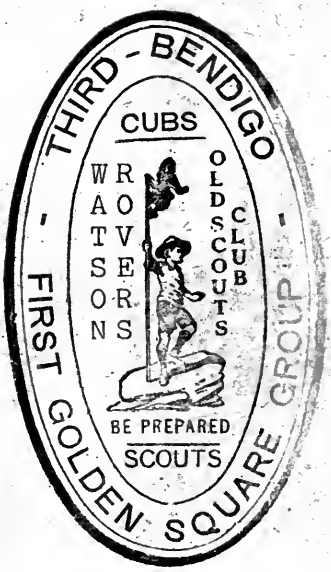
QUEENSLAND COUSINS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QUEENSLAND COUSINS

It was the great native chief.

QUEENSLAND COUSINS

BY

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QUEENSLAND COUSINS.

CHAPTER I.

HOME.

"IT has come, it has come, it has come! Oh, do be quick, father!"

The cry rang out lustily from three young voices, three eager heads were thrust over the veranda railings. Below, on horseback, was a big, brown-haired, brown-bearded man, who looked up from under his soft slouch hat with a laugh, and exclaimed,—

"What has come, you outrageously noisy youngsters? One would think I had a family of dingoes, to hear you."

Then another head appeared over the railings—a gentle-faced, fair-haired woman looked down.

"It is the parcel from home, Jack," she said. "Hadji brought it up an hour ago."

"Yes, yes, father; it is the parcel from England at last, and mother wouldn't open it till you came,

so we have been waiting a whole hour—the longest hour I have ever lived."

Nesta Orban, to whom one of the first heads over the railing belonged, shook back her masses of fair, fluffy hair with an impatient little toss.

"Stuff, Nesta; you always say that," exclaimed Eustace, her twin of fourteen. "You said it yesterday coming through the scrub because you were tired; and the day before when mother made you sew for an hour instead of reading; and the day before—"

"Oh, shut up!" Nesta retorted. "You needn't quote pages from my biography like that. Let's think about the parcel.—Hurry up, dad, darling."

This last she called after her father, for Mr. Orban had not stayed a second after his wife's explanation of the excitement.

"The parcel from home," he repeated, all the laughter dying out of his face, and he spurred his horse into a trot round the house towards the stable.

The heads all came back into the veranda, and there fell a hush of expectancy as every one listened for Mr. Orban's footsteps coming up through the house.

"La, la, la! look, Nesta. Dolly downside up; Becky done it," piped a little voice from the floor.

"Oh, do be quiet, Becky. Think about the parcel from England. Perhaps there is something in it for you," said Nesta.

Mrs. Orban had seated herself again in a low wicker chair, and was busy sewing—patching a well-worn shirt with utmost patience.

"Don't be cross with Becky," she said gently.

"She can't be expected at two years old to realize the meaning of a parcel from home. I don't believe you do yourself, Nesta. It is just a lot of nice things from England to you—only to father and me is it 'a parcel from home.'"

Nesta flushed a little and looked grave as she stood by the table fingering the string of the wonderful parcel. Such a lot of string there was, and so much sewing and writing! Whatever it might contain, at least the parcel looked interesting.

The owner of the third head that had looked over the veranda railing to shout the news was ten-year-old Peter. It always seemed to Nesta and Eustace that he was ever so much younger than they were—perhaps because he had been the baby for so many years, till Becky came.

"Mother," said Peter, setting himself right in front of her, and staring at her with wide blue eyes, "why don't you and father live in England when you want to so much?"

Peter was fair, and very like his mother and Nesta. Eustace and little Becky were the two who were like their father, brown-haired and brown-eyed. Peter had a delicate, sensitive face, and he was always wondering about things in a queer, dreamy sort of way.

"It is easier said than done, my little son," Mrs. Orban answered, bending low over her sewing that the child might not see the tears his question had brought to her eyes. "Father must work."

"But couldn't he work in England just as well as Queensland?" asked Peter.

"Unfortunately not," said his mother sadly.

"Work is not easy to get in England, or anywhere for the matter of that."

Eustace caught the note of sadness in his mother's voice, and strolling behind Peter he gave him a kick on the ankle with all the air of its being accidental.

"Ow-wow-wow!" exclaimed Peter, hopping on one leg and holding on to the other. "You hurt me."

"Sorry," said Eustace carelessly, following him across the veranda.

"La, la, la! dolly upside downey," crooned Becky from the floor, where she sat deeply engaged in trying to make her boy doll stand on its head as she had seen Eustace do.

"Look here," said Eustace under cover of Becky's singing, "don't ask stupid questions, Peter. It always makes mother feel bad to talk about England—any silly could see that without being told, I should think."

But Peter looked surprised.

"Then you kicked me on purpose," he said, no louder than Eustace had spoken.

"Of course," said Eustace.

"What for?" demanded Peter, flushing hotly.

"To make you shut up, that's all," Eustace said coolly.

Peter dropped his injured leg and flung himself upon his brother with doubled fists.

"How dare you, you—you horrid boy!" he said chokily, for Peter's temper always sprang out like a sheet of flame up muslin curtains.

With a queer little smile, Eustace gripped his slender wrists, and held them so that the little chap could do nothing but wriggle about like an eel.

"Let me go, I say," he said; "let me go, I tell you. I won't be held like a baby."

He had about as much strength as a baby in Eustace's grip, for the elder boy was a well-built, square-shouldered fellow, and powerful for his age.

Mrs. Orban looked up at the commotion, and wondered what it could be all about so suddenly.

"As you are strong, be merciful, Eustace," she said quietly—that was all.

Eustace instantly let go, and Peter stood for a second staring down at the two red rings round his wrists, then, as Eustace turned unconcernedly away, dashed at his back and pommelled it.

"Go on," said Eustace with seeming carelessness, but the words were jerked out by the thumps; "my coat hasn't had a brushing for a week. Glad to get the dust out of it."

"Peter, Peter," said his mother warningly, "you surely don't want to be sent away before the parcel is opened, do you?"

This stopped Peter effectually; a minute later he had forgotten his grievance, which was also Peter's way.

"So the great day has come at last," said Mr. Orban, coming out from the house on to the veranda, which was so large and spacious that it was as useful to the household as several extra rooms.

Mrs. Orban put away her sewing, and every one gathered round the table as Mr. Orban began carefully undoing the string.

"Here's my knife, father," Eustace said, with a pleading note in his voice.

"Plenty of time, my lad," Mr. Orban said quietly.

"One doesn't get a bit of string like this every day."

Becky had become infected by the excitement at last, and now insisted upon being held up in her mother's arms. All the eager eyes were bent on Mr. Orban's hands as he skilfully untied knot after knot.

"You won't unpick the sewing on the American cloth too, will you?" asked Nesta anxiously.

"No; I think we can cut that, Miss Impatience," laughed her father. "Mother could hardly use it again even for hemming floor-cloths."

"I'm not so sure, Jack," said Mrs. Orban; "my stock of cottons is running very low. It is time you went away and brought me a fresh supply."

Mr. Orban undid the last knot, but instead of taking the knife Eustace was still patiently holding out, he began winding up the string into a neat coil. The children glanced up in desperation, to find his face grave and preoccupied. He looked as if he had entirely forgotten the parcel.

"What is it, dear?" said Mrs. Orban, with sudden alarm in her voice. "Is anything wrong?"

Mr. Orban roused himself with an effort.

"Oh no," he replied slowly; "nothing wrong exactly. Only your words struck me oddly, for, as a matter of fact, I have to go away, and soon too."

Eustace glanced quickly at his mother, and the look in her eyes made him forget the parcel too.

"Not far, Jack, I hope," she said.

"Rather, I'm afraid," was the answer. "I hope you won't mind being left for a week or two."

"A week or two!" exclaimed Mrs. Orban in a tone that was unmistakably disturbed.

"I can't do it in less," Mr. Orban went on. "I am obliged to go down to Brisbane on business."

"To Brisbane!" Nesta cried. "O dad, couldn't you take us all with you? It would be lovely!"

"If you will find the fares, young woman, I shall be delighted," said her father, pinching her ear. "The journey to Brisbane is rather an expensive matter. I couldn't afford to take myself there just for the fun of the thing."

"When must you go, Jack?" asked Mrs. Orban, trying hard to speak steadily and naturally.

"Next week—as soon as possible, that is," Mr. Orban said; "and I will get back just as quick as I can. You will be all right, dear. . I will tell Farley or Robertson to sleep up here in the house, and you won't feel so lonely at night."

"Oh no, no," Mrs. Orban said, "don't do that. They have both got their wives and families to look after. Eustace will be an efficient man of the house and companion to his mummie—won't you, son?"

"I'll do my best," Eustace said soberly.

To be quite honest, he was as startled as his mother at his father's announcement; he did not like the idea at all. He had caught that curious look in his mother's eyes, and it troubled him.

But Nesta was too much taken up with the thought of the parcel to notice anything except the delay in opening it.

"Couldn't we go on?" she pleaded.

"Poor Nesta," said Mr. Orban, beginning to cut the sewing, "is it getting beyond your patience altogether? Well, here goes then!"

Inside the American cloth was yet another wrapper,

this time of linen sewn up most carefully, and within that paper after paper. The excitement grew more and more tense, till at last, when they came to a series of neat packages, each with a label to say from whom and to whom the gift was, every one except Becky was beyond speaking point.

The joys that parcel contained were indescribable, because no child born and bred in England could be made to understand how wonderful, how undreamed of, how surprising were the most ordinary things to those four Bush children. They lived right out of the world, and had spent most of their lives on a sugar plantation in North Queensland; the common things of our everyday existence were marvels to them.

A clockwork train sent out to Peter with a hope that "he was not too old for it" fascinated Eustace, despite his four years' seniority; the exquisite little doll's dinner service for Becky set Nesta longing to play with it and cook pretence dinners for it.

There was something for every one, and the children's eyes shone with pleasure; but Mrs. Orban's were dim as, the unpacking over, she turned quietly away and disappeared into the house.

In the midst of turning the pages of his new book to look for pictures, Eustace missed her, and shortly after Mr. Orban went away too.

"Oh!" Eustace exclaimed, slamming his book together with a big sigh, "I do wish parcels from England didn't always make mother sad."

"I guess she wants to see grannie and Aunt Dorothy badly," Nesta suggested.

"Oh, it is more than that," Eustace said, getting up and moving restlessly about. "I sometimes think

she simply hates this place and everything to do with it."

"Do you, Eustace?" asked Peter, his eyes round with wonder.

"Well, it is fearfully dull, isn't it?" Nesta said. "England must be quite different. English stories always make me ache to go there. It must be so awfully interesting, mustn't it?"

"Wouldn't it be splendid if father said suddenly one day we could all go to England!" Peter cried excitedly.

"I don't think there is the least chance of that," Eustace said. "You heard what he said about its being too expensive to take us even to Brisbane. It would cost ten times as much to go to England."

"I say," Nesta said quickly, "I wonder why father has to go to Brisbane in such a hurry? Don't you, Eustace?"

"I haven't thought about it," Eustace answered. "But, anyhow, mother doesn't like his going—that's very clear."

"Doesn't she?" Nesta asked in a surprised voice. "How *do* you know?"

"Didn't you see her face when father said he must go?" Eustace asked with a touch of impatience.

Nesta shook her head.

"Oh!" was all Eustace exclaimed; then he turned, and resting his elbows on the railings, stared straight ahead with unseeing eyes.

The Orbans' house was built on the top of an isolated hill three hundred feet above a valley which, except where the scrub had been cleared for the growing of sugar-cane, was thickly wooded. On

three sides of the valley, stretching round like a great horse-shoe, lay range upon range of hills, now softest purple. The fourth side, on which the boy gazed, was bounded by the sea—a shimmering patch of blue. No scene could have been grander, none more infinitely lonely. But Eustace was not thinking about it either admiringly or otherwise.

Nesta joined her brother, and stared curiously at his unusually serious face.

"What do you mean, Eustace?" she demanded.

He did not speak, so she put her hand on his shoulder and gave him a little shake.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Mother," Eustace said quite shortly.

"Yes, I know," Nesta said; "but what about her?"

"Father's going away," Eustace said.

"Of course," Nesta said, rather scornfully; "you told me that before. And I know mother will be dreadfully dull without him."

"Dull!" exclaimed Eustace, knocking the tips of his toes impatiently against the woodwork.

"Yes, dull," said the girl.

"Worse than dull," Eustace responded soberly.

"But we can do our best to cheer her up till he comes back."

Eustace turned slowly round until he was staring right into Nesta's eyes, and his look was so queer that she was startled.

"Do you mean to say you don't understand?" he said solemnly.

"No, I certainly don't," Nesta replied.

Eustace wheeled quickly back to the railing, gazing seaward again.

"Then I'm not going to tell you," he said decidedly.

Nesta stood blankly wondering for a moment.

"Well, it's hateful of you," she began; then suddenly her expression changed. "Eustace," she exclaimed, grabbing his arm with both hands, "do you mean mother will be frightened?"

"I'm not going to tell you," repeated the boy with seeming obstinacy.

But Nesta's face was full of certainty.

"It *is* that!" she said with conviction. "You think she will be scared at being left."

Now Eustace had suddenly begun to repent of having said so much. He had not the least desire to frighten Nesta; he had honestly believed that she must have noticed what he did in their mother's tone and look, but now he realized Nesta had not understood. He stood silent, regretting his carelessness.

"O Eustace," Nesta cried, "of course it is that. How dreadful! I remember now what father said—he knew mother might be frightened, and that is why he offered to have Farley or Robertson up."

There was terror in Nesta's voice now, and Eustace rounded sharply upon her.

"I say, shut up!" he said, with a glance towards Peter, who was too engrossed with his train at the other side of the veranda to be listening. "You don't want to frighten the kids, do you? Besides, father said we should be all right, and he knows."

"But mother was frightened," Nesta said, looking unconvinced.

"She didn't say so," Eustace argued. "She refused to have either of the men up, you see. That doesn't look much like funking it."

"Then what did you mean?" demanded Nesta.

"Oh, never mind," Eustace said, throwing himself into a chair and reopening his book. "Don't let's talk about it."

"That is nonsense," Nesta said. "How can I help minding about a thing like that?"

"Well, but what's the good of talking?" Eustace exclaimed. "Dad has to go; we can't prevent that if we talk for ever."

"Yes; but if it is dangerous—" Nesta began in a low, awe-struck voice.

"Dangerous!" Eustace repeated. "What could there be dangerous about it?"

"You know as well as I do," Nesta replied. "Supposing the blacks were to come down on us in the night when we were here all alone!"

"Oh, do shut up!" Eustace said sharply. "Why should the blacks happen to come just because father is away? They may not even be in the neighbourhood."

"Yes; but you remember that horrid story Kate told us," Nesta said, almost whispering. "The father was away—there were nothing but women and children in the house—"

"Oh, stop, Nesta!" Eustace said. "Of course I remember all about it. I don't want to hear the beastly thing all over again. What is the good of frightening ourselves all for nothing? Don't you know that father wouldn't go if he could possibly help it? And if he must go, we've got to make the best of it, that's all. Now I'm going to read, so do shut up."

Nesta stood silently staring at him a moment,

but he seemed already to have forgotten her very existence.

"Well, you are a queer boy," she said, in what the boys always called her "huffy" voice.

Still Eustace took no notice.

"Perhaps you will be sorry some day," Nesta said with a little gulp, and turned away to Becky, who was calling her.

Eustace was apparently engrossed in his book, but not a word did he see on the page he stared at so intently. He had done a stupid thing, and he regretted it, for the mischief was past remedy now. Quite unintentionally he had made Nesta as nervous as he was himself, and he knew that nothing he might say would reassure her. He was quite right that there was no use in talking about it; he felt sure that his father would say he ought not to have said so much, and he was vexed with himself for his carelessness. Silence seemed the only course open to him—silence on the subject for the present, and for the future a great, whole-hearted resolve to play the man come what might.

CHAPTER II.

BOB.

EUSTACE was right: their father would not have gone to Brisbane had it not been necessary; but this was not because Mr. Orban was troubled by any fears for the safety of his family. He had lived so long in North Queensland that he was used to the solitude, and thought nothing of the dangers surrounding them. It distressed him to have to go away simply because he knew that his wife would be terribly nervous without him. Fifteen years in the colony had not accustomed her to the loneliness of their position.

Besides the two engineers, and the field manager, Mr. Ashton, who all lived at the foot of the hill, the Orbans had no white neighbours nearer than five miles off. The field hands were coloured men of some five or six different races, chiefly Chinese or Malays—the good-for-nothing riff-raff of their own countries come to seek a living elsewhere.

There was no society, no constant dropping in of friends, nothing to relieve the monotony of daily life. But none of this did Mrs. Orban mind; she was always busy and content by day. It was only of the night-time she was afraid, when strange-voiced

creatures were never silent an hour, weird cries from the scrub pierced the air, and there arose from the plantation below wild sounds, sometimes of revelry over a feast, the beating of tom-toms, and wailing of voices as the natives conducted their heathen worship, or indulged in noisy quarrels likely to end in bloodshed between antagonistic tribes.

But though for some reasons the coolies were not pleasant neighbours, the house on the hill had nothing to fear from them. Their worst feature was their utter uselessness in any real danger, coming from quite another quarter. Though they might serve him solely for their own benefit, and were for the most part thieves and rogues, the coolies had no desire to harm the white man personally.

But wandering stealthily through the woods, homeless and lawless, is a race that hates the white man —the aborigines of Australia. Civilization has driven them farther and farther north, for the Australian black-fellows cannot be tamed and trained —their nature is too wild and fierce to be kept within bounds except by fear and crushing. They are treacherous and savage, and most repulsive in appearance. Though spoken of as black, they are really chocolate-brown, but so covered with hair as to be very dusky.

Being very cunning in their movements, it is always difficult to know where they are, and there are often such long lapses between the times they are heard of, that most people forget their existence as a matter of any importance. But Mr. Orban knew that his wife was haunted by a very constant horror of them—a dread lest one night the blacks should make a raid

upon their plantation, as they had been known to do upon other white men's dwellings.

What neither Mr. nor Mrs. Orban realized was how much Eustace and Nesta knew of certain terrible events happening from time to time in just such isolated homes as their own. It was from the two young white maidservants the children heard tales they listened to with a kind of awful enjoyment by day, but which were remembered at night with a shudder. The creaking of the wooden house in which they lived as the boards contracted after the tropical heat of day, and the weird sounds rising from the plantation below, held a hundred terrors to be ashamed of in the morning.

Eustace and Nesta never spoke of these night panics to any one, least of all to each other—they seemed so silly when broad daylight proved there had been absolutely nothing to be cowardly about.

By some unspoken rule Peter was never allowed to hear these stories. He was always considered so very much younger than Eustace and Nesta that even the servants had the sense not to frighten him. So Peter's spirits were not damped by the thought of their father's departure, and he knew nothing of the queer little tiff that had taken place between Eustace and Nesta.

It is very odd how people can quarrel over a matter upon which they are perfectly agreed; but they frequently do, especially when it has anything to do with fear.

Nesta went to bed that night still in the sulks, with an air of "You'll be sorry some day" about her every attitude. Eustace seemed inseparable from his

book, and disinclined to talk. He went heavily to bed, more troubled than ever because, though his mother was unusually merry, making much of all the presents from England, and showing great interest in them, he saw she was very white, and there was still a strange look about her eyes. He suspected her gaiety to be only put on for their amusement, and he felt sorrier and sorrier for her.

But a good night's rest did wonders for both children, and they came in to breakfast in better humours. Nesta forgot to be tragic when she heard her father and mother discussing what material should be brought from Brisbane for the girls' new dresses. New clothes were a rare event for the Orban children, and always caused a good deal of excitement.

Eustace had been up early, and everything looked so calm, peaceful, and ordinary about the place that he was inclined to be more than half ashamed of his outburst the day before. "After all," he argued, "nothing ever has happened to us—why should it now? The black-fellows have never come this way. Why should they, just because father is away? How could they get to know of his going? Besides, the plantation isn't so awfully far off."

He had stood on the veranda and stared down at the sugar mill lying at the foot of the hill, where Robertson and Farley lived; at Mr. Ashton's house, and all the familiar, odd-shaped huts in which the coolies lived. It was all just as he had seen it every day of his life, and nothing had ever happened—why, indeed, should it now?

Mrs. Orban's interest in the new dresses was certainly not feigned.

"Now, Jack," she was saying as Eustace entered the room, "don't—don't go and ask for dusters. It is that pretty pink and blue check zephyr I want—pink for Becky, and blue for Nesta."

"Well, dear, you must confess it is just like duster stuff—now, isn't it?" demanded Mr. Orban with a laugh.

"O daddy, not a bit!" Nesta exclaimed. "What a horrid thought!"

"Some of mother's dusters are very pretty, young woman," said her father. "I wouldn't mind having shirts made of them myself."

"I should object very much," Mrs. Orban said with a laugh; "you would look like a coolie. But let us talk sense again."

Talking sense meant talking business, which on this occasion was the making out of a list of really rather dull things wanted in the house.

Daily life begins early on a sugar plantation. It was now only half-past six, and the house had been astir since half-past four; the children playing, Mrs. Orban working about the house, and Mr. Orban away down on the plantation. The comparative cool of the morning was the best time for any sort of activity. Later, as the fierce December sun rose higher, even the children became listless and disinclined to race about.

After breakfast, when Mr. Orban went back to work, Mrs. Orban gave the children lessons—the only teaching they had ever had. At eleven Mr. Orban returned for early dinner.

To our English ideas the routine seems strange; but the Orban children were used to it, and had no

realization of how different was life in their parents' old home. It did not seem at all funny even to the twins to have tea at five, and go to bed at half-past six or seven. They were generally very ready for sleep by then, after their long, exhausting day.

"I say, father," Eustace said suddenly, after a long meditation while business was being discussed, "I can stay up to dinner with mother when you are away—can't I? It will be awfully dull for her if I don't."

"And me too," said Nesta, who never allowed it to be forgotten that, being the same age as Eustace, she claimed the same privileges.

"Rot," said Eustace; "you're only a girl."

"And me too," chimed in Peter.

"Oh, you silly baby," said Eustace impatiently, "what good would you do?"

Peter's delicate face became scarlet.

"I could play games with mother quite as well as you," he said with an angry frown.

"Mother doesn't want amusing like that to keep her from being dull," Eustace declared. "She wants somebody who can talk sensibly like father, and be grown up."

Nesta gave a little derisive laugh.

"Like father!" she repeated; "that is funny. I suppose you think you could be just like him. Why don't you ask him to let you smoke one of his pipes at once?"

"Don't be silly, Nesta," Eustace retorted.

"It's you who are silly," Nesta said, "thinking only boys can be grown up or of any use."

"When you have quite done snapping each other's heads off," interposed their father in his deep, quiet

voice, "perhaps you will allow me to speak. As a matter of fact, the mother thinks of going to bed with the cocks and hens herself."

"To bed with the cocks and hens!" repeated Peter, with an expression of blank surprise in his blue eyes.

Now the cocks and hens many of them roosted under the house, which was built on pillars, and set some distance above the ground. It was not an attractive spot at any time, for here there also lived many strange creatures, snakes amongst them.

"Well, not exactly in the henhouse, Peter," said his father, with a twinkle in his eyes. "I dare say she will sleep as usual in her own bedroom. I was referring more to the hour at which she says she means to go to bed—not very long after you."

"Still you will have dinner—won't you, mummie?" Eustace said.

"Certainly," Mrs. Orban answered with a smile; "and I don't think it would be a bad plan for you and Nesta to stay up for it, if you will promise not to get up quite so early in the morning. We will have dinner directly after Peter and Becky are in bed; but we won't sit up late ourselves, any of us."

Mrs. Orban certainly showed no signs of nervousness to-day; the strained expression had left her eyes; she was laughing and talking quite naturally.

"I suppose," thought Eustace, "she was partly upset by the parcel from England."

"Father," Nesta exclaimed, "I'm certain I hear a horse coming up the hill. Who can it be at this time of day?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," said her father; "it might be one of a dozen people. You had better go and

sing out 'friend or foe' over the veranda; but I dare say it isn't a horse at all. More probably it is old Hadji with the mail bag that ought to have come with the parcel yesterday."

But the three elder children had disappeared out on to the veranda and were leaning over, straining their eyes down the road that wound up the hill from the plain.

It was a very rough road, with ruts in it sometimes two or three feet deep. During the rains little better than a bog, it was now burnt hard as flint.

There was nothing to be seen though a mile of road was visible, lost now and then among bends; but the children listened breathlessly, and at last Eustace said,—

"It is two horses and a four-wheel buggy, and it has only just begun the hill. Let's go in and tell father."

"Oh, what a bother it is so far off!" Nesta exclaimed, with a sigh of impatience. "We shall have to wait ages to find out who it is."

"Who do you think it can be, father?" Peter asked, as Eustace explained what he believed to be coming.

"How should I know?" Mr. Orban answered with mock seriousness.

"It might be a magician with milk-white steeds, or a fairy godmother, Peter, in a coach made out of pumpkins," said Mrs. Orban.

"O mother!" Peter cried impatiently, "don't be silly—"

The sentence was never completed; it finished in a howl of mingled pain and rage.

"What on earth is the matter now?" asked Mr. Orban.

"Eustace ki-ki-kicked me," stormed Peter, making a dive at his brother with doubled fists; but his father caught him and held him pinioned.

"I can pretty well guess why," said the big man severely. "If he hadn't, I should have spanked you myself. How dare you say 'don't be silly' to your mother?"

Peter hung his head.

"I didn't mean—" he began.

"I should just think you didn't mean it," said his father. "You'll kindly remember you've no right by birth to be a cad, and it is caddish for a gentleman to speak like that to a lady—whether he is ten years old or a hundred."

"Besides," said Eustace, looking furiously at the small culprit, "mother couldn't be silly if she tried."

Peter's humbled expression changed.

"It wasn't for you to kick me," he spluttered resentfully; "I'll kick you back."

"Oh, if you like to be a donkey," began Eustace in a lordly tone.

"Who was donkey first?" demanded Peter.

"I guess," said Nesta, who was accustomed to these scenes, "the buggy may be in sight at the first bend by now. I'm going to look."

Eustace followed.

"Well, Peter, what comes next?" asked Mr. Orban, without letting go the child's wrists.

Peter looked over his shoulder towards his mother —the blue eyes were swimming with tears, there was a choke in his voice.

"I'm sorry, mummie," he gasped.

The next moment he was clasped in his mother's arms, there was a manful struggle with gathering tears, and then like an arrow from a bow Peter was off to the veranda with every intention of thumping Eustace soundly. But the news that greeted him there put the recent fray right out of his mind.

"It is a buggy, Peter," said Nesta, "and I believe Bob Cochrane is driving it."

Now the Cochranes were the Orbans' nearest neighbours—the family that lived only five miles away. It consisted of a father and mother and this young fellow Robert, who was six-and-twenty, the idol and greatest admiration of the Orban children's hearts. In their eyes there was nothing Bob could not do; his shooting, his driving and riding, his jokes, his ways—everything about him was wonderful. A visit from Bob was a splendid event, no matter what the hour of the day.

Bob had a sister who was about the twins' age, and Nesta's only friend.

"It looks just like Bob's driving," said Eustace.

Then they waited with eager faces, too excited to speak, till suddenly they all cried at once,—

"It is Bob—it is—it is—it is!"

Mr. and Mrs. Orban came out on to the veranda, Becky toddling behind.

"There is no doubt about it," said Mr. Orban as he watched the jolting, bumping carriage toiling up the terribly steep hill that was almost too much for the horses, fine beasts though they were.

"How strange of him to come in the buggy instead of riding, as he is alone," said Mrs. Orban.

"Yes," chimed in Nesta, "that was just what I was thinking. Bob always—always rides, excepting—"

She paused to think whether she had ever seen Bob driving before, and Eustace finished her sentence for her.

"Excepting when he doesn't," he said.

"Goose," said Nesta tartly.

"Or, more correctly speaking, 'gander,'" said Mr. Orban. "Well, we needn't squeeze our heads to a pulp trying to guess what we shall learn from Bob without the slightest trouble in another twenty minutes at most."

When Bob Cochrane came within earshot he was greeted with such a chorus of yells that not a single word could he hear of what the children were trying to say. He grinned back good-humouredly, waved, and whipping up his horses, came as fast as he could under the veranda. Then he gathered the meaning of the noise.

"What have you come for, Bob?" shouted the three.

"What have I come for?" he repeated, with his particular laugh which had a way of setting every one else off laughing too as a rule. "Well, upon my word, that is a nice polite way to greet a chap. I had better be off again."

He was big, fair-haired, and gray-eyed, not handsome, but far too manly for that to matter. As Manuel the Manila boy ran round the house to take charge of the horses, Bob got down from the buggy and sprang up the veranda steps in contradiction of his own words. He was surrounded at the top

by the children, all talking at once. Without an attempt at answering, he picked up Becky, who adored him with the rest, and passed on to Mr. and Mrs. Orban.

"I apologize for the disorder," Mr. Orban said, "but they have been working themselves up into a fever of expectation ever since they first heard the buggy wheels. Seriously though, I hope nothing is wrong at home. Your mother isn't ill, is she? You haven't come to fetch the wife as nurse, or anything?"

Such friendly acts as these were the common courtesies of their simple colonial life. But Bob only laughed now.

"Oh, nothing wrong at all," he replied. "Mater is right enough; it is only Trix who is the trouble now. She doesn't seem to pick up after that last bout of fever, and she is so awfully depressed and lonely, mother thought if you would let me take a couple of the children—Nesta and another—back with me for a week, it might brighten the kiddy up. Could you spare them, Mrs. Orban?"

"With pleasure," began Mrs. Orban readily, when Nesta started a sort of war-dance with accompanying cries of delight.

"When you have quite done!" said Bob, with a solemn stare that quelled the disturbance after a moment. "I shan't have an ear to hear with by the time I get home, at this rate. Well, who is the other one to be? You, Eustace?"

Eustace coloured deeply. There was nothing he would have liked better. To go to the Highlands, as the Cochranes' plantation was called, was the greatest pleasure that could have been offered him

—the treat had only come his way about twice in his life. It meant so much—rides with Bob, shooting with Bob, long rambles always with his hero.

"I should like to awfully," he said, and stopped, looking beseechingly at his father.

"Why, what's the matter, old chap?" asked Bob in a kindly voice. "You're as limp as if all the starch had been boiled out of you. Come along if you want to, of course. Peter can come another time, if it's afraid of being selfish that you are."

"But it isn't that," Eustace said with difficulty. "I mean I can't. You see, father is going away, and I couldn't leave mother."

Bob darted a quick look at Mr. Orban.

"Are you really going away?" he asked—"any distance, I mean?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Mr. Orban said gravely. "I have to be away about a fortnight or three weeks. I go the day after to-morrow."

Bob looked serious.

"Oh, I say," he said, "I'm sorry."

To Nesta, standing there in the sunshine, with a great big pleasure ahead of her, the words conveyed nothing beyond a civil sympathy with the annoyance it must be to Mr. Orban to have to go away on business. To Eustace, who must stay behind, there was something underlying those few words that brought back all the fears of the day before.

"It is a nuisance, but it can't be helped," Mr. Orban said; "business won't wait."

"I am sorry," repeated Bob, with that same strange solemnity, "because I can't offer to come and stay here while you are away. Father is going away

too, and of course I couldn't leave the mater and Trix. If only it hadn't happened just now—"

"It is very good of you to think of it, Bob," said Mrs. Orban, "but of course we shall be perfectly safe. I think I would rather you took Peter, though," she added in a lower tone. "Eustace is more companionable. I can spare one of the twins, but not both at once."

"Of course," agreed Bob.

He was strangely unlike his usual cheerful self, but he roused himself, as every one seemed to be looking at him, and added, "Could the children be ready to go back with me soon?"

"Stay till the heat is over, and drive home in the cool with them," suggested Mr. Orban. "I'll say good-bye for the present; I'm due at the plantation."

Eustace was left alone with Bob, for the others went with their mother to watch her preparations for their departure.

"Well, old man," questioned Bob from the depths of a cane chair, where he had flung himself for a quiet smoke, "what's up?"

Eustace stood staring at him.

"I say," he said with some difficulty, "it's beastly about father going, isn't it?"

"Rather," said Bob carelessly. "Mrs. Orban will feel awfully dull."

"That isn't the worst of it," said the lad mysteriously.

"Really?" questioned Bob indifferently, as he packed his pipe with great apparent interest.

"You know it isn't, Bob," Eustace broke out desperately.

"Do I?" questioned Bob lazily, but with a shrewd glance at the thin, pale face before him. "Why, what's the trouble?"

"It's the black-fellows," Eustace said in a half whisper.

Bob raised his eyebrows a little, and was again attentive to his pipe.

"Indeed?" he said; "what about them?"

"They are all round us in the scrub; you never know where they are," Eustace said with a gulp.

"They always are, and one never does," said Bob lightly. "I don't see that it matters. Are you in a funk about them?"

The cool question brought crimson to Eustace's cheeks.

