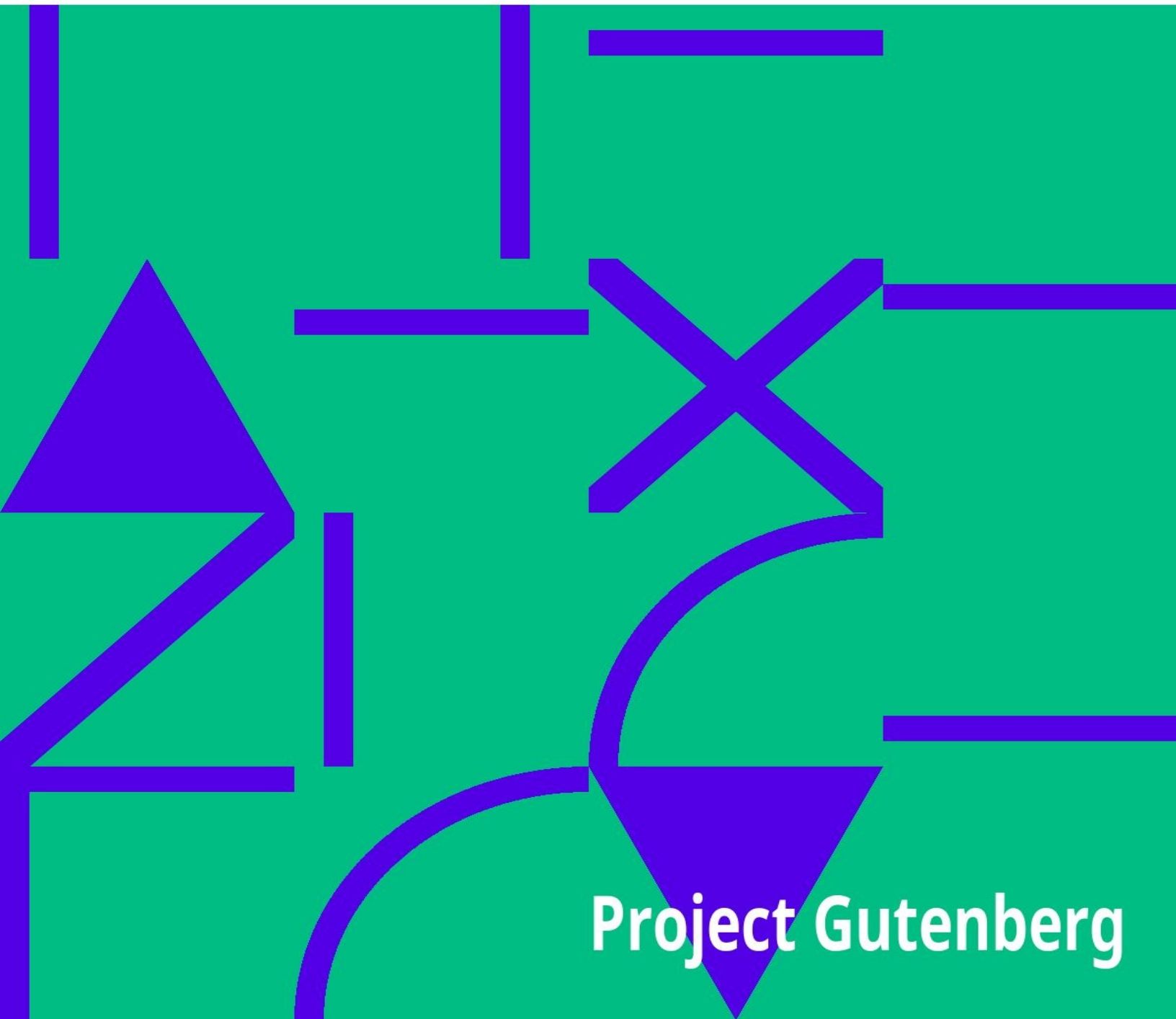


The Adventurous Seven

Their Hazardous Undertaking

Bessie Marchant



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"THE DOCTOR'S CANE CAME CUTTING THROUGH THE AIR"

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The

Adventurous Seven

Their Hazardous Undertaking

BY
BESSIE MARCHANT

Author of "The Heroine of the Ranch"
"The Loyalty of Hester Hope" "A Princess of Servia"
"The Youngest Sister" &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY W. R. S. STOTT

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THE ADVENTUROUS SEVEN

CHAPTER I

The Great Idea

The village schoolroom was packed as full as it would hold, and the air was so thick that, as Sylvia said, it could almost be scooped up with a spoon. The lecturer was stout and perspiring freely, but he meant to do his duty at all costs, and he rose to the occasion with tremendous vigour, declaiming in really fine style:

"It is a poor man's paradise, and there is no place on the face of this earth to rival it. You reach it by a pleasure cruise across summer seas, to find it has the finest scenery your eyes have ever beheld and a climate that is not to be beaten."

"Hear, hear!" shouted Rumble, clapping vigorously. He had led the applause from the very beginning of the lecture, only it was a little awkward for the lecturer that he mostly broke into the middle of a sentence instead of waiting for a pause, as a more judicious person might have done.

"Encore!" yelled Billykins, forgetting for the moment that it was not a concert, and, as the lecture had already lasted for upwards of an hour and a half, it might have proved a little tedious to some of the audience if it had been repeated from the very beginning.

The rows of people sitting in the seats behind broke into a wild uproar of stamping, thumping, and clapping which lasted for nearly five minutes, and, of course, raised more dust to thicken the atmosphere.

The pause gave the lecturer time to recover his breath and wipe some of the perspiration from his face; it also made him rather cross, for he had somehow got the idea that he was being laughed at, which was quite wrong, because all seven of the Plumsteads, from Nealie down to Ducky, thought that he was doing very well indeed.

"If you don't believe what I say," concluded the lecturer, "just come out to New South Wales and see for yourselves if I have not told you the plain, unvarnished truth; and I repeat what I have said before, that although it is no place for the idle

rich, for the man or the woman who wants to work it is not to be beaten."

It was at this moment that Nealie leaned forward to whisper to Rupert, who sat on the other side of Don and Billykins:

"Would it not be lovely for us all to go? Just think how we could help dear Father, and he would not be lonely any more."

"Rather!" ejaculated Rupert, making a noise which was first cousin to a whistle; then he passed the whisper on to Sylvia and Rumble, and that was how the great idea started.

When the lecture was over they all crowded forward to speak to the lecturer, explaining in a rather incoherent fashion the reason of their keen interest in what he had been saying, and their hard and fast intention to emigrate as soon as possible.

"Our father lives in New South Wales; but most likely you have met him," said Nealie, whose knowledge of Australian geography was rather vague, and who supposed that, as the lecturer came from Sydney, he would most probably know everyone who lived in the country known as New South Wales.

"I can't remember him offhand, young lady, but perhaps if you tell me his name I may recollect whether I have met him," said the lecturer, smiling at her in a genial fashion.

"He is Dr. Plumstead, and he is very clever," said Nealie, giving her head the proud little tilt which it always took on when she spoke of her father. She was very much of a child, despite her nineteen years, and she never seemed able to understand that her father was not at the top of his profession.

"Father is very much like Rumble, only, of course, bigger," broke in Billykins, who could never be reduced to silence for many minutes together nor yet be thrust into the background.

But Rumble blushed furiously at being dragged into notice in such a way, and, turning his head abruptly, gave the lecturer no chance of comparing his face with those of possible acquaintances on the other side of the world.

"Most likely I have met him. I see so many people, far too many to be able to recall their names at will," said the lecturer; but then the vicar came up to claim his attention and the seven could get no further chance to talk to him.

They set off home then; and as it was so dark, and a drizzling rain was falling, Nealie took Ducky on her back, while Sylvia and Rumble helped Rupert, who

was lame, leaving Don and Billykins to bring up the rear.

The nearest way was down through Boughlee Wood, but this route was not to be thought of in the dark. It was not even wise to take the short cut across Kennel Hill, so they tramped along the hard road, splashing through the puddles and talking like a set of magpies about the lecture, the lecturer, and their own determination to emigrate at once.

"No one wants us here, and there is nothing to do except get into mischief," said Sylvia, with a sigh.

"Father will be glad to have us, of course, and we will make him so very happy!" cried Nealie, and then Ducky leaned forward to kiss her on the nose, hugging her so tightly that it was quite wonderful she was not choked.

"But how are we to get to Australia?" panted Rupert, who was finding the pace rather trying.

"We must ask Mr. Runciman to let us have the money," said Nealie. "I should think that he would be glad to do it, for then he will get rid of us, don't you see? And he is always grumbling about our being such a dreadful expense."

"Mr. Runciman is horrid!" burst out Ducky, giving Nealie another hug. "I just hate him when he says nasty things to you, Nealie."

"Of course we are an expense to him, especially when dear Father is not able to send enough money to keep us, and we have all got such big appetites," said Nealie, with a sigh.

"I am hungry now, dreadfully hungry," put in Billykins from the rear.

"Shall we go to see Mr. Runciman to-morrow?" asked Rumble.

"We can't manage to get back before dark, I am afraid, and Mrs. Puffin makes such a fuss if we are out after dark; just as if anyone would want to run away with the seven of us," returned Nealie in a scornful tone.

"We can go in the morning, for the vicar is going to a Diocesan Conference, and he has given us a holiday. He told me about it to-night," said Rupert.

"That will be lovely. Then we will have Aunt Judith's chair for you and Ducky, it will be just a jolly jaunt for us; only we must be at The Paddock early, to catch Mr. Runciman before he goes out," said Nealie.

"I would rather walk——" began Ducky, with a touch of petulance in her voice, but Nealie stopped her quickly with a whisper:

"You must ride, darling, or Rupert won't have the chair, and a long walk does take it out of him so badly you know."

"If we have the chair, Don and I will be the horses, and we will go down Coombe Lane at a gallop," said Billykins, with a festive prance.

"That will be perfectly lovely, only Rupert will have to hold me tightly or I shall be tossed out at the turn, and I might damage my nose again," replied Ducky, with a gleeful chuckle.

By this time they had reached Beechleigh, and turning short across the green by the pond they tramped in at the gate of the funny little house where their great-aunt, Miss Judith Webber, had lived and died, and which was the only home they had known since Ducky was a tiny babe.

Mrs. Puffin, a lean little widow of mouldy aspect, opened the door to let them in and exclaimed loudly to see how damp they were.

"Now you will all be catching colds, and I shall have to nurse you," she said in a woebegone tone, as she felt them all round. "If you must go out in the wet in this fashion, why can't you take umbrellas?"

"Because we haven't got them," answered Nealie, with a laugh. She mostly laughed about their limitations, because it made them just a little easier to bear. "The little boys had the last umbrella that we possess to play at Bedouin tents with on Tuesday, and they had a sad accident and broke three of its ribs, poor thing. But we shall not catch cold, Mrs. Puffin, because we are all going straight to bed."

"But I am hungry," protested Billykins.

"I know, and so am I; but we will all have a big piece of seed cake when we get into bed, and go to sleep to dream of big bowls of steaming porridge with brown sugar on the top," said Nealie; and the vision proved so alluring that all seven trooped up the dark stairs and crowded into the small bedrooms, feeling quite cheerful in spite of tired limbs, hunger, and the discomfort of damp clothes.

But their voices hushed, and a wistful look crept into their faces, as they passed the door leading into Aunt Judith's empty bedroom. The old lady had loved them so dearly, and they had given her love for love in unstinted measure, so that now she was dead there was an awful blank in their hearts and their lives.

Being very tired and very healthy, however, they went to sleep directly they tumbled into bed; indeed Ducky could not keep awake long enough to eat her

cake, so Nealie laid it on the chair by the little girl's bed for her to find when she opened her eyes in the morning.

Sleep was longer in coming to Nealie than to the others. She was older than they were, and had been mother to them so long that she was apt to be thinking out ways and means when she ought to have been asleep.

It would be too utterly delightful to go out to Australia and live with her father. It was nearly seven years since she had seen him, and her heart was always aching at the thought of his lonely exile.

If only Mr. Runciman would consent to their going! But would he?

"Well, it is of no use to worry and to wonder; we must just wait and see. But I think when all seven of us go marching into that splendid library of his at The Paddock, he will be so dismayed to see what a lot of us there are, that he will be quite ready to take the very shortest way of getting rid of the bother of looking after us," she said to herself, with a soft little laugh which rippled through the dark room and even made itself heard in the other room across the passage where the four boys were sleeping; and Rupert, who had been having bad dreams because his lame foot was hurting rather badly, smiled in his uneasy slumber and straightway drifted off into a more profound repose, from which he did not wake until the misty September dawning crept over the wide plantations of beech and larch for which Beechleigh was famous.



CHAPTER II

The Deputation

It was well for Nealie Plumstead that she could mostly laugh in spite of troubles, for her life had been shadowed by a great disaster which had brought in its turn a battalion of cares, worries, and responsibilities.

Until she was almost twelve years old life had been one unbroken happiness. She had been at the head of an ever-increasing nursery, and she had governed her small kingdom to the very best of her ability. Then had come a cloud of black trouble, the exact nature of which she did not understand even now, only vaguely she had gathered that it was something professional.

Then Ducky, whose name was Hilda Grace, had been born, and the dear mother had sunk out of life, leaving a distracted husband and seven children to mourn their loss.

Following this came the long journey from the busy manufacturing town, where they had always lived, to Beechleigh and the home of Miss Judith Webber. Dr. Plumstead had come with them to see them safely settled, but on the day that Ducky was one month old, he had kissed them all round, in a heartbreaking goodbye, and had set off on the voyage to Australia.

Sometimes he used to write to Aunt Judith and send her money for the children's keep, when he had any to send; but he almost never wrote to his children, although they simply pelted him with letters of the most affectionate description.

Two years ago, however, a great weakness had fallen upon Aunt Judith; she could write no letters nor do any business at all, and another nephew of hers, a Mr. Runciman, undertook the administration of her affairs.

The seven hated him in a hearty, downright fashion, for he always made himself as disagreeable as possible to them, and certainly seemed to resent their existence.

It was soon after Aunt Judith had been taken ill that a letter coming from

Australia, directed to Miss Webber, had been opened by Nealie in all good faith, for she never supposed that her father would write anything to her aunt that she might not read; but to her dismay she learned that the numerous letters of the children, instead of bringing pleasure to the heart of the exile, gave him so much pain that he begged Miss Webber not to let them write to him, because it reminded him too sadly of all that he had lost in the past, and was missing in the present. It was such a sad, dreadful sort of letter that Nealie had cried herself nearly blind over it, and then had gathered the others for a solemn council. The elders had no secrets from the younger ones, so Billykins and Ducky had as much to say on the subject as their seniors; and in the end it was resolved that Nealie and Rupert should write a letter to their father and tell him that they would worry him with no more letters until he expressed a desire to have them.

A year and a half had passed since that time, but although the children watched for the mails with pathetic eagerness, there had come no letter from their father for them. He did not write to Aunt Judith either, after he had been told how ill she was; but he wrote to Mr. Runciman sometimes, they knew, because Mr. Runciman had spoken of having letters from him.

This long silence would have made them very miserable, if it had not been that they were so sorry for him that it never occurred to them to be sorry for themselves. They had each other, but he was alone, and so, of course, he was to be pitied.

Inspired by the great idea, the seven woke in riotous spirits next morning, which not even the near prospect of an interview with Mr. Runciman could daunt, although he was quite sufficiently formidable at close quarters to make any ordinary person afraid.

Rupert and Rumble cleaned the boots, while Nealie and Sylvia got breakfast ready, the three juniors having to make themselves useful in any direction where help was most needed.

They had all learned to wait on themselves during the long illness of Aunt Judith, for Mrs. Puffin had her hands full with nursing, while since the death of the old lady she had been in such poor health that Nealie and Sylvia had done all the cooking and most of the housework, with a great deal of help from the others.

Breakfast consisted of big plates of porridge and slices of home-made bread spread with damson jam. There were two trees in Aunt Judith's small garden, and they had borne a record crop this year.

There was no lingering over their food this morning, but directly the meal was dispatched the boys washed up the breakfast crockery, while the girls made the beds and put the rooms tidy. Then Nealie asked Mrs. Puffin to make them a suet pudding and bake them some potatoes for dinner, after which they brushed themselves into a fine state of neatness, and then, bringing the bath chair from the shed, Rupert and Ducky were packed into it and the expedition set out on the five miles' journey to The Paddock, Smethwick, where Mr. Runciman lived.

It was still quite early, and Mr. Runciman, having dealt with the morning's letters, was sitting in his library looking through the daily paper before going out to interview his steward and settling the other business of the day, when the butler entered the room and announced:

"The seven Misses and Masters Plumstead to see you, sir."

"Goodness gracious, what next?" exclaimed Mr. Runciman in a tone of positive alarm.

"Shall I show them in, if you please, sir?" asked the butler in a sympathetic fashion, looking as if he really felt sorry for the perturbed gentleman.

"All seven of them? Yes, I suppose you must, and see here, Roberts, just ask the housekeeper to have some cakes and cocoa, or something of that kind, ready for them to have before they go back to Beechleigh, for I suppose that they are walking?"

"Yes, sir; that is to say, some of them are, but the lame young gentleman and the little girl rode down in a bath chair," replied the butler, and then permitted himself a grin of pure amusement as he retired from the room to usher in the visitors, for the harassed master of the house fairly groaned at the thought of having callers arrive in such a fashion.

"The Misses and Masters Plumstead," announced the butler, throwing open the door with the grand flourish which was worth at least ten pounds a year to him in salary.

Nelialie and Ducky entered first, followed by Rupert, walking alone, then came Sylvia and Rumble, while Don and Billykins brought up the rear.

Mr. Runciman rose at once and came forward to greet them, trying very hard to infuse as much cordiality as possible into his manner.

"My dear children, what an unexpected pleasure! Why, Cornelia, you are positively blooming, and my little friend Hilda is as charming as always. Ah,

Rupert, my boy, how goes the Latin? Nothing like the dead languages for training the mind. Sylvia, you grow so fast that there is no keeping up with you. Dalrymple, you will have to use the dumb-bells more or you will positively have Donald and William beat you in the matter of height."

It was one of Mr. Runciman's vices in the eyes of the seven that he would always give them the full benefit of their baptismal names, although he knew, because they had told him so, that they simply hated the formal mode of address, which no one used except himself. It always had the effect of making them stiff and self-conscious; so now Rupert limped more than usual, Sylvia dropped her gloves, which she was carrying because they had too many holes to be wearable, and Rumble lurched against a pile of books that lay at the edge of the table and brought the whole lot to the floor with a crash.

"Sorry," murmured Rumble, diving hastily to recover the volumes, and promptly knocking his head against that of Billykins, who was also grovelling for the same purpose, while Nealie plunged into the business of their visit, hoping to divert the attention of the master of the house from the awkwardness of the boys, poor things; but Sylvia giggled in quite a disgraceful fashion, then blinked hard at a bust of Apollo which stood on a bookshelf opposite, and tried to look as if she were appreciating the admirable way in which it was sculptured.

"We have come down to see you to-day to ask you if you will please send us out to New South Wales to our father," said Nealie, holding her head at an extremely haughty angle, just because she was so very nervous.

"Good gracious! I wonder what you will want next?" gasped Mr. Runciman, who had probably not been so much astonished for a very long time.

"It would really be taking a great load of worry from you, sir," put in Rupert eagerly, thrusting himself abreast of Nealie and leaning on his stick while he talked. "A large family, as we are, would be a valuable asset in a new country, while here we are only an encumbrance and a nuisance. Besides, we should like to be with our father."

"Quite so, quite so; but think of the expense!" murmured Mr. Runciman, as he rubbed his hands together in a nervous manner. He said the first thing which came into his head for the sake of gaining time. The proposition was sufficiently staggering, but on the other hand it might be worth consideration.

"I am afraid that we must be a heavy expense to you now, sir, seeing that we have to be fed and clothed," replied Rupert, with a deference that was really soothing to Mr. Runciman, who smiled graciously and waved his hand as much

as to say that the matter was too trifling to be considered.

"You will let us go, won't you, air, because we want to build the Empire?" burst out Billykins, thrusting himself in between his elders and looking so flushed and excited that Mr. Runciman, who had no son of his own, could not be so repressive as he felt he ought to have been.

"Eh, what? And how do you expect you are going to set about it, young man?" he demanded, while Billykins went suddenly red in the face, because Sylvia had tweaked his jacket, which was the signal that he was overstepping the mark.

"I don't know, but I expect we will find out when we get there. Don and I mostly find out how to do things, and Nealie says we are going to be the business men of the family. Rupert and Rumble have got the brains, but there is practical perseverance in us——"

The small boy came to a sudden pause, for Sylvia, fearing what he might say next, had dragged him into the background, leaving Nealie to speak.

"We should be very glad to go to Australia, if you please; for now that Aunt Judith is dead no one wants us here, and we might be a very great comfort to our father when he got used to having us." Her voice broke a little on the last words; she was remembering the letter which she had so innocently opened and read, and the wonder whether he would be quite glad to see them at first crept in to spoil her joy at the thought that perhaps Mr. Runciman was for once going to do the thing they wanted so badly.

Her words brought a frown to his face, and when he spoke his voice had an apologetic ring which sounded strangely in the ears of the seven.

"I am sorry that you should feel that no one wants you here. Of course Mrs. Runciman and my daughters have so many engagements that it is not easy for them to go as far as Beechleigh very often; but we have certainly tried to take care of you since your great-aunt passed away."

"You have been most kind," said Nealie hastily, divining in a vague fashion that she had somehow said something to hurt his feelings, which was certainly outside her intentions. "But we hate to be a continual burden upon our connections, and there seems no way in which we can earn money here."

"Don and I could keep pigs on the stubble fields, only Nealie won't let us. We could earn half a crown a week at it too," burst out Billykins, thrusting himself to the front like a jack-in-the-box and disappearing as suddenly, being again dragged back by Sylvia.

There was a troubled look on the face of Mr. Runciman as his gaze rested upon Nealie, who was the living image of her dead mother. There was a secret chamber in his heart that was tenanted by the mournful memory of a dead love. He had loved the mother of the seven, but she had passed him by to marry Dr. Plumstead, and so the secret chamber had held nothing but a shrine ever since, only it made him a little kinder to the motherless children than he otherwise might have been.

"It would be a tremendous expense to send you all such a long distance," he said, still speaking for the sake of gaining time, yet disposed to regard the proposal as a really practical way in which to solve the problem of their future.

"It could be done for about seventy pounds, I think, if we went steerage; and it is quite comfortable for people who do not mind roughing it, and as we have not been used to any sort of luxury, of course we shall not miss it," said Sylvia.

"I could not allow you to go as steerage passengers," replied Mr. Runciman.

"We would much rather go as steerage passengers than not go at all," murmured Nealie.

"I will think about it and let you know," he said, but with so much giving way in his tone that they burst into a chorus of imploring.

"Please, please decide now and write to tell Father that we are coming. We are quite ready to start by the next boat, and it is so lonely living at Beechleigh now that Aunt Judith is dead," pleaded Nealie, silencing the others with a wave of her hand.

If one of the others had spoken then, Mr. Runciman would certainly have refused, but because of her likeness to the dead he had to give way. He reflected, too, that if he wrote the letter now it would be impossible for him to draw back from his word, however angry his wife might be when she heard what he had done.

"Very well, I will write to your father to-night," he said.

"Do not leave it until this evening; you might forget; there are so many other things for you to remember," said Nealie softly. "If you will write the letter now we will post it as we go through Braybrook Lees; then it will be just in time for the outgoing mail. Tell dear Father that we are coming by the next boat. We will be ready somehow."

"Yes, please, please, dear Mr. Runciman, write now," said Sylvia, leaning

forward in her most engaging manner, while even Ducky smiled upon him, clasping her hands entreatingly, just as Sylvia and Nealie were doing.

"Very well; but it will have to be a short letter, for the cart is coming round in twenty minutes to take me over to Aldington," he said, giving way before their entreaties and pulling out his watch to see what the time was; and then he touched the bell at his side, saying to Nealie, as Roberts appeared in answer to the summons: "My dear, if you and the others will go into the housekeeper's room for a little refreshment I will get the letter written, and you shall have it to take with you; then I will write to London about your passage to-night."

"Oh, you are a dear, a most kind dear!" burst out Sylvia, flinging her arms round his neck and kissing him on the cheek—a liberty she had never in her life ventured upon before, and which considerably shocked Nealie, who was afraid it would make him angry, and was agreeably surprised to find that he only seemed to be startled by it.

Then they all trooped off to the housekeeper's room, where they made a tremendous onslaught upon a big and very plummy cake; and they were still drinking cups of steaming cocoa when Roberts appeared again, this time bringing a letter on a silver salver, which he handed to Nealie with a grave bow, saying that Mr. Runciman wished her to read it and then to post it, and he would ride over to Beechleigh on the day after to-morrow to tell them what arrangements he had been able to make for their journey.

"It is jolly decent of him!" muttered Rupert, who had looked over Nealie's shoulder while she read the letter.

"Oh, he is not half bad at the bottom, I should say!" remarked Rumble, who was wondering if Mr. Runciman would feel flattered if he were to make a short poem about this most gracious concession to their wishes. The worst of it was that Mr. Runciman did not exactly lend himself to poetry, that is, he was by no means an inspiring subject.

The housekeeper looked on in smiling amusement at their frank criticism of the master of the house; but she was a kindly soul, and it was only human to feel sorry for these poor young people, whom no one seemed to want, now that old Miss Webber was dead. There had been a good deal of wondering comment in the servants' hall and the housekeeper's room at The Paddock as to what would be done with the family. Everyone was quite sure that Mrs. Runciman would never consent to receive them, even temporarily, and it was because of her refusal to in any way recognize their claim upon her kindness that they had been

left for Mrs. Puffin to look after since the death of their great-aunt.

When they could eat no more cake they bade a cordial goodbye to the housekeeper, shook hands all round with the dignified Roberts, and then trooped off in the highest spirits, talking eagerly of the voyage and the wonderful things they would do when they reached the other side of the world.

"It is almost too good to be true!" cried Sylvia, dancing along on the tips of her toes. "Race me to the gate, Rumble, so that I may get some of this excitement out of my brain, for I am sure that it can't be good for me, and it will never do to fall ill at this juncture."

"I can't run; I'm thinking," replied Rumble, with a heavy frown. He was finding difficulties at the very outset in his poem, because of the seeming impossibility of finding any word which would rhyme with Runciman.

"We will race you," shouted Don and Billykins together, and, dropping the handle of the bath chair, they set off at full tear, while Sylvia came helter-skelter after them, her long legs helping not a little in overhauling the small boys, who had a distinct advantage by getting away so smartly at the first.

Rupert and Ducky clapped, cheered, and shouted encouragements to all the competitors, while Nealie and Rumble hurried the chair along so that they might view the finish from a distance; and they all were too much engrossed to notice a discontented lady who was approaching the drive from a side alley, and who was not a little scandalized at the noise and commotion caused by the seven in their departure.

The lady was Mrs. Runciman, and she walked on to the house, feeling very much annoyed, her thin lips screwed into a disagreeable pucker and her eyes flashing angrily.

"I thought that I told you I did not care to have those Plumstead children hanging about the place," she remarked in an acid tone to her husband, whom she met in the hall as she entered by the big front door.

"You will not see them here many more times. I am sending them out to their father," he answered briefly, adding hastily: "I think that the money Aunt Judith left behind her to be used for their benefit will about cover the expense, and it will mean the solving of a good many problems."

"I hope it will," she said as she turned away.

It had never occurred to her to look upon the seven in any other light than that of

a burden to be ignored, or got rid of as speedily as possible. And because she did not like them, the children, as a matter of course, did not like her.

They did not particularly care for Mr. Runciman, but he at least always treated them properly, and they guessed that he would have been kinder still if only Mrs. Runciman had permitted it.

But when he went back to his library, and with pencil and paper began to estimate the probable cost of sending the seven to New South Wales, he soon found that the little fund left by Aunt Judith would need a lot of supplementing.

"Ah, well, something must be done for the poor things, and if that is what they want, they shall have it," he muttered, as he shook his head in a thoughtful fashion.



CHAPTER III

The Emigrants

"Oh, Nealie, it is a most beautiful ship, and bigger than Bodstead Church!" cried Ducky, rushing up to her eldest sister and flinging herself into the arms held out to her. She and Sylvia had rushed below to find their berths, while Nealie was still standing on deck by the side of Mr. Runciman, who had himself escorted them to London to see them safely on board the big liner which was to take them to Sydney.

Events had marched so fast in the last fortnight that sometimes Nealie had wondered if she were really dreaming. For the first time in her life she was realizing what a lot of things money can do. Mr. Runciman had told her that Aunt Judith had left a little money to be used for the benefit of the seven. He had not told her how much it was, but had merely said it would be enough to cover the cost of their journey, and so they could start as soon as they pleased. And because of the fear there was in her heart lest her father should send word they were not to come, she had declared that she was ready to set off as soon as berths could be secured for them.

Perhaps Mr. Runciman was also afraid that Dr. Plumstead would cable that they were not to come, for he certainly spared neither time nor money to facilitate their going, using so much energy in the preparations that his servants were about equally divided in calling him hard names for his eagerness to rid himself of a heavy burden and in praising his generosity in making the way so easy for the seven to go to their father.

Just at the last it had been quite hard to say goodbye to the old home at Beechleigh and all the people they had known there. So standing on the deck of the ocean-going liner Nealie was thankful that it was all over, and that at last she was free from the necessity to say any more goodbyes. Any more save one, that is, for there was still the farewell to Mr. Runciman to be faced, and she was dreading this with a very real shrinking as she stood so quietly by his side, while the others ran up and down exploring their new quarters and exclaiming in

delight at the bustle and novelty all around them.

"Now mind, Cornelia, if when you land at Sydney you find that you have not sufficient money, you must not hesitate to cable to me, and I shall be most willing to cable you back what you may require," said Mr. Runciman impressively, and because of the kindness in his tone Nealie forgave him calling her Cornelia.

"Thank you very much, but I am sure that we ought not to need any more, and I will be very, very careful not to waste our funds," she said, smiling up at him, but her lips quivered a little in spite of her determination to maintain a Spartan-like control of her emotions.

"Money melts when you are travelling, and you are all such babies in the matter of finance. Let me see what I have in my pocket," he said, thrusting his hand in and tugging out a bulky purse from some mysterious inner depths. "Three, five, seven, ten. Yes, I can let you have ten pounds. Put it in your pocket and say nothing about it. If you do not need it for your journey you can keep it as a little gift from me and spend it for your own pleasure."

"You are so very kind, I cannot think what we should have done without you in getting away; you seem to have forgotten nothing, and I am sure that Father will be most grateful to you," she said, looking at him with so much trust and affection in her eyes that his conscience pricked him dreadfully for what he knew to be his selfish eagerness to shift a heavy burden on to the shoulders of someone else.

SAYING GOODBYE TO MR. RUNCIMAN

SAYING GOODBYE TO MR. RUNCIMAN

"It is no great virtue to be kind to you, child; indeed it would be a hard heart that would be anything else," he said in a deeply moved tone; and because the bell began to ring then, in warning to people to leave the ship, he took both her hands in his, and, leaning down, kissed her on the forehead; then with a nod in the direction of the others, who at the sound of the bell had gathered round to bid him a civil goodbye, he disappeared down the gangway and was lost to view in the crowd.

"The old chappy cut up quite decent at the last. I expect it was that little poem of mine which fetched him," said Rumble, who was strutting round like a peacock in a new suit of clothes and feeling himself someone of importance.

"Hush, dear, don't call him names, I do not like it," said Nealie with gentle dignity, while she struggled with her tears.

"Are you crying over saying goodbye to Mr. Runciman?" asked Sylvia in a wondering tone. "I thought we all made up our minds ages ago that he was really an unmitigated nuisance?"

"We have had to suspend judgment a bit of late in his direction," put in Rupert, coming to the rescue, for he guessed that Nealie did not want to talk just then, not even in defence of Mr. Runciman.

"I think there is more in him than we know," said Rumble in a patronizing tone. "At any rate he had the sense to like my verses, and that shows that he is not altogether callous; he even said that it was clever of me to find such a nice rhyme for Runciman."

"How does that first line go?" asked Rupert, still intent on shielding Nealie, who had walked to the side, and, with tear-blinded eyes, was watching the gangways being lifted.

Rumble instantly struck an attitude, screwed his face into what he called an intense expression, and, waving one arm like a semaphore, declaimed in loud, clear tones:

"Oh, Runciman, dear Runciman,
You've proved yourself a gentleman,
Both in pocket and in sense,
For your care to send us hence;
And we join in three times three,

May your shadow ne'er less be."

"Hip, hip, hooray!" yelled Billykins, waving his cap; then Don and Ducky cheered lustily also, and the sound of the jubilant shouting reached the ears of Mr. Runciman as he stood on the shore and watched the big ship glide slowly from the land.

Nealie went down to the cabin then, meaning to have a hearty good cry by way of relieving her feelings; but Ducky ran down with her to show her how delightfully cosy their quarters were, and there was so much to be seen and admired on every hand that, on second thoughts, Nealie decided to let the crying stand over until she went to bed, by which time she was so sleepy that she entirely forgot about it.

By the kindness of Mr. Runciman the three girls had a four-berth cabin to themselves; for, realizing how trying it would be for them to have a stranger thrust in among them, he had paid the extra so that they might be undisturbed. The four boys had also a four-berth cabin, which opened a little farther along the lower deck; so they were all quite near together, and speedily made themselves at home.

Don and Billykins made up their minds to be sailors long before they were out of the Thames, and although they changed their minds when they got a terrific tossing in the Bay of Biscay, their bearing was strictly nautical right through the voyage.

Rupert and Sylvia were the only two who did not suffer from seasickness, but, as Sylvia remarked, it was not all fun being immune, because they had such hard work in waiting upon the others. However, the end of the week found them all upon their feet again, and very much disposed to enjoy the novelty of life at sea.

Nealie and Don sang duets, to which Rupert played accompaniments on the banjo, while Ducky and Billykins led the applause, and Sylvia posed as audience, aping the languid, bored look of a fine lady at a concert with such inimitable mimicry that she came in for nearly as much applause as the proper performers from such of the other passengers as gathered round to hear.

Then Rumble would do his share towards entertaining the company by declaiming his own poetry, and he was so funny to look at when he stood on one foot, with his face screwed into puckers, and his arms waving wildly above his head, that his performance used to evoke shouts of laughter.

"I can't think what makes the silly goats guffaw at such a rate when I recite my

'Ode to a Dying Sparrow'," he said in a petulant tone to Nealie, one day when his audience had been more than usually convulsed. "It must be shocking bad form to double up in public as they did; a photograph of them would have served as an up-to-date advertisement of the latest thing in gramophones, and when I came to that touching line, about the poor bird sighing out its last feeble chirp ere it closed its eyes and died, those two very fat women simply howled."

"Dear, they could not help it, you did look so funny, and—I don't think that dying birds sigh, at least I never heard them, and I have seen quite a lot of Mrs. Puffin's chickens die," replied Nealie, who was struggling with her own laughter at the remembrance of the comic attitude which Rumble had struck. He was a queer-looking boy at the best, and then he always went in for the most extraordinary gestures, so it was not wonderful that people found food for mirth in watching him.

"I shall not go in for pathetic poetry with an audience who cannot appreciate fine shades of feeling," he said in a disgusted fashion. "I will just get away by myself and throw a few thoughts together which may prove suitable to their intelligence."

"That would be a good idea," said Nealie in a rather choky voice, and then, when he had gone, she put her head down on her hands, laughing and laughing, until someone touched her shoulder, to ask her in kindly pity what she was crying for.

That was really the last straw, and Nealie gurgled and choked as if she were going to have a very bad fit of hysterics, which made the sympathizer—a kind-looking elderly man—still more concerned on her account.

"My dear, shall I call the stewardess, or one of your friends, to help you?" he asked, with so much anxiety on her account that Nealie was instantly sobered, and proceeded to explain the situation.

"You see, Rumble, that is my brother, always does take himself and his poetry so seriously; but the worst of it is that everyone who hears him recite his own things fancies it is the latest idea in comedy, and they laugh accordingly."

"And I have been watching you for the last five minutes, until I could no longer bear to see you, as I thought, in such trouble, and that was why I spoke to you," the gentleman said, scarcely able to make up his mind whether he was vexed with her for having so innocently deceived him, or whether he was only relieved to find himself mistaken.

"You must think us all very foolish and childish, I am afraid," Nealie murmured

in apology. "But the children must have amusement, and we are always interested in what we can each do. Some of Rumple's verses are quite nice, although, of course, others are pure nonsense."

"Just so, just so; young folks must have something to amuse them, and it is very much to the credit of you all that you are so thoroughly amused by it, and I do not remember that I have ever heard you quarrel since you came on board," the gentleman said in a musing tone.

"We do not quarrel," rejoined Nealie with quite crushing dignity, for really the idea sounded almost insulting in her ears.

"Then you as a family must be the eighth wonder of the world, I should think, for I never heard of a family yet who did not have an occasional row," he said in an amused tone.

"Oh, but we are different; and besides we only have each other, and so we cannot afford to disagree," she replied earnestly.

"Are you orphans, and going to Australia alone?" he asked in great surprise.

"Oh no, we are not orphans; that is, our father is living in New South Wales, and we are going out to him, but we have not seen him for seven years. Indeed, Ducky, that is my youngest sister, may be said not to have seen him at all, as she was only four weeks old when he went away; the little boys do not remember him very well either. But Rupert, Sylvia, and I can remember him perfectly," replied Nealie.

"It is certain that he will not know you if he has not seen you for seven years," said the gentleman; and then he asked, with a great deal of interest in his tone: "and are you travelling all that distance without a chaperon of any sort?"

"I have my brothers, and I do not need anyone else," she answered, looking up at him in surprise at his question. "I have always had to take care of myself, for our great-aunt, with whom we lived, was very old and feeble; for two years before she died she did not leave her room, so it would not have done for me to require taking care of, seeing that it was not possible for anyone to spare time to look after me."

"I think that you must be a very remarkable young lady, for I thought that all girls required someone to take care of them, unless they were colonials that is, and you are not that," he said, in the manner of one who seeks information.

"No, we are only going to be," she said, with a happy little laugh, for it was fine

to have achieved one's heart's desire with so little delay in the getting, and she was setting her face towards the new and untried life with radiant happiness in her heart.

"I am going to Cape Town, so I shall have to say goodbye to you when your voyage is only half done, although it would have been a great pleasure to me to have seen you safely ashore and in the care of your father. Does he meet you in Sydney?" asked the gentleman, when he had told Nealie that his name was Melrose, and that he was at the bottom as English as she was herself.

"I don't know; I suppose he will, for Mr. Runciman would have written to tell him the name of the ship we were coming by," said Nealie; but now there was a dubious note in her tone, for she was trying to remember whether Mr. Runciman had said anything about having written to her father. She had thought of writing herself, but had refrained from doing it because of the feeling of hurt pride which was still strong upon her, as it had been ever since she read the letter which was not meant for her.

"What will you do if he does not?" asked Mr. Melrose.

"Oh, we shall find our way out to Hammerville! That is the name of the place where he lives. There are seven of us, you see; it is not as if we were just one or two," she answered brightly.

"Hammerville? I wonder whether that is the Hammerville in the Murrumbidgee district, where Tom Fletcher went to live?" said Mr. Melrose in a musing fashion. "They have a little way of repeating names in these colonial places which is rather distracting. But Fletcher told me that the Hammerville to which he went was nearly three hundred miles from Sydney."

"I suppose there is a railway?" queried Nealie, knitting her brows, and wondering how they were all to be transported for three hundred miles across an unknown country, in the event of there being no railway by which they could travel.

"I suppose the rail would go a point nearer than three hundred miles, unless indeed the place is quite at the back of beyond, as some of those Australian towns are," replied Mr. Melrose. "But Fletcher told me that he hired a horse and wagon and drove the whole distance, sleeping in the wagon at night to save hotel charges."

"Oh, what a perfectly charming thing to do!" cried Sylvia, who had come up behind and was leaning over the back of Nealie's chair. "If Father is not waiting

to meet us when we reach Sydney, shall we hire a horse and a wagon and drive out to Hammerville, Nealie?"

"It would be very jolly," said Nealie, with shining eyes. "I have always longed to go caravanning, but I expect the difficulty would be to find anyone willing to hire a horse and wagon to entire strangers like ourselves; and if Hammerville is so far from Sydney, Father would hardly be known so far away, even though he is a doctor."

"Did you say your father is a doctor?" asked Mr. Melrose, who was very much interested in this adventurous family, who seemed so well able to take care of themselves, and were roaming about the world without even the pretence of a guardian to look after them.

"Yes; he is Dr. Plumstead. Have you heard of him?" asked Sylvia, with the happy belief in her father's greatness which was characteristic of them all.

"I used to know a Dr. Plumstead some years ago, but I do not expect it was the same," said Mr. Melrose, looking as if he were going to say something more, and then suddenly changing his mind.

It was some days later, and they were nearing Cape Town, which was the halfway house of their journey, when Mr. Melrose, who had been keeping his cabin from illness, appeared again on deck, and, seeking Nealie out, laid an addressed envelope in her hand.

"It is the privilege of friends to help each other," he said quietly. "I know a man in Sydney who lets horses and wagons on hire, and I have ventured to give you a letter to him from myself, so that you may have no difficulty in hiring a conveyance for the journey to Hammerville if your father does not meet you."

"How very kind you are!" exclaimed Nealie.

He waved an impatient hand. "It is nothing, nothing. I may even be coming to New South Wales next year, if only my health is better, and then I shall do myself the pleasure of finding you out and renewing our acquaintance," he said.

"That will be very pleasant," replied Nealie, her hand closing upon the letter. "Then we can introduce you to Father, and tell him how kind you have been to us."

"We shall see; but I fancy the indebtedness is on my side," he answered, and then he turned abruptly away.

Nalie looked at him a little wistfully. He was so very friendly and kind up to a

certain point; but when that was reached he was in the habit of retiring into himself, and she was left out in the cold.

"What is the matter, old girl?" asked Rupert, who came up at that moment, and noticed the cloud on Nealie's face.

"I was only thinking how much nicer it would be if we could know what was in the minds of people, and whether they were really friendly all through, or only pretending," she answered, with a sigh.

"Rather a tall order that would be," said Rupert, laughing. "Why, all the rogues would stand betrayed, and honest folk would get the credit of their good intentions. The world would be turned upside down in short!"

"I suppose it would," replied Nealie, shaking her head, and then she laughed too.



CHAPTER IV

Rumple's Discovery

Day after day of unbroken fine weather followed. There was the halt of twelve hours at Cape Town, and the seven earnestly desired to be allowed to go ashore. But the captain refused to allow them off the vessel, as they had been placed in his charge by Mr. Runciman, and so they had to content themselves with gazing at Table Mountain from the deck of the ship, or rather at the tablecloth, as the brooding cloud was called, which hid the mountain from their view.

The shipping in the bay, and the distant glimpses of the town, gave them plenty to look at, however; and although the little boys and Rumple were in a state of simmering rebellion against the dictates of the kindly but rather autocratic commander, Rupert and Nealie were so well amused that they had no room for grumbling, while Sylvia had taken to drawing as a pastime, and spent the hours in making an ambitious sketch of the scene. It was a little out in drawing, naturally as she had had no lessons, and it was difficult to determine whether the ships were sailing up Table Mountain, or the houses taking short voyages across the bay; but she was so thoroughly happy and satisfied with her performance that it would have been almost cruel to have found any fault with it; and, as Rupert said, there was the fun of finding out whether any particular object stood for a ship, a warehouse, or a clump of trees, the fun being increased when the artist herself was not sure on the subject.

When they were a week out from Cape Town the weather changed and became wet and stormy. The rolling was dreadