eh, Merton? Good Heavens! to think I feel in a mood to jest with my banker. That dread functionary! What is it Lever says—that quarrelling with your wife is like boxing with your doctor, who knows where to plant the blow that would, maybe, be the death of you? Such is your banker’s fatal strength.”

“I envy you your recovered spirits, my dear fellow,” said the over-worked man of figures, with a weary smile, glancing towards a pile of papers on his table. “Perhaps things will turn out well for you and all of us after all. You are not the only one, believe me, whose fate has been trembling in the balance. You don’t think it’s too pleasant for us either, do you? Well, I’ll send young Backwater down to Barrington Hope with these documents. You can go with him, and he will give a receipt for the cheque. For the rest, my congratulations and best wishes.” He pressed an electric knob, the door opened, a clerk looked in. “Tell Mr. Overdue I am at liberty now. Good bye, Stamford, and God bless you!”

On the previous day Mr. Stamford had betaken himself to his hotel immediately after quitting Mr. Barrington Hope’s office, and poured out his soul with fullest unreserve in a long letter to his wife, in which he had informed her of the great and glorious news, and with his usual sanguine disposition to improve on each temporary ray of sunshine, had predicted wonders in the future.

“What my present feelings are, even you, my darling Linda—sharer that you have ever been in every thought of my heart—can hardly realise. I know that you will say that only the present pressure is removed. The misfortune we have all so long, so sadly dreaded, which involves the loss of our dear old home, the poverty of our children, and woe unutterable for ourselves, may yet be slowly advancing on us. You hope I will be prudent, and take nothing for granted until it shall have been proved. I am not to relax even the smallest endeavour to right ourselves, or suffer myself to be led into any fresh expense, no matter how bright, or rather (pastoral joke of the period) how cloudy, the present outlook, till rain comes—until rains comes; even then to remember that there is lost ground to recover, much headway to make up.

“My dearest, I am as sure that you have got all these warning voices ready to put into your letter as if you phonographed them, and I recognised the low, sweet tones which have ever been for me so instinct with love and wisdom. But I feel that, on this present occasion—(I hear you interpose, ‘My dearest Harold, how often have you said so before!’)—there is no need for any extraordinary prudence. I am confident that the season will change, or that something advantageous will happen long before this new advance is likely to be called in. Mr. Hope assures me that no sudden demand will at any time be made, that all reasonable time will be given; that if the interest be but regularly paid, the Company is in a position, from their control of English capital, to give better terms than any colonial institution of the same nature. I see you shake your wise, distrustful head. My dearest, you women, who are said to be gifted with so much imagination in many ways, possess but little in matters of business. I have often told you so. This time I hope to convince you of the superior forecast of our sex.

“And now give my love to our darlings. Tell them I shall give practical expression to my fondness for them for this once, only this once; really, I must be a little extravagant. I shall probably stay down here for another week or ten days.

“Now that I am in town I may just as well enjoy myself a little, and get up a reserve fund of health and strength for future emergencies. I don’t complain, as you know, but I think I shall be all the better for another week’s sea air. I met my cousin, Bob Grandison, in the street to-day. Kind as usual, though he studiously avoided all allusion to business; wanted me to stay at Chatsworth House for a few days. I wouldn’t do that. I don’t care for Mrs. Grandison sufficiently; but I am going to a swell dinner there on Friday. And now, dearest, yours ever and always, fondly, lovingly, HAROLD STAMFORD.”

Having sent off this characteristic epistle, Mr. Stamford felt as easy in his mind as if he had provided his family with everything they could possibly want for a year. He was partially endowed with that Sheridanesque temperament which dismissed renewed acceptances as liabilities discharged, and viewed all debentures as debts of the future which a kindly Providence might be safely trusted to find means to pay.

Capable of extraordinary effort under pressure or the excitement of emergency; personally economical; temperate, and, above all, benevolent of intention towards every living creature, it must be admitted that Harold Stamford was instinctively prone frankly to enjoy the present and to take the future on trust.

Much of this joyous confidence had been “knocked out of him”—as he familiarly phrased it—by the austere course of events. He had for five years worked harder than any of his own servants. He had contented himself with but the bare necessaries of food and clothing. Nothing had been purchased that could in any way be done without by that much-enduring, conscientious household, the members of which had made high resolve to do battle with remorseless Nature and unmerited misfortune.

And well indeed had all fought, all endured, during the long, dreary, dusty summers—the cloudless, mocking, rainless winters of past years. The family garrison had stood to their guns; had not given back an inch. The men had toiled and ridden, watched and worked, from earliest dawn to the still, starlit depths of many a midnight. The tenderly-nurtured mother and her fair, proud girls had cooked the dinners, washed the clothes, faithfully performed all, even the humblest, household work, with weary hands and tired eyes, for weeks and months together. Still, through all the uncongenial drudgery, their hearts had been firm with hope and the pride of fulfilled duty. And now Harold Stamford told himself that the enemy was in retreat, that the siege was about to be raised.

CHAPTER III

Mr. Stamford, having fulfilled his home duties temporarily in this liberal and satisfactory manner, felt himself at liberty to enter upon justifiable recreations with an easy conscience. He was by no means a person of luxurious tastes. But there had been always certain dainty meats, intellectually speaking, which his soul loved. These are rarely to be met with save in large cities. It had been an abiding regret with this man that his narrow circumstances had shut him out from the inner circles of art and literature. Now, he promised himself, at any rate, a taste of these long-forbidden repasts.

On this memorable afternoon he betook himself only to the sea-marge, where he lay dreaming in the shade of an overhanging fig-tree during the closing hours of day. What an unutterable luxury was it to his desert-worn soul thus to repose with the rhythmic roll of the surges in his ear—before his half-shut eyes the wondrous, ever-changing magic mirror of the ocean!

"What an alteration," thought he, "had a single day wrought in his destiny! What a different person was he from the care-burdened, desponding man who had seen no possible outlet from the path of sorrow and disaster, at the end of which lay the grisly form of Ruin, like some fell monster watching for prey. Now the airs of Paradise were around him. The fresh salt odours of the deep, the whispering breezes which fanned his cheek, which cooled his throbbing brow, how strangely contrasted were these surroundings with the shrivelled, arid waste, the burning sun-blast, the endless monotony of pale-hued woodland, which he had so lately quitted!"

As the low sun fell beneath the horizon verge, he watched the golden wavelet and the crimson sky mingle in one supreme colour study. He heard the night wind come moaning up from misty unknown seas of the farthest South, where the hungry billow lay hushed to rest in eternal ice-fields, where dwelt the mystery and dread of polar wastes.

Then, with the darkening eve, the pageant glided into the vestibule of night and Mr. Stamford somewhat hastily arose, bethinking himself of the dining hour at Chatsworth House. He had not overmuch time to spare, but a few minutes before the appointed hour his cab deposited him beside the Pompeian mosaic which composed the floor of the portico. A wide, cool hall, gay with encaustic tiles, received him, thence to be ushered by the accurately-costumed footman into the drawing-room, already fairly astir with the expected company.

He was not an unfamiliar guest, but his present temper inclined him to consider more closely the curious inequalities of life—the various modes in which persons, not widely differing in tastes and aspirations, are socially encircled. What a contrast was there between the abounding luxury here heaped up, pressed down and running over, and the homely surroundings of his own home, from which nevertheless the danger of departure had well-nigh driven him mad. The parquet floors, the glittering treasures of the overmantels, the lounges, the dado, the friezes, the rare china, the plaques, the antique and the modern collections, each a study, the cost of which would have gone nigh to buy halt Windāhgil.

When the hostess was informed by the imposing butler that dinner was served, and the guests filed into the dining-room, Mr. Stamford was nearly as much astonished by the magnificence of the repast and the concomitants thereof as if he had for the first time in his life beheld such splendours. In earlier days, now almost forgotten, such repasts had been to him sufficiently familiar. But these latter seasons of drought and despair had wholly, or in great part, excluded all thought of the pomps and vanities of life. So he smiled to himself, as he took the arm of Miss Crewit the *passée* society damsel to whom, by the fiat of Mrs. Grandison, he had been allotted, to find that his first thought was of startled surprise—his second of the habitudes which came to him as by second nature, and a conviction that he must have witnessed such presentments in a former state of existence.

All was very splendid, beyond denial. What was otherwise was æsthetically rare and almost beyond price. Antique carved furniture, mediæval royal relics, a sideboard which looked like an Egyptian sarcophagus, contrasted effectively with the massiveness of the plate, the glory of the glass, the triumph of the matchless Sèvres dinner-service. In perfect keeping was the quiet assiduity of the attendants, the quality of the iced wines, the perfection and finish of the whole entertainment.

"Rather a contrast to the tea-table at Windāhgil!" Harold Stamford said to himself; "not but what I should have been able to do things like this if I could have held on to those Kilbride blocks for another year. Only another year!" and he sighed involuntarily. "It is very fine in its way, though I should be sorry to have to go through this ordeal every evening. Grandison doesn't look too happy making conversation with that deaf old dowager on his right. He was brighter looking in the old working-time, when he used to drop in at Din Din, where we had a glass of whisky before bedtime with a smoke and a good talk afterwards. Bob certainly read more or less then. He begins to look puffy too; he doesn't see much of the library now, I'm afraid, except to snore in it."

Here his fair neighbour, who had finished her soup and sipped her sherry, began to hint an assertion of social rights.

"Don't you think dear Josie looks a little pale and thin, though she is exquisitely dressed as usual? But I always say no girls can stand the ceaseless excitement, the wild racketing of a Sydney season. Can they, now?"

"To my eye she looks very nice, pale if you like; but you don't expect roses and lilies with the thermometer at 80° for half the year, except when it's at 100°."

"Well, perhaps you're right; but it isn't the climate altogether in her case, I should say. It's the

fearfully exciting life girls of her *monde* seem to lead nowadays. It’s that which brings on the wrinkles. You notice her face when she turns to the light.”

“Are women worse than they used to be, do you think; or is Josie more dissipated than the rest of her age and sex?” queried Stamford.

“I don’t know that, though they do say that she is the fastest of a very fast set; and between you and me, there have been some rather queer stories about her, not that I believe a word of them. But the girls nowadays do go such awful lengths; they say and do such things, you don’t know *what* to believe.”

“Ah! well, she’s young and happy, I suppose, and makes the most of her opportunities of enjoyment. My old friend, Bob Grandison, has been lucky, and his family seem to have everything they can possibly want.”

“Everything, indeed, and more besides. (Chablis, if you please!) Then I suppose you knew Mr. Grandison when he was not quite so well off? They say he got into society rather suddenly; but I’m afraid it doesn’t do the young people quite as much good as it might. There’s the eldest son, Carlo, as they call him—he used to be Charlie when I first knew them.”

“Why, what about him? Nothing wrong, is there? He seems a fine lad.”

“Well, nothing wrong yet. Not yet; oh, no! Only he spends half his time at the club, playing billiards from morning till night, and he’s always going about with that horrid gambling Captain Maelstrom. They do say—but you won’t let it go further—that he was one of that party at loo when young Weener lost five thousand pounds, and such a scandal arose out of it.”

“Good heavens! You horrify me! A mere boy like that! It can’t be true; surely not.”

“I heard it on good authority, I assure you, and other stories too, which I can’t repeat—really too shocking to talk about. See how *empresse* he is with that Mrs. Loreleigh! What men see in that women I really can’t think.”

“My old friend had both sense and right feeling once upon a time,” said Stamford. “He can’t be so weak as to allow all this.”

“He does all he can, poor old gentleman; but Mrs. Grandison is so absurdly vain about Carlo’s good looks, and the fine friends he goes about with, that she can’t see any danger. Lord Edgar Wildgrave and that Sir Harry Falconer who was here last year (you know they do say that Josie broke her heart about Lord Edgar, and that makes her so reckless). But I know his father is very uneasy about him, and well he may be. I’m afraid Ned bids fair to follow in his brother’s footsteps. Thanks—I will take an olive.”

“What a wretched state of things!” groaned Mr. Stamford, almost audibly. “I must hope, for the sake of my friend’s family, that matters may be exaggerated.”

“I wish they are, with all my heart,” said the candid friend. “They always have such delicious fruit here, haven’t they? I must say they do things well at Chatsworth House. I always enjoy a dinner here. I see Mrs. Grandison making a move. Thanks!”

And so Miss Crewitt followed the retreating file of ladies that, headed by Mrs. Grandison’s stately form, quitted the dining-room, leaving Mr. Stamford much disordered with the unpleasant nature of the ideas which he had perforce absorbed with his dinner. He could not forgive his late neighbour for introducing them into his system.

“Confounded, venomous, ungrateful cat!” he said in his righteous wrath. “How she enjoyed every mouthful of her dinner, pouring out malice and all uncharitableness the while! Serves Mrs. Grandison right, all the same. If she’d picked me out a nice girl, or a good motherly dame, I should not have heard all this scandal about her household. But what a frightful pity it seems! I must talk to Grandison about it.”

At this stage Mr. Stamford was aroused by his host’s voice. “Why, Harold, old man, where have you got to? Close up, now the women are gone. Bring your chair next to Carlo.”

He walked up as desired, the other guests having concentrated themselves in position nearer the head of the table, and found himself next to the heir of the house, Mr. Carlo Grandison. That young gentleman, whom he had observed during dinner talking with earnestness to a lady no longer young, but still handsome and interesting, in spite of Miss Crewitt’s acidulated denial of the fact, did not trouble himself to be over agreeable to his father’s old friend.

He devoted himself, however, with considerable assiduity to the decanters as they passed, and drank more wine in half an hour than Mr. Stamford had ever known Hubert to consume in a month.

He did talk after a while, but his conversation was mainly about the last Melbourne Cup, upon which he admitted that he had wagered heavily, and “dropped in for,” to use his own expression, “a beastly facer.”

“Was not that imprudent?” asked Mr. Stamford, as he looked sadly at the young man’s flushed face. “Don’t you think it a pity to lose more than you can afford?”

“Oh! the governor had to stand the racket, of course,” he said, filling his glass; “and a dashed row he made about it—very bad form, I told him—just as if a thousand or two mattered to him. Do you know what we stood to win?”

“Well, but you didn’t win!”

“I suppose in the bush, Mr. Stamford, you don’t do much in that way,” answered the young man

with aristocratic hauteur, “but Maelstrom and I, Sir Harry Falconer and another fellow, whose name I won’t mention, would have pulled off forty-five thousand if that infernal First Robber hadn’t gone wrong the very day of the race. Think of that! He was poisoned, I believe. If I had my will I’d hang every blessed bookmaker in the whole colony. Never mind, I’ll land them next Melbourne Spring.”

“If there were no young gentlemen who backed the favourite, there would be fewer bookmakers,” replied Stamford, peaceably. “But don’t you think it a waste of time devoting so much of it to horseracing?”

“What can a fellow do? There’s coursing, to be sure, and they’re getting up a trotting match. I make believe to do a little work in the governor’s office, you know, but I’m dead beat to get through the day as it is.”

“Try a year in the bush, my dear boy. You could soon learn to manage one of your father’s stations. It would be a healthy change from town life.”

“By Jove! It *would* be a change indeed! Ha, ha! ‘Right you are, says Moses.’ But I stayed at Banyule one shearing, and I give you my word I was that sick of it all that I should have suicided if I had not been let come to town. The same everlasting grind—sheep, supers, and saltbush; rides, drives, wire fences, dams, dampers, and dingoes—day after day. At night it was worse—not a blessed thing to amuse yourself with. I used to play draughts with the book-keeper.”

“But you could surely read! Books are easy to get up, and there are always neighbours.”

“I couldn’t stand reading out there, anyhow; the books we had were all dry stuff, and the neighbours were such a deuced slow lot. Things are not too lively in Sydney, but it’s heaven compared with the bush. I want the governor to let me go to Europe. I should fancy Paris for a year or so. Take another glass of this Madeira; it’s not an everyday wine. No! Then I will, as I see the governor’s toddlin’.”

In the drawing-room matters were in a general way more satisfactory. A lady with a voice apparently borrowed from the angelic choir was singing when they entered, and Mr. Stamford, passionately fond of music, moved near the grand piano to listen. The guests disposed themselves *au plaisir*.

Master Carlo, singling out Mrs. Loreleigh, devoted himself to her for the rest of the evening, with perfect indifference to the claims of the other lady guests.

“What a lovely voice Mrs. Thrushton has!” said his hostess to Stamford, as soon as the notes of enchantment came to an end.

“Lovely indeed!” echoed he; “it is long since I have heard such a song, if ever—though my daughter Laura has a voice worth listening to. But will not Miss Grandison sing?” he said after a decent interval.

“Josie has been well taught, and few girls sing better when she likes,” said her mother with a half sigh; “but she is so capricious that I can’t always get her to perform for us. She has got into an argument with Count Zamoreski, that handsome young Pole you see across the room, and she says she’s not coming away to amuse a lot of stupid people. Josie is quite a character, I assure you, and really the girls are so dreadfully self-willed nowadays, that there is no doing anything with them. But you must miss society so much in the bush! Don’t you? There are very few nice men to be found there, I have heard.”

“We are not so badly off as you suppose, Mrs. Grandison. People even there keep themselves informed of the world’s doings, and value art and literature. I often think the young people devote more time to mental culture than they do in town.”

“Indeed! I should hardly have supposed so. They can get masters so easily in town, and then again the young folks have such chances of meeting the best strangers—people of rank, for instance, and so on—that they never can dream of even *seeing*, away from town. Mr. Grandison wanted me to go into the bush when the children were young; and indeed one of his stations, Banyule, was a charming place, but I never would hear of it.”

“A town life fulfilled all your expectations, I conclude.”

“Yes, really, I think so; very nearly, that is to say. Josie has such ease of manner and is so thoroughly at home with people in every rank of life that I feel certain she will make her mark some day.”

“And your son Carlo?”

“Well, I don’t mind telling you, as an old friend, Mr. Stamford, that Mr. Grandison is uneasy about him sometimes, says he won’t settle down to anything, and is—well not really dissipated, you know, but inclined to be fast. But I tell him that will wear off as he gets older. Boys will be boys. Besides, see what an advantage it is to him to be in the society of men like Captain Maelstrom, Sir Harry Falconer, and people of that stamp.”

“I am not so sure of that, but I trust all will come right, my dear Mrs. Grandison. It is a great responsibility that we parents undertake. There is nothing in life but care and trouble, it seems to me, in one form or another. And now, as I hear the carriages coming up, I will say good night.”

Mr. Stamford went home to his hotel, much musing on the events of the evening, nor was he able to sleep, indeed, during the early portion of the night, in consequence of the uneasiness which the unsatisfactory condition of his friend’s family caused him.

“Poor Grandison!” he said to himself. “More than once have I envied him his easy circumstances. I suppose it is impossible for a man laden with debt and crushed with poverty to avoid that sort of thing. But I shall never do so again. With all my troubles, if I thought Hubert and Laura were likely to become like those two young people as a natural consequence, I would not change places with him to-morrow. The boy, so early *blasé*, with evil knowledge of the world, tainted with the incurable vice of gambling, too fond of wine already, what has he to look forward to? What will he be in middle age? And the girl, selfish and frivolous, a woman of the world, when hardly out of her teens, scorning her mother’s wishes, owning no law but her own pleasure, looking forward but to a marriage of wealth or rank, if her own undisciplined feelings stand not in the way! Money is good, at any rate, as far as it softens the hard places of life; but if I thought that wealth would bring such a blight upon my household, would so wither the tender blossoms of hope and faith, would undermine manly endeavour and girlish graces, I would spurn it from me to-morrow. I would—-”

With which noble and sincere resolve Mr. Stamford fell asleep.

Upon awaking next morning, he was almost disposed to think that the strength of his disapproval as to the younger members of the Grandison family might only have been enthusiasm, artificially heightened by his host’s extremely good wine. “That were indeed a breach of hospitality,” he said to himself. “And after all, it is not, strictly speaking, my affair. I am grown rusty and precise, it may be, from living so monotonous a life in the bush, so far removed from the higher fashionable existence. Doubtless these things, which appear to me so dangerous and alarming, are only the everyday phenomena of a more artificial society. Let us hope for the best—that Carlo Grandison may tone down after a few years, and that Miss Josie’s frivolity may subside into mere fashionable matronhood.”

Mr. Stamford finished his breakfast with an appetite which proved either his moderation in the use of the good familiar creature over-night, or a singularly happy state of the biliary secretions. He then proceeded in a leisurely way to open his letters. Glancing at the postmark “Mooramah,” the little country town near home, and recognising Hubert’s bold, firm handwriting, he opened it, and read as follows:—

“My dear old Dad,—I have no doubt you are enjoying yourself quietly, but thoroughly, now that you have cleared off the Bank of New Guinea and got in with the Austral Agency Company. Mother says you are to give yourself all reasonable treats, and renew your youth if possible, but not to think you have the Bank of England to draw upon just yet.

“I told her you were to be trusted, and I have a piece of good news for you, which will bear a little extravagance on its back. I am very glad we were able to pay off that bank.

“They had no right to push you as they did. However, I suppose they can’t always help it. Now for the news, if some beastly telegram has not anticipated it. We have had RAIN!

“Yes, rain in large letters! What do you think of that? Forty-eight hours of steady rain! Five inches sixty points! Didn’t it come down!—cats and dogs, floods and waterspouts!

“The drought has broken up. The river is tearing down a banker. You can see the grass grow already. All bother about feed and water put safely away for a year at least. Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!

“I have sent most of the sheep out back. Dams all full, but none carried away, thank goodness!

“I got the hill paddock fence finished and the weaners all into it yesterday. Didn’t get home till midnight.

“The run like a batter pudding, soaked right down to the bed rock. We shall have more grass than we can use. Old Saville (Save-all, I call him!) would sell five thousand young sheep, mixed sexes. He wants to realise. If Mr. Barrington Hope, or whatever his name is, will stand it, they would pay to buy. Wire me if I can close, but of course I don’t expect it.

“I think I may safely treat myself to John Richard Green’s *Making of England* and Motley’s *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, so please post them. Everything looking first-rate. Laura is writing too.

“Your loving son,

Hubert Stamford.”

Next came a letter in a neat, characteristic, legible hand, not angular-feminine, which he well knew:—

“Oh! darling Dad,—We are all gone straight out of our senses with joy. We have had such blessed and beauteous rain. The windows of Heaven have indeed been opened—where else could such a lovely downpour come from?

“All our doubts and fears are cleared away. Hubert has been working himself to death, poor boy; off before daylight and never home till twelve or one in the morning. He says that we shall have the best season known for years, and that nothing can possibly hurt the grass for a whole twelvemonth. Besides, more rain is sure to come. They always say that though. Some water came through here and there, but it was a blessing that Hubert and the old splitter put the new roof over the kitchen before the drought broke up. The dear garden looks lovely, I have been sowing a few flower seeds—so fresh and beautiful it is already.

“I rode to one of the out-stations with Hubert yesterday, and we got such glorious ferns coming back. I am sorry to say dear mother is not over strong. The hot weather, and the old trouble, ‘no servants,’ have been too much for her. Do you think you could bring back a good, willing girl as cook and laundress—that would shift the hardest part of the work off our shoulders—and I think Linda and I could manage the house-work, and be thankful too? Try your best, that’s a good old dad!

"I have been reading *Middlemarch* strictly in spare time, and am getting on pretty well with my German and Italian. If you could bring up two or three books, and by all means a pretty song or two, we should have nothing left to wish for. Now that the rain has come, it seems like a new world. I intend to do great things in languages next year. How about Mrs. Carlyle's letters? From the review we saw in *The Australasian*, they must be deeply interesting. We expect you to return quite restored to your old self. Write longer letters, and I am always, [51]

"Your loving daughter,
"LAURA STAMFORD."

"So far, so good, indeed," quoth Mr. Stamford to himself. "The year has turned with a vengeance. Let me see what the *Herald's* telegrams say. Lucky I did not look at the paper. So Hubert's letter gives me first news. Ah! another letter. Handwriting unknown, formal, with the English postmark, too. No bad news, I hope. Though I can hardly imagine any news of importance from the old country, good or bad, now. Luckily, I am outside the pale of bad news for a while, thanks to Barrington Hope and this breaking up of the drought. What says the *Herald*?

"MOORAMAH.

"(From our Own Correspondent.)

"Drought broken up. Heavy, continuous rain. Six inches in forty-eight hours. Country under water. Dams full. A grand season anticipated.

"Quite right for once, 'Our Own Correspondent,' albeit too prone to pronounce the 'drought broken up' on insufficient data. But now accurately and carefully observant. I drink to him in a fresh cup of tea. [52]

"And now for the unknown correspondent. Here we have him."

Mr. Stamford carefully and slowly opened his letter, after examining all outward superscription and signs. Thus went the unaccustomed missive:—

"HAROLD STAMFORD, ESQ.,
"Windāhgil Station, Mooramah,
"New South Wales, Australia.

"LONDON, 23 Capel Court,
"*April 14, 1883*.

"SIR,—It has become our duty to announce the fact that, consequent upon the death of your cousin, Godwin Stamford, Esq., late of Stamford Park, Berkshire, you are entitled to the sum of one hundred and seventy-three thousand four hundred and sixty-nine pounds fourteen shillings and ninepence (£173,469 14*s.* 9*d.*), with interest from date, which sum now stands to your credit in the Funds.

"You are possibly aware that your cousin's only son, Mark Atheling Stamford, would have inherited the said sum, and other moneys and property, at the death of his father, had he not been unfortunately lost in his yacht, the *Walrus*, in a white squall in the Mediterranean, a few days before the date of this letter.

"In his will, the late Mr. Godwin Stamford named you, as next of kin, to be the legatee of this amount, in the case of the deceased Mark Atheling Stamford dying without issue. We have communicated with our agent, Mr. Worthington, of Phillip Street, Sydney, from whom you will be enabled to learn all necessary particulars. We shall feel honoured by your commands as to the disposal or investment of this said sum, or any part of it. All business with which you may think fit to entrust our firm shall have prompt attention.—We have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servants, [53]

"WALLINGFORD, RICHARDS & STOWE."

Mr. Stamford read the letter carefully from end to end, twice, indeed, with an unmoved countenance. He pushed it away; he walked up and down the room. Then he went into the balcony of the hotel and gazed at the people in the street. He retired to his bed-room after this, whence he did not emerge for a short space.

Returning to the table he sat calmly down, gazing at his letter, and again examining the signature, the important figures, which also had the value set forth formally in writing. Yes, there was no mistake. It was not seven thousand four hundred and sixty-nine pounds. Nothing of the kind. One hundred and seventy thousand pounds and the rest. "One hundred and seventy thousand!" He repeated the words over and over again in a calm and collected voice. Then the tears rushed to his eyes, and he laid his head on his hands and sobbed like a child. [54]

"For what did it all mean? Nothing less than this. That he was a rich man for life. That his wife, best-beloved, tender, patient, self-sacrificing as she had always been since he took her, a fresh-hearted, beautiful girl, from her father's house, where she had never known aught but the most loving care, the most elaborate comfort, would henceforth be enabled to enjoy all the old pleasures, even the luxuries of life, from which they had all been so long debarred. They

could live in Sydney or Melbourne, as it pleased them best. They could even sojourn in London or Paris, and travel on the continent of Europe.

"The girls could have all the 'advantages,' as they are called, of the best teaching, the best society, change of scene, travel.

"Great Heaven! what a vista of endless bliss seemed opening before him!"

But then, as he sat and thought, another aspect of the case, dimly, shadowy, of darker colours and stranger light, seemed to pass before him.

"Would the effect of the sudden withdrawal of all necessity for effort, all reason for self-denial, be favourable to the development of these tenderly-cultured, generous but still youthful natures?

"When the cares of this world—which up to this point had served but to elevate and ennoble—were dismissed, would 'the deceitfulness of riches' have power to choke the good seed?

55

"Would the tares multiply and flourish, overrunning the corn, and would the uprooting of them import another trouble—a difficulty which might be enlarged into a sorrow?

"Would indolence and reckless enjoyment succeed to the resolute march along the pathway of duty, to the prayerful trust in that Almighty Father who granted strength from day to day? Would the taste for simple pleasures, which now proved so satisfying, be lost irrevocably, to be succeeded, perhaps, by a dangerous craving for excitement, by satiety or indifferentism?

"What guarantee was there for this conservation of the healthful tone of body and mind when the mainsprings of all action, restraint, and self-discipline were in one hour relaxed or broken?

"Could he bear to behold the gradual degeneration which might take place, which had so manifested itself, as he had witnessed, in natures perhaps not originally inferior to their own?"

Long and anxiously did Harold Stamford ponder over these thoughts, with nearly as grave a face, as anxious a brow, as he had worn in his deepest troubles.

At length he arose with a resolved air. He left the hotel, and took his way to the office of Mr. Worthington, whom he knew well, who had been his legal adviser and the depository of all official confidences for many years past.

56

It was he who had drawn the deed by which the slender dowry of his wife, with some moderate addition of his own, had been settled upon her. He knew that he could be trusted implicitly with his present intentions; that the secret he intended to confide in him this day would be inviolably preserved.

This, then, was the resolution at which Harold Stamford had arrived. He would *not* abruptly alter the conditions of his family life; he would gradually and unostentatiously ameliorate the circumstances of the household. But he would defer to a future period the information that riches had succeeded to this dreaded and probable poverty. He would endeavour to maintain the standard of "plain living and high thinking," in which his family had been reared; he would preserve it in its integrity, as far as lay in his power until, with characters fully formed, tried, and matured, his children would in all probability be enabled to withstand the allurements of luxury, the flatteries of a facile society, the insidious temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Intent upon removing such dangers from their path in life, he felt himself warranted in using the *suppressio veri* which he meditated. And he implored the blessing of God upon his endeavours to that end.

Then, again, the station? It must stand apparently upon its own foundation. What pride and joy to Hubert's ardent nature for the next few years would it be to plot and plan, to labour and to endure, in order to compass the freedom of the beloved home from debt! Now that the rain *had* come, that the account was in good standing, he had felt so sanguine of success that it would be cruel to deprive him of the gratification he looked forward to—the privilege he so prized.

57

And what task would employ every faculty of mind and body more worthily, more nobly, than this one to which he had addressed himself! Hubert's favourite quotation occurred to him—

And how can man die better
  Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers,
  And the temples of his gods?

This he was wont to declaim when his mother, meeting him as he returned from weary rides, chilled by winter frosts, burnt black well-nigh by summer suns, had many a time and oft expostulated, telling him that he would kill himself.

The tears came into the father's eyes as he thought of these things.

"Poor Hubert! poor boy! How he has worked; how he means to work in the future! We must manage not to let him overdo things now. I daresay I shall be able to slacken the pace a little for him without his suspecting the real cause."

58

As he thought of his son, sitting Centaur-like on his favourite horse, with his head up, his throat bare, courage in his eye and manly resolution in his whole bearing—wild to do anything

that was self-sacrificing, dangerous, laborious, fully repaid by a smile from his mother, a kiss from Laura, a nod of approval from himself—he could not help contrasting him with Carlo Grandison, the product, as he surmised, of a life of ease—of a system where self-restraint had been rendered obsolete.

He thought of Laura’s patient labours, of her constancy to uncongenial tasks, of her fresh, unsullied bloom, and sweet, childlike nature.

“God forbid!” he said, “that they should ever know wealth if such a transformation is likely to take place in their character. I know what they are now. It shall be my aim to preserve them in their present innocence. Let them remain unspotted from the world. I must invent a way by which fair development and mental culture may be furnished. But as to taking them away from this humble retreat where all their natural good qualities have so grown and flourished in the healthful atmosphere of home life, it were a sin to do it. I have made up my mind.” And here Mr. Stamford almost frowned as he walked along and looked as stern as it was in his nature to do.

On arriving at Mr. Worthington’s chambers, with the precious document carefully secured within his pocket book, he found that gentleman engaged. He, however, sent in his card with a request to be admitted at his leisure upon business of importance, and received a reply to the effect that if he could remain for a quarter of an hour, the principal would be at liberty.

The time seemed not so long with a tranquil mind. The days of the torture-chamber were over.

He employed it in re-considering the points of his argument, and when the door of Mr. Worthington’s private room opened, he felt his position strengthened.

“Sorry to detain you,” said the lawyer, “but it is a rule of mine to take clients as they come, great and small. Haven’t seen you for some time, Mr. Stamford. Had rain, I hear, in your country; that means everything—everything good. What can I do for you?”

CHAPTER IV

The eminent solicitor, than whom no man in his profession held more family confidences, not to say secrets in trust, here fixed a pair of keen grey eyes, not unkindly in expression, but marvellously direct and searching, upon his visitor.

“You have had a communication with reference to the subject of this letter,” said Mr. Stamford, placing it before him.

“Ah! Wallingford, Richards and Stowe—first-class men in the profession. Now you mention it, I certainly have, and I congratulate you heartily upon it. I have heard generally about your affairs, Mr. Stamford; losses and crosses, bad seasons, and so on. It has come at the right time, hasn’t it?”

“It certainly has; but, curiously, I had managed, with the aid of the grand change of season, to do without it. Now I have at once an explanation and an uncommon request to make.”

Mr. Worthington settled himself in his chair and took a pinch of snuff. “My dear sir,” said he, “pray go on. I am in the habit of hearing uncommon requests and curious explanations every day of my life.”

“Perhaps I may surprise even you a little. In the first place, does any one know of this rather exceptional legacy which I have received, or rather to which I am entitled?”

Mr. Worthington unlocked an escritoire, opened a drawer labelled “Private,” and took from it a letter in the same handwriting as the one before them. “Here is Wallingford’s letter. It has been seen by no eye but mine. It was answered by me personally. No other living soul is aware of it.”

“I have reasons, connected with my family chiefly, for not desiring to permit my accession to a fortune, for such it is, to be known by them, or by the public generally, till, at any rate, a certain number of years has passed. Can this be done?”

“Most assuredly, I can receive the money, which will then be at your disposal. No one need be a jot the wiser.”

“That’s exactly what I want you to do for me. To invest the amount securely, and to let the interest accumulate for the present. At the same time, I may, upon notice, be compelled to draw upon it.”

“That can be easily done. The interest will be lodged in the Occidental Bank—they have no directors there, by the way—to be drawn out if required, by cheque signed by you and me or my partner at my decease—must provide for everything, you know. If you require the whole, or any part, you have but to let me know, and I can send you the firm’s written guarantee that the money will be at your credit at the bank referred to, on any given day.”

“I am not likely to require the principal, but the interest I may draw upon from time to time.”

“The arrangement can be made precisely as you desire. When you authorise us on that behalf, the principal sum can be transmitted to this colony without delay. You will be able to secure seven or eight per cent. interest upon mortgage here without risk; and, as I said before, to draw, should you require, by giving reasonable notice. The course you are about to adopt is unusual; but I presume your reasons to be adequate. It is not my business to be concerned with them further than regards their legal aspect.”

“You have made my course easy, my dear sir, and relieved me of some anxiety. I wish now to give instructions for the addition of a codicil to my will, which is in your office. That being done, our business will be over.”

This truly momentous interview was at length concluded most satisfactorily, as Mr. Stamford thought. He made his way back to his hotel in a serious but not uncheerful state of mind, reserving till the following day a last interview with Mr. Barrington Hope.

On the morrow, when he betook himself to the offices of the Austral Agency Company, he smiled as he thought with what different feelings he had made his first entrance. How agitated had been his mind with hope and fear! Scarcely daring to believe that he would receive other than the stereotyped answer to so many such requests—“Would have been happy under any other circumstances. Stock and stations unsalable. The money market in so critical a condition. The company have decided to make no further advances for the present. At another time, probably,” and so forth. He knew the formula by heart.

How fortunate for him that it had been the policy of this company, shaped by the alert and enterprising financial instinct of Barrington Hope, to entertain his proposal; to make the sorely needed advance; to float the sinking argosy; to risk loss and guarantee speculative transactions for the sake of extending the business of the company and gaining the confidence of the great pastoral interest. The bold stroke, carried out as to so many larger properties than poor, hardly-pressed Windāhgil, had been successful. The daring policy, now that the rain had come, had turned out to be wisely prescient. Capitalists began to talk of the man who, comparatively young, had shown such nerve and decision in the throes of a financial crisis—such as had just passed, thank God! The oft-quoted succour might have proceeded chiefly from a superior quality of head.

But Mr. Stamford told himself that to his dying day he should always credit Barrington Hope with those attributes of the heart which were rarely granted to meaner men.

At the present interview there were of course mutual congratulations.

“Had rain, I saw by the telegram, my dear sir. Heartily glad for your sake—indeed, for our own. Squatters fully appreciate the benefit their class receives by such a glorious change in the seasons. I wonder if they always remember their hard-worked brethren, the managers of banks and finance companies, upon whose weary brains such a weight of responsibility presses. Well, ‘to each his sufferings, all are men condemned alike to groan,’ &c.; we must bear our burdens as we best may. But this is very frivolous. It must be the rain. Nearly six inches! Enough to make any one talk nonsense. What can I do for you at present?”

Mr. Stamford shortly gave a *résumé* of Hubert’s letter, and mentioned the store sheep.

“Certainly, by all means; if, as I assume, you will have grass to spare. Buy for cash and save the discount. Would you like to telegraph? Excuse me.” He summoned a clerk. “Mr. Stamford wishes this telegram sent at once.” He had written: “Buy store sheep at once—for cash. Draw at sight.—Barrington Hope.—Hubert Stamford, Esq., Mooramah.”

“Is that right? Mr. Bowker, you will see that message sent through.” The door closed. “It is best not to lose time in these matters. Don’t you think so? Prices are rising every hour; sheep might be withdrawn.”

Mr. Stamford was quite of the same opinion, and was moreover delighted with the promptness with which the transaction was concluded.

“Shall you want more sheep before shearing? If so, don’t scruple to buy.”

“Well, we shall have more grass than we know what to do with, Hubert says,” commenced Mr. Stamford, rather aghast at this magnificent manner of buying all before him; “but I don’t know whether there is not a risk of over-stocking.”

“None whatever, I should say; take advantage of a good season when it comes, that’s the modern stock policy. Some very successful men, whose names I could tell you, always practise it. You will consult your son when you go home and let me know. But, admitting that you bought up to your carrying capacity, and sold all but your best sheep directly after shearing, you might make all safe, as they say at sea. Our Queensland constituents are buying largely to stock up new country. As your district has a good name for wool, you would have no difficulty in quitting them at a profit.”

“That makes a difference, certainly,” said Mr. Stamford, to whose mind—long a *tabula rasa* as regards speculation, having been too deeply occupied in compassing mere existence (pecuniarily speaking)—gorgeous enterprises and profits commenced to present themselves. “I will talk it over with Hubert, and let you know.”

“Certainly; wire rather than write, though; in matters of importance time is generally most precious. You are going; good bye! Most happy that our business intercourse has progressed so favourably.”

“You must permit me, my dear Mr. Hope, to say that I feel most grateful,” said Mr. Stamford, standing up and holding out his hand, “deeply grateful personally, for your kindness and courtesy, outside of any business relation whatever. No, you must not stop me. I shall feel it to my dying day, and I trust you will come and see us at our home—the home you saved for us, I shall always think—whenever you visit our part of the country.”

The hand-clasp was sincere and hearty; the interview terminated. The squatter went his way musingly down narrow, not over-straight George Street, on either side of which towering freestone buildings seemed to be uprising daily; while Barrington Hope addressed himself to a pile of letters from which he hardly raised his head until the closing of the office. As for Mr. Stamford, his day’s work was done. He mechanically thought over the store sheep question, but his face suddenly changed as he remembered in such matters he would be absolved from all anxiety or doubt in future. What rest—rest—all blessed rest of mind and body, would be his for all time to come!

Are there any disorders, sorrows, misfortunes, here below which so surely, if gradually, eat away the heart of man as those which spring from pecuniary dearth or doubt?

How the days are dimmed! How the nights are troubled! The glory of the sky, the beauty of the flower, the breath of morn, the solemn hush of midnight, Nature’s best gifts and treasures, how unheeded all, if not despised are they, when exhibited before the wretched thrall of debt!

To the galley slave in old classic days what were the purple waters of the Egean—the haunting beauty of the temple-crowned promontory? The choral dances, the flower-wreathed fanes of the Greek Isles were but mockeries to the haggard rowers of the trireme as she swept by, all too close to land. The grim jest of the old-world humorist was keenly close—that even the demons of the nethermost pit disdained to torture the luckless debtor, so wasted and dried up was every attribute of body and soul!

And was he indeed the same Harold Stamford that paced this very street wearily and so despondingly but one poor week agone? “And without the timely aid of the Austral Agency Company,” thought he, “I was even then so near to safety, to triumph! I feel like the man who clung so long to a marsh pile the long night through, in dread of drowning, and, dropping from exhaustion, found himself in four feet of water. And how wretched and despairing was I, how little hope was there in the world apparently! But for Linda and the children, I could have found it in my heart to make a quick end, in the harbour, of the misery which was becoming

unendurable. It shows that a man should never despair. There are always chances. Hundreds, as poor Hubert said. But shall I ever forget Barrington Hope and his kindness? No, or may God forget me in my need. And what a grand fellow he seems to be!”

Having satisfactorily finished his soliloquy, Mr. Stamford bethought himself that he would make a parting call upon his friends, the Grandisons. He was going home in a day or two now and should be tolerably busy, he knew by experience, what with commissions and other matters which he was but too apt to put off till the last moment.

The ladies were engaged. Mr. Grandison was, however, at home, and, as it turned out, not in that cheerful frame of mind which befitted so rich a man. He had the world’s goods in profusion, but as Stamford marked his anxious brow and perturbed countenance, he saw that something had gone wrong.

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” Mr. Grandison said. “I was afraid it was a young fellow just out from home—got letters to us—the Honourable Mr. Devereux; he’s not a bad chap, but I don’t feel up to talking to a youngster I never saw before and won’t see again after next week. Come into my den and have a yarn, Harold. I want to talk to you. And, I say, stop and have a quiet *tête-à-tête* dinner. They’re going out—Josie and her mother—to one of Ketten’s recitals, as they call it. I’m in no humour for musical humbug, I can tell you. I’m worried to death about that eldest boy of mine, Carlo. Stay, like a good fellow, and you can advise me. I’m fairly puzzled.”

This was a matter of charity, and old friendship besides. Stamford’s heart was touched at the spectacle of his old comrade troubled and in distress. He forgot the obtrusive magnificence, and thought of the long past days when they rode together beneath burning sky or winter storm, before one had found the road to fortune and the other had taken the bye-path which had only ended in happiness. “All right, Bob,” he answered. “You shall have all the help I can offer. I’m sorry you’ve cause to be uneasy about the boy. We must hope for the best though. Youthful imprudence is not so uncommon.”

“It’s worse than that,” said Mr. Grandison, gloomily—with a portentous shake of his head.

CHAPTER V

Just as dinner was announced, the carriage behind the grand three hundred guinea browns—perhaps the best pair in Sydney—rolled up to the door. Mrs. Grandison and Miss Josie fluttered down the stairs a few minutes afterwards in the full glory of evening costume. As host and guest stood in the hall, the lady of the house vouchsafed a slight explanation, mingled with faint regret that the latter was not coming with them.

“You know, Mr. Stamford, this is one of that dear Ketten’s last recitals. We really could not afford to miss it—especially as our friends, the Cranberrys, will be there. Lady C. sent a private message to Josie that she *must* go. I wanted to stop, for we really are miserable about that wicked boy Carlo; but Josie said it couldn’t make any difference to him, and why should we punish ourselves because he chose to be selfish and extravagant.”

Mr. Stamford could not wholly assent to these philosophical propositions. He thought of what Laura’s pleasure in hearing the musical magnate would have been on the same evening that Hubert had been declared a defaulter as to play debts, and was socially, if not legally, under a cloud.

He simply bowed coldly. Then he saw the pained maternal expression in Mrs. Grandison’s face, in spite of her worldliness and frivolity, and his heart smote him.

“My dear Mrs. Grandison,” he said, taking her hand, “I feel for you most deeply.”

Then suddenly came a voice from the carriage, in which Miss Josie had ensconced herself. “Mamma, I shall catch cold if we wait one moment longer. Hadn’t you better postpone your interesting talk with Mr. Stamford?”

Mrs. Grandison started, and then recovering herself, shook Mr. Stamford’s hand. “You will talk it over with Robert, won’t you? You are old friends, you know. Don’t let him be too hard on poor Carlo. I’m sure he has a good heart. Pray come and see us again before you leave.”

The portly form of his hostess moved off at a swifter rate than her appearance denoted. The footman banged the carriage door, and the grand equipage rattled out over the mathematically accurate curves of the drive. The dinner gong commenced to resound after a warlike and sudden fashion, and caused Mr. Stamford to betake himself hurriedly to the drawing-room. There he found Mr. Grandison standing by the fire-place in a meditative position.

Mr. Grandison turned at his friend’s entrance. “Seen Mrs. Grandison? Has she told you about it? Well, they’re gone now, and we can talk it over quietly. Come in to dinner. I’ve no appetite, God knows! but I want something to steady my nerves.”

The dinner, somewhat restricted for the occasion, was extremely good, though his host ate little, confining himself to a cutlet and some wonderful brown sherry. Not until the dessert was placed before them and they were alone did he begin the subject which lay so near to his heart.

“Of course I know, Stamford, that young fellows like my boy can’t be expected to live in a town like Sydney upon a screwy allowance—at any rate not if they are to be seen in good company. Therefore I’ve always said to Carlo, ‘Let me see you make your mark, and live like a gentleman. That’s all I ask of you, and you sha’n’t want for a hundred or two.’ I hadn’t got it to spend when I was his age—you know that, Harold; but if I like my youngster to be a bit different in some things, that’s my own affair, isn’t it, as long as I am willing to pay for it? Well that’s all right, you say. Take some of this claret, it won’t hurt you. It’s my own importation from Bordeaux. Of course I didn’t want the boy to slave in an office, nor yet to live in the bush year after year with nothing but station hands to talk to. If Mrs. Grandison had done what I wanted her to do, while the children were young, and lived quietly at Banyule, it might have been different. There we could have had everything comfortable; nearly as good as here. It would have been better for me, and them too, I expect. But she wouldn’t see it, and that’s why we’ve always lived in town.”

“Still,” interposed Stamford, “though you have been well enough off to afford to live where you pleased, I can’t imagine why Carlo should not keep the course and run straight, even in Sydney, like other young men of his age.”

Mr. Grandison sighed and filled his glass. “Some do, and some don’t, that’s about the size of it. I don’t know why the lad shouldn’t have enjoyed himself in reason like young Norman McAllister, Jack Staunton, Neil O’Donnell, and others that we know. They’ve always had lots of money, too; they’ve been home to the Old Country and knocked about by themselves, and I never heard that they’ve got into rows or overrun the constable. How my boy should have made such a fool of himself with a father that’s always stuck well to him, I can’t think. I’m afraid we’ve thought too much of his swell friends’ names and families, and not enough of their principles. I’ve told my wife that before now.”

“But what has he done?” asked Stamford. “If it’s a matter of a few thousands, you can settle that easily enough—particularly now we’ve had rain,” continued he, introducing the pleasantry as a slight relief to his friend’s self-reproachful strain.

“Yes, of course, I can do that, thank God! rain or no rain, though it made a matter of thirty thousand profit to me on those back Dillandra blocks—more than that. I shouldn’t care if the money was all; but this is how it is. I may as well bring it straight out. It seems that Carlo and

Captain Maelstrom (d—-n him!—I never liked a bone in his body) and some others were playing loo last week with a young fellow whose father had just died and left him a lot of money. The stakes ran up high—a deal higher than the club committee would have allowed if they'd known about it. Well, just at first they had it all their own way. This young chap was a long way to the bad—thousands, they say. Then the luck turned, and after that they never held a card. He played a bold game, and the end of it was that Carlo and the Captain were ten thousand out, and of course neither of them able to pay up. The Captain managed to get time, but Carlo, like a fool, went straight off and said nothing about it. He was afraid to come to me, it seems, as we'd had a row last time; so he did the very worst thing he could have done and cleared out to Tasmania. We got a letter yesterday. He's over there now." Here Mr. Grandison fairly groaned, and looked piteously in his old friend's face.

"Well, well! but after all," said Mr. Stamford, "of course it's bad enough, gambling—high stakes and folly generally; but if you pay up, things will be much as they were, and it will be a lesson to him."

"I hope it may be, but the worst of it is," went on Mr. Grandison, "that the whole thing came out, and there was a regular *exposé*. The young fellow, Newlands, made a disturbance when he wasn't paid, swore he'd horsewhip Carlo whenever he met him, and went on tremendously. Then the committee of the club took it up and talked of expelling Maelstrom and him for playing for stakes above the proper limit, and if the affair's raked up it's possible they will. I paid up in full, of course, as soon as I could get to know the amount. Newlands apologised very properly and all that. But the mischief's done! Carlo can't show his face in Sydney for I don't know how long. All our hopes about his turning steady and settling down are disappointed. It's a round sum of money to throw away for nothing, and worse than nothing. And what to do with the boy I don't know."

"It certainly *is* a hard case for his parents," said Mr. Stamford, thoughtfully. "I scarcely know what to advise. A year or two on a station, or a turn at exploring in the far north used to be thought a remedy, or, at any rate, to hold out reasonable hope of amendment by change of scene and fresh interests, but—-"

"But that wouldn't suit Carlo. He hates bush life—can't live away from excitement—and I'm afraid, if I sent him away against his will, he'd take to drinking, or do something worse still. I'm at my wits' end. He seems to have got it into his head that I'm to provide for him under any circumstances, and the consequence is he never thinks of doing anything for himself."

"How do you think travel would act upon him? He has never seen the Old World, 'the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them.' Surely that would rouse sufficient enthusiasm to counteract the meaner pleasures?"

"Carlo would never get further than Paris if I trusted him alone. However, I shall have to try it, I suppose. The long and the short of it will be that we shall be obliged to move *en famille*. I can't send him by himself after what has happened."

"I really do think it is the best thing you can do. You can afford it easily. Station property is likely to look up for a few years now. You have excellent managers, and it will most likely benefit the other young people. I don't see any objection; indeed everything seems in favour of it."

"Of course we can do it," said his friend, doubtfully; "but I didn't intend to leave for a year or two yet—until we could have entered Cecil at one of the universities, and, in fact, made other arrangements. But Carlo is the master of the situation at present—he must be, as usual, considered before everything and everybody. Well, I'm much obliged to you, Stamford; indeed I feel most grateful; it has been a great relief to my mind to be able to talk the matter over with you quietly, and I really believe this idea of yours of travel abroad will suit everybody. Mrs. Grandison and Josie will be wild with delight, I feel sure."

"I hope you will all have reason to be satisfied with the results of the step; and now, as it is getting late, I will say good night."

"Good night, and thank you very much, old fellow! By the way, this rain has reached your part of the world, I see; I suppose your affairs are improving a bit now—look brighter, eh!"

"I have been enabled to make satisfactory arrangements lately," said Stamford, shortly. "I have placed my account with the Austral Agency Company and we got on very well."

"Ah, indeed. Rising man, that Barrington Hope. I wish—but it's no use wishing. Well, good night again! Nothing like being independent of the banks; that's always the safest line!"

"Safest indeed," thought his guest as he walked down the gravel drive, just in time to miss the blazing lamps and chariot wheels of Mrs. Grandison's equipage, which bore herself and her daughter back from the hall where the *maestro* had been delighting the *crême de la crême* of fashionable musical Sydney. "Safest indeed; but how is one to manage it with droughty seasons, and markets practically closed? I think Master Bob might have asked that question before. But his own troubles have been greater than mine, poor fellow—greater, ah, a thousandfold. What bribe, indeed, would tempt me to change places with him? However, we must hope for the best, though I am afraid Carlo will only substitute Baden Baden for Bent Street. Miserable boy!"

The sacrifice at the altar of friendship being duly performed, Mr. Stamford addressed himself to the arrangements necessary for a speedy return to the home which he had quitted under

such depressing conditions. How different were the sensations with which he set about preparing for departure from those which he had good reason to fear would have overshadowed his return journey! “The sad companion, ghastly Care,” had retired, indefinitely banished, as far as human foresight could discover.

All difficulties, all doubt as to ways and means, had vanished. The kind hand of Providence had been specially exerted for his benefit. He hardly recognised in himself the sanguine individual that had replaced his boding, desponding entity, tortured by vain regrets and undefined dread; hopeless of succour alike from God and man! [79]

He went about his business with alacrity and a cheerful enjoyment of life that even surprised himself. He seemed to have renewed his youth. Tastes and fancies which had long been relegated to the realm of the impossible reappeared like the wild-wood flowers of his own land after the gracious rainfall of which he had received tidings. He was now enabled to indulge them in moderation with a clear conscience.

And he savoured them with a relish akin to that of the returned traveller after perils by land and sea, of the desert-worn pilgrim who sees again the green fields and rippling brooks of the fatherland which he had despaired of again beholding.

What a novel joy was it to him to awake at midnight—at early dawn—to realise with returning consciousness that safety, comfort, honourable independence were to be the portion of his loved ones henceforward and for ever! What a relief to turn again to his pillow, and sink into untroubled slumber with a heart filled with gratitude—with peace unutterable!

One of his first expeditions in the shopping line was to the chief book mart, an establishment where he previously had been wont to linger but for short intervals, regarding with a melancholy interest the rows of new, enticing works, into the pages of which he hardly dared to look. [80] Now he boldly produced a list of standard authors, magazines, works of travel, science, autobiography, fiction, what not; commanded that they should be packed in a suitable case and forwarded to the railway station to his address. How he relished the actual writing of a cheque for the amount! How the thought of being able to enjoy them with an untroubled mind, in the peaceful evenings at Windāhgil, caused his spirits to rise, his heart to expand!

Hubert’s modest commission was not forgotten, nor the less-developed literary needs of Maurice and Ned, while at a neighbouring establishment he chose a collection of music, vocal and instrumental, which would keep Laura and Linda moderately well employed for a twelvemonth. A new piano the girls must have, but not yet, not all at once, whispered Prudence. He must not show his hand too suddenly. All in good time. And, as a young professional of the period ran his fingers lightly over the notes of a lovely Erard semi-grand, Mr. Stamford almost waltzed out of the shop, to the seductive strains of “Auf Wiedersehn.” His last and crowning exploit was to procure, after, perhaps, rather more personal exertion and loss of dignity than were expended on the foregoing transactions, the services of a well-recommended, capable female domestic, whose scruples at going so far into the bush he combated by a liberal rate of wages, and a promise to pay her return fare if she remained for twelve months in his service. [81] After all this Mr. Stamford paid a farewell visit to Mr. Barrington Hope, with whom he arranged for shearing supplies, and, finally, at the close of an exciting day, he found himself in the mail-train in a state of high contentment, in charity with all men, and honestly grateful to that Almighty Ruler who had uplifted him from those dark depths, at the remembrance of which he still shuddered.

At a reasonably early hour on the following day the unpretending architecture of Mooramah emerged from the forest hills which encompass that rising township, and there was Hubert sure enough, with the well-worn buggy and the good old horses, still high in bone, though, like himself, much improved in spirits and demeanour.

“Why, governor!” quoth that young man, after an affectionate greeting and the gradual absorption into the recesses of the buggy of the tolerably heavy miscellaneous luggage of his parent, “you’re quite another man. Let me look at you. Fashionable and distinguished-looking, I declare! Thought you were a gentleman from England. Mother and the girls won’t know you. I suppose it’s the rain, and Mr. Barrington—what’s his name, Hope or Faith, isn’t it? He seems to have lots of the latter requisite, doesn’t he? We ought to have made his acquaintance years ago. And this is the new servant, I suppose. Very glad to see you, Mary Jane. Not Mary Jane? Isabella; well, that sounds nicer—country looks grand, doesn’t it? [82] Old Mooramah’s quite another place. But I can’t take my eyes off you, governor! You look ten years younger.”

“I feel so, my boy, I assure you. Things have gone well, I needn’t tell you. I found Mr. Hope a most satisfactory person to do business with. And of course the rain has crowned everything.”

“Satisfactory! I should think he was! Smartest man we’ve ever worked with. I closed with old Saville, and bought six thousand Riverina ewes bred at Broongal. Sent a wire to him, had his answer, and nailed them before dark. I believe I could make a half-a-crown profit a head on the whole lot. That’s something like business, if you like.”

“And you’re sure you’ll have grass enough for them and our own, too! It doesn’t do to run risks, you know, Hubert!”

“Grass!” retorted the young man scornfully. “Wait till you see the old place. Now that the stock are all off the frontage, the prairie grass and trefoil are coming up like a hayfield. Why, we sha’n’t be able to *see* the sheep in it at shearing time. Don’t the old horses go differently? They’re picking up hand over hand, though of course they’ve not had time to lay on flesh yet. The sheep are quicker about it, and they look wonderful. You’d hardly know the dry flocks.

We’re not far from the river, now; it’s just crossable again. Wait till you come to the outer gate. But it’s all alike. I feel almost too happy. If I hadn’t had a good lot of hardish work just at first, I think I should have gone off my head.”

Harold Stamford put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, and looked with loving pride into his clear eyes and bold, frank brow. “God in His mercy be thanked for our prosperity, my son!” he said. “May He keep us in health of body and mind, and long preserve us to each other. I feel, also, as if my cup was almost too full. May He aid us to enjoy and use wisely the benefits He has conferred on us!”

The young man turned and wrung his father’s hand silently.

“Great Heaven!” thought Mr. Stamford to himself, as he noted the clear bronzed cheek, the manly, frank impression, the muscular frame of his first-born, the whole figure instinct with the splendid health and graceful vigour of early manhood when developed to maturity amid the wholesome influences of a country life. “What a contrast does he present to Carlo Grandison! Surely I am wise in shielding him from the disturbing forces, the crowding temptations, with which wealth besets mankind. I dislike every aspect of deception, but surely the postponing the dangerous knowledge, which would relieve these children from all necessity for self-denial, is a justifiable exercise of my discretion as the head of the household. It will, it must, I feel convinced, be for their ultimate advantage.”

By the time the train of reflection induced by this consideration had come to an end, the river was forded—tolerably high indeed; so much so as to cause the new domestic some natural misgivings, but the strong, temperate horses breasted the swirling current, and landed them safely, under Hubert’s experienced guidance, upon the pebbly beach of the farther shore.

“So far, so good,” said the charioteer; “we couldn’t have done that yesterday, and it’s not every pair of horses that would fancy all that rushing and bubbling of the stream. Don’t you remember Mr. Round nearly making a mess of it last year at night in this very place, with the governess and all the children too? He had a pretty bad quarter of an hour after he broke his pole. Now look at the grass, that’s something like, isn’t it?”

Mr. Stamford had seen such things before in his pastoral experience. Not for the first time did he look upon the marvellous transformation wrought in “dry country” by forty-eight hours’ rain. But he could not avoid an exclamation of surprise when he gazed around him. Was this the same place—the same country even, which he had driven over so lately to catch the train, with the self-same pair of horses too?

Then the river trickled in a thin rivulet from one pond to another in the wide, half-dry bed of the stream; then the dusty banks were lined with dead sheep; the black-soiled alluvial flat was innocent of grass in root or stalk or living herbage as the trampled dust of a stockyard. Now a thick, green carpet of various verdure covered all the great meadow as far as eye could see, and brought its bright green border to the very verge of the sand and shingle of the river shore.

The half-flood which had resulted from the rainfall nearer the source had swept away the carcases of the sheep and cattle and deposited all saddening souvenirs of the drought amid the reed beds of the lower Mooramah. All was spring-like and splendidly luxuriant, though as yet but in the later autumn season. It was a new land, a new climate, a region recovered from the waste.

CHAPTER VI

In ten minutes Mr. Stamford was deposited safely at the home which he had quitted with such gloomy forebodings, such dreadful doubt and uncertainty. Then he had asked himself, ‘Should he be enabled to call it his own on returning? Was not Ruin’s knell already sounding in his ears?’

A few short weeks had elapsed, and how different was the outlook! When he beheld again the true and tender wife, the loving daughters, the joyful children, his heart swelled nigh to bursting. An unspoken prayer went up to heaven that he might ever remain worthy of the unselfish love, the trusting faith which had been his since first he had acquired a household of his own. How unworthy are the best of men of such treasures—the purest, the richest, which are granted to mortal man!

When his affairs were at the worst, had he not always known where to receive wise counsel, tender consolation, heartfelt sympathy? When a ray of sunshine broke through the cloud-wrack which environed his fortunes, had not a double brilliancy been added to it by those loving hearts which took their colour so readily from his every mood? Now all was joy, peace, magical transformation. The storm-clouds had passed over, the menacing powers had vanished like evil dreams. All was hope and sanguine trust in the future. He was a monarch restored to his throne, a leader once more in front of his faithful band, the head of a household which care and pain, in certain forms, could never more approach.

87

“So, father, you have deigned to return to us!” said Mrs. Stamford, smiling the bright, loving welcome which had never failed her husband. “We began to think that the ‘pleasures and palaces’ were becoming too much for the ‘home, sweet home’ side of the question. Didn’t we, Laura? But how wonderfully well you look, darling! We are all ready to go on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Barrington Hope, as it seems he has wrought all these miracles.”

“Yes, indeed, dear old dad,” cried Laura; “I would have put up his image in my bedroom, and done a little private worship if I had had the least idea of what he was like. But you never vouchsafed any sketch of his personal appearance. You haven’t brought a photo, have you? That would be something.”

“Mr. Barrington Hope is a very fine man, pussy, as you will see probably, one of these days—a good deal out of the common in every respect.”

88

“Young, is he?” queried Linda, who, having climbed on her father’s knee, was patting his face and smoothing his hair. “He isn’t a horrid old man, or married? Good gracious! we never thought of that, did we? Oh! don’t say he is bald or grey, or unromantic. Laura and I would never get over it. We have fixed on him for our hero, like Guy in the *Heir of Redclyffe*. Surely some one said he was young!”

“He is a good deal more like Philip, but there is nothing of the prig about him, as I fear there was about that estimable young man,” replied her father. “But what does his personal appearance matter, I should like to know?”

“But it *does*, it matters everything,” returned the enthusiastic damsel. “Oh! he can’t be plain, surely not—after all he has done for us. You mustn’t knock down the romance we have all been building up.”

“He is a very fine man, a few years older than Hubert, that is all. I can’t give any inventory of his features, but he is tall and distinguished looking. Isn’t that enough?”

“Oh! splendid!” Here Linda clapped her hands in childish glee. “Fate is too kind! Our preserver is all that we could wish. Nothing was wanting but that. We are the happiest family in New South Wales—in the world.”

“Amen!” said Mr. Stamford. “Now you may unlock my portmanteau and turn out a few presents I have brought my little girls. I shall be ready for lunch when it comes in, I may venture to remark. The bush air is still keen, I perceive.”

89

In accordance with his well-studied programme, Mr. Stamford informed his family, in general terms, that the arrangements he had made with Mr. Barrington Hope were of a satisfactory description. That gentleman had behaved most liberally and courteously in all respects. The rain having so fortunately arrived on the top of all this, had enabled him even to improve on his first terms, which were nearly all that could be wished. They would therefore be warranted in allowing themselves a few indulgences such as, had the season continued dry, could not have been so much as thought of.

After lunch, or rather dinner, the mid-day meal being of that unfashionable description, Mr. Stamford and Hubert took a long drive round the run. The appearance of the pastures, as also of the sheep they encountered, was such as to draw forth exclamations of surprise and delight from their possessor.

“I never remember such a season since the year I bought the run,” he remarked to his son. “You were quite a little fellow then, and Laura hardly able to walk. It puts me quite in mind of old times—of the happy days which I thought had fled for ever.”

“Well, please goodness, governor, we’ll knock something out of the old place this year that will make up for past losses. Sheep are rising fast, and, as we can’t help having a fine lambing and a good clip, you’ll see what we’ll rake in. We must put up a new washpen, though, and

90

enlarge the shed a bit. It won’t cost much, as I’ve put a first-rate man on. He’s a Swede, been a ship’s carpenter, and the quickest worker, when he understands what you want done, that I ever saw. Not one of your cabinet-making humbugs who are all day morticing a gate-head. I’ll draw in all the round stuff, and you’ll see how soon we’ll knock it up.”

“All right, my boy; any improvements in reason, only we mustn’t spend all our money before we make it.”

“Trust me for that, dad; you won’t find me spending a penny that can be saved. We shall want no extra hands till shearing time. All the paddocks are right and tight, so the sheep will shepherd themselves, and do all the better, too. How jolly it is to have no bother about water, isn’t it? And what a bit of luck we had that dam in the hill paddock finished just before the rain came.”

“Nothing like doing things at the right time, Hubert,” replied Mr. Stamford, with an air of oracular wisdom. “You had half a mind to leave that same dam till next year.”

“Well, I must confess I hadn’t much heart to go shovelling and picking that gravelly clay—hard as iron—with the weather so hot too, and looking as if rain was never coming again. But you were right to have it done, and now we have the benefit of it. Got a pretty fair paddock of oats in too. It’s coming up splendidly.”

“How did you manage that without a team?”

“Hired a carrier’s for a week or two. He was short of cash, and wanted to spell his bullocks; besides we ripped over the ploughing in no time. Then I made a brush harrow and finished it with the station horses. The main thing was to get in the seed the first break of dry weather, and now we shall have a stack that will last us two years at least.”

“Well done, my boy; dry seasons will come again some day; we must prepare for them, though everything looks so bright, or rather so delightfully cloudy, just now. We shall have to invent a fresh set of proverbs to suit Australia, shall we not, instead of using our old-fashioned English ones?”

“Yes, indeed. Can anything be more ludicrous than ‘Save up for a rainy day?’ ‘Look ahead in case of a dry season,’ should be our motto. This carrier was rather a smart chap, and understood similes. ‘Will that bullock go steady on the near side?’ I asked him the other day. ‘Oh! he’s right,’ he said; ‘right as rain!’ That was something like, wasn’t it? By the bye, dad, you didn’t forget those books of mine, did you?”

“No, my son! I bought a few more in addition. In fact, there’s a box of books coming up by the train.”

“A box of books! Hurrah! What times we shall have, when the evenings get longer. But, I say, dad! isn’t that rather extravagant? You’ll have the mater on to you if you begin to buy books by the box.”

“They will have to last us some time, Hubert; you will find a good deal of stiff reading among them. But if things go well generally, I won’t stint you in books. We must charge them to the rain account this time.”

“I suppose we can save out of something else, but I really have found it hard, the last year or two, to do without a new book now and then. It’s so tantalising to see the names and read the reviews when you’re not able to get them. But of course it couldn’t be helped when things looked so bad.”

“I have a notion, Hubert, that things will never look so bad again. However, we must not be led away by temporary good fortune. Perseverance is, after all, the great secret of success. Without that mere cleverness is misleading, and even mischievous.”

It was so far fortunate for Mr. Stamford, and it certainly made his allotted task the easier, that he had always been somewhat reticent as to business details.

They were subjects concerning which he disliked conversation extremely, so that although he confided in his wife and family as to every change in their pecuniary position, he was wont to ignore special explanation, much more the repetition of detail.

When he announced therefore in general terms, from time to time, to his family that things were going well, and that Mr. Barrington Hope’s financial plan, coupled with that extraordinary advance in the value of pastoral property occasioned by the rain, enabled him to raise the standard of their house-keeping, they were satisfied, and did not press for further information.

Now commenced for Harold Stamford the ideal country life towards which he had always aspired, but from which, latterly, he had been further removed than ever. He enjoyed the advantages of the dweller away from cities without the drawbacks which so often tend to render that idyllic life monotonous and depressing.

He had daily outdoor exercise in sufficient quantity to produce the wholesome half-tired feeling so necessary to repose.

At the same time, he was entirely freed from dominant and engrossing dread, a state of mind which had for years past coloured so large a portion of his waking thoughts. How hard it had been to fall asleep with endless plans coursing through his tired brain, having for their central idea the admitted fact of bankruptcy. How were they to act? What was there to support the family while he sought for employment? Employment, too! To what occupation could he

betake himself, now that middle age was reached, and much of the vigour and activity of manhood departed? He had acquired “experience.” There was a grim irony in the expression—of what use would it be to him without capital? A managership of the station of another? True that might be possibly attained after weeks and months of effort, or years, as the case might be.

He was familiar with the appearance of saddened men who haunted the offices of stock-agents and merchants—the waiting-rooms of bankers, the steps of clubs whence their more prosperous comrades walked forth redolent of solvency. He had noticed such men growing shabbier, more hopeless of aspect as the months rolled on. He had heard them alluded to with contemptuous pity as “Poor old So-and-so! Not up to much now, younger and smarter men to be had,” &c. He had wondered whether such might be his fate, whether with his fall he should drag down those beloved ones, who, whatever might be the trials they had undergone together, had always enjoyed the fullest personal freedom and independence.

Such dreary reflections had been his companions in the past—daily, hourly, as well under the light of the sun as in the night watches, when silence lends to every reproach of conscience, every signal of danger, a treble force and distinctness.

In those terrible years of doubt and dread, of ruin and despair, what tragedies had been enacted before his eyes, among his friends and comrades, dwellers in the same region, dependent upon the same seasons, betrayed by the same natural causes! But the other men had not, like him, been shielded by the soft encircling influence of a happy home. A logical mind, a sanguine spirit, combined with a philosophical habit, had perhaps proved his safeguard. However that might be, and Harold Stamford was the last man to boast to himself or to others, his bark had battled with the angry waters while others had become dismal wrecks, or had foundered suddenly and irrevocably.

Despair had written its tale in the chronicles of the district, in reckless deep drinking, in suicide, in brain-ruin.

All these things had he seen and known of. From these and other evils, not less deadly, but of slower effect, had he been preserved.

When he looked around and saw himself on a pinnacle of prosperity, safe in the possession of all that he held most dear—the lands he had so loved—the life of labour and of leisure so happily apportioned, which he had so fully appreciated—the assured position of respect and consideration, which it is not in mortal man wholly to undervalue, he could with difficulty restrain his feelings. His heart swelled with thankfulness to that Supreme Ruler who had so mercifully ordered all matters concerning him and his, and again he vowed so to shape his future life that he might be held in some degree worthy of the blessings which had been showered upon him all unworthy.

This adjustment of ways and means he found nearly as difficult in its way as the former trial. He often smiled to himself as he found what an amount of conscientious reluctance to accept the unwonted plenty he was compelled to combat. Did he effect a surprise of a few rare plants for his flower-loving wife, she would calculate the railway charges, and ask gravely if he was sure he could afford it. Did he order a new riding-habit for Laura, a hat or a summer dress for Linda, they were sure they could make the old ones do for another season. It was interesting to watch the conflict between the natural, girlish eagerness for the new and desirable and the inner voice which had so long cried “refrain, refrain!” in that sorely tried household.

However, in spite of their virtuous resistance, by the exercise of a little diplomacy, Harold Stamford had his way. The garden was dug over, the trees were pruned, the parterre refilled with choice varieties of the old loved flowers that the drought had slain. Even a bush-house and a fernery were managed—put up indeed by the man who had been temporarily retained as gardener, and whom Mrs. Stamford, deeply as she appreciated the enjoyment of once more beholding trim alleys and well-tended beds, could not help regarding in the light of a superfluity.

Then there was the American buggy, a wonderful vehicle, in which so many journeys had been made over roads that were rough or smooth, ways that were short or long, as need was, wherein all the family had been closely packed in the days of their childhood, still strong and serviceable, but woefully deficient in paint and varnish. This family friend, and a friend in need had it been, found its way to the coachmaker’s, whence it issued resplendent, nearly as distinguished in appearance, Mrs. Stamford conceded, as when, in the earlier days of their wedded life, they had been secretly proud of their handsome carriage and well-matched, fast-trotting pair.

“It quite brought back,” she averred, “the old days of love in a cottage, with all their precious memories.”

Gradually, and unobtrusively, was the master of the establishment enabled to compass these and other desirable repairs and refittings. All things that had become shabby were dismissed or replaced after the same piecemeal manner. As time wore on, the process ceased to alarm his wife or children, more especially as, aided by the bounteous season and Hubert’s ceaseless energy, the general prosperity of the station was marked and gratifying.

The increase of the stock was unexampled. The anxious, toilsome period of shearing was passed successfully.

The new washpen answered beyond the most sanguine anticipation. The clip was heavy, and

“got up” so as almost to resemble raw silk—a pardonable exaggeration—so free from dust and all contamination had sleepless vigilance and care on Hubert’s part “turned it out.” The crop was as “high as the fence,” Maurice averred, and the haystack, consequently, a colossal and imposing pile of fragrant fodder. The spring was sufficiently showery to lay the dust and keep the matted grass green at the roots. Water was abundant, both “out back” as well as on the frontage. “All went merry as a marriage bell,” and when the last high-piled waggon-load had moved slowly away, on which was imprinted “Windāhgil, First Combing, 348,” with other suggestive and satisfactory legends, Mr. Stamford put his arm round his wife’s waist, and remarked, “My dear, I think a trip to Sydney would do you and the girls so much good. As I am compelled to see Mr. Hope on business, we may as well all go together.”

CHAPTER VII

The thrill of pleasure with which this proposal was received showed itself in the flushing cheeks and brightened eyes of Laura and her sister—while upon Mrs. Stamford's features an almost pathetic expression appeared, as of a revelation of joy sudden and unhoped-for. "You are so kind, Harold; but, oh! are you prudent? Think of the expense—new dresses, new everything, indeed! Why it seems an age since I saw Sydney!"

"Think of the clip, Mrs. Stamford," retorted her husband. "Think of the lambs, think of the fat sheep ready for market. Your journey to town will be the merest trifle of expenditure compared to what we can lawfully and reasonably afford. I speak in sober earnest. Besides, the Intercolonial Exhibition is open. The girls may never have such another chance. Hubert must stay at home for fear of bush fires. He shall have his holiday when we return. So, girls, the great Windāhgil migration is settled."

100

The departure for the metropolis of a family that has long dwelt in the "bush," or veritable far country division of Australian life, is an event of no ordinary magnitude.

Not that the conditions of their rural life are so widely different from those in England. There is the country town within reasonable distance, to which visits are by no means infrequent. There reside the clergymen, lawyers, doctors, bankers, teachers, and tradespeople, the chief component parts of rural society—as in England. There are also various retired non-combatants, decayed gentry and others, the poor and proud section—as in Europe. The squirearchy is represented by large-acred, wealthy personages, who have either acquired or inherited estates, exceeding ten- or twenty-fold in value those of average proprietors—as in Europe. These great people are frequently absent, but contribute fairly by a higher scale of expenditure, often comprising picture-galleries, and valuable collections of *objets d'art*, generally to the mental advancement of the neighbourhood. It is not to be supposed, either, that they are for the most part uneducated or unrefined.

It follows, therefore, that even when deprived of access to metropolitan luxuries, the families of rural colonists are not wholly without intellectual privileges, invariable as has been the custom of the British novelist to depict them as living a rude, unpolished, and wholly unlettered life.

101

In ordinary seasons it is the custom for squatters of a certain rank to visit the sea coast with their families once a year, if not oftener. The pleasures of city life are then moderately partaken of, fresh ideas are acquired, old tastes are indulged; friendships are contracted, repaired, or revived. Mental and physical benefits unspecified are acquired, and after a few weeks' absence the country family returns, much contented with their experiences, but perfectly resigned to await the changing year's recurrence ere such another momentous journeying takes place.

But when, as at Windāhgil, a succession of untoward seasons brings the family ark well-nigh to wreck and ruin, it is obvious that no such holiday-making can be thought of. "Certainly not this year, perhaps not next year," says Paterfamilias, sorrowfully, but firmly. Then doubtless all the reserves are called up; steady, instructive reading must take the place of travel, old acquaintances whose minds, so to speak, have been read through and through, and dog's-eared besides, must perforce be endured through lack of charmingly-new fresh romantically-respectful strangers. The old dresses are turned and returned, freshly trimmed, and their terms of service lengthened by every economical device, pathetic in the patience and true homely virtue displayed. But though all these substitutes and makeshifts are availed of, the time *does* pass a little wearily and monotonously.

But now the "route was given," the delightful signal had sounded. The sudden change of ideas necessitated by the announcement of Mr. Stamford was at first bewildering to his wife, and nearly in an equal degree to his daughters.

102

Calculation and arrangement were required; much forecasting as to where they were to go first, when they could possibly be ready to start, maternal doubts as to what poor Hubert would do in their absence, as the maids would necessarily return to their friends. These weighty considerations absorbed so much time and thought that it was generally agreed to be a species of miracle by which the family found themselves safely packed in the waggonette one memorable Monday on the way to Mooarmah railway station, the luggage having been sent on in the early morning.

"Poor dear Hubert, it seems so selfish to leave him at home by himself," said Laura; "I think one of us ought to have stayed to keep house for him."

"It's not too late now," said Linda. "Which is it to be? Shall we toss up? I'm quite ready, if I lose."

"No! I will stay," said Laura. "I'm the eldest."

"I think I will stop after all," said Mrs. Stamford. "You two girls are due for a little enjoyment, and it does not matter so much about me."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Mr. Stamford, with rather more emphasis than usual. "Your mother wants a change as much as any of us. It's very good of you girls to be ready to remain, and it pleases me, my dears. But Hubert is man enough to look after himself, as well as the station, for a month or two. When our holiday is up, his will begin."

103

“As if I would have let anybody stop,” said Hubert, “let alone the dear mater; bless her old heart! And how am I going to do when I go to the ‘Never-Never’ country, do you suppose—and I must have a turn there some day—if you all coddle me up so?”

“I hope you never will go to that dreadful new country,” said Mrs. Stamford, half-tearfully. “Didn’t you read that shocking account of the poor fellow who died of thirst by the telegraph line the other day, besides that nice young Belford who was killed by the blacks?”

“Accidents will happen,” said Hubert. “The British Empire wouldn’t be what it is, if every mother kept her boy at home so that she could see him, while she knitted his warm socks. Windāhgil is paying fairly now, but there’s no fortune to be made here, is there, governor?”

“I didn’t know that you were growing discontented with your lot, my boy,” said the father, looking admiringly at his first-born; “but there’s time enough to think about all that. I’ll see when we are all settled at home again. There goes the bell; we must take our places. God bless you, my boy!”

The following morning found the Stamford family comfortably deposited in one of the hotels which in Sydney combine proximity to the sea with perfect accessibility from all city centres. Bath and breakfast had removed all traces of fatigue or travelling discomfort. Laura, with her sister, was standing at a window which overlooked the sea, wild with delight at the unaccustomed glory of the ocean.

“Oh! what a lovely, lovely sight!” cried Linda. “Look at that glorious bay, with those white-winged boats flying across it like sea-gulls—it’s an old simile, I know, but it always sounds nice. Look at the rocks and promontories, beaches and islands! And there, a great ocean liner is moving majestically along, as if she was going to steam up to the verandah. Wouldn’t it be nice if she did! I wonder what the people would be like? Oh! I shall expire with joy and wonder if I stay here much longer.”

“Then put on your bonnet, and come to George Street with me,” said Mrs. Stamford. “I want to do a little quiet shopping before lunch. Laura can stay with her father. He is going to take her to see the Grandisons.”

“Oh! how nice; I haven’t seen a real shop,” said Linda, “like Palmer’s and David Bowen’s, you know, since I was a little girl. That will tone the excitement down a little, or give it a new direction. Oh, I *do* feel so happy! Do you think it will last, mother? It can’t be any better in England—or Fairyland. The world does not offer anything superior to my present feeling of perfect—yes, perfect happiness. Don’t let us go to the opera for a week yet, till I have had time to subside. I feel like a glass of champagne; I should effervesce over. La! la, la, la! la, la, la! la, la!” And here the excited girl waltzed into her bed-room to the tune of “The Venetia.”

When Mrs. Stamford and her youngest daughter departed on their shopping expedition, the latter declaring that she felt the greatest difficulty in restraining herself from bursting into song from pure gladsomeness of heart, her father betook himself in a cab with Laura to Mr. Grandison’s house, where he proposed to leave her with her cousin Josie till his return in the evening. Laura was little less inwardly delighted with her general surroundings than Linda, but not being so highly demonstrative, she forbore to testify her pleasure by bodily movement. Yet was her heart filled with innocent joy and honest admiration as she surveyed the unwonted scene.

As their carriage wound slowly up one of the steep ascents by which, on leaving the city proper, the more fashionable suburbs are reached, her dark eyes sparkled and her fair cheek glowed while she pointed out the fresh combination of sea and shore.

“Oh, father!” she said, “when you look on this, does it not seem strange that any one should choose to live away from the sea? I should spend half my time on the beach! What changeful beauty! What new wonders arise, even from this tiny outlook! Nothing can be more delicious than this harbour, with gardens and lawns down to the very ends of the promontories. The dear little bays too, like fairy pictures, with smooth shores, and a big rock with an archway here and there. And oh! the Heads! Grand and majestic, are they not?—frowning above the restless deep like eternal ocean portals. I can see billows, I declare. How vast and awe-striking! I am really thankful we haven’t been to Sydney all these bad seasons. A day like this is worth a year of common life.”

“That’s an extravagant price to pay for a day’s pleasure, pussy,” said her father fondly, as he watched the fire of enthusiasm glow in the girl’s bright eyes, which seemed to dilate and sparkle at intervals as if the glory of the grand vision had been transfused into her very blood. “You will count your years, as other people count their money, much more carefully as you grow older. But I trust, pet, that you will have long years of happiness before you, and that this is not the only one of earth’s precious things that you will enjoy.”

“What a divine pleasure travel must be!” said she, gazing steadfastly before her, as if looking out on a new world of wonder and enchantment. “Think of seeing, with one’s own very eyes, the cities and battle-fields of the earth, the shrines of the dead, immortal past! Oh! to see Rome and Venice, Athens and the Greek Isles, even dear old England with Saxon ruins and Norman castles. I wonder it does not kill people.”

“Happiness is rarely fatal, though the sensation of sudden joy is often overpowering,” remarked Mr. Stamford with a quiet smile, as he recalled his own recent experience. “But I hope you and Linda will qualify yourselves by study for an intelligent appreciation of the marvels of the Old World. That is,”—he added—“in the event of your being fortunate enough

to get there. ‘We colonists have a great deal to learn in art and literature,’ as Lord Kimberley was pleased to say the other day. We must show that we are not altogether without a glimmering of taste and attainment.”

“That is the fixed British idea about all colonists,” said Laura with indignation. “I suppose Lord Kimberley thinks we do nothing but chop down trees and gallop about all day long. Well, one mustn’t boast, but we have been getting on with our French and Italian lately, and Linda’s sketches show something more than amateur work, I think.”

When they drew up at Chatsworth, and the cabman was opening the gold and bronze-coloured iron gates, Laura’s ecstasies broke out anew.

“Oh! father, do look; did you ever see such a beautiful place? Look at the gravel, look at the flowers, look at the sea which makes a background for the whole picture! Look at that purple mass of *Bougainvillea* covering all one side of the house. Why the lawn is like a big billiard table! It is a morsel of Fairyland. How happy they must be in such a lovely home!”

108

“Humph!” said Mr. Stamford, “perhaps the less we say about that the better. The people that live in the best houses do not always lead the pleasantest lives. But it certainly is a show place.”

It was truly difficult to overpraise the Chatsworth house and grounds. Nature had been bountiful, and every beauty was heightened, every trifling defect corrected by art.

The gravel of which the drive was composed was in itself a study—its dark red colour, its perfect condition, daily raked and rolled as it was to the smoothness of a board. Rare shrubs and massed flowers bordered the accurately defined tiled edges. The bright blue blossoms of the *Jacaranda*, the scarlet stars of the *Hibiscus*, the broad purple and green leaves of the *Coleus*, the waving, restless spires of the pine, the rustling, delicate banana fronds—all these and a host of tropical plants which the mild Sydney winter suffers to flourish in the open air, were here. Fountains, tennis-grounds, and shaded walks, all were to be found in the tiny demesne, every yard of which had been measured and calculated so as to produce the largest amount of effect and convenience.

109

The hot-house and green-houses were under the care of an autocratic Scotch gardener, who treated Mr. Grandison’s suggestions with silent contempt, and obeyed or defied Mrs. Grandison’s orders as to fruit or flowers entirely as it seemed good to him.

Mrs. Grandison was at home. The footman admitted so much, as he asked the country cousins into a morning room—a most grand apartment to their eyes; nevertheless, Mrs. Grandison’s countenance—she was there alone—wore a clouded and dissatisfied expression. She relaxed considerably, though with an effort, as her visitors were announced, and came forward to greet them warmly enough.

“So glad to see you, Mr. Stamford. It was nice of you to bring Laura. Why you look as fresh as a rose, child! How do you manage to have such a complexion in a hot district? I tell Josie she is getting as pale as a ghost, and yellow too. The fact is, she goes out too much, and this Sydney climate is enough to age any one. She hasn’t been down to breakfast yet—naughty girl—but she was at the Moreton’s ball last night. Mrs. Watchtower took her, and she didn’t get home till past four o’clock.”

“I suppose Grandison’s in town,” said Mr. Stamford.

“Oh! yes; he goes in regularly every day, though I often tell him I don’t know what he has to do. He lunches at his club; you’ll find him there at one o’clock. He says it’s dull enough there, but nothing to what it would be if he stopped at home. Not very complimentary, is it? But men are all alike; they like to get away from their wives and families.”

110

“I’ve brought mine with me, you see, this time; so I don’t fall under your disapproval.”

“Oh! I do think you’re pretty good, as men go, though there’s no knowing. But, Laura, you’d better go up to Josie’s room, if you want to have a talk, or else you may have to wait. Now, Mr. Stamford, when will you all come and dine? To-day you’ll be tired—to-morrow or next day, which shall it be—and we’ll have somebody to make it a little lively for the girls?”

“Thank you. I think the day after to-morrow, if it is equally convenient,” said Stamford. “And now I must go, as I have some business to attend to. I will leave Laura, with your permission, and call for her as I return in the afternoon.”

“Oh! yes, by all means. Josie will enjoy a long talk with her. What a fine girl she has grown, and so handsome too! She wants dressing a bit. But how does she manage to get all that fine bloom in the bush? I thought Windāhgil was a hot place, yet Laura looks as fresh as a milkmaid.”

“She is a good girl, and has had very little dissipation. We lead very simple lives in the bush, you know. My daughters are very unsophisticated as yet.”

111

“That’s all very well, but being simple doesn’t give beauty or style, and Laura seems to have a very fair share of both. You let her come to the Assembly Ball next week that all the girls are talking about, and see what a sensation she’ll make.”

“If there’s a ball while we are down I should not think of denying the girls a legitimate pleasure, though Linda is rather young yet; but I think you flatter Laura.”

“Not a bit. It’s her fresh, natural manner that will strike everybody, and the way all her face seems to speak without words. Her eyes are perfectly wonderful. Why didn’t you tell us she

was such a beauty, and had a charming manner?”

“To my mind, it’s rather a disadvantage than otherwise—the beauty—not the manner, of course,” said Mr. Stamford philosophically. “I beg you won’t inform her of the fact, though I really don’t think she’d believe you, my dear Mrs. Grandison. But I must go now, so good-bye for the present.”

“It is nearly lunch time now,” said Mrs. Grandison; “you may as well stay, and go to town afterwards.” But Mr. Stamford pleaded “urgent private affairs,” and notwithstanding the temptress—who began to look forward to a lonely meal, with the two girls chatting in the bed-room, and was fain to fall back on even a middle-aged squatter—he sought his cab.

[112] Mr. Stamford looked at his watch; it wanted more than half an hour to one o’clock. He bade his cabman drive briskly, and was landed at the palatial offices of the Austral Agency Company in reasonable time. He dashed into Barrington Hope’s sanctuary with something like boyish enthusiasm. That gentleman raised his head from a pile of accounts, and to Mr. Stamford’s eyes looked even more careworn and fagged than at his last visit.

“How are you, Mr. Stamford?” he said, with a sudden brightening up of the weary features. “But I needn’t ask. You’re a different man from what you were when our acquaintance commenced. And no wonder. Talk about physicians! Rain is the king of them all. Tell me a healer, a preserver like him! What a grand season you have had, to be sure—the precursor of many others, I hope. The Windāhgil wool brought a high price, didn’t it? Splendidly got up; every one said so. Bought for the French market. It made a character for the brand, if one was wanted. But all this is gossip. You wanted to say something on business.”

“Not now,” said Mr. Stamford; “‘sufficient for the day,’ and so on. We only reached Sydney this morning. But I have a piece of very particular business. I want you to come down and dine with us, *en famille*, at Batty’s this evening. Brought my wife and daughters down. They’re anxious to make your acquaintance.”

[113] “Delighted, I’m sure. I hope the ladies will find Sydney amusing. There’s nothing going on particularly, except a Bachelors’ Ball next week, of which I happen to be a steward. Perhaps you will allow me to send you invitations.”

“I can answer for their being accepted,” said Mr. Stamford, “as far as my daughters are concerned. Their parents are rather old to do more than look on. But I will promise to do that energetically. And now I will not bother you longer. You have a stiff bit of work before you there. Don’t knock yourself up, that’s all. There’s such a thing as overdoing these confounded figure columns, and when a cogwheel goes, Nature’s workshop provides no duplicate.”

“I understand you,” said Hope, pressing his hand with a quick gesture to his forehead. “I *have* felt rather run down lately. The business has been increasing at a tremendous rate, too. I must take a holiday before long, though I don’t quite see my way.”

“Come and see us at Windāhgil,” said Mr. Stamford warmly. “The fresh bush air and a gallop on horseback will set you right again. That’s all you want. We must talk about it. In the meantime, adieu.” And Mr. Stamford vanished.

He reached his hotel in time for lunch, where he found Mrs. Stamford and Linda, who had returned from their expedition into the heart of the kingdom of finery.

[114] Linda declared that she had never comprehended the subject before—never was aware that she knew nothing, so to speak, of this all-engrossing subject, so important in all its details to womanhood. “I can quite imagine people with lots of money going to any lengths in the way of dress,” she said. “The variety is so charming, and the milliners are so persuasive. How that dear little girl at Farmer’s tried to get me to take the silk dress. Didn’t she, mother?”

“I was afraid she would succeed at one time, my dear; you appeared to be hesitating.”

“I should have liked it, of course. Such a lovely lilac. It suited my complexion perfectly, she said; but I knew my allowance wouldn’t stand it, and you have been so good, my dear old dad. I don’t want you and mother to think I can’t resist temptation.”

“Act on steady principles through life, my dear, and you will never regret it. I don’t say the silk dresses and other suitable vanities may not come in time, but not just yet, not yet for my little girls. And now for the reward of merit. Mr. Hope is coming to dine with us this evening, so you and Laura must entertain him pleasantly.”

“Oh, what a delightful surprise! Sydney is full of them. Of course I knew we should see him some time or other, but perhaps not for ever so long, unless he called. I wonder if he will be like my impression of him? Does Laura know of it?”

[115] “Not until I go for her, unless you would like to send her a telegram; but I think she will have full time for preparation.”

“What a pity it will be if they keep her at Chatsworth! They are sure to want to. But don’t you give in, if they do ever so much.”

“There will be the less necessity for that, my dear Linda, as we are all to dine there on the day after to-morrow. They can feast their eyes on Laura and all the family then.”

“That is surprise number two. A real dinner-party! It will be my first invitation to one. I hope I shall behave well, and not upset my wine-glass or do anything dreadful. I shall be looking at the butler or the hostess, or the attractive guests, I know, and break something. I think I shall begin to practise calm dignity to-night, mother. Don’t you think it a good opportunity?”

“If my little girl remembers what she has always been taught,” said the fond mother, looking at the girlish, eager face, bright with the hues of early womanhood, “and will not think about herself, or the effect she is likely to produce, she will do very well. I don’t think we shall have cause to be ashamed of her. And now for a little luncheon. My appetite is really quite surprising.”

After lunch Mr. Stamford betook himself to the Archaic Club, where it was tolerably certain his friend would be found, for an hour or two. By the way, how very few married men return to their homes, even those of abounding leisure, before it is time to dress for dinner. They will sit yawning at a club, when they have nothing to do, where they care for nobody, and don’t go in for reading or even play billiards, until the late afternoon, when there is just time to catch a cab or train to reach home in the gathering twilight.

116

How, then, can these things be? The solution of this and other social problems must be left to the coming philosophical student, who will analyse and depict the causes of all seeming anomalies.

CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Stamford, on inquiring of the club porter, found that his friend was at home, so to speak, and had not been more than ten minutes in an apartment very unostentatiously furnished, which was devoted to the reception of strangers, when Mr. Grandison entered.

“Are you club magnates afraid that strangers may run away with a chair or two, or a spare sofa, that you are so confoundedly parsimonious in the furniture line?” inquired Stamford. “I have more than once considered the question when I have been kicking my heels here and at the Junior Pioneers, and that is the conclusion I have arrived at. It must be so. Surely there must be a legend of a dried-out squatter being driven to spout an arm-chair or a table-cover. Isn’t that it?”

“You’re in famous spirits, Harold, old man,” said the capitalist, who was by no means over-joyous of demeanour. “It’s the rain that’s done it, I suppose. ’Pon my soul, you’re right about this room. It isn’t fit for a gentleman to be put into. I must bring it before the committee. How are Mrs. Stamford and the girls? Brought them down?”

“Yes, we’re at Batty’s. I took Laura to Chatsworth this morning; I’m going out now to call for her. I saw Mrs. Grandison; she was kind enough to ask us to dine on Thursday.”

“That’s all right. Now I’ll tell you what I’ll do. The mail-phaeton will be here in five minutes, and we’ll go out home together. I want to have a talk with you. Things are not going altogether right in the family, and I want another good yarn with you. You know what I told you about Carlo? Well, he’s done worse since then, pretty near broke my heart and his mother’s.” And here Mr. Grandison looked so worried and hopeless that his friend felt himself to be grossly selfish in that he found himself in such good spirits.

“I’m very sorry to hear it, Bob, my dear fellow,” said he with real concern. “But worse! how can he have done worse?”

“He *has* done worse, much worse. He has married, and married badly too, by Jingo!” and here Mr. Grandison could no longer contain himself.

“I hate to talk about it,” said he, after a pause, “but it’s one of those things that must be faced. And of course you and I are too old friends to mind telling each other the whole truth. But the fact is, the confounded young fool has gone and married a barmaid.”

“You don’t say so!” said Mr. Stamford, starting back as from a blow, but gradually bringing his mind to bear on the question, and wondering how the consequences and complication of such an inconceivable step in the case of an eldest son would end. “Carlo a married man! And to a barmaid too! Surely there must be some mistake. How in the world did it happen—how could it happen?” he asked.

“I suppose it could happen, because it did,” answered his friend gloomily. “Unfortunately, it’s only too true. The fact is, that while he was living in Tasmania—you know he had just gone there when you were in Sydney last, after that card-scrape he got into here—he was living an idle, aimless life. He did that here, for that matter, so that there was no need for him to complain about it so bitterly. I sent him a very fair allowance, and thought he was well out of harm’s way. He used to write his mother long letters; I thought he was on the way to be reformed.” Here Mr. Grandison lit a cigar.

“What happened then?”

“After that he wanted me to give him an allowance, and let him go to Europe. I wish to heaven I had done so now!”

“But why didn’t you?”

“Because I couldn’t trust him. I knew if I let him go on that understanding, he would overdraw his allowance—gamble on a large scale at some of those foreign places—Baden Baden or Homburg. Blow his brains out then, perhaps.”

“I should have let him go, but I can understand your very natural reluctance.”

“Yes, he’s a bad boy, Stamford, there’s no denying. But he’s my eldest son, my first child. My God! how I remember all the love and fondness poor Mary and I lavished on him—how we fretted ourselves to death when he had any childish complaint—the agony we were in when he was away from home one night, we thought he was lost. And to think he should have repaid us for all our care and love, perhaps foolish indulgence, like this—like this! It’s very bitter; it’s hard to bear. Dashed if I didn’t envy our gardener last week, whose son was apprenticed to a blacksmith! I did, by Jove! What’s all the money to us now?”

“It is hard, my dear fellow,” said Stamford, touched by his friend’s evident distress and hopeless air. “I pity you from my heart. But are things so very bad? Can nothing be done?”

“Well they might be worse. The girl’s character is good, I believe; she is a dairyman’s daughter, with no education, and that’s all the harm I know of her. She has a pretty face. Carlo met her at a roadside inn near where he was lodging. He writes over and says he was so confoundedly dull and miserable that he’d made up his mind he’d either marry the girl if she’d have him, or shoot himself. She did have him. So this is the end of all our slaving and striving for his benefit and to give him a chance of keeping in the first flight of the best society the colony could show. He goes and throws himself away like this. And we have a daughter-in-law that doesn’t know an aitch when she sees it, I suppose, and if ever she comes here, which isn’t

likely, perhaps, can’t tell a finger-glass from a flower-pot.” At this dreadful picture evoked from his inner consciousness, Mr. Grandison groaned again, and made as if he could tear his hair, were such gestures of grief permissible in a member of a fashionable club.

Mr. Stamford did not really know for the moment what to say to console the unhappy father, who, unless his son had died, could hardly have been in a position of more hopeless sorrow. No doubt some fathers would have been sufficiently Spartan to have preferred an honourable death to an undesirable marriage. But, except in business matters, he was not a hard man. Stamford knew that such Lacedæmonian severity was alien to his nature. He set himself to suggest consolatory ideas as the London built phaeton drew up to the club steps.

“It’s a bad enough affair, doubtless. I won’t say I don’t think so. I should have felt all you do, in my own case.” Here Mr. Stamford inwardly scoffed at the possibility of Hubert’s acting in this manner under any possible circumstances. “But it’s no use taking too sombre a view. The girl is good looking, and honest, which is much. She will, doubtless improve with opportunities. If she has any strength of character, she will probably keep Carlo straight for the future. We have known such things happen before. It’s a desperate remedy, but occasionally efficacious.”

“Desperate! You may say so,” replied Mr. Grandison, testily. “Take the other side of the question. Suppose she turns out a flirt or a scold—or both; runs away from him, or he from her, leaving three or four half-bred brats to worry me in my old age. What then?”

With the expression of these gloomy apprehensions as to the probable matrimonial fate of the heir apparent of Chatsworth and many a fair acre of plain and woodland, the phaeton entered the massive and ornate portals of Chatsworth House, and crunched the immaculate gravel, while the lord of all sat with folded arms and darkened brow, indifferent as a captive to outer grandeur.

“Here we are! Come in Harold, old man,” he said, as the wheels almost grazed the portico. “By George, I could find it in my heart to sit down and cry on our own doorstep, but we have to live and see it out, I suppose. Didn’t you say you were going to take Laura back? Better stay and dine. Keep me company, there’s a good fellow. I’m low enough, God knows!”

Harold Stamford would have agreed to this proposal at once, so touched was he by his old friend’s woebegone appearance and desponding words, but he recalled his own engagement. This he pleaded successfully, adding, “You’ll have the whole family here on Thursday.”

“All right, if you can’t, you can’t. Here, Bateman,” he called out to the coachman who was driving away from the front, “don’t go away yet. I want you to take Mr. Stamford and his daughter home. You may as well go back to Batty’s in comfort, and this pair doesn’t get half work enough. They’ll be making a bolt of it one of these days like Carlo, if I don’t look out. Ha, ha!”

Mr. Grandison’s laugh was not pleasant to hear. His friend followed him into the drawing-room in silence. Here sat the three ladies, who were apparently not in bad spirits. Mrs. Grandison had chased from her brow the marks of care which were so apparent at an earlier period of the day, and was joining, apparently without effort, in the vivacious discourse of the two young ladies. Miss Josie had contrived to arise and apparel herself after the fashion of the period, and though showing some of the pallor produced by a round of gaiety in a semi-tropical climate, was on the whole sufficiently attractive.

“So this is Laura,” said Mr. Grandison, as he advanced and warmly greeted the young lady in question. “Why, what a woman you’ve grown, and a handsome one, too, or I mistake much. Why, Josie, we must send you up to the banks of the Warra Warra, or wherever Windāhgil is. Near Mooramah, isn’t it, Stamford? ’Pon my soul! I forget where my own stations are sometimes.”

“You won’t catch me going into the bush, father!” said Miss Josie, in a rather sharp tone of voice. “That is, not farther than North Shore. It certainly agrees with some people, and Laura here might play the part of Patience without dressing. But Sydney is my home, and I don’t mean to stir from it.”

“It’s the worst day’s work I ever did in my life when I brought you all to live here,” said her father. “I wish to heaven we had continued to live at the old bush cottage you were born in, my lady.”

“I don’t see what difference that would have made, Robert,” said his wife.

“But I do,” said the master of the house. “You and your children would never have learned the habits of fashionable folly and reckless extravagance in which your lives are spent. We might have been satisfied with a more natural existence—aye, and, a happier life.”

“If you only come home early to say disagreeable things, my dear Robert, I must say that I like the old way best,” said Mrs. Grandison with dignity.

“I would say a great many more things of the same sort,” replied he, “if I could persuade myself that they would do any good. But it is too late now. We have sown the wind and must reap the whirlwind.”

This form of discussion tended to render things generally rather uncomfortable. It would have been difficult to direct the conversation into a more conventional channel had not Mr. Grandison abruptly left the room.

“I can’t think what has put Robert out so this afternoon,” said his wife, “of course he keeps worrying himself about that dreadful affair of Carlo’s—wicked boy! He told you about that, Mr. Stamford, I know. I’ve cried my eyes out, and I shall never be the same woman again, I know. But what is the use of making your life one long misery for the sake of a selfish, disobedient son? He never considered us, I firmly believe, since he was a boy at school. Then why, as Josie says, should we consider him? I am not going to grieve over him any longer. He has chosen his path.”

“He’s a selfish, stupid, unprincipled fellow,” said Josie, with an air of cold decision. “He has done everything he could to disgrace himself and us. I am not going to spoil my life on his account, and I shall never mention his name, or that of the servant-girl he has chosen to bring into the family.”

“I think you are too hard; I do indeed, Josie!” said her mother, “though he deserves very little at our hands. You are not his mother, my dear, and you don’t know how it feels. But I can’t think we should deny ourselves anything in society for his sake. Just at the beginning of the gay season in Sydney, too!”

126

Laura, who had looked extremely grave throughout the discussion, now felt inclined to smile at Mrs. Grandison’s distressful *finale*. She rose, and looked at her father to explain the absolute necessity for their departure.

“We shall see you all here at dinner on Thursday, then, mind that!” said their hostess. “And, Laura, put on your best bib and tucker. I’ll have some of our show young men to meet you.”

“I’m sure I don’t know where you’ll find them, mother,” said Josie, disdainfully. “Since the Lorenzo went to Fiji, there hasn’t been a man in Sydney fit to look at.”

The coachman’s temper was not improved by the length of time during which he had been kept waiting. One of the highly-conditioned, irregularly-exercised horses had indeed revenged himself by pawing and scraping, the result of which was a hole in the gravel, which caused the head gardener to use a much stronger expression when he saw it than, still mindful of kirk and minister, he was in the habit of employing.

As they went spinning down the incline to Double Bay, in the easy, well-hung carriage, her father said, “Wouldn’t you like to have a drag like this, my dear, to put your husband down at his office in if you were married and lived in Sydney?”

“That means if I were somebody else altogether,” replied Laura, with a slight blush. “I can’t say how I might act then. But if you ask me whether I would change places with the poor people in the splendid house we have just left, I say, with the country mouse, ‘Give me my hollow tree and liberty,’ or rather our love and affection for each other. I don’t think anything could happen to alter that; do you, father?”

127

Mr. Stamford answered by a quick, decided movement rather than by words. It is to be hoped no one in that fashionable suburb observed the action; but even if so, the faultlessly aristocratic appearance of the equipage in which the offenders sat would have sufficed to condone the offence.

A comparatively short time saw them at Hyde Park—too short, indeed, it seemed to Laura, eager to enjoy the varied beauty of the scene. The splendours of the dying day, the roll of the surge upon the outer shore, the rising ocean breeze, all these seemed to the keen and cultured sense of the enthusiastic maiden but portions of a wondrous panorama, of which each hour furnished a fresh presentment.

Linda, from the balcony, beheld them arrive in state, and waved her handkerchief in token of welcome and approval. “Oh! Laura, I was beginning to think you were never coming. What kept you so late? You will hardly have time to dress for dinner, and I do so want you to look well.”

“Why should you want me to look well? I fancied I was looking rather nice—that is, for a country cousin, as Josie says.”

128

“What!” almost shouted Linda; “hasn’t father told you? I see he hasn’t—isn’t it just like him? If the Duke of Edinburgh and Lord Wolseley were coming to dinner he’d forget all about it. And yet he thinks he’s a good father.”

“So he is,” said Laura, “and I won’t have him run down. What is the dreadful secret? Has the aide-de-camp come to ask us to dinner at Government House?”

“No! But without joking, Laura, it is a matter of importance. That is—we should have thought so at Windāhgil. Mr. Barrington Hope is coming to dine.”

“Is he?” said Laura, coolly. Linda afterwards said it was “unnatural calmness.” “Then suppose you ask the maid to turn on the gas directly. We must put on our best bibs and tuckers, as Mrs. Grandison says.”

Mr. Barrington Hope arrived in due time, accurately apparelled and looking—as most men do—to great advantage in evening costume. Though much above the ordinary height, his breadth of shoulder and justness of proportion prevented any appearance of incongruity. Evidently one of those persons who wisely dismiss the problems of the day with their ordinary garb, his features wore an entirely different expression, so closely allied to careless ease that Mr. Stamford could hardly believe he saw before him the anxious brain-worker of the morning.

129

As the two men stood together on the balcony overlooking the bay with its evening crowd of

water-wayfarers and pleasure seekers, the elder said—

"How wonderful an image of rest and peace a calm sea presents, especially at this hour! There are hard work and deep thoughts frequently upon blue water, but I confess I can never connect them together."

"My own feeling, quite," said Hope. "I am passionately fond of the sea, but few people have less time for indulging such a taste. I always feel it to be the true home of the lotus-eater. 'In calm or storm, by rock or bay,' there is rest for the soul when on the deep. If I were safely embarked for Europe and clear of the Heads, I should almost expire of joy, I really believe."

"But why do you not take a holiday—a run to Fiji, San Francisco, Galle, anywhere? All places strange and foreign are equally good for change."

"Or to the moon," laughed the young man. "Nearly as much chance of getting to one as the other. However, I will think it over and arrange."

"Depend upon it, you should not delay. I am something of a physiognomist, and I see reasons for a foreign tour. Why not make an application? Urgent private affairs. They could not be more truthfully described. But here come my young people."

Mrs. Stamford and her daughters now appeared. With her usual prompt kindness she advanced, upon hearing her husband commence a formal introduction, and held out her hand to the young man.

"You are well known to us by name, Mr. Hope! I have great pleasure, believe me, in making your acquaintance. I trust some day that we may be able to see you at Windāhgil. You will be indeed welcome to our country home."

Mr. Hope bowed with an air as if disclaiming all title to unusual indulgence, but his eyes strayed from the kind face of the speaker to that of Laura Stamford, to whom, with Linda, he was now presented.

Both these young ladies, in spite of an air of calm repose, were inwardly somewhat agitated at beholding a personage in whose favour they had heard so much. Prone, like most damsels of the romantic age, to invest the probable hero with striking attributes, they had yet fallen short of a correct estimate of Barrington Hope's appearance. Connecting him in more or less degree with his mercantile profession, they had expected perhaps a look of greater age, a more concentrated regard, or care-encumbered countenance. When therefore they were confronted by one of the best-looking, best-dressed men in the metropolis, separated as to air and manner apparently from any commonplace pecuniary labours, they could hardly believe their eyes.

Linda was inwardly gnashing her teeth, and reproaching the author of her being in that he was such an inefficient hand at description. "Would not any one have imagined, Laura," she said afterwards, "that Mr. Hope was a hard-headed sort of person, clever at figures and all that, and good to us? And now, quite suddenly we are brought face to face with a magnificent man—the finest man I ever saw in my life. Isn't it a shame—a crying shame, Laura?"

"Isn't what a crying shame? That Mr. Hope is asked to dine, or that we couldn't write and request his photograph before the original burst upon us in all his glory? Do you think you would have liked to behave differently?"

"I am sure I can't tell. But it was such a surprise. I might have fainted and disgraced myself. But you are such a cold-blooded creature, Laura; I sometimes think you have no heart."

"H'm," said Laura, "that is a matter of opinion. I do not profess to wear my heart upon my sleeve, but there is an article of the kind somewhere deep down, I daresay. What do I think about Mr. Hope? I think him very nice. He is well-informed, though he did not parade his knowledge. Understands the science of music, and plays with taste. I don't know that I can say more about him at present."

"What a prosaic list of qualities; it might have been read out of a book! But didn't you like him a great deal?"

"How could I like any one a great deal the first day I met him? Do you think I resemble Miss Morton's heroines, who meet a perfectly unknown young man, and in an hour have told him all their family affairs and inmost thoughts? That kind of transparent simplicity is not in my line."

"But you do like him, Laura. Say you do really."

"Of course I like a handsome, agreeable man who has been of the greatest use and benefit to the family, as I like any pleasant acquaintance. Further than that I decline to commit myself. And now let me go to sleep."

"How you can go to sleep entirely astonishes me. Oh! wasn't it a delightful dinner? I felt so nice. I am sure I looked the essence of propriety and countrified inexperience. Do you think he could discover that we had seen very little society, Laura?"

"If he was not a very unobservant man he might easily have made out so much, I should say; that is if he troubled himself to study us so deeply. What can it matter?"

It was not only on that memorable evening that Barrington Hope produced a favourable impression upon the youthful portion of the Stamford family. Mrs. Stamford was charmed with him. His manner was so easy, yet so deferential and so respectful to her and her daughters. Well-informed as to the European politics of the day, he inferentially, in an argument with Mr.

Stamford, showed himself to be widely read. He was familiar with the latest songs, the very last waltz; he sang a duet with Laura, and even played an accompaniment which showed more than theoretical knowledge of the science of music.

When he made his adieux somewhat early in the evening, every voice was musical in his praise.

“He’s a delightful creature,” said Linda, “all my fancy painted him, and more. How different he is from most of the men one meets. So free from conceit, and yet he knows so much, doesn’t he? And what a good touch he has on the piano! But men always play better than we do when they play at all. When are we going to see him again?”

“He is to send us tickets for the Bachelors’ Ball,” said Laura. “We shall meet him there, of course. What a grand affair it is to be!”

“I shall catch a fever and die before the day arrives,” said Linda, plaintively. “The happiness will be too great to be realised. Oh! oh, dear! Oh! dear! how shall we pass the intervening days? Luckily our dresses will take up a good deal of our thoughts and spare time. Do you think he dances well, Laura?”

“Mr. Hope appears to do many things well. I don’t suppose he showed us all his good qualities in one evening. He is a man of the world, and doesn’t have all his goods in the shop window at once.”

134

“What a horrid idea, Laura. You haven’t half as much sentiment as I have. I hope he hasn’t many more accomplishments; I don’t care for a man being perfect. Perhaps he has a bad temper underneath. Men with soft voices often have.”

“I didn’t notice any uncommon softness of voice. I thought he spoke naturally, which is the great thing after all, with men or women either. But after we go to the ball you will most likely discover that there are other men in the world.”

“I don’t care. I am quite certain there are very few nicer ones, if any. I think you must admire him yourself, Laura; you are so guarded about him, and I am sure he has taken a fancy to you.”

“Nonsense, Linda! Really you are old enough to talk more sensibly. How can any one form any liking or otherwise in a single evening?”

“What, not love at first sight?” exclaimed Linda, jumping up in an excited manner. “Do you disbelieve wholly in that? What does Disraeli say in that lovely *Venetia* of his? ‘There is no love but love at first sight,’ or first love, I forget which.”

“They are different things,” answered Laura; “but Disraeli ought to have more sense than to write in a way to turn silly girls’ heads. I think your novel-reading will have to be restricted, Linda, before long; I must really speak to mother.”

135

“It’s too late now, Laura. I’ve read all sorts of things, but they don’t do girls any harm. Bad companions do, if you like. They are destructive; but we never had any friends that we were ashamed of. And so you don’t like Mr. Hope.”

“I didn’t say that,” answered Laura; “but really you’re as persistent as an interviewer, Linda,” and she quitted the room.

In spite of Linda’s repeated assertions that the week preceding the ball never would come to an end, the despised days passed away—perhaps too quickly indeed for some people. A picnic in the harbour, the detail of which was arranged by Mr. Hope, and which every one enjoyed ecstatically, as Linda avowed, perhaps aided the flight of time. A visit to the theatre, where the London Comedy Company was performing, also tended to prevent undue concentration of thought. And, oh! wonder of wonders, and joy of joys, was not the Intercolonial Exhibition, that Aladdin’s Palace of Art and Industry, daily open, daily enjoyed to the very acme of novel excitement?

How delicious was it to stroll around the fountain in the afternoon of each day, while the music of the Austrian Band rose to the lofty roof or floated dreamlike amid the aisles and courts; to sit silently absorbing delicious sounds amid the strange beauty and variety of the scene; to wander amid the heaped up riches of the curiosities of every land under the sun, encountering well-known friends unexpectedly, or exchanging the pleasantries of the hour with gay acquaintances. Such were the resources thrown open to the erstwhile dwellers at Windāhgil. Small surprise need therefore be aroused by Linda’s next declaration, that the ball would be upon them all too swiftly, and find them unprepared. Strangely sweet sorrows and sighs of youth! joys in disguise are they for the most part.

136

CHAPTER IX

Although the ball bore the name of the Bachelors', it was generally known to be an entertainment got up by the unmarried members of the leading clubs. As was their wont, no expense would be spared. Invitations had been comparatively restricted; many had been disappointed who had made certain of the privilege. All this, of course, made the happy possessors of the tickets still more gratified by their good fortune. The finest hall in the city had been secured for the occasion. The ornamentation was said to be unparalleled, the supper without precedent for style and expensiveness. A celebrated European band, then on a tour through Australia, had been engaged. Sailors from a man-of-war anchored in the harbour were kindly lent to hold a rope which served to divide the ball-room. It was questionable whether so truly magnificent a ball had ever been given in Sydney, or perhaps would be given again.

The weather was evidently "set fair"—there would be no deduction from comfort on that account. It was weeks since a great society entertainment had been given. The *haute volée* of Sydney was manifestly fluttered. Some of the younger feminine members openly stated that, after tasting to the full of its delights, they would be ready to lie down and die.

At length the long-expected day arrived, on the night of which the fondly-anticipated Bachelors' Ball was to take place. All feminine adult Sydney—that is to say, the fortunate section which was entitled to the *entrée*—was moved to its centre. No statistics are to hand of the number of dressmakers who temporarily became of unsound mind because of the terrific call upon their fingers and brains, tempers and tongues. Nevertheless, according to the doctrine of averages, there must have been a certain number of the managers and of the young persons whose passage to an early grave was thereby accelerated.

Mrs. Stamford, wisely forecasting, had carried out arrangements for her own and the girls' dresses at a comparatively early period, had got them home with all necessary alterations and trimmings decided upon long before the real crush of the thoughtless began, or the panic of the dangerously late set in.

Simple as were the materials, few the ornaments, and unobtrusive the accordance with the prevailing fashion, the full measure of satisfactory fitting was not completed without several interviews and divers alterations. The sum total of her milliner's bill astonished, even alarmed, Mrs. Stamford.

But her husband, when giving her *carte blanche*, had intimated that he did not wish trifling economies to be studied, that his wife and daughters must look their best; all the world was to be there, and as it was to be a rare occasion, they had better take full advantage of it.

When the hour sounded, Laura had been dressed and finished to the last lace; had indeed been sitting quietly reading, awaiting the arrival of their carriage. But Linda could not contain her impatience. She walked up and down the sitting-room spreading out her dress occasionally, and requesting her mother to say if it was "straight," whether her flowers were exactly in their places, whether it would not have been better for her to have worn another colour. This conversation was varied by wondering whether she would get any partners, or have to sit on a seat the whole evening; whether Mr. Hope would find them out, or be so occupied with his duties as steward that he would not observe them or have time to dance with them. To which inquiries her parents either were unable to reply satisfactorily or said she would see when she got there.

"Do you know, Laura," she suddenly added, "impartially speaking, you are really a pretty girl! I am sure if I were a stranger I should think so; I should indeed. Your features are not perfection, except your eyes, I mean—I don't think any one could say they were not first class. But you have a very taking look when you are interested about anything; and then you are tallish and slight—not too tall either. You could look dignified too, if you liked, which is a great advantage to a woman, while I am afraid I never could. If I were to set my mouth and knit my brows and say 'Sir! I fail to understand you,' people would only laugh and pat me on the back. It would never freeze the blood in their veins, or anything of that sort. Now 'father, dearest father!' as the Wanderer in the play says, don't you think Laura looks perfectly splendid to-night?"

"Bless her heart!" said Mr. Stamford, answering the question while he gazed at his eldest daughter with fond admiration, "she looks like a—like a queen in a book, like a princess in the *Arabian Nights*; like her father's own dear girl. I trust she will enjoy herself as much as she deserves; and you too, Linda, darling."

Laura Stamford without doubt did look a most perfect incarnation of innocent, girlish beauty. And, indeed, when is a maiden more likely to present that appearance than on the night of the first ball of note and importance to which she has been bidden? Her cheek slightly flushed with the excitement of untasted pleasure, her eyes sparkling with innocent excitement; her red-rose lips; her rounded arms; her ivory neck; her slender, supple form; her free, elastic step—if these attributes do not, in combination, make up the wondrous, God-given, crowning gift of beauty, then have the grateful eyes of mankind never been gladdened with the vision.

"Father is perfectly just in his opinion of dear Laura's appearance to-night," said Mrs. Stamford, with a mother's guarded approval; "and my little girl here, too, looks extremely nice. I might say more, were I not afraid of making her vain. I can only tell her not to be

anxious about herself; to trust to the course of events, and all will go well. We must have a grand talk over it all to-morrow morning.”

“Here comes the carriage at last, I am thankful to say,” said Laura, as the grand London-made barouche rolled up to the door, while the footman rang the bell sufficiently long to make a nervous inmate conclude it to be a fire.

“Muffle up and run down, my dears! We must not keep three hundred guineas’ worth of horseflesh waiting at night,” said her father.

Mrs. Grandison and Josie were in the carriage. The former made room beside her for Mrs. Stamford, saying, “You girls must sit together on the back seat. It’s large enough to hold four of you now there’s no crinoline—at least, none to speak of. Perhaps Mr. Stamford won’t mind sitting on the box—once upon a time two people would have filled this carriage. How did you get on with your dresses, girls? Mine and Josie’s only came late in the afternoon, after that infamous Madame Rocheretti promising to have them fitted on and everything done in the way of trimmings yesterday. However, she threw herself on my mercy, as she said the Government House people had come down upon her at the last moment.”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” said Josie. “However, I have made up my mind to have my dresses made at Justine’s in future. She is dearer, but she has twice as much originality. What have you got on, Laura?”

“Nothing very wonderful. We went to mother’s old dressmaker, Madame Schlesinger, that she used to have when she was first married. She is behind the times, I dare say, but a ball is a ball with Linda and me. We shall enjoy ourselves, I dare say. If we are much disfigured this time, we shall gradually advance to a knowledge of high millinery.”

“You’ll see when you go into the room how the other women are dressed,” said Josie authoritatively. “If you’re dowdy, it will make you so miserable that you’ll be more careful next time. I would have come down and given you a hint or two, but I make it a rule never to stir out on the day of a ball, and all yesterday I was too busy.”

“It is very kind of you,” said Laura, warmly, “and we were uncertain about several things, but it doesn’t matter particularly.”

“Laura must make up by freshness and youth what she wants in style,” said Mrs. Grandison good-humouredly. “I dare say she and Linda will do very well, though I really believe Josie’s will be the best dress in the room. And indeed it ought to be. Mr. Grandison’s cheque, and it was a large one, didn’t nearly pay for it.”

“Laura is only a year younger than I am, mamma,” said Josie, rather sharply. “One would think I was getting quite an old hag. I wonder if all the best men are going? Is that good looking Mr. Hope sure to be there?”

“Yes,” said Linda; “he told us he was one of the committee.”

Further conversation was rendered difficult by the dashing of the carriage into the “line.” The string of ball-ward carriages, of which they now formed a part, compelled them to proceed at a walk until the foremost vehicles drove up and deposited their occupants. The novelty of making a part of such an astonishing procession almost roused Linda’s spirits to the point of expressing the admiration of everything which she felt. But, recalling her mother’s advice and the responsibility of decorous demeanour now cast upon her, she refrained, at great personal cost and self-denial. She was rewarded in turn by the arrival of the carriage at the magic portal, from the interior of which a blaze of lamps and fairy splendour was visible.

A few moments saw them safely ushered into the dressing-room, provided with all accessories needful for repairing temporary damage or partial disarray. Small stay, however, was made here, and after Josie had gazed at herself in the mirrors from every conceivable point, and had herself adjusted by her obedient mother in several different modes, they bent their steps towards the main entrance to the ball-room, where they found Mr. Stamford awaiting them. By a curious coincidence, Mr. Barrington Hope chanced to come that way, when, giving his arm to Mrs. Stamford and Laura, he walked up to the top of the enormous room, leaving Mr. Stamford to bring up the rear with Mrs. Grandison and the two girls.

The latter lady lost no time in locating herself next to the wife of a well-known member of Parliament, and at no great distance from the wife and daughter of the Governor.

She signed to Mrs. Stamford to sit next to her, and being thus within the Vice-regal circle, as it were, considered the seating and rendezvous part of the business to be settled for the night.

Mr. Barrington Hope immediately possessed himself of Laura’s card, upon which he inscribed his name for two waltzes and said something about an extra as well. Josie was surrounded by several of the *jeunesse dorée*, who appropriated a large share of the dances not marked engaged. Of these there were several unnamed, and yet not open. When questioned, she declined to give the names of her partners, merely remarking that she reserved them for friends. As for Linda, she sat down in a state of wonder and admiration at the whole splendid array, to her astonished gaze supernal in glory and dazzling in brilliancy. The magnificent and lofty hall, the crowd of well-dressed men and women, the glass-like floor, the melodious crash of the band, which filled the room with the music of the spheres, as it seemed to her, the hall divided by a rope held by picturesque tars modelled upon the lines of the nautical melodrama; the swing and sway of the immortal dance-music of Johann Strauss—which had for some time commenced—the uniforms of the naval and military officers, all these wonders and splendours

for a time obscured in her mind the fact that nobody had as yet asked her to dance.

She had suddenly become aware of this fact, and was subsiding into a plaintive and resigned condition, a prey to dismal anticipations, when Mr. Hope suddenly appeared in company of a naval lieutenant, whom he begged leave to introduce.

Linda bowed with acquiescence, and the next moment was whirling around with the joyous throng, conscious that she danced well, feeling herself to be one of the leading performers, and quite on a par with all other individuals of her age and sex.

The young officer danced well, as do naval men generally. He talked easily and agreeably, with that happy mixture of brusquerie and refinement which renders the service so irresistible. Linda apparently came up to his standard of a nice girl and a desirable partner, since he begged leave to put down his name for two more dances; he also brought up some brother officers, including a stout doctor and a small but preternaturally cool and amusing midshipman, so that when Mr. Hope came for his dance, he was nearly crowded out by the naval brigade, who quite encompassed Linda, to the exclusion of the most irreproachable civilians.

If Linda was a success, it seemed that Laura was destined to achieve a genuine triumph.

Shortly after her first dance with Barrington Hope there appeared to be an unusual amount of interest displayed in the vicinity of Mrs. Grandison, who, of course, was extensively known in the *grande monde*. A variety of entertaining conversation was indulged in with that lady, generally ending with a respectful request for an introduction to the young lady in white.

The good-natured matron did not grudge the girl her meed of praise; still she occasionally remarked without satisfaction that the great guns of the fashionable world, the inheritors of wealth and estates of proverbial grandeur, the travelled and fastidious “elegants,” contented themselves with a passing notice or a laughing exchange of badinage with Josie while they struggled for Laura’s card, and searched closely the lower figures of the programme, uncertain as she declared it to be that her party would remain to conclude it.

Mr. Grandison, who had stayed rather late at the club over a seductive hand of whist, now came up in time to glance at things generally. He was extremely complimentary as to the appearance of his young friends, and declared that Laura had been voted the belle of the ball by several of the leading authorities of the club, against whose decision there was manifestly no appeal.

“There’s a sort of freshness, and, well, I hardly know what to call it,” he said, “about girls that come from the country that fetches the men of taste. The town girls are better millinered and so on; but they can’t get the colour and the innocent look, the—ah—dew-drop, early morning sort of brightness,” continued Mr. Grandison, who had refreshed liberally with the Heidsiek dry monopole which the club imported, and was becoming poetical. “That’s what there’s no standing against. Dash it, Stamford, old fellow! Laura’s cut ’em all down to-night. White dress, rose in her hair, and so on. It’s the real thing when the complexion will stand it. There’s not a girl here to-night who’s a patch on her. I heard Donald M’Intosh say so himself.”

This stupendous announcement produced no reply for the moment. That *the* bachelor eligible, *par excellence*, the man of estates and establishments, who had travelled, had taken an English University degree, distinguished equally for tennis play as for parliamentary influence, who was generally an invited member of the Vice-regal party at public demonstrations and amusements, that *he* should have awarded the golden pippin to the unknown provincial damsel, struck Mrs. Grandison dumb with astonishment, and caused Josie to turn paler with envy than even her ordinary complexion warranted.

When Mrs. Grandison recovered herself, she said, “Upon my word, Mr. Grandison, you’re determined to make the girl vain—though she is dancing now, and can’t hear. One would think you hadn’t a daughter of your own. Not but what Laura does look very nice, Mrs. Stamford, only it seems to me the champagne’s very good to-night.”

“What do people come to a ball for?” returned her husband, gallantly. “Come over to the supper-table and have a glass yourself, my dear. Stamford, you bring my wife and Josie. I’ll take Mrs. Stamford, and we’ll drink Laura’s health. After that it’s time to go home. Struck two, and the best of the fun’s over.”

“I’ve had enough,” said Josie, who had sat out the last two dances. “For my part, I begin to hate balls; they get stupider every time, I think. And, oh, how tired I am!”

So in ten minutes afterwards, Mr. Stamford and his wife marched down the room and carried off their daughters, to the great and sincere grief of their prospective partners.

CHAPTER X

Laura Stamford, like other girls, would have preferred to stay at the ball for another hour—to have danced another waltz with Mr. Donald M’Intosh, who indeed made himself most agreeable. But her natural tendencies lay in the direction of sympathetic consideration for others. When, therefore, she remarked the tired look on her mother’s face, and, moreover, instantly remembered that they were to be conveyed homeward in the Grandisons’ carriage, she at once declared her willingness to depart, telling her despairing partner that “she must really go; Mrs. Grandison and her mother were waiting for her.”

“If I persuade Mrs. Grandison to wait for the next waltz, may I say I have your permission?” eagerly inquired Mr. M’Intosh.

“No! indeed, no!” said Laura, looking at Mrs. Stamford’s resigned yet weary countenance, the lines on which she could read so well. “No, thank you! I must say good bye, I really must not consent to stay on any terms whatever. Please to take me to my mother.”

Mr. M’Intosh bowed low, and made his most impressive adieu. After which he betook himself to the supper-room, and declined dancing for the short time for which he remained among the revellers.

Latish, but not unreasonably near to lunchtime, the Stamford family showed up to breakfast after the ball.

Every one was tolerably fresh. The slight pallor, the darkened lines under the eyes of Laura and Linda, only communicated an added charm to their youthful countenances.

Mrs. Stamford looked hardly restored, but after the first cup of tea rallied, and enjoyed a *réchauffé* of the great night’s entertainment.

“Whatever happens, *Ich habe gelebt und geliebt*,” said Linda, who had a turn for German literature. “I did not believe such happiness was to be found on earth! And to think that I am only nineteen, too! I shall die early, or else it will consume me.”

“You certainly seemed to be having a very pleasant time of it, with your naval friends,” assented Laura. “People’s views of the area of existence must be enlarging. But it certainly was the most transcendent ball. I feel almost humiliated at having enjoyed it so much.”

“I begin to think we must not have many dances of that sort,” said Mrs. Stamford. “I’m afraid they are too exciting. You girls will find Windāhgil dull and prosaic after this.”

“Not at all,” said Laura, taking her mother’s hand affectionately. “We shall have souvenirs that will last us a year, that is all. Next to coming to town the going back to dear, peaceful, happy old Windāhgil is the greatest pleasure I can imagine in life.”

“Won’t it be delightful,” said Linda, “talking over all our experiences? Then reading up the lovely books we’re taking home. I always wonder how any one can call “the bush” dull. It will be a perfect elysium of rest after all this fierce excitement.”

“And when are we to go home?” inquired Mr. Stamford tentatively; “at the end of the week?”

“Oh! no, no! out of the question,” called out both the girls.

“Mr. Fitzurse said,” pleaded Linda, “that they were going to have a *déjeuner* and a dance on board the *Eurydice* on Monday, and if I didn’t go the ship would turn over and sink, like the *Austral*.”

“Mr. M’Intosh mentioned something about a *matinée musicale* which was to be at Government House on Tuesday,“ said Laura, at which Mademoiselle Claironnet was to give her celebrated recitals out of *Lohengrin*. It would be a pity to miss that. He felt sure we would have tickets sent us.”

“There’s to be a tennis party at the Whartons’,” said Linda, “on Wednesday. They have an asphalte court, and the winners of the last tournament are to be there, besides Miss Constance Grey, who is the champion Melbourne player. I want to see if I have any of my old form left.”

“Mr. Hope is going to drive four-in-hand to the picnic at Botany Heads on Thursday,” said Laura, carelessly; “he said he could easily take us all, and I was to have the box seat. It would be almost a pity not to go, don’t you think?”

“Exactly so,” said Mr. Stamford; “and we’re all to dine at Chatsworth on Friday, so it looks as if the week was pretty well discounted in advance. Well, Saturday for recovery, on Sunday we’ll all go to the Cathedral, on Monday—mind, Monday week—we start for home, if all the picnics, parties, and pleasure-promises of Sydney were to be left unfurnished and unfulfilled.”

“I am sure, girls, you should think your father the best of living parents,” said Mrs. Stamford. “I don’t know how we can be grateful enough to him. I wanted a day’s shopping before our departure, and this will give us time to finish up comfortably. I was dreadfully afraid that we should have to leave town this week.”

Laura and Linda laughed outright at this.

“Why, mother,” said Linda, we couldn’t do that without breaking our words, being ungrateful, and doing everything that you have brought us up not to do; could we, Laura? I promised faithfully to go to this dance on board the *Eurydice*; she’s anchored in Neutral Bay, and Mr.

Fitzurse said he’d send a boat specially for us. It would be disgraceful to throw him over.”

“And who gave you leave to promise and vow, Miss Linda, in the absence of your parents, may I ask?” said Mr. Stamford. “You don’t seem to understand that, unless we are consulted, all your undertakings are vain.”

“Oh! but I knew you would approve,” said Linda; “besides Mr. Fitzurse was so respectful and nice—perfectly timid, in fact—that I thought it would be unladylike to refuse. And we have never seen a man-of-war—a ship I mean. What a lot we shall have to tell Hubert, shall we not, mother?”

“If you tell him everything you’ll have a great historiette, or confession, whatever you call it, to make,” said Laura, “if one may judge by the amount of chattering I saw going on.

“Some people may not chatter, but do a great deal of serious—h’m—friendship-making in the same time,” retorted Linda. “But I don’t mind, I’m so happy. Everything’s delightful. I had no idea the world was such a nice place.”

Although matters could not be expected to keep up to the degree of high pressure indicated, an unusual and highly satisfactory amount of recreation was transacted during the remainder [155] of the reprieve allowed by fate and Mr. Stamford.

The dance on board the *Eurydice* came off, when Linda enjoyed the supreme and exquisite felicity of being taken off from the pier in a barge with twelve rowers and the *Eurydice* flag flying; the crew being dominated by an implacable midshipman of the sternest demeanour. They were received with all due formality and ceremony at the gangway, and being thereafter marshalled about by Lieutenant Fitzurse, before envious comrades, Linda’s joy was complete. The dance, as most naval entertainments are, was wonderfully organised, and truly successful. Epauletted heroes were plentiful, and even the Commodore himself graciously explained the rudiments of nautical science to Laura and her mother. The happy day ended with a romantic return sail, with a favouring breeze, under a silver moon, over the mystical, motionless deep.

It was fairyland once more possible in this world below. The happy girls could hardly realise that they were the same people who had been, but one little year ago, mourning the unkind season, sadly contending with the wrath of Heaven and the wrongs of earth.

The *matinée musicale*, honoured by Vice-regal patronage, was also transacted with all the society population of Sydney in full array and punctual attendance. Here Mr. Donald M’Intosh, a distinguished amateur, held pre-eminent sway. His “marked attentions” to Laura caused her [156] to be the observed of all observers, a circumstance which, however, did not interfere with her frankly expressed enjoyment of the musical luxuries.

“Why, Laura!” said her cousin, “if you go on in this way you and Linda will have all the Sydney girls mobbing you, or petitioning for your rustication without delay. You have fascinated the sailors, and not contented with that, you seem only to have to hold up your hand to have that difficult, delightful Mr. M’Intosh, the least susceptible man in Sydney, at your feet. Then there is Mr. Hope, neglecting his business and driving four-in-hand, as I hear to this picnic, all for your sake! What is your charm, may I ask?”

“I don’t quite understand you, Josie,” she answered (which, perhaps, was pardonably insincere); “we are enjoying ourselves very much, and everybody is extremely kind.”

“I should think so, indeed,” replied Miss Josie, scornfully.

As for the great picnic, everybody was there. The day was lovely, the sea calm, the sky of the glowing azure which the south land only boasts, the road perfect. The rival four-in-hand drags, including Mr. Hope’s chestnuts, combined to produce a perfectly faithful presentment of the ideal life which Linda had previously concluded to be limited to society novels, and the, perhaps, mythical personages depicted therein.

[157] There was even a Royal Duke among the guests, though when he was pointed out to her, Laura committed the error of mistaking for him a well-known officer of police in attendance, whose aristocratic figure and distinguished bearing at once decided her in her quest for royalty. However, the slight mistake was soon rectified, and the day burned itself into her maiden consciousness as one of those seasons of enjoyment which rarely fulfil anticipation, but if so, continue to illumine the halls of memory until life’s latest hour.

“This is our farewell to the sea for a while,” thought Laura. “I can’t help feeling melancholy. What a lovely haze spreads over the ocean in the distance! How strange to think that it is nearly a hundred years since Cook sailed into these silent headlands. What a new world he was preparing! It was more than a discovery. Almost a creation. Oh, day of days! Oh, whispering breeze! Oh, soft blue sky! Can the earth hold anything more lovely?”

The “pleasures and palaces” having come to an end, the fatal Monday made its unwelcome appearance.

As the Stamfords’ day of departure was known, there was an unwonted influx of afternoon visitors at their rooms, besides a dropping fire of cards, notes, and messages, expressive of different shades of regret.

[158] “Oh, dear! I had no idea Sydney was such a nice place,” exclaimed Linda, as the twilight hour approached, and the stream of friends and acquaintances ceased to flow. “I could not have believed there were so many delightful people in the world. Why will writers say so many unpleasant things about society? It seems full of polite, graceful, affectionate persons. As for

the malignant and wicked people that all the books rave about, where are they? We have not seen them, certainly, or even heard of them, have we, Laura?"

"I believe not—yes—no," answered Laura, absently. "But who said anybody was wicked?"

"Nobody, of course," explained Linda. "I only meant that in every book you read there are pages and pages devoted to descriptions of ingeniously wicked people, who seem as common in every city as bookmakers at a racecourse, whereas I said we never see any of them, or hear either."

"See whom?" inquired Laura, who was looking out thoughtfully over the harbour. "Do you mean any one who called this afternoon?"

"What nonsense you are talking, Laura! I really believe you must be thinking of something, or rather somebody, else. I wonder whom it can be? Certainly you have received a good deal of attention—'marked attention,' as Mrs. Grandison always says. How cross Josie looked when she said it! First of all Mr. Barrington Hope, then Mr. M'Intosh, then Mr.—who was that nice man from New Zealand?"

"Really Linda, you are altogether too ridiculous. Am I to be called to account about every one of my partners? If so, you had better get my ball programmes—I have kept them all—and ask everybody's intentions right down the lists."

"I don't mean partners, Laura; I had plenty of them, I am thankful to say; but people didn't come every other day to the house—besides waylaying one everywhere, and making a fuss over father and poor dear mother. They drew the line at that."

"I feel more and more convinced, Linda, that you have not quite finished packing," remarked Laura calmly. "The tea-bell will ring directly, and we shall have no more time then. Do think a little. I saw your cerise silk in our room, I feel sure, just now."

"Oh, my lovely cerise silk! To think I should have forgotten it!" said Linda, quite diverted from her line of cross-questioning. "But where will it go? I haven't the faintest notion. My trunk is full—more than full—and pressed down. It wouldn't hold another handkerchief."

"Be a good girl, and promise to talk sensibly, and I may spare you a place in mine," said Laura, smiling at her victory. "I am just going to fold and put away my last dress."

"You are always so kind, Laura. I did not mean to tease you, but I really do feel anxious about Mr. M'Intosh. Suppose he was only amusing himself with you all the time!"

"Then you will be able to console yourself with the idea that you have seen at least one wicked person," said Laura, with great good humour; "and so your knowledge of the great world will be expanded. But I will venture to contradict the charge, as far as he is concerned. But remember on what terms I provide a place for your forlorn dress. Besides I want to write one or two good-bye notes."

Although Laura was outwardly calm and self-possessed, she was not wholly unmoved by certain considerations which Linda's badinage had suggested.

Unless her perception played her false upon a subject on which women, even when inexperienced, commonly judge correctly, both Mr. Barrington Hope and Mr. M'Intosh were seriously interested in her good opinion of them. The latter gentleman had indeed been so persistent and pressing, that she had been compelled with great gentleness, yet with firmness, to discourage his advances. This step she took with a certain reluctance—more perhaps, because she had not finally resolved as to her state of feeling than because she in any way disliked him.

Dislike him? No—who could, indeed, dislike Donald M'Intosh? Was he not handsome, accomplished, manly, possessed, moreover, of all the subtle graces of manner that almost invariably attach themselves to a man, be he good, bad, or indifferent as to morals or brains, who has "seen the world," as the phrase runs—who has met his fellow-creatures all his life under the highly-favoured circumstances of an assured position and ample means?

He certainly had been most assiduous, most respectful, most flatteringly *empresse* in his manner, bestowing that unconcealed admiration which gratifies the vanity of womanhood, at the same time that it is apt to arouse the ire of the virgins, both wise and foolish, who are less prominently noticed.

Then his "position," as it is called. He possessed that social distinction, that untitled rank, which is perhaps as clearly defined, as freely yielded, or firmly refused, in a colony as in England. He was a great country gentleman—such a man as in Britain a hundred years ago would have periodically gone up to London in his family carriage attended by outriders and driven by postillions. Here in the colonies he was known as a man of good family, who had inherited large estates, besides pastoral possessions of even greater value, lands in city and suburbs, houses in fashionable squares all derived from well-considered investments in those early days when every hundred pounds in cash—sometimes even a tenth of that proverbial sum—so invested bore fruit fiftyfold or a thousandfold, as the case might be.

Then there was his magnificent place, Glenduart, of which everybody had heard. Such a drawing-room, such suites of apartments! Gardens and stables, conservatories and fountains, picture-gallery and statuary—what not! Had he not entertained the Governor and Lady Delmore there? Everybody said it was like a nobleman's house in England, or, at any rate, one

of those beautiful old country seats which are the glory of the parent land. His horses, too, his carriages—what a four-in-hand team had he driven at the picnic they had all gone to!

And all this at her feet! Was there a girl in Sydney—as far as any one could judge—that would not—she could not say “jump at,” even in her thoughts—but willingly accept him?

What a chorus of congratulations or detractions, both equally gratifying, would not the announcement of her engagement arouse!

Thus far the world, the natural, impulsive feeling of the human heart, unchecked by the calm voice of reason, the warnings of the inner soul.

On the other hand, was he so fitted in character and mentally fashioned as to accord with the tone of her mind, with the principles in which from childhood she had been reared? Did they agree in opinion on subjects which were to her vitally important? Were their tastes mainly in accord? and if differing, was his disposition such as would lead her to suppose that he would modify his predilections to suit her wishes?

She could not say. She did not know. Her ignorance of his character was complete. All that she could possibly assure herself that she knew concerning Donald M’Intosh was what the world said of him, and no more—that he was brave, generous, courteous, and rich. So much she admitted. But her experience had been merely of the outer husk of his nature. The varnish with which the natural man is concealed from his fellows was flawless and brilliant. All might be in accordance with the fair-seeming, attractive exterior. On the other hand, much might be hidden beneath, the revelation of which would constitute the difference to Laura Stamford between joy and peace, hope and happiness upon earth, or misery complete and unending, hopeless despair.

It was a terrible risk to run, an uncertainty altogether too momentous to encounter at present. Dismissing the subject of Mr. M’Intosh’s interests and prospects, there was—and she blushed even when naming his name in her own heart—there was Barrington Hope. He had little to offer in any way comparable to the other in what most people would consider the essentials of matrimonial success. A hard-worked man compelled to tax his every mental faculty to the uttermost, in order to meet the demands of his occupation. From one point of view, no doubt, his position was high; no man of his age had, perhaps, the same rank and consideration in finance. But the magnificence of “seigneury” was not his—never probably would be. In spite of his birth, which was equal to that of any magnate of the land, no girl of the period, no matron who knew the world, would think for a moment of comparing the social status of the two men.

But in his favour there were arguments of weight. She knew him to be a man of refined tastes, of literary culture, of high moral principle, of fastidious delicacy of tone and taste. It may be that Laura Stamford only thought she knew these things, that she committed the feminine mistake of taking for granted that the hero of her girlish romance was perfection. It may be confessed here that Barrington Hope was the first man who had had power to stir those mysterious passion-currents which sleep so calmly in the heart of youth, puissant as they are when fully aroused to hurry the possessor to destruction or despair. But she was, for her age, a calm observer, having, moreover, a full measure of the sex’s intuitive discernment. In all their light or serious conversation, she had marked in the mind of Barrington Hope the signs of high and lofty purpose, of a chivalrous nature, an inborn generosity only controlled by the voice of conscience and the dictates of an enforced prudence.

And did he love her as in her heart she told herself she deserved to be loved?

Of that all-important fact she could not yet assure herself. But, patient ever, and modestly doubtful of all things which concerned her personal influence, Laura decided that she could well afford to await the direction of circumstances. Her home duties were still paramount in her steadfast mind. She had no immediate wish that they should be cast aside for objects purely personal. There was yet much to do at Windāhgil. Linda was scarcely capable of assuming the responsibilities of housekeeping, and should she make default, she knew upon whose shoulders the burden would fall. The younger brothers and Hubert, who had hardly been separated from her thoughts for an hour since childhood—all the love and gentle tendence due to them were not to be uprooted and flung away to wither like weeds out of the garden path. No! The time might come when she, Laura Stamford, like other girls, would go forth from her father’s house, bidding farewell to the loved ones of her youth—of her life—part of her very soul, as they were; but there was no necessity for haste. She must take time for careful choice—for sober counsel. She had never been wont to do anything of importance hastily. She would not furnish so bad a precedent now.

So in spite of Linda’s desponding protestations that they never would be actually, completely, and finally packed up, the fated evening came which witnessed a devoted cab, overladen with such an array of luggage as caused Mr. Stamford to exclaim and the hall-porter to smile.

On the preceding Sunday every one had gone dutifully to church, but in the afternoon Linda’s devotional feelings must have been somewhat intermixed with ideas of a nautical nature, judging from audible scraps of conversation, as carried on by Lieutenant Fitzurse, R.N., and his comrades, who had thought it only decent and fitting, as they observed, to make their adieux to Miss Linda Stamford before she went back to Western Australia or Riverina, or whatever far-away place “in the bush,” they had heard she was bound for.

Mr. Hope did not arrive on that afternoon, although Mr. M’Intosh did, but, having something to say to Mr. Stamford, presumably on business, he came in time to accompany them to the railway station, and to receive a warm invitation from that gentleman to visit them at

Windāhgil directly he could get leave of absence.

CHAPTER XI

Linda began to look out of the window at least two miles from the Mooramah railway station. A few seconds before the train stopped, she discovered Hubert on the platform.

Waving his hand to her, he was at the window in a moment, receiving, indeed, personal tokens of welcome long before the guard could open the door and collect the tickets.

“Oh! I *am* so glad to see you again, dearest, dearest Hubert,” exclaimed Linda. “You have no idea how nice and large Mooramah looks. I am sure I shall never stir away from dear old Windāhgil for a year. I don’t feel proud at all, do you, Laura? I am sure we are both immensely improved, though. Don’t you think so, Hubert?”

“You must wait till you are at home again, and I can turn you round and examine you both carefully,” said Hubert; “there are too many people here at present. I think mother looks splendid, and the governor gets younger every time he sees Sydney. I shall have to go soon, or our ages will be reversed.”

168

“Poor, dear old Hubert!” said Laura, looking at her brother’s sun-burnt face, and spare, muscular figure; “I’m sure you’ve been working yourself to death while we were away, with nobody to stop you. Never mind, we’ll soon make a difference—if we don’t talk you to death the first week.”

“I can hear all you’ve got to say,” said Hubert; “but just now let us get the luggage counted and ready for Jerry to put in the spring cart; then we’ll rattle home in the buggy. Don’t the old horses look well?”

“Splendid!” said Linda. “They have beautiful coats too, which I did not expect. They’re not quite so aristocratic in demeanour as Mr. Grandison’s carriage horses, but they can trot about double as fast, I daresay.”

“They look very different to what they did this time last year,” said Hubert, running his eye over the middle-sized, well-bred, wiry pair. “Do you remember poor old Whalebone tumbling down—Whipcord was nearly as bad—as we were driving to church, from sheer weakness?”

“Oh! yes,” said Linda; “we had to tie up the pole of the buggy with our pocket-handkerchiefs; poor old dear! He looks as if he could pull one’s arms off now.”

Once fairly off behind the fourteen-mile-an-hour buggy horses, spinning along the smooth bush road—the best wheel track in the world in good weather and in a dry country, that is, its normal state—the spirits of the party rose several degrees. Mr. Stamford and his wife were calmly happy at the idea of returning to their quiet home life, having had enough of the excitement of city and suburb for a while. The girls were continually exclaiming, as each new turn of the road brought them within sight of well-remembered spots and familiar points of the landscape, while Hubert, much too happy to talk, kept looking at his relatives, one by one, with an air of intense, overflowing affection.

169

“It’s worth all the loneliness to have you back again,” he said, patting his mother’s cheek; “but it was horribly dismal for a time. I felt as if I could have left the run in charge of the boundary-riders, only for shame, and run down to Sydney myself. Fortunately, Laura wrote so regularly that I seemed to know what you were doing and saving, as well as almost everything you thought.”

“I wrote too, I’m sure,” said Linda, with an injured air.

“Well, you were more spasmodic. Though I was very glad to get your letters too. I acquired a deal of information about the ‘Queen’s Navee,’ in which department I was weak. However, I suppose it’s as well to know everything.”

“I’m sure you are most ungrateful,” pouted Linda, “If you only knew how hard it is to write!”

170

“Oh, ho! quoting from Lord Sandwich’s lines:—

‘To all you ladies now on land
  We men at sea indite,
But first I’d have you understand
  How hard it is to write.’”

“You are too clever altogether, Hubert,” said Linda, with rather a conscious laugh. “You must have been taking lessons in mind-reading, or some such stuff, in our absence. But oh! there are some of the Windāhgil sheep. How well they look! I’d almost forgotten there were such dear creatures in the world.”

“If it were not for them and their fleeces there would not be any trips to Sydney, or bachelors’ balls, or picnics,” said Mr. Stamford; “so keep up a proper respect for the merino interest, and all belonging to it.”

“They never looked better than they do now,” said Hubert; “the season has been a trifle dry since you left, but I think they are all the better for it. And did not the wool bring a capital price?” he continued. “I see you sold it all in Sydney—two and a penny, and two and threepence for the hogget bales. The wash-pen was paid for over and over again. However, I have a plan in my head for getting it up better still next year.”

171

“That’s right, my boy,” said his father; “stick well to your business and it will stick to you—a

homely proverb, but full of wisdom. How does the garden look?”

“Not so bad. I had it made pretty decent for mother to look at. I kept all the new plants watered—they’ve grown splendidly, and I managed, with a little help, to get up a ‘bush house’ in case mother brought up any new ferns, or *Coleus* novelties.”

“The very thing I am wishing for, my dear boy,” said his mother. “I was just wondering how I could manage; I did get a few pot plants and ferns.”

“A few!” said Mr. Stamford, making believe to frown. “You showed a correct estimate of your mother’s probable weakness, however, Hubert. I don’t know that you could have spent your leisure time more profitably.”

“Home, sweet home!” sang Linda, as they drove up to the well-known white gate. “How lovely the garden looks, and everything about the dear old place is flourishing; even the turkeys have grown up since we left. I feel as if I could go round and kiss everything—the very posts of the verandah. That is the advantage of going away. I really think it is one’s duty to do so; it makes you value your home so when you come back.”

“I shall have no curiosity about the great world for a year at least,” said Laura. “It will take us nearly that time to read all the new books; and to properly enjoy the garden, I am going to have a fernery of my own. I bought the *Fern World* out of my own money, and somebody—I forget who it was—promised to send me some rare New Zealand and South Sea Island ferns. After all, the pleasures of country life are the best, I really do believe; they are so calm and peaceful and yet satisfying.”

That first meal, lunch or dinner, as it might happen to be, in the old familiar room, was an unmixed delight to all. The two servants, having just returned, had exerted themselves to prepare a somewhat *recherché* repast for the family, to whom they were attached, and whose return they hailed with honest expressions of welcome. The cookery and arrangements generally met with special commendation, while in the intervals of talking, laughing, and sudden exclamations of delight, Linda repeated her conviction that she had never enjoyed eating and drinking so much since she left Windāhgil.

Immediately after this necessary performance, Hubert and Mr. Stamford betook themselves to one of the outlying portions of the run, where the son was anxious for his father to behold the success of a new dam lately constructed. This piece of engineering had “thrown back” the water of a creek nearly two miles, thus affording permanent sustenance for a large flock of sheep.

“These weaners were formerly obliged to come in to the frontage, you remember governor, where they were always mixing with the other sheep. The water dried up regularly about this time. Now they can stay here till next shearing, and I think the country suits them better, too.”

“They are looking uncommonly well,” said Mr. Stamford, running his eye over a flock of fine, well-grown young sheep, which were just moving out to grass after their noonday rest. “They ought to cut a first-rate fleece this year.”

“Yes; and the wool is so clean,” said Hubert. “There is nothing like having your sheep within fences; no running about with dogs and shepherds; they don’t get half the dust and sand into their fleeces. But I’m afraid this is about the last improvement Windāhgil wants doing to it. It’s getting too settled and finished. How I should like to tackle a big, wild, half-stocked run in new country, with no fencing done, and all the water to make!”

“You must bide your time, my boy,” said Mr. Stamford, with a serious face. “It will come some day—in another year or two, perhaps. You mustn’t be in too great a hurry to leave us all. Windāhgil is not such a bad place.”

“On the contrary, it’s getting too good altogether. There’s only half enough work, and next to no management required. Why, you could do all the work yourself, governor, with a steady working overseer!”

“Thank you, my boy, for the compliment,” said Mr. Stamford, taking off his hat.

“Oh, you know what I mean, father! so don’t pretend you don’t. I’m not growing cheeky because things have gone well lately; but really there’s only enough managing to keep you in exercise. It will half break my heart to go away, but what’s the use of settling down on a small comfortable place like this? And how can I feel that I’m doing the best for the family, when I hear of fellows like Persse, and Grantley, and Philipson taking up that new country beyond the Barcoo by the thousand square miles; splendid downs covered with blue grass and Mitchell grass? Grand water, too, when you come upon it. Think what all that country will be worth in a few years.”

“I understand you, my boy,” said the proud father, while a sudden emotion stirred his heart, as he remembered the days of his own youth, when he too had nourished the same high thoughts of adventure and discovery, and had played his part amid the dangers and privations of frontier life. “You can talk it over with Mr. Hope. We’ll see what can be done.”

“I suppose,” said Hubert, after a while, “when you’ve been up a week or ten days, and I’ve talked over everything with mother and the girls, from the regatta to the last new waltz step, I may as well take my holiday. I haven’t had one for three years. I begin to forget what the sea looks like, and I think a month in the ‘big smoke’ and a few new ideas will do me no harm.”

“Have your holiday, by all means, and enjoy it too, my boy. Thank God, it is not a question of

money now. I have the fullest belief in the sanitary value, mentally, of a trip to the metropolis now and then.”

“Thank you, father. I’m sure it will brush me up a little; besides, I want to go to the Lands Office for certain reasons. I want, above all, to have a good talk with this Mr. Barrington Hope that I’ve heard so much about.”

“You’ll find him an uncommon sort of person. The more you see of him, the more you’ll like him, I feel certain. He is just the man I should like you to make a friend of. Try and get him to return with you, if he can spare the time.”

After the tea-things were cleared away, and the large, steadfast, satisfactory table was left free for reading, writing, or needlework—for all of which purposes it was equally well adapted—what a season of rational enjoyment set in! The book box had been opened before. The beautiful new uncut volumes, the titles of which were received with exclamations of joy, were placed upon a table. The collection of new music was inspected, Linda going there and then to the piano and dashing off a waltz; making, besides, a running commentary upon half-a-dozen songs which she and Laura were going to learn directly there was a minute to spare. Mr. Stamford took his accustomed chair, and devoted himself to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Mrs. Stamford resumed the needlework which is apparently a species of Penelope’s web for all mothers of families, while Hubert and Laura, somewhat apart from the rest, kneeling on their chairs as if they had been children again, made a cursory examination of the new books, exclaiming from time to time at passages or illustrations.

“I feel inclined not to go to Sydney till after I’ve read most of these books,” said Hubert; “only that would make it so late. But it seems a pity to leave such a lot of splendid reading. Certainly there’s the Public Library in Sydney, but I hardly ever go in there, because I find it so hard to get out again. I did stay there once till the lamps were lit. I had gone in for a few minutes after breakfast.”

“What a queer idea!” said Laura, laughing outright. “How strange it must have felt to have lost a whole day in Sydney. Never mind, Hubert! There are a good many young men to whom it would not occur to spend a whole day in a library, public or private. Everything in moderation, though. You must have another station at your back before you can read all day long.”

“Please God, we’ll have that too,” replied he with a cheery smile, “or else the new country will be taken up very fast. I don’t think Windāhgil will see me after next shearing; that is if the governor doesn’t forbid it.”

“You don’t care about breaking our hearts, you naughty boy!” said his sister, pressing her cheek against his, as they looked over the same book. “What are we all to do when you are gone! You don’t think how lonely and miserable the place will be.”

“Are you going to stay here all your life, Laura? If you will, I will. But don’t think I shall not feel the parting bitterly; I quite tremble to think of it. How miserable I was when you were in Sydney! But what is a man to do? A few years of self-denial and hard life now will make things easy for the rest of our days. I am the working head of the family now. Father is not the man he used to be. And if I take life too easily for the next few years, all these great opportunities will be gone, and we shall regret it all the rest of our lives.”

“But the risk!” sighed Laura; “the wild country, blacks, thirst, fever and ague. Every paper brings news of some poor fellow losing his life out there. What should we do if you were taken? Remember how many lives you carry about with you.”

“You set a great value on Hubert Stamford,” he said jokingly, while something in his eyes showed a deeper feeling. “Other people wouldn’t think any great loss had taken place if I dropped. But men still go to sea, though wrecks occur. Think how nice it will be when I return bronzed, and illustrious, a gallant explorer with a whole country-side taken up for ‘Stamford and Son,’ with runs to keep and to sell, and to give away if we like.”

“I’m afraid you won’t be stopped; you are an obstinate boy, though no one would think it. I think I shall take possession of the piano and sing you that lovely ‘Volkslied,’ though I’m afraid my voice is weak after the night journey.”

Laura had taken a few lessons in Sydney, very wisely. Her naturally sweet, pure voice and correct intonation were therefore much aided by her later instruction.

“You *have* improved,” said her brother. “I never expected you to turn out such a *prima donna*, though there is a tone in your voice that always makes me wish to cry, as if that would be the height of enjoyment. You brought up a duet for me, didn’t you? Well, we won’t try it to-night. You’re rather tired, I can see. We’ll attack it some morning after breakfast, when we’re fresh.”

From this day forward, life flowed on with uninterrupted felicity for the Windāhgil household. It was nearly a week before the excitement passed away of enjoying all the treasures and novelties brought from the metropolis. The weather even became favourable to the new development of the garden, in which Mr. Stamford and his wife were principally interested. Genial showers refreshed the soil—always inclined to be thirsty in that region—so that Mrs. Stamford’s ferns and flowers, and plants with parti-coloured leaves, as well as her husband’s new varieties of vegetables, shrubs, and fruit trees, all partook of the beneficence of the season.

As for Hubert and his sisters, they rode and drove about by day whenever the weather was

favourable; indeed sometimes when it was not. They read steadily at the new books by night, and by that means, and a few visits to old friends in the neighbourhood, filled up every spare moment in a mode of life each day of which was consciously and unaffectedly happy.

In addition to these quasi-pastoral occupations, one day brought the exciting news that a new proprietor—indeed a new family—was about to arrive in the district—now the owner of a sheep station distant from Windāhgil about twenty miles had for some months, indeed since the change of season, cherished hopes of selling out to advantage.

An astute, unscrupulous speculator, he had purchased sheep largely, at low prices, directly the weather broke, had crowded on to Wantabalree all the stock it could hold—and more, had sent the rest of his cheap purchase "on the road." This means, in Australia, travelling for grass to a distant undefined point in a neighbouring colony whence at any time they could be ordered back; subsisting at free quarters, on other men's pastures till shearing.

180

He then offered Wantabalree for sale, at the high market price of the day, describing it as a magnificent pastoral property with a stock of sheep of the highest quality and breeding; puffed up the grass, the improvements, the homestead, the water supply, directly and indirectly, and having done all this, awaited quietly the usual victim provided with cash and deficient in experience.

In Australia, as in other countries probably, it is a fact patent to observers of human nature that the weak points of any particular locality are rarely obtruded upon the incoming proprietor or tenant. He is, in a general way, prone to spend money on a liberal scale for the first two or three years.

The interests of other proprietors are, in a way, identical. Assuming that the newly-arrived purchaser has made an indifferent bargain—that is, has misunderstood wholly the value of his investment, or bought in total ignorance of the peculiar drawbacks of the district, it is rarely that any one volunteers to enlighten him.

Such information, if unfavourable, might tend to depreciate the value of property locally. It was none of their business. Every one had enough to do to look after their own affairs. They might want to sell out themselves some day.

Besides, after all, the seasons might prove wet for years to come, in which case a tide of general prosperity would set in, quite sufficient to float Colonel Dacre's as well as the other partially stranded argosies of the period.

181

This was the mode of reasoning which mostly obtained around Mooramah—possibly not wholly unknown in other centres more or less connected with financial operations.

Even an experienced Australian pastoralist may be placed at considerable disadvantage when he comes to inspect station property in a region previously unknown to him. He may underrate or over-estimate the changes in pasture produced in varying seasons. He may be wholly ignorant of probable or latent disease. Summer's heat or winter's cold may surprise him by their diverse results. Such men may make—have indeed made—the most astonishing mistakes in purchasing stations in unfamiliar country. How much more so the wholly inexperienced, newly-arrived buyer from Europe, or Hindustan—ignorant of the very alphabet of pastoral science! He is indeed delivered over as a prey. The net is, in a manner, spread for him. Unless he be clearly warned, and indeed vigorously frightened away from this all-tempting enclosure, he is very apt to be enmeshed. After his entanglement—from which except by the blindest chance he rarely emerges save with despoiled plumage and drooping crest—he can hear from his too reticent neighbours doleful tales of loss and distress, a portion of which information would have been sufficient to deter him from (as he now believes) so suicidal an investment.

182

To do the Stamfords justice, they were not the sort of people likely to stand by and see an injustice perpetrated without protest. Colonel Dacre, on arriving in the district, had called at Windāhgil, and informing Mr. Stamford that he felt disposed to buy Wantabalree, which was then offered for sale with so many sheep, so much purchased land, &c., had asked his opinion of the policy of the purchase.

Hubert and his father looked at one another for a moment. Then the younger man burst out —"I think it's a confounded shame that any gentleman coming to a fresh district should be taken in, utterly deceived in a purchase like this one of Wantabalree. It is known to every child within fifty miles that the place is over-stocked by nearly one-half. The reason the run looks so well is that a lot of sheep that were travelling have just been put on. They haven't had time to eat down the grass yet. If a dry season comes they'll die like flies."

"You must be careful in making statements to Mr. Dealerson's prejudice," said his father. "We are not on good terms with him. That should be, perhaps, considered by Colonel Dacre. At the same time, I endorse every word you have said."

183

"I know I hate the fellow like poison," said Hubert. "He's mean and dishonest—and deserves to be had up for false representation to boot; but I would say the same if he were my own brother. The sale of Wantabalree with the stock at present on it, under the advertisement of a fairly-stocked run, is a deception and a robbery. I give Colonel Dacre leave to repeat my words to Mr. Dealerson or his friends."

"I gather from what you say," said the Colonel; "that the stock upon Wantabalree is in excess of what it would be safe to depasture in ordinary seasons; that the buyer would probably, in the event of an unfavourable season, be at a disadvantage—--"

“Such a disadvantage that he would lose twenty or thirty thousand sheep to begin with,” replied Hubert; “and even under the most favourable circumstances the place could never carry its present stock.”

“Yet the sheep look very well—are indeed fit for market—as I am informed by the person the agents recommended me to consult.”

“This is the finest season we have had for five years. It is the best time of year also,” said Hubert. “Any run about here would carry double its ordinary stock for a few months—till winter, for instance. If a third more sheep were put on now, say on to this run, neither sheep nor run would exhibit much difference until the autumn was well over.”

“And what would happen then?” asked the Colonel.

“Then they would merely begin to starve—become weak and die—thousand after thousand, while all the survivors would be impoverished and lessened in value.”

“Good Heavens!” said the astonished soldier. “I never imagined such deceit could be practised in a pastoral community. It amounts to obtaining money under false pretences!”

“Not legally,” said Mr. Stamford; “but every word which my son has told you is substantially true. Wantabalree with its present stock is nothing better than a trap skilfully set to catch the unwary purchaser. Mr. Dealerson is, so to speak, an enemy of ours, but I will do Hubert the justice to say that a friend acting similarly would have fared no better at his hands.”

“Well! forewarned is forearmed,” said the colonel. “I feel deeply indebted to you, but your conduct has been in marked contrast to that of all the other residents to whom I have spoken on the subject.”

“Unfortunately, there is too much caution or apathy in matters of this sort,” said Mr. Stamford. “We should have been delighted to have you as a neighbour, believe me, but not at such cost to yourself.”

CHAPTER XII

About a week after this conversation Hubert dropped the local paper he was reading in the evening with such a sudden exclamation that his mother and sisters looked up in mild astonishment.

"'Well I'm gormed!' as Dan Peggotty has it!" he said at length. "Nothing will ever surprise me again as long as there is such a crop of fools in the world—no wonder that rogues like Dealerson flourish! After all I said too! Listen to this! headed 'Important Sale of Station.—We have much pleasure in noticing that our energetic and popular neighbour, Mr. Dealerson, has completed the sale of his well-known station, Wantabalree, with fifty-four thousand six hundred sheep of a superior character, to Colonel Dacre, a gentleman lately arrived from England. Furniture, stores, station, horses and cattle given in. The price is said to be satisfactory.' Well, the devil helps some people," said Hubert. "How that poor gentleman could have run into the snare blindfold after the talking to father and I gave him, I can't make out. Mark my words; he's a dead man (financially) unless it's going to rain for years."

186

"Dealerson is a very astute man," remarked Mr. Stamford, musingly. "As a persuasive talker he has few equals. Fine, frank, engaging manner too. Bold and ready-witted; I think I can see how he managed it."

"Well I can't see—can't make it out at all," said Hubert, "unless he is a mesmerist."

"No doubt he made the most of being on bad terms with Windāhgil. He would rake up that old story of the disputed sheep; tell it his own way; get that fellow Ospreigh, who always goes about with him, to back him up; also make small concessions such as furniture and working plant; talk about the house and garden—they would be attractive to a new arrival; and if Colonel Dacre is at all impulsive—and I think he is—he has thus landed him. I wonder what the Colonel will think of Dealerson about three years from this time?"

"I'll tell him what *I* think of him, the next time we meet in public," said Hubert, squaring his shoulders, while a dangerous light came into his eyes. "If he could be tempted into giving me the lie, I should like to have the pleasure of thrashing him."

"Gently, my boy!" said Mr. Stamford; "we must not set up ourselves as the redressers of wrongs for Lower Mooramah, Few people are in a position to discharge the duties of that appointment. I honour your righteous indignation all the same, and trust you will always retain an honest scorn of wrong and wrongdoers."

187

"I should hope so," said Laura. "I can't imagine Hubert holding his tongue discreetly or passing by on the other side. There are a good many Levites in this part of the world, I am afraid."

"Oh, my gracious!" said Linda, who was reading a closely-written letter; "think of this! Isn't his name Colonel John Dacre, late of the 75th Regiment? There is one redeeming feature about the affair, at all events."

"What can that be?" said Laura and Hubert both together.

"Why! there's a distressed damsel in the case. If I didn't know better, I should think Hubert must have heard about her. Listen to this!" And she read aloud:—"'I hear that you are to have delightful neighbours. I was told that Colonel Dacre was going to settle in your neighbourhood. He has bought Wantabalree station—young Groves told me last night. He is a widower, handsome and middle-aged. But I don't mean him. He has an only daughter, also a son. Think of that! Jane Robinson met her at Mrs. Preston's, where she is staying. She says she is most sweet—handsome, though not objectionable in the beauty-girl line, clever, sensible, distinguished-looking, &c. Take care of Hubert, if you don't want to lose him for good and all.' That's from Nellie Conway. Oh! isn't that lovely?" and here Linda held the letter aloft, and danced for joy.

188

"I don't see what difference it makes," said Hubert, gloomily, "except that there are three people to be ruined instead of one. You girls are always thinking of marriage and giving in marriage."

"Now don't be provoking, Hubert," said Laura, coaxingly; "we know somebody who is not always thinking about cattle and sheep. Now, listen to me. How long will it take for Mr. Dealerson to ruin them?"

"About three years," said Hubert; "depends on the terms. Of course he's got all the Colonel's cash, but he would take long-dated bills rather than let him slip. Say three—three and a half—that's the very outside month."

"That means that we are to have the society and companionship of the very nice girl for three or four years," said Laura; "we can ask her here for the last six months, you know, I really think, Hubert, it won't turn out such a bad investment for the Colonel after all."

"You'd better marry him out of pity," said Hubert; "get father to endorse his bills, and that will effectually finish up the Stamford family as well—stock, lock, and barrel."

"I'll complete the tragedy by marrying Mr. Dealerson," said Linda, "whom I shall afterwards poison, then come on to the stage and repent in white satin in my last agonies, having by mistake taken some out of the same glass. What a charming melodrama! Who says there are no Australian romances possible in real life?"

189

“No; but nonsense apart,” said Laura, “I intend to make a friend of Miss Dacre; she will be rather lonely. There are no decent people within twenty miles of Wantabalree. You must drive us over to call directly we hear that they have arrived at the station. It is a pleasant house, and the garden is lovely, to give Mr. Dealerson his due.”

“You girls generally manage to persuade everybody to do as you like,” said Hubert, making believe to be sulky still, but putting his arm round Laura’s waist. “It’s a pity you didn’t tackle the Colonel about not buying the beastly place, instead of father and me. He’d have dropped it like a shot most likely.”

“Don’t you worry yourself any more about it,” said Linda. “You have been ‘faithful’ to the Colonel—as Mrs. Christianson always says—and done the honest and disagreeable. Now let it rest.”

“You’re bordering on a Levite,” retorted her brother. “However, it was always the fashionable side.”

About a fortnight after the return of the family party, when most of the books had been read, when all the songs had been sung, when every conceivable incident that had happened in Sydney had been described and dilated on, after every new phase of intellectual growth in the three young minds had been stated and reviewed, Hubert Stamford relinquished his charge of Windāhgil, and departed for the metropolis on his long-expected holiday. Not without tears shed by his female relatives did he leave Windāhgil, that true and sacred home in every sense of the word—a family abiding place consecrated by fervent, unselfish love, which had grown and deepened since childhood’s hour with every opening year. How could they think without a sudden pang of the possibility of an accident—of one of the everyday mischances in this age of rushing, resistless forces harnessed to the car of man’s feverish need—depriving them for ever of the sight of that pleasant face, those frank, kind eyes, that manly form! Such might happen—*had* happened. Therefore, there were averted heads, fast falling tears, as the signal sounded, and the punctual, pitiless steam-giant bore away the hope of Windāhgil from the little platform at Mooramah.

“Poor, dear Hubert!” said Linda, sneezing violently, and then wiping her eyes; “it seems ridiculous to cry, when he’s going away to enjoy himself so much, and deserves it so well; but, somehow, one can’t help it. There is a great relief in tears. I think they are specially adapted to the feminine temperament, a nice, comforting sort of protest against circumstances. Dear me! how lonely we shall be to-night.”

“I really believe father was afraid he would ‘give way’ too, as Nurse Allen used to say,” said Laura, “and that was the reason he declined to come. Never mind; we shall have a telegram to-morrow. He must have been much more lonely when we departed. Fancy you or me at home, Linda, and all the rest of the family away!”

When Hubert Stamford had got over the first feeling of parting with those whom he loved better than his own life, the change of place and scene which the fast-speeding mail train rapidly furnished commenced to raise his youthful spirits. After all, *ce n’est que le premier pas qui coûte*. Ah, but that first step! Some people never can accomplish it, for things good as well as evil, and a whole world of delights and dangers remain unexplored.

In Hubert Stamford’s case the initiatory stage was now accomplished. The journey, more or less eventful to home-keeping youths—the first really accredited visit to the metropolis since his manhood, with all things made easy for him, was now about to take place. Imagination commenced to conjure up the various wonders and witcheries which he was about to encounter, as well as the campaign of business which he hoped to plan out and engineer definitely, if not finally.

Much revolving these pleasing and, in a sense, profitable thoughts, the night became reasonably far advanced. It then occurred to him that, as he intended to have a long day before him in Sydney, he might as well prepare for it by an orthodox allowance of sleep; so, commending himself and those never-forgotten idols of his heart to the mercy of the All-wise, All-seeing Father of this wondrous world, he wrapped himself in his rug and fell asleep.

When he awoke the train was speeding down the long incline which divides the mountain world of rock and dell-rifted peak and alpine summit, from the lowlands of the Nepean River. A few more miles—another hour. Farms and home-steadings, orangeries and orchards, vineyards and cornfields, alternated with wide pastures, dank with river fogs and morning dew, darksome jungles of eucalyptus which the axe of the woodman had as yet spared. Yet another terminus, suburbs, smoke, a distant view of the great sea, a turmoil of railway sheds, carriages, tramcars, and cabs—Sydney!

Comfortably established at Batty’s Hotel, to the management of which he had taken the trouble to telegraph for a room, and received with that pleasing welcome accorded to the guest who is known to spend liberally and pay promptly, Hubert found the situation, as he surveyed the harbour from the balcony with after-breakfast feelings, to be one of measureless content mingled with sanguine anticipation.

Oh! precious spring-time of life! Blest reflex of the golden days of Arcady. What might we not have done with thy celestial hours, strewn with diamonds and rubies more precious than the fabled valley of the Arabian voyager, had we but have divined their value. For how much is it now too late? The scythe-bearer, slow, passionless, pitiless, has passed on. The irrevocable winged hours have fled. Opportunity, fleet nymph with haunting eyes and shining hair, has

disappeared in the recesses of the charmed forest, and we, gazing hopelessly on the shore of life’s ocean, hear from afar the hollow murmur of the maelstrom of Fate—the rhythmic cadence of the tideless waves of eternity.

Hubert Stamford, more fortunate, had all the world before him; moreover, nothing to do but elect, with the aid of a sufficiency of cash, leisure and introductions, to what particular pleasures he should devote the cheerful day. He revolved in his mind several kinds of entertainments of which he would like to partake, but finally resolved to present himself at the office of the Austral Agency Company, having a great desire to see the wonderful Barrington Hope, of whom he had heard so much, as also to sound him as to a Queensland stock speculation. He would leave a card for Mr. Grandison at his club. If no engagement turned up he would take a steamer to Manly Beach, and afterwards go to the theatre.

Having mapped out the day to his satisfaction, Hubert betook himself to the Austral Agency Company’s offices, by the splendour of which he was much struck, and sent in his card.

[194]

He was not suffered to remain long in the outer office, but was promptly ushered into the manager’s room and confronted with the head of the department in person. Doubtless it was a mutual pleasure. Hubert was impressed with the autocrat’s appearance, the manner, as well as the reserve of power which in every word and gesture Barrington Hope displayed. The latter, on the other hand, did full justice to the bold, sincere countenance, the manly, muscular figure of his young visitor. Reading between the lines, he saw there written quenchless energy and love of adventure, yet shrewd forecast.

“This youngster is not like other men,” Mr. Hope said to himself, after the first direct, searching gaze. “He only wants opportunity, encouragement, and the backing-up of capital to become a successful speculator. He has enterprise, undying pluck, persistent energy, and still sufficient apprehensiveness to shield him from disaster. We must send him along. He will do well for himself and the company. His complexion and features are different—but how like he is to his sister!”

Much of this he may have thought, but merely said, “Mr. Hubert Stamford, I am sincerely glad to make your acquaintance. Having had the pleasure of knowing your family, I was really anxious to meet you. I venture to predict that we shall become friends and allies. I trust you left all well at Windāhgil, and that the season continues favourable.”

[195]

“Perfectly well, thank you,” said Hubert. “My father desired to be particularly remembered to you. My sisters have not yet left off describing their pleasant visit to Sydney. The season is a trifle dry, but otherwise everything that can be desired.”

“Thanks very much! Tell your sisters when you write that a great melancholy fell upon me when they left. We had been so much together in town, fortunately for me.”

“I have been waiting for an opportunity to thank you for the assistance you gave us at a very critical time,” said Hubert. “My father has, I daresay, told you all we thought about it. But I always determined to speak for myself on the subject.”

“It was a speculation, a purely business risk, which I undertook,” replied Mr. Hope. “I told your father so at the time. That it has resulted so favourably, is of course, most satisfactory.”

“I see your point. All the same, it was more than fortunate for us, and for Windāhgil, that you happened to take that precise commercial risk at that particular time. It is, besides, more agreeable to work financially with some people than others. And now, will you come and lunch with me, so that we may have a talk?”

“I am really sorry,” said Mr. Hope, looking at his watch, “but shall not have five minutes to spare till five o’clock, when I should like to consult you on a business matter. If, afterwards, you will dine with me at the club, at seven sharp, I will talk as much as you like.”

[196]

“That will do as well, indeed better,” said Hubert, “as the day will be over, which is a great advantage if one is to enjoy oneself. I have a call or two to make, so adieu for the present!” Making a direct point for the club which Mr. Grandison ornamented, Hubert was fortunate in discovering that gentleman just emerging from the strangers’ room with an elderly gentleman, whom Hubert recognised as Colonel Dacre.

“How are you, Hubert, my boy?” said Grandison. “What a man you’ve grown! Nothing like bush air. Father quite well? Mother and the girls? Glad to hear it. Let me introduce you to Colonel Dacre, soon to be a neighbour of yours at Wantabalree.”

“I’m very sorry for it,” blurted out Hubert. “That is, in one sense, as I told Colonel Dacre before. I said then, and think now, that he made a bad bargain. That apart, I am, of course, delighted to hear that he is coming with his family to live so near us.”

“Oh! indeed; I didn’t know you had met before.”

The Colonel bowed, and looking slightly embarrassed, for a veteran, before so youthful a soldier as Hubert, said, “I ought to thank Mr. Stamford and his father for their sincere and kindly advice about my purchase. I did not take it wholly, and indeed acted on my own judgment and that of other friends in buying Wantabalree. But I shall always feel grateful for their well-meant counsel.”

[197]

“Why, how is this, Hubert?” said Mr. Grandison with an important air. “You seem to have been very decided on the subject. My friend Barterdale, under whose financial advice Colonel Dacre acted, says he is credibly informed that it is a most paying purchase. And Dealerson says it is

the best bargain of the day.”

“For *him*, no doubt; but Dealerson is a liar and a rogue,” said Hubert, bluntly. “I will tell him so to his face, if ever I meet him. As for Mr. Barterdale, he keeps Dealerson’s account, and perhaps may not wish to offend a good customer. The Colonel has been deceived and robbed, that’s all! And having said enough, perhaps more than is polite, I shall not speak another word about the affair, except to assure Colonel Dacre that all Windāhgil is at his service in the way of neighbourly assistance.”

“Thanks very much!” said the Colonel, looking rather crestfallen; “but have you heard” Hubert felt quite ashamed of his savage sentence as he remarked the old gentleman’s humility of tone—“the price I have sold the fat sheep at?”

“No,” replied Hubert, “I can’t say that I have; but, assuming that the wool does as well you are still in a dangerous position, with an overcrowded run. However, I sincerely trust that it may be otherwise.”

[198]

“And so do I,” said Mr. Grandison; “but you’ve done your duty, my boy, and Providence must do the rest. Colonel Dacre is coming to lunch with me. Here’s the phaeton, jump in and you will see Mrs. Grandison and Josie, besides another young lady that you haven’t before met.”

“I asked Mr. Hope to lunch,” said Hubert; “but as he can’t come I am free. And so, if Colonel Dacre isn’t offended by my plain speaking, I shall be most happy.”

At luncheon Mrs. Grandison appeared with the fair Josie, who welcomed Hubert so warmly that he began to think that he was mistaken in the opinion he had previously formed of both these ladies. Certainly, in his boyhood, they had expressed remarkably little interest in his welfare. But being slow to think evil, he took himself severely to task, and decided that Mrs. Grandison was a warm-hearted matron, and Josie a very attractive-looking girl.

At that moment a young lady entered the room and apologised to Mrs. Grandison in so sweet a voice, and with so much natural grace of manner, for being late that his too susceptible heart was immediately led captive. Miss Josie’s charms receded to a register below zero, where they remained as unalterably fixed as the “set fair” in an aneroid barometer in a drought.

[199]

“Allow me to introduce our cousin, Mr. Hubert Stamford,” said the elder lady; “Miss Dacre, I think you are to be neighbours in the bush.”

“I am happy to meet Mr. Stamford,” said the young lady, bestowing a gaze on Hubert so honest, kindly, and yet questioning, that his subjection was complete. “Though, from what papa tells me, it is not his fault that we are not in some other district.”

“I was acting against my own interest—against all our interests,” Hubert said, rather nervously. “Believe me that the whole family were most anxious to have you as neighbours. So you must give me credit for honesty of intention.”

“I shall never doubt that, from all I hear,” said Miss Dacre. “Papa is rather sanguine, I am afraid.”

“And perhaps I am not sufficiently so,” said Hubert; “It’s all over now. Let us find a pleasanter subject. When do you think of going up?”

“Oh! next week at farthest. Are we not, papa?”

The Colonel nodded. “I’m enthusiastically fond of the country. I hear there’s such a nice cottage, quite a pretty garden, a flowing stream, a mountain, cows and pigs, and chickens, a fair library—in fact, almost an English home. You’ll admit that, I hope, Mr. Stamford?”

[200]

“I’ll admit anything,” said Hubert; “the homestead’s the best in the district. My mother and sisters will be charmed to put you *au fait* in all matters of bush housekeeping. And now, Josie, are you going to the opera on Thursday night, and would you like a cavalier?”

“We were thinking of it,” said she. “Mother was doubtful, and father doesn’t care about opera. If you can get some one else, I have no doubt Mrs. Stopford would be glad to act as chaperon, and Miss Dacre and I would go—if she would like it?”

“Oh! above all things,” said that young lady; “I am always ready to hear opera. And I hear you have a very good company here. I was stupid enough, when I left England, to think I should never hear Italian opera again. I feel ashamed.”

“We are not quite barbarians, nor yet copper-coloured,” said Josie; “though I am afraid we Sydney girls can’t boast of our complexions.”

“I am quite ready to make recantation of all my errors,” said Miss Dacre. “I suppose it need not be done publicly, in a white sheet. I am divided between that and writing to the *Times*.”

“I believe you will make the best bush-woman possible,” said the Colonel, with an admiring glance. “Only we both have so much to unlearn. I didn’t expect to see a room like this, for instance, or such appointments,” he continued, raising a glass of claret pensively to his lips.

“It’s rather a bad thing for us, pappy, as we have to live in the real bush, don’t you think? We must forget it all as soon as possible.”

[201]

“It won’t make the least difference to you, my dear,” said Mrs. Grandison. “If you had seen Hubert’s sisters here you would have been—well—astonished to see such girls come out of the bush. For some reasons I begin really to think it would be better for all of us to live there.” Here she glanced reflectively at Josie, who looked scarcely as self-possessed as usual.

“I shall not say another word about bush matters,” said Hubert. “They will keep. When Miss Dacre comes up she will judge for herself. If my opinion is requested, I shall be happy to give it, but shall not volunteer advice. Will your brother travel up with you, Miss Dacre?”

“Willoughby went to stay a few days with a ship friend, who lives near Penrith, I think it is, but he is quite as enthusiastic as I am about beginning life in earnest. He will be in town again on Friday.”

“Come and dine with us on Saturday, then, Hubert,” said Mrs. Grandison, and I’ll ask Mr. Hope and one or two of your rude bush pioneers. Josie, can’t you get a couple of young ladies for Hubert’s benefit and to show Mr. Dacre?”

“I don’t think Hubert wants any more young ladies,” said Josie mischievously; “but I’ll ask the Flemington girls to come in—one of them plays marvellously and the other sings. Her voice is very like Parepa’s.”

CHAPTER XIII

The dinner was a success, the party to the opera having gone off without a drawback to the unbroken joyousness of the affair. The Misses Flemington came and performed such musical feats as were expected of them, and Miss Dacre admitted that she had not heard a voice unprofessional for years to equal May Flemington's. She wondered, indeed, what she could have been thinking of to imagine that when she came to Australia all artistic luxuries were to be banished from her thoughts.

"The fact is," she said, "we are frightfully narrow and prejudiced in England. We know a great deal about France, Germany and the Continent generally, because we are always running backwards and forwards. But of our own countrymen in Australia and New Zealand we know next to nothing. I was going to say as little as about Timbuctoo, but we do really know something about Africa, because the missionaries tell us, and we have returned evangelists from Borioboolah Gha, even from Fiji and New Zealand. But of Australia we know nothing."

203

"When you go home again, Miss Dacre," said Hubert, "you will be able to do battle for us, I see. We must make you Agent-General, or Ambassadress, if any such post is vacant. I am sure you will do us justice."

"Indeed I shall, but I feel ashamed of the ludicrous notions which I brought out with me. No one would think of going down to Yorkshire and saying, 'I suppose you have nothing newer in songs than "The days when we went gipsying,"' or asking the Edinburgh people if they had ever seen a bicycle. But really men and women who have had 'advantages,' as they are called, do come out here (five weeks from England) and expect to see you living a sort of Fenimore Cooper life, cutting down trees, 'trailing' your enemies, and sleeping in wigwams or huts only once removed."

"Perhaps a portion of this is natural enough," said Hubert, "we are a long way from town."

"No, it is not natural," said Miss Dacre; "because have not so many of our friends come out for generations past? And then for us to think that their sons and daughters were to grow up as clods and *belles sauvages*!"

"It will all come right in time," said Hubert. "It doesn't hurt us, if it pleases them, always excepting people"—here he bowed—"whom we don't want to have wrong impressions about us. Wait till you get fairly settled at Wantabalree, Miss Dacre, and you'll lose a few more illusions."

204

"Oh! but I don't want to lose all of them," replied the young lady. "Some of them are so nice, that I want to retain them in full freshness. I am going to keep pigs and poultry and send wonderful hams to England to show our people what we can do. I am going to be a great walker, and write letters about my impressions to the magazines. I am sure they will do good. Then I shall have a good collection of books, and grow quite learned, besides making myself acquainted with all the people round about, and doing good among the poor. I am certain there is a great field for an energetic person like myself."

"True!" replied Hubert reflectively. "Australians are rarely energetic, and your programme is excellent. I fully agree with all your plans and ideas, but I am only afraid there may be difficulties in the way of carrying them out."

"You really are most disappointing people—you colonists." Here Hubert held up his finger warningly.

"Oh! I forgot. I am not to call you colonists, but to talk to you as if you were like everybody else—is not that so? Well—but you *do* disappoint me. There is an air of guarded toleration, or mild disapproval, which I observe among all of you when I begin to talk of carrying out reforms. You are very polite, I admit; but tell me now, why should I not? Surely one does not come all this way to do only what everyone else does!"

205

Josie laughed. Hubert looked sympathetic, but did not offer an explanation. Then Mrs. Grandison took up the running. "My dear, you are quite right in wishing to do everything in your power in the way of good; it is what every girl ought to strive after. It would keep them out of mischief, and so on. But where you English people—when you first come out, not afterwards—differ a little from us is that you are all going to set us benighted colonists right, and to improve us in a great many ways. You say, "I only want to do my duty—just as one would do in England," but the idea is that you can improve things ever so much."

"Well, perhaps there may be a feeling that a good deal appears to be left undone; but the intention is to do our duty in that state of life, &c."

"Quite true," assented Mrs. Grandison; "but remember what you said, that so many of the best people of the old country had come out here. May not they and their children have worked to some purpose, with results like the Miss Flemington's music and singing?"

"Well, that does seem probable, but a great deal remains undone; you must admit that, surely?"

"I am afraid many of us are not up to the mark in our duties, but the same kind of persons would perhaps have done no better in an English county. But I could show you people who pass their lives in doing good—who hardly do anything else, in fact."

206

"And for what is not done," said Hubert, who had been regarding Mrs. Grandison's defence of

Australian institutions with a slightly surprised air, “there is commonly some reason, though not visible to a newly arrived young lady like yourself.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stamford. But why did you not call me a ‘new chum’ while you were about it? I know you all look down on us.”

“We do not call ladies ‘new chums,’” said Hubert gravely, bowing slightly at the same time. “And I really must decline any more passages of arms about my native land. I hope you will like it, and us too on further acquaintance. I will hand you over to my sisters, who will argue the point with you at any length, and if you can inoculate each other with your different opinions, it will be mutually advantageous.” With which diplomatic recommendation Mr. Hubert Stamford looked at his watch and bowed himself out. “I mustn’t be late for this appointment with Barrington Hope,” he told himself. “It is important enough, and though I could sit and argue with that nice, fresh, enthusiastic Miss Dacre all day, yet ‘business is business.’”

From which latter proverb, it may be inferred that Mr. Stamford, junior, although by no means averse to the proper and gallant attendance upon ladies which every man of his age should hold to be a part of his knightly devoir, was yet in the main a practical youth, likely in the long run to win his spurs in the modern tourney of pastoral commerce.

After thinking over the points of the coming conference, he signalled to a hansom cabby, and was taken up by that modern benefactor of the late, the imprudent, and the unlucky, and whirled swiftly to the offices of the Austral Agency Company. Here Mr. Hope had arranged to meet a Mr. Delamere, who was anxious to acquire a pastoral property in the new country, Queensland, just opened and in every man’s mouth. This gentleman had but lately arrived from England. In a kind of way he was consigned to the company by one of the English directors, who happened to be his uncle.

Mr. Delamere, senior, had known the colonies in former years, and being fully aware that high hope and lofty purpose, even when combined with an available capital, do not altogether make up for total inexperience of all Australian pastoral matters, had besought the manager of the Melbourne branch of the Austral Agency Company to advise the cadet of his house.

“I am aware, my dear Thornton,” he wrote, “that in a general way it is thought better that a newly arrived young gentleman should work out his own destiny in Australia—that after repeated falls and losses he learns to run alone, and may be trusted henceforth to move more circumspectly than if he had been ‘shepherded’ from the first. But I dissent from this theory. The falls are often serious; after some losses there is nothing left. I prefer a partner, such a one as I had myself thirty years ago if possible. There ought to be a few well-bred youngsters knocking about who know everything that can be known about stations and stock but are held back for want of capital. Such a one could supply the experience, while Frank Delamere would find the capital. The old joke used to be that in two or three years the new arrival had acquired all the experience and the colonist all the cash. This reads smartly, but is false enough, like many *bons mots* both in the Old World and the New. Where was there ever a better man than my old overseer, Jock Maxwell, afterwards partner, and now deservedly pastoral magnate? He could work twice as hard as I ever did; he knew station life *ab ovo*. He was honest to a fault. He—but I always prose when I get on this topic. It is enough to say that I had sufficient sense to form this estimate of his character and act upon it, ‘whereby,’ as Captain Cuttle has it, I am now writing from Greyland Manor, near Glastonbury Thorn, instead of being a white slave in a counting house, or the half-pay pauper generally known as a retired military officer.

“Therefore—a convenient, if illogical expression—I charge you to procure a good steady ‘pardner’ for Frank, who will see that his ten thousand, perhaps more, if need be, is not wasted or pillaged before he cuts his wisdom teeth as a bushman. Draw at sight, when investments are made with your consent.—Yours ever sincerely,

“Robert Delamere.”

#/

This was the business on which the three men met on this day at the Austral Agency Company’s office. Before this momentous interview a certain amount of preliminary work had been done. Letters and ‘wires’ had circulated freely between Windāhgil, Sydney and Melbourne, from which city the newly-fledged intending purchaser had recently been summoned. Permission had been reluctantly granted by Mr. Stamford, who foresaw years of separation from the son and heir, who had never cost him an anxious moment as to his conduct. The affair was tearfully discussed by Mrs. Stamford and the girls, who thought life would no longer be worth living at Windāhgil when Hubert’s merry voice and unfailing good spirits were withdrawn.

“Why do people want to change and alter things—to go away and bring sorrow and misery and destruction—no, I mean desolation—on those they love?” demanded Linda. “And we are all so happy here! It seems cruel of Hubert to take it into his head to go to Queensland—all among blacks, and fever, and sunstroke, and everything.” Here she got to the end of her list of probable disasters, and though sensible that her climax was not effective, was fain to conclude, “Don’t you think it’s too bad, mother?”

“We shall feel dear Hubert’s absence deeply, bitterly, I grant,” said the fond mother; “but he is animated by the very natural desire of all high-spirited young men to improve the fortunes of the family, and to distinguish himself in a career which is open to all.”

“But the danger, mother!” said Laura, in a low voice; “you remember poor young Talbot, whom the blacks killed last month, and Mr. Haldane, who died of fever. Suppose—oh! suppose —-”

“Suppose the house fell down and killed, us all,” said Mr. Stamford, rather testily, for the purpose of hiding his own inward disquiet, which, though not expressed, was as deeply felt as that of his wife and daughters. “It’s no use talking in that way, as if a young man had never gone out into the world before. Boys go to sea and into the army every day of the year. People must make up their minds to it. It is a grand opportunity, Mr. Hope says, and may not occur again.”

“I shall hate Mr. Hope,” said Linda, “if he has induced Hubert to go into this speculation along with some one no one knows, into a country which half the people, it seems to me, never come back from. But I suppose those mercantile men don’t care.”

211

“You mustn’t be unjust, Linda,” interposed Laura. “Whatever Mr. Hope has done has been in Hubert’s interest, we may feel sure. He has always been most friendly to the family. And you must remember that Hubert has been lately always pining to go to Queensland, and talking about wasting his life here in this old settled district.”

“What’s the use of being miserable if you can’t be unjust to some one?” retorted Linda. “If you felt as deeply as I do, Laura, you wouldn’t talk in that cold-blooded way. I can see the whole thing. Mr. Hope and his company are anxious to establish a great station property out in Queensland, or Kimberley, or King George’s Sound, or wherever it is, and they have pitched upon poor Hubert as a likely victim for the sacrifice. That’s the whole thing! They’re regular Molochs, and Mr. Hope is the officiating High Priest—nothing else. I wonder how he’d look with a garland of oak leaves, like the Druid in *Norma*?” Here Linda’s feelings, brought to a climax by a smile which she detected on Laura’s countenance at her *mélange* of metaphors, became too much for her, and pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, she retreated to her bedroom.

212

All the high contracting parties having sent in unqualified assent, it but remained for Mr. Hope to introduce the young men to each other—the representatives of the Parent Land and that Greater Britain which has now in the South and West attained such vast proportions; also to reduce to writing the terms of an agreement by which the two men bound themselves to work together for their joint benefit as graziers, explorers, stock and station proprietors for the fixed term of five years.

Mr. Delamere was to place to the credit of the new firm of Delamere and Stamford the sum of ten thousand pounds, which would be amply sufficient for the purchase of stock, the taking up, or even securing at second-hand, the requisite areas of Crown lands in new or partially settled country.

Hubert Stamford, on the other hand, “did agree and contract to personally manage and conduct the details of the joint concern—to superintend the management of stock, the hiring of station hands, the purchase of stores, and whatever work, either of exploration, travel, or management, might be found necessary, for which he was, in consideration of such personal knowledge and experience of the management of stock and stations by him acquired, to be placed and held to be the possessor of one-third share of the said property and of the profits of said stock and stations.”

These provisions and declarations were embodied in an agreement, which was drawn up by the company’s solicitor and submitted by him to Mr. Worthington for inspection and approval.

213

That gentleman, as instructed, wrote to Mr. Stamford, senior, who, it would appear, made some subsequent communication to him, inasmuch as Mr Hope received a letter signed Worthington, Wardell and Co., which briefly but clearly stated that his friend and client, Mr. Stamford, of Windāhgil, approved generally of the terms of the agreement entered into by his son and Mr. Delamere, and that he was quite willing that he should enter into such an arrangement, and that Mr. Hope, of the Austral Agency Company, had his full confidence and trust. But that he desired his son to place a proportionate sum of ready money to the credit of the firm, and not to enter it wholly upon the outlay of another. And therefore that he had placed in Mr. Worthington’s hands securities to the value of five thousand pounds, which sum they were ready to pay over on Mr. Hope’s order to that effect.

Upon the receipt of this letter, Mr. Hope at once proposed that the share of the profits to which Mr. Hubert Stamford was entitled under the agreement should be altered to one half, inasmuch as his superior knowledge and experience would be in value to the interest of the other moiety of the ten thousand pounds to be advanced by Mr. Delamere, and would thus equalise matters. This was at once agreed to, on the part of Mr. Delamere and the Melbourne manager of the company acting in his interests, upon which the agreement was “signed, sealed, and delivered.”

214

Nothing now remained but for Hubert to pay a farewell visit to Windāhgil, for the purpose of settling up what personal business he might have, to take leave of the family, and then to journey into a far country after the fashion of the princes, prodigals, and younger sons of historic ages.

Place and time being appointed for the newly-joined partners to meet and take ship for their destination, Hubert Stamford commenced all requisite preparation for a start homewards.

He had no further heart for the pleasures of Sydney—the ordinary distractions of a young man

palled upon him. He felt like a general whose army is about to march for the imminent battle—like a soldier picked for a forlorn hope, or an advanced guard. The meaner pleasures revolted him. Balls and picnics, theatres and concerts, were but the straws and *débris* of life's ocean. The argosy which carried his fortunes was about to sail with canvas spread and streamers flying. Would she return gold-laden, or would the cold ocean engulf her as so many other fairer barks which, "youth at the prow and pleasure at the helm," had sailed away through the *ingens aequor*, and returned nevermore? Was it to be so with him?

Might it be a proved success, a wider experience with the praise of all men, the joyful tears and triumph of those who loved him? Or that other thing? Who could tell? He could only resolve to do and to dare worthily, whatever might befall, for their dear sakes.

[215] Miss Dacre, with her father and brother, had left town for Wantabalree, being anxious to be settled in their new abode. The Colonel, distrusting more deeply day by day the wisdom of his purchase, had become restless and uneasy; he wanted to see with his own eyes how things went on, and to justify himself, if possible, for the investment, at which more than one disinterested critic had shaken his head. Willoughby Dacre, an ardent inexperienced youngster, who thought Australian squatter life made up wholly of galloping about on horseback, and lying under shady trees eating tropical fruits, was also impatient to be in the thick of the half-Arab life he pictured to himself.

Rosalind Dacre, though the chief doubter and dissentient, was yet eager to see with her own eyes this land of promise, which was, according to Hubert, to fail so woefully in performance, and also to put in practice her own ideas of "the gentle life" as possible in Australia; at the same time to comfort her father and aid in the household management.

For all these reasons the Dacre family had departed; and Hubert, calling at their hotel, found to his surprise and slight dissatisfaction, that they had gone the day before, a note of the Colonel's alone remaining *en souvenir*, in which he thanked him for his well-meant, valuable advice, and trusted they would meet in the neighbourhood of their respective stations.

[216] For some unexplained reason Hubert read this trivial note several times, and then tearing it up in a reflective manner, walked slowly towards his own hostelry.

"When do you think of leaving, Hubert?" said Mr. Hope, as they were talking over districts and markets, land laws and tenures, railways and syndicates, all more or less bearing on the great pastoral central idea. "When shall you go home?"

"On Friday, I think. I am getting tired of town, and everything is fully arranged."

"Everything is settled that needs settling, and nothing more can be done until you young men manage to get pretty far back, and make your first deal in new country. It's a gloriously exciting, adventurous kind of life, this starting to take up new country. I often wish I'd taken to it myself in youth, instead of this branch of the business."

"Living in town seems a pleasant life enough," said Hubert. "You have all sorts of things that we people in the bush have to do without."

"And we need them all," said the elder man. "This office life is one eternal grind, month after month, year after year. But I don't wish to complain. I suppose all men get 'hypped' sometimes."

"I never do," laughed Hubert; "the day's never long enough for me; but I suppose I soon [217] should if I lived all the year round in town. It's being so much in the open air that saves one. But why don't you clear out to Windāhgil for a change? Come home with me. The governor and my mother are always expecting you to send them word you're coming."

"I wish to heaven I could," said the man of the city, looking enviously at Hubert's cheery countenance and unworn features; "but I can't find the time at present. However, I promise to turn up at Mooramah—isn't that your railway town?—some time before Christmas. I shall count the days till I can, I assure you."

"I shall be away then, I am sorry to say," said Hubert. "I should like to have taken you all over the old place. There are one or two decent views, and rides and drives no end. However, the girls and the young brothers know them as well as I do; you must get them to do the honours. Oh! I forgot, too—you can drive them over to the Dacres'. But you mustn't put it off too long. Still, they can't be ruined within a year or eighteen months, anyhow."

"And perhaps not then," said Mr. Hope, with a smile. "Friends might intervene judiciously, you know. It won't be Mr. Dealerson's fault if they pull through, however."

"No, hang him! However, there must be Dealersons in the world, I suppose. They act as a kind of foil to honest men, and serve as transparencies to show roguery in all its glory. Well, good-bye till then. We may meet before Delamere and I start for the 'Never-Never' country." [218]

When Hubert Stamford beheld his sisters and his younger brother, who had driven to Mooramah to meet him, he felt more like a stranger and pilgrim than he ever expected to feel in that familiar spot. He was there with them, but not of them, as it were. He was to stay a month or so at Windāhgil—only a month at the dear old place where he had lived ever since he could remember anything; he was to go over all the familiar scenes once more, and then—to leave it, certainly for years, perhaps for ever. After the first warm greeting the girls looked inquiringly at him; the tears came into Laura's eyes. "Oh, how happy we are to see you, our own dear Hubert; but to think you are going away so soon nearly breaks my heart!" she said.

“He looks wonderfully well. Town life—not too much—always refines people,” said Linda, with an air of tender criticism; “but I think there’s a hard look about his eyes. I suppose it’s making up his mind to this grand new speculation.”

“You see exactly the same Hubert Stamford that went away, you little analysing duffer, but is it my fault that I have had to move with the rest of the world? Do you want me to stay at home and become a superior sort of ‘cockatoo,’ and are you and Laura—if it is to come to that—prepared to remain at Windāhgil for the rest of your lives?” 219

“I wish I could,” groaned Laura; “but as you say, we must move with the rest of the world. Still these separations are heart-breaking. You needn’t mind us overmuch, dear; but we are women, remember, and you must let us have our cry out. It does us good, and relieves the overcharged heart.”

“Very well, I consent. But you must manage it all to-day. To-morrow must be sunshine, and only blue sky appear till I depart. But there’s a whole month or more yet. Think of that! We can be ever so happy all that time. Now, to change the subject. Have you seen anything of the Dacres?”

“That means Miss Dacre, I suppose,” said Linda. “Oh, yes; we went to call almost directly we heard they were up. Said we thought they might want something. That was how we described our curiosity.”

“And what do you think of her?”

“She’s a dear, sweet creature, and Laura and I have agreed that if you don’t fall in love with her, your taste isn’t as good as we believed it to be.”

“She’s very nice,” said Hubert, with society nonchalance; “but I’ve got something else to do besides falling in love for the next three or four years. Besides, she mightn’t condescend to a humble colonist like me. But tell me, Laura, what was there about her that you were struck with chiefly?”

“Several things,” said Laura, reflectively. “She is a high-caste, cultured girl in every respect, though she is so fresh, and natural, and plain in all her ways, that people who are always looking out for the airs and graces of the Lady Clara Vere de Vere species might be disappointed in her.” 220

“All that I can understand and generally agree with,” said Hubert. “What next?”

“She is awfully energetic,” continued Laura. “Of course, there are plenty of girls in this country that are, but she never seems to have any notion of repose from the time she gets up, which is early, till bed-time. She reads and writes and does her housekeeping, and walks, and rides and drives, and what she calls visits the poor (oh, there is quite a good story about that, which I must tell you!), all with unvarying industry.”

“She is a newly imported broom,” said Hubert, “and naturally sweeps with effectiveness. It will slow down a little with time. But it’s a fault on the right side. Tell us the story, Laura dear.”

CHAPTER XIV

“Well,” said Laura, putting on a Scheherazade expression of countenance, “it appears that Miss Dacre, having been used to be good to the poor of the village near where they lived in England, could not get on without them. Much to her surprise, she found them scarce in the neighbourhood of Wantabalree. Mr. Dealerson did not ‘believe in’ poor people, and generally ‘fed out,’ ‘blocked,’ or bought out small holders. At length, in one of her rides, she came upon an old couple living in a miserable hut, the man feeble and half-blind, both apparently destitute; their one little girl was barefooted and in rags. They told a pitiful story of having been deceived in the matter of a free selection—which, of course, she couldn’t understand—and deserted by their children. Charmed by their evident poverty and artless expressions of gratitude, she gave them what silver she had, and promised them employment.”

“Her intention was good,” said Hubert. “I can guess the kind of people they were; but it speaks well for her kindness of heart.”

222

“Nothing could be kinder, I am sure; but I grieve to say, she rushed into a declamation (she confessed) about the hardness of colonists’ hearts—who would let so deserving a couple almost die of hunger in a land of plenty.”

“As to that,” said Hubert, “very few people suffer from hunger in Australia, except when they decline work. Even then, they manage to live on their friends. How did the story end?”

“Well, she formed a plan for persuading these delightful poor to migrate to Wantabalree, where they were to be fed and furnished with light work. Fortunately for her peace of mind, when she told her father and brother, they made inquiries among the neighbours. Then they found out that the old man was one of the most artful and successful sheep-stealers in the district, and had even been tried for graver crimes. The money she gave him he invested in rum, under the influence of which he beat his wife and turned his little daughter out of doors.”

“And what effect had this discovery on her philanthropy, for of course it was old Jimmy Doolan—a man the police have been trying to get hold of for years—as slippery as a fox and as savage as a wolf?”

“She had to recant; to admit that perhaps, on the whole, the characters of people were known and appreciated by those amongst whom they lived. Still, she said there was a want of systematic benevolence in the neighbourhood, and that she would rather be deceived occasionally, than sink into a state of cold indifferentism towards her fellow creatures.”

223

“It’s really quite pathetic,” said Hubert. “One feels drawn towards a girl of such tendencies as if she were a nice child. It seems hard that a few years of colonial experience should deprive her of such tender illusions.”

“I don’t think anything will tone her down into anything uninteresting, if you mean that,” said Linda; “she has too much high principle and refinement.”

“She will learn to act judiciously in time, as mother does, for instance,” said Laura. “She’s always bestowing father’s substance upon some poor creature or other; but she finds out the right sort of people, and the proper when and where.”

Before long a return visit occurred from Wantabalree, from which place Willoughby Dacre drove his sister to Windāhgil about a week after the conversation above recorded.

The brother and sister made their appearance in a vehicle of unpretending appearance, being, indeed, no other than the spring-cart which was “given in” ostentatiously by Mr. Dealerson, along with furniture and other station requisites. Willoughby, having managed to rig up leading harness, had accomplished a tandem with two of the best-looking horses on the station, so that the turn-out was not wholly plebeian.

Much mutual delight was expressed by the girls, and various experiences interchanged which had occurred since their last meeting. The young men went off together to put up the horses, and took advantage of the opportunity to have a little sheep-talk.

224

“How are you getting on so far?” said Hubert. “Shaking down a bit, I suppose. Does your father approve of bush life?”

“Oh, he finds himself most comfortable,” answered Willoughby. “He has a snug morning room with a fire, and plenty of books and papers. He says he never expected to enjoy himself so much in the bush. He takes a great interest in the garden too. The fruit trees and vines are really something to look at.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Hubert. “The house and grounds, stabling and out-offices are about the best in the district. Well, I hope you’ll all live there many years to enjoy them.”

“I hope so too,” said Willoughby; “but excuse me if I say that you don’t seem to expect it. Now, why is it that, as everything is so good in its way, the sheep well-bred, everybody says, and looking so well now, that you regard the investment as a bad one? You are not alone in that opinion either, though the other neighbours don’t speak so honestly.”

“My prophecy of evil may not come off, after all. This is an uncertain country as to weather, and weather with us is everything. But if the rain holds off, you’ll see what I mean. You have about two-thirds too many sheep on the run. That is all.”

“What can we do?”

“Well, nothing just at present. In a general way, sell off surplus stock as soon as you can do so profitably. But in a dry season everybody wishes to sell, and few care to buy except at the lowest prices. However, I’ll put you up to the likeliest dodges when the time comes.”

“Thanks very much. I can’t help feeling anxious from time to time when I think that our all is embarked in this undertaking. I thought it was so safe and solid, and never dreamed that there could be such a swindle worked when all looked fair outside. The governor was rash, I must say. It’s a way of his. But we must fight our way out of the scrape, now we’re in it.”

“That’s the only thing to be done, and not to lose heart. There are always chances and changes with stock in Australia. Fortunes are always to be made.”

“And to be lost, it seems. You are just going to invest in Queensland, I hear. Isn’t that a long way off?”

“It’s never too far off if the country’s good,” said Hubert. “Runs are cheap there now, but they are always rising in value. I intend to send a lot of our Windāhgil sheep out there as soon as we get settled.”

“If we hadn’t spent all our money,” said the young Englishman regretfully, “we might have bought a run there too. However, it can’t be helped, as we said before. I shall be glad to hear from you when you get there.”

226

“Any information I can give shall be at your service, as well as all possible assistance,” said Hubert, warmly. “Always depend upon that. But it’s early in the day to talk about such things. We shall see more clearly what to do as the occasion arises. And now, we had better join the ladies.”

It was settled after a rather animated discussion that the visitors were not to return to Wantabalree that night. In vain they pleaded household tasks, station exigencies, the anxiety which Colonel Dacre was certain to experience at their absence. All these reasons were treated as mere excuses. There couldn’t be much housekeeping for one person, especially as they had, for a wonder, a decent cook. The station could wait, the less work done among the sheep at present, the better; while it was extracted in cross-examination that Colonel Dacre had told them that if they did not return, he should conclude they had stayed at Windāhgil. So the truce was definitely arranged, the horses turned into the river paddock, the young men went out for a drive in Hubert’s buggy to inspect a dam “at the back,” concerning which young Dacre had expressed some interest, while the three girls, after a ramble in the garden, settled down to a good steady afternoon’s needlework and an exhaustive discussion of bush life, and Australian matters generally.

227

“What a famous, light-running, easy trap this is of yours!” said Dacre, as they spun over the smooth, sandy bush track, Whalebone and Whipcord, an exceptionally fast pair of horses, slipping along at half-speed.

“Yes,” said Hubert. “It’s the best thing of the kind that’s made, I believe. I bought this to take out with me to the new country. I think it is economical to have a vehicle of this sort. There are many bits of station work that a buggy comes in for, and you save horseflesh. I wonder you don’t get one for your sister.”

“Well, we found the tax-cart at the station, and Rosalind’s such a terrific economist that she wouldn’t hear of us buying a carriage, as she calls it, for her. But I really must go in for a buggy, if it’s only on the governor’s account. He’s not so young as he was, and riding knocks him about, I can see. But how fast your horses are! I didn’t think Australian horses went in for trotting much. None of ours do.”

“Australian horses (and men and women too, as I think I have mentioned before),” remarked Hubert with suspicious mildness, “resemble those in other parts of the world, though the contrary is asserted. Some are good, others bad. Some of them—the horses, I now allude to—can trot. Others cannot. This pair, for instance”—(here he tightened his reins, and in some imperceptible fashion gave a signal, which they answered to by putting up their heads and bursting into sixteen miles an hour)—“can do a mile in very fair time for non-professionals.”

228

“So I see,” replied the young Englishman. “I wish I was not so hasty in forming impressions; however, I shall be cured of that in time. But it is awfully trying to hold your tongue when everything is new and exciting, and to talk cautiously is foreign to the Dacre nature.”

“‘*Experientia* does it,’ as we used to say at school,” laughed Hubert. “You’ll be chaffing new arrivals in a couple of years yourself. The regulation period is about that time, and I don’t think you’ll take so long as some people.”

“That’s a compliment to my general intelligence,” said Dacre. “I suppose I ought to feel grateful. But one can’t help a slight feeling of soreness, you know, that after being regularly educated for a colonial life, as I was, and coached in all the necessary carpentering, blacksmithing, agriculture, and so on, I should find myself so utterly ignorant and helpless here.”

“Come, come,” said Hubert; “you do yourself injustice. It won’t take more than a year to make a smart bushman of you, I can see. But I suppose it’s something like going into a strange country to hunt. You remember that when Mr. Sawyer went to the Shires he felt under a disadvantage at first.”

“Yes, but you wouldn’t, or M’Intosh, or any of the other fellows I’ve seen; that’s what makes me so savage with myself. You’d know your way about; people wouldn’t discover, unless you

told them, that you had lived in England all your days, while we fellows, who came out here certainly thinking ourselves as good all round as any one we were likely to find, are always exposing our ignorance, getting laughed at, or taken in, and are marked for immigrants and tyros as far as we can be seen.”

“I observe your point, and it is a little aggravating,” replied Hubert. “But after all, it is a compliment to our mother country that we make it our business from childhood to know all about her history and traditions, manners and customs, from a thousand accurate chronicles. Our usages, modelled upon hers and religiously handed down by our parents, are identical, or as nearly so as we can make them. But our country and our trifling yet marked departures from English standards have found few close observers, accurate descriptions, and fewer narrators still. There is hardly any way of getting acquainted with us, except by actual experience.”

“It looks like it,” assented his friend, reluctantly; “but I mourn over the fond illusions Rosalind and I are doomed to lose before we complete our apprenticeship. Hope we may acquire others not less satisfactory. The outlook at Wantabalree at present might be brighter too, if what you told my father comes to pass.”

“It may not happen after all, or it may be parried and averted. All manner of chances may arise in your interest. So do not *think* of desponding,” said Hubert. “One of the special characteristics of Australians is, that they *never despair*.”

“Never know when they are beat, in fact,” said Dacre, with a returning smile. “Well that is a genuine English trait at any rate, so I must support the credit of my country.”

The dam was inspected and the principle of the “by-wash” explained to Dacre, who showed an aptitude and readiness to comprehend the necessary detail which favourably impressed Hubert.

The free horses pulled more on the homeward track than coming out, and elicited high commendation.

“They certainly are superb goers, and this is the poetry of motion,” Dacre exclaimed, as, sending out their eight legs as if they belonged to one horse, the well-matched pair made the light, yet strong vehicle spin over the level road with an ease and velocity which no two-wheeled trap ever approached. “I shall be unhappy till I set up a buggy and a pair of trotters—all the good resolutions to spend nothing that could be helped made at the beginning of the month notwithstanding.”

“It’s false economy to go without a buggy,” said Hubert. “Tell your father I said so. And that is easily demonstrable. It saves horse-flesh, enables you to carry feed in a dry season, and has other useful and agreeable qualities.”

The tea, for which they were just in time to dress, was an agreeable, not to say hilarious, meal. The Miss Stamfords, it would seem, had been admitting their visitor into all kinds of occult mysteries of domestic management. How they arranged when they were short of a servant, without a cook or a housemaid, or indeed, as occasionally happened, though not for any protracted period, when they had no servant at all.

Miss Dacre was astonished to find what a complete and practical knowledge these soft-appearing, graceful damsels displayed with many branches of household lore, and how many hints they were able to offer for her acceptance, all of which tended to lighten the labours of bush housekeeping, which she had already found burdensome.

From Mrs. Stamford, on opening the relief question, it was discovered that she had various humble friends and pensioners, all of whom she helped, after a fashion which encouraged them to be industrious and self-supporting; others again received advice in the management of their families, the treatment of their children, the choice of trades for their sons, and of service for their daughters. In a number of humble homes, and by all the neighbouring settlers, this gentle, low-voiced woman was regarded as the *châtelaine* of the manor, the good angel of the neighbourhood, the personage to whom all deferred, whose virtues all imitated at a distance, and whom to disappoint or to pain was a matter more deeply regretted than the actual shortcoming which had led to reproof.

And all this work had been done—this sensible system of true Christian benevolence and aid was in full flow and operation—without one word being said by the agents themselves which gave a hint of the energy, contrivance, and self-denial manifestly necessary for such results. All things were done silently, unobtrusively; no one spoke of them, or seemed to think them other than matters of course.

This was a phase of colonial life which struck the eager critic of the new land with something like dismay. Was it possible in this strange country that there might be yet other instances of human love and charity efficiently performed with equal thoroughness and absence of demonstration? If so, had she not been making herself somewhat ridiculous in assuming hurriedly that there were so many niches in Australian temples sacred to heroic effort which were unfilled before she arrived.

In spite of the slight feeling of soreness which the knowledge caused her, the general influence of the symposium, separated as she had been for some weeks from companions of her own sex and social standing, was unusually exhilarating. Her naturally genial temperament led her, therefore, to laugh secretly at her own miscalculation and discomfiture

as a very good and choice joke indeed.

However, she was less explanatory than her brother had been, preferring inferential admission, after the manner of her sex. This concession to the wisdom of the colonists exhibited itself in unaffected good humour and affectionate cordiality towards her comparatively recent friends.

She joined cheerily in all the amusements and occupations of the evening. She sang and played, praising the performances of the Stamford girls and the new songs they had brought back with them from the metropolis. She talked flowers and greenhouse with her hostess, and had a slight political tilt with Mr. Stamford. In all these subjects she exhibited sound teaching as well as a careful theoretical training. Nothing could be more modest and less assertive than her general manner, at the same time that a wider range of thought, consequent upon European travel and extended social experience, was unconsciously apparent. When the Windāhgil family retired for the night, Mr. Stamford expressed his opinion to his wife, in the sanctity of the matrimonial chamber, that he had never met a finer girl in his life before, and that he was delighted that they should have such a neighbour; while Hubert, in the smoking-room, whither he had retired with his young friend at a late period of the evening, *may have* meditated upon the command "to love thy neighbour as thyself," but forbore to commit himself by unguarded expression.

On the next day, after a mirthful and consolatory breakfast—a trifle later than usual, inasmuch as the three maidens sat talking so late that the morning slumbers were prolonged—the new neighbours departed. Fresh expressions of approval and surprise were exhibited by this English guest at the home-baked bread, the butter, the honey, the incomparable home-cured bacon, and other triumphs of domestic economy.

"I have enjoyed myself as I never expected to do in the bush," she said; "I thought there would be nothing but devotion to 'duty, stern daughter of the voice of God.' I never dreamed that so much of the poetry of life was attainable. You have taught me a lesson" (this was in confidence to Laura at parting) "for which I shall be all the better henceforth. I am not too old or too conceited to learn, at any rate."

"You have nothing very much to learn," replied Laura; "we may be mutually advantageous to one another, that's all, if we make an agreement to put as much friendship and as little ceremony into our intercourse as possible. It will not be long before we come over to stay a night at Wantabalree, before poor Hubert starts for Queensland, I grieve to say, and then you must comfort us in our loneliness."

"Papa will be quite charmed to see you again. If you had heard all the fine things he said about you and Linda, you would have thought he was looking out for a step-mamma for me. But he is purely theoretical in that department, I am thankful to say, and now good bye, and *au revoir*!"

The promised visit was paid, and a renewal of friendship and good offices ratified, while the days passed on and the period of Hubert's stay with his family drew near to a close. The long-expected, long-dreaded day arrived for his departure to the land of adventure, and, alas! of danger—it could not be concealed.

All preparations for the momentous event were at length completed, and once more the family assembled at the railway terminus at Mooramah to bid farewell to the son and brother—the mainstay, the hope of Windāhgil. Deep and unaffected was the grief, although outward manifestations were heroically suppressed.

The warning bell sounded, the last adieux were said, and, as the train moved off, relentless, irrevocable as fate—the fair summer day gloomed, while the family party drove sadly back to their home, from which the sunshine seemed to have been suddenly withdrawn.

Such are the partings in this world of chequered joy and sorrow—of light and shadow. What prayers were that night offered up to the All-wise Dispenser of events for the safety, the success, the return—ah, me!—of the absent wayfarer—for him might the fervid sunbeams of the inner deserts—be tempered—for him might the fierce denizens of the wild be placated—for him might the terrible uncertainty of flood and field be guided for good! The sisters wept themselves to sleep in each other's arms, while the mother's face was sad with unuttered grief, and the father's brow grave for many a day after this long-remembered parting.

But Time, the healer, brought to them, as to others, the successive stages of calm resignation, of renewed hope. The post brought tidings of a safely concluded voyage, of accomplished land travel. At longer intervals, of promising investment, of successful exploration, of permanent settlement in the land of promise, of the occupation of pastures new in a region richly gifted by nature, and needing but the gradual advance of civilisation to be promoted to a profitable and acknowledged status.

Lastly, a despatch arrived of an eminently satisfactory nature, from Mr. Barrington Hope, confirming the latest advices from "the wandering heir." "Mr. Hubert Stamford had more than justified all the expectations formed of his energy and business aptitude. He had purchased, at a comparatively small outlay, a lightly-stocked and very extensive station upon the border of the settled country. Leaving Mr. Delamere and a manager of proved ability in charge, he had pushed on, and after a toilsome journey, happily accomplished without accident or loss, had discovered and taken up, under the Queensland regulations, which are most favourable to pioneers, an immense tract of well-watered, pastoral country of the best quality. They had received from their correspondents the highest commendation of the value of the property

now secured and registered in the name of Delamere and Stamford. Windāhgil Downs was a proverb in the mouths of the pioneer squatters of the colony, and the Laura and Linda rivers were duly marked upon the official map at the Surveyor-General's office as permanent and important watercourses.

"The Austral Agency Company had the fullest confidence in the prospects of the firm, and any reasonable amount of capital would be forthcoming for necessary expenses in stocking up and legally occupying the magnificent tract of pastoral country referred to."

A private letter accompanied this formally-worded official communication, informing Mr. and Mrs. Stamford that the writer proposed to avail himself of their kind invitation to visit Windāhgil at Christmas, when he would be enabled to utilise a long-promised leave of absence for a few weeks.

It may be imagined, but can with difficulty be even sketched faintly, with what feelings of joy and gratitude this precious intelligence was received at Windāhgil; the happiness, too deep for words, of the parents; the wild, ecstatic triumph of the sisters; the elation of the servants and station hands, which communicated itself to the inhabitants of the surrounding sub-district, all of whom were included in the general glory of the event and unfeignedly happy at the news of Hubert's brilliant success.

"He deserves it all. I never thought but he'd come to good, and show 'em all the way if he got a chance," was the general comment of the humbler partisans. "He was always the poor man's friend, was Master Hubert; and now he's going to be at the top of the tree, and it's where he ought to be. He's a good sort, and always was. There wasn't a young man within a day's ride of Mooramah as was fit to be named in the same day with him."

"Oh! Laura, isn't it splendid, delicious, divine?" exclaimed Linda, dancing round her sister and mother with inexpressible delight. (Mr. Stamford had retired to compose his feelings in the garden.) "Oh! dear, this world's a splendid place of abode, after all, though I've had terrible doubts lately. Wasn't it fortunate we had strength of mind to let dear, darling Hubert go, though it nearly broke our hearts? I was certain some of my heart-strings cracked—really I was—but now I feel better than ever, quite *young*, indeed! Oh! how grateful we ought to be!"

"You were not the only one who suffered, were you, dear?" said Laura, looking dreamily into the distance, beyond the gleaming river, now indeed reduced to nearly its old dimensions. "Our prayer has been answered. Some day we shall see our hero returning 'bringing his sheaves with him.' Oh! happy day! Mother, what shall we do to relieve our feelings? I feel as if I could not bear it unless we did something."

"Suppose we drive over to Wantabalree?" suggested Linda. "Father always enjoys a chat with the Colonel, and that dear, good Rosalind is always so nice and sympathising about Hubert. I wonder if she cares for him the *least little* bit? But she'd die before she let anybody know, and Hubert was so disagreeable, he refused to give me the least hint. What do you think, mother?"

"I think nothing at all, my dear child. In all these matters, it is the wisest course neither to think nor to speak prematurely. But I daresay your father would drive us over, if we asked him, and we could stay a night there. As you say, a chat with the Colonel always does him good."

CHAPTER XV

So at Windāhgil and Wantabalree the calm, uneventful bush life went on as usual. That life so peaceful, so wholesome for the spirit, so chiefly free from the sharp cares and anxieties of city existence—where the eye is refreshed daily with nature pictures, at once grand and consoling. The early morn, so fair and fresh, when the sun first glorifies the pale mists of dawn, changing all the Orient with magic suddenness to opaline hues and golden flame. The green gloom, the august solitude of the boundless forest, the glowing sunshine which pierces even its inmost recesses at midday; the wavering shadows, born of the inconstant breeze; the tender eve when a solemn hush falls alike on stream and valley, on mountain-side or wildwood glade, and all the ancient majesty of night awes the senses. For the Windāhgil family, the placid days came and went, lightened, as of old, by the regularity of customary home duties, by books and music, by walks along the rippling river, by rides and drives through the winding forest paths. Occasional expeditions to Wantabalree made salutary change for all. As the summer months wore on—as the days lengthened, and the mid-day heat became intense; as the fiercer sun rays commenced to wither the bush herbage of the river meadows, the many-hued wild flowers of heath and hill; as the watercourses, fed by spring showers, commenced to trickle faintly—there was a tendency to complain of the tyrant Summer, and yet to long for the Christmas-tide as a period of mirth and enjoyment—this year invested with a special charm.

For had not a telegram from some unknown, unknowable place, and costing quite a small fortune, arrived, which stated that Hubert, the *bien aimé*, would return at Christmas—actually return? “Like the prodigal,” as Linda said, “only that it was the reverse in everything except the coincidence of its being ‘from a far country.’”

“The coincidence being so very slight, Linda,” said her mother, “perhaps it would have been as well to refrain from Scriptural parallel altogether. Don’t you think so, Miss Dacre? I had given up expecting him after his last letter, in which he said there were insuperable difficulties in the way.”

“He has managed to surmount the insuperable apparently,” said Linda. “Hubert always was a wonderful boy for accomplishing things just at the last moment. I don’t think I ever knew him beaten by anything he made up his mind to do, though he used to leave things rather too long.”

“That is one of Hubert’s worst points—or rather, most pronounced weaknesses,” said Laura; “he won’t be wise in time except on what he thinks are occasions of importance. It seems a defect with people of energy and resource. For instance, I can’t imagine Hubert saying he will cross a river or accomplish a journey and failing to carry out his purpose, whatever happened. He is one of those people who seem made for difficulties.”

“But difficulties which come upon the unprepared are apt to be disastrous,” said Miss Dacre; “for my part, I am strongly in favour of taking every imaginable precaution before the time of need.”

“The principle is good, but it doesn’t apply to Hubert,” said Linda, still unconvinced. “Difficulties and impossibilities only stimulate his resources, which are innumerable. When another man would lie down and die, he would be quite in his element, ordering, inventing, combining, and finally pulling through triumphantly.”

“It must be interesting to watch such a *tour de force*,” said Miss Dacre; “but I prefer the generalship which surveys the field, and places the battle in advance. Hit or miss, conquerors find their Moscow some day.”

“Hubert has made a glorious campaign this time,” said Laura. “What a day of days it will be when he shows his brown face at Mooramah again! Doesn’t it seem an age since he went away, Rosalind?”

“I am sure papa and Willoughby will be very glad to see him again,” said she. “I know they wish to have his advice about the sheep and the season. They are getting quite anxious.”

No! The engine did not break down. The steamer with the Chinese name, from the far north, the *Ly-wang-foo*, did not founder or take fire. The floods did not sweep away the railway bridges. There was not even an earthquake. All these phenomena and abnormal occurrences were, in Linda’s opinion, almost certain to happen because Hubert was coming home to spend Christmas with the family, and envious Fate would be certain to interfere. Everything had gone so prosperously hitherto that Destiny must be propitiated by sacrifice. Mr. Barrington Hope was coming up also, as he had looked forward to a holiday—of course *he* would be disappointed, and so on.

Wonderful to relate, a few days before Christmas, again the family trap was in requisition, driven by one of the boys.

The door of the first-class carriage opened, and a bronzed, Indian-officer-looking man stepped out. The boys at first did not know him. But when a tall, broad-shouldered gentleman, who followed him, proposed to send a porter for their luggage, the younger boy shouted out—“Why, it’s Hubert! Hubert! What a lark! We didn’t know him. Why you *have* changed! You’re ever so much thinner, and your eyes are larger, and your face browner. What have you done to yourself? We’ve come for you and Mr. Hope. Is this him?”

“Yes, this is he, Master Maurice. Your grammar appears to have stood still, though you have grown such a big fellow. See about the luggage, and have it put in the buggy; it will hold it all, unless it has got smaller. Well, how are mother and father and Laura, and Linda, and Waterking, and everybody? Why didn’t they come?”

“Well—they thought they’d be hugging you before all the people, and they’d better wait and do it at home. So they sent me and Val with the buggy. You’d better drive.”

“That is my intention, Maurice. I prefer to drive, though I know you can handle the reins. But tell me about Windāhgil. What is the grass like? Had much rain?”

“Only enough for sprinkling the garden these three months. I heard old Jerry, the shepherd, tell Paddy Nolan that he thought it was going to set in dry—the west wind was always blowing. *We’ve* lots of feed yet.”

“Old Jerry is a good judge of the weather at Mooramah; he’s been watching it these fifty years. And how are they at Wantabalree?”

“Very poor, almost starving.”

“What?” said Hubert. And then laughing at the boy’s strictly pastoral ideas, he said—“You mean the sheep in the paddocks, I suppose.”

“Yes, of course; they’re getting as bare as your hand. What they’ll do with all those sheep in another month or two nobody knows. Half of ’em’ll die before winter.”

“You seem to take a practical view of things, Maurice,” said Mr. Hope. “Are matters as bad as all that?”

“Well, I’m about a good deal, and I can’t help seeing. It’s a pity, too; they’re so nice, all of them.”

Hubert at home again! After all the doubts, fears, delays. Maurice had not exaggerated the amount of hugging, as he disrespectfully expressed it, which the returning hero had to undergo, and which would probably have created a stoppage on Mooramah platform. Mr. Hope stood by with a tolerant air, and even made some light remark to Miss Dacre as to their being left out of the extremely warm greetings which prevailed. A very short time, however, was suffered to elapse before all due apologies were made to their guests, and the cordiality of Laura’s manner perhaps caused Barrington Hope to overlook any overweening measure of love bestowed upon the long-absent brother.

“How her eyes sparkled, how her cheek glowed, how she seemed to devour the young fellow with her eyes!” he said to himself. And he argued favourably, knowing something of womankind, of the probable devotion to her husband should she ever condescend to endow mortal man with that supreme and sacred title.

It was in vain to expect much general conversation that day. If the visitors had been less sympathetic persons they might easily have been aggrieved at the predominance of Hubert’s personal adventures, opinions and experiences in all subsequent intercourse.

For the moment, everybody thought him much altered and changed, wasted even in frame, sunburned, blackened by exposure, but, on the whole, improved. There was a determination in his expression which had not so habitually marked his features before—a look as of a man who has confronted the grim hazards of the waste—who has dared the odds which in the desert land of the savage are arrayed against him; dared them only to conquer. It was the face of the conscript after the campaign and the battle-field. If there was less than the old measure of schoolboy gaiety and frolicsome spirits, there was an added infusion of the dignity of the man.

Then his adventures. He must relate some of them. Even Miss Dacre joined in this request. Like the knife-grinder, “story he had none to tell,” but could not escape owning to having been laid up in a bark hut with fever and ague, that had pulled him down so; nearly drowned in crossing a flooded river; had a brush with the blacks, who rose up from the tall grass all round him; horse speared under him, and so on. All this, though Hubert made light of it with characteristic modesty, seemed to his hearers of the nature of thrilling and exciting romance.

“Hubert must feel like a troubadour of the Middle Ages,” said Linda, “reciting before the lady of the castle and her maidens. It must have been an awful temptation to improvise situations, and I dare say they did. Fancy if we had no books, and were dependent entirely upon wandering minstrels!”

“It mightn’t be altogether such a bad thing, Miss Linda,” said Barrington Hope. “A handsome young troubadour would be more entertaining than a dry book, or even an indifferent novel.”

“It wouldn’t be such a bad trade for the unemployed,” said Laura; “but I suspect neither their manners nor their education would be found suitable.”

“Some of the swagmen in Queensland would fill the requirements so far,” said Hubert. “I have seen more than one ‘honourable’ on the tramp. Only it would not do to trust them too near the sideboard.”

“What a pathetic picture,” said Miss Dacre; “fancy the son of a peer trudging along the road, with his knapsack on his back, actually begging from door to door!”

“It is not regarded as begging in outside country,” said Hubert. “It is the recognised mode of locomotion for labourers and artisans.”

"And can they not procure steady employment?" said Miss Dacre, in a tone of deep anxiety. "Surely it only needs some one to take an interest in them, and give them good advice. Now, don't smile in that provoking way, Mr. Stamford, or I shall think you have brought back unimpaired one of your least amiable traits."

"Forgive me, Miss Dacre, for presuming on my part to hint that you do not appear to be cured of what I supposed you would have learned by this time to distrust—an unlimited trust in your less favoured fellow creatures. The men of whom I speak live at free quarters when they travel, are occasionally received on equal terms, and are paid, when they condescend to do work, at the ordinary high rate of wages, viz., from thirty shillings to two pounds per week, with board and lodging."

"And are they not encouraged to save this? They could soon put by quite a small fortune."

"Their misfortune is that they never *do* save. They invariably gamble or drink—generally the latter—till all is gone. Once lapsed, they follow the habits of the uneducated working man with curious fidelity."

"What a terrible condition! What a terrible country where such things can take place!"

"On the contrary; it is the best land attainable by the confirmed prodigal. In England, I take it, the dissipated, improvident men of their order go rapidly and thoroughly to the bad, passing swiftly out of knowledge. Here they have intervals of wholesome labour and compulsory sobriety, which recruit the constitution and give them opportunity for repentance, if they ever *do* repent."

While this conversation was proceeding, Mr. Stamford and Barrington Hope had been having a quiet semi-business talk, and this being concluded, Miss Dacre was persuaded to open the piano, after which Mr. Hope gave them some of the latest *Parsifal* morceaux fresh from Bayreuth, where he had a musical correspondent, having spent there some of the days of his youth. Music now absorbed all attention for the rest of the evening, everybody being more or less of an amateur; and even Hubert showing that he had not been wholly without the region of sweet sounds by bringing back and displaying two new songs.

"Who played the accompaniments for you, Hubert?" said Linda. "Somebody did, or you couldn't have learnt them so well."

"Do you suppose there are no ladies in the 'Never-Never' country?" said he. "Quite a mistake. People of culture abound."

The next day was adjudged by common consent to be spent at Wantabalree. Miss Dacre was anxious to get home, and would by no means consent to stay another day at Windāhgil. Mr. Hope thought he would like to see Wantabalree, of which celebrated station he had heard so much, and to pay his respects to the Colonel. So it was arranged that Hubert should drive Miss Dacre and Linda, while Laura went under Mr. Hope's guidance in the Windāhgil trap. Mr. and Mrs. Stamford elected to stay at home to take care of the house, and talk quietly over Hubert's return, personal appearance, prospects, and generally interesting belongings.

Arrived at Wantabalree, the Colonel met them with his usual courteous and hospitable manner. He congratulated Hubert on his safe return from Queensland, and hoped he had not taken up all the good country, as it seemed to him that other people would have to migrate, if the season did not improve.

"Not for another year or two, Colonel, at any rate," said Hubert, cheerily; "you've plenty of water here, and Willoughby must do a little 'travelling'; anything's better than throwing up the sponge."

"I see little else for it," said the Colonel, who had come to wear an anxious expression. Miss Dacre grew grave as she marked her father's face, but she controlled herself with an effort, as it seemed to Hubert, and telling Linda to go into the drawing-room and admire her flowers, followed her guests. The men remained outside and lounged into the stable yard, where the horses and traps were being arranged, looking about them, and chatting on indifferent subjects before going to the house.

"What a pretty situation you have here!" said Hope. "The accomplished Mr. Dealerson, of whom I have heard so much, must have been a man of taste. How picturesquely the creek winds round the point near that splendid willow; the elevation is just sufficient, and the flat seems made on purpose for a few fields and the fruit-garden. The view of the distant mountain-range completes the landscape. Capital stabling too."

"Oh! confound him!" growled Willoughby; "he was sharp enough to see that a smart homestead like this was just the thing to catch 'new-chum' buyers. It's not bad in its way, but I hate the whole thing so, when I think of the price we shall have to pay for it, that I could burn the house down with pleasure."

"I don't know so much about that," said Hope; "it doesn't do to be hasty in realising in stock matters any more than in purchasing. You and Hubert had better have a good talk over accounts before I leave, and if he can suggest anything, perhaps we may manage to tide over for a while. He's quite a rising man of business, I assure you."

"I wish to heaven the governor had remained in Sydney with my sister, and sent me out to Queensland with him," said the young man; "but it's too late to think of that now. We must make the best of it. But I won't stand grumbling here all day, Mr. Hope. Come in and we'll see if there's any lunch to be had. 'Sufficient for the day,' and so on?"

Hubert had found his way into the drawing-room before this colloquy had ended, and was looking over a collection of Venetian photographs which Miss Dacre had collected during their last visit to that city of the sea.

“I wonder if I shall ever see the Lion of St. Mark again?” she said. “I feel as if we were in another planet.”

“It is difficult to say where we shall all be in a few years’ time,“ said Hubert. ”*I* am not going to stay here all my life. But you won’t run away from Australia just yet, Miss Dacre?”

“I should think not,” she replied, cheerfully; “matters don’t look like it at present. The doubt in my mind is whether we shall ever be able to leave it. I don’t say that I am dissatisfied, but I should like to see the Old World again before I die.”

“When Willoughby has made his fortune, or other things come to pass, you will be able to go home and do all sorts of fascinating travel,” said Hubert. “We must look forward.”

“I feel certain you are not laughing at me, Mr. Stamford,” she said, fixing her eyes upon him with a wistful expression; “but if I did not know you so well I should suspect it.”

“Nothing, of course, is farther from my thoughts,” said the young man, meeting the gaze with equal directness; “but I really see no reason to doubt your seeing Europe within the next five years, so many changes take place in this Australian world of ours.”

“Hardly such a change as that,” she replied, smiling apparently at the absurdity of the idea; “and now I think I hear the luncheon bell. You must have thought I meant to starve you all.”

That no intention of this kind had actuated the fair hostess was made apparent as they were ushered into the dining-room, a large and handsome apartment wherein the furniture and appointments were in keeping with the general plan of the house. Everybody was in capital spirits; youth and hope were in the ascendant in the majority of the party, and as their conversation became general, everybody seemed as joyous as if Wantabalree were the best paying and the most fortunate station in the district.

“What a lovely place this is altogether!” said Linda. “Mr. Dealerson must have had some good in him after all. If father and Hubert had not been so prejudiced against him, he might have married and settled in the district. I believe he’s not so bad-looking.”

“I should never have come to see you, for one,” said Hubert, “if you had been the lucky girl that carried off such a prize. But I should like to have condemned him to work out this place, with its present stock, in a dry season; that would have been a truly appropriate punishment for his iniquities. The ancients used to think of fitting fellows in another world in their own line. But this savours of shop. Willoughby, did you get any snipe this spring?”

“Made two or three capital bags, but they went off as soon as the weather got dry. Hares are getting plentiful too, and I was going to get up a couple of greyhounds, but all that sort of thing’s knocked on the head now.”

“Oh! nonsense; you mustn’t give up your shooting. ‘Never allow your business to interfere with your pleasure’; we have little enough recreation in Australia. You should have seen the brown quail in the Mitchell grass in our new country. I used to put up bevies of them looking like partridges. I must take some setters up next time.”

“Isn’t the heat very dreadful up there?” inquired Miss Dacre.

“Rather tropical,” said Hubert; “but there is a freshness in the air that carries you through. The mosquitoes and sandflies, are perhaps the worst evils. But with a good pisé house, which you could shut up and keep cool, they might be greatly reduced.”

“Then the blacks; they seem nearly as bad as the North American Indians?”

“Not quite. I suspect ‘Sitting Bull’ or ‘Red Cloud’ would have given us a deal more trouble. Not but what we have to be careful. The best way, I find, is to treat them with perfect justice, to keep your word with them for good or evil. They learn to respect you in the end. After a while we shall have no trouble with them.”

During the afternoon, which was devoted to nothing in particular, a very agreeable arrangement which leaves guests at liberty to amuse themselves as they feel inclined, Hubert found himself in Miss Dacre’s company at the end of the lower walk of the orchard which followed the winding bank of the creek.

The bank was high at this particular spot, having been partially worn away by flood waters, leaving a wide, low shore at the opposite side. A deep pool had been formed, which now gleamed and sparkled in the lowered sun rays. A grand weeping-willow, self-planted, perhaps, in the earliest days of the occupation of the station, shaded it with trailing green streamers.

“Wantabalree is certainly the show station of the district,” said Hubert. “You were fortunate in some respects in having so pleasant a home in which to make your first Australian experiences.”

“I have been very happy here,” said she; “but that will make it all the more painful to leave, as I fear we shall be obliged to do at no distant period. I do not so much care for my own sake, but it will be discouraging to Willoughby, and my father is certain to feel the change more than any of us.”

“Matters look bad, and we are going to have another dry season, I believe,” replied Hubert. “I don’t like these westerly winds, and clouds coming up without rain. Still there is hope.”

“But had we not a drought two years before—just before my father made this purchase?”

“Quite true, but of late years, unfortunately, that has been no reason why another should not follow in quick succession. It is rather unfair of *Madre Natura*, but there is no help for it.”

“And what shall you do at Windāhgil, for I suppose we shall all be in the same boat?”

“I shall persuade my father to start every sheep he has, with the exception of the best flock, for my new country. The Wantabalree sheep had better take the road too. I must have a talk to Willoughby.”

“Oh, I do so wish you would, Mr. Stamford. I am sure he and papa are growing very troubled about our prospects. Willoughby and I can bear all that may come, but it will be a terrible blow to poor papa.”

“Miss Dacre, if you will permit me to confide in you—I have been concocting a little plot. If carried out it may—I say only it may—perhaps serve to improve the aspect of things. If you thought the Colonel would like to consult with me and Willoughby about the coming difficulty, I should be very glad to make the attempt.”

“Nothing would give my father more pleasure, and, indeed, tend to relieve his mind. I feel certain he has been anxious to consult you, Mr. Stamford, but hardly likes to begin the subject.”

“We must have a council of war then, which will include Mr. Barrington Hope. He is a tower of strength, as I know by experience, and it’s a piece of luck his being here now.”

“We should be grateful to you all the days of our lives, you may be sure, whatever happens, for the interest you have always shown in our welfare. If your advice had been taken in the first instance, all would have been well.” And here the young lady looked at Hubert with such an approving expression of countenance, that he felt as if he could throw up the new country and devote himself to the Sisyphean task of getting Wantabalree out of debt, if only she would promise to repay him by an occasional smile such as this one, the memory of which he felt certain would haunt him for an indefinite period.

“I can’t, of course, guarantee success, but I think I see my way towards lightening the ship and getting steerage way on her.” This nautical simile had probably been derived from his late maritime experiences, and was, perhaps, not altogether appropriate; but Miss Dacre was evidently not by any means in a critical frame of mind, for she again looked approvingly at him, and then led the way to the verandah, where Laura and Willoughby, Mr. Hope and Linda, were apparently having such an animated conversation that they seemed to be trying who could make the most noise.

The principal contention was whether a town or country life was the more wholesome and enjoyable. Laura and Willoughby were in favour of rural felicity, while Linda and Mr. Hope brought all the arguments they could think of in favour of cities—greater stimulation of the intellect, removal of prejudice, leaning towards altruism; in fact, higher general development of the individual. When Miss Dacre arrived, she, being appealed to, in the capacity of referee, unhesitatingly gave her decision in favour of a country life, stating her arguments so clearly that she completely turned the scale, besides causing Hubert the keenest enjoyment by, as he supposed, thus laying bare her own predilections.

After this contest of wits the Colonel appeared on the scene, having returned from his usual afternoon’s ride; and Hubert, with some address, managed to interest him in a discussion on station management, and the probable profits of agriculture, listening with deference to his senior’s ideas and suggestions.

CHAPTER XVI

Before the Windāhgil party returned on the following day a council of war was held, at the conclusion of which the Colonel's face assumed a very different expression from that which it habitually wore. The four men met in his study, where the accounts, assets, and liabilities were laid before the financial authority, who scanned them with keen and practised eye.

After what appeared to the others, and especially to Willoughby and his father, an astonishingly short examination, he raised his head and asked these pertinent questions: "I see your next bill, £12,437 14*s.* 10*d.*, falls due in March," he said. "After that, there is nothing more to be met but station expenses for another year, against which there will, of course, be the wool clip. You have 54,786 sheep, more or less, on the run. Is that so?"

"Half of which are to die this winter, Hubert says. Oh, yes—they're all in the paddocks," replied the younger Dacre, in a tone of reckless despair, while the Colonel's face set with steadfast resolve, yet showed by the twitching of his lips how severe was the repression of feeling—how tense the strain of anxiety.

260

"Never mind about that just yet," said Barrington Hope. "We'll see into the available assets first. About this next bill, Colonel; how do you propose to meet it?"

"By the sale of sheep, I suppose. There is no other way. And if this drought comes to pass I am informed they will be next to valueless. How is the next one—of equal amount, and another still, to be paid? In such a case I see nothing but ruin staring me in the face. Good God! that I should have brought my poor children to such a pass!"

Here the brave soldier, who had fought with cheerful courage on more than one battle-field, when comrades lay dead and dying around him—who had been the first man across the breach when the rebel artillery were mowing down his regiment like swathes of meadow grass at Delhi, appeared quite unmanned.

"It will never do to give up the fight before the end of the day, Colonel," said Mr. Hope, gently. "As a military man, you must know that reserves may come up at any moment. I will promise to give you a decided answer at the end of our colloquy. But we must move according to the rules of war."

261

"You must pardon me, my dear sir," said the Colonel, with a faint smile. "I trust not to embarrass the court again; but the fact is, I am a child in commercial affairs, and the probable loss of my children's whole fortune touches me too acutely."

"Have *you* any advice to offer, Hubert?" queried Hope. "I understand we are all here on terms of friendly equality."

"Yes, I have," said the young man, with an air of decision. "You can judge of its value. All the Windāhgil sheep, with the exception of a couple of flocks of studs, start for our Queensland country in January. The dry belt likely to be affected by the coming drought is a narrow one not more than two hundred miles wide, and as the sheep are fairly strong now, though they won't remain so, they should cross that with trifling loss. Donald Greenhaugh, a first-class man, has agreed to go in charge. Sheep are sheep over there now for stocking up new country, and we can sell to advantage what we do not want for Windāhgil Downs. The larger the number sent in one overland journey like this, the smaller the expense of droving per head. I propose that Wantabalree should be cleared in the same way. Willoughby can go in charge of his own sheep, and we can share the expense."

"I see nothing to prevent your idea from being carried out," said Mr. Hope. "I am aware that sheep of good quality, as the Wantabalree sheep proverbially are, are scarce, and saleable at high rates, in the new country. The main thing will be to have a first-class road overseer."

262

"Greenhaugh has been out with an exploring party over all that country," said Hubert; "and as a head drover is worth his weight in gold. A sober, steady fellow, too, and a good hand with men. No better bushman anywhere."

"I'm ready to start next week," said Willoughby, with the fire of ardent youth in his kindling eye. "I never expected to have such a chance. But—" and here his face became grave and thoughtful—"what do you say, father? Will you and Rosalind be able to get on without me?"

"We must try, my boy. The time will pass heavily, I doubt not; but," and here he walked over to Hubert, and put his hand on his firm shoulder, "your father did not grudge you in the path of honourable ambition, nor can I be more selfish. God bless you both, my boys! and bring you safe back once more to gladden our hearts. It seems to me as if Providence had decided this issue, and that I have little hand in it."

"I wish now to understand, Colonel Dacre," said Hope; "if, upon their arrival in Queensland, you will place 20,000 sheep in our hands for sale—at such prices as may be then ruling—and whether by the terms of your mortgage to Mr. Dealerson—who has of course, taken care to tie you up as tightly as he could—you have the power of disposing of so many."

263

"It so happens that I have permission to reduce the stock—I believe that's the expression—by just such a number," said the Colonel more cheerfully; "and I most willingly invest you with the power of disposing of them."

"Then I will take upon myself to state that the Austral Agency Company will guarantee to take up your bill next coming due, and to provide you with funds to carry you over the next

shearing, when we may perhaps make a more complete and satisfactory arrangement.”

The Colonel gazed at Mr. Hope with an expression as of one not fully realising the effect of the words he heard with his outward ears. Then suddenly stepping forward, he stretched out his hand, and taking that of the younger man wrung it silently.

He retreated to his chair, where he sat down with an expression of relief too deep for words. He then left, apparently, all further transactions of the interview in the hands of the “coming race.”

They began to go into detail a little, as if about *un fait accompli*, Hubert, more particularly, talking rapidly, in order to cover any appearance of awkwardness on the part of his hosts.

“You know,” he said, “that by doing this travelling business, we ‘hedge,’ so to speak, instead of standing to lose on the double event of a dry season and a panic in the money market, more than any of us can afford. If the weather breaks in February, of course we needn’t have started, but we can’t lose anything, as our sheep will be regularly run after when we get them over, and at high prices too. They talk of maiden ewes being worth a pound from the shears, and anything else fifteen shillings, while if it holds dry for three or four months here, sheep will have to be given away, or next thing to it.”

“I suppose I shall have to hire a lot of shepherds,” said Willoughby; “that will be a nuisance, won’t it?”

“If I were you I’d leave all that to Greenhaugh; he’s accustomed to these fellows, and knows how to talk to them on the road, which you don’t. You’d better, ostensibly, be second in command of the expedition. You won’t have much responsibility, and will be able to pick up heaps of experience. All you will have to find will be your own horses. He’ll arrange everything else and keep the accounts of rations and wages, which you and I can settle when you get there.”

“I suppose there’s a strong probability of a drought setting in,” said Mr. Hope; “if not, you will be rather premature.”

“The more I see of the weather signs, the more certain I am that we are on the edge of another drought, perhaps worse than the last,” said Hubert. “You’ll see that a great many people will hang on, expecting it to break up; then, making sure of getting the ‘tail end’ of the tropical rains, and generally trusting to the doctrine of chances until their sheep get too weak to travel, and then—-”

“And what then?” asked Willoughby. “I haven’t had the pleasure of witnessing a dry season as yet.”

Hubert smiled grimly. “You will thank your stars the Wantabalree sheep cleared out in time. You would never have forgotten it as long as you lived. Some squatters will lose half their stock, some two-thirds, some even more. A man told me he lost a hundred thousand sheep in the last drought. But *he* could afford it.”

“If it’s going to be so bad, what will your governor and mine do with the sheep we leave behind, for we must leave some.”

“They will have all the grass and water to themselves, which will give them a chance, and then, if it gets very cruel, they must cut scrub and oak for them.”

“Cut the trees down!” said Willoughby, with astonishment. “I never heard of such a thing!”

“You’ll find out everything in time,” said Hubert. “‘The brave old oak’ has an antipodean signification here. I don’t know what we should do without him in a dry time. I’ve known sheep kept in good condition that hadn’t seen grass for eighteen months.”

Before the drive back, which took place after lunch, in the midst of pathetic leave-takings between the Windāhgil girls and Miss Dacre, the latter young lady took an opportunity of expressing to Hubert her sincere gratitude for his organisation of the opportune alliance which was, so to speak, to raise the siege of Wantabalree.

“It has made dearest papa quite young again,” she said. “For weeks he has not been able to sleep at night, but used to get up and go wandering up and down the garden. I really began to fear for his reason. And now he seems quite a different man. I am so happy myself at the change for the better, that I cannot feel properly sorry that dear Willoughby is going away from us.”

“He is going among friends, at any rate, Miss Dacre,” said Hubert, pressing the young lady’s hand warmly in the agitation of the moment. “He will be well looked after, rely upon it. I feel certain it will be for everybody’s benefit in the long run.”

“I shall always think that you and that good genius, Mr. Hope, have stood between us and ruin,” said she, and here her bright, steadfast eyes were somewhat dimmed. “If papa does not say all that is in his heart, believe me that we are not ungrateful.”

“*Nothing* could ever lead me to think that,” said Hubert meeting her eyes with a glance which expressed more than that simple sentence, if freely translated. “Whatever happens, I am more than repaid by your approval.”

By this time Whalebone and Whipcord, harnessed up and having their heads turned homeward, began to exhibit signs of impatience, which caused Linda to call out to Hubert that she was sure Whipcord would throw himself down and break the pole if they didn’t start at

once, which appalling contingency cut short the interview, to Hubert's secret indignation. This expressed itself in letting them out with a will and quitting Wantabalree at the rate of fourteen miles an hour.

Some people would have felt nervous at proceeding along a winding, narrow bush road, well furnished with stumps, at such an express train rate, but the sure hand and steady eye of Hubert Stamford, in combination with the light mouths and regular if speedy movement of the well-matched horses, engendered the most absolute confidence in his driving.

"What do you think of bush life generally, Mr. Hope?" said Laura—after the first rush of the excitable goers had steadied into a twelve-mile-an-hour trot—"and how do you like Wantabalree?"

"I think the Wantabalree people perfect in their own way, worthy to be neighbours of Windāhgil," he added with a slight inclination of his head. "A man could live there very happily, 'with one fair spirit to be his minister,' if Miss Dacre would condescend to the office. It's a lovely verandah to read in. It would be like the days of Thalaba, while it lasted."

"And why should it not last?" demanded Laura. "The bush appears to me the place of all others where the feelings and emotions are the most permanent and deep-seated." [268]

Barrington Hope fixed his eyes upon her as she spoke with a gaze wistful and almost melancholy in its earnestness.

"Can anything endure that is fair, joyous, dreamlike, in this uncertain life of ours?" he said. "Is the ideal existence realised for most of us, or, if so, does it continue? You are more fortunate than I in your experiences, if such is your belief."

"Surely you have no reason to talk of despondency," said she, turning towards him her bright face, in which the summer-time seemed idealised. "You, who have made a success in your profession, and whom everybody talks of with—with, I won't say admiration, it might make you conceited—but high approval."

"I have done fairly well, I *suppose*," he said. "I may take it as the natural consequence of twenty years' hard, unrelieved work. I have coined my brain, my very heart's blood, for it; and I will not say but that I have had my reward in a proved success and high consideration. But, at times, a feeling comes over me of unrest and of doubt, well-nigh despair, as to the reality of human happiness—the value of success—against which I can scarcely defend myself."

"You have been working too hard lately. Reaction has set in. In old days Hubert used to suffer so, occasionally doubting whether life was worth living, &c. But with men it is generally a temporary ailment. You must take life easily for the next few weeks, and, like the old farm labourer in the village church, 'think about nothing'—Linda and I must cultivate part-singing, and improve our acquaintance with Wagner, now that we have the benefit of your criticism." [269]

"It is a passing weakness, I suppose," he said; "still, you would wonder at its intensity. But I didn't come here to bore you with my whims and fancies. One thing I shall carry away as a pleasant souvenir—that Hubert and I have been able to lighten the load on poor old Colonel Dacre's heart."

"I *am* charmed beyond measure," said Laura. "Hubert told me something—though he is such a close creature when he is speaking about himself that I could get next to nothing out of him. Willoughby will be able to get the sheep away to Queensland, I suppose, with ours, and they may not be ruined after all."

"They will have a struggle, but I really believe the station will pull through with Hubert's assistance and advice. If anything serious does happen at Wantabalree, it will not be for want of all the aid that an energetic young friend can furnish. I can see as much as that."

"And so can I," said Laura; "he could find no better or sweeter reason if he looked for a century." [270]

Linda and Hubert, according to their wont and usage, were embarked in such an animated argument that it is probable they did not hear this last confidential reference; more especially as—perhaps for the greater convenience of separate converse—the speakers' voices had become somewhat lowered, and Hubert's attention was partly taken up with his horses.

The twenty miles were accomplished in less than two hours. The horses in as hard condition upon the now partially-dried summer grasses as if they had been stabled, apparently treated the drive as the merest trifle, trotting off down the paddock, when released from harness, apparently as free from fatigue as if they had not gone a mile.

"I must say your bush horses surprise me," said Mr. Hope. "They are like Arabs of the desert for speed and hardihood."

"These two are a little out of the common," said Hubert; "not plentiful here or anywhere else."

The merry Christmastide was nearly spent—a season fully enjoyed in those newer Englands, which are growing fast and blooming fair beneath the Southern Cross, in despite of the red summer sun, and brown crisp pastures—a blessed time of rest from toil, "surcease of sorrow," gathering of friends and kinsfolk. Barrington Hope had thoroughly enjoyed his holiday; more, he averred than on any previous vacation of his life. There had been walks, drives and rides, picnics to the limestone caves in the vicinity, where vast halls were explored by the light of torches, stalactites brought home in triumph, and wondrous depths of gloom and primæval [271]

chaos penetrated; fishing parties on the river, where, although the water trickled faintly over the gravelly shallows, the wide reaches were deep and sport-permitting. Occasional visits to Mooramah township, their communication with the outer world, helped to fill up the term, and drive away the dreadful thought, uppermost in the hearts of the Windāhgil family, that Hubert was so soon to leave them for the far north land.

As soon as Christmas was well over the serious work of the year—only interrupted by this “truce of God”—began again with even greater energy; the industrial battle, never long pretermitted in Australia, raged furiously. So there was great mustering on Windāhgil and Wantabalree. Counting of sheep and tar-branding of the same with the travelling “T,” hiring of shepherds and “knock about” men. Purchase of rations, tools, horses, drays, harness, hobbles, “bells, bells, bells”—as Linda quoted—in short, the thousand and one road requisites for a long overland journey.

Towards the end of January Mr. Donald Greenhaugh arrived, riding one serviceable horse, and leading another, whereon, disposed over a pack saddle, was all his worldly wealth deposited. A keen-eyed, mild voiced Scottish-Australian, sun-bronzed, and lean as an Arab, who looked as if the desert sun had dried all superfluous moisture out of his wiry frame, he superintended the preparations at Windāhgil in a quiet, superior sort of way, occasionally offering suggestions, but chiefly leaving Hubert to manage matters as he thought fit. He also found time to go over to Wantabalree, where he remained a week, meeting with apparently greater exercise for his generalship.

At length the great day of departure arrived. The first flock of two thousand took the road through the north Windāhgil gate, followed by a second, at a decent interval, until the whole thirty thousand sheep passed out. Next day the advanced guard of the Wantabalree contingent showed themselves—Greenhaugh having decided to keep a day’s march between them. Forty thousand of these came by. The fat and saleable sheep of both stations had been retained. After these had been sold in the autumnal markets there would be but a small and manageable balance on either station.

The Colonel came as far as Windāhgil, and even a stage further, with his daughter, to see his boy off. They were dreadfully downhearted and saddened in appearance as they called at Windāhgil on their homeward route, but cheered up a little under the attentions of sympathising friends. Hubert had remained behind, not choosing to follow for another week. He was already beginning to assume the air of a large operator and successful explorer. “Greenhaugh can do all that business as well or better than I can,” he said. “It’s no use paying a man and doing the work yourself; I can catch them up easily before they get to Banda.”

“Then we might have had Willoughby for another week,” said Miss Dacre, with a slightly reproachful air.

“I don’t suppose it would have made much difference,” admitted Hubert; “but it is perhaps as well that he made the start with the sheep. He has a larger lot to look after; I don’t know but that it’s as well to have the wrench at once, and get it over—like a double tooth, you know.”

“It’s the most philosophical way to look at it,” said the girl, smiling through her tears, “and no tongue can tell the comfort it has been to us to know that matters are in a comparatively favourable train. I must not weary you with protestations, but papa and I can never adequately express our gratitude.”

“That could be done easily enough,” thought the young man; but he said: “At present it’s only a case of good intentions; we must wait to see how they turn out. How will you and the Colonel get on by yourselves?”

“Better than I at first thought; Willoughby left us our working overseer, who will do excellently to look after a smaller number of sheep. It will just give papa exercise, and occupation to help him to manage them, he says. Laura and Linda must be good neighbours, and perhaps Mr. Stamford will come over now and then and indulge papa with a game of whist.”

“I will undertake everything,” said Hubert, “for our people, but you and the Colonel must reciprocate. If both families make common cause till ‘Johnny comes marching home’—I mean Willoughby—you will find the time pass more quickly than you anticipate.”

Those last days of a pleasant holiday time, what an element of sadness pervades them. How swiftly they fly! Ah, me! The flowers fade, the sky clouds over as if at the touch of an untoward magician. The land of faery recedes—the region of plain prose, of arduous effort, and heroic but dreary self-abnegation looms painfully near. Much, however, of this sombre aspect of the inevitable is relieved in early youth by the kindly glamour of high hope, and the ardent imagination of the as yet successful aspirant. For him the forest gloom is but the high road to the castle of the enchanted princess; the sternest tourney is more than recompensed by the smiles of his queen of beauty; the burning summer day, the drear winter night, but aids to fortune and accessories to boundless wealth.

So, for Barrington Hope and Hubert Stamford, the tranquil days came and went, scarce tinged with melancholy, till the fateful morn of departure arrived; before noon Windāhgil was left desolate and forsaken of its heroes. Hubert fared forth along the north-west trail, bound for the sea-like plains of the Lower Warroo, where the wild orange flowers bloom on their lonely sand islands, bright with glossy-leaved shrubs; where the emu rears her brood undisturbed under the sad-hued myall, that waves her slender streamers and whispers ghost-like at

midnight to the pitiless desert moon.

Mr. Barrington Hope, on the other hand, betook himself by rail to the metropolis, to plunge once more, with the eagerness of a strong swimmer, into the great ocean of speculative finance, which there “heaves and seethes alway.” But before he departed he had transacted a rather important interview, in which Laura Stamford was the person chiefly interested; had, indeed, promised to revisit Windāhgil before the winter ended.

CHAPTER XVII

Local critics were not lacking around Mooramah, as in other places. They failed not to make unfavourable comments upon Hubert's decided course of action. They were pleased to say "that young man was going too fast"—was leading his father into hazardous speculations; all this new country that such a fuss was made about was too far off to pay interest upon the capital for years and years to come; the Austral Agency Company had better mind what they were about, or they would drop something serious if they went on backing every boy that wanted to take up outside country, instead of making the most of what his family had and helping his parents at home. As for young Dacre, he would most likely get his sheep eaten by the blacks and himself speared, as he knew nothing about the bush, and hardly could tell the difference between a broken-mouthed ewe and a weaner. Besides, the season might "turn round" after all—there was plenty of time for rain yet. Most likely it would come in February, as it had often done before. Travelling sheep was a most expensive game, and you were never done putting your hand in your pocket."

Thus argued the unambitious, stay-at-home, easy-going section of society which obtains in rural Australia in almost the same proportion and degree that it does in English counties. In the older-settled portions of the land one may discern the same tendency to over-crowding the given area with unnecessary adults, procuring but a bare subsistence, narrowing with each generation as in Britain, where sons of proprietors are too often contented to sink somewhat in the social scale rather than forego the so-called "comforts" of civilised life. The poorly-paid curate, the Irish squireen, "Jock, the Laird's brother," and the French *hobereau*, so cordially hated by the peasantry before the Revolution, are examples of this class.

And, in the older-settled portions of Australia are to be found far too many men of birth and breeding who are contented to abide in the enjoyment of the small amenities of country town life, to sink down to the positions of yeomen, farmers, and tenants, rather than turn their faces to the broad desert as their fathers did before them, and carve out for themselves, even at the cost of peril and privation, a heritage worthy of a race of sea kings and conquerors.

Hubert Stamford did not belong, by any means, to the contented mediocrities. Willoughby Dacre was a kindred spirit. So the two young men fared cheerfully forth across the dusty, thirsty zone, beyond which lay the Promised Land. Hard work and wearisome it was, in a sense, but held nothing to daunt strong men in the full vigour of early manhood. The days were hot, and Willoughby's English skin peeled off in patches for the first week or two from the exposed portions of his person. But cooler airs came before midnight, and the appetites of both after long days in the saddle were surprising. The sheep, being in good condition at starting, bore the forced marches, which were necessary, fairly well. Donald Greenhaugh seemed to know every creek, water-course, and spring in the whole country. And on one fine day Willoughby pulled up his horse, and in a tone of extreme surprise exclaimed, "Why, there's grass!" pointing to a fine green tuft of the succulent *Bromus Mitchelli*. It was even so. They had struck the "rain line," marked as with a measuring tape. Henceforth all was peace and plenty with the rejoicing flocks, which grew strong and even fat as they fed onward through a land of succulent herbage and full-fed streams.

"Well, Willoughby, old man; what do you think of this?" asked Hubert one evening, as they sat on a log before their tent and watched the converging flocks feeding into camp; marked also the fantastic summits of isolated volcanic peaks which stood like watch-towers amid a grass ocean waving billowy in the breeze. "Do you think we did well to cut the painter? How do you suppose all these sheep would have looked at Windāhgil and Wantabalree?"

"They've had no rain yet," said Willoughby. "In that letter I got at the last township we passed, the governor said there hadn't been a shower since I left. It's nearly three months now, and we should hardly have had a sheep to our name by this time."

"There'll be some awful losses in the district," said Hubert. "Men *will* put off clearing out till too late. My own idea is that this will be a worse drought all down the Warroo than the last one. Our people will make shift to feed the few sheep we have left, thank goodness! And we have enough here to stock more than one run or two either. Windāhgil Downs will carry a hundred thousand sheep if it will ten. All we have to do now is to breed up. That's plain sailing."

"I wish we had some Wantabalree Downs ready to take up," said Willoughby, regretfully. "If we hadn't those beastly bills yet to pay, we might have done something in that way too."

"Wait till we've settled a bit, and have landed the sheep all safe," said Hubert. "That will be stage the first. After we 'see' that, we must 'go one better.' Barrington Hope is a good backer, and outside country is to be had cheap just now."

Events—in that sort of contrary way which occasionally obtains in this world—went far to justify the bold policy of this confident young man, who quietly ignored his elders, and to confound the wise, represented by the cautious croakers who stayed at home and disparaged him.

There had occurred a drought of crushing severity but three years since, and only one "good"—that is, rainy season had intervened, so rendering it unlikely, and in a sense unreasonable and outrageous, as one exasperated impeacher of Providence averred, that another year of famine should so soon succeed. Nevertheless, the rain came not. The long, hot

summer waned. Autumn lingered with sunny days and cold nights. Winter too, with hard frosts, with black wailing winds, that seemed to mourn over the dead earth and its dumbly dying tribes. *But no rain!* No rain! The havoc which then devastated all the great district watered by the Warroo and its tributaries was piteous, and terrible to behold.

Rich and poor, small and great, owners of stock fared alike. A herd of five thousand head of cattle died on Murragulmerang to the last beast. Eight thousand at Wando. John Stokes, Angus Campbell, Patrick Murphy, struggling farmers, lost every milch cow, every sheep, every horse. They were too short of cash to travel. Their small pastures of a few hundred acres were as dust and ashes. Too careless to provide a stock of hay and straw, selling all when prices were good, and "chancing it," they lost hoof and horn. Mammoth squatters were short—fifty thousand sheep—seventy thousand—a hundred thousand. Smaller graziers with fifteen or twenty thousand, lost two-thirds, three-fourths, four-fifths, as the case may be. Ruin and desolation overspread the land. Waggon loads of bales stripped from the skins of starved sheep—"dead wool" as it was familiarly called—were seen unseasonably moving along the roads in all directions.

From all this death and destruction Hubert's family and the Wantabalree people had been preserved, as they now gratefully remembered, by his prompt yet well-considered action. Harold Stamford, as he watched his stud flocks, fairly nourished and thriving from constant change of pasture which the empty paddocks permitted, thanked God in his heart for the son who had always been the mainstay of his father's house, while the Colonel was never weary of invoking blessings on Hubert's head, and wishing that it had been his lot to have been presented with a Commission in the Imperial army, in which so bold and cool a subaltern would have been certain to have distinguished himself.

"Better as it is, father," said Miss Dacre; "he might have sold out and lost his money in a bad station. Except for the honour and glory, I think squatting is the better profession, after all; if Willoughby only turns out successful, I shall think Australia the finest country in the world."

"We shall have to live in it, my darling, for a long time, as far as I see, so we may as well think so," said the Colonel. "Suppose we drive over to Windāhgil, and have another rubber of whist? Stamford plays a sound game, though he's too slow with his trumps; and Laura has quite a talent for it—such a memory too!"

Many games of whist were played. Much quiet interchange of hopes and fears, discussions of small events and occurrences, such as make up the sum of rural daily life, had taken place between the two families ere the famine year ended. It left a trail of ruin, not wholly financial. Old properties had been sold, high hopes laid low, never to arise; strong hearts broken. "Mourning and lamentation and woe" had followed each month, and still Nature showed no sign of relenting pity.

Through all this devastation the life of the dwellers at Windāhgil had been comparatively tranquil; if not demonstratively joyous, yet free from serious mishap or anxiety. The tidings from the far country were eminently satisfactory, and as regular as circumstances would permit.

"Windāhgil Downs" was quoted as one of the crack stations of North Queensland, and in order to devote his whole attention to that principality in embryo, Hubert had sold his share in the first station purchased to Willoughby on long credit. All the Wantabalree sheep were there, and doing splendidly. Mr. Delamere and Willoughby were sworn friends, and whenever Hubert could get a chance to "come in" Delamere would take his place at Windāhgil Downs, and leave Willoughby in charge at the home station. Added to this, Mr. Hope had "taken over" the Wantabalree account, and saw no difficulty in providing for future payment and working expenses.

This was good news in every sense of the word. The Colonel became so exceedingly cheerful and sanguine, that his daughter again asserted that he must be thinking of a stepmother for her. In which behalf she implored Laura and Linda to continue their complaisance towards him, lest he should in despair go farther afield, and so be appropriated by some enterprising "daughter of Heth."

"That is all very well," said Linda; "I suppose it's a quiet way of warning us off. But here we are living in a kind of pastoral nunnery, with no society to speak of, and nothing to do. The atmosphere's pervaded with *bouquet de merino*, for though ours are all right, I feel certain I can catch the perfume of Mr. Dawdell's dead sheep across the river. Now, why shouldn't I take compassion on the Colonel? I like mature men, and can't bear boys. I should rather enjoy ordering a superior girl like you about. Wouldn't it be grand, Laura?"

"I have no doubt Rosalind will grant you her full permission," said Laura, "if you think such a little chit as you is likely to attract a man like Colonel Dacre."

"Little chit, indeed!" said Linda, indignantly. "That's the *very reason*. It would be my youth, and freshness, and general stupidity (in the ways of the world) that would attract him. Oh, dear! think of the white satin, too! I should look so lovely in white satin with a Honiton lace veil and a train." Then Linda began to walk up and down the room in a stately manner, which created a burst of laughter and general hilarity.

Now that fortune had taken it into her head to be kind, she, like other personages of her sex, became almost demonstrative in her attentions. Every letter from Queensland contained news of a gratifying and exhilarating nature. Hubert had heard of some "forfeited" country, of

which he had informed Willoughby, who, having gone out with the requisite number of sheep, blackfellows, and shepherds, had “taken it up.” He expected in a year or so to sell a portion of it, there being about a thousand square miles altogether, and thus help to clear off the Wantabalree account. As soon as they got it into working order they would sell Delamere and Dacre’s home station, with twenty thousand sheep, and put all their capital into Glastonbury, as Mr. Delamere had chosen to name the new property.

285

Hubert had several times been offered a high price for Windāhgil Downs, but he was not disposed to sell on any terms, being bent on stocking it up and improving it, so as fully to develop its capacity. “Some day, when the projected railway from Roma comes through, we’ll have a syndicate formed to buy it,” Hubert said. “In the meantime, there’s a few thousand acres of freehold to pick up round old Windāhgil.”

“All this was very well,” said the dwellers in the old homes; “but were the young men going to stay away for ever? They might just as well be in England. Surely, now that the season had changed and everything was going on so prosperously, they could afford two or three months’ time to see their relatives.”

This view of the case was pressed upon Hubert’s attention in several of Laura’s letters. Linda went so far as to threaten that she would, in default of Hubert’s paying attention to her next letter, invent an admirer of distinguished appearance for Miss Dacre, which harrowing contingency might serve to bring back the wanderer.

But there be many important, and, indeed, indispensable duties in new country. Men are scarce. Responsibilities are heavy. Risks abound. The captain and the first mate cannot leave the ship, be the inducements ever so great, until the anchor is down. Some day, however, the commander dons his shore-going “togs,” frock coat, tall hat, gloves, and all the rest of it, and goes in for a little well-earned enjoyment.

286

So, as again the summer days drew near, word came that matters had so moulded themselves that Hubert and Willoughby were on the homeward track. The “home station” of Delamere and Dacre had been sold to Messrs. Jinks and Newboy with thirty-three thousand sheep at a satisfactory price (*vide* the *Aramac Arrow*), as the energetic proprietors had concluded to concentrate their capital upon their magnificent newly taken up property of Glastonbury.

Mr. Delamere was to locate himself thereon, in the absence of his partner, while Donald Greenhaugh would be left in charge of Windāhgil Downs, now pretty well in working order. Hubert and Willoughby would come down from Rockhampton by steamer to Sydney, and might be expected to be home in a month or six weeks at farthest. This promise they faithfully carried out, and by a remarkable coincidence, Mr. Barrington Hope arranged to have a short holiday, and come up to Windāhgil with them.

There *is* a little true happiness in the world, however hard-hearted materialists and cynical poets affect to deny the fact. There might have been an approximation in other young persons’ lives; to the state of blissful content in which the two families were steeped to the lips on the arrival of the long-absent heroes, but no conceivable satisfaction here below could have exceeded it.

287

The Colonel kept walking round his son, taking in every personal detail with unflagging interest for hours and hours, as Miss Dacre averred; she was positive he never took his eyes off him, except when he retired to bed, for a whole week afterwards.

Laura and Linda declared Hubert had grown bigger, taller, handsomer, older—in short, had in every way improved. Miss Dacre, when called upon to confirm the decision, seemed to have a slight difficulty in putting her opinion into suitable form, but it was understood to be on the whole favourable. At any rate, the object of all this affectionate interest had reason so to believe.

Mr. Barrington Hope was surprised to find both home stations alive and kicking—so to speak—after the terrific ordeal which they had undergone. But, as he remarked, understocking was a more scientific mode of management than most squatters would allow. It was many a year since the paddocks on either station had looked so well. As to the non-wool-bearing inhabitants, he was lost in astonishment at their brilliant appearance after the deprivation of so many of the comforts of life.

“We were sorely tempted to go away to Sydney during the worst part of the drought,” said Laura. “Father gave us leave at the end of one terrible month, when we had not tasted milk, butter, or any decent meat. But as Mr. Dacre and Hubert were living on salt beef and ‘pig’s face’ (*Mesembryanthemum*) when last heard from, and risking their lives as well—moreover, as Rosalind wouldn’t hear of leaving the Colonel—we determined to bear our share of discomfort also.”

288

“I declare I grew quite nice and thin,” said Linda, who was sometimes uneasy about a possibly redundant figure; “mine was just what the old novelists used to call ‘a slight, but rounded form.’ Laura and poor Rosalind fell off dreadfully, though. No vegetables either. We were reduced to eating an onion one day with positive relish. Father said it was medicinally necessary.”

“Good heavens, if I had had the least idea that matters were so bad,” said Mr. Hope, glancing at Laura with a look of the tenderest compassion, “I should have insisted upon everybody migrating to Sydney, and come up in person to take charge, or done something desperate. I should indeed.”

“That would have been a last resource,” said Hubert, laughing. “Fancy the Austral Agency Company, with the manager ruralising at such a time! That would have caused a financial earthquake, which would have been more serious than the absence of milk and butter and a short supply of vegetables. Never mind, it was only a temporary inconvenience—much to be lamented, doubtless—but everybody looks very nice, notwithstanding.”

“I suppose we can put up with the old place for a few weeks longer?” interposed Mr. Stamford. “After Christmas, as we’ve all been such good boys and girls, I think we’re due for another trip to Sydney. I want to see the pantomime, for one. Miss Dacre requires change of air. I’m not sure that the climate of Tasmania or Melbourne wouldn’t brace us all up after the rather—well, not particularly exciting life we’ve had for the last year.” 289

“Oh! you dear old father,” said Linda; “you’re a man of the most original ideas and splendid ingenuity. You’ve divined our inmost thoughts intuitively.”

With such a prospect before them, the members of both families endured the unmistakably warm weather which generally precedes Christmas with philosophical composure. Indeed, so extremely contented were they with the existing state of affairs, that Linda vowed it was hardly worth while going away at all. This unnaturally virtuous state of mind was, however, combated by the majority, who possibly had reasons of their own for desiring to wander for a season far from their usual surroundings, for early in the first week of the new year the *Mooramah Independent, and Warroo, Eyall, and Bundaburhamah Advertiser* contained this wildly interesting announcement:—

“MARRIAGES.

“On the 3rd January, by the Rev. Edward Chalfont, at St. John’s Church, Mooramah, Hubert, eldest son of Harold Stamford, Esq., of Windāhgil, to Rosalind, only daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel Rupert Dacre, of Wantabalree, late of H.M. 83rd Regiment. At the same time and place, Barrington, second son of Commander Collingwood Hope, R.N., to Laura, eldest daughter of Harold Stamford, Esq., of Windāhgil.” 290

These momentous events were not wholly unexpected. It may be imagined how the church at Mooramah was crowded on that day. It was not a particularly small one either, having been built mainly through the exertions of an energetic young clergyman, who did not allow himself to be discouraged by the fact that a considerable debt thereon still remained unpaid. So there was not a seat, or half a seat, to be had inside, while a much larger congregation than usual stood around the porch and entrance doors. School children strewed flowers on the pathway of the happy brides, and none of the usual ceremonies were omitted.

As it had not rained for three months, and apparently was not likely to do so for three more, the old-word proverb, “happy is the bride that the sun shines on,” received most literal fulfilment. However, the near prospect of ocean breeze and plashing wavelets sustained them amid the too ardent sun rays. Hubert, as a local celebrity, came in for a certain amount of guarded approval, and, in spite of the misgivings with which his Napoleonic policy had been regarded, it was conceded that “he looked twice the man” since his departure for foreign parts. Rosalind Dacre quietly, though becomingly, dressed, on that account was thought to have scarcely paid due and befitting regard to her serious and sacred duty as a bride. But as to Laura, there was no thought of dispraise or any, the faintest, doubt. Universally admired and beloved, the flower of a family not less popular than respected in the district, each one in that crowded building seemed to take a personal pride in her day of maiden triumph. Barrington Hope, radiantly happy and enjoying the prestige of a distinguished stranger, also received the highest compliments of the spectators by being declared to be worthy of the belle of Mooramah. 291

The happy couples departed by train to Melbourne, *en route* for Tasmania, that favoured isle where the summer of Britain is reproduced with the improved conditions of assured fine weather, and a less inconvenient proximity to the Pole. There annually do the desert-worn pilgrims from the tropic north and central wastes of the Australian continent resort for coolness, greenery, and agreeable society, as to the garden of Armida. Thus, in those rare intervals when they were not engaged in gazing on the perfections of their brides, were Hubert Stamford and Barrington Hope enabled to indulge in a little pioneer talk, and to listen to far-off echoes from the wild scenes which the former had so lately quitted. 292

Mr. and Mrs. Stamford, with Linda, remained for a few days longer before they took wing for the metropolis, leaving behind the Colonel and Willoughby, who elected to remain at home in charge of both stations. They arrived in Sydney just in time to take leave of their friends, the Grandisons. Chatsworth had been let for a term of years, and preparations were complete for their going to live upon one of the station properties.

“The fact is, my dear fellow,” said Mr. Grandison, “that my wife and I have resolved to take these younger children up into the bush and live there quietly with them till their education is finished. We must try if possible to bring them up in an atmosphere untainted by fashionable folly and excitement. It has been the ruin (at least, I think so) of the older ones. Now that Josie has married—-”

“What! Josie married?” exclaimed Mr. Stamford. “I never heard of it. You astonish me!”

“Married, indeed,” said Mrs. Grandison, who now joined them; “and a pretty match she has

made of it. Not that there's anything against the young man—he's two or three years younger than she is—except that he's rather stupid, and hasn't an idea of anything, except billiards and betting, that I can discover. As he's only a clerk in an insurance office, he has just enough to keep himself and not a penny for a wife, unless what her parents give her."

"The sort of young fellow I never shall be able to take the slightest interest in," said Mr. Grandison; "not bad-looking, I suppose, but quite incapable of raising himself a single step by his own exertions, or aspiring to anything beyond a sufficiency of cigars and an afternoon lounge in George Street."

"Of course you tried to prevent the marriage," said Mrs. Stamford; "but it's too late now to do anything but make the best of it, for poor Josie's sake."

Mr. Grandison turned away his head as his wife said, in a tone of deep feeling, "The silly girl went and was married before the Registrar. She knew we could not approve of it, and took that means of being beforehand with us. Her father won't see her yet; but of course she'll have an allowance, and we must help them if he keeps steady. But it nearly broke our hearts, you may believe."

"We see all these things too late," said her husband, with a sigh, which he tried bravely to repress. "If we had brought our children up with other ideas, or placed before them higher objects of ambition, a different result might have been reached. Over and over again have I cursed the day when we left the bush for good—for good, indeed!—and came to live in this city of shams. Not worse than other places, I believe; but all this artificial town life, while not too good for older people, is ruin and destruction for young ones. What a fortunate man you've been, Stamford, though, in our selfish grief, I've forgotten to congratulate you."

"It is the goodness of God," he replied, warmly grasping the hand which was silently held out to him. "My children have never given me a moment's anxiety. We have been sheltered, too, from the temptations of the world, and so far from the 'deceitfulness of riches.' I can never be sufficiently thankful."

"That won't last long," said Mr. Grandison, with an effort to be cheerful. "People tell me that Windāhgil Downs is going to be the finest sheep property west of the Barcoo, and Hubert's reputation as a pioneer is in everybody's mouth now. He managed to pull the Colonel's investment out of the fire. Well paid for it too, by all I hear! Give our love to Laura. She must live in Sydney, I suppose, now she's married a business man. A rising fellow, Barrington Hope, and one of the smartest operators we have. Heigho! time's up. We shall meet again some day I hope, when I have a better story to tell you."

Mrs. Stamford was sincerely grieved to hear of this latest misfortune of the Grandison family. She could hardly forgive Josie for the insincerity and ingratitude with which she had acted. "However," said the kindly matron in continuation, "perhaps it is not so bad as they are disposed to think. They're dreadfully disappointed, of course. If the young man's character is good, he may get on, and of course Mr. Grandison will help them by and by. It will do Josie good to have a house of her own to look after, and to be obliged to save and contrive. The girl's heart is not naturally bad, I believe; but she has been spoilt by over-indulgence and extravagance ever since she was a baby. A poor marriage may be the best thing that ever happened to her. Oh! Harold, should we not be deeply grateful for the mercy of Providence in so ordering our lives that until lately we have never had any money to spare, and self-denial has been compulsory?"

"H'm," said Mr. Stamford, musingly; "no doubt, no doubt! Too much money is one form of danger, of moral death, which the devil must regard with great, great complacency. Few people take that view, though."

"I am very glad we have never been tried in that way," said Mrs. Stamford, simply, looking up into her husband's face. "I have pitied you, darling, when I have seen you tormented and anxious about money matters, but we have always been very happy among ourselves, even when things were at their worst. There is no chance now, I suppose, of our affairs going wrong? These Queensland stations are quite safe!"

"Quite safe, my dearest wife," answered Harold Stamford, with a pang of remorse at his heart, as he imprinted a kiss on the fond face which had never looked into his save with truth and love shining in her clear eyes. "'Safe as a bank,' or suppose we say as Australian debentures. I don't mind affirming that nothing, humanly speaking, could materially injure our investments now."

"I am glad to hear that, for the dear children's sake," she answered. "If their future is secured, that is everything."

Before the close of the summer, a naval squadron cruising in Australian waters, strange to say, happened to need partial refitting in Sydney Harbour, and, entering that picturesque haven, anchored as usual in Farm Cove. In one of the delicious sea-girdled nooks of Neutral Bay, it so chanced that Mr. Stamford had rented a furnished villa for the season. The ladies were wont to use the telescope in close inspection of any strange vessel that approached. Wonderful to relate, it appeared that the frigate which on a previous occasion had been the ocean home of Lieutenant Fitzurse was even now among the graceful war-hawks which, after battling with storm and tempest, were, so to speak, furling their pinions under Linda's excited gaze.

There may or may not be a new system of marine telegraphy, but the fact comes within my experience that naval men have exceptionally prompt means of discovery, upon arrival in port, whether the ladies of their acquaintance are in town, and if so, where they abide.

297

It so chanced, therefore, that, upon the following afternoon, a gig left H.M.S. *Vengeful*, and with eight able seamen pulled straight for the Dirrāhbah jetty, landing the lieutenant and a brother officer, who, making their call in due form, betrayed great anxiety for the health of Mr. and Mrs. Stamford and the young ladies during their long absence from Sydney. They were also politely astonished at the news of Miss Stamford's and Hubert's marriages. Indeed, the recital of the family news (presumably) as conveyed by Linda to Mr. Fitzurse in full, during an examination of the green-house, lasted so long that Mrs. Stamford looked several times from the window, and the gallant tars in the boat referred to the protracted absence of their superior officers in unqualified Saxon terms.

What more is left to tell? It would appear that there might have been a previously implied, if unspoken confession between the young people. Reference being permitted to Stamford *père*, and satisfactory credentials forthcoming, it was arranged that an "engagement" should be officially allowed, hope being cautiously held out by that wary diplomatist that, in the event of the coveted "step" being attained, the full concession might be thought about. Which decision gave unqualified satisfaction, Linda being, as she averred, willing to wait for years; indeed rather glad on the whole, that separation and delay were necessary, so that she might have time to think over and thoroughly enjoy her unparalleled happiness.

298

With the autumn came the returning travellers, Hubert declaring that he dared not stay away another week from the Downs; frightful consequences might happen; Mr. Hope and Laura preparing to inhabit the comfortable abode which, for a few years to come, they had agreed, would be commensurate with their means. Something was said about Mrs. Hubert Stamford remaining at Wantabalree with her father while her husband went forth again on his task of subduing the waste. But that young woman replied promptly, with the opening words of an ancient family record, "Where thou goest, I will go." In reference to the possibly rude architecture of their abode, she declared "that if Hubert had only a packing case to live in, she, being his wife, thought it her duty to live there with him."

After this, of course, there was no more to be said, and the *Catterthun*, sailing soon afterwards for the uttermost northern port, had in her passenger list the names of Mr. and Mrs. Hubert Stamford and servant.

From this time forth the star of Stamford family was manifestly in the ascendant; for not only did their undertakings flourish and the sons and daughters of the house "grow in favour with God and man," but everyone bound to them by the ties of kindred or friendship prospered exceedingly. The debt on Wantabalree was cleared off in due time, while the "Glastonbury Thorn" seemed to have taken deep root in the northern wilds of the far land to which it had been carried, and to bring a blessing upon the dwellers around its sacred stem. The Colonel lived rather a solitary existence at the home station after Willoughby had departed again for the north, but he got into the way of going to Sydney for the summer, where the Australian Club afforded him congenial society, with a certainty of comradeship at the nightly whist table.

299

Mr. and Mrs. Hubert Stamford returned after a year's absence, the latter, though having lost something of her English freshness of complexion, by no means delicate of health, and very proud of the infant Harold, whose steadfast eyes and bold brow marked him out as a future pioneer. Neither were sorry to abide with the Colonel for a season, and Hubert threw out hints about "the far north" being too hot for any white woman, although Rosalind would rather die than admit it. "She's the pluckiest little woman in the world, I believe," he said. "Didn't she wash and cook for me and Donald the whole month we were without a servant? I believe she'd have kept the station accounts too, if we'd have let her. But I don't want to run risks."

Mr. and Mrs. Stamford, being more impartial observers, were of opinion that a change would be beneficial to both the young people. Hubert was too thin to satisfy the maternal eye. She believed that he had never properly got over that horrid fever and ague attack. "And of course Hubert would never give in; but really as the boy had done so well, wouldn't it be a nice time for them to run home for a year or two? The station was settling down, and as Mr. Greenhaugh had been taken into partnership, surely he could manage things for a time? It would benefit Hubert in every way, and as he had never been 'home,' of course they would like him to see a little of the world."

300

Something of this sort may have occurred to Mr. Stamford, but he had refrained in order to permit his more cautious helpmate to propose the extravagant notion. He shook his head oracularly, said he would think over it, and if it was decided—mind, if after due consideration it turned out to be feasible—he thought it would do Barrington and Laura a great deal of good too. Barrington would knock himself up if they didn't mind. He was such a terribly constant worker, and so conscientious that he did not permit himself the relaxation that other men in his position would have claimed.

"What a splendid idea!" exclaimed Mrs. Stamford; "my dear Harold, you always seem to hit upon the exact thing we have all been thinking of but have hesitated about mentioning. It will be the saving of Barrington, and as for Laura, the great dream of her life will be fulfilled. I

301

know she almost pines for Rome and Florence, but she told me once she did not think they could afford it for some years to come.”

“*I* can afford it, though,” said Mr. Stamford, with pardonable exultation. “Things have prospered with us lately. And what have we to think of in this world but our children’s happiness? Barrington shall have a cheque for a thousand the day their passage is taken. As for Hubert, he can draw one for himself now, thank God! without interviewing his banker.”

Mrs. Stamford was an economical and intelligent woman as to her household accounts, but she had the vague idea of “business” common to her sex. She knew in a general way from her son and husband that the stations were all paying and improving in value. So she accepted the situation without further inquiry. When her husband, therefore, spoke of drawing so large a cheque for travelling expenses, she was not alarmed as she would once have been at the idea of paying a tenth part of the amount, but regarded the apparent profusion of money in the family as a consequence of the higher standard of pastoral property which they had been so wonderfully guided to reach. “Hitherto has the Lord helped us,” she quoted softly to herself. “May His mercy be around our paths and shield those who are dear to us from every evil!”

302

The news that a trip to the old country was not only possible but considered expedient, and in a sense necessary, came with the effect of a delightful surprise upon both couples. Hubert had, in a hazy, contemplative way been revolving the idea, but had not thought it likely that it could be arranged in less than three or four years. But now, brought face to face with the idea, he found it to be unexpectedly practicable. There was no very complicated work or management necessary for two or three years. Donald Greenhaugh, who had now a fourth share, was fully able to superintend the ordinary station work. Fencing, branding the increase and selling the fat stock, were operations which he could conduct as well as—in a sense better—than Hubert could himself. In case “anything happened to him”—and such things have occurred ere now, disastrously for the absentee partner—there was Willoughby, with whom he could leave a power of attorney, on the spot. All that was wanted was to increase the cattle herd from five thousand head to twenty, and that would not half stock the runs. The sheep of course were right. One man of experience could see to that process nearly as well as another.

Barrington Hope too, urged by his wife, who was fully of opinion that he worked too hard, also that a purely sedentary life was drawing fresh lines upon his brow, and prematurely ageing him—pressed firmly his claim for a lengthened vacation. To that end a relieving manager was appointed to take his place during his absence. When he found that Mr. Stamford’s liberality was about to take such a pleasing form, he was indeed surprised as well as gratified. That gentleman felt it necessary to make a slight explanation as to his private means, but he merely mentioned that he was now possessed of certain family funds not available at the time of their first acquaintance, and could therefore well afford the outlay.

303

As for Laura, it seemed as if the old days of nursery tales had come back. The fairy godmother had arisen and gifted her with the precise form of happiness previously as impossible as a slice of the moon. It had long been the wish of her heart to behold, to wander amid, those historic relics, those wondrous art creations, those hallowed spots with which her reading and her imaginative faculty had rendered her so familiar. It was her favourite dream for middle life. When years of self-denial and steady industry had wrought out the coveted independence, *then* the journey into the land of ancient fame, of wonder, mystery, and romance, was to be their reward. But to think of its being vouchsafed to them in their youth, before the stern counsel of middle age, with its slower heart-currents, had warned them that the years were slowly advancing, fated to carry with them the best treasures of life.

And oh, gracious destiny! in the full tide of youthful feeling, of the joyous exalting sense of happiness born of the unworn heart of youth, *now* to bestow on them these all-priceless luxuries! It was more than wonderful—it was magical. Who were they to have so much undeserved happiness showered upon them? Hubert and Rosalind would join them, perhaps to part in England for a while. But they would roam the Continent together, they could in company gaze upon the dead giantess Rome; the city by the sea, even Venice; resting under the shade of German pine forests, they could listen to weird legends beneath the shadow of the Hartz Mountains. Oh! joy, glory, peace unspeakable! What an astonishing change in their life-history! And to think that in less than a month—so it had been ordered—they would be saying farewell to the land of their birth!

304

It was felt by the Colonel and Willoughby to be an unfair stroke of destiny that Rosalind, the chief joy and glory of their life, should be spirited away to Europe. But her father also considered that, when in Queensland, she was virtually as far from his ken, while the pleasures and advantages procurable from the former locality bore no comparison with the latter. There was an unspoken wish also on the part of the elder relatives that the Australian contingent should enjoy the inestimable advantage of beholding with their own eyes the wonders of the other hemisphere, of forming an alliance by personal experience with the glory and the loveliness, the literature and art of the ancient world, to endure in memory’s treasure-house till life’s latest hour.

CHAPTER XVIII

Barrington Hope could hardly realise the fact, till he found himself actually on board of a mail steamer, that he would have no business cares for the next two years—a whole elysium of rest and recreation. For this respite from the “figure and fact” mill, Laura was deeply grateful, sensible as she had been for some months past that the calculating machine was working under occasional effort.

When the Hubert Stamfords and Hopes bestowed themselves on board the *Lahore*—the last triumph of the Peninsular and Oriental Company—one would have thought all Sydney was coming to say farewell—such was the congregation on the deck and in the magnificent saloon of that noble vessel. Of course the Colonel and Willoughby, Mr. and Mrs. Stamford, and all their Sydney friends turned out on purpose to “see them off” as the phrase is, according to British etiquette on such occasions. Other people—friends and relatives—had come to say farewell to their wives and daughters, sons and sweethearts. Thus many a saddened countenance and tearful eye were to be noted as the great steamer moved slowly astern, and then glided at half-speed down the harbour.

Of their safe and pleasant voyage—of fast friends, and congenial acquaintances made on board and parted from with regret—what need to speak? Of the entrance to fairyland which the first few months’ sojourn in the dear old island so closely resembles for home-returning Australians. Of the stores of information acquired. Of the intoxicating luxury of mere existence under such conditions. Of the transcending of all anticipation and belief.

Barrington Hope and Laura remained in Europe for the full term of their holiday—two years. But six months ere that period closed Hubert and his wife became impatient to return to their life-task in the south land, too satiated with mere sensuous enjoyment to remain longer.

“We are young and strong, thank God,” said Hubert; “it’s not as though we did not see our way to be back here again within a reasonable time. But my work lies in Australia, and I can’t settle to this kind of easy-going life just yet. When Windāhgil Downs is in thorough working order and fully stocked, we can treat ourselves to a run home every five years or so without feeling uneasy about the seasons or anything else. So we’ll just take our passage by the next boat and wake them up at Mooramah once more.”

“I’m ready, dearest,” said his wife. “With you, I think our work is only half-done, and the sooner we commence life in earnest the better. We’ve seen picture galleries enough to last us for the next few years, and I begin to pine for a sight of my dear old father, and Willoughby, poor boy! I wonder how they are getting on at Wantabalree?”

Once more the family circles were replenished, irradiated by the old love and tenderness in the persons of the wanderers—once more grateful hearts were full to overflowing, and humble thanks were offered up to the Supreme Power which had permitted their happy reunion, in spite of perils by land and sea—the thousand chances of danger and death which had irrevocably marred less fortunate households. All had gone well in their absence—Linda and her sailor love had been made mutually happy, and through the exercise of judicious local interest Captain Fitzurse, as he was now proudly styled by mankind and his adoring bride, had secured a colonial appointment involving naval duty, but not forbidding the occupation of one of those delightful marine residences of which Sydney boasts so many perfect specimens.

Donald Greenhaugh had amply justified the confidence bestowed on him. The stations were growing and flourishing to the fullest extent of sanguine expectation. Willoughby had developed into a stalwart bushman, properly bronzed and duly experienced in all pastoral lore. The seasons “out back” had been good. Nothing was wanting of all the conditions of permanent prosperity.

Of all the members of the two families so happily united and thankfully enjoying their unwonted success, universally admired and envied, Mr. Stamford alone seemed to be laden with care. At times abstracted and preoccupied, silent and grave amidst the family hilarity; at whist, striking out confusing lines of play, for which no precedent could be found. Such was his departure in general behaviour from the ordinary cheerful and equable habit that his wife and children commenced seriously to fear that the unwonted prosperity had turned his head, or that old anxieties had induced morbid action of the brain. The Colonel shook his head as he delicately alluded to the melancholy fact in a walk with Rosalind. It would grieve him to the heart. He didn’t think really he could stay on at Wantabalree; that a man who could lead from a weak suit and play the Queen of Hearts when the King was still *in petto*, *must* be suffering from incipient softening of the brain, was patent to him.

The fact was that Mr. Stamford had come to the conclusion that the time had arrived when it was necessary to make a clean breast of his secret. And he did not like the idea at all. When the matter was buried in his own breast and in that of Mr. Worthington, than whom his own iron safe was not more reticent of office secrets, it did not, like other hidden deeds, appear so frightful. But now, after all these years, to be compelled to tell his wife and children, who believed that they shared every thought of his heart, that he had carefully, wilfully, artfully concealed from them the knowledge of their true position! He could hardly stand up and face the idea. “What if his children should resent this want of all confidence? Would his wife think that all her love and trust deserved a different return?”

Mr. Stamford wiped his heated brow and thought the position unendurable. Still, the motive was a good one, a pure one, even practical. And how had it worked? The result might not have directly proceeded from the means employed; but still everything had followed for which he had hoped and prayed.

His children had not shrunk from any test of self-denial, of fortitude, of continuous industry rendered necessary by the apparent narrowness of their fortunes. True, they were at the same time actuated by filial reverence and family love, swayed by the tenets of that religious teaching which from their infancy had been unwaveringly inculcated. But could these influences have been sufficiently strong to counteract the strong currents of ease and pleasure, the soft zephyrs of flattery, the clinging weight of indolence, all urging towards the wreck-strewn shore of self-indulgence, when once the fatal knowledge should be acquired that all care for the morrow was superfluous?

Who shall say? Had not the fate of his friend’s family, the melancholy failure of even his modest aspirations for social distinction, been as a beacon light and a warning?

As it was, every noble feeling, every desire to spare no effort either of mind or body which could tend to raise the fortunes and to lighten the hearts of those so dear to him, had been stimulated and intensified in his son and heir by the sharp urgency and weight of the Alternative. His daughters had emulated their mother’s virtues and with uncomplaining patience had endured isolation, monotony, plain living, and sparing apparel. For this they had had their reward—doubtless. But would all these fragrant flowers of the soul have thriven and bloomed in the ungenial soil of luxury, and the indolence born of unwonted, uncounted wealth?

Whatever had been his sin of omission or commission, could he fairly be chargeable with apathy as to the welfare of his children?

For them, and in their interest, he had striven in every conscious hour from that of their birth until now. For them he had toiled and endured hardness—had hoped and prayed. For their welfare in this world and the next was his every waking thought engaged. Other than these had he no pleasures worthy of the name in the latter years of a life now approaching—slowly, but still approaching—the inevitable close. He had, it was true, chosen an unusual mode, but withal an intelligible course of action.

Looking at the question in all its points, and pushing the reasoning on either side to its conclusion, Mr. Stamford began to find his position more tenable than he had expected. After all, he had only done in life what most people did in death—reserved the distribution of his fortune until a later period, for the eventual benefit of his children.

Thus fortified, Mr. Stamford, having made up his mind, as the phrase runs, resolved to communicate the terrible secret fully and finally to his assembled family that very evening, being averse to spoiling another night’s rest with a burden of thought the weight of which had become so oppressive. It happened that the Colonel and Willoughby were at Windāhgil, so Mr. Stamford rightly judged that it would save all after trouble of explanation if he made his Budget speech when nearly all concerned were present.

Partly in deference to the Colonel’s habitudes and those of the European travellers, the fashion of a late dinner had been revived at Windāhgil. Everybody had been unusually cheerful. The never-failing fund of Continental or English experiences had been drawn upon over the “walnuts and the wine,” or rather, when grapes and peaches were receiving attention—Hubert had been laughingly threatening Rosalind with a dozen more years of Queensland life—when Mr. Stamford stood up and remarked that “the time had arrived when he felt it his duty to make a statement which had been, for reasons of his own, postponed—perhaps unnecessarily so. However, it deeply concerned the interests of all present, directly or indirectly, and as he said before, the time had come for him to explain, he might say disclose, the a—a—affair.”

Here Mr. Stamford, who was not a fluent speaker, became aware that though he had not furnished a particularly accurate termination to his last sentence, he had at all events sufficiently puzzled, not to say alarmed, his audience. He therefore filled his glass and sipped it slowly, while Mrs. Stamford looked wistfully at him. Laura gazed with fully opened eyes, in which might be observed a slight glimmer of dread; Hubert waited calmly for the next words, and Mr. Hope and the Colonel politely preserved a studied indifference. Rosalind took the cue from her husband, and betrayed no uneasiness by word or gesture.

“My dearest wife, my children, my friends,” the speaker proceeded, “what I have to tell you is rather of a pleasing than of an alarming nature. The only awkwardness of my position arises from uncertainty as to whether I ought to have said what I do now several years ago. I can truly assert that it is the only secret I ever kept from my dear wife, or even from my children since they arrived at years of discretion.”

Here everybody’s face expressed different degrees of amazement.

The orator continued. “The leading fact is that I am a much richer man than is generally supposed.” (“Hear, hear,” from the Colonel.) “In a year we all remember well, as you will see by the date of this letter, I was left £170,000 or thereabouts by a relative. You do not forget the dry year in which we were so nearly ruined? We recovered our position chiefly through the well-considered, safe, yet liberal action of my dear son-in-law, Barrington Hope. The gratitude I felt for the way in which he then acted, strictly consonant as it was with proper business principles, is still warm and fresh in my recollection.”

Here Laura’s eyes sparkled.

“Immediately after this comparative good fortune I received this letter, which told me of a bequest beyond all hope or expectation. It rendered me a rich, a very rich man, as fortunes go in Australia. Circumstances which then came under my observation caused me to doubt whether a sudden accession of wealth would act beneficially upon the as yet unformed characters of my darling children. Up to that period their dispositions, their principles, had been all the fondest parent could have wished. Why, then, run the risk of an alteration, necessarily for the worse? Would they so continue under a total change of conditions and prospects? I felt doubtful, judging from analogy. So deeply was the danger to them at such a critical period of their lives borne in upon me, that I took time to consider my course of action. Finally, after deep thought and earnest prayer, I resolved to withhold the important intelligence—to permit them to remain in ignorance of aught but a gradual relief from threatened ruin. In short, I elected to live our old life, gradually modified and developed, until, in course of time, their characters had acquired maturity, with that strength to resist all ordinary temptation which I hoped and trusted the coming years would bring. My secret was known to but one man, our trusted legal adviser and friend, Mr. Worthington. Meanwhile, I proposed judiciously to improve our mode of living, and to provide, by degrees, such indulgences as befitted our apparent position. You can judge whether I have kept the promise which I then made to myself, whether our cherished ideal of ‘plain living and high thinking’ has been reached.”

Here Mrs. Stamford approached her husband, and placed her hand in his, amid the silent astonishment which pervaded the company.

“I have only now to say that all things shaped themselves in every respect as I could have wished. I am the happiest and proudest father this day in Australia. I can trust my beloved children, in ripened manhood and womanhood, with the full knowledge of their altered position, and I ask their forgiveness, and that of my dearest wife, for the apparent want of confidence involved in this my first and last secret, as far as they are concerned.”

Here Mr. Stamford resumed his seat, and looked round vainly for any sign of dissent. Before other comment was possible, his wife turned towards him with a countenance expressive of the purest tenderness, the most loving and perfect confidence.

“My darling husband,” she said, “you lay too much stress upon the reserve necessary for your purpose. As the head of the family, you had a perfect right to give or withhold the information. Have you not always considered the best interests of us all? You *might* have taken me into your confidence, perhaps, but no child of ours would dream of questioning your action in this or any other matter. Could we have been happier with all the money in the world?”

“And so say all of us, my dear old governor,” said Hubert, walking round to his father’s chair and shaking his hand warmly, a proceeding which was quickly followed by Barrington Hope, Willoughby, and Colonel Dacre. “I should never have stuck to my collar or been half the fellow, if I had thought, years ago, that work or play was optional with us—would never have tackled the things that now I feel proud and happy to have carried through; never had such a little wife, most likely, either. In her name, in all our names, I thank you from my heart for what you did.”

Laura’s arms had been for some moments round her father’s neck; her feelings were too deep for words; her tears were those of relief and gratitude. The Colonel made an opportune diversion by expressing a hope that his esteemed friend’s whist would now undergo a beneficial change. His sudden deterioration of form had, he confessed, caused him, the Colonel, great uneasiness, even alarm. Now that the murder was out, and his breast unburdened of its dreadful secret, he felt confident they would return to their former most enjoyable social relations. As a friend, a father, and an antagonist in the king of games, he begged to be permitted to congratulate him most warmly and sincerely.

THE END

RICHARD CLAY AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BUNGAY.

Crown 8vo. 6s.

THE

QUEEN OF THE MOOR

A TALE OF DARTMOOR IN THE DAYS OF WATERLOO

By FREDERIC ADYE

CONTENTS.

CHAP.

I. TOR ROYAL.
II. MORNING ON THE MOOR.
III. THE WAR PRISON.
IV. *PARCERE SUBJECTIS.*
V. THE DARTMOOR HUNT.
VI. A FOX CHASE ON DARTMOOR.
VII. SOUTH HESSARY.
VIII. A KISS IN TIME.
IX. OKERY COTTAGE.
X. THE SHERBURTON BULL.
XI. MADAME GALMADY DE TOR ROYAL.
XII. BY THE CORNISH SEA.
XIII. THE FORSTERS AT HOME.
XIV. FAMILY TALK.
XV. FATHER SEGUIER.
XVI. MISS CALMADY ENTERTAINS.
XVII. A DINNER PARTY AT TOR ROYAL.

318

XVIII. “DO TAKE HIM, HE’S THOROUGH-BRED.”
XIX. THE FISHERMAN’S DAUGHTER.
XX. A PERILOUS SAIL.
XXI. NAUGHTY GUNHILDA.
XXII. THE HONOURABLE JACK.
XXIII. “THERE SHOULD BE A GENTLEMAN.”
XXIV. SNOWBALLING.
XXV. THE TAME HERON.
XXVI. A SCENE ON THE ICE.
XXVII. THE FRENCH SERGEANT.
XXVIII. DANGER AHEAD.
XXIX. A DISCIPLE OF LAVATER.
XXX. THE REVEREND ROUNDER.
XXXI. FRANK IN TROUBLE.
XXXII. DRIVING THE DRIFT.
XXXIII. POVERA PICCIOLA.
XXXIV. THE KING’S SHILLING.
XXXV. THE MARSEILLAISE.
XXXVI. *VAE VICTIS.*
XXXVII. WISTMAN’S WOOD.
XXXVIII. BROTHER AND SISTER.
XXXIX. CECIL VISITS THE BARBICAN.
XL. THE SEARCH WARRANT.
XLI. THE DOCTOR’S KITCHEN.
XLII. GOOD-BYE TO THE MOOR.
XLIII. WAR’S ALARUMS.
XLIV. THE EIGHTEENTH OF JUNE.
XLV. AMONG THE PROVENCE ROSES.
XLVI. THE BELLS OF BATTREAUX.
XLVII. CONCLUSION.

319

OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.

DAILY TELEGRAPH—“His chapters in praise of the stout hill foxes, and the brilliant runs they

give over miles of grass and fern, remind us in their freshness and abundance of life of Whyte Melville at his best.... The novel is an excellent one.”

GRAPHIC—“It is long since we have read a novel with so much unbroken pleasure.”

PALL MALL GAZETTE—“A very pretty little plot of adventure and love is woven out of this material. Interspersed, but not too frequently, are some hunting scenes drawn with great spirit.”

MANCHESTER EXAMINER—“Reminds us very forcibly of some of the most characteristic romances of Charles Kingsley and Mr. Blackmore. The *Queen of the Moor* is like *Westward Ho!* and *Lorna Doone*, full of nature and of human nature.”

MORNING POST—“Since *Lorna Doone* the natural features of an English district have not been described with such a vigorous touch as is Dartmoor and the country that surrounds it in Mr. Adye’s novel ... his delightful romance which has the freshness of the wild moors it so vividly paints.”

DAILY CHRONICLE—“Lovers of the picturesque in nature will render grateful thanks to Mr. Adye for the admirable sketches he gives of romantic Dartmoor.... There is a charm about these descriptions which reminds us of those of Mr. R.D. Blackmore. We never tire of them, for they are never twice the same. Each time we get a new glimpse, and each time we feel more strongly drawn to this land of heath and tor.”

OBSERVER—“A work that will rank high among the historical romances of the present day.”

Crown 8vo. 6s.

ROLF BOLDREWOOD’S NEW NOVEL

PLAIN LIVING

A Bush Idyll

By ROLF BOLDREWOOD

BY THE SAME

MY RUN HOME

Crown 8vo. 6s.

ATHENÆUM—“Rolf Boldrewood’s last story is a racy volume. It has many of the best qualities of Whyte Melville, the breezy freshness and vigour of Frank Smedley, with the dash and something of the abandon of Lever... His last volume is one of his best.”

GLASGOW HERALD—“There is a fresh breeziness about the book which makes it pleasant reading.”

DAILY MAIL—“A sprightly book, this is, as much English as Australian, with a style distinguished by a rattling freedom which rarely degenerates into slipshodness. The interest is mainly horsey, yet the men and women live and the whole story goes with a swing and a rush.”

OBSERVER—“Lacks neither incident nor interest, and will, doubtless, find many readers.”

MANCHESTER GUARDIAN—“There is always life and movement in what Mr. Rolf Boldrewood writes.”

Crown 8vo. 6s.

THE

SECRET OF ST. FLOREL

By JOHN BERWICK

SPEAKER—“A book to be unreservedly recommended.”

DAILY TELEGRAPH—“The thrilling interest of the narrative is continuously sustained by the malefactions of no fewer than three several and distinct villains, whom the author utilizes with consummate ability as instruments of romantic complication.... Teems with novel incident, and bristles with exciting adventures.”

OBSERVER—“A capital romance, and well worth reading.”

STANDARD—“Clever and well written.”

DAILY CHRONICLE—“The story is interesting.... The end is dramatic and original.”

GLASGOW HERALD—“The descriptions of foreign life and travel are delightful, and this novel is in every way a well-written one.”

SCOTSMAN—“A thoroughly healthy and well-told story, with plenty of stirring incident and variety of scene and situation, and it is not wanting in study of character and knowledge of life, savage, semi-savage, and civilized.”

Globe 8vo. 12s.

F. MARION CRAWFORD’S NEW NOVEL

CORLEONE

In Two Volumes.

DAILY CHRONICLE—“These Sicilian scenes are admirably rendered, for Mr. Crawford is an artist, and an artist of strongly dramatic instincts.... All who love Mr. Crawford’s work (roughly speaking, all who know it, that is) know well enough that the oldest story would be improved by his telling of it.”

ACADEMY—“The story is told in Mr. Crawford’s best manner, and after the preliminary chapters are well out of the way, you can hardly lay it aside.”

PUNCH—“The reader’s interest in the story, roused at the commencement, grows in intensity as the plot is artistically developed to its climax. Mr. Crawford’s pictures of Italian scenery are perfect, and his characters, belonging to the Roman Society, with which he has familiarized us in so many of his books, are living beings before our eyes.”

DAILY TELEGRAPH—“A good story ... full of vigorous touches, interesting, and even absorbing from beginning to end.”

SPECTATOR—“The glories of the Sicilian landscape are admirably painted, and the book is enriched by a good deal of illuminative commentary on the peculiarities of the Italian and Sicilian temperament.... A brilliant and engrossing story.”

LITERATURE—“We have not often met with a more satisfactory novel than Corleone, and have little doubt that it will be regarded as one of Mr. Crawford’s best works.... An exciting and dramatic story.”

PALL MALL GAZETTE—“Mr. Marion Crawford at his best, with his inventive faculties at their boldest, his constructive skill at its fullest, and with his grace of manner always before us, gives such joy as the fabulist may rarely hope to afford. In *Corleone* we find to our huge delight that it is once again Mr. Crawford at his best.... A splendid romance of much originality, and always captivating and impressive.”

SPEAKER—“This is almost, if not quite, the strongest and most striking of the brilliant series of romances to which it belongs.”

NOVELS BY F. MARION CRAWFORD

Crown 8vo. 6s. each.

A ROSE OF YESTERDAY.

WORLD—“A charming story.”

TAQUISARA.

PALL MALL GAZETTE—“Cannot fail to be read with interest and pleasure by all to whom clever characterization and delicate drawing make appeal.”

Crown 8vo. 3s. 6d. each.

Mr. Isaacs: A Tale of Modern India.

Athenæum—“A work of unusual ability.”

Doctor Claudius: A True Story.

Athenæum—“Mr. Crawford has achieved another success.”

A Roman Singer.

Times—“A masterpiece of narrative.... Unlike any other romance in English literature.”

Zoroaster.

Guardian—“An instance of the highest and noblest form of novel.”

Marzio’s Crucifix.

Times—“A subtle compound of artistic feeling, avarice, malice, and criminal frenzy is this carver of silver chalices and crucifixes.”

A Tale of a Lonely Parish.

Saturday Review—“Unlike most novels ‘A Tale of a Lonely Parish’ goes on improving up to the end.”

Paul Patoff.

St. James’s Gazette—“Those who neglect to read ‘Paul Patoff’ will throw away a very pleasurable opportunity.”

With the Immortals.

Spectator—“Cannot fail to please a reader who enjoys crisp, clear, vigorous writing, and thoughts that are alike original and suggestive.”

Greifenstein.

Guardian—“The book, we doubt not, will rank very high among Mr. Crawford’s novels.”

Sant’ Ilario.

Athenæum—“The plot is skilfully concocted, and the interest is sustained to the end.... A very clever piece of work.”

A Cigarette-Maker’s Romance.

Globe—“We are inclined to think this is the best of Mr. M. Crawford’s stories.”

Khaled: A Tale of Arabia.

Anti-Jacobin—“Mr. Crawford has written some stories more powerful, but none more attractive than this.”

The Three Fates.

National Observer—“A brilliant variation from Mr. F. Marion Crawford’s wonted style.”

The Witch of Prague.

Academy—“It is a romance of singular daring and power.”

Marion Darche: A Story without Comment.

Athenæum—“The characters are thoroughly interesting, the dialogue easy, and the situations effective....”

Katherine Lauderdale.

Punch—“Admirable in its simple pathos, its unforced humour, and, above all, in its truth to human nature.”

The Children of the King.

Daily Chronicle—“Mr. Crawford has not done better work than ‘The Children of the King’ for a long time.”

Pietro Ghisleri.

Speaker—“Mr. Crawford is an artist, and a great one, and he has been brilliantly successful in a task in which ninety-nine out of every

hundred writers would have failed.”

Don Orsino.

Athenæum—“‘Don Orsino’ is a story with many strong points.”

Casa Braccio.

Daily Telegraph—“The reader will not easily lay it down until he has reached the concluding page.”

Adam Johnstone’s Son.

Daily News—“Mr. Crawford has written stories richer in incident and more powerful in intention, but we do not think that he has handled more deftly or shown a more delicate insight into tendencies that go towards making some of the more spiritual tragedies of life.”

The Ralstons.

Academy—“A book to be read, and read more than once.”

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

Crown 8vo. 6s.

By the Author of
“The Courtship of Morrice Buckler”

PHILANDERERS

BY

A.E.W. MASON

GLOBE—“His work is virile; it is individual; it is, in certain fine qualities, distinguished.”

WORLD—“One of the most interesting novels we have met for a long time.”

ACADEMY—“*The Philanderers* should add to Mr. Mason’s reputation—a reputation which, I am convinced, will continue to grow.”

DAILY MAIL—“There is no weakness here, no shallowness, no compromise. Built up with strength and sincerity, and finely written, the story braces the mind as much as it captivates the taste.”

PALL MALL GAZETTE—“The charm of the story lies in the clear, sharp outlines and delicate shading with which the chief characters are limned, and the grace and ease of the style and of the dialogues.... All Mr. Mason’s *Philanderers* are convincing—‘neither children nor gods,’ but men and women in a world of afternoon teas—and thoroughly convincing.”

DAILY TELEGRAPH—“It is light, sparkling, and very well told.”

ATHENÆUM—“Mr. Mason is to be much congratulated on a fine book.”

BRITISH REVIEW AND NATIONAL OBSERVER—“A book to read.”

GUARDIAN—“It is cleverly and well written, with both humour and brilliance.”

WESTMINSTER GAZETTE—“A clever and original story, told with much freshness and vivacity.”

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

Crown 8vo. 6s.

THE COURTSHIP

OF

MORRICE BUCKLER

By A.E.W. MASON

TIMES—“It is a pleasure to meet a romance of historical times, rather than a romance of history (for actual events are scarcely introduced), so vigorous, brilliant, rapid, and exciting as

The Courtship of Morrice Buckler.... If his work be not widely read, if many do not breathlessly follow Morrice Buckler from Leyden to London, to Bristol, to Lukstein, and in all his wanderings, the loss will be that of novel-readers."

ATHENÆUM—"Mr. Mason's manner is alert and engaging, and his matter fresh and stirring. No one who takes up his novel is likely to lay it down unfinished."

PUNCH—"If this my hint will increase the number of readers, they will, unless gratitude be extinct, thank me for my strong recommendation as to the excellent entertainment provided for them in *The Courtship of Morrice Buckler*."

PALL MALL GAZETTE—"A right gallant romance of the seventeenth century, which is attractive from one end to the other."

SPECTATOR—"A thrilling romance, with a most ingenious and mysterious plot. The story is excellently told."

BLACK AND WHITE—"Admirable in every respect."

SPEAKER—"A fine dramatic tale."

DAILY TELEGRAPH—"Without a doubt the name of Mr. A.E. W. Mason must be added to that small but distinguished band who have given so brilliant a revival to the old-fashioned bustling romance of fair and haughty ladies, brave gallants, duels, ruffles and brocades, and all the varied and charming ingredients of those tales of bygone days which are such welcome refreshment in these prosaic times."

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

326

Crown 8vo. 6s.

STORIES OF NAPLES

AND THEM

CAMORRA

By CHARLES GRANT

GUARDIAN—"These stories are written from personal knowledge of the Neapolitan peasant class, and in consequence they are most remarkable. To gain this knowledge, Mr. Grant gathered his material 'by personal intercourse with the lower classes in their narrow homes, or in by-ways and lanes still narrower.'... Such material gained in so intimate a fashion Mr. Grant has worked up into stories thrilling in their realistic interest."

PALL MALL GAZETTE—"We cordially recommend the book, especially to the lovers of Italy and her picturesque people."

NATIONAL OBSERVER—"As a picture of the way in which the South Italians live and act, and think and feel, these sketches, drawn mostly from life, are of historical as well as literary value."

Mr. Gladstone writes to the publishers: "In all the tales I think it most interesting and instructive—in the two first delightful, and extremely skilful also.... Mr. Grant must have been a delightful man."

TIMES—"Mr. Grant's collection of Neapolitan sketches, or studies in fiction, founded on his peculiar and extensive knowledge of the populace, is a work of poignant interest.... Full of incident and colour.... The book is one of permanent value."

MORNING POST—"Within its limits leaves nothing to be desired for fidelity of characterization and colouring, and induces regret that a writer of such varied gifts should have died at a comparatively early age.... The entire volume is vividly descriptive and full of Southern colour."

DAILY NEWS—"The book is well worth reading and even studying. The street scenes are handled with artistic effectiveness, and the people seem to live before us."

SCOTSMAN—"It is not a bare, Zolaesque, photographic picture of low life that is revealed. The hand of the artist in words, and the touch of the genial sympathizer with human nature in all its aspects invest it with infinite charm, and few who take up this book will lay it down without feeling that Mr. Grant has conveyed in these pages some notion of the fascination which held him so long in Naples."

GLASGOW HERALD—"If Mr. Grant has left any other studies of the city he loved so well, we hope that they too may be published, for this book makes us long for more."

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

Crown 8vo. 6s.

A

Chapter of Accidents

BY

MRS. HUGH FRASER

Crown 8vo. 6s.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

PALLADIA

SATURDAY REVIEW—“It has a capital plot, fascinating characters, and much dramatic interest.... A good piece of work, full of interest and humour.”

SPEAKER—“There are very few who, having begun the perusal of Palladia, will care to lay it down until the last page is reached.”

MORNING POST—“Romantic, picturesque, and interesting.”

NATIONAL OBSERVER—“A romance of thrilling interest.”

SPECTATOR—“A most engrossing and ingenious story.”

ACADEMY—“It cannot be said there is a dull page in *Palladia* from beginning to end.”

DAILY TELEGRAPH—“It is even better than *The Brown Ambassador*, good as that delightfully humorous book was in its way, and higher praise than this it is unnecessary to bestow.”

GLASGOW HERALD—“This is in every respect a capital romance.”

PALL MALL GAZETTE—“A satisfactory romance is *Palladia*.”

SCOTSMAN—“Full of stirring and exciting scenes. Many of the characters are drawn with great skill, and the novel deserves to find many readers.”

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

Crown 8vo. 6s.

A SON OF THE PLAINS

By ARTHUR PATERSON

TIMES—“As a book for a railway journey, or to pass a pleasant, indeed a thrilling, hour with, Mr. Arthur Paterson’s *A Son of the Plains* may be thoroughly recommended.”

PALL MALL GAZETTE—“A book of great interest.... He has written a most thrilling and effective story in the simplest and most unaffected manner.”

WORLD—“The interest is never allowed to flag.”

BRITISH WEEKLY—“The book is written in a masterly style.”

DAILY CHRONICLE—“If boys are what they were and what they ought to be, and parents and guardians know how to select books for presents at Christmas time, Mr. Paterson will receive a big cheque from his publishers; and most thoroughly will he have deserved it.”

DAILY TELEGRAPH—“A bright, exhilarating story of thrilling adventures and hairbreadth ’scapes in Western America.... As a sensational romance Mr. Paterson’s latest fiction may safely be pronounced ‘bad to beat.’”

ST. JAMES’S BUDGET—“It would be difficult to find a more exciting story of adventure than that provided by Mr. Arthur Paterson in *A Son of the Plains*.... The interest never flags for a single instant.”

GLASGOW HERALD—“There is a fine spirit of adventure about this story.... Mr. Paterson is, as it were, a Fenimore Cooper born out of due time, and his story is distinctly clever and exciting.”

SCOTSMAN—“A better story of love and adventure, specially adventure, neither boy nor man has any need to desire.”

ADMIRALTY GAZETTE—“A graphic and extremely readable tale of western frontier life.”

WHITEHALL REVIEW—“The author has succeeded in producing a work that will rank among high-class fiction, and as a wholesome book for boys nothing will be more eagerly welcomed.”

SPEAKER—“His new story is as thrilling, as brimful of adventure and incident, and as graphic in narration as anything he has yet written.... To say that there is not a dull page in the story

is to understate the case.”

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

Crown 8vo. 6s. [329]

FOR PRINCE & PEOPLE

A Tale of Old Genoa

BY

E.K. SANDERS

MANCHESTER GUARDIAN—“A spirited story of political strife in Genoa in the sixteenth century. The conclusion does not land us in fairyland, but if the sober colouring of a work-a-day world would be not an absolute bar to the enjoyment of youthful readers the book can be heartily recommended to them, both for its sustained interest and for the high tone pervading it.”

SCOTSMAN—“The plot is well conceived and well handled.”

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

Crown 8vo. 6s. [330]

RED ROWANS

By Mrs. F.A. STEEL

AUTHOR OF “ON THE FACE OF THE WATERS”

STANDARD—“Mrs. Steel’s book is healthy and well written, full of rational optimism and sympathetic understanding of poor human nature.”

DAILY CHRONICLE—“Judge it by what canons of criticism you will, the book is a work of art.... The story is simple enough, but it is as life-like as anything in modern fiction. The people speak and act as people do act and speak. There is not a false note throughout. Mrs. Steel draws children as none but a master hand can draw.”

BLACK AND WHITE—“It reveals keen sympathy with nature, and clever portraiture, and it possesses many passages both humorous and pathetic.”

NATIONAL OBSERVER—“Her cleverness reveals itself in many a felicitous phrase expressive of just judgment and earnest thought.”

ST. JAMES’S GAZETTE—“It is such as goes far towards the making of a solid and enduring reputation.”

GLASGOW HERALD—“Her book is a notable one.”

SCOTSMAN—“It is not every day that one lights on a story so entertaining, clever, and at times even brilliant.”

PUBLISHERS’ CIRCULAR—“The story is thoroughly interesting throughout, being clever alike in its style, plot, and character drawing.”

WESTMINSTER GAZETTE—“*Red Rowans* is far and away above the average of novels, and, without doubt, one of those books which no reader of current fiction should miss.”

DAILY NEWS—“The book is written with distinction. It is moving, picturesque, the character drawing is sensitive and strong.”

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

Crown 8vo. 6s. [331]

THE FALL OF A STAR

A Novel

BY

SIR WM. MAGNAY, Bart.

DAILY CHRONICLE—“Its interest is breathless and cumulative from the first page to the last.”

WORKS BY RUDYARD KIPLING.

Crown 8vo. 6s. each.

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED.
SOLDIERS THREE.
WEE WILLIE WINKIE.
LIFE’S HANDICAP.
MANY INVENTIONS.
PLAIN TALES FROM THE HILLS.
SOLDIER TALES.
THE FIRST JUNGLE BOOK.
THE SECOND JUNGLE BOOK.
CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS.

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

80,000 copies of this work have been sold.

Fcap. 8vo. 6s.

THE CHOIR INVISIBLE

BY

JAMES LANE ALLEN

AUTHOR OF “SUMMER IN ARCADY,” “A KENTUCKY CARDINAL,” ETC.

ACADEMY—“A book to read, and a book to keep after reading. Mr. Allen’s gifts are many—a style pellucid and picturesque, a vivid and disciplined power of characterization, and an intimate knowledge of a striking epoch and an alluring country.... So magical is the wilderness environment, so fresh the characters, so buoyant the life they lead, so companionable, so well balanced, and so touched with humanity, the author’s personality, that I hereby send him greeting and thanks for a brave book.... *The Choir Invisible* is a fine achievement.”

PALL MALL GAZETTE—“Mr. Allen’s power of character drawing invests the old, old story with renewed and absorbing interest.... The fascination of the story lies in great part in Mr. Allen’s graceful and vivid style.“

DAILY MAIL—” *The Choir Invisible* is one of those very few books which help one to live. And hereby it is beautiful even more than by reason of its absolute purity of style, its splendid descriptions of nature, and the level grandeur of its severe, yet warm and passionate atmosphere.”

BRITISH WEEKLY—“Certainly this is no commonplace book, and I have failed to do justice to its beauty, its picturesqueness, its style, its frequent nobility of feeling, and its large, patient charity.”

SPEAKER—“We trust that there are few who read it who will fail to regard its perusal as one of the new pleasures of their lives.... One of those rare stories which make a direct appeal alike to the taste and feeling of most men and women, and which afford a gratification that is far greater than that of mere critical approval. It is, in plain English, a beautiful book—beautiful in language and in sentiments, in design and in execution. Its chief merit lies in the fact that Mr. Allen has grasped the true spirit of historical romance, and has shown how fully he understands both the links which unite, and the time-spaces which divide, the different generations of man.”

SATURDAY REVIEW—“Mr. James Lane Allen is a writer who cannot well put pen to paper without revealing how finely sensitive he is to beauty.”

BOOKMAN—“The main interest is not the revival of old times, but a love-story which might be of to-day, or any day, a story which reminds one very pleasantly of Harry Esmond and Lady Castlewood.”

ATLANTIC MONTHLY—“We think he will be a novelist, perhaps even a great novelist—one of the few who hold large powers of divers sort in solution to be precipitated in some new unexpected form.”

GUARDIAN—“One of those rare books that will bear reading many times.”

DAILY NEWS—“Mr. J.L. Allen shows himself a delicate observer, and a fine literary artist in *The Choir Invisible*.”

ST. JAMES’ GAZETTE—“A book that should be read by all those who ask for something beside

sensationalism in their fiction.”

SPECTATOR—“Marked by beauty of conception, reticence of treatment, and it has an atmosphere all its own.”

DAILY CHRONICLE—“It is written with singular delicacy and has an old-world fragrance which seems to come from the classics we keep in lavender.... There are few who can approach his delicate execution in the painting of ideal tenderness and fleeting moods.”

MACMILLAN AND CO., Ltd., LONDON

Transcriber's Note

The following issues should be noted. In general obvious errors were corrected and noted below. The use of the 'ā' in Windāhgal, a place name, is almost universal, and has been corrected where the printer occasionally neglected to employ it. Where the author's intent is unclear, the text is retained.

Errors of punctuation in the advertisement section at the end of the text were corrected, silently, in the interest of consistency.

p. 9	Reisling	*Sic.*
p. 40	["]but Mrs. Grandison	Removed.
p. 107	—he[—]added—	Spurious dash removed.
	[']We colonists	Added.
p. 286	["]as the energetic proprietors	Removed.
p. 315	so say all of us,["] my dear	Removed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PLAIN LIVING: A BUSH IDYLL ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg

are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.