"No," he said sturdily, "but they are a fearfully low grade lot, and—and they have done some awful things in lonely places, out of revenge, on white people."

Bob looked up sharply.

"What do you know about it?" he asked in a voice that sounded almost stern.

"The servants—Kate and Mary—have told us stories," Eustace explained.

"Oh, they have, have they?" Bob positively snorted in indignation. "Then they deserve to be sacked."

He was silent a long time, puffing out volumes of smoke, then he said suddenly,—

"Look here, Eustace, don't get stupid and frightened about the black-fellows. Your father has never done them any harm; they have nothing to revenge here, for he hasn't interfered with any of them."

"But Kate says that doesn't matter," Eustace said dismally. "She says they have a deadly hatred against all white people."

"Kate is an ignorant goose," growled Bob; "much she can know about it! Why, my father has had black-fellows in his employment for years, and they've been all right. Don't you listen to Kate's nonsense."

There was silence awhile, then Bob went on,—

"But I tell you what I'll do, if it will be any comfort to Mrs. Orban. I'll come over nearly every day and hang about the place as if I were living here. How would that do?"

"I should like it, of course, and I believe mother would," said the boy slowly.

"Of course you would be all right anyhow," Bob said bracingly.

"Of course," repeated Eustace with less certainty, hesitated, then went on haltingly, "but supposing—of course I believe you, Bob—but just only supposing one night some black-fellows did turn up, what should you do?"

"I should shoot them," Bob said promptly.

"But if you were me?" questioned Eustace.

"Oh, if I were you," repeated Bob thoughtfully. "Well, of course, you wouldn't shoot them—they wouldn't be scared enough of a chap your size. On the whole, I think if I were you I should scoot down the hill as hard as I could go for Robertson, Farley, and Ashton. They would soon settle matters."

"But that would be leaving mother to face them alone," objected Eustace.

Bob stared solemnly for one moment, then broke into a laugh.

"Cheer up, old boy," he exclaimed; "you look as if you had a whole tribe at your heels this minute. Why, what has happened to you? I thought you had more spirit than to be scared by a pack of silly maids' stories."

The laugh was so genuine, the look in Bob's eyes so quizzical, that Eustace felt suddenly abashed, and as if he had been making a stupid fuss about nothing. With all his heart he wished he had not mentioned the subject to Bob—Bob whose opinion he valued above all others, except, perhaps, his own father's.

CHAPTER III.

THE BAREFOOT VISITOR.

WHEN Mr. Orban came home to dinner he brought with him another excitement—the mail letters that Hadji ought to have brought with the parcel the day before.

To Bob Cochrane, whose parents were Australian born and bred, this meant nothing; but he was so intimate with the Orbans that he understood their feelings on the subject. He sat silently puffing at his pipe while Mr. and Mrs. Orban read their letters. Eustace, Nesta, and Peter had seized on some packets which they knew to contain English papers and magazines.

Suddenly Mrs. Orban gave a curious exclamation, and all eyes were turned questioningly upon her.

"Mother, mother, what is it?" cried Nesta, noting the colour flooding her mother's usually pale face.

"Any news, darling?" asked Mr. Orban.

"I should just think it is news," said Mrs. Orban unsteadily. "Listen to this, Jack: 'Dorothy has been so very slow in her recovery from the terrible bout of typhoid she had in spring that the doctor advises a long sea voyage at once, and we have decided to send her out to you by the first boat available. We go up to London to-morrow to get her outfit.'"

"Aunt Dorothy!" yelled the children. "Aunt Dorothy coming here!"

It was a most surprising piece of news, almost incredibly so. The children had never seen any of their parents' people, as none of them had been over to Queensland. They knew them only by name and the oft-repeated tales of childhood, which were their favourite stories of all Mr. and Mrs. Orban told.

This was their mother's unmarried sister, Dorothy Chase, who lived with her father and mother in Herefordshire, in the "old home" the children knew so well by hearsay, and longed so much to see. Some one coming out from England was next best to going home, and the news produced the wildest commotion of questions and suggestions.

"When will she come, mother? When can she be here?" came in chorus.

"Well, I am sure I don't know," Mrs. Orban said; "but it seems to me she will not be very far behind this letter."

"Not more than a fortnight, I should think," said Mr. Orban. "You see they are hurrying her off."

"O mummie, this is exciting!" Nesta exclaimed. "Do tell us how old Aunt Dorothy is!"

"Just twenty-three. She was a little child when I last saw her, and I can never picture her grown up."

"Twenty-three is a decent age for girls," said Eustace.

"Out of a vast and varied experience speaks Sir Eustace," laughed Bob—and Eustace reddened.

"Twenty-three," said Mr. Orban. "Fancy little Dot twenty-three! There'll be a big change in her."

"There must be a big change in every one, Jack," Mrs. Orban sighed. "What wouldn't I give to see them all!"

"The next thing we shall hear," remarked Bob solemnly, "is that you will be clearing out to England —the whole lot of you. I don't think I like the idea of Miss Dorothy coming at all. She will bewitch you, and off you will all go."

"No such luck," cried Nesta impulsively.

"Alas! an impossibility," said Mrs. Orban.

Mr. Orban said nothing, but looked very grave.

These few words, however, could only shadow the great excitement a moment. Mrs. Orban returned to her letter, and read interesting little scraps from time to time, such as 'I am cudgelling my brains in the hurry to think of everything I can send you—it is such a grand opportunity—I wish I had time to get a list of wants from you—but I dare say nothing will come amiss. Frocks for the girls and yourself, of course—'"

"Darling gran!" cried Nesta.

"Then I needn't get the duster stuff," said Mr. Orban.

"No, none of the clothes," said Mrs. Orban. "I know what grannie is when she gets a chance to send a box."

Nesta and Peter went off in high spirits with Bob later in the day, Nesta exacting many promises that should Aunt Dorothy by some miracle appear before she was expected, Mrs. Orban would send for the children back.

Eustace let the party go without a pang; he was actually glad not to be going. So taken up was he

with the new idea that he even forgot his fear lest he had made a bad impression on the great Bob.

There was so much to be thought of in the preparations for Miss Chase's arrival that even Mr. Orban's departure two mornings later left no one depressed. Up to the last Mrs. Orban was wondering whether there was anything she could think of that could be brought from Brisbane for their visitor's greater comfort.

"She will be used to such a different life," Mrs. Orban said. "I do hope she won't mind roughing it."

"Not she," said Mr. Orban heartily. "She will like it all the better if we make no changes for her, but just let her see life as we live it. After all, it is only for a time with her."

"Well, my darling old man," said Mrs. Orban gaily that evening, as she and Eustace sat alone at late dinner, "how does it feel to be 'man of the house'? Do you feel a great burden of responsibility as mummie's guardian and protector?"

"I don't know, mummie," said Eustace.

He was looking very grave, for now that the lamps were lighted and it was dusk outside everything felt different again.

The veranda ran round the entire house; only on one side was there a flight of steps down to the ground. The drawing-room opened out on to the other side of the house, facing the sea. It was here Mrs. Orban and Eustace went after dinner, for the day had been exhaustingly hot, and now a slight breeze blew landwards.

But for the rustling of leaves and a distant

murmur from the plantation, the night was very still. As she meant to go to bed so early, Mrs. Orban did not have lamps brought out on to the veranda; she and Eustace sat close together in the gloom, their only light a faint golden streak from the drawing-room.

Becky had been in bed a long time, and was fast asleep. For a while they could hear the servants clearing away the dinner; then there was silence even in that quarter, and they knew that Mary and Kate had gone to bed.

"We ought to be going too, I think, my man," Mrs. Orban said softly.

Eustace slipped down on to a stool at her feet and rested his head against her knee.

"O mummie," he pleaded, "not just yet. Couldn't you tell me a story first?"

"I could, of course," Mrs. Orban admitted slowly, "but the question is, Ought I to? It is getting late for you."

"But it is awfully early for you," Eustace argued. "I don't believe you will sleep if you go now. You always say you can't if you go to bed too soon. You see, we needn't get up quite so early, as father isn't here to go out to the plantation."

"That is true," said Mrs. Orban with a laugh. "I really think we shall have to make a barrister of you, Eustace, you plead a cause so eloquently. But what kind of story shall I tell you?"

"Oh, one of the old home stories, please," he said instantly. "I should like to know all I can about it before Aunt Dorothy comes."

"I wonder if there are any I have not told you," Mrs. Orban said thoughtfully.

"There must be hundreds," Eustace said. "I always think Maze Court must have stories without end."

"We used to think so, I remember," said his mother; "but I suppose that is always the case with a house when one family has possessed and occupied it for so many generations."

"It is a sixteenth-century house, isn't it?" Eustace asked.

"Seventeenth century," was the answer, "built in 1688 by Eustace Chase, a loyal subject of the king. His father lost everything for the cause, and the young man was rewarded for following the Royalist fortunes—or rather misfortunes—soon after the king came to his own again."

Eustace gave a huge sigh.

"I do like belonging to people like that," he said with satisfaction.

There was a long silence.

"Mummie—the story," prompted Eustace at last.

"I was just hunting my memory for one," said his mother. "Did you ever hear how we lost Aunt Dorothy?"

Eustace shook his head and settled himself comfortably to listen, so Mrs. Orban went on:—

"One summer we gave a large party for young people. It happens that several of us have birthdays in the summer, and this was a sort of combined birthday treat. So we invited friends varying in age from five, suitable for Dorothy, to seventeen or eighteen, and a very merry party it promised to be. The day began gloriously, but father prophesied it was going to be too hot to be perfect; and he was right. About the middle of the afternoon thunder-

clouds gathered quickly, and by tea-time there was a raging storm; but it was as short as it was sharp, and all over in an hour. There was no question as to going out again, the ground was too sopping wet after the rain to dream of such a thing, so it was proposed that we should have a good game of hide-and-seek all over the house. I wish I could tell you what a lovely place home is for hide-and-seek. There are so many rooms with doors between that you can almost go the round of the house on any landing without coming out into the passage more than twice or three times. Then there are several staircases, and lastly the turret, which was always used for 'home,' because it was a regular trap for hiding in. Once found, you could never get away from there."

"O mummie," breathed Eustace softly, "how it does make me want to go and see it all."

"I am glad it does, sonny," Mrs. Orban said. "I want you to want to go—I always pray some day you will. It is a home to be proud of."

"Go on, please," said Eustace in the little pause that followed.

"I don't think people ever get tired of hide-and-seek," Mrs. Orban continued. "It is the one game that seems to suit all ages—I mean among young people. We played on and on till dusk, and then the game was only stopped by people coming for or sending to fetch their children home. Just in the middle of the first 'good-byes,' mother, who had been entertaining grown-ups most of the afternoon, came and asked for Dorothy. No one knew where she was. 'Who had seen her last?' It was impossible

to find out, but apparently she had not been seen by any one for a long time. Dorothy at five years old was a very independent little person, and resented being obviously looked after. She always liked to hide by herself, for instance. Well, then, there began a game of hide-and-seek in real earnest, and it became more and more serious every minute, when white-faced groups met in the hall declaring that every corner had been searched, and still there was no trace of Dorothy."

"Didn't grannie nearly go mad?" asked Eustace feelingly. He well knew what the loss of Becky would mean to his mother.

"Very nearly," was the answer; "but I think your grandfather was even worse. All the tiny children were taken home, but many of the elder boys and girls begged to be allowed to stay and help, and now the hunt began outside with lanterns among out-houses and stables. The echoes rang with Dorothy's name, but in vain; the hunt was useless, and some of us straggled back into the house and began calling and looking all over the same ground again. I cannot tell you what terrible thoughts had got into our heads by that time. We remembered the story of the lady who hid herself in the old spring chest and could not get out—"

"The Mistletoe Bough lady," breathed Eustace.

"Yes; and we hunted every box, chest, and cupboard in the house, but Dorothy was in none of them. She seemed literally to have been spirited away. It became so late that at last all the other children were taken home, and we were left just ourselves—a very miserable family."

Eustace sat up suddenly and held his breath, his face blanched, his eyes alert.

"At last, close on midnight," Mrs. Orban went on in a low voice.

"Mother, mother," Eustace said in a sharp whisper, kneeling and putting an arm protectingly round her, "did you hear something?"

"Yes, darling," Mrs. Orban continued, "close on midnight—"

"No, no," Eustace said, "not then—now—this minute, as you were speaking!"

Mrs. Orban started perceptibly.

"No, darling," she answered. "Why? Did you?"

There was an instant's tense silence.

"It is some one coming round the veranda—barefoot," Eustace whispered.

"One of the maids, perhaps," said Mrs. Orban, but her voice quivered.

"They would come through the house," said the boy. "This fellow has come up the veranda steps. I heard them creak."

A lifetime in great solitude sharpens the hearing to the most extraordinary extent. Children born and brought up in the wilds often have this sense more keenly developed than any other. The Orban children seemed to hear without listening—sounds which, even when she was told of them, Mrs. Orban, with her English training, did not catch till several minutes later.

But now the pad-pad-pad of bare feet was unmistakable—a pad-pad-pad, then a halt, as if the visitor stopped to listen.

Below in the scrub—that wild thick undergrowth

among trees, harbouring so many strange creatures—there were hoarse cries, and now and then the howl of a dingo, so horribly suggestive of a human being in an agony of pain.

The pair on the veranda clung together for an instant—one only.

"I must go to Becky," whispered Mrs. Orban, recovering herself.

But Eustace held her down.

"Oh, don't—don't for one moment," he implored; "wait and see what it is."

"Pad-pad-pad" came the steps, nearer and nearer. A shadow fell aslant the corner of the veranda—the shadow of a man thrown by the light from the drawing-room side window.

The shadow of a man fell aslant the corner of the veranda.

CHAPTER IV.

A NIGHT OF TERROR.

"MRS. ORBAN," called a voice softly—a familiar English-speaking voice; "Mrs. Orban, are you still up?"

Mother and son fell apart, and Eustace sprang to his feet.

"Why, it is Bob!" he exclaimed in bewilderment.

"Bob!" cried his mother. "Impossible!"

"Not a bit," said Bob Cochrane, coming round into the streak of lamplight, carrying his boots in his hands. "I just strolled over to see if you were all right. When I got to the steps it struck me I might startle you if I came thundering up, so I took my boots off and crept round to find out where you were. You were so quiet I thought you must have gone to bed and left the lights burning."

"We were talking, nevertheless, when you arrived," Mrs. Orban said, "for I was telling Eustace a story."

"I didn't hear you," Bob said. "Probably my heart was in my mouth, and beating so loud that it deafened me; for, of course, I knew I carried my life in my hand."

"Your life in your hand?" repeated Eustace wonderingly.

"Certainly. I felt sure you would bound on me with a revolver the moment you heard me, shoot me dead, and then demand an explanation. It is the sort of ardent thing one might expect from a knight of your order, Sir Eustace."

Bob's chaff went deeper home than he meant it to. Eustace was in no mood for joking after the strain of the last few minutes. He hoped with all his heart that Mrs. Orban would not betray to Bob how terror-stricken he had just shown himself. Perhaps she understood, or it may be that she was half ashamed of her own unnecessary panic, for she only said,—

"It is really very good of you to have come in the face of that grave peril, and at such an hour too."

"Well, the fact is I wanted to," Bob said in his casual way, "and the mater insisted. I've left our old foreman sleeping in the house for to-night, and I thought I would just turn in with Eustace, if you don't mind."

"We shall be simply delighted," Mrs. Orban said, with a feeling of real relief.

"The mater wants me to take you all back to the Highlands early to-morrow," Bob went on; "you, Becky, and Eustace. She can't bear to think of your loneliness here. Do come and stay with us till Mr. Orban comes back."

It was the kind of thought good, homely little Mrs. Cochrane was celebrated for. But Mrs. Orban shook her head.

"It is just like your mother to think of such a thing," she said, "and just like her son to be her messenger so readily, but I can't do it, Bob. I

couldn't possibly leave the maids and the house to take care of themselves. Mary and Kate would be terrified."

"Oh, bother Mary and Kate!" said Bob.

"I should be *most* bothered if they took it into their heads to run away and leave us, especially now that my sister is coming. No, really, I cannot leave home, much as I should enjoy it. Your mother, as an experienced housekeeper, will feel for me in that."

"We forgot the maids and the house," said Bob in a disappointed tone.

"It can't be helped," said Mrs. Orban lightly; "and, indeed, we are quite all right. There is nothing to be afraid of, and I have Eustace.—Which reminds me, old man, hadn't you better be off to bed? This is considerably later than I meant you to be."

"Oh but, mother," Eustace exclaimed, "what about Aunt Dorothy? I couldn't sleep without the rest of that story."

"Oh yes, do let's have the rest of the story first," pleaded Bob.

"There isn't much left now," said Mrs. Orban. "I was only telling him how we once lost Dorothy in a game of hide-and-seek when she was five years old. We had been hunting the house for hours; a sort of awful silence had fallen among us, as if we were expecting I don't know what—"

"When close upon midnight," quoted Eustace in a mysterious voice.

"There arose the cry of a terror-stricken child—shriek upon shriek—feeble because of the distance it was from the great hall, where we were all mustered

in shivering silence, but distinct enough to be recognized as Dorothy's voice. I shall never forget it—it makes me shudder now—for the panic in that child's cry was appalling. What was being done to her? What awful pain was she in that she should shriek in such a way? Such were our thoughts as we hurried in a tumbling mass after father and mother. We reached the turret stairs, and father commanded every one with lanterns to go first and light the way. Right to the very top we went, into the little round room we called the Watchman's Nest, and here the sounds were loudest; but they were still muffled, and there was not a sign of Dorothy anywhere."

"Was there any furniture for her to hide in?" asked Eustace, looking puzzled.

"One table, one chair," said Mrs. Orban, "and a small black oak cupboard against the inner wall—it would have just about held Dorothy on the lower shelf. We opened it, flashed in our lanterns, but it was black and empty. One peculiar feature there was about it—when the cupboard door was open we heard the child more clearly. It seemed a stupid, senseless thing to do, but down I went on my hands and knees to feel those empty shelves, as if I imagined Dorothy might be there in spite of our seeing nothing—invisible but tangible. Of course there was nothing but wood to touch; but with my head inside there, I could hear Dorothy so well I might have been in the same room with her."

"How queer!" Eustace broke out excitedly.

"'Dorothy, Dorothy,' I shouted. 'Mother—I want mother, mother, mother,' she shrieked. 'Where are

you? Tell us where you are,' I called. 'I want mother, mother, mother,' was the only answer. 'Mother is here,' I said; and again, 'Tell us where you are.' Something made me feel the cupboard again, and this time I did not only touch the shelves, but put my hand right back. 'Quick, quick! a lantern,' I simply screamed, and half a dozen were lowered instantly. There was no back to the cupboard on the lower shelf. The blackness we had mistaken for the old oak was just nothingness—a deep, deep hollow into the wall."

"Mother," Eustace cried, "a secret chamber!"

"A secret chamber that no one had ever suspected; and Dorothy it was who had found it."

"But how?" The question came from Bob Cochrane.

"She was the most daring child I have ever known," said Mrs. Orban. "I don't think Dorothy knew what fear meant in those days. She knew that scarcely any one ever searched the turret, because it was difficult to get away from, and it entered her small head to creep up to the Watchman's Nest and into this cupboard. Whether she went to sleep waiting for us to find her, or whether she rolled over at once and fell down the little flight of steps into the secret chamber, to lie there stunned, no one knows. Dorothy could not explain herself. Anyhow, there she was, and the moment she came to her senses and found herself in the dark she began to scream with fright."

"But how was it no one had ever discovered the secret chamber before?" demanded Eustace. "It seems funny."

"You would not think so if you saw the cupboard," Mrs. Orban said. "It is a little, insignificant-looking thing—low and rather deep, and, as we then found, built into the wall. The back of the lower shelf was a sliding panel; and your grandfather's theory is that the last person who used the secret chamber left the panel open. Without nearly standing on one's head it was impossible to see the back of the lower shelf, and no one had ever suspected such a thing."

"O Bob, Bob, wouldn't you just like to see Maze Court?" cried Eustace. "I shall never be happy till I do."

"I tell you you will all be off on Miss Dorothy's broomstick one of these fine days," growled Bob. "She is a witch, and she has already bewitched you, for you can talk of nothing but England now."

"You had better go to bed, Eustace," Mrs. Orban said with a laugh. "Bob is getting quite fierce."

Bob left very early next day to get back to work. As Nesta and Peter were having holidays, Eustace, of course, did no lessons, but spent the day very contentedly helping his mother. She was busy re-arranging furniture in the room that was to be Miss Chase's, and they scarcely sat down the whole day till evening.

"Early to bed this night, my son," said Mrs. Orban as they left the dinner-table. "I expect you will sleep like a top."

He was looking sleepy already, and a quarter of an hour later went very readily to his room, with a parting entreaty to his mother that she would not sit up late.

"Not I," was the laughing rejoinder. "I promise you I will only write one little line to father and begin my mail letter to grannie, and then I will go to bed."

This Mrs. Orban did, and being very tired she fell asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

For several hours a great silence reigned over the house; but even when it was broken by the soft pad-pad-pad of bare feet creeping stealthily round the veranda, the sleepers lay utterly unconscious. The stairs had not creaked under the weight of this figure; it cast no shadows, for there was no light either within the house or without. At every window it halted, listened, peered in, as if it had the eyes of a cat to see with in the dark.

First came the dining-room, and next it the room in which Eustace and Peter slept. Round the corner were Mrs. Orban's room and part of the drawing-room. At the other corner was Nesta's room, where Miss Chase would also sleep, and next to that the servants' room.

The strange visitor made a complete tour of the veranda and reached the stair again.

Eustace was dreaming vividly. He was out with Nesta and Becky. Becky had been specially entrusted to their care, and they had been told only to go a little way into the scrub. As a rule the children were not allowed to go into the scrub without a grown-up in charge, for there were dangers among the thick bushy undergrowth known by this odd name. For one thing, snakes abounded there; for another, it was only too easy to lose one's bearings, wander farther and farther into the wood, and eventu-

ally die of thirst and starvation, utterly unable to find the way home again. To Eustace's distraction, in his dream Becky would insist on playing hide-and-seek, and kept constantly disappearing and returning, flitting on in front of them now and again like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"We mustn't let her do it," Eustace exclaimed. "Run, Nesta; we must catch her."

But the faster they ran, the farther Becky went; it was extraordinary how fast she could go.

"I can't keep up," Nesta panted.

"Just like a girl," puffed Eustace back, for he was getting exhausted himself.

Then Becky disappeared right out of sight, and though Eustace called her till the echoes rang again and again with her name, there came no answer.

"Now I guess we shall all be lost," thought Eustace desperately.

He was rushing madly hither and thither, when suddenly he heard a blood-curdling yell not very far off. It was followed by another and another, till his heart stood still with terror.

"Of course," he said, pulling himself together with all his might, "she must be in the secret chamber. I never thought of that."

But even as the notion flashed into his mind he knew how silly it was to think of a secret chamber in the Bush. He was so paralyzed by the awfulness of the sounds that for a moment he could not move; but at last, with a mighty effort, he forced himself to dart forward in the direction whence the cries came.

A second later he was fighting blindly with something that clung unpleasantly to him. It took him

a moment to realize that this was the mosquito net round his bed. He was out on the floor in his own room at home. He had been dreaming, and was now awake; but the screams continued, and were most horribly real. It was not Becky's voice—no child could have cried like that.

There was a door from his room into Mrs. Orban's, and through this the boy dashed.

"Mother, mother," he cried, "what is happening?"

There was a light in the room. Mrs. Orban was standing with a look of terror on her face.

"I don't know," she said unsteadily.

"It has been going on for ages," Eustace whispered.

But Mrs. Orban shook her head. "It has only just begun," she said. "I must go and see what is the matter."

Eustace was haunted by his dream—a second in a dream is equivalent to hours of real life.

"O mother, don't go!" he exclaimed in an agonized voice, and clung to her.

"I must," was the answer, and gently but firmly Mrs. Orban put the boy from her. "Perhaps one of the servants is ill. At least they are both frightened, and need me. Stay here with Becky."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when the door burst open, and in rushed Mary, followed by Kate. Both girls looked half mad with fear.

"O ma'am, ma'am," they cried, piecing out the tale between them, "there was a black-fellow in our room. He has stolen our watches from under our pillows, and everything he could find before we woke, and he was pulling the rings off Mary's finger when she felt him and jumped out of bed. But he got the

rings, and we don't know where he is—somewhere about the house—and maybe there are others with him. O ma'am, whatever shall we do? We shall all be murdered in our beds."

"Nonsense, you silly girls," said Mrs. Orban, with sudden sternness; "we can't possibly be murdered in our beds when we are all out of them."

Even in the stress of the moment Eustace could not help being struck by the humour of the assertion, but he was in no mood for laughing.

Creeping to the window, he peered out, to find that it was no longer pitch dark; there was a sufficient glimmer of light to have enabled their uninvited guest to do all that the servants described.

By this time Becky was awake and howling. Her mother took her into her arms and soothed her gently.

"As to what we shall do," Mrs. Orban said in that same firm tone; "we must all stay here till daylight together. If there are thieves about the house, we can do nothing to check them. They will not hurt us if we don't interfere. There is nothing to be done but to behave as little like cowards as we can manage."

"But black-fellows do such—" began Kate.

"Hold your tongue, Kate," said the usually gentle Mrs. Orban, with sudden anger. "What good can it do to scare yourself and us by talking in such a way? We are in God's hands, don't forget that."

"Mother," Eustace said, "has father got his revolver away with him?"

"There are two in this room," Mrs. Orban replied. "Could you use one if necessary?"

"Oh, for mercy's sake don't let Master Eustace have a gun in his hands!" said Mary. "There's no saying which of us he might shoot in mistake if he began playing with one."

"Playing with one!" repeated Eustace scornfully; "why, father says my shooting is very good for my age."

Mrs. Orban took a revolver from a cupboard and gave it into the boy's hands.

"It is loaded," she said, and now there was the suspicion of a quiver in her voice; "but realize I am trusting you to be sensible. Don't shoot at random. Remember what Bob said last night. You are only to fire if terribly necessary. Now jump into Becky's bed, or you will be getting a chill and fever."

From beneath her own pillow she drew out a second revolver, examined it, and set it on a table within easy reach.

"Mother," said Eustace in surprise, "do you always sleep with a revolver under your pillow?"

"Only when your father is away," was the reply. —"Now, Mary and Kate, get into my bed. I am going to sit in this cosy chair with Miss Becky. We will talk and keep the light burning; but it is my belief nothing more will happen to-night."

The maids obeyed, still looking terrified, and then Mrs. Orban seated herself, with Becky in her arms, near the table where the revolver lay.

Thus they prepared to face the remaining hour of darkness, powerless to do anything, utterly helpless, with nerves strung to the highest possible pitch, and hearts that beat wildly at every sound.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST SHOT.

MRS. ORBAN'S words were brave, her whole bearing courageous, but she was more frightened than she had ever been in her life before. It is doubtful whether she really believed her own assertion that nothing more would happen that night, though she tried to. As a matter of fact her prophecy was correct. Scared by the screams of the women, the unpleasant guest must have promptly run away. He was probably alone, and, uncertain as to who was in the house, had fled from the chance of being peppered by a revolver.

It was found in the morning that nothing was missing except the servants' watches, their few small trinkets that were lying on the dressing-table, and Mary's rings. The extraordinary silence with which he had perpetrated the theft, his skill in taking the rings off Mary's hand as it lay outside the coverlet, were not at all unprecedented — the natives were known to be silent and subtle as snakes in their doings.

Mrs. Orban sent Eustace down to the plantation as soon as she knew every one would be astir. Mr. Ashton, the field manager, was suffering from fever,

so that it was useless to go to him; but on hearing the story, Robertson, the chief engineer, returned with the boy to look into the matter.

Investigations were in vain; the man had left no tracks around the house, no footprints on the veranda.

The servants were so terrified that they declared they would not stay another night in the house. They wanted to be sent to Cooktown immediately—a five days' journey by sea. Robertson, a big burly Scotsman, roughly told them that such a thing was impossible. They could not get away for another week, when the schooner might be expected to bring provisions. He lectured them on their cowardice in wanting to run away and leave their mistress alone at such a time, but the girls would not listen to reason; they said they would hire horses and ride all the way to the first civilized place they could find.

Then Mrs. Orban tried persuasion. Had they not better wait at least to see whether anything could be heard of their lost possessions? She would offer a reward to any one finding the thief or restoring the stolen goods to their owners—the offer should be made known all over the plantation.

The suggestion carried the day, and the bargain was made. Mrs. Orban felt that at all costs she must keep the maids until Mr. Orban's return, for the work and the solitude would have been too much for her to stand, brave as she had proved herself to be.

The offering of a reward was greatly against Robertson's advice. He pointed out that it would only prove an incentive to further robbery. The

plantation hands were an unprincipled lot, and if they discovered that they could get money by stealing things and bringing them back, as if they had discovered them in the possession of some one else, there would be no end to the thefts, and no tangible means of getting hold of the thieves unless they were caught red-handed.

But so anxious was Mrs. Orban to keep the servants that she disregarded Robertson's opinion, and the reward was duly offered. The engineer had one proposal to make, which was accepted. With Mrs. Orban's leave, he said, he, with his wife and two little children, would come up the hill and sleep in the house until Mr. Orban's return. There would be safety in numbers; and if the night visitor came again, some one to deal with him better than by screaming at him.

In spite of the fuller house, and the fact that Robertson's eight-year-old boy was sleeping in Peter's bed that night, Eustace did not feel particularly happy in the hours of darkness before him, after the party had broken up and said good-night.

The door between his mother's room and his own was left open, by way of companionship for them both, but the boy was so overtired as to be restless and unable to go to sleep. To his excited fancy there were unusual sounds about. The creaking of unwarping boards, the soughing of the night breeze round the house, even Sandy Robertson turning round in his bed, with an impatient but sleepy flump at the heat, were noises that set his hair on end and made him feel cold and damp all over again and again. Once or twice he stole from his bed to

peer into his mother's room, but she always seemed asleep; or he would look stealthily out of the window, as if he could possibly have seen anything in the dark.

Robertson, with his wife and baby, was in Nesta's room at the other side of the house. It occurred to Eustace that if anything did happen—anything needing immediate action—Robertson was very far away and ungetatable. The boy sat up in bed hugging his knees, making feverish plans as to what he should do supposing the night visitor came again and he should see him.

Unknown to his mother, Eustace had taken the revolver he had been entrusted with the night before to bed with him. He meant to sleep with it under his pillow, but every time he got up to make his investigations he took it, gripped tightly in his hand ready for immediate use.

When the first gray light stole into the room at last, Eustace began to feel drowsy. Almost against his will he lay back on his pillow and fell asleep. He had determined to watch the night through, but a great heaviness overpowered him, and he lay like a log.

It seemed to him he had hardly closed his eyes—indeed, it cannot have been much later, for there was but little difference in the light—when a resounding pistol report rang through the silent house. Eustace awoke with an instant consciousness of having slept on his self-imposed sentry work. He felt queer and oddly shaken as, with a cry of dismay, he sprang out of bed and rushed into his mother's room.

"Oh, what is it?" exclaimed Mrs. Orban, frightened out of her wits by the noise.

She stared at Eustace, who stood, revolver in hand, gazing blankly round the room.

"I don't know," he began, stopped abruptly, and added in a choked voice, "Oh, look! look!"

He was staring towards the window. Outside on the veranda, crouching on all fours in the dusk, was a dark figure. With a strange, sudden movement it raised itself and stretched out an arm towards the room—standing lank, tall, and horribly sinister.

Without a moment's hesitation Eustace raised his hand and fired. There was a splintering of glass, a wild howl of pain, and the figure dropped like a stone.

"Eustace," cried Mrs. Orban in a horrified voice, "what have you done?"

"I had to fire first," returned the boy in an odd, sullen tone.

The figure outside moved, and with a succession of dreadful yells began rapidly crawling along the veranda towards the stairs.

At the bedroom door appeared the entire household, Robertson leading the way, his usually ruddy face ghastly with astonishment.

"What on earth is happening?" he asked, staring at Eustace and his mother.

"I've shot something," Eustace faltered. "It is going down the steps—"

Robertson waited to hear no more. Seizing the boy's revolver, he took a short cut through the house for the veranda steps.

"What was it?" asked the frightened women, as they huddled together in the doorway.

"I don't know," Eustace answered—"a black-

fellow of some sort. I wonder if I—I killed him."

There had fallen a sudden silence outside; the awful howling had ceased.

Eustace sat down on the edge of his mother's bed feeling sick and shivery. To have killed a man—a white fellow, black-fellow, any sort of fellow; it was horrible!

The most extraordinary sounds arose from the veranda. Had Robertson gone mad, or what could be the matter with him?

"Ho-ho-ho! ha-ha-ha! ho-ho-ho-ho!" he roared.

Every one stood as if paralyzed. There was something terribly uncanny about the laughter. It seemed so ill-timed, so jarring and unkind.

Robertson appeared at the broken window.

"Upon my word, Eustace," exclaimed the Scotsman, "it's the best joke ever I heard or saw. Come and look at your black-fellow and be proud of yourself."

"I can't!" said Eustace, his knees knocking together as he attempted to stand, and he fell back on the bed.

"Oh, what is it, Mr. Robertson?" asked Mrs. Orban.

"Why, it's nothing but a miserable, half-starved dingo-dog that must have prowled up to the house in search of food," Robertson said. "You marked him well—I will say that for you, Eustace. He was dead before I could reach the steps."

"Thank God it was not a human being," exclaimed Mrs. Orban.

"A dingo!" cried Eustace, sitting up suddenly with a perplexed expression in his eyes. "Then who fired the first shot? I mean the one that woke me."

The relief faded from Mrs. Orban's face. It was a startling question, an uncomfortable reflection that the first shot had not been accounted for.

"Yes, by the way," she said, "there was that other shot. It seemed to come from Eustace's room, and I was frightened out of my wits. I was thankful to see him safe and sound a minute later."

"I heard two shots distinctly," Robertson said, looking grave; "but of course I fancied Eustace had fired twice at the dingo."

"Not I," said Eustace. "I never saw the beast till I came into mother's room; and I didn't fire till it stood up against the window and looked like a human being."

"H'm," said Robertson. "It strikes me I had better have a look round. Just stay here till I come back."

The women all looked scared. It was not a pleasant idea that the person who fired that first shot was possibly lurking about somewhere in the shadows. They listened breathlessly as Robertson made the tour of the house, momentarily expecting a fresh commotion, the firing of shots and a struggle. Mrs. Robertson was dreadfully upset, and held her two children close; the maids huddled together in a corner. Mrs. Orban stood, revolver in hand, near Becky's bed with such quiet dignity that somehow Eustace was steadied.

The chances were that, finding himself hunted by Robertson, the man would try to effect an escape on to the veranda this way as a short cut to the steps.

If the visitor were the same as that of the night before, it was all important he should be captured

—otherwise this disagreeable night raid might be repeated.

But no shots and no sound of a scuffle were heard. Robertson returned to say that he had investigated every nook and cranny that a man might have hidden in, and found no trace of any one having entered the house anywhere.

The little gathering stared about with questioning, bewildered eyes, and no one felt any happier for the news. The fact remained that a shot had been fired by a mysterious being who had apparently vanished into air. For what purpose had that shot been fired? At what? At whom?

"I can't make it out," said Robertson. "There seems no sense in a fellow coming and letting off fireworks in the middle of the night for nothing."

"Perhaps it is a trick of some sort," suggested Mrs. Orban; "some one trying to frighten us. But I don't see that that is possible."

"Nor I," said Robertson. "People aren't in the habit of playing practical jokes without some purpose in them hereabouts. All the same, it doesn't seem much good all of you staying up like this. If you'll just get back to your beds, I'll watch for the rest of the night. It may be a better way of trapping a chap, if he hasn't got clean away by now. That is the most likely thing, of course—his firearm probably went off inadvertently as he was coming round the veranda, and he knew he had done for himself, so made tracks at once. He might come back as soon as he thought the house was quiet again, but I don't expect him."

No one felt much inclined to take Robertson's practical advice. At the same time it seemed foolish

to stay up and exhaust themselves for nothing, and Mrs. Orban agreed that every one should go to bed.

Eustace went very reluctantly. He would have liked to stay up and share Robertson's watch like a man; it seemed so childish to be sent to bed after taking part in such an excitement. He wondered what Nesta would have thought of it had she been there.

"Goodness, wouldn't she have been scared!" he reflected. "I do wonder what she would have done."

At least there would be plenty to tell her when she came home. She might be having a jolly time; but Eustace guessed, when it was all over, she would be disappointed at having been out of such adventures as these. There was a sort of glow about the realization that they were such very real adventures—experiences that did not come every day and to every one. The only stupid part about it was having to go to bed.

Mrs. Orban felt no glow in her realization of the situation. She longed for her husband, and wondered how she was going to bear his absence much longer. If this sort of thing were to go on she felt that it would break her nerve entirely.

Having kissed Eustace and sent him away, she felt too restless to get into bed. Sleep she knew would be impossible; and taking a book, she was just sitting down with the set purpose of making herself read awhile, in order to quiet her mind, when a sharp cry reached her from the next room.

"Mother! mother!" Eustace cried, "come here—quick!"

CHAPTER VI.

BOB'S VERDICT.

SHE found Eustace standing beside his bed staring at it in utter bewilderment.

"My dearest boy, what is it?" she asked.

"Why, look at that!" Eustace exclaimed, pointing down at the coverlet.

From about the centre of the bed on the right side, down almost to the foot, was a long brown streak like a burn: the coverlet was cut and charred.

Mrs. Orban stared at it in astonishment.

"What can it be?" she said.

"I can't think," Eustace replied.

"You had better fetch Robertson," Mrs. Orban said. "There is something very odd about this."

"Don't you mind being left alone, mother?" Eustace asked, looking round anxiously, as if he thought an explanation of the mystery might jump from under a bed or out of a cupboard.

"Of course not, dear," Mrs. Orban replied gravely.

It amused her even in her anxiety that this slender scrap of fourteen should assume such an air of protection, but it touched her also, and she would not for worlds have let him fancy she could smile at him.

Robertson hurried to the spot immediately, and when he saw the condition of the coverlet he looked utterly nonplussed.

"Well, this is a queer state of things," he said, rubbing his head meditatively. "I never saw anything to equal it."

Further examination proved that not only was the coverlet burnt right through, but the under clothes were scorched and crumbled like tinder at a touch.

"It looks like the track of a shot," Robertson said; "but how could it come there?"

"I don't know," Eustace said, "unless some one was kneeling on the floor at the foot of the bed and tried to shoot me without raising his hand. The shot sounded most awfully close."

Robertson took a quick survey of the situation, ending with an examination of the wall at the head of the bed.

"No," he said, "that couldn't be. The bullet would have gone into the pillow or lodged in the wall, but there isn't a sign of it. Seems to me it went the other way by the mark. It is broadest in the middle of the bed."

He followed the line with his eye, then glanced across the room.

"Why," he exclaimed, going over to the opposite wall, "here is the mark of the bullet—here is the bullet itself, deep in the wood. That shot went off from the middle of your bed, lad."

Eustace looked incredulous, Mrs. Orban horrified. It was awful to think that the boy had been in such danger. The man who had fired that first alarming

shot was close to him, perhaps bending over him, when inadvertently the weapon had gone off! The mother could picture it only too vividly, and she felt sick at the thought of the ghastly peril.

"But what happened to the man?" questioned Eustace. "I was awake in a minute, and must have seen him."

"Not if he ducked under the bed," suggested Mrs. Orban. "He must have been there when you came to me, and made his escape the instant you were out of the way."

"Much more likely if he had knocked the youngster on the head to silence him," argued Robertson, as he stood toying with Mr. Orban's revolver. "I don't think that story will wash."

Quite suddenly the man threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"I have it," he said. "Eustace, you young rascal, what a scare you have given us!"

"I!" exclaimed Eustace, with a touch of indignation in his tone.

"Yes, you," was the reply. "Why, you fired that first shot yourself; I'll bet you anything you did. You only shot once at the dingo—there are two chambers empty in this revolver. Come, own up; where was the revolver when you went to sleep?"

Eustace flushed crimson as the realization flooded his mind.

"It was in my hand when I jumped out of bed," he said. "I—I do believe I went to sleep holding it. I dropped off suddenly."

He remembered how inexplicably queer and shaken he had felt when he awoke. Now he came to think

of it, he had been strangely jarred. A mere sound could scarcely have accounted for the feeling.

"Well, that clears the whole mystery, then," said Robertson. "There is no one lurking about the house, and there hasn't been anything to be frightened about —except that you might have shot your own foot through, and lamed yourself for life."

"He might have killed himself," said Mrs. Orban seriously. "It was a terribly dangerous thing to do."

She said nothing more, for it was evident Eustace felt very small and uncomfortable. It was the tamest possible ending to what had promised to be such a stirring adventure—such a tale to tell!

Presently, when he was left alone to try and get a little sleep before it was time to get up and dress, the full humiliation of it overcame him. What would his father say? and Nesta? and, worse and worse, Bob Cochrane? How he would be laughed at—teased! He would never be allowed to forget the dingo he had mistaken for a black-fellow; and he felt hot all over when he thought of that foolish shot—the cause of all the commotion.

It was a very depressed Eustace who appeared at breakfast. He took Robertson's unabated amusement so gravely that the engineer stopped laughing at him, and wondered if the youngster were sulking.

Mrs. Orban felt a good deal distressed to see how pale the boy was, and that he could hardly touch the food set before him. But every one showed signs of exhaustion, as was natural after two nights of such unusual strain. Mrs. Orban kept Eustace with her all day, setting him small jobs to keep him

occupied. They all went to bed early that night, and the household slept without rocking.

Next day, in the cool of the morning, Bob Cochrane rode over to inquire how the Orbans were getting on. Eustace heard him come—the boy was on the lookout for this particular visit—and as Bob walked round one side of the veranda, Eustace disappeared along the other, left a message with Mary that he was going down to the mill, and started away from the house at a run. The truth was, he felt he simply could not be present while Bob listened to the story of his absurd adventures; he wanted the narration to be over before he faced the fusillade of chaff with which the young fellow might pepper him. "He'll think me a silly little fool, I know he will," Eustace told himself again and again; "and he'll say, 'What did I tell you about shooting recklessly?' I expect he'll think I'm a baby, not fit to be trusted with firearms. It's disgusting, just when I was hoping he might begin to think me worth taking out shooting with him soon."

Thoroughly out of conceit with himself, Eustace wished he need not go home at all until Bob was certain to be gone. But no sooner did he reach the mill and begin wandering about the rooms full of machinery than it struck him it had been rather cowardly even to run away for a time. Bob would know he had not felt equal to facing him, and perhaps he would despise that as much as he was bound to be amused at the other. The lad had a sharp tussle with himself, and at last started back up the hill with the feelings of a most unwilling martyr going to the stake.

He was about two-thirds of the way up when he caught sight of Bob Cochrane coming swinging down towards him. Bob was just the kind of fellow every boy wants to grow into—big, well-made, splendidly manly; he looked jolly in his riding-suit.

"Hulloa!" he called as soon as he came within speaking distance.

"Hulloa!" Eustace called back tonelessly, his heart thumping hard, his colour coming and going ridiculously.

Bob waited till they met. Then, "Well, youngster," he said gravely, putting a big hand on the lad's shoulder and walking on beside him, "you've had a rough time since I saw you last. I don't wonder you shot at that dingo in the way you did; I should have done it myself, I believe, under the circumstances."

Eustace's heart almost stopped beating, he was so surprised; he could not speak a word.

"Of course that chap coming the night before put you all on edge," proceeded Bob, "and you were flurried by the first shot. That might have been a nasty business too. Glad you didn't hurt yourself."

There was another pause, but Bob did not seem to mind. He went on again presently,—

"It is just this kind of thing, I always think, that gives one a bit of a useful warning: first, to be cautious; and second, to keep a cool head. You'll never go to sleep with a revolver ready cocked again, and another time you will give yourself a second's deliberation before you fire at anything looking like a man. It might have been Robertson making a tour of the house, you know."

Eustace felt suddenly rather sick.

"I never thought of that," he said.

"Of course not," was the cheery response. "One doesn't look all round a question in a hurry, but one has to learn to remember there may be two sides to it. You'll get the hang of the idea one of these days. I know it was a long time before I gave up wanting to shoot down everything I didn't quite like the looks of. Sometimes it turns out well, sometimes pretty badly."

He ended with a little laugh. Eustace, looking up into the merry, kindly face, knew that the awful time he had so dreaded was over, and it had not been an "awful time" after all. Bob did not think him a fool; he might have done the same himself, he said. He only warned him to be more careful another time, and gave him the reasons why he should.

The boy had always admired this friend of the family; he positively glowed with pride at this minute that Bob was a friend of his own. Whatever might happen now, whoever might snub or laugh at him, Eustace had this comforting knowledge always at heart—Bob understood, and Bob was a man no one would laugh at.

"He is a brick," thought the lad warmly. "I wish there was anything, anything in the world I could do to show him what a brick I think him. If ever there is, won't I just do it! The more dangerous it is the better."

"I remember once having a pretty gruesome experience," said Bob, chatting on easily. "I expect you've never heard about it, because you were nothing but a kiddy at the time, and it has been forgotten

lately. I was going home across our plantation with two other fellows late at night—much later than the mater liked us to be out. In order to be as quick as possible, when we got to the little line running to the mill we hoisted the trolley on to the rails and began pushing ourselves along at a great rate. It was the sort of darkness one can peer through, making things look weird and distorted, often much bigger than they really are."

"Like the dingo."

"Like the dingo. Well, we were getting along finely, when we got to rather a steep gradient and had to go slower up it. Near the top one of us suddenly caught sight of something unusual to the left of the line. It looked like a huge cowering figure, wide but not tall. Whether four-legged or two-legged it was impossible to say because of the gloom. It wasn't a nice feeling to have this thing silently waiting for one. We all boo'd and shoo'd first, thinking that if it were a beast of any sort it would scoot at the noise; but it didn't stir an inch or make a sound. We felt pretty creepy by then, for black-fellow tales were even commoner in those days than they are now. From the size of it we guessed it might have been a group of three men. Then we shouted, 'Hands up and declare yourself, or we fire!' But still the creature didn't move or speak."

"My hat!" exclaimed Eustace sympathetically.

"We had got to get past it somehow to reach home, for it wasn't likely we could stay there all night. We gave it two more chances, and then we fired for all we were worth. There were instantly

shrieks, groans, and such horrible sounds that we waited for nothing more, but pushing our stakes into the ground, sent the trolley flying past the awful spot and down the next hill. How we didn't turn over and get killed down that incline I don't know—it was the one nearest home, you know, where one has to be so fearfully careful about putting on a brake as a rule. However, we got in all right, and gave a detailed account of our adventure. Every one was interested and puzzled. Father was a little inclined to laugh; he said it was probably the stump of a tree, but of course we had evidence against that in the genuine shrieks and groans following our shots. 'Well, we must just go first thing to-morrow,' father said, 'and look into the matter by daylight.'"

"And did you?" asked Eustace eagerly.

"Rather! I should just think we did—father, a friend of his who was staying with us, and the two boys I had been out with. We rode, and when we got to the spot the first thing we saw was the huge stump of a newly-felled tree, right in the very place we had seen the gruesome object."

Eustace whistled.

"But a tree couldn't shriek and groan," he objected.

"So *we* said when father began minutely examining the bark; and to our satisfaction there wasn't a single shot mark in the tree, though we must have fired half a dozen between us. 'We can't have seen this,' I said, feeling rather cock-a-hoopy; 'it must have been something nearer.' We were just all puzzling our heads over the matter when a Chinkee came running towards us from a group of huts not very far off. He was gesticulating and making a fearful

fuss. We followed him in a fine state of excitement, and he led us to a little low shed with a railing before it. We looked in, and there lay two dead pigs!"

"Two dead pigs!" cried Eustace.

"Yes. It was pretty humiliating, for it just proved we had aimed at the tree and missed it. Instead, we shot the Chinkee's inoffensive pigs. It was many a long day before that joke was forgotten against us. Moreover, amongst us we had to scrape a pound together to pay the Chinaman for his loss. I never felt so small in my life."

Eustace could well appreciate the sensation after his own experiences.

Bob took a very light view of the real visit the Orbans had had from the black-fellow two nights before.

"He wouldn't have hurt any one," said the young fellow. "He was nothing but a cowardly thief, or he wouldn't have behaved in the way he did. I'm only sorry you've offered a reward for the things; it will be an incentive to other fellows to do the same. However, I dare say, with Robertson sleeping up here, no one will venture again. I shouldn't worry if I were you, Mrs. Orban."

"I will try not to," Mrs. Orban answered bravely.

They had a quiet enough night again to warrant confidence, and every one felt rested and refreshed next day.

Just after breakfast Kate appeared to tell her mistress that a Chinaman from the plantation wished to speak to her. His name was Sinkum Fung, and he was the plantation storekeeper, a man who thought a good deal of himself, but for lying and

trickery, Mr. Orban declared, was no better than his neighbours the coolies who dealt at his shop.

As soon as Sinkum Fung was shown on to the veranda, he did a good deal of bowing and scraping by way of politeness, and he had so much to say on the subject of his own unimpeachable integrity that it was a long time before Mrs. Orban could bring him to an explanation of his early visit. Both she and Eustace guessed he must be wanting to sell something, and probably hoped to drive a good bargain in Mr. Orban's absence, the cunning of the average Chinese being unsurpassed.

After a considerable preamble, Sinkum began the following remarkable tale, all told in such strange Chinkee patter, and with so much self-praise interspersed, that it took the listeners' whole attention to unravel it.

CHAPTER VII.

PETER'S NIGHTMARE.

SOME nights before Sinkum Fung was sitting in his store waiting for customers. His best trade was always in the evening, when the coolies' work was over, and they had time to do some shopping. But it was getting late, and Sinkum thought it about time to close the store and go to bed. Suddenly there fell a shadow across the threshold, and a big black-fellow entered—a stranger whom Sinkum Fung had never seen before. What had he come to buy? Sinkum asked politely. But the black-fellow had come to buy nothing—he had a fierce, wild face, and his voice made Sinkum tremble when he said he had not come to buy, but to sell. He declared his name to be Jaga-Jaga of the great "Rat clan" now living in the Bush not far away. He had found, he said, a white man hanging in a tree, caught and held fast by the dreadful "wait-a-bit" cane that will swing round man or beast at a touch, and hold them fast till they die of exposure and starvation. This man was dead, and on his body, Jaga-Jaga said, he discovered sundry things which he now brought to the store to sell. What would Sinkum Fung give for them? The payment must be made in food, for the

tribe were nearly starving. Food was difficult to procure in the intense heat; the ground was arid and unproductive.

Sinkum examined the goods; he made his offer; whereat the wild man swung his boomerang disagreeably, and indicated that he must have "more, more." Tears of self-pity flooded Sinkum's eyes. He had no choice but to obey, and at last the black-fellow left with a sack containing ten times the value of the goods the storeman had been forced to buy. He had been cheated, cruelly used; he was a poor man, and could not stand such losses. The things were of no value—none; but if he had not bought them he would have been a dead man.

Sinkum's hands were no longer in his sleeves—he had made dramatic passes, illustrative of the fearful fate that might have befallen him.

It presented to Eustace's mind a vivid picture—the black-fellow with poised boomerang standing over the shrinking Chinkee, threatening his life if he did not obey the exorbitant demands.

To Mrs. Orban came another thought. There apparently really were black-fellows in the neighbourhood—a whole tribe living in the Bush.

The story of the poor white man strung up in the wood made the listeners shudder. Such a thing had never come into their experience, but they knew the terrible possibility of it. Many a man has been so detained in the Bush, riding inadvertently against the "wait-a-bit" or "lawyer cane." It springs round its victim like a coiled spring, and he is helpless to free himself if his arms happen to be pinioned. Who could this particular poor fellow have been, found

not far from the plantation? No one would ever know, Mrs. Orban reflected pitifully.

"And what were the things you had to buy, Sinkum Fung?" asked Eustace, with intense interest.

Sinkum searched amongst his curious garments and produced a handful of things, which he set solemnly down upon the table beside Mrs. Orban, watching her narrowly, to see what effect his action produced.

She gave a start of surprise.

"Why," said Eustace, springing to his feet, "this is the servants' jewellery, and their watches. The black-fellow never got them off any dead white man at all; he stole them straight out of our house."

Sinkum nodded drearily.

So he had discovered, he said. When too late he had heard of the reward for the catching of that black-fellow. He could only claim the reward for returning the goods; but surely the good missee would not let him lose so much. He had given ten times the value of those things, and thus only had he saved them from the black-fellow.

In his endeavour to point out that it was due to him, and him alone, the jewellery had reappeared, Sinkum Fung next fell into raptures over his own deeds. Had he but known that missee wanted the black-fellow too, he would have given his greatest treasure —his fine long pig-tail—to have detained him. He made the statement with a great air of devotion—a Chinaman does not part lightly with his pig-tail.

But no amount of assurances would prevail on Mrs. Orban to give the man more than the promised reward. Any further claim he might have to make, she said, must be made to Mr. Orban on his return.

Sinkum Fung went away in a transparently aggrieved frame of mind.

"Mother," Eustace said, as soon as the man's footsteps died away round the veranda, "did you believe his story about the black-fellow?"

"At first, yes," Mrs. Orban admitted. "I dare say such a thing is quite possible. I pictured the black-fellow bringing in a wallet containing the poor traveller's kit, a worn leather belt, with perhaps some money in it, a pipe and pouch."

"Yes, that is what I expected," said Eustace.

"Then one could have believed that Sinkum Fung might be taken in by the tale," Mrs. Orban went on; "but never tell me he believed it when he saw those trinkets. They are not the sort of things a Bushman would be carrying about with him, and Sinkum knows that as well as I do. He is no simpleton. His mistake was that he thought I might be one, and he overreached himself in his description of the ferocious Jaga-Jaga."

"You don't even think Sinkum was terrified into buying the things?" Eustace asked.

Mrs. Orban shook her head and smiled.

"I very much doubt it," she said. "Indeed, I am inclined to fancy the thief was no black-fellow at all now. It is just as likely he was a Malay or Manila boy from the plantation, and Sinkum Fung is in collusion with him. They will probably go shares in the reward; but Sinkum meant to make as much more out of me for himself as he possibly could."

"My word! if the other fellow comes again," said Eustace, "don't I just hope we shall catch him."

"I am sure I hope and trust he will not come

again," said Mrs. Orban gravely. "We have had quite as many disturbances already as I feel inclined for."

Mary and Kate were delighted to get back their belongings, and made no further reference to running away. They felt more secure with the Robertson family living in the house. Besides, a letter from Mr. Orban stated that he was getting through his business quicker than he had expected, and he should only now wait for Miss Chase's boat from England, because she would need an escort up country.

This cheered every one immensely. It was something to look forward to, and the days began to go quicker and more brightly.

Then Nesta and Peter came home full of all their doings at the Highlands, and this made a great difference to the house. Eustace did not know he could have been so glad to see his brother and sister; it was not till they came back that he realized how dull he had really been without them.

The Robertsons still stayed. Nesta slept with her mother, and the three boys were in the next room.

Nesta knew a good deal about the excitements that had been taking place at home. It was thought useless to try and hush the matter up. Something was bound to slip out in the course of conversation, and so she was given the lightest possible version of the theft, ending with an amusing account of Sinkum Fung's visit.

Of course Bob brought the children over, and to Eustace's intense gratitude, when it came to the story of the bogus scare, and Nesta seemed inclined to giggle, Bob said gravely, "Older people have made worse mistakes," and then proceeded to tell the

story against himself about the tree stump and the pigs.

There was something so big and nice about Bob's nature that, without meaning to, he always made people ashamed of being petty and ill-natured when he was present.

"You made a good shot at the dingo, old man," he said. "It won't be long before you are out shooting with me, at this rate."

Of course no one could laugh at Eustace after that. Bob saw nothing funny about what he had done—Bob actually praised him—and when Bob praised it meant something.

"I say," Nesta asked when the twins were alone together, "weren't you most awfully scared?"

"Well, I guess I was rather," Eustace admitted; "but of course it was silly to be. Mother thinks it was only one of the plantation hands now, and not a black-fellow at all, you see."

"But a plantation hand might have knifed somebody," Nesta said, with a shudder. "I hope he won't come again. I know I should scream like anything."

"I believe it would be the worst thing you could do," Eustace said gravely. "He would be sure to try and shut you up if you made a row—any thief would, if he wasn't such a coward as that one. But I wouldn't think about it if I were you, or you'll be fancying things, just as I did."

In spite of which advice Nesta did suffer a few qualms at night, if she happened to wake in the dark; but sleeping with her mother was comforting, and the panics never lasted long.

Lessons began again, and the days passed in their usual routine, but with the added joy of something to look forward to in the arrival of the new aunt.

It was a nightly annoyance to Peter that he was put to bed at the same time as Sandy Robertson, while the twins stayed up to late dinner. Becky went to bed still earlier, and was generally fast asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

"You might shoot pistols in the room after Becky is asleep," was a favourite saying, "and you wouldn't wake her."

Which statement she almost verified the night Eustace caused such an excitement; she really did not wake until the second shot was fired.

But Peter was not a heavy sleeper. Moreover, he had heard something about the black-fellow stories too. Sandy Robertson gave him a good deal of information as they played together, and the little fellow got into a thoroughly nervous state.

Mrs. Orban often sat with him till he was asleep, and then left a shaded light burning both in his room and her own.

It did not startle her very much one night as she sat at dinner with the twins to see Peter tear into the room yelling for her at the top of his voice. She guessed he had awakened from a dream, and was just frightened at finding himself alone with no one but Sandy.

He sprang into her arms and lay there trembling, panting only "Mother—mother—mother," over and over again.

"Well, sonny, what is it?" said his mother soothingly, stroking back his hair from his forehead.

"O mummie," he gasped, "there's something moving in your room. I heard it."

Eustace and Nesta started, and exchanged frightened glances. But Mrs. Orban answered quite calmly,—

"I dare say, darling. It is probably Mary turning down the beds."

She rose as she spoke and went towards the door.

"Oh, don't, mummie! don't go," Peter pleaded eagerly; "perhaps it's a black-fellow."

"Nonsense, darling," Mrs. Orban said. "You can stay here with Eustace and Nesta if you like, but of course I must go and see what the noise was."

"I'm going with mother," said Eustace sturdily.

"So am I," said Nesta.

"We'll all go," said Mrs. Orban cheerily; "and I am quite sure Mary will think us mad when she sees us."

So down the passage they went, Peter trembling and clinging to his mother. Straight into Mrs. Orban's room they all trooped, and of course, when they got there, there was no one to be seen—not even Mary turning down the beds.

On they went into the boys' room, and all was peaceful there; for Peter had been too frightened to yell till he reached the dining-room, and Sandy had not been roused.

"There, you see," said Mrs. Orban; "what did I tell you? There are far too many of us in the house now for any one to dare to come."

She went on into the kitchen still holding Peter, and Mary and Kate certainly did look surprised.

"Master Peter has been having a nightmare," Mrs. Orban explained, "and I want to reassure him. Were you in my room just now, Mary?"

"No, ma'am," Mary said; "I haven't been there since dinner."

"Oh, well, then, he must have been dreaming," Mrs. Orban said, still in the same cheery way. "We will just go all through the house and show him everything is all right, and then I will sit by him till he gets to sleep again."

Eustace took a lantern, and on they all went right through the house, very naturally finding no one. Robertson, who was smoking on the veranda, declared that no one had been up or down the steps since he had been out, and Mrs. Robertson, who was in her bedroom lulling the baby to sleep, said no one had been that way either.

After all of which Eustace and Nesta began to breathe freely; but, to tell the truth, at first they had both been a good deal scared by Peter's announcement. They guessed their mother was just making all this show of bravery for Peter's and their sakes, for another visit from the thief was not at all unlikely.

But when Robertson laughed at the notion of any one having been able to pass him unseen where he stood near the veranda steps, when every nook and cranny had been looked into and no one was forthcoming to prove Peter's tale, every one was certain he had had a bad dream.

"You are a little silly," Nesta said bracingly. "Of course there are always noises in the house."

"But this was a big noise," Peter objected; "something banged."

"Why didn't you say that before?" said Eustace with superiority; then added, out of the vastness of his recent experience, "Nobody ever bangs when they

want to rob a house; they try to be as silent as mice."

"Besides," said Nesta, "there is nothing for any one to steal now, since we keep all our things hidden away."

This was a rule Mrs. Orban had made—that everything of value must be put away under lock and key. She had no fancy to be perpetually paying away rewards for recovered goods. She believed Sinkum Fung to be quite capable of setting people to do these little pilferings just in order to obtain the rewards. Disagreeable as was the idea, it frightened her far less than the thought of genuine black-fellows lurking about the place; they were really dangerous, cruel, and lawless.

Mrs. Orban took Peter back with her into the dining-room, and he sat cuddled up on her knee while she finished dinner.

They were all sitting listening to just one "good-night" story before going to bed, when Mary came into the room, gave a frightened glance round, and exclaimed,—

"Lor', ma'am, haven't you got Miss Becky here? I made sure you had."

Every one stared at Mary, and thought she looked rather white and queer.

"Did you, Mary?" asked Mrs. Orban rather hurriedly. "Why?"

"Well, ma'am," said Mary in an unsteady voice, "because she isn't in her bed."

Mrs. Orban sprang to her feet.

"Not in her bed?" she exclaimed. "My good woman, what do you mean?"

Setting Peter down on the ground, she turned swiftly and left the room.

"I just went in to turn down the beds," explained Mary to the twins as they hurriedly followed, "and went over to Miss Becky's corner to take a look at her, and she wasn't there. I didn't stop a minute, I was so took aback, but came straight off to see if maybe she was in the dining-room. You might have knocked me down with a feather when I saw she wasn't."

Mrs. Orban rushed to Becky's bed. She was standing beside it as if petrified when the others entered. The bed was empty. This was no dream. Becky really and truly was not there.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WITCH.

OF course Peter's story jumped to every one's mind, and with a horrified cry Mrs. Orban fell forward, fainting, on to the empty bed.

The recent hunt through the house had been, as Eustace guessed, a greater strain than she had allowed any one to see; she could not be certain that they were on a wild-goose chase. This, coming on the top of it, was just too much for her.

Instances of children being stolen had from time to time come to her knowledge—stories of little ones silently, mysteriously disappearing and never being heard of again. The twins had heard the same from the servants, among other disturbing stories. This last terrible event seemed just to prove that the first visitor had been no mere plantation hand; the stealing of a baby was more like the work of the native blacks.

Nesta wrung her hands and wept. Eustace dashed away to fetch Robertson. Mary lost her head completely, and nobody thought of trying to restore poor Mrs. Orban to consciousness till motherly little Mrs. Robertson appeared on the scene.

Robertson stood in the middle of the room looking the picture of bewilderment.

"This beats everything," he said in an awed voice.

Every one was really too terrified to make a noise. Puzzled glances were exchanged, questions whispered, and Robertson said again,—

"This beats everything! It doesn't seem possible, unless she has been spirited away; for how could any one pass me on those steps without my seeing them?"

"Could he have swarmed one of the posts?" Eustace asked.

"I shouldn't say he could," Robertson replied, "but it looks as if he did. How could a man swarm a post with a sleeping child in his arms?"

"Black-fellows are dreadfully clever," said Kate.

"Hush," said Mrs. Robertson, "the poor lady is coming to herself. Don't let her hear you talking like that. Oh dear, how will she bear it?"

The poor woman's eyes were full of tears. She knew well enough what a mother's feelings would be under such awful circumstances.

"Every corner of the house was searched," said Robertson meditatively.

"We didn't look under the beds," said Nesta.

"Silly," said Eustace. "As if a black-fellow would have stopped to be looked for under a bed."

"Yes—that's no go," said Robertson; and just at that moment there came such a strange sound from under the very bed they were standing by that every one jumped—a sound that brought Mrs. Orban back to her senses far quicker than any of good Mrs. Robertson's restoratives, for it was the voice of Becky herself.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed all the women, after the first shock of surprise was over.

"My patience," said Robertson, and down they all went on their hands and knees like a party of kangaroos, peering under the bed.

There lay Becky, rosy with sleep, safe and sound, with puckered face and plaintive voice, evidently wondering what all the fuss was about.

They hauled her from under the bed, and placed her on her mother's knee, where she sat blinking at the light like a young owl.

"Why," said Nesta, "she must have tumbled out of bed in her sleep, and rolled over underneath."

"So she must," agreed every one.

"That was the noise Peter heard," Eustace said.

"Of course it was," said every one except Mrs. Orban; and she said, as she bent her face over the baby in her arms,—

"Oh, you dreadful children! Have you a conspiracy amongst you to frighten me out of my wits? Or are you trying to harden my nerves? I begin to wish your father would come home."

She laughed a little, and it sounded much more like sobbing. So kind Mrs. Robertson hurried every one off to bed, because she said Mrs. Orban must be quite worn out.

Eustace was so upset by his mother's words that he could not get to sleep for hours. They seemed to hold a reproach specially for himself—for had he not been the first to terrify his mother? It was not a good record to present to his father; and he had meant to be such a stand-by and comfort. With all his heart he echoed Mrs. Orban's wish. He had dreaded his father's going away; he longed for his return.

The very next day the wish was fulfilled. News came up the hill that the plantation schooner had been sighted the evening before; she was in the bay. By midday the travellers had arrived, and the climax of the great excitement was reached.

Every one had wondered a hundred times and more what that first greeting would be like—what words would be said. As a matter of fact, when the time really came, nobody said anything at all except Mr. Orban, who exclaimed when he caught sight of his wife, "Darling, what is the matter? You are looking ill."

But Mrs. Orban stopped him with the promise to tell him everything later on. Meanwhile she nearly wept for joy over the meeting with Aunt Dorothy, and was far too happy to remember or speak of the distresses of the past week or so.

The children hung back shyly and stared at the new-comer—a tall, slender girl, dressed, Nesta afterwards commented, just like a person in a story book, so dainty was she.

Dorothy Chase was not at all like Mrs. Orban. She was certainly pretty, but the most remarkable thing about her was her expression, so vivacious was it, so keenly interested and alert. She was a great contrast to the people amongst whom she had come, for tropical heat saps a good deal of the enthusiasm of life out of people—even the children were subject to lassitude.

They looked a quiet enough set as Miss Chase cast a quick searching glance around her after greeting her sister, and there flashed through her mind a contrast between them and the nephew and niece she had left

but a few weeks ago in England—the children of another sister, orphans who lived with their grandparents in the old home.

"Well, chicks," said Aunt Dorothy, with a laugh, "who is going to speak to me first?"

They were standing, all in an untidy row, Becky, with one finger in her mouth, hanging on to Nesta's skirt.

To the new-comer they looked pasty-faced, spiritless beings. The prints that the girls were dressed in were rather washed out; Peter had outgrown his suit. They were ill-clad, shy, and awkward.

Eustace flushed with an uncomfortable feeling that they were not behaving very courteously, and came forward the instant Miss Chase spoke. Nesta followed, and then Peter, all as stiff as pokers in their shyness. But Becky Miss Chase picked up with a playful little shake, and kissed her heartily.

"Oh, you dear, funny wee soul," she said, "how glad I am to see you. I've brought out a Kodak and I've promised to take all your photos almost every other day, for certainly no one at home could guess the least little bit what you are like."

Becky did not resent the unceremonious treatment at all, but took it quite placidly in her own particular way. This gave Peter confidence.

"Have you brought lots of boxes?" he asked, with an interested stare up into his young aunt's face.

Eustace pulled his sleeve.

"Shut up," he whispered. "Don't ask questions; it's rude"

Eustace felt uncomfortable. He knew quite well whither his small brother's questions were trending.

Peter was wondering what would be in those boxes for himself.

"A good many," answered Miss Chase; but she was allowed time to say no more, because she was hurried into the house to rest and refresh.

At tea the children sat round as solemn as owls and listened to all the questions and answers about the home folk. They picked up scraps of information most interesting to themselves, especially about the English cousins, Herbert, who was sixteen, and Brenda, who was a month or so older than the twins. From time to time they had heard of these cousins in letters, but it made them seem much more real when they were talked about by some one who had just come away from them.

"Herbert is a very big fellow," Miss Chase said. "He is doing famously at Winchester."

"Lucky chap," thought Eustace, who never read a school story without longing to go to a big English school.

"And what about Brenda?" questioned Mrs. Orban.

"You shall see a photo that was taken of her the other day," was the answer. "Most people think her very pretty."

"Does she go to school too?" said Mrs. Orban, asking the very question Nesta was bursting to put.

"Oh yes, Brenda is a regular schoolgirl. You see it would be so lonely for her to have lessons at home with a governess."

"Lucky girl," thought Nesta, and sighed.

"She was quite green with envy when she heard I was coming out here," Miss Chase said, "and threat-

ened to have all sorts of illnesses, necessitating change of air for recovery, so that she might come with me."

"Oh, I wish she had," Nesta said impulsively.

"I don't think her grannie would agree with you," laughed Miss Chase. "She can hardly bear to part with her every term. If you want to see her, I think your best plan is to have an illness yourself, and let me take you back with me for change of air."

"That would be better and better," Nesta exclaimed, "only I should want mother and every one else to come too."

"Well, why not?" asked Miss Chase gaily. "Let's make up a party and all go back together. I am only allowed to stay two months, and then I must be off again. I will willingly pack you all up in my boxes and take you with me."

"What did I tell you?" said a deep voice from the window, and there stood Bob Cochrane on the veranda. "I said she would bewitch you and spirit you all away."

"You did, you did," said Peter, who had been drinking in every word; "you said you wouldn't like her."

"Oh, come, no tales out of school," said Bob, as he crossed the threshold and came forward to be introduced; "you are giving me a bad start, you know."

"I am sorry to have made such a bad impression at the outset," Miss Chase responded merrily as she shook hands. "Would it appease you at all if I offered to pack you with the rest?"

"I wouldn't if I were you, Dorothy," said Mr. Orban. "He would take such a fearful amount of room, even if you doubled him up."

Miss Chase smiled as she eyed the great big fellow.

"I wouldn't come if you paid me," Bob said lightly. "They tell me it is a toss up whether the climate or the people freeze you up most in England."

"Treason, treason, Bob," said Mrs. Orban. "Remember we are English."

"I guess you have mellowed in the sunshine," Bob said imperturbably. "Children, don't you listen to a good word about England; don't you let yourselves be spirited away by bad fairies, or you'll regret it."

"It's high treason," shouted Eustace. "England is our country. Off with his head."

Then suddenly Miss Chase saw what her nephews and nieces really were like.

"He has got to be punished," Nesta sang out.

Peter and Becky made a simultaneous dive at the unfortunate Bob, who had begun whistling with a great show of unconcern.

"What's his punishment to be?" demanded Eustace.

Mrs. Orban thought a minute while Peter suggested pommelling, and Nesta mentioned a few tortures in the way of old-fashioned forfeits.

"It's too hot for violent exercise," said Bob, when Nesta requested him to walk round the room three times on his head. "I shall go home to mother if I am ill-used."

"Have some tea, Bob," said Mr. Orban.

"No, no," cried the bullying trio, "not till he has paid his penalty for high treason."

"Well," said Mrs. Orban gently, "suppose you fetch the banjo and make him sing for his tea."

"Good! Good!" was the immediate acclamation.

Bob sat down resignedly.

"I don't think a crueller sentence could have been passed," he said with a mock groan.

"Between ourselves," said Mrs. Orban, as the children rushed into the drawing-room to fetch the banjo, "there is no tea in the pot, and you may as well sing till the kettle is boiling."

Bob took the banjo with the air of a martyr and tuned it skilfully.

"I choose my own song," he said, struck a few chords, and began, in his really beautiful voice,—

"Dey told us darkies right away out west
In England men make der money much de best,
And I believed dat ebry word was true,
So dat is why I come along wid you.
Oho you and de banjo."

"Oh, oh, oh," interrupted the children, "more treason! If you sing that song you will have to do another as well."

"You can't hang a man after his head is cut off," said Bob stolidly, and went on,—

"But now we're here, why, de money doesn't grow,
And we ain't got nuffin' but de old banjo:
So we rove the streets if de wedder's wet or dry,
Till my heart most breaks and der's water in your eye.
Oho you and de banjo."

"Most pathetic," said Miss Chase, with a twinkle in her dark eyes. "I think I begin to see where Mr. Cochrane gets his revolutionary sentiments from."

"Then in sleep at night de nigger dreams ob home,
Where de sun really shines and de frosts nebber come,
Where we'd plenty to eat, and a little hut of logs,
And we hadn't got to beg for our bread like de dogs.
Oho you and de banjo."

Bob's voice became more and more plaintive; he sat

in a drooping attitude with his head on one side as he finished,—

"But it ain't no good all dis singin' out of tune,
For we can't get warm, tho' they say it's hot for June;
It's certain for darkies dis is not de place,
Where eben de sun am ashamed to show his face.
Oho you and de banjo."

"So that is your opinion of England, is it?" asked Miss Chase. "Well, I am not surprised you don't want to come, then."

"But of course it is all stuff, and nothing but a silly old darkie song," said Eustace.

"You wait till you get there, young man," said Bob, still with an air of mock gloom about him; "you'll remember my warning then. It is so cold in England the natives have their windows glued in to keep out the air, and they have front doors as thick as walls, all studded with nails and brass knockers."

"But what are the brass knockers for?" asked Nesta. "They wouldn't keep you warm."

"Certainly not," was the answer; "the brass knockers are for the purpose of waking the people inside the house, who are always asleep with the cold—like dormice."

"Mother," demanded Eustace, "do you think he ought to have any tea after that? He hasn't done penance, and he isn't a bit sorry. He is making it worse and worse."

"I think, darling, as he is a guest he must have his tea," Mrs. Orban said; "but I will send a note by him to his mother to say he has not been good."

"I'm not going home to-night—so there," said Bob complacently; "I'm going to sleep in a hammock on the veranda."

"Oh, jolly!" exclaimed every one, and there was a chorus of, "We can stay up late, can't we, just for to-night—Aunt Dorothy's first night?"

But Aunt Dorothy did not allow the compliment to deceive her. Not for her but for Bob Cochrane did the young people want to stay up later. He was certainly a great favourite.

CHAPTER IX.

A RIDERLESS HORSE.

IT was a delightfully merry evening. Bob had to re-do his punishment and sing several songs, and then he struck.

"I am quite sure Miss Chase sings," he declared. "It's her turn now. Witches ought to be punished even more severely than traitors."

She made no demur, but sat down to the piano and began to sing. But in the middle of her song such a noise began over her head that she dropped her hands laughingly, and exclaimed,—

"How can I sing with that wretched electric bell going on all the time?"

"Tr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r," sounded shrilly through the room, louder and louder.

"Electric bell?" exclaimed the children with blank faces.

"Oh, you dear new chum," said Mr. Orban, bursting into peals of laughter, accompanied by Bob, "that isn't an electric bell; it's a cicada."

"A cicada!" repeated Miss Chase.

"Yes; a kind of grasshopper, or cricket, you know," Mrs. Orban explained, looking much amused. "He is up there in the roof. I am afraid you

will have to stop, for as long as you go on so will he."

"How very ill-mannered of him," said Miss Chase.

"Let's play something instead," said Peter, who was getting sleepy, but would not own it.

He was not really fond of music—Bob's comic songs excepted.

The game was begun, and going merrily, when suddenly there rose on the night air such an appalling howl that Miss Chase started and turned pale. To her astonishment, when she looked round the table, she found that no one but herself was at all disturbed by the sound.

"You to play, I believe, Miss Chase," said Bob, who sat opposite her.

She put down her card, and at that moment the agonized cry came again, apparently from immediately under the veranda. Dorothy gripped her hands tightly together, and again looked round on the unmoved faces. Again the cry resounded.

"Surely," she said, looking appealingly at Bob, "there is something or some one in dreadful pain outside."

Bob laughed.

"I thought you seemed upset, but I didn't like to mention it," he said. "That's nothing but a dingo howling. There'll be a whole pack of them at it presently, I dare say. I'll go out and disperse them as soon as the game is over."

"What is a dingo?" inquired Miss Chase.

"Don't you know that, Aunt Dorothy?" asked Peter in tones of contemptuous astonishment. "Well, it's the commonest thing here."

"Peter," said Bob gravely, "do you know what a top hat and a frock coat are like?"

Peter shook his head in bewilderment.

"Don't you?" said Bob, mimicking the small boy's tone. "Well, they're the commonest things in England. I am surprised at your ignorance!"

Peter reddened.

"But I've never seen them," he said.

"Nor has Miss Chase ever seen a dingo," said Bob calmly.—"It is the wild dog of the Bush, Miss Chase. They come prowling round the house at night, looking for food."

The howling grew worse and worse. Bob quietly sauntered out on to the veranda. There were a few shots, and the noise changed to yelps as the dingoes scurried in terror down the hill.

"Don't be worried if you hear them in the distance most of the night," said Mrs. Orban. "I am afraid it will take you some time to get used to our noisy hours of darkness."

When Miss Chase tried to settle down to sleep she remembered these words, and it seemed superfluous to her that she should have been wished "good-night" by every one. A good night was impossible. The dingoes howled persistently in the woods below, and quite close there was the incessant "croak-croak-croak-croak" of tree-frogs, together with many other inexplicable and weird noises.

Nesta slept placidly through it all; but not till there came a lull just an hour or so before dawn did the weary stranger drop into oblivion.

It did not seem to her she had been asleep five minutes, and there was only the faintest glimmer of

light in her room, when she was awakened by something new. Just under her window there was a strident laugh.

"Ha-ha-ha!" Then another, "Ha-ha-ha!"

Miss Chase listened in bewilderment.

"What extraordinary people," she thought, glancing enviously at the undisturbed Nesta. "Who on earth can be out at this time?"

She supposed that it must be some of the plantation hands prowling about outside; but she wondered at her brother-in-law allowing them to behave in such a tiresome way when people were wanting to sleep.

"Ha-ha! ha-ha!" jeered the voice outside, as if mocking at her annoyance. Then followed a chorus of chuckles, and Miss Chase sat up in bed, and strained her ears to catch the joke, if possible. But no words reached her. There was a little pause as if some one might be speaking, and then another burst of delighted chuckles, so very funny that they were quite infectious, and Miss Chase smiled in spite of herself.

"Ha-ha! ha-ha! ha-ha-ha-ha!" laughed the voices. Now certainly there were more than one.

"This is too ridiculous," thought Miss Chase, beginning to chuckle softly to herself. "What can they be saying or doing out there?"

At last the hilarity became so boisterous that her curiosity got the better of her, and slipping on a wrapper she opened the window and crept out on to the veranda.

To her surprise there was no one to be seen—not a soul was about either on the veranda or below,

though she leant right over, and strained her eyes to catch a glimpse of these queer people.

It was comparatively deliciously cool outside, the grayness before dawn a pleasant contrast to the tropical glare that was positively hurtful to the newcomer's eyes. Going to the corner of the veranda, she gazed away and away towards the now deep gray sea, lying like a bath of mist beyond the dense black of the trees in the valley.

"What a queer, unreal world it seems," she was thinking, "and yet to little Peter this is all reality, and England nothing but a dream."

"Ha-ha!" said a voice from immediately below, so loudly as to sound almost insulting.

Miss Chase jumped, looked about in astonishment —and saw no one.

"Ha-ha! ha-ha-ha!" repeated the mocker.

"I wonder if he sees me, and is laughing at me now?" thought the girl.

She gave a little shiver. It was not a very pleasant sensation to feel herself spied upon by an unseen watcher, and she began to beat a hasty retreat towards her own window again.

"Ha-ha!" laughed the unseen one, with such a note of triumph that now she was certain the humour was at her expense. It annoyed her, and at the same time it rather frightened her. Was it possibly a madman?—for assuredly the chuckles became madder and madder as they increased. Besides which, what sane person would be out of bed and giggling at such an hour? The thought of a lunatic or two at large lurking round the house was discomforting indeed. In England, with fast-barred doors and

windows that are supposed to be unassailable, it would not be pleasant; but here—where what might be called the "front door" was nothing but the flimsiest of French windows, the windows themselves utterly powerless to keep any one out—the English girl found this new suspicion particularly disagreeable. She wondered whether she ought not to go and rouse Mr. Orban. Perhaps he ought to be warned, she reflected, so as to be ready in case these maniacs burst into the house, intent on the mischief they were so evidently gloating over in anticipation.

"I wish I knew what to do," she thought in great agitation.

"Ha-ha! ha-ha-ha-ha!" responded the laughers with maniacal glee.

"Why, Aunt Dorothy," exclaimed Nesta, as Miss Chase entered the room in a hurry, "what have you been doing?"

Nesta was sitting up in bed. She had evidently awakened, and discovering her aunt's absence, was wondering about it. It comforted Miss Chase to have some one to speak to; but, determined not to frighten the child, she said as steadily as she could,—

"I was only trying to find out what those people are laughing at out there. It seems such a strange time to be so amused. I suppose they must be some of the coolies going to work."

"People!" repeated Nesta blankly.

"Yes—listen!" said Miss Chase; and as another burst of thick-toned mirth reached them, "There—don't you hear that?"

Nesta rolled down into her pillow, and fairly shouted into it.

"What is the matter with the child?" asked Miss Chase in bewilderment.

"People!" gasped Nesta, as soon as she had any voice to speak with. "Those aren't people; they're birds!"

"Birds!" said Miss Chase. "Impossible. You must be asleep still, or you didn't hear what I said."

"Yes, I did," Nesta replied. "You mean those funny fat chuckles and ha-ha's? Well, those are birds—the laughing jackasses. I can show them to you in a minute."

Out they both went on to the veranda, and in the fast-increasing light Nesta pointed out some trees below, on which sat groups of brightly-hued birds, not unlike kingfishers in appearance, but very much larger. They had without doubt the funniest faces Miss Chase had ever seen. Not only did they laugh aloud—they positively grinned, so comic was the expression of their wide beaks. She laughed herself till the tears ran down her cheeks, and Nesta put her head down on the veranda railing and wept with laughter too.

The sun was up now, there being practically no twilight either before sunrise or after sunset in North Queensland. The glory of the scene sobered Miss Chase, and she stood watching.

The glee of the birds was explained. They sat and laughed as they watched for their prey, then pounced down upon the unwary locusts or lizards they had marked, and returning to the tree, sat chuckling triumphantly over the capture before eating.

"It is really rather horrid of them, isn't it?" said Miss Chase.

But Nesta did not sympathize.

"Nobody minds," she said, "especially about locusts being eaten—nasty things. When there is a plague of them it means ruin to father; they destroy every blade of sugar-cane."

Over the tree-tops in the valley below appeared a cloud of shimmering whiteness, moving swiftly round the base of the hill.

"What is that?" asked Miss Chase curiously.

"White cockatoos," said Nesta, with a yawn; "they're changing their feeding-ground — white cockatoos with bright yellow crests. But, I say, don't you think you had better go back to bed? You're looking awfully tired."

"Is that one for me and two for yourself?" said Miss Chase lightly. "Personally, I would rather dress and go for a walk in the wood down there."

"I don't think you had better," Nesta said, shaking her head doubtfully. "We aren't allowed to go there alone. It is awfully easy to get lost; and then there are snakes and things. You might get into a mangrove swamp too—or you might meet black-fellows."

"Well, really," laughed Miss Chase, leading the way back to bed, "you don't give a very flattering description. Why, at home I'm often up at sunrise, out all by myself in the woods. You don't even meet poachers, for they take good care not to be seen."

"I think England must be splendid," sighed Nesta.

"I wonder if you would really think so," Miss Chase responded. "Mr. Cochrane gave you a very dismal picture of it, remember."

"Oh, but Bob has never been there. Besides, he was only exaggerating, because he doesn't want us to go, you know."

Miss Chase gave such a graphic account at breakfast of her early morning experiences that every one at the table shouted with laughter. The jackasses were alluded to ever after as Aunt Dorothy's lunatics.

"To talk of serious things," said Mr. Orban, half way through the meal, "we shall have to be fearfully careful with the water. The second tank is almost empty, and I doubt its lasting till the rains come."

"That's bad," said Bob.

"Things are bad," said Mr. Orban. "I hope the rains will hurry up, or we shall have the cane catching fire. We should lose every bit of the crop if that happened."

"Dear me," said Miss Chase, "you seem to have fearful difficulties to contend with. Nesta was talking about locusts only this morning."

"Locusts will destroy the young crop," said Mr. Orban. "If it escapes them, fire may destroy the old. Too much rain and too little do equal damage. We've had a good many unprosperous years, with one thing and another."

"It looks grand burning," said Eustace.

"A sheet of flame, and your heart in the middle of it, never seems very grand to the man whose year's work and hope is being burnt under his very nose," said Mr. Orban.

The children had seldom seen their father look as worried as he did then. It seemed to Eustace there was trouble in the air.

"Can't you put out a fire in the cane once it begins?" asked Miss Chase with interest.

"No," was the answer; "you can only try to stop it spreading by cutting as wide a path as possible between the burning part and the sound. It takes all hands to do it, though, and some of the coolies can't be got to work for love or money. It is a nasty business when it happens."

Bob started off home early; not quite so early as he had meant to, because when his horse was brought round ready saddled, he found it had lamed itself somehow in the stable. He therefore borrowed a horse from Mr. Orban, and left his own to rest for a day or two.

Generally when Bob took his departure after a particularly jolly time there was a good deal of depression about. But to-day, with the arrival of Aunt Dorothy's boxes up the hill, low spirits disappeared as if by magic.

The contents of those boxes kept every one occupied the whole day. What with the excitement and curiosity over the many presents—the clothes, useful things, and games stowed quaintly into the packing-cases together; what with every one's amusement over Miss Chase's frequent astonishment at the commonest things of their everyday life, time slipped cheerily away towards evening. The children never remembered such happiness in their quiet existence before, and Miss Chase felt half inclined to weep when she saw what simple things were joys to them.

"Herbert and Brenda would laugh at them if they saw them," she thought gravely.

Brenda's photograph was very much admired. She was a beautiful girl indeed, with a proudly-carried head, and just the suspicion of a scornful curve to her lips.

Nesta suppressed a sigh as she looked at her cousin's clothes, for Nesta loved pretty things. She let out little bursts of admiration that amused her aunt considerably.

"She looks a regular angel," Nesta said. "I never saw any one so lovely. Isn't she simply perfect, Aunt Dorothy?"

"She is a very nice girl," was all Miss Chase could be brought to admit.

"And she goes to school," murmured Nesta, gazing lingeringly at the lucky girl, who seemed to have everything heart could desire. "I just want to see her more than everything in the world."

"Perhaps you will some day," said Miss Chase, wondering silently how much of the compliment Brenda would return could she see a photograph of this rough-headed, ill-dressed little cousin of hers; for Brenda was particular—at least over her friends at school.

Eustace gazed silently at the portrait of Herbert. He had no word to say about the immaculately-dressed English boy, photographed in his best suit, his highest collar, and pet tie. At least he made no public comment; but when Nesta bothered him later for an opinion, he said shortly,—

"He looks an ass."

"Oh, he doesn't," Nesta said warmly, ready to admire everything English.

"I think so," Eustace said imperturbably.

"Then you're a silly, jealous boy," said Nesta in fiery championship.

"Who wants to have clothes like Brenda?" was the instant retort, "and go to school like Brenda, and be just like Brenda? But I'm certain I don't want to look like Herbert anyway. He looks a stuck-up ass."

"He—he looks like a gentleman," spluttered Nesta.

"Oh, shut up," said Eustace. "Can't a gentleman look an ass? Who is that riding up the hill?"

His quick ears had caught the sound of hoofs, and glad of a pretext to change the subject he went and leant over the balcony.

Nesta was at his side with a pounce.

"Hulloa!" he shouted a few seconds later; "here is something queer."

"What is it, Eustace?" called his mother from within; and soon every one was on the veranda, staring eagerly down the hill.

Coming up at a leisurely trot was a riderless horse—saddled, bridled, but alone.

The watchful party waited in breathless astonishment till it was close to the house. Then Eustace said sharply,—

"Mother, it's the horse Bob went away on this morning! There's been some accident."

CHAPTER X.

A VOICE FROM THE SCRUB.

THERE could be no doubt about it, and every one stared blankly after the beautiful big creature as it passed on, round the house towards its own stable.

"What can have happened?" Mrs. Orban exclaimed. "Bob is such a splendid rider."

"Oh, he can't have been thrown, of course," Eustace said, with an emphasis meant to impress Aunt Dorothy.

"Perhaps it's black-fellows," said Nesta shakily.

"Stupid," said Eustace sharply, "Bob can shoot straighter than any one I know."

"Instead of wrangling over possibilities, we ought to be doing something," said Mrs. Orban. "Eustace, you had better fetch that horse and ride down to father at once. Perhaps he will guess what it means."

Eustace was off like an arrow from a bow, and presently appeared below the veranda, sitting erect and fearless, riding the returned horse.

He looked such a scrap perched up there that Miss Chase had a sudden qualm as to his safety.

"Will he be all right going down alone?" she asked.

"All right?" questioned Mrs. Orban, looking puzzled.

"Yes; I mean, isn't it rather a risk for him?"

"Oh goody, no!" Nesta answered with a laugh. "Why, Eustace can ride anything; he has ridden ever since he was six."

"Father will want to see the horse," Mrs. Orban said. "Perhaps it has only run away from the Highlands before it was stabled. But I can't think what it has been doing in the interval, or why Bob has not sent over to inquire. He ought to have got home by nine at latest."

Mr. Orban was as puzzled as every one else when he saw the horse. He examined it carefully.

"Well, so far as I can see, Bolter has not been running away," he said thoughtfully. "He has not been overheated, and he is as fresh as paint. I should say he has had some quiet hours of grazing. But where Bob is remains a mystery. I must ride over to the Highlands at once and find out if he is there."

"O father, can I come too?" Eustace cried eagerly. "I could ride Bolter, and I shall never be happy till I know Bob is all right."

Mr. Orban eyed the boy kindly.

"Yes, you can come," he said. "It will scare Mrs. Cochrane less perhaps, and look more casual if I have you with me."

Away they went at a quick trot along the rough road leading to the wood known as Palm Tree Scrub. Eustace knew every inch of the way, and generally loved to get into the cool and shade under the feathery palms. But to-day he glanced left and right, looking for he knew not what with sickening anxiety.

The road, nothing but a cart-track, skirted a mangrove swamp awhile

"He can't have got in there," said Eustace, with a nod towards the thickly growing stems of ti-trees rearing up from long coarse grass.

There was a mysterious darkness in the depths of the woods that somehow chilled the boy to-day.

"What should he get into a rank place like that for?" said Mr. Orban bracingly.

At the same time he whipped up his horse and hurried forward. He was regretting having brought Eustace. A mangrove swamp is an unhealthy spot at the best of times, productive of a great deal of malarial fever; it would be nightfall, he reflected, before they got back, and the mist would be rising.

Away and away out into the open the pair galloped, and came to the side of the creek—the bend in the river through which the horses had to wade. The water was low just now. There were times when such floods roared over this spot that the man carrying the mails had been known to be swept away, horse and all, and was never heard of again.

At the other side the horses plunged into grass as high as their flanks—a flat, uninteresting tract of land, bare of trees except where here and there a single palm tree arose. But beyond that the ground rose suddenly from the banks of this bend of the river. On the summit of a high bank, luxuriantly surrounded by tropical foliage of all sorts, was Bob Cochrane's home.

It was a relief to Mr. Orban to find only Mr. Cochrane on the lower veranda. He was a short, broad, sandy-haired man with a rough appearance, and as kind a heart as could be found in the colony, which is saying a great deal.

"Good-evening, Cochrane," said Mr. Orban casually, as he reined in his horse. "Is Bob at home?"

Eustace listened for the answer with a thumping heart, and he saw a slight look of surprise flit across Mr. Cochrane's face as he replied slowly,—

"Bob? No. I thought he was over at your place. He hasn't turned up here to-day."

"Well, he was with us," Mr. Orban said, trying hard to keep up the careless tone, "but he started off this morning—I thought for home."

"Not he," said Mr. Cochrane; "at least he hasn't arrived. Perhaps he had to come round by somewhere else—Gairloch or one of those places. Come in, won't you, and wait for him, if you want to see him."

"Afraid I can't do that," Mr. Orban said, speaking low so that only Mr. Cochrane, now by his horse's head, should hear. "Fact is, I'm rather worried. Bob's horse went lame, and he borrowed one of mine. He should have been here at about nine, but the horse—this one Eustace is on—appeared back at my place an hour ago."

Mr. Cochrane stared blankly.

"Without Bob?" he questioned in a dazed way.

"Yes. Don't say anything about it to your wife—it might frighten her unnecessarily," Mr. Orban said. "He may have gone round by Gairloch, and the beast ran away from there. We can just say I came over on business, and then you had better come right off with me to see if Bob is all right."

"I'll do that," said the Scotsman, and hurried off to get his horse.

"Now look here, Eustace," Mr. Orban said, "I'm going to leave you here for to-night, whatever

happens. Mother would not thank me for bringing you through that mangrove swamp and risking fever. But you'll have to keep a quiet tongue in your head and say nothing about Bob's leaving our house to-day. If you say nothing, Mrs. Cochrane and Trix will only fancy he is staying with us."

"O father," Eustace said pleadingly, "need I stay really?"

The prospect frightened him, for he was terrified lest he should let the cat out of the bag. Keeping a secret was not one of his accomplishments.

"Yes, my lad," was the answer, however; "there is to be no question about it, and you are to behave like a man. Anxiety is much worse to bear than any bodily hurt, and a man should protect a woman from it as he would save her from being tortured. Do you understand?"

"Yes, father," Eustace said, with a sinking heart.

"It isn't a little thing to do," Mr. Orban went on; "it is one of the big things, for it means self-sacrifice. It is always comforting to oneself to talk things out. You'll have plenty of things to say without mentioning Bob. Tell them about Aunt Dorothy and her queer mistakes—the boxes you have unpacked— Ah, Mrs. Cochrane," he broke off suddenly, looking up to a figure that appeared on the upper veranda, "how do you do? I've just come over to steal your husband for a bit. I hope you won't mind."

Eustace was amazed at the change in his father's tone; it was brisk, cheery, and impossible to suspect.

"But won't you come in?" asked Mrs. Cochrane, who in appearance was something like a little brown robin. "You must be hot and tired."

"Not a bit," Mr. Orban said; "and I'm in such a hurry I must ask you to forgive the rudeness. I want you to do me a favour too, if you will. Keep Eustace the night. I never thought how late I might be going home when I brought him; I want to go back by Gairloch."

"Certainly, I'll keep the dear laddie with pleasure," was the cordial answer, and the kindly look that beamed on Eustace positively hurt him. She looked so happy, and oh, what awful news was there in store for her!

"I may even keep your husband all night," Mr. Orban added. "You won't be scared if he doesn't turn up in good time for bed?"

"Not I," said Mrs. Cochrane. "I know my dear belongings are always safe with you."

Eustace could have cried at the words. "Safe!" and where was Bob whom she pictured so safely at this very minute in the Orbans' house? Mr. Orban did not look up as he said,—

"Don't expect Bob either. Eustace will tell you all about what a merry household we have suddenly become. We've got a witch into it, as Bob calls her. Here comes Cochrane. I hope he won't want an hour to say farewell."

"Not I," said Mr. Cochrane bravely. "Orban has made his apologies, I suppose?"

He ran up the steps, said good-bye, and in a few minutes the two men were gone, leaving Eustace to face a terrible ordeal.

He took his father's suggestion and talked much of Miss Chase. It was made easy for him by the kindly curiosity of both Mrs. Cochrane and Trixy.

Beatrix was a jolly girl, rather like Bob both in looks and ways. She was older for her age than Nesta, perhaps because she had no companions of her own standing to keep her back. Eustace and she always got on well together, and to-night he was grateful to her for being such a chatterbox. The story of Aunt Dorothy's lunatics made Mrs. Cochrane and Trix both laugh till the tears ran down their cheeks. It was harder to tell them about the evening before, for that was all so full of Bob.

It struck Mrs. Cochrane after a time that Eustace looked singularly pale, and that the boy was talking rather fast and excitedly, unlike his usual self.

"Do you know," she said, "I believe you are very tired, Eustace. What do you say to going to bed?"

"Oh, I should love it," he said, with such eagerness that Mrs. Cochrane was startled, and eyeing him critically she discovered he was now crimson.

"I just hope he has not got a touch of the sun," was her thought.

But she said nothing of her fear.

Eustace was put into Bob's room, and everything he looked at in it made him more miserable. But he was thankful to get away by himself at last and give up the wretched pretence of good spirits. He felt he was getting to the end of his powers, that in another minute the truth would tumble out in spite of him. All the time he was talking he was also listening—listening—listening for the sound of hoofs that never came.

He went on listening long after he got into bed, for he could not sleep, he was so certain there must

be bad news, as neither Mr. Cochrane nor his father returned.

He must have dozed fitfully through the night, but it seemed a terribly long one. Every time he opened his eyes he was wide awake in a minute to the remembrance of what had happened. When he awoke at last to find the sun rising, he could lie still no longer, he was haunted by such restless thoughts. He dressed and went downstairs into the open air.

"Supposing Bob had gone off the track for some reason, and lost his way," ran his thoughts. "Supposing he was wandering about seeking it all night up to this very minute! Supposing he had been waylaid and surrounded by black-fellows!—Sinkum Fung had declared they were camping in the neighbourhood. No, Eustace would not think of that—one white man against a tribe of blacks: it was too terrible! And yet supposing he had been, and no one found out!" Thoughts are sometimes dreadfully uncontrollable things.

"I believe I will go for a ride," he said to himself. "I might just go down to the creek—I won't cross it—but just as far as there, to see if they are in sight. I can do that easily, and be in to breakfast."

He found a man near the stables whom he got to saddle Bolter, then off he started down the slope across the river, and away over the uninteresting stretch of flatness till he again reached the river bank. There he paused, staring towards the mangrove swamp with the same chilled feeling he had experienced the day before. It was the terrible dread that the depths of the woods might hold something

ghastly—Bob living, but in awful distress of mind or body; Bob dead!

There were no signs of his father or Mr. Cochrane; no sounds but those of nature. They certainly could not have found Bob at Gairloch. The only alternative seemed the scrub.

Suddenly Eustace threw back his head, and in a shrill treble gave vent to a prolonged Australian "coo-ee."

"If he is there," argued the boy, "of course he will answer. How silly of me not to think of that before."

He could hardly believe his ears for joy, but there was instantly an answer—so faint that he only caught a bit of it; still he heard it.

In wild excitement he coo-eed again, his very loudest this time; and again came the reply, scarcely more distinct, and more like a cry than a coo-ee.

"It comes from the scrub," thought Eustace. "He must be there, but awfully far off or ill, for that isn't like his voice. What shall I do? I can't go back and fetch any one, because father said I was not to tell. I daren't wait till father comes, for fear I lose it. It might get fainter and fainter. Oh, I must do something when Bob is calling out for help! If I could find him, if—if I could save him, it would be splendid!"

Just once again he sent out his piercing coo-ee, and this time the answer was distinct enough for him to decide its exact position. Without another moment for reflection, he urged Bolter on, waded through the river, and dashed helter-skelter towards the wood. He thought nothing of the possibility

of himself being lost, nothing of the danger of meeting black-fellows. He was going to Bob—that was the central idea. Bob was in danger and called for help. It was the fulfilment of the greatest wish of Eustace's life to serve Bob.

CHAPTER XI.

BLACK-FELLOWS.

IN the exultation of the thought Eustace plunged into the scrub and rode on and on unheedingly, lost in dreams of the adventure before him. Always he found Bob, always he rescued him, sometimes with the most thrilling hair-breadth escapes.

The wood was not dark but densely shady, with black distances. It presently began to worry Eustace that it was impossible to keep a straight line for the direction whence the answering cry had come; it was often necessary to wind in and out of the close-growing tree stems to find a passage for himself and Bolter. There was no road, path, or even track to follow.

"This will get muddling," he thought, when he had been twisting and turning, doubling back on his route, for about half an hour. "I guess I ought to have marked the trees with notches as I came along. I'll go back and start again."

He pulled Bolter up, sat back on his saddle, and looked round for the gleam of light through the trunks of the trees that would guide him back to the open; but there was none—nothing but an even monotony of dense distance, no matter where he turned.

The boy's heart stood still in the unpleasant shock of surprise. Which way had he come? He had not the slightest notion, for each way looked so exactly the same as the other. He realized with sickening intensity that he had lost his bearings.

"But I must find my way out, of course," he said, addressing Bolter's glossy ears. "I'll try each way in turn till I see the light. There is nothing to be scared about."

He felt quite angry with himself for his momentary panic; it was stupid and babyish. Of course fellows had been lost in the Bush, but they couldn't have been such a short way in as he must be by now. True, he had heard a story of a chap who had gone round and round like a squirrel in a cage not a mile from the outskirts of the scrub. He was "bushed," and found dead.

The boy shuddered, then literally shook himself as he urged Bolter on again to begin investigations.

"I won't think about it," he said, setting his teeth. "I must get out, and begin again; I must."

In and out of the trees he wound, trying his utmost to retrace his steps; but he had noticed nothing on the way in, and he had no landmarks to guide him. This went on so long that, fight as he would with the fear at his heart, it began to master him.

"Seems to me I am always coming back to the place I start from," he thought, with a desperate sense of helplessness; "but there isn't a bit of difference between these hateful trees. I'll mark one and try."

He cut a deep gash in the bark of the nearest

to him, and went on. But though he watched most carefully, he never came on that tree again.

"As I'm not getting out," he reflected, "I must be getting deeper and deeper into the scrub. Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do? What a silly fool I have been! I might have remembered father's warnings. Bob said one ought to learn to think out all sides of a question. I didn't; and now if father goes back I shan't be there to tell him I heard the coo-ee. Oh dear, oh dear!"

He gave a gasping sigh, almost a sob. To have been so near saving Bob, and not to have done it after all—only to die "bushed"! It was enough to break a man's nerve, let alone a child's.

He went back in thought to the river bank, picturing how it would have been if he had only patiently waited, giving a coo-ee now and again to keep in touch with the answerer.

"Why, how silly I am!" he exclaimed. "If I coo-ee now he will answer me, and I can follow that."

The thought cheered him instantly, and making a hollow mouthpiece with his hands to increase the sound, he gave the loudest coo-ee he had ever given in his life.

There was not the faintest response.

Again and again he repeated it, straining his ears to hear if there came a reply. More and more agonized grew his cries; so intense his silences between that he even stopped his breathing to listen. But there was nothing to hear. He got hot and cold by turns; he felt sick and queer. It was now hours since his departure from the Highlands, and he had had no food since the very poor

supper he managed to eat the night before. The effort of shouting did not improve matters, and he was so hoarse at last he could call no more.

Then he completely lost his head, and began riding with desperate inconsequence as straight ahead as the trees would allow. Stay still he could not; the inaction terrified him. He argued that he must get somewhere by going on long enough—somewhere "through to the other side," as he expressed it.

"Why doesn't Bob answer?" that was the most troublesome thought. "Have I got out of earshot?"

Presently Eustace was beyond thinking; he went on dully because he felt he must keep on the move; but hunger, exhaustion, and the heat of the now well-advanced day were beginning to tell on him. The apathy threatened to become so settled that it was a mercy when Bolter presently stumbled so badly that Eustace had to rouse himself to hold on. Then it was that he noticed straight before him at last a wide gleam of light amongst the stems of the trees.

The sight put such life and spirit into him that he whipped up the now drooping Bolter, who also had just cause to reflect on no breakfast and general ill-usage, and they covered the ground as fast as possible, considering how unequal it was, how thick the undergrowth in parts.

A disappointment and a great surprise awaited the pair when they emerged into this open space—it was nothing but a clearing in the wood after all, dotted about with queer-shaped huts scarcely as tall as a

man, and all made of pliable branches of trees interwoven with grass for walls.

Eustace pulled up short in breathless dismay, for a few paces away there arose from among these untidy "humpies" some twenty natives—erect, alert, all with poised boomerangs or spears ready to fling. It was a sinister reception for one small boy on a spent horse. Of course the keen-eared blackfellows had heard him coming from miles away, and were ready.

It was small wonder, considering his condition, that after one wild, appealing glance at the line of fierce, dark faces Eustace fell forward on Bolter's neck in a dead faint. He did not see the weapons lowered, or the gleam of something like grim amusement on the chief's face as he realized for what it was they had been so elaborately prepared.

Out of the huts crept stealthy figures of women and children. When Eustace opened his eyes he found himself lying flat on his back with these people crowding inquisitively around. He looked up into their repulsively heavy faces with a horror of realization. For some moments he was too paralyzed to stir. No more awful fate could have befallen him than this—it was the sort of thing that might come to one in a nightmare. But he knew it was no dream. There stood Bolter a few paces away, grazing thankfully, and in no way perturbed.

The harsh guttural language these people spoke was unintelligible to the boy, but he could guess they were intensely curious about him from the way they pointed and stared. It seemed to him

that some of them could never have seen a white child before, they were so excited, especially the children, who looked half terrified. Were they cannibals these people? he wondered, with a sinking heart.

He forced himself to his feet, and stood shaking a second, then dropped on his knees. The performance seemed to amuse the gaping group—the younger men and women laughed, the children clapped their hands.

Eustace was wondering drearily how long they would stand staring at him, when the chief strode up to him and said something with many gesticulations; but not a thing could the boy understand.

The chief was much more decorated than any one else—covered from head to heels with stripes and devices in white, blue, and red paint. There were feathers in his crisp dark hair, and slung over his shoulder a strange shaped club.

Eustace proceeded, by means of much waving, pointing, and the patter talked on the plantation by the coolies, to try and explain how he had come there, and how very much he only wanted to get away and find the way home. But it was useless—the men shook their heads and looked perplexed.

Seeing that no one seemed inclined to molest him, but that every one merely watched him as if he were a monkey in a cage at the Zoo, he resolved on a desperate step. With a supreme effort he stood again, staggered over to Bolter, and attempted to mount.

But this was not allowed. With two strides the

chief was upon him, flinging him back on the ground as a big boy might fling a kitten from him. Then the great man plainly intimated that this creature he considered his; no one should touch it. Eustace was not to dare to approach it. The chief's attitude was menacing; it was well to be seen he felt he had acquired a prize.

"But what is going to happen to me?" thought Eustace, quaking with fear. "What will they do with me?"

No one seemed to have any intention of doing anything with him at the moment; he was only stared at. The men, for the most part, were now more interested in Bolter, particularly his saddle and bridle. Little by little the women dropped off, as if they had work to attend to, and a smell of cooking arose that made the boy sick with longing as he sat huddled up and half silly with starvation and fatigue. The apathy that had been upon him before he was cheered by the gleam of light crept over him again; fear faded from his mind; nothing seemed to matter any more.

He sat so still that presently the children crept closer, and began to finger his clothes, as if they puzzled them. What drew them away from him he did not realize till something was thrust under his very nose, and the smell told him it was food.

He had just enough sense left to try and eat; but before he had swallowed five mouthfuls he rolled over and fell sound asleep. Nothing could have kept him awake—neither a thunderstorm nor an earthquake.

When he awoke again to a consciousness of his

surroundings the sun was rising. He had come through the night in safety—that was his first thought; and it both surprised and encouraged him. Surely, he argued, if they wanted to kill him he would not have been spared so long.

The scarcely-touched food was still beside him. Refreshed by the much-needed sleep, he was able to eat it now, and began to feel more like himself again, though stiff and still weary. He was sufficiently rested for his brain to be active once more, and his whole thoughts were bent upon what was to become of him next.

Bolter was tethered at the other side of the open space, well guarded, as if the chief thought he might try to inveigle the horse away by some magic means, then mount and ride off. It was very evident that if he meant to get away it would have to be on foot—the chief would not part with Bolter. The question was: Did they mean to detain Eustace as prisoner? At present, except that they stared inquisitively at him, every one seemed fairly indifferent to his presence. However, he decided that it would be foolish to put the matter to the test in broad daylight; he must wait till nightfall, and under cover of the intense darkness make his escape. He set himself to wait as patiently as he could, pretending to be as drowsy and inert as a well-fed snake; but his mind was very active. He had never thought so many thoughts in all his life before. What, he wondered, could Mrs. Cochrane have thought of his disappearance? Had his father returned to the Highlands and discovered it? Were they keeping his loss from his mother as they had

kept Bob's from Mrs. Cochrane? Was it possible Bob had got safe and sound home again? And oh! were they looking for him?

There came an answer both to this and to the question as to the black-fellows' intentions respecting him that very morning.

Eustace had been furtively watching the dark figures moving to and fro. Apparently some of the men went off to hunt. Except when they were preparing food, the women seemed to do nothing. The children squabbled and tumbled about, or slept like tired brown kittens in casual places. There was a great hush over everything, when suddenly across the silence came a sound that set every pulse in the boy's body astir, so that the beating of his heart almost choked him. It was a distant but long, clear coo-ee.

Wild with joy Eustace sprang to his feet, but before he could make a sound he found himself surrounded by a dozen menacing figures, clubs in hand, ready to fell him if he dared to reply.

Some of the tribes are very secretive and stealthy in their movements. It was well to be seen that this one did not wish to have its camping ground divulged.

With a thrill of horror Eustace understood that he was powerless. To cry out would mean certain death. It might be their intention to kill him at any rate, but in the postponement lay a chance of escape. He must meet stealth by stealth.

Again the coo-ee cut through the air, but Eustace covered his face with his hands and dropped dejectedly back on the ground.

It was a bitter moment. Could anything have been worse than to know help was at hand, and to be unable to take it?

That a search-party was now out he felt certain; it was probably his father's voice, and he dared not answer. He had the sense to see how useless it would be to give one cry, and die for it. But oh! it was hard—cruelly hard.

It seemed to him those coo-ees went on for hours, each with a long listening pause after it, sometimes nearer, gradually fading away and away till they were no louder than the answer he had received on the banks of the creek.

In addition to the keenness of the disappointment and the terror that he was losing his last chance of ever getting home again came the speculation as to what these wild-faced people meant to do with him, and there leaped to his mind a new and very terrible question. Was it possible that Bob had come this way? Had they met him with spears and boomerangs, and dispatched him before he had time to whip out his revolver? But no. There was still that answering coo-ee to be accounted for. Perhaps they had only bound him and made him prisoner till then, undecided what to do with him. It was possible that on hearing Eustace's coo-ee he had dared the blacks, and attempted those three faint answers. If so, they had cost him his life, and the ultimate silence was explained.

Eustace lay shuddering over the thought. He could only keep his teeth from chattering by holding his jaw tightly in both hands.

How long he lay lost in those miserable thoughts

he did not know. He was roused from his lethargy by a soft kick, and, starting up, he found the woman who fed him the day before beside him offering him food again. She seemed to treat him as if he were a white pig that had strayed amongst them. He was probably a less intelligible creature in her eyes, but she knew that he must at least eat to live.

It was a messy preparation, but he managed to eat some; and all the driest portions of it he could extract unnoticed he slipped into his pockets, laying in provision for possible starvation next day. Then he lay down again and feigned sleep.

He looked through half-closed lids with longing eyes at the peaceful Bolter. Eustace wondered whether he too had heard those tantalizing coo-ees and ached to respond. What would be poor Bolter's fate here? The blacks make the women of the tribes into their beasts of burden when shifting camp; they do not habitually use horses. The chief was perhaps only keeping Bolter as a valuable addition to the larder when provisions ran short.

Every thought that came to the boy was horrid. He wished he did not have to think, and as dusk fell set his mind to the task of keeping awake after his captors had settled down for the night. It would be fatal to sleep as he had done the night before.

The chief had been away all day, and was not yet come back. It was possible judgment on the prisoner was suspended till his return. When the great man heard of the coo-ees and Eustace's attempt to answer, probably the boy's fate would be sealed. Escape must be now or never.

Eustace made up his mind that he would start off in the direction whence the coo-ees had come. It was the only guide he had, and a very poor one, as had already been proved by the first cry he had so unfortunately tried to follow.

He waited just as long as he could bear, after silence fell on the camp. There was no question of taking Bolter. He was guarded as on the night before; besides, he would have made too much noise. Eustace dared not get up and walk himself, or even crawl. He had invented a silent, gliding movement as he lay scheming—by means of strong tufts of grass he meant to gradually pull his body, snakewise, little by little away from the open into the wood.

As soon as he dared he began his weird progress, quaking at every sound he made lest it should rouse those keen-eared sleepers so close around him. The soft "frou-frou" of the dry grass beneath him sounded to his excited fancy like the sudden rushing of a torrent. He was almost overwhelmed by the fear of pulling himself inadvertently up against one of those dark forms, for he did not know where every one was lying. One false move now, and it would mean the end of all things for him.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SECRET OF THE THICKET.

THE night was close and still with the silence that intensifies sound tenfold. Eustace thought he could not have had worse luck. His temptation was to hurry; common sense bade him hold himself in check. Panic urged him to risk everything, and make a bolt for it. But Bob's precept was ringing in his mind—there were two sides to the question; he might bolt, but where to in the dark? It was useless to dash headlong into trees and make for nowhere in particular. The plan was to get as far away as possible in the dark, unheard, so that by daylight he would be out of sight, and able to quicken his pace to some purpose.

Gliding, halting, scarcely breathing, he pulled himself along, and great beads of perspiration started on his forehead and trickled down into his eyes.

The darkness was useful in one way, but it had its disadvantages. He had no idea what progress he was making, and it seemed ages before his hand came against what he thankfully realized was the bark of a tree. Almost simultaneously there was a blinding flash of lightning, so vivid that for a full moment the sleeping camp lay revealed, and Eustace

had time to grasp the fact that he was well within the outskirts of the wood. The crash of thunder almost overhead brought him to his feet. Now was the time to make some pace, in the dense darkness, under cover of that merciful noise. Eustace was not the least afraid of thunder and lightning; he was used to tremendous storms, and loved nothing better than to stand out on the veranda to watch one raging round among the hills or out at sea. Now it was a positive blessing. Every flash showed him where he was, and he took care to have a tree trunk between himself and the camp. Then during the thunder bursts he made his way swiftly forward, groping cautiously like a blind man. His spirits rose with the excitement, and all his courage came back to him.

By the time the storm had grumbled itself away into the distance he knew he was well out of sight of the camp, and he dared to sit down to wait for dawn. Without the aid of the lightning it was folly to plunge farther into the scrub.

In spite of a stern resolve not even to let himself doze, the tired boy must have slept awhile, sitting with his back against a tree. There was just a first glimmer of light penetrating the thick foliage above when he opened his eyes with a sudden definite feeling of something having roused him.

Very much on the alert, instantly he raised his head, and sat listening with held breath. He was beginning to think he must have been mistaken, when there came a sound that made his hair stand on end and his blood run cold. He got up swiftly but softly, and stood, still backed by the tree, staring

into the gloom. The sound seemed to come from what looked like a dense thicket not very far to the right, but as yet it was not light enough to distinguish objects from each other.

"Is it some animal, or a native, or what can it be?" Eustace questioned, feeling most horribly shaky.

There was a long pause, and then the silence was once more broken by a deep, heavy groan—something like a long sobbing sigh.

The boy was paralyzed with horror. Besides which, to have moved, to have gone forward, would have been useless in this half light. He could have done nothing, seen nothing. There was nothing for it but to wait till daybreak. He could not bring himself to sit down again; there is always a feeling of being ready for anything when one is standing.

There was another long interval, and then this awful sound came once more—slow, laboured, intensely painful. There could be no doubt that something or some one was suffering inexpressibly not twenty yards away. The voice was like the voice of a man having a nightmare, and trying to call some one to help him. The third time the sound came Eustace almost fancied it contained a word—"Help."

Five times he heard it, and every time it was exactly the same in tone and duration. Each time he became more persuaded that it was a muffled cry for help.

The light was coming at last. Soon he would be able to venture forward and find out what horrible secret the thicket held.

The boy sank down on his knees and prayed with all his might for strength to face whatever it might be

for at the thought of the ordeal before him he could have turned and fled. He stood up again as white as a sheet, but resolute, and ashamed of the temptation.

"Who is there?" he demanded in a hoarse, shaky voice unlike his own.

His throat was parched, his lips dry. He had not spoken a word for two nights and a day; it was scarcely wonderful speech was difficult.

There was no answer for a full minute, and then came that same groaning cry again, not as in answer to the question, but at its own regular interval.

Following the curve of the thicket a little way, behind a thick group of trees Eustace came to a sudden standstill with a cry of dismay; for there, standing almost upright in the thickest of the scrub, was the figure of a man, his bare head bowed down upon his breast so that his face was invisible, his arms hanging down at his sides.

It struck Eustace at once as strange that he should be standing making this terrible sound. It would not have surprised the boy nearly so much to have found him lying down—indeed, that he had expected. Bracing himself to the task, Eustace went closer.

"I say," he said in a loud voice, "what's up?"

The man made neither sign nor movement. Could he be tied there to a stake? the boy wondered. Was he deaf and blind?

"I say," Eustace said, almost shouting now, "can't you see me?"

Fighting down his own horror of the situation, he pressed a little closer, to find the man's shirt torn to shreds, his arms pinioned down to his sides by something that looked like small cords.

"It's the 'wait-a-bit' cane!" Eustace exclaimed aloud, shrinking back sharply with a quick horror of being entrapped by it himself.

Here was an awful state of affairs. A wretched wayfarer caught and held like a fly in a spider's web, and not a soul at hand to help.

To go back to the natives was out of the question. With their reputation for cruelty and hatred of white men it would be worse than useless to appeal to them. What was to be done? What would Bob have done under the circumstances?

With a gasping cry Eustace crept closer again, and bending low he strained to catch a glimpse of the man's face without going too perilously deep into the thicket.

"Bob," whispered the boy, "Bob, is it you? Oh, speak to me—is it you?"

Little fool that he had been not to think of it before. But somehow these last hours of terror, centred only upon himself and his own means of escape, had blunted his intelligence to everything else—even to the remembrance of Bob. He was mad with himself for it now—so mad that all thought of personal danger fell away from him. He had room for nothing but the realization that this must be Bob indeed standing here helpless and dying of privation.

Oh the folly of having waited for the light! But Eustace stayed for nothing more now—not even to look at the two sides of the question. He dashed against the bushes like a little mad thing, recklessly fighting his way towards the imprisoned man.

"Bob, Bob!" he said in a voice choked with sobs.

It was difficult to grasp that this huddled, helpless figure was Bob, the big, the strong. But when at last Eustace saw the white, drawn face he knew there was no mistake about it.

There came that awful groan again, but this time Eustace did not shrink back.

"It's all right, Bob," he said huskily. "I've come now. I'm going to help you all I can. You shan't die—you shan't—you shan't."

He spoke the last words through set teeth, for he had taken out his clasp-knife, and was hacking at the cruel bonds with all his might.

It needed no explanation to tell Eustace how Bob had got there. The thing was as plain as daylight. He must have been riding fast, and inadvertently struck against some "wait-a-bit," which rebounded like a bit of twisted elastic, and caught him in such a grip that he was powerless to free himself. Bolter passed on from beneath, and the more he fought and struggled the tighter he became entangled. Had his arms been free it would have been different; but the strength of the cane was marvellous—moreover, it was covered with vicious thorns. That Bob had fought desperately for his life was to be seen by the condition of his shirt and his deeply-scored skin. He was now in a state of more than semi-unconsciousness from exhaustion and starvation; still, at intervals, he half roused himself to call for help, as he must have been doing for days.

It was no easy matter to saw through the cane, which was wound again and again round him. But bit by bit Eustace worked at it, with a ferocity that was bound to tell. He was mad with fear for Bob,

and madness is said to increase strength extraordinarily.

More by good luck than good guidance the boy was not caught in the meshes himself, for he took no care.

As the last coils were cut, and Bob was bereft of his main support, he fell gradually to the ground, lying in the pathway Eustace had made to reach him, and from there the boy could not move him an inch. Perhaps owing to the change of position Bob had stopped groaning at last; but though Eustace called him, and implored him to speak, if only a word, he made no sign.

"I suppose it is faintness," Eustace thought in deep trouble, for this was something so terribly new in Bob. He did not seem the sort of fellow who could ever be ill.

Something ought to be done for him, and that quickly; this much Eustace knew. At home he would have rushed for water; but here where there was none—where there was nothing—what was he to do? If only he were a man, and carried a brandy flask, as his father always did! A sudden brilliant idea struck him—perhaps Bob carried a flask himself!

It was the work of but a few seconds to search him, and to the boy's joy he found a little flask full of spirit. It was not very long since Eustace had had a practical demonstration of what to do with some one in a faint. He remembered Mrs. Robertson's treatment of his mother the night of their fright about Becky.

So first he moistened the dry blue lips, then put

a few drops between them. Oh, it was a tedious, terrifying business—too long to describe; and nothing scared Eustace more than the choking and gasping with which Bob came to himself at last. But it was the turning-point and saving of his life.

It took Bob a long time to pull himself sufficiently together to make a sign to Eustace that he knew him. He was far too weak to speak at first; but after a long, dazed study of the boy's white, miserable face, Bob's lips parted in a pitiful attempt at a smile.

To his own after-annoyance and shame, whenever he remembered it, Eustace flung himself face downwards on the ground and fairly sobbed. What fear for his own safety and all the horrors he had gone through had no power to do, the relaxation of this tension of anxiety about Bob did.

"Say, old chap," came in a far-away whisper to his ears, "don't!"

It pulled him up short. Bob's eyes were closed, and he looked so like fainting again that Eustace gave him more brandy.

It had a good effect; but later, not even when he had regained his full consciousness, could Bob move hand or foot; he was as stiff as a log. Just as he had been bound rigidly upright, so he remained now lying at full length.

"Guess I'm pretty helpless," he said in a thin, weak voice. "I shall have to be oiled before I can move." Then, after a little while, when he had been lying staring at his companion meditatively some minutes, he said, "Just explain what you are doing here, will you?"

From the very beginning—the return of Bolter—Eustace told the story of the last few days, and Bob listened with growing eagerness in his eyes.

"So you lost yourself finding me," he said at the end. "And there isn't a doubt you've saved my life, old boy."

But even this assertion did not cheer Eustace.

"I'm afraid I haven't, though," he said miserably, "because you see we are lost."

"Not a bit of it," Bob said. "If I had any legs I could walk you out of the wood in two hours. I know the way perfectly."

"Do you?" Eustace exclaimed. "Then what did you come here for?"

"Merely to see if it was true there were any natives in the neighbourhood," was the answer. "I never got as far as the camp, but my shouts brought a whole lot of them gibbering round me. It seemed to amuse them to see me there; but they threatened to kill me if I went on shouting, so I had to shut up and hope for the best. They have come each day in little batches and watched me awhile, then slipped away. At last I began to feel so bad that I rather wished they would come and finish me off, to put me out of my misery; so I began calling again. But I suppose my voice was too weak to matter; they knew I couldn't be heard. Anyhow, the beggars didn't touch me. I dare say they'll come again to-day."

Eustace looked scared.

"Oh, I say," he exclaimed, "I hope they won't. They'll take us prisoners, and goodness knows what they'll do to us. We must get away from here before they come."

"You must," said Bob, "but I can't. You'll have to take my compass, and keep going due west with it all the time. You'll know where you are the minute you get out into the open."

Eustace stared at him blankly.

"But I couldn't go and leave you," he exclaimed.

"Why not?" asked Bob with a smile.

"How could I," Eustace said warmly, "and you in danger? I just won't go. Nothing shall make me."

There was a curious light in Bob's eyes as they rested on the slip of a lad kneeling beside him.

"Good old man," he said, "you can't do me any good by staying. For both our sakes you must go, and as fast as you can."

"But suppose while I am away—" began Eustace desperately.

"We've got to chance that," said Bob bravely. "You couldn't save my life if you stayed; you could only die too, and what would be the good of that?"

"I would rather," said Eustace chokily.

"Well, I wouldn't," Bob said firmly. "We mustn't think about ourselves in it at all. You've got to go home and set the dear home-folks' minds at rest about us. They'll know no peace till they hear, one way or another. Then, of course, they'll set out to fetch me. You'll guide them. If I am here, well and good. If I am not, don't you forget I wouldn't let you stay. You did the only thing you could for me by obeying orders."

Eustace hid his face in his hands because his lips were trembling so; he felt sick, and shaky all over.

"O Bob," he said, "must I?"

"For my sake, laddie," said Bob softly.

Eustace stood up, but kept his head turned away that Bob should still not see his face.

"I do wish," said Bob lightly, "that you could give me a nice slice of beef before you go; I'm so hungry."

It was a little bit of chaff to help the boy to pull himself together. It worked quite a miracle, for Eustace's face cleared instantly.

"Why, how stupid of me!" he said. "I can give you something to eat. It was what I couldn't finish of my own."

Out of his pockets he pulled the unappetizing lumps of food he had secreted, and kneeling again, he began feeding the helpless man as if he had been a baby.

"Upon my word, you are a magician," said Bob, keeping up a cheery tone, although he could little more than whisper. "But eat some yourself; turn and turn about."

"I don't want any," said the boy.

"Obey," said Bob briskly, with his kind smile.

So they made their strange meal together. It was a small one, but quite enough for Bob after his long starvation.

"I ate every leaf and berry within my reach," he told Eustace, "or I don't think I should be alive to tell the tale. Lucky for me, they were none of them poisonous. When they were done I started on chewing twigs, but they didn't go far."

At last Eustace had no excuse to linger. Very unwillingly he rose to do Bob's behest. He had never heard of anything so awful as leaving him

like this to his fate. It seemed the worst kind of desertion—something that he would be ashamed of all the days of his life.

Bob made him take his watch and chain with the compass on it.

"Keep the compass afterwards if you like," Bob said, "and give my love to every one."

Eustace turned sharply away; he could stand no more.

"Good-bye," he said thickly; "I feel a beast."

He took two quick strides forward, and walked right into some one. It was the great native chief.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GREAT SURPRISE.

EUSTACE thought he had never seen anything so wicked as the chief's grin when he looked down into his astonished face. The black-fellow's teeth gleamed like a wolf's. His whole expression seemed to say, "Ha, ha! so I've caught you in the very act. You don't escape me so easily, you see." He evidently felt an exultant satisfaction in frustrating his departure, or he was rejoicing over having found him again.

With an overwhelming consciousness of Bob's helplessness, Eustace moved back quickly to the prostrate figure, as if to shelter it.

"What's up, old man?" questioned Bob, who from his position could see nothing. "You're not shirking, are you?"

The chief came rapidly within range of the sick man's eyes, and Bob's face fell most unmistakably. There was disappointment in every line of it.

"Phew!" he whistled, "we've lost our chance this time."

Exactly how crestfallen the pair was it would be impossible to describe. Not that Bob had harboured any hope for himself. He knew the natives would

come to him before Eustace could possibly get back with assistance, and finding him no longer an amusing spectacle, would probably dispatch him. But he had been bent on saving the boy's life and sending his message home.

The native chief said something in his rapid, unintelligible language, then turned, made a strange call, and began gesticulating violently.

Eustace dropped on his knees and hid his face on Bob's tattered shirt.

"Buck up, old chap," Bob said softly; "one can only die once. Let's show these black-fellows how a Christian and an Englishman can do it. You'll get the strength right enough; I'm not a bit afraid of your funking."

There was an advancing tramp, a crashing of branches: the chief's summons was being rapidly obeyed. With a long shuddering sigh Eustace raised himself and knelt upright, gazing down on his hero.

"That's right," said Bob steadily, with his own genial smile lighting up his whole face, "keep your eyes on mine; hold on to me if you like. I shan't think you a muff, because I know you aren't one."

But the boy did not touch him; he kept his hands clasped tightly together in a supreme effort to be worthy of Bob's belief in him. He heard the newcomers halt. The native spoke and moved aside. Then—

"Both of them!" exclaimed a familiar voice. "Thank God for that."

Eustace sank back in a heap on the ground and stared up.

"Father!" cried Bob in astonishment.

It was Mr. Cochrane indeed, and with him Mr. Orban—as haggard a pair as could be met with in a long day's march.

It seemed little short of a miracle that they should appear at such a juncture, yet the explanation proved simple enough. The native chief had fetched them straight to the spot. There was no sort of nobility in the act: the man knew enough of white men's ways to expect a big reward. Bob he did not know; but when Eustace appeared on the scene he recognized the boy as belonging to the master of the neighbouring plantation, whom he had seen many times from a distance as he rode through the Bush. Mr. Orban was out with Mr. Cochrane making a frantic search of the entire neighbourhood when the chief arrived, and he would communicate his business to no one else. Not that it is likely any one else would have understood him or followed him as Mr. Orban did the moment he arrived home. The language was unintelligible to both men; but putting two and two together in their great anxiety, they made out that the chief could lead them where they would find something of interest to themselves. They had not dared to hope he knew the whereabouts of both their sons, or to speculate which they should find; they did not even know whether they were being taken to the living or the dead.

"I'm afraid you'll have a bit of bother getting me home," said Bob; "I'm as stiff as a board, and can't move hand or foot."

Then he told his story, and how Eustace had found him, and to all intents and purposes saved his life.

"And you, Eustace," said Mr. Orban—"how did you come here?"

When Eustace came to the description of the answering coo-ee on the banks of the creek, Mr. Orban interrupted him.

"That was only an echo. I knew there was one there, but I never thought of telling you."

"Thank God you didn't," said Mr. Cochrane, "and that he made the mistake. We should never have found Bob but for that."

"Father," Eustace said anxiously, "you won't forget poor old Bolter, will you? This black-fellow has got him in the camp over there."

"I had quite forgotten him," Mr. Orban said; "and we shall need him too."

Their own horses were quietly waiting a little distance back. By means of much gesticulation—pointing towards the horses, and then in the direction of the camp—the chief was made to understand what was wanted; and after a little demur he went away to fetch Bolter, but certainly most grudgingly.

The journey back to the plantation was one that none of the party could ever forget. The difficulty of conveying the helpless Bob, the suffering he so bravely tried to endure, and the terrible time it took, were indescribable.

It had of course been necessary to tell both mothers of the loss of their sons. Mrs. Cochrane and Trixy had gone immediately to the Orbans' house as more central for obtaining news.

Mr. Orban dispatched one coolie from the plantation for the doctor, who lived fifteen miles away. Another man he sent up the hill as fast as he could

go with a note preparing his wife for their arrival, and the whole white-faced party was out waiting for it as the slow procession—Bob on a stretcher in the midst—wound its way to the house.

The joy of the meeting was lost sight of in the anxiety, for Bob was by this time delirious with pain, Eustace so weak that he was nearly fainting.

For the next ten days the house was no better than a hospital—its central interest the condition of the two patients within its walls; but the first day Bob and Eustace were brought out on to the veranda —two white-faced shadows of themselves—Bob laughingly called it the convalescent home.

Up to that point everything was, as Nesta expressed it, horrid; but when Bob was about again, even if his voice was weaker, his laugh a ghost of itself, matters at once began to improve.

They were all sitting together enjoying the cool of the evening.

"What I can't understand," said Nesta meditatively, breaking a long pause, "is why the black-fellows wouldn't let Eustace answer father's coo-ee."

"It is quite simple," said Mr. Orban. "The chief had evidently given strict orders he was not to be allowed to go in his absence, and they were afraid we should come and take him away. Then the chief would have got no reward."

"What I can't understand," said Peter, who never remained long in the background, "is why the black-fellows didn't cut Bob down. It was wicked of them."

"That's what I think," said Nesta. "If they left him because they thought it funny, I wish they could be tortured."

"Nesta, Nesta, my darling!" said Mrs. Orban warningly.

"I suppose," said Miss Chase softly, "the poor things have no knowledge of mercy."

"None," said Mr. Cochrane, who was over spending the evening; "and they wouldn't understand it if you showed them any, either."

"No heathens ever do," said Mrs. Orban, "and how should they? They have no Great Example to follow as we have. It is the people who have the chance of knowing better, and still are cruel and heartless, that I would have tortured—if any one."

Mr. Orban gave a soft laugh.

"If any one, indeed, wife," he said. "You know as well as I do that you wouldn't have a spider hurt for torturing a fly."

Every one laughed with him except Mrs. Orban herself. Her tender heart was as good as a fable in the household. But she said quite gravely,—

"You have chosen a bad example for once, Jack. A spider is as ignorant as a heathen. It has only its own nature to follow."

"Got the worst of it there, Mr. Orban," said Bob in an amused tone.

"Talking of cruelty," remarked Miss Chase, "what do you do to your unfortunate cows here at night? I never heard such a dismal noise as they make."

"Cows!" exclaimed every one in astonishment.

"Yes, cows," was the answer. "If you listen you can hear them now."

There was an instant hush, followed by renewed peals of laughter.

"Those aren't cows I advise you to go and sympa-

thize with, Miss Chase," said Bob. "We call them alligators hereabouts, and at the present minute they are lying on the banks of the creek wishing a nice, tasty supper would come strolling along."

"There are alligators in the river, and yet Nesta says you boat on it and bathe in it!" exclaimed Miss Chase. "What extraordinary people you are!"

"There are alligators one side of the bar and sharks the other, and one often upsets going over it in rough weather," said Bob cheerfully.

"How horrible!" said Miss Chase.

"When Aunt Dorothy saw a tarantula strolling round the table towards her the other day she nearly had a fit," said Peter.

"Don't tell tales out of school, Peter Perky," said Aunt Dorothy. "A poor, ignorant Englishwoman isn't expected to be brave when she sees a spider as big as a penny bun, with furry legs in proportion, trying to sit on her knee."

"Then, so far, Miss Chase," said Bob, with a twinkle in his eyes, "you are not infatuated with our Bush life?"

"Have you and Eustace given me much chance to be?" she asked. "You must confess you did not give me a very good first impression by both running away and losing yourselves. We don't think that sort of thing necessary for the entertainment of our friends in England. Spiders are spiders there, too, not animated penny buns, and our cows don't want to eat us."

"Oh, of course," said Bob, "everything is perfect in England—isn't it, Nesta?"

"It has some advantages," said Mrs. Orban. "I think the absence of these excitements is amongst them."

She was looking very worn out after her recent experiences.

"Well, it's my opinion, my dear," said Mr. Orban, "that with your little family you would have excitements wherever you went. It has seemed fated to give you one shock after another."

"Only just lately, Jack," was the gentle response, for Mrs. Orban caught a contrite expression in Eustace's eyes.

"It was the coming of the witch that did it," said Bob. "As soon as she started for Queensland queer things began happening over here. She wanted to make you out of conceit with life here, so that she could more easily bewitch you over to England. That was her spell."

"And the queer thing is," said Mr. Orban quite gravely, "that it has acted. She is going to take them all away from me when she goes—wife, and sons, and daughters."

"Father," exclaimed Nesta, "what are you saying?"

"Is it a story, daddy?" demanded Peter.

"No, the solemn truth," said Mr. Orban.

"I don't understand," said Eustace blankly.

"How should you when so much nonsense is being talked?" said his mother. "But the fact is, father thinks a change of air would do us all a great deal of good; and as grannie wants us, and has sent us our passage money—"

"Oh! oh! oh!" cried Nesta, "don't go on, mummie. You make it sound just as if it were real, and it

will be so disappointing to have to *un*-fancy it again."

But Eustace said breathlessly,—

"Mother, *is* it true?"

"Quite true," was the grave answer. "We sail the end of next month. It is all settled."

"What did I say?" said Bob in mock despair. "She'll take you away, and you'll never come back any more."

"Oh, there you are quite wrong, Bob," said Mrs. Orban. "If Dorothy is a witch, Jack is a wizard, and he will magic us all back again in a year and a day at latest."

"Well, I simply can't believe it," said Nesta.

"It's the queerest thing I have ever heard," said Eustace.

But Peter set up such yells of delight he had to be repressed by the early-to-bed threat—always a useful one when Peter became rampageous, for he hated going to bed at any time.

That evening no one could talk of anything but this trip to England. No matter what subject was started, everything harked back to this wonderful plan, which Mr. Orban had been thinking out for some time, only confiding in his wife and Miss Chase as long as the matter was undecided. Bob kept up the appearance of being utterly woebegone, and Nesta and Peter seemed to have turned into machines for asking questions.

Of the party only Eustace was silent, and presently Nesta noticed the fact.

"Aren't you most awfully glad?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Eustace slowly.

"Goodness!" said Nesta in a bustling tone, "you've always said you wanted to go."

"That was when I knew we couldn't," replied Eustace, scarcely thinking what he was saying.

"What a funny thing to say," said Nesta. "But you *do* still want to go, don't you?"

"I don't know," said Eustace.

"Well, you are a queer boy," said Nesta in rather a disgusted tone. "I call that silly."

"I think I know just what Eustace means," said Miss Chase quietly. "He wants to get there without going—to be there without leaving home. It is how I felt about coming here."

"I don't understand a bit," said Nesta, with a shake of her head.

"I do," said Bob. "One knows what one is leaving, but one doesn't know what one is going to. It is a toss-up whether there is to be any happiness in the venture. But I prophesy the witch will see to it you don't want to come back in a hurry. You'll enjoy yourself no end."

"Why, Bob," exclaimed Nesta in astonishment, "how you have changed! That is all the opposite to what you have always said before."

"Is it?" said Bob lamely. "Well, I suppose I must be bewitched too. What do you expect when you will import such things into the country?"

CHAPTER XIV.

A MOONLIGHT DISTURBANCE.

"AUNT DOROTHY'S cows" became as great a family joke as "Aunt Dorothy's lunatics;" indeed, scarcely a day passed that the household was not amused by some quaint mistake of hers. Every one chaffed her, especially Bob; and as the two patients rapidly recovered, the house-party was a merry one. In spite of the thought of parting with his family so soon, Mr. Orban was in much better spirits; the cane had been safely cut, the good crop had been spoiled neither by fire nor the rainy season coming too soon, and the crushing was well in progress.

"Oh dear," exclaimed Nesta one morning at breakfast, "I am so sorry you are getting well, Bob."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," said Bob with deliberate politeness. "One is always so glad of one's friends' good wishes."

Every one laughed except Nesta.

"Well, you know what I mean," she said. "Of course the minute you are well you will go, and the house will be duller than ever without you."

"Very prettily put for the rest of us, dear," said Miss Chase. "I am sure we feel much complimented."

"I don't know what you mean," said Nesta in bewilderment. "I didn't mean to compliment any one."

"You achieved it, however," said Bob. "You called them a pack of dull dogs not fit to live with. Of course they feel charmed with your opinion."

"Oh, I didn't," said Nesta.

"You inferred it," said Miss Chase. "However, we forgive you. Fortunately we shan't be able to die of dullness entirely, because there will be so much to be done preparing for the voyage."

"I vote Bob stays with us till we go," said Eustace. —"He would be jolly useful, wouldn't he, mother?"

"Really, Eustace," remonstrated Mrs. Orban with a laugh, "I am ashamed of you. Is that the way you treat your friends?"

Eustace reddened and looked uncomfortable as the laugh went round. Glancing deprecatingly at Bob, he found that he was not even smiling. It did seem a cheeky way of putting it.

"I beg your pardon," he began, when Bob interrupted quickly.

"No, don't. I was only thinking what a jolly thing you had said. What are friends for if they are not to be made use of?"

"That is rather a dangerous theory to propound," said Mr. Orban. "Supposing your friends take advantage of it—what then?"

"A real friend never would take advantage of it," said Bob with certainty; "that is just how you can test him. The chap who will take nothing from you, but only give, is a patronizing bounder; the fellow who will give nothing to you, but only take, is a mean beggar; the man who will give and take equally is your chum. Hold on to him when you've got him."

"An excellent definition, Bob," said Mr. Orban, with a genial smile. "We shall certainly never let you go."

There was a second's pause, then Bob said quietly,—

"Thank you, sir. I guess I shall hold on to all of you too."

It took Nesta to the end of breakfast to unravel the meaning of the sudden gravity that had fallen over the party, and then she was not sure of herself.

"Why, you silly," said Eustace, to whom she appealed in private, "don't you see?—Father as good as said it—Bob is the right kind of chap to have for a chum. And so he is. I guess I know that better than any one."

"I don't see why you should," exclaimed Nesta jealously. "We all know Bob; he isn't anybody's in particular. He said himself he meant to hold on to *all* of us, not just one person only."

Her tone was "snubby" in the extreme, but Eustace was utterly silent for a moment.

Nesta did not know it; he would never know it himself; but there was a big difference in Eustace nowadays. He had not gone through great experiences untouched; some things in life leave an indelible impression.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, "I'm glad he said that."

Nesta was so astonished at getting no response to her assertion that she exclaimed,—

"Said what?"

"Why, that he will hold on to us," Eustace said.

"Well," Nesta remarked, again with a touch of superiority, "of course we all knew that without his telling us."

Eustace eyed her with a quietness that somehow irritated the girl. She could not understand him at all, and nothing annoyed Nesta so much as to discover she was not understanding something that was perfectly clear to somebody else.

"Didn't you know it?" she asked sharply.

"Of course," said Eustace dreamily.

"Then what do you mean?" Nesta demanded.

"I was thinking about going to England," was the seemingly irrelevant reply.

"What has that got to do with it?" said Nesta.

"Everything," Eustace said. "If we had been going to stay here for ever and ever I shouldn't have thought so much about it. As it is, it means a lot that good old Bob won't forget us."

"Why, how stupid you are to-day," Nesta exclaimed. "Did you think he might in 'a year and a day,' as mother calls it?"

"How do you know it will be only 'a year and a day'?" Eustace said almost roughly. "How do you know we shall ever come back?"

"Eustace!" cried Nesta, staring at him as if she thought he must have suddenly gone mad.

"Well?" he said briefly.

"But this is home—and father is staying here," the girl argued. "We couldn't stay in England for ever."

"I don't know," said Eustace. "I've got an awfully queer feeling about going ever since it was settled. And it seems to me Bob has it too."

"Oh, stuff!" said Nesta bracingly. "Bob only says it to tease Aunt Dorothy."

"He said just the same things before Aunt Dor-

othy came," was the response. "That is nothing to go by."

"Well, neither are your queer feelings," said Nesta. "I haven't any. I don't see why we should stay in England. What is to make us?"

"Suppose we were left there to go to school?" suggested Eustace, watching her narrowly.

Nesta stared at him blankly. It was evidently a new idea to her.

"Do you think we might be?" she said; then her expression broke, and she smiled. "It would be just splendid, wouldn't it?" she added.

Eustace was silent a moment.

"You wouldn't mind leaving Trixy?" he said.

"Well, I should come back again," Nesta answered, feeling somehow annoyingly rebuked, "and I should have such loads and shoals of things to tell her and show her. All about the girls and my clothes, you know—"

"Oh," exclaimed Eustace in a tone of disgust, "that is all girls care about—talking, and showing off."

"It isn't," Nesta said quickly. "I should like the learning."

"Well, I shouldn't," admitted Eustace frankly; "I hate learning. It is only games that make school worth going to, and that isn't enough to make up for other things."

"What other things?" asked Nesta curiously.

"Oh, never mind," said Eustace impatiently; "I don't want to talk about it."

But Nesta did exceedingly; she wanted to talk of nothing else; till at last Eustace went off in desperation down the hill to watch the sugar crushing,

saying something about, "It isn't as if people could come back to Queensland for the holidays," and "Everything would be different when they were all grown up."

"I don't know what is the matter with him," Nesta said to herself in perplexity. "I do believe he doesn't want to go at all. And I'm sure he is wrong about our staying there. No such luck!"

Bob did stay on after he was quite well and strong, and he entirely justified Eustace's prophecy. He proved most useful; nothing apparently could have been done without him. "But for Bob," said Mrs. Orban, "I don't believe we should ever be ready in time."

It was he who saw to the soundness of the travelling boxes, to the making of a packing case; he who had advice and assistance to give to every one, and who was certainly the life and spirit of the party in the evenings when other people seemed tired or out of heart. Eustace was not at all in good form. Mrs. Orban was at times inclined to have grave misgivings as to the wisdom of the step, and of course felt leaving her husband. Mr. Orban himself, though he insisted on the trip, was naturally a little sad at the prospect. Even Aunt Dorothy—the witch—had her moments of sadness that her visit should be drawing so rapidly to a close. Only to Nesta and Peter did the time seem to drag and hang heavy, as if it would never pass.

"You'll have to come back with them, Miss Chase," said Bob a few evenings before the great departure.

"I wish I could," she said; "but I am quite sure mother and father won't see the force of that."

"Well, I think you ought to—don't you, Mrs. Orban?" Bob said. "Miss Chase hasn't had half enough Colonial experiences yet."

"The few you have given me have been sufficiently vivid to count for a good many though," said the girl merrily. "I don't know that I really want any more."

"One doesn't always want what is good for one," said Bob. "Besides, there is another way of looking at it—isn't there, Nesta? It has been proved you are a witch. You ought to be brought back by main force to be punished for whisking these good people all off to England with you."

"So she ought," said Nesta gleefully. "She must be burned at the stake. We'll make you come."

"We will, Aunt Dorothy," cried Peter, ready for the fray; "and if you won't, we'll get Bob to come and fetch you."

"Will you really, Peter Perky?" retorted Aunt Dorothy. "I should like to see you. Why, Mr. Cochrane wouldn't set his nose inside England for all the witches in the world."

"Well, no, perhaps not for all the witches in the world," said Bob thoughtfully; "they might prove rather too much for me. But what a lot of nonsense we talk, to be sure."

The nonsense had the effect of sending Miss Chase to bed quite unusually meditative, and, do what she would, she could not get off to sleep for wondering whether she ever would come back to Queensland again. It seemed of all things most impossible, and yet, as she argued, who would ever have thought of her coming at all this time only a year ago?

She had become accustomed to most of the night sounds that had at first puzzled and sometimes frightened her, and by day there was something about the life that delighted her—it was so free, such an open air existence! "They seem to me to sweep all their worries with the dust over the edge of the veranda," she thought. "I think England will feel a little stiff and shut in after it."

It was a bright moonlight night. A deluded cock at about midnight awoke and fancied it must be day. He crowed so loudly over his discovery that he roused a great enemy of his, who replied in husky irritation and no measured terms that he was a fool. But the mischief was done—some half-dozen young cockerels took the matter up as a joke, and crowed persistently in spite of all remonstrance from the rest of the poultry.

Miss Chase put her head under the bedclothes and tried to shut out the sound, but in vain. Besides, it was far too hot to sleep with a buried nose and mouth. Resolutely keeping her eyes tight shut, she set her mind upon nothing but sleep. She must have lain like that for quite ten minutes, when suddenly her eyes unclosed in spite of her, just as if they were worked by a spring, and she was as wide awake as ever. At least so she fancied the first instant, but the next she thought she must be dreaming. There had been no sound—nothing but Nesta's regular breathing—and yet at the other side of the room, standing with his back towards her, was the figure of a man.

Her first impulse was to call out, her second prompted caution, and she pinched herself hard to

make sure whether she was awake or not. There was no doubt about it—she was not asleep; the pinch hurt considerably, and the man was still there. He was apparently examining the things on her dressing-table minutely, and she guessed he was looking for valuables. Knowing the story of the dark visitor who had frightened every one so before her arrival, Miss Chase had followed the general rule and left nothing of any value lying about, though no one thought a thief would venture into the house now that it was so full. Here he certainly was, however, and the question was, "What ought she to do?"

Miss Chase lay absolutely still, her heart beating to suffocation, her mind working rapidly. There was no saying that this was the same man. He might be of a much more desperate and vicious character. Had she been alone she might have risked screaming for help, but there was also Nesta to be considered; she dared not expose the child to a knock on the head to silence her.

The man took a slow tour of the room, peering into nooks and corners in a stealthy, silent way that was most eerie to watch. Miss Chase bore it until at last he went towards Nesta's bed with that cat-like, sinister gait. The horror of his approaching the helpless sleeper at the other side of the room was too much for the girl's strained nerves. His back was towards her; he fancied her asleep. Slipping her hand under her pillow she drew out a small revolver, then sat up softly and took careful aim. There was a report, a howl of fear and pain, and the man turned to gaze wildly round the room. Nesta sprang from her bed with a terrified yell and rushed

to her aunt, who sat, still pointing her weapon at the intruder, with a look of grim determination in her eyes.

With a heavy groan the man started towards the window, limping pitifully. He disappeared out on to the veranda, leaving a trail of blood across the uncarpeted floor.

"Now go for your father," said Miss Chase, giving the trembling girl a push. "Tell him what has happened."

Nesta needed no second bidding, but she had not reached the door before it opened and Mr. Orban dashed in.

"Through there," said Miss Chase, pointing towards the window. "Follow the blood track. He can't go fast. I winged him."

CHAPTER XV.

WHO IS IN THE BOAT?

"REALLY, Miss Chase," said Bob next morning, "I'm glad you didn't burst all your accomplishments on us at once. We might have been rather frightened of you."

Miss Chase smiled. She was looking very pale, and unlike her usual bright self.

"I hope I didn't do an awfully wrong thing," she said nervously; "but I had only two definite ideas—one was to save Nesta, the other not to let the man get away."

"You were perfectly right, Dorothy," Mr. Orban said; "there would never have been any end to the worry until he was caught. He may thank his stars I didn't find him out. I should not have been so merciful."

"So that is why you aimed at his ankle, Aunt Dorothy?" said Eustace. "It was clever of you to think of laming him."

"She says she did," said Bob, the tease.—"But are you quite sure, Miss Chase, that you really didn't aim at his head? For most women his ankle would have been wonderfully near the mark."

"I shall treat the aspersion with silent contempt," laughed Miss Chase.

"Where did you learn to shoot like that, Dorothy?" asked Mrs. Orban.

"Oh, I've patronized every shooting gallery that has come to the village for the last eighteen years, I should think," was the answer. "But, do you know, I feel most awfully remorseful about that poor fellow. He will be lame for a long time."

In the kitchen sat Manuel, the stable-boy, his leg bandaged and resting on a chair; for the midnight visitor on both occasions had been no other. He confessed to the first performance quite readily, and declared that this second had been at the instigation of Sinkum Fung, who promised always to get the reward for stolen goods, and give him half. Mr. Orban was not sorry to get hold of some definite reason for turning Sinkum Fung out of the place. He had long suspected him to be a cheat, and he wanted an Englishman in the store. But Manuel, when he was well, was to be allowed to retrieve his character, as he protested vehemently he would.

"You needn't worry about Manuel," said Bob. "We shall all be coming to you to shoot us, if you'll just bind us up as beautifully afterwards. Did you learn that in the shooting galleries too, in case you put the showman's eye out?"

Miss Chase really did treat this speech with silent scorn, and changed the subject.

The clearing up of the black-fellow mystery was a great relief to every one's mind.

"Though it comes rather late in the day, just when we are going away," said Mrs. Orban.

"Do you know, I don't feel a bit as if we were

really going," Miss Chase declared the very evening before their departure.

All the same, when the next day came, they started in the plantation schooner for Cooktown, accompanied by Bob and Mr. Orban, who were going to see them off.

The children found many excitements on the way; and when finally they were hoisted on board the big boat by means of a crane and basket, Peter's joy knew no bounds.

Nesta found it was certainly not very nice saying the last "good-byes," and she wished Eustace had not said anything to her about the possibility of not coming back to Queensland for years.

But when they were fairly off, and out of sight of waving hands and the two strong, kind faces that had been his ideals from his babyhood, even Eustace began to cheer up considerably. He had been very much like a bear with a sore head, rather to his mother's and Miss Chase's astonishment; for Eustace could generally be counted on as sensible and fairly serene in temper. To get short answers from him, to find him unreasonably uninterested in things, and to see him really snappy with Nesta and Peter, was something new and extraordinary.

"Well, good-bye, old chap," said Bob. "Let England see the best side of you, and be a credit to us."

The words rang in the boy's ears long after, and he pulled himself together with a sudden consciousness that he had not been much of a credit to any one for some days. He hoped Bob hadn't noticed it, for never, never could he explain to him that it was just the thought of leaving him that made going away so

hard. If only he had not been possessed by the horrible feeling that he would never come back again, or at least not for years and years, it would have been different.

It was impossible not to become interested in the boat before very long—it was so huge, such a real house afloat, and so unusual. Peter revelled in going downstairs to bed. Becky wanted to play in what she called her "bunky-bye" instead of going to sleep. Nesta eyed some other families of children speculatively, wondering how much good they would prove as friends on the voyage. But Eustace only wanted to talk to the officers, especially the captain, of whom he determined to ask hundreds of questions about the machinery, how he knew his way, and the exact time the boat would reach every port, just to be able to check it off, and see how far he was right in his estimates.

The first day was a lovely one—a less likely one to be productive of adventures could scarcely be imagined.

"Calm as a duck-pond, isn't it, sir?" said one of the seamen to Eustace, who stood staring out to sea. "Yet I've seen some storms here too. It's a nasty bit of coast, with some ugly reefs about."

"Are there many wrecks here?" asked Eustace with interest.

"A goodish few," said the seaman; "but one doesn't look for them this kind of weather."

"No, of course not," said Eustace, with a great show of certainty, for he did not want the man to imagine he was scaring him.

Peter had been fairly irrepressible all day. He

was always a fidget—made on springs, his father said—and the excitement carried him away entirely. He talked to every one indiscriminately, especially if they happened to be in uniform, and had no shyness in asking questions. He had a dozen friends in a very few hours. Afraid lest he should weary people, Mrs. Orban tried to keep him with her, and towards evening she said,—

"You might play with poor Becky a little, Peter. She will have to go to bed very soon, and I think it has been a duller day for her than for any one else."

Which was probably true, as Becky was too tiny to have the sustained interest in things the others had.

So Peter began a game of romps with Becky, which at first consisted of careering round and round and in and out between their mother's and aunt's chairs, Peter making the reiterated assertion, "I'll catch you, I'll catch you," Becky retorting with delighted chuckles, "Oo can't, oo can't!"

Mrs. Orban was just congratulating herself that Becky would be delightfully sleepy after the exercise, when the child made a sudden dive away from the chairs in her excitement, Peter behind her. The next minute she was rolling head over heels down the companion-ladder, down which it had evidently been her intention to go right side up, for a joke.

The yells that proceeded from the passage below assured every one that Becky was not killed; but when she was picked up it was discovered that one poor little wrist was terribly sprained. She must have fallen with it doubled under her. To put her to bed in such pain was out of the question; her mother's arms was the only place in which she could

find any rest. So Mrs. Orban remained on deck in the cool with Miss Chase near her. The children's bedtime was quite forgotten; in fact, after the doctor had examined Becky and reported on her injuries, Nesta, Eustace, and Peter had disappeared—probably out of range of orders to go to bed. Their mother, when she gave them a thought, supposed them to be all together, and in her anxiety over Becky never realized how late it was getting.

It was quite dark. All the other children had disappeared. Most of the grown-ups who had begun the voyage together, and were friendly by now, were in the music-room below having a concert. The ship was utterly still but for the throb of the engines and the "swish" of the water as the bows cut through it. They were running at full speed, without a pitch or a roll, the sea as clear as glass, when all of a sudden there was an awful crash, and the boat shuddered from bow to stern.

In an instant the peaceful scene was changed to one of wildest confusion. There were cries of terror, hurried questions, rapid orders, the crew dashing hither and thither, and a stream of horror-stricken people began swarming up from below. It was awful, the intense darkness of the night adding to the confusion immeasurably.

"We've struck on a rock," Mrs. Orban heard some one say. "There isn't a minute to lose."

"Man the boats!" called a strident voice, and there was a running of ropes over pulleys, a creaking and a splashing not far away.

"Here you are, ma'am," a seaman said, taking her by the arm.

"Oh, the children!" said Mrs. Orban, holding back.

"We're here, mother," said Nesta's voice at her elbow.

"We'll see to them, ma'am," said the seaman; "you and the little one first."

He was almost rough in his kindness; and Mrs. Orban found herself swinging down into the boat below before she had time to make any protestations.

One after another, through pitch darkness into the only chance for safety, people were sent down. It was impossible to know who came—nothing could be seen or heard. The seamen above could not stop to pick and choose, but whoever they could lay hands on went.

Then came a hoarse cry—the boat was becoming overcrowded, the crew pushed off, and away they went with a bound at every stroke of the oars. To Mrs. Orban it was a hideous nightmare of awful anxiety. She could not tell whether all her children and her sister were with her or not. Her one ray of hope was that as they had apparently been all standing close together, the others must have been put in after her. But people had rushed so the moment they knew the boats were lowered, there was an awful possibility the children had been swept aside. They were certainly not near her, for she called their names and Dorothy's again and again, and there was no answer.

The men had not been rowing for seven minutes when there was a sudden awful sound behind them, and the boat plunged and rocked as if she were a living thing gone mad with terror.

"Oh, what was that?" Mrs. Orban cried, and the question ran from mouth to mouth.

"The ship," answered a solemn voice with a break in it; "she's gone under, poor thing. Must have been ripped from bows to stern."

The silence that followed was dreadful. How many boats had got away? Who was left on board? There was not one in the boat who had not a thought of agonized pity for the poor souls left behind.

It was so unexpected; every one was so unprepared. Who could suppose that with a sea as calm as a mill-pond a great vessel could strike on a rock and sink in less than seven minutes?

Afterwards, when the matter came to be investigated, it was discovered that the *Cora* had run on to a coral reef unmarked in the charts. Coral reefs form with extraordinary rapidity, and are infinitely dangerous, because they are so sharp as to cut like razors. The loss of the *Cora* was no one's fault; but that fact was of but little comfort to those whose friends went down in her.

The boat pulled steadily on awhile, then paused, for no one could be certain where she lay as regarded the shore.

"Easy, mates," said the man in command. "We must hang about till there's a gleam of light to give us our bearings, or we shall go down like that poor thing over there."

In the hush that fell it was possible to hear each other speak. People began to question who was in the boat with them.

"Eustace, Nesta, Peter, are you there?" cried Mrs. Orban.

"Yes, mother; yes, mother," she heard, and her heart bounded with thankfulness.

"And you, Dorothy?" she forced herself to say.

But to this there was no answer.

"Children," Mrs. Orban said, "isn't your aunt there?"

"I don't know," Eustace said; "she wouldn't come before us."

There could be no doubt that Miss Chase was not there.

The first streak of daylight fell upon a boatload of haggard men and women, afraid of, yet longing for, the day. It was discovered that they had come within half a mile of shore, and the crew pulled with a will till they beached the boat. One after another in the shadowy gloom the stiff, cramped figures landed. There were meetings, but no open rejoicings, because of those others left behind.

Eustace and Nesta clung to their mother, half sobbing.

"And Peter," she said—"where is Peter?"

"Peter?" said the other two blankly.

"I thought you said he was there?" said Mrs. Orban

"We — we answered for ourselves," faltered Eustace. "I didn't notice he didn't speak."

The boat was empty now. Groups of shivering, unstrung people stood about, utterly incapable of thinking what to do next. But Peter was not there —nor was Dorothy.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT THE TIDE BROUGHT IN.

THE stranded party was much in need of a leader till one of the crew volunteered the information that some miles higher up the coast there was a bêche-de-mer station where they would probably get some means of communicating with the rest of the world, and at least find food, of which every one was much in need. Bêche-de-mer fisheries are a feature of the coast, the bêche-de-mer being a huge sea-slug, thought to be a great delicacy.

This particular station was owned by some half-caste Portuguese, and worked by a mixture of aborigines and Malays, a most unpromising and ruffianly-looking set. However, they received the unhappy boatload quite civilly, promised that a messenger should be dispatched across country to the nearest civilized centre, and provided a good meal of salt junk, sweet potatoes, rice, and tea. It did not matter to the exhausted men and women that they had to eat off tin plates, drink out of tin pannikins, and that the food was more roughly prepared and served than any they had ever tasted before.

They camped under some trees for the meal; and

many sad eyes looked towards the great calm sea, where not a trace of last night's tragedy was to be seen. In the distance there was the sail of an outgoing vessel—one of the bêche-de-mer boats off on a several months' trip. Besides that, there was just one tiny speck, not so far out as the sail, but much smaller.

"It's a boat," said the captain of the station, a swarthy Portuguese. He had been watching the speck for some time through a telescope. "So far as I can make out it is something of the same build as yours."

There was instant excitement. Could it be another of the ship's boats?

It seemed an eternity before the boat came close enough to discover that she did indeed belong to the ill-fated *Cora*. The crowd on the beach was speechless before she pulled in to shore and her worn-out occupants were disembarked.

Amongst the anxious watchers were Mrs. Orban, with the fretful, feverish Becky in her arms, and Nesta and Eustace. But though they pressed forward and saw every man, woman, and child that landed, there was no comfort for them. Miss Chase and Peter had not come. There was but one interpretation to put on this—they had never left the ship.

"Any more boats likely to come?" asked a woman whose husband was missing.

"No, lady," said a sailor, shaking his head pitifully. "They only got one more out, and she was overcrowded and swamped. There was no time for anything."

There is no describing the misery of the day that followed—the terrible blankness for many, the haunting recollection that all had of the nightmare experience.

The men at the station were as kind as they could be in their rough way. The sailors who had manned the boats set to work to arrange some comforts for the women and children, improvising hammocks for them to lie in, as sleeping in the grass was dangerous on account of snakes and other disagreeables.

Poor little Becky spent a day of weeping, for her wrist was very painful. She needed all Mrs. Orban's attention, which was perhaps fortunate for the poor lady—it gave her less time for brooding over her terrible loss. Nesta cried herself nearly silly, and then fell asleep in a hammock that a kindly old sailor prevailed on her to try.

Eustace was too restless to settle down. He spent his time hovering about his white-faced, desolate-looking mother. The moment inaction began to tell on him and make him feel sleepy he went away for a while, and paced up and down by the water's edge to rouse himself. However useless his presence, he could not bear to leave his mother lonely and unwatched; it seemed heartless to forget her and her sorrows in sleep when she could take no rest.

"She might want something, or perhaps she would like to speak," he argued, "or she may cry presently; and there mustn't be no one to comfort her."

But Mrs. Orban asked for nothing for herself, only water now and then to bandage Becky's wrist. She took the food when it was given her, but ate very

little. Whatever she was thinking about, she did not speak of her trouble, but inquired after Nesta, and whether she and Eustace had had plenty of food and felt no symptoms of chill or fever.

"I wish father or Bob would come quick," thought the boy helplessly; "we're no good. She is only thinking about taking care of us all the time; and I don't know how to look after her. It would have been better if I had been drowned instead of Aunt Dorothy; she would have known what to do."

He was doing one of his violent pacings up and down, and every turn backwards or forwards he had to change his course, for the tide was running in fast. The sea fascinated him; he could not help watching it, especially now when all sorts of bits of wreckage were beginning to float in—lengths of rope, a life-belt or two, and things belonging to the *Cora's* deck. The men from the station were watching with the sailors and hauling things in to land.

"Any bodies that went down will be carried by the under current into the next bay," Eustace heard the bêche-de-mer owner explaining to the *Cora's* crew.

"Well, my name's not Swaine," said an old sailor with a telescope, "if that isn't one coming now."

There was a thrill of excitement, an immediate demand for the telescope, as every one pressed forward.

"It will be a broken spar," said the bêche-de-mer captain. "I've been here fifteen years and there's never such a thing happened yet."

"I'm going out in one of the boats, mate," said the old sailor resolutely. "Who is coming with me?"

There were many volunteers at once, and the boat was launched.

Eustace remained as if frozen to the spot. He could just see the log-like thing lying upon the water, gently tossed by the tiny waves that were slowly, slowly bearing it to shore. It certainly looked no bigger than a broken spar, and very much that shape as, the boat drawn up alongside, two sailors leant over and lifted it in.

It was all Eustace could do to make himself stay until the boat's return, and he covered his face as the burden was gently lifted ashore.

"It's all right, youngster," said a kindly voice at his elbow, one of the older sailors; "he is alive—only unconscious. It's a miracle; but there, miracles do happen, say what you will."

The news made all the difference to Eustace, and he pressed round with the rest.

"Here," said one of the *Cora's* crew, catching sight of him suddenly, "make way for this laddie—it's his own brother."

In utter bewilderment Eustace felt himself forced to the centre of the crowd, and there, with a man kneeling beside him trying restoratives, lay Peter, with a life-belt round him, his face ashen, and his fair hair all sodden—but he was living. They said he was alive, but certainly he did not look it.

Eustace turned, fought his way madly through the press, and dashed up the beach straight to the trees where his mother sat bending over Becky.

"Hush," she said warningly; "I am just getting her off to sleep."

The quiet voice pulled the boy up just in time,

before he had blurted out his news in all its crudeness.

"Mother," he said instead, "let me hold Becky—I can really. Peter will want you."

Mrs. Orban neither started nor changed colour; she just stared at Eustace curiously, and said inquiringly,—

"Peter?"

"Yes, mummie, Peter," Eustace said in a shaking voice. "He is unconscious, but he will want you when he opens his eyes."

He held out his arms for Becky; and Mrs. Orban rose and went as if she were dreaming, leaving him standing there with the baby.

It was a very long time before Peter knew that he wanted his mother. Terror and the exposure in the water for so many hours had done their work, and even when the little fellow recovered consciousness he was too ill to realize anything at all.

Every one was very kind to the Orbans. The poor lady who had lost her husband took entire charge of Becky; other fellow-passengers offered to help with Peter, who needed nursing night and day. The survivors from the wreck clung together, and found some comfort in helping each other. The people of the station were very attentive and good; but the relief party from Cooktown was hailed with thankfulness, for there were of course many discomforts and unpleasantnesses. The blacks had a disagreeable habit of prowling about in the night and peeping at their guests as they tried to sleep in the impromptu hammocks. The food was coarse and monotonous; the men rough, and uncouth in their ways.

When Eustace saw his father he felt a great burden lifted from his shoulders; his powerlessness to help his mother did not matter any more; no one could comfort her like his father. Then there was Bob; he would help the whole family to keep up in his usual splendid way!

Fortunately Mr. Orban and Bob had not yet left Cooktown when the news of the disaster arrived. They hastened to the bêche-de-mer station on getting Mrs. Orban's message, without the least knowledge whom they would find of their own party; and after the first explanations were over, no one could speak of the cloud shadowing the joy of meeting. To Eustace's infinite surprise, Bob, to whom he had looked for so much, failed him utterly—he could not rouse himself, let alone other people.

The survivors of the wrecked *Cora* were carried by steamer to Cooktown, and Mr. Orban took his family to the best hotel, for no plans could be made till Peter was better.

Alone with Eustace, Nesta gave vent to her feelings very often.

"Eustace," she said, "wasn't it queer Aunt Dorothy saying the very day before we left she didn't feel a bit as if we were going to England? Do you remember?"

Eustace replied with a kind of grunt. He had not words for every emotion as Nesta had.

"And it seems so horrid," she proceeded chokily, "to know nothing about what happened to her or even how it happened. If only some one could tell us!"

"What's the good of talking when no one can?"

said Eustace gruffly. "I can't think why you do. You only make yourself cry."

The first person to speak of Miss Chase without tears was Peter. He was lying in their private sitting-room, and suddenly he said,—

"I say, where's Aunt Dorothy?"

He had asked before, but in his weakness the subject had easily been changed.

"She is not here, dear," said Mrs. Orban.

"That's funny," said Peter, in his old talkative way; "she distinctly said she was coming."

Bob got up from a deep chair and stood, with his back to the room, looking out of the window.

"Did she, Peter?" said Mr. Orban quickly. "When?"

"Why, on the boat," said Peter; "when she put the life-belt round me."

"Oh, she put the life-belt round you, did she?" said Mr. Orban. "And what did she say?"

Every one leant forward eagerly. It was the first time Peter had shown any inclination to talk, and no one had guessed he could possibly know anything of Miss Chase.

"She said," was his clear reply, 'That's right, Peter Perky. Now mind you float; don't struggle, but lie on your back.'—Bob," he broke off, "lucky you taught me to float, wasn't it?"

"Yes, yes," said Bob; "never mind about that. Go on about Dorothy."

Eustace stared at his back in wonder. For the first time in his life he heard Bob irritable.

"She said," Peter went on obediently, "'Don't be frightened; I am coming too.'"

"Well?" prompted Mr. Orban.

"Then she took me up, and we jumped overboard. I don't know what happened next."

"Try to think," said Bob in a hard voice.

"I can't," said Peter; "everything was noise and blackness. Ask Aunt Dorothy; she'll tell you."

There was a solemn hush—so solemn that Peter stared round in amazement at the grave faces. Bob turned and walked heavily out of the room. Nesta buried her head in her hands.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Peter sharply.

He had to be told then, and he wept as if his heart would break; but he could remember nothing after the jump into the sea. It appeared that he was all by himself at the other side of the ship, very unhappy because he thought it was all his fault Becky had been hurt. Then came the crash, and he was terrified. He was wondering what had happened, when Aunt Dorothy came running towards him, crying, "Peter, Peter, where are you?" And then followed the putting on of the life-belt. It was so easy to picture her talking to him all the time, to reassure him, in that quick, cheery way of hers.

"O Eustace," Nesta said afterwards, "wasn't she splendid? I guess Bob must be sorry he teased her so now."

"Pooh," said Eustace, "that was only his fun. Aunt Dorothy knew it."

But Nesta could not stand teasing herself, and was sure no one liked or understood it.

"I don't know," she said; "she used to get red sometimes. And I'm not so sure Bob did mean it

all in chaff. He has a real down-on-anything-English. I mean to ask him some day what he thinks of English girls' pluck now."

"If you do," said Eustace, with sudden ferocity, "I'll never speak to you again."

Nesta stared at him in dismay.

"Why ever?" she asked dully. "Wouldn't he like to talk about her? Didn't he like her, really?"

"Like her!" Eustace exclaimed. "Oh, you little stupid! Didn't you see him when Peter was telling us about her? Didn't you hear Bob then? Can't you understand?"

Nesta stared in blank silence for some seconds.

"Oh, I say!" she gasped, "I didn't know! I never thought of that! I—I wasn't looking at him."

"I wasn't looking at anything else," said Eustace; "but I guess he wouldn't like to think any one knew, so we must hold our tongues. But I couldn't have you going and asking him blundering questions."

"I won't," said Nesta, with unwonted meekness. "When did you guess?"

"Only then," said Eustace; "but now I can remember lots of things. Bob always liked talking to her better than any one. Bob didn't want her to go. Bob asked her to come back."

He broke off short and slammed out of the room. It was as bad to think of as it had been to bear his mother's helpless loneliness; for as he could do nothing then for her, he could do nothing now for Bob.

It was a matter of conjecture between the twins what was likely to happen next. They really expected that, when Peter was well enough for the

rough journey, they would all go back to the plantation, and settle down again for ever and ever.

A telegram had been dispatched with the bad news to Mr. and Mrs. Chase. The reply was an urgent appeal for them all to go on as first intended.

Leaving everything on the plantation in Bob's care, Mr. Orban decided to take his wife and family home himself. It would not be the joyful home-coming they had anticipated; and Mrs. Orban would need him, he knew.

"We must do what we can for the poor dear old people," Mr. Orban explained to Bob. "Dorothy was their baby. It is a terrible loss to them."

"To every one," said Bob briefly.

CHAPTER XVII.

MOTHER'S HOME.

IN the length and breadth of England there could hardly have been found a more lovely little property than Maze Court. There were larger houses in the neighbourhood, with more extensive grounds; but as Brenda Dixon stood on the terrace and gazed down towards the good old English park she felt a real glow of pride and pleasure in belonging to such a place. It was the sort of feeling she had whenever she brought a new school friend home for the holidays.

Beside her stood Herbert—long, lean, and very gentlemanly in his flannels. It was one of his sister's great joys that he always looked a gentleman in everything.

She was a striking-looking girl herself, with features a little too pronounced for accurate beauty; but this very fault had the effect of making her handsome. She had little personal vanity—mere features she cared nothing for—but pride of birth and of the old home were deeply rooted in her.

"I think Nesta and Eustace ought to be surprised," she was thinking; "they won't have seen anything like it. It will seem so big and splendid to them after the kind of life they have had."

Brenda was never very sure how to picture the Orbans' existence in Queensland. There was a touch of pettiness about it—a feeling of poverty and "hugger-muggerness," if one may coin such a word. The thought of her uncle going daily to his work in his shirt-sleeves; of her aunt helping in the house-work; her cousins brought up just anyhow, without a governess or any schooling, shocked her sensibilities and gave vivid local colouring to her ideas about the Orbans. Those were the sort of details she would never have referred to at school.

And now she and Herbert were waiting for the arrival of the travellers, whom their grandparents had driven to the station to meet.

"Oh dear," she said with a sigh, "how I wish I didn't wish they weren't coming! If they are fearfully eccentric, all the neighbourhood will be talking about it in a week, and thinking it funny we have such relations. One can't explain to every one that they really are ladies and gentlemen gone to seed, can one?"

"Not exactly," said Herbert. "I jolly well hope you won't try; it would be beastly bad form. Of course if one had a fellow staying in the house one might have to explain."

"I simply couldn't ask any one," Brenda said. "It would be all over the school next term my uncle was a common labourer, and my cousins savages—or something!"

"Nice sort of friends you seem to have," said Herbert. "Is that a girl's usual way?"

"Well," said Brenda, with some asperity, "boys aren't any better, if you should have to explain matters to a chum of yours."

"That's different," Herbert said; "one doesn't want to give a bad impression. What I hope is that Eustace isn't an awful little muff. I expect he is, though—can't help being when he has never been amongst any boys. It will have to be knocked out of him."

"Aunt Dorothy said he was a very nice little chap," Brenda quoted, and then her voice broke, so that she could not go on.

It was the beginning of the summer holidays, and both she and Herbert were feeling the death of Miss Chase most dreadfully. It had been bad enough when she left before the end of the winter holidays. Again at Easter the dullness of the house without her had known no bounds. But now, when they knew she would never be with them again, her very name choked them; they could scarcely speak of her, because her absence proved at every turn all that her presence had meant to them and to every one. How they had hated Australia when she left! How much more they hated it now and everything to do with it—even the coming of the cousins! Australia seemed the root of all evil—the cause of Aunt Dorothy's death.

"Aunt Dorothy was a brick," said Herbert jerkily; "she saw niceness in people whatever they were like. But girls don't really know when fellows are muffs."

"I don't know about Eustace," said Brenda, "but Nesta looked fearfully long-legged and queerly dressed in those snapshots Aunt Dorothy did."

"I hope she won't want to kiss me when she says 'How-do-you-do,'" said Herbert; "that is all I mind about her. But if that kid Eustace fancies he is

going to hang around with me perpetually, he will find himself mistaken. I couldn't be bothered."

"But we shall have to look after them properly, and treat them just as we would any other visitors," Brenda said anxiously; "we can't sort of leave them to themselves, you know."

"Of course," said Herbert rather testily; "what do you take me for? I hope I shan't behave like a cad in my own house! But that is just the nuisance of it: they'll be visitors without being visitors, and they'll be here such an awful time. Thank goodness, there will be term time to look forward to!"

"If only Aunt Dorothy—" began Brenda.

"Oh, shut up," said Herbert roughly. Then added more gently, "I think the carriage has just turned in at the park gate. Listen."

All through the voyage Eustace and Nesta had been picturing this very day—this very hour. The parting with Bob and the farewell to home necessarily dropped into the background of their thoughts; the foreground was full of expectations. Now that they could realize they were on their way to the fulfilment of what had originally been the dream of their lives, all the old feeling of longing possessed them. At last they would see England! At last they would know what real "home" was like—their mother's old home, to which she had given them such a sense of belonging by all the tales they knew so well!

That England was not what they expected was natural enough. Mrs. Orban had never pretended to describe England, but simply her own particular corner of it on the borders of Wales. Leaving the

ship was all bustle and rush, but during the long train journey there was plenty of time to look about, and English scenery struck all three children as most peculiar.

"Why, it's just like a map!" exclaimed Peter, as he knelt up at a window. "I'm certain if I was up in a balloon it would look like a map with all those funny little hedges."

"I think it would look like a patchwork quilt," said Nesta. "Father, why do people mark their land out into such funny little bits?"

So spoke the children, used to wide tracts of land without boundaries, hundreds of acres without fence or railing—such country as England boasts of in miniature only on its wildest moors.

The twins were speechless and almost suffocated with excitement when the train at last ran into a little country station, and Mr. Orban said briskly,—

"Here we are!"

"There they are!" exclaimed Mrs. Orban, with a little sob in her voice.

"Who? who?" yelled Peter, dashing from the other side of the carriage.

"Grannie and grandpapa," answered Mrs. Orban.

"Oh, where?" said Peter, as the train stopped. The children knew Bob Cochrane's grandfather and grandmother—a very comfortable, homely old pair of the typical "grannyish" type, rather bent, rather deaf, and always referred to as "the old people." Trixy invariably rushed at them when they came, and called them "the dear old pets."

There was no one the least "grannyish" or cosy-

looking on the platform. Only a very erect, elderly gentleman with silver hair, and a lady who might have been the Queen, so dignified, so stately was she. They were the sort of people the twins had read of but never seen.

A hush fell over the children as they scrambled out of the carriage after their mother, and waited till their grandparents were ready to notice them. Then they each received a kiss and a handshake which made them instantly feel that nothing would be more impossible than to rush upon this grandfather and grandmother and call them either "dear," "old," or "pets."

All through the drive in the old-fashioned waggonette the sense of unfamiliarity grew as the children stared—the twins furtively, Peter openly—at Mr. and Mrs. Chase.

It seemed to the twins such a queer arrival, and so different to anything they had expected, that they could scarcely believe it was real. "Why," thought Nesta, "the Cochranes make much more fuss over us when we go to see them for a day." But Eustace's thoughts were too confused for description.

The conversation was funny and jerky, and just the sort of things strangers say to each other. Mrs. Chase hoped they were not very tired, and that they had had a nice journey. And Mr. Chase said it was a hotter summer than there had been for the last ten years, and so on.

"Oh dear," thought Eustace wearily, as they drove into the park, "how different it would have been if Aunt Dorothy had been here!"

But still there was the place to be interested in,

and when his mother said, "This is home, Eustace," he roused himself, and looked about him.

Even a Colonial child, accustomed to vastness, could not help admiring such a place as this, full of fine old trees spreading over the short cropped turf. The park was hilly, and swept away to right and left towards thick woods.

Then, as the carriage reached a bend and came into full view of the great house, standing gray, massive, and strong in the evening light, the children's hearts did thrill with pride. This was something better than their own slenderly-built, iron-roofed house in Queensland.

"There are Herbert and Brenda waiting for us," said Mrs. Chase, "but I don't see nurse. I have got you a charming woman as nurse for Becky and Peter. You can't be tied down to looking after the children, you know. I want you to be free to enjoy yourself."

Peter started as if he had been shot.

"Me have a nurse!" he exclaimed. "I don't want looking after."

Eustace and Nesta glanced quickly at their mother. Becky with a nurse! This was something extraordinary. And mother "not to be tied down to looking after the children." When had it ever been a tie to mother to look after them? Such a strange idea had never occurred to any of them before, and all in their own separate ways resented it.

Mr. Chase looked at Peter in surprise.

"When I was your age," he said gravely, "I had what was given me, no matter what I wanted."

"We've got to think about your mother's wants

first," said Mrs. Chase, "and she deserves a holiday after all these years."

"Quite right," said Mr. Orban; "she needs one badly. I am thankful she should have it."

There was no time to say more, for just then the carriage pulled up under the fine old portico.

Again there was that sense of stiffness and awkwardness as the Dixons came forward to greet their cousins; there was no triumphant entry and welcome to the old home. Mrs. Chase drew Mrs. Orban in; Mr. Chase took Mr. Orban; Becky, sleepy and perfectly placid, was whisked away by a grave-faced, elderly woman who said, "Come along, sir," to Peter, and disappeared through a red baize door, whither the little fellow had to follow.

"We're to have meals with the little ones in the schoolroom," said Brenda, to whom this new rule was not pleasing. "Come and get ready."

Now that she was a schoolgirl, and only home for holidays, she had all her meals with her grandparents except late dinner; but the arrival of the Orbans put an end to this. It was felt that the perpetual presence of such a crowd of youngsters at meals would never do. To Brenda and Herbert the change was typical of the whole difference these unwelcome guests would make in their lives.

"Couldn't we just have one look round first?" said Nesta, staring about her in proprietary admiration at the walls of the great hall, where hung the horns and weapons, the family portraits and trophies, of bygone Chases. "I would like just to see the secret chamber. Let me see—it must be through that door and up some steps—"

She stopped inquiringly.

"No, it isn't," Brenda said, with a look of surprise; "you go just the other way. But there isn't time now; Herbert and I will show you everything to-morrow."

Nesta looked taken aback.

"I don't expect I shall need much showing," she said, with a little air of importance.

Her cousins both stared at her.

"You certainly will," said Herbert decidedly; "it isn't at all an easy house to find one's way about in, I can tell you. You would go blundering into all sorts of places you oughtn't to."

"Places we oughtn't to?" repeated Eustace in bewilderment.

"Yes, the servants' quarters, you know," said Herbert, as if he were talking to a child of eight.

"Aren't you allowed to go into the servants' quarters?" asked Nesta wonderingly.

"Oh, we're *allowed*, of course," said Herbert; "but one doesn't go. I dare say things were rather mixed out with you, though."

"What do you mean?" asked Eustace abruptly.

"Oh, you had to rough it rather, hadn't you?" said the elder boy. "I had a sort of idea you all had meals together."

"With the servants?" questioned Eustace.

"Yes," said Herbert, with perfect gravity.

Eustace flushed deeply.

"Oh, of course," he said, "coolies and every one had meals together. We all ate out of a trough."

"Eustace!" exclaimed Nesta in dismay, wondering what had happened to him all of a sudden.

The cousins stared at him blankly, hardly realizing for a moment what he had said.

"Well, it is just as sensible as saying we had meals with the servants," said the boy, in such a tone of disgust that Herbert was left in no doubt as to his meaning.

"You needn't be cheeky, youngster," he said; "you can't expect me to know your habits, can you? I do know people in the Colonies can't pick and choose their company, and have to make friends with cowboys and bushrangers, if they want any society."

"What!" shouted the twins. "Who told you that?"

"Oh, I've read it somewhere," Herbert said carelessly. "It said 'there are no class distinctions in Colonial life. Men and women meet as equals.'"

"Then it is rot," said Eustace briefly. "I don't know how you could believe it. Our friends were all gentlemen and ladies. Australians are as particular as you are whom they have for friends."

"My good kid," said Herbert aggravatingly, "you don't know everything, and you haven't been everywhere in the Colonies, you know. But it really doesn't matter, does it? We were only saying one doesn't do that sort of thing in England. Come and wash for tea."

The small passage of arms left neither boy much pleased with the other. Herbert foresaw that Eustace was likely to be uppish and cheeky, and would want keeping in his place. Eustace thought Herbert gave himself airs, and more than justified the criticism he had long accorded his portrait. He did not look it in real life, for Herbert was manly and unaffected in

appearance. "All the same," thought Eustace, "he's a silly ass."

Not so much what was said as the tone in which it was said left an unpleasant impression upon both new-comers. They had planned together that the very first thing they would do when they arrived would be to rush all over the house and see everything. Nesta declared she would not be able to sleep a wink for excitement if she did not. It had never occurred to them there would be barriers of any sort. Nothing in their own free lives hitherto had suggested baize doors through which they "ought not to go."

Somehow those baize doors were suggestive of everything irksome and disappointing; they were of a piece with all the other changes which the twins began to feel from the outset.

Before the evening was over Eustace and Nesta had grasped something of what coming to England really meant: it seemed a case of shut doors all round—there was no feeling of home about it. Rather, Eustace reflected bitterly, it was like prison, and all the freedom of existence was gone. It appeared that here the grown-ups lived in one part of the house, the children in another. There were certain times at which the drawing-room or dining-room might be visited, otherwise the grown-ups must not be interrupted. Becky and Peter were provided with a sort of jailer, whose business it also was to give all the young people their meals, and their mother seemed utterly ungetatable.

Life on the veranda always together, always in the thick of everything that was going on, with

no shut doors anywhere, had ill-prepared them for this.

Then there were Herbert and Brenda.

Strange to say, Eustace and Nesta had not thought of them as anything but some one to play with—other children staying in the same house as themselves. That they were really the son and daughter of the place had never occurred to the newcomers. That they would play the part of host and hostess, and treat the Australians entirely as visitors, was a shock to Eustace and Nesta. Not thus did they expect to be received into their mother's old home, which she had always taught them to look on as their own.

Before the end of the day, however, they had realized this one thing very vividly—Herbert and Brenda had lived here all their lives, but the Orbans were outsiders, their very coldly-welcomed guests.

"It is delightful," said Mrs. Orban, as she dressed for dinner, "to think of the children getting to know each other at last. I do hope they will be happy."

"All the happier for being thrown so much together," said Mr. Orban. "We couldn't help it, of course, but ours have been thrown far too much with older people. This sort of thing is much healthier for them."

"It is all hateful," wept Nesta to her pillow that night. "Herbert is a bully, and Brenda is a stuck-up pig—and I wish we had never come."

And Eustace did not close his eyes for hours.

"Bob was quite right," he thought. "English people are horrid; they freeze you right up the minute you

see them. But oh! I believe it would be better if only there was a veranda. They do live in such a queer way, all divided up like this."

Back into his mind there came the refrain of one of Bob's songs—the one he had sung to Aunt Dorothy the day of her arrival. He went to sleep with the tune ringing in his head,—

"Certain for darkies dis is not de place,
Where eben de sun am ashamed to show his face."

CHAPTER XVIII.

PETER MAKES A DIVERSION.

BUT for Peter and Becky schoolroom breakfast next morning would have been a very dismal and quiet affair, for the elder cousins had little to say to each other.

Herbert and Brenda cudgelled their brains for topics of conversation to keep things going, and they thought they had never had any one so difficult to talk to in their lives. The Australian cousins seemed downright stupid and uninteresting. Just for one thing Brenda was thankful—they were not outwardly so unpresentable as she had anticipated.

Nesta, still smarting under a sense of disappointment, had made a sullen resolution not to appear to want to know anything at all. In spite of Herbert's assurances she was quite sure she did know a great deal about the house and grounds. Brenda and he should see later that she did.

Eustace held his tongue because he had literally nothing to say that was at all agreeable. They had begun the day by going into their mother's room to say good-morning.

"O children," she had exclaimed when she saw them, "isn't it all lovely?"

"It is, mummie," began Nesta in such a miserable voice that Eustace knew she was going on with a "but."

There were tears of joy in Mrs. Orban's eyes. To her at least everything was perfect. Eustace was standing close to Nesta, and he gave her a surreptitious pinch that just nipped the complaint right off before the "but" could come out.

"It is ripping, mother," he said. "I never thought it would be half so splendid."

"I knew you would love it," said Mrs. Orban confidently; "and it is so jolly for you having Brenda and Herbert. If only—"

She stopped, and her face had grown suddenly sad. There was always that "if only." The twins knew she was thinking of Aunt Dorothy.

"Look here, Nesta," said Eustace in a low voice when they left the room, "don't you go grumbling to mother and spoiling everything for her, or you will be a selfish little pig."

"But when things are horrid—" began Nesta.

"It won't make them better to worry her," said Eustace shortly.

"But how could you say it is splendid?" Nesta said with a choke.

"Well, isn't it?" said Eustace. "I was thinking about the house and the park. It was not the people mother told us about before we came, but the place."

"Grannie and grandfather are not a bit like what I thought," Nesta remarked in an aggrieved tone.

"They are very beautiful," said Eustace in an awed voice. "They somehow match the house and everything in it, and it seems to make them much too grand for us."

"I know Herbert and Brenda think *themselves* much too grand for us," said Nesta crossly. "Fancy their thinking such silly things about the way we lived, just as if we weren't ladies and gentlemen! Why, last night, when Brenda told me we were to go in to dessert, she said, 'You know people always dress for dinner in England,' in that snubby way of hers; and I laughed right out, and said, 'Goodness, father and mother dress for dinner every night at home.'"

"I think they fancy we are sort of savages," said Eustace. "It makes me feel inclined to be one, and give them a shock."

Dessert the evening before had proved a very dull affair, and the time in the drawing-room afterwards, playing halma with the cousins, was worse. They all four hailed bedtime with thankfulness. Never before had Eustace and Nesta felt so shut in—so pinned down and overawed. Never, thought Herbert and Brenda, had they met such queer, unresponsive children.

At breakfast they found Becky entirely at home with her keeper, who had a grave kind of way of smiling down upon the small person and Peter.

"You had better come and see the house now," said Herbert immediately after breakfast. "I'm going off rabbit-shooting later."

"Not you, Master Peter," said nurse as Peter shot off his chair; "your hands and face are all sticky, and must be washed before you can do anything."

The others did not offer to wait for him, so the crestfallen Peter was left behind, wondering why people wanted so much washing in England.

Herbert and Brenda took the twins through

the house as they might have conducted a party of sight-seers. Eustace accepted everything in silence, but Nesta did not. For instance,—

"This is the picture gallery," said Herbert, "and all these people are our ancestors."

"Yes, I know," said Nesta.

"This is the room Queen Elizabeth is supposed to have slept in once—"

"Oh yes, mother told us all about that," broke in Nesta; "and the bishop always sleeps here when he comes to hold confirmations in the neighbourhood."

The party passed on in silence. This sort of thing was damping to the showman.

"You see that group of swords over there," began Herbert, trying again as they reached the hall.

"The middle one was the one Sir Herbert Chase killed the man with at Worcester and just saved the Prince's life, and you are called after him," said Nesta, anticipating the tale.

Herbert mentally voted his cousin a bumptious brat of a girl. Eustace began to wish Nesta would stop showing off so palpably—it seemed small and silly.

They passed an interesting looking door, and Nesta at once said,—

"Oh, we're missing one. That must be the library, because of the double doors and the carved owl over them. Do let's go in."

"Can't," said Herbert, glad to show some superior knowledge at least of the ways of the house if not of its contents. "Grandfather is always there all morning, and no one ever disturbs him."

"That portrait over there is our great-great-grandfather," said Brenda in the dining-room.

"No," said Nesta, shaking her head; "one more great. Great-great-great-grandfather, Eustace Chase."

Brenda flushed with annoyance.

"Well, I really think I ought to know," she said, "considering I've lived here all my life.—It is only great-great, isn't it, Herbert?"

Herbert looked worried.

"No, it is three greats," he said grudgingly.

"I knew for certain," said Nesta.

Brenda allowed Herbert to take up the *rôle* of conductor awhile. Nesta was getting on her nerves. But presently, in the smaller drawing-room, they all came to a standstill in front of the picture of a beautiful little brown-haired girl.

"That was Aunt Dorothy when she was little," said Brenda very low.

Nesta knew this also, but she said nothing for once.

Herbert led the way out of the house in silence.

Out of doors Nesta displayed just the same irritating certainty of things. The sun-dial she noticed from a distance.

"That has '*Sic transit vita*' on it," she said hurriedly, lest she should be forestalled. "Oh, and that tank is the little well place mother fell into when she was Becky's age."

But she received a check later.

"The good old swing and the giant's stride," she said with enthusiasm.

"No—new ones," said Herbert with satisfaction; "the old ones were rotten, and these were put up for us."

Nesta put her next venture in the form of a question.

"Is that the summer-house mother and the aunts played dolls in?"

"No," said Brenda, "that fell down. This is mine. Grandfather gave it me one birthday."

Everything had the impress of the Dixon children —everything seemed to be "mine" or "Herbert's." It was a depressing morning for the Australians, though Nesta did flatter herself she must have clearly demonstrated her knowledge of Maze Court and pretty well surprised her cousins. It annoyed her that Eustace had been so dumb, and seemingly unable to say more than "yes" or "no" to things. It showed a lack of spirit about him she would not have expected after his sally about the troughs they fed out of with the coolies, and his assertion only that morning that he felt inclined to become a savage and astonish the Dixons.

"I expect he's afraid of Herbert," she thought; "but I'm not."

Eustace was not either, but he was just a little ashamed of his outburst of the evening before. Looked at by light of day it seemed unnecessary waste of temper. He thought Bob would not have thought much of him for it; it was rather babyish.

Oh, how homesick he felt! What wouldn't he have given to have seen Bob walking down one of those wide paths towards them. Good old Bob! Poor old Bob! What would Brenda and Herbert think if they only knew all that story? It was enough to keep the boy silent to have such thoughts as these starting up in his memory again and again; enough to

make him ashamed of any pettiness. But the thought of Bob alone had power to do that; he was so big, so splendid, such a man!

Coming out of the gardens into the park they met nurse and Becky.

"Oh," said nurse, looking flushed and flustered, "isn't Master Peter with you? I can't find him anywhere. I just left him while I went to dress Miss Becky, and never thought to tell him to wait for me."

"Peter isn't used to staying in one room," said Eustace quietly. "I guess he is looking for us."

"But it is very naughty of him," said the English nurse in vexation.

"Peter wouldn't mean to be naughty," said Eustace in the same quiet tone; "but you see we are so used to be all together all day long on the veranda."

"That's all very fine," said nurse, "but it doesn't find him for me. I just hope he won't come to some harm or do some mischief before I get him."

"Could he come to any harm?" asked Nesta anxiously.

"Well, there are ponds he could fall into, and places he could climb and tumble out of. And as to mischief—there are things everywhere he could handle and break," said the woman. "I never saw such an inquisitive little fidget as he is. He is all the time asking questions and wanting to touch everything he sees."

There immediately began a hunt for Peter. Here, there, and everywhere they went in pairs, but nowhere could he be found. They called him,

but there was no answer; they asked every one they met, but no one had seen him.

Mrs. Chase was out driving with Mr. and Mrs. Orban; there seemed no one to appeal to.

The search reminded Eustace of the story of the loss of Aunt Dorothy, and he went and looked in the turret and the secret chamber through the cupboard door; but Peter was not there.

Nurse was becoming frantic, for of course she felt responsible for her charge. Eustace and Nesta began to be worried. Herbert was cross because this prevented his rabbit-shooting; he could not very well go away leaving such an anxious household as this. Brenda felt sorry both for him and for the twins, but said nothing.

The search-party met in the hall, just as that other search-party had kept doing so many, many years ago, but there was never any news.

"Can there be a secret chamber somewhere else?" said Nesta.

Brenda shook her head.

"I don't think so," she said.

"I wish father would come home," Eustace thought miserably. "He might think of something."

"We had better ask grandfather what is to be done," said Herbert at last in desperation.

It was a last resource. Nothing but the most serious business was allowed to interrupt Mr. Chase's morning, but this had become sufficiently pressing to warrant the intrusion.

In through the folding-doors trooped the anxious-looking searchers, Herbert first.

"Well, I never!" he exclaimed, for there stood

Peter as calm as you please, his hands behind him, staring at his grandfather across the broad writing-table.

"Can you ride bareback?" he was inquiring in his shrill treble. "Bob can; but he said I mustn't try because it is slimy."

"Slimy?" repeated Mr. Chase, with brows bent in perplexity.

"Yes," said Peter, "sliddery, you know. A horse is a very slippery beast for short legs, Bob says."

He went on quite regardless of the intruders, who stood watching in awed silence, because if Mr. Chase did not order Peter out of the room, it was no one's business to do so.

"And who may this Bob be you keep quoting?" asked Mr. Chase—"a bushranger?"

"No, he's our friend," replied Peter. "He is just Bob, you know, who comes to see us. Once Eustace and he were lost in the scrub. And Bob says Eustace is a—"

"Peter!" exclaimed Eustace.

"I wasn't going to say anything bad," said Peter. "I was only going to tell grandfather how you—"

"Grandfather doesn't want to know," said Eustace, looking red and uncomfortable.

Mr. Chase turned his bright blue eyes on Eustace; they were blue eyes, very like Peter's.

"Perhaps grandfather does," he said firmly.—"Go on, Peter."

"I can tell you better," said Eustace hurriedly. "It is only Bob was lost, and I got lost looking for him; and we thought some natives were going to kill us,

but the chief wanted a reward, so he fetched father and Mr. Cochrane to take us home."

Mr. Chase listened quietly. It was a tame little story, without much point to it told like that, but he had watched Eustace's sensitive face narrowly, and he asked no further questions.

"I seem to be honoured with much company this morning," he said instead, looking round the group on the threshold. "What are you all doing, if I may ask?"

"Looking for Peter, grandfather," explained Herbert uncomfortably, certain that Mr. Chase was annoyed. "We've been hunting for him for the last hour."

"I've had the pleasure of his society for about that space of time," said Mr. Chase. "I have had to give an account of how many black men and how many Chinkees I employ about the place; whether I wouldn't rather live in Queensland if I had a hundred pounds of my own; and how long I sleep in the winter. I don't know why he wants to know that, I am sure."

"Oh," said Peter quickly, "because Bob says people in England sleep like dormice in the winter, and have to be wakened by big knockers on the door."

"I see," said Mr. Chase gravely, "your friend Bob seems to know more about England than I do—probably because I sleep right through the winter. Now, if you have asked everything you can think of, perhaps you will take your tribe away with you, Peter Perky."

The twins jumped violently at the name, and stared at the speaker in astonishment. No one but Aunt Dorothy had ever called Peter that.

"I should like to know if you roll up when you sleep, or lie flat," Peter said, not feeling at all anxious to go. "Aunt Dorothy always called me a dormouse at night—"

"You can go, Peter," interrupted Mr. Chase hurriedly; "I am busy."

Herbert took the child by the shoulder and marched him out of the room.

"Peter, how could you?" exclaimed Brenda, when they reached the schoolroom.

"How could I what?" demanded Peter, looking puzzled.

"Why, speak about poor Aunt Dorothy before grandfather," said the girl. "Nobody does; he can't bear it."

"Can't he?" said Peter mildly; "but he asked me a lot of questions about her himself. And I told him how she called me Peter Perky, and all about her saving my life in the wreck."

"What!" interrupted the cousins in a breath; "she did what?"

"Didn't you know?" said Eustace.

"We don't know anything except what that awful cable said," Brenda said in a low, shaky voice.

Between them the twins and Peter told the whole story. Herbert sat at the table, his head buried in his hands. Brenda listened with her back to the speakers, looking away out of the window.

There was a long pause.

"Then," said Herbert huskily at last, "if it hadn't been for Peter, Aunt Dorothy would never have been drowned."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAST STRAW.

THE words fell like a thunderbolt into the midst of the group. Eustace moved involuntarily to Peter's side and put a protecting arm round him, as if he had been struck. The little fellow himself looked utterly bewildered.

"How can you say such a wicked, wicked thing?" exclaimed Nesta in astonishment; "just as if it was poor Peter's fault."

"Well, wasn't it?" demanded Herbert bitterly, his face still hidden. "If Peter hadn't been at the other side of the ship—if Aunt Dorothy had not had to go away and find him—but you all got into the boat and went away and left her!"

"Don't!" exclaimed Eustace sharply. "You don't know what a wreck in the dark is like, or you wouldn't talk like that. There isn't time to know anything. We didn't know Aunt Dorothy was left."

"I should have known," said Herbert, with all the confidence of ignorance, "and I would have stayed and drowned with her."

He broke off short, rose abruptly, and stumbled in a queer, blind way from the room. He could not bear that any one should witness his grief.

Brenda turned a tear-stained face from the

window and stared at the trio now standing close together.

"He isn't thinking what he is saying," she said chokily; "but we are so frightfully unhappy about Aunt Dorothy—and this seems to make it worse—I mean that she might so easily have been saved. Of course you didn't really know her, so you can't understand. But ever since our mother died Aunt Dorothy—"

But here Brenda's voice broke utterly, and she, too, hurriedly left the room.

"Well," exclaimed Nesta, "I think it just horrid of them. I shall never, never like them now."

Eustace turned a pair of surprised brown eyes upon her.

"Won't you?" he said wonderingly. "Why, I like them better than I did, ever so much."

"What!" Nesta said, "you like them better for saying a horrid thing like that? To make out it was Peter's fault! Poor little Peter, who was so nearly drowned himself!"

"It wasn't that part I was thinking of," said Eustace, "but just how they loved her. Somehow I never thought of it before. Same way we love mother, I guess; and I don't know what I should have thought if mother had been drowned saving some one else's brother."

Nesta stared at him blankly. There were things about Eustace lately that she did not understand. She knew nothing of Bob's maxim about looking at two sides of a question, so she could see no reason for the strange things he sometimes said, and he was far too reticent to have explained.

"Well, all I can say is, I wish we had never come," said Nesta for about the twentieth time. "Nothing is nice, and it will be more hateful than ever now they feel like that about Peter. We had better tell mother and father, and ask them to take us away."

"What's that I hear?" said an astonished voice at the door.

The children all jumped and turned round, for there stood their grandfather. They were speechless with dismay; they could not have pictured a worse thing happening.

"What did you say, Nesta?" asked Mr. Chase again, in a tone that made the twins' hearts stand still.

He looked angry, surprised, and very commanding. But how were they to repeat what they had been saying? Nesta remembered they had been warned not to speak of Aunt Dorothy before him. Eustace felt it would be mean and ungenerous to get Herbert into trouble behind his back. But Peter had no such scruples. Dropping his head into his arms on the table, he broke out sobbingly,—

"Herbert says it was me drowned Aunt Dorothy."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Chase incredulously; "he surely never said such a thing? Explain this to me, Eustace, at once."

His tone was so severe that the boy literally shook. He had never seen any one really angry in his life before.

"He didn't say quite that," Eustace said with difficulty; "he only meant it was because of Peter."

"Kindly give me his exact words," Mr. Chase said, still in that awful voice.

Eustace closed his thin lips tight, with an expression that meant wild horses would not drag it from him. His grandfather scanned his face closely, then turned to Nesta.

"As Eustace seems to have lost his tongue, I must ask you to tell me what Herbert said in exactly his own words."

Nesta glanced furtively at her twin, but she was angry with Herbert and saw no reason why he should be protected.

"He said," she replied, "if Peter had not been at the other side of the boat, and Aunt Dorothy had not had to go and find him, she wouldn't have been drowned. He said we all went away and left her—"

"How dared he!" Mr. Chase thundered. "I am ashamed that a grandson of mine should have behaved in such a way. Whatever he thought, he had no right to say such a thing."

"He — he was most fearfully unhappy," said Eustace nervously.

"That is no excuse for his making other people so too," Mr. Chase replied. "Eustace, go and tell Herbert to come here at once."

It was a disagreeable errand, and the boy whitened as he turned to obey. Mr. Chase's prompt, old-fashioned methods were something new to him. Fault-finding at home had always been reserved for quiet talks alone with father or mother; they were never made big public affairs like this.

Eustace found Herbert in his own room pacing up and down the floor with his hands in his pockets. He had got control of himself by then, and he turned on his visitor with a look of impatient surprise.

"What do you want?" he said.

"I'm awfully sorry," Eustace began lamely, "but you've got to come to grandfather. We were talking about what you said, and he came in without our hearing. He made us tell him the rest, and I'm afraid he—he is going to lecture you."

"You—you told tales?" said Herbert scathingly. Without waiting for a reply he marched past his cousin to the schoolroom. Eustace could not bear to follow and see him humiliated. It would be just a little better for him with one person less present, he thought.

"Grandfather was fearfully severe," said Nesta later, when she had found Eustace prowling about like a bear with a sore head alone in the grounds. "So you see it was a beastly thing to say. He said Herbert was no gentleman if he didn't apologize."

"And did he?" asked Eustace shortly.

"He said he was sorry if he hadn't behaved like a gentleman, and it shouldn't occur again. Most awfully stiffly he spoke, just like a grown-up, and then grandfather said he might go."

"And that before you and Peter!" exclaimed Eustace in tones of disgust. "I'm jolly glad I wasn't there; it would have made me feel a low-down blackfellow if Herbert had apologized to me. I don't think Peter behaved like a white man, and I mean to tell him so, too, when I get him to myself."

"Grandfather seems to have taken a fancy to Peter," said Nesta. "He had come up to fetch him when he overheard me. He said Peter had already broken his morning, and he had better have the rest of it and take him a walk. Brenda says she never

knew him do such a queer thing before; he is not generally supposed to be fond of children, and that is why we have no meals downstairs."

Every one was surprised at Mr. Chase's sudden partiality for Peter, but the reason was a very simple one. From Peter he could hear more about Miss Chase than from any one else. No tears choked little Peter's voice when he described Aunt Dorothy's first day, or told the story of her quaint mistakes. He quite forgot the sad part of her visit, and lost himself in his stories. The old man led him on from point to point, and learned all that he could of his beloved daughter's stay in Queensland without Peter's guessing what he was really doing.

The little fellow was radiantly happy. They walked about the grounds together, and presently Mr. Chase said Peter must learn to ride—he would teach him himself. Accordingly, out went Peter on a little pony with Mr. Chase at its head, and the riding lessons began.

"It doesn't look as if grandfather thought it was Peter's fault," said Nesta to Eustace; "he seems fonder of him than any one."

If Peter was content, not so the twins. The scene with Herbert had produced a very uncomfortable state of affairs. He no longer played the part of host, but kept out of his cousins' way as much as possible, going out on long expeditions by himself, and never joining the schoolroom party when he could help it.

Nesta thought him detestable, but Eustace had a feeling that Herbert had been very hardly treated in his own home. He could not forget how genuine

had been the big fellow's unhappiness over the awful loss of his beloved aunt, and Eustace could have forgiven much more than the outburst against Peter in the face of such real distress. But he had no chance of showing his sympathy; Herbert would have resented any exhibition of sentiment most haughtily. Eustace only felt exceedingly awkward whenever he was with him, and wished with all his heart he could awake to find all these unfortunate English experiences nothing but a bad dream.

Between her loyalty to her brother and the sense of courtesy that bade her look after her cousins, Brenda had a very difficult course to steer; being proud and reserved by nature, she only succeeded in being exceedingly stiff in her attempts at civility to the twins.

"It gets horrider and horrider," Nesta said after two or three days of it.

But the secret treaty not to trouble their mother and disturb her enjoyment held good through everything.

"It will come to an end in a year," Eustace said bravely; "and we couldn't bear it after we got back if we had to remember we had spoiled mother's trip. She has been longing for it such a long time."

Because they saw so comparatively little of their mother, it was always possible to keep their grievances from her; and she was so certain her children must be sharing the pleasures with herself, it never occurred to her to suspect that anything was wrong.

"It wouldn't be us spoiling her trip," Nesta objected; "it would be Brenda's and Herbert's faults, because they are so disagreeable."

"It would be because of us," Eustace held out, "and I'll never forgive you if you go whining about it to mother or any one. We can bear it for a year, or we aren't worth anything."

But even Eustace's courage received a check one evening when he and Nesta were called into their mother's room for a talk before she dressed for dinner. Her face was aglow with some pleasant thoughts, yet she was very serious—a strange mixture that immediately struck the twins as portending something very big and out of the way.

"Chicks," she said, drawing them down on each side of her on the sofa, "I have got something very special to say to you to-day—something I scarcely know whether to be most glad or sorry about, for it cuts two ways. It fulfils the ambition of my life for you, and at the same time it costs me my twins."

There was a breathless, expectant silence.

"I think for you the happiness will outweigh the pain," she went on gently, "because it means new interests, new life, everything you must most desire. And, dears, we have to thank grandfather for it; he insists on sending you both to school."

"To school!" shouted the twins simultaneously.

"Yes," Mrs. Orban said, "actually to school. He wishes you to have exactly the same advantages as Brenda and Herbert. Won't it be splendid for you?"

There was dead silence. Mrs. Orban glanced from one grave face to the other. Nesta's was crumpled and bewildered; Eustace's very white, and his expression sadly strained.

"Why, darlings," Mrs. Orban said, "you have always wanted to go to school. Hasn't it nearly

made me cry again and again to hear you craving for a thing we could not give you? And now your wishes have been granted as it were by magic, I do believe you are not glad after all."

There was such a ring of disappointment in their mother's voice that even Nesta was roused.

"We've wanted it awfully," stammered Eustace awkwardly, "but we—we didn't think of it coming quite so soon."

"Oh, is that it, you dears?" Mrs. Orban said in a tone between laughter and tears. "I was afraid something much worse was the matter—that you had changed your minds, for instance, or that you didn't like England after all; but of course that couldn't be."

She spoke with such perfect certainty that the twins were dumb; they could think of nothing to say.

"There really is rather a blessing in disguise in your going to school at once, though I can't bear parting with you," Mrs. Orban went on after a little silence. "I shall be quite close to you while you are still feeling strange in your new life; I shall hear all about everything from you by word of mouth in the holidays; and I shall go away next year feeling content that you are settled down, and likely to be nothing but a tiny bit mammy-sick at my departure."

Eustace rubbed his head against her shoulder.

"More than a tiny bit, mummie," he said.

"We needn't think about that yet, though," said Mrs. Orban cheerily; "it is a long way off, with plenty of lovely times between. I only wish father had not to go so soon."

"How soon?" queried Nesta sharply.

"He says he must be off the end of this month," was the answer; "that is why the school-going has had to be settled so hurriedly. But he has a lovely dream for the future: before you have left school he hopes to be able to come to England for good and settle down here."

"How long would it be before that, mother?" Eustace asked.

"Oh, four or five years, perhaps," said Mrs. Orban.

"But shan't we ever go back to Australia again?" Nesta said with a gulp.

"You won't want to, my dear, once you get used to England," said her mother gently. "Of course it would not be possible for you to come home all that distance for holidays, but you will soon learn not to mind if you have our home-coming to look forward to. Now I will tell you a little about the schools you are going to."

It was easy to listen with apparent interest to this, to put in a question here and there and glean all the information possible. But when the pair left the room Nesta suddenly gripped her brother's arm.

"Eustace," she said huskily, "I—I can't bear it."

"You just must," said the boy sturdily. "I guess there is nothing else to do."

The words were so hopeless that Nesta's tears began to fall thick and fast, and he drew her almost roughly down the passage out of earshot. They reached the picture gallery, and sat down in a deep window-seat overlooking the front drive and the beautiful park beyond. Here Nesta buried her face in her hands and fairly sobbed. Eustace bore it for some seconds, then,—

"Look here, old girl," he said, "don't be silly. You'll have a red nose for dessert."

"I don't care," Nesta blurted out.

"But you must care," Eustace said a little impatiently, "because then mother will see you have been crying and find out we're miserable."

"I don't care," sobbed Nesta again. "I can't hide it any more, and I don't want to. I shall ask father to let me go home with him. Nothing will make me stay here with these—these horrid people."

"Nesta!" Eustace exclaimed.

"Well, I can't help it; they are horrid, even if they are our people. I never thought of them being anything like this. And I can't—I won't stay with them."

"Rot," said Eustace angrily. "You know we can't help staying if every one says we are to."

"Then," said Nesta, drawing herself up with a sudden attempt at dignity, "I shall run away."

"Silly!" Eustace exclaimed irritably.

"You'll see it isn't silly when I do it," said Nesta gloomily. "I shall tell father and mother everything about how horrid it is for us, and then if they won't take us home—"

She stopped dramatically, leaving Eustace to fill in the threat for himself.

"You really will tell mother, and spoil everything for her?" he asked in a low, angry tone.

Nesta nodded defiantly.

"Then you are a little beast," said Eustace furiously—"a cruel little beast."

Nesta rose with her nose very high in the air.

"Thank you," she said; "you are most awfully

polite. I shall take care not to tell you anything ever again."

Eustace knelt up on the seat, and leant out of the open window into the soft evening air. He was too angry to speak coherently, too bewildered to know what to say. With a toss of her head Nesta turned and left him.

He heard her determined footsteps die away down the gallery, and knew he was meant to understand he had her sincerest disapproval. A few months earlier, he would presently have thrown off his sense of irritation and laughed at Nesta's little airs of importance. To-night he had no heart for the funny side of it. He was vexed to have lost his influence over Nesta, and worried at the thought of what an upset her headstrong course would make. Let alone his mother's disappointment, there would be the grandparents' indignation to reckon with, and Herbert's and Brenda's scornful surprise. They would indeed think them wild Bush children, and be justified in their present attitude of cool unfriendliness.

Yet to be left in these uncongenial surroundings for a space of time that seemed like an eternity to a lad of fourteen; to be forced to remain with these unsympathetic companions for the next four or five years, with no one to turn to and without a home, meant desolation as complete for Eustace as for Nesta.

Away in the park some rooks cawed fussily over the choice of their night quarters. Nearer, a blackbird piped an evening song. They sounded restless and plaintive to the lonely boy, and he hid his face in his hands, covering eyes and ears that he might see

nothing, hear nothing. Then into his mind there surged a recollection of the dear old free days at home, never to come again. Right in the midst of every memory stood Bob—his friend Bob whom he would never see again. That was the thought that broke his spirit, and had he been a girl he would have cried; but Eustace shed no tears—this sorrow was beyond them, for a boy.

Something hard suddenly struck him with a sharp tap on the shoulder, and, as he started back in surprise, fell with a clatter back on the gravel below.

Then Eustace gasped, rubbed his eyes, and stared, feeling as if he must suddenly have taken leave of his senses; for there in the drive, his hand poised ready to throw another stone if the first had missed its mark, stood Bob Cochrane.

CHAPTER XX.

BREAKING THE NEWS.

BEFORE the boy had recovered sufficiently to make a sound, Bob said in a low, distinct voice,—

"Don't make a row, old man. It's all right; I'm not a ghost. I want you to get hold of your father for me without a soul knowing that you have seen me. Tell him I am waiting by the first drive gate, and want to speak to him at once. Mind no one else hears what you say. Seeing you is better luck than I expected."

He turned and was walking rapidly away across the centre grass plot before Eustace quite realized this was no dream, but a solid truth, and that something was required of him.

"Bob, Bob, how have you come here?" he called in a trembling voice.

But the figure only half turned with a warning gesture, and passed resolutely on.

For a moment the boy was rooted to the spot. Was this thing real? Could Bob possibly be there? The idea was incredible; yet his eyes, his ears, both bore witness to the fact. But how had it happened? what did it mean?

With thoughts in a turmoil and heart beating to suffocation, he made his way to his father's dressing-room.

"I say, father," he said breathlessly, putting his head round the door at the answer to his knock, "are you nearly dressed?"

"All but my coat," said Mr. Orban, without turning from the glass where he was carefully arranging his evening tie. "Come in if you want to."

There was an open door into the bedroom, where Eustace knew his mother was certain still to be.

"I—I would rather speak to you out here," said the boy, "if you could be quick."

Mr. Orban turned a surprised face.

"Oh, if it is a secret I am sure mother will excuse our shutting the door," he said, and suited the action to the word. "Now come, out with it. Have you been getting into some scrape, old man?"

The boy looked so extraordinarily white that Mr. Orban began to be afraid something serious had happened.

"You are quite certain mother can't hear?" Eustace said in a low tone.

"Perfectly," said Mr. Orban, looking more deeply perplexed, for hitherto Mrs. Orban had shared all secrets; in fact, the children had gone more readily to her with their troubles than to him, because he had so little time for such things. "There hasn't been any accident to one of the others?" he added sharply, struck by a new idea.

"Oh no, no," Eustace said; "nothing like that. But, father," he went on, drawing very close, "I'm not to tell another soul—only you. Bob Cochrane

is here. He is waiting for you down by the first drive gate, and wants to speak to you at once."

"Bob Cochrane!" repeated Mr. Orban, blankly staring at the boy. "What are you talking about, child? You've been dreaming, or you've got a touch of fever."

He passed his hand over Eustace's brow, and found it cool enough.

"But it's the truth, father," Eustace said. "I thought I was dreaming myself, and it feels awfully strange still. I was kneeling at the window with my head in my hands, thinking—thinking about home"—his voice faltered a good deal over the words—"when some one hit me on the shoulder with a stone, and I looked down and saw Bob."

"Impossible!" said Mr. Orban. "You've had a delusion because you were thinking about home. You were thinking so hard about Bob you fancied you saw him. Things like that do happen sometimes, you know. Bob is thousands of miles away, looking after the plantation; he couldn't by any earthly possibility be here."

Mr. Orban spoke so certainly that Eustace's faith in his own reason almost wavered; but if vision it were, it had impressed him strongly.

"I don't think I could have seen it so clearly if it had only been my own thought," he argued aloud. "Besides, he spoke; he said quite clearly, 'Don't make a row, old man; I'm not a ghost. I want you to get hold of your father for me without a soul knowing that you have seen me. Tell him I am waiting by the first drive gate, and want to speak to him at once. Mind no one else hears

what you say. Seeing you is better luck than I expected.'"

The words were branded on his memory by the shock he had received, and now it was Mr. Orban's turn to become white.

"If it is so really," he said in an odd, unsteady voice, "he brings bad news. Something so bad has happened that he could not break it to me in a letter."

It flashed into Eustace's mind that Bob had looked awfully grave and queer—if Bob it really were, and no delusion! Suppose his father should go to the gate and find no one awaiting him—what then?

"You—you will go and see if he is there?" faltered the boy nervously.

"I am going at once," said Mr. Orban. "When you are dressed yourself, go down into the drawing-room as usual, as if nothing had happened." He opened the door into Mrs. Orban's room and said lightly, "There's a man just called to see me, dear. If I happen to be detained, make my apologies to the old people, and ask them not to wait dinner for me."

Mrs. Orban made a cheery, unsuspecting response, and he and Eustace left the room.

The twins and the Dixon pair always assembled in the drawing-room with every one before dinner was served, and there they awaited the summons to dessert, as a rule with books, in dreary silence.

When Eustace came down he found every one waiting for dinner. Mr. Orban was not yet in, and Mr. Chase would not hear of beginning the meal without him.

"His friend can't in conscience keep him late at such an hour," he said. "Of course we will wait."

No one was very talkative. It seemed to Eustace as if something of the coming shadow were creeping over the community before the bad news could even be dreamed of by any one except himself. There was just the sort of deadly calm and stillness over everything that comes before a thunderstorm.

Nesta had curled herself up in a deep window-seat, well out of sight. Eustace guessed she had made such a fright of herself with crying she was afraid to show her face. He sat near the door into the great conservatory with a book, pretending to read. Really he could do nothing but wonder what terrible thing could be going to happen next.

Presently, just when Mr. Chase was getting a little restless, and Mrs. Orban began anxiously watching the door, Mr. Orban came hurriedly into the room.

"Forgive my being so late," he said in a voice that vibrated strangely; "but I am afraid I must detain you still for a few minutes. The fact is, a Queensland friend of mine has just turned up with —with some rather curious details about the wreck of the *Cora*. He thought it would pain us less to hear them by word of mouth than by letter, so he came himself."

"Very good of him, I'm sure," said Mr. Chase, looking surprised. "Won't he stay and dine with us, and then afterwards—"

"Oh, of course he must stay the night!" cried Mrs. Chase hospitably; "and this evening we can talk things over quietly when the children have gone to bed."

"I think," said Mr. Orban, with a gravity that

impressed every one deeply, "my friend would rather have his interview at once. He is anxious to get it over as soon as possible. I have asked him into the boudoir, Mrs. Chase. I thought we would talk there more quietly than here."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Chase, rising and leading the way to the boudoir, which opened off the drawing-room.

Every one looked utterly bewildered, and Mr. Chase just a little annoyed. It was most unprecedented that dinner should be so delayed. Eustace noticed his father whisper something to his mother; she started, flushed painfully, and he guessed Mr. Orban had told her who the visitor was.

The boudoir door closed after the elders, and there was silence in the drawing-room. Herbert became restless, and wandered about the room opening books or fingering the ornaments in an aimless way; Nesta stared gloomily out of the window, and Brenda tried to read.

Eustace could stand the inaction and the unsympathetic company no longer, so, getting up, he strolled into the sweet-smelling conservatory to be alone.

There were scents there that always wafted him in memory back home—he loved the warmth and the plants. There was a large oval stage covered with flowers in the centre, and round this he strolled towards the outer door.

So it was about the wreck Bob had come to speak. What more painful news could he have to bring than they already knew? The boy's common sense told him that the details must have to do with the death of Aunt Dorothy; nothing of less importance could

have brought Bob over. Perhaps he had met an eye-witness of the tragedy! Perhaps there were last messages from the drowned girl!

Eustace turned a corner and came to an abrupt standstill. It seemed to him in that instant as if his very heart stopped beating and his hair stood straight on end.

It was absurd, of course. Bob had turned out to be no mere creation of his own brain, but this could be nothing else. Here was proof positive of Mr. Orban's words that one has but to think hard enough about a person to imagine one sees him.

With her back to the outer door—a white figure with a face as colourless as her dress—stood Dorothy Chase; nothing about her was lifelike except the familiar deep-brown eyes that gazed steadfastly on the startled boy.

It was an extraordinarily vivid hallucination, and not a little terrifying. Was it no fancy? Could it possibly be Aunt Dorothy's spirit come to visit her old home again? The thought leapt into the boy's mind.

Eustace was no coward, but the notion fairly paralyzed him; he could not have moved to save his life. One supreme effort he made.

"Aunt Dorothy," he whispered hoarsely, and could say no more, for his lips were parched, his throat was dry.

The vision raised a warning hand.

"Hush!" she said; "don't be frightened. I see Bob has not told you yet; but it is all right, darling. I am a real live human being, and no spirit. Just Aunt Dorothy come back to you safe and sound."

The words seemed to come from far away, and Eustace felt so queer he swayed to try and keep his balance. He was so giddy he must have fallen had the vision not swept forward and caught him. The feeling of those strong arms about him, the warm touch of Aunt Dorothy's face bent down to his, brought him with a jerk to himself again, and he did not faint. But even then he could not believe his senses.

"I don't understand," he gasped, shaking from head to foot in her arms; and he pressed his face tight against her shoulder to try and recover himself.

"Poor old chap!" said Aunt Dorothy, "how I have upset you! I never meant any of you to see me till you knew. Bob is breaking the news to father and mother gently. We were afraid the shock of joy would be too much for them, so we did not even cable, but came at once. A letter would have got here very little sooner than ourselves."

She talked on in a soft, soothing voice to give the boy time to pull himself together, and all the time she held him close.

"You—you weren't drowned," Eustace managed to blurt out.

"Very nearly, but not quite," was the reply; "my escape was like a miracle. Ah, here comes Bob at last."

"Have I seemed an awful time?" said Bob gently. "It was a difficult thing to do. Come—they are waiting for you."

The pair passed swiftly up the conservatory into the drawing-room.

Herbert was standing by the mantelpiece examin-

ing a piece of valuable Sèvres china. As the stranger, accompanied by that white figure, crossed the room to the boudoir, the ornament fell with a crash, to be splintered into twenty pieces on the fender.

"Oh, what was that?" cried Brenda, starting to her feet and gazing after the apparition.

"It's Aunt Dorothy," said Eustace from the conservatory. "She was never drowned at all."

"What!" said Herbert sharply. "You are dreaming."

"Then we are all dreaming," said Eustace gravely. "You saw her for yourself."

It would be impossible to describe the scene that followed. When the boudoir door opened and the grown-ups all trooped out, headed by Aunt Dorothy, the commotion was beyond words. From the midst of it Mr. Chase slipped away, to return with Peter in his arms. Peter was in pyjamas and dressing-gown, rosy, and fresh roused from sleep.

"We can't let him be out of it all," said Mr. Chase. "I have told him of our joyful surprise, and he takes it quite calmly."

"Peter would," said Miss Chase, taking the wee fellow in her arms.

"I'm very glad I didn't drown you," Peter said serenely. "Herbert—"

But he finished the sentence in an incoherent yell, kicking out right and left.

"What is the matter?" asked Dorothy in surprise.

"Eustace pinched my bare leg," Peter said irately, wriggling to the ground in order to avenge himself.

Eustace caught his wrists, and bending low, whispered,—

"You are not to tell tales. I told you that the other day. You don't want to be a low-down black-fellow, do you?"

Peter's face was crumpled with anger, and there is no saying what he would have done if Bob had not exclaimed,—

"Hulloa, Peter! haven't you a word for me?"

The shock was complete. Mr. Chase had not mentioned Bob's arrival, and Peter was wholly unprepared for seeing him.

"Bob!" he shouted, "good old Bob!" and sprang like a young cat at the big fellow, who caught him skilfully.

"When you have quite done throttling me I shall be glad," said Bob, after enduring the embrace of the merciless little arms a moment.

"But how did you get here?" demanded Peter of the long memory. "Were you bewitched over to England?"

"Come, come," said Mr. Chase; "dinner first and stories afterwards. We shall have to eat cinders as it is, I expect, and cook will give notice to-morrow."

"Every one must come into the dining-room, father," laughed Aunt Dorothy; "I can't part with one of you yet. We will talk while we eat."

In a moment everything seemed changed. All the severity had faded from the old people's faces; they could not have looked more delightfully "grannyish" if they had tried. The dreadful barriers of formality were broken down; no noisier, freer family party had ever gathered in the Queensland home than the one that peopled the stately old dining-room that night.

"This," whispered Brenda to Nesta, "is how we always were before Aunt Dorothy went away. Now you can see why we missed her."

The change was something like a fairy tale to the Bush children; every one seemed suddenly "magicked" into different beings. This, then, was home as mother had known it.

The story of Aunt Dorothy's rescue held the table spellbound; the very butler and footman forgot their duties as they listened.

It appeared that, having jumped into the water with Peter, Dorothy struck out as fast as possible to swim away from the ship, keeping a grip of the little fellow as best she could. But in the terrible commotion that occurred on the going down of the *Cora* she lost her grasp, and Peter was swept away from her into the inky blackness of the night.

She swam, floated, called, it seemed to her for ages, but all in vain, and at last, in a state of utter exhaustion, she gave herself up merely to the thought of keeping afloat. She must have been many hours in the water, but, losing consciousness after a while, her next experience was to find herself on board a vessel of some sort—a schooner it turned out to be on her way out to the reefs for bêche-de-mer fishing.

"Why, we saw her!" exclaimed Eustace. "Mother, that must have been the boat we saw far away out to sea. The captain of the station told us it was theirs."

"They must have picked me up soon after dawn, before the turn of the tide," said Aunt Dorothy. "I think when I came to my senses and saw the kind of people I was among, I was more frightened

than I had been even by the wreck. Most of them were black-fellows—the rest I have since discovered were Portuguese; but not a soul in all that uncouth crowd could speak English or understand a word I said."

"It was pretty terrifying," Bob agreed.

"They therefore did not know where I came from, where I wanted to go, or anything about me I kept imploring them to take me back to land; but this, though they must have understood my signs, they refused to do."

"What brutes!" exclaimed Herbert hotly.

"They are a low-grade lot," said Bob in his quaint Colonial way, "but you know they can only get the bêche-de-mer at certain tides. It would have meant a dead loss to them to have put back, and probably they were working under contract, bound to supply a certain amount at a given time to their Chinkee employers."

"But it was horrid of them," said Nesta, who had recovered herself entirely in the excitement, and was inclined to agree even with Herbert for once.

"It was a real adventure, wasn't it?" Eustace said, appealing to Bob.

"Rather more of one than I bargained for," said Aunt Dorothy. "But in their own rough way the men tried to be kind to me. The food we had was disgusting, the boat dreadfully fishy, oily, and dirty; there was not a possibility of being comfortable day or night. But I have nothing to grumble at. They took me back safe and sound to the bêche-de-mer station at last, and there I heard all about you, even to the saving of Peter. All the discomforts and

horrors put together were nothing to my suspense about your fates till then."

The rest of the story was simple enough. Finding the Orbans had left Cooktown, Miss Chase instantly communicated with Bob, and together they arranged the plan for the home-coming. Their chief aim was to convey the good news as gently as possible, and they certainly achieved their end.

"I don't know how I could have borne the waiting had you cabled," Mrs. Chase said. "I should have suffered agonies imagining fresh accidents that might happen to you all the time."

"Dorothy has become quite an experienced traveller one way and another," said Mr. Chase. "You little thought, my dear, when you set out so gaily from here, what a stormy life you were embarking upon."

"I should think you would be terrified ever to go there again," said Brenda.

"On the contrary," said Bob Cochrane, "I hope your aunt will feel encouraged to return before long. What was the compact, Peter? She was to come back and be burnt as a witch, wasn't she?"

"Not yet awhile," said Mr. Chase gravely. "You can't expect us to part with her for some little time to come."

"Of course not, sir," said Bob genially.

And then he and Dorothy just glanced at each other and laughed with a strange kind of joyousness that mystified the Dixons; but Eustace looked hard at Nesta and nodded meaningly.

Bob's face was no longer haggard and drawn; it wore its old, habitual expression of steadfast happiness.

The party did not break up till "disgracefully late," as Mr. Chase put it. Peter was carried by his mother asleep to bed. The twins and the Dixons felt so wide awake they fancied they would not close an eye all night.

Mr. Chase laughed when he heard the story of the Sèvres ornament.

"I'm not surprised you were startled," he said kindly; "but please try to have something a little less valuable in your hands next ghost you meet."

"Nesta," said Eustace, following his twin to her door, "what are you going to do now? Shall you tell mother?"

"Tell mother what?" asked Nesta, with well-feigned astonishment.

"Why, that you are miserable, and won't stay, and all that stuff," was the reply.

"Of course not, silly," Nesta retorted. "Any one can see everything is going to be quite different now Aunt Dorothy has come."

"Of course, silly," said Eustace, in a mocking tone, and they both laughed.

"Good-night, you two," said a voice along the passage, and Herbert turned off into his own room.

"I'm coming to brush my hair in your room to-night," said Brenda, bearing down upon them, brush and comb in hand.

Eustace passed on.

"It is all different already," he said softly. "I think Bob has been right all along—Aunt Dorothy has bewitched us, every one."

THE END.

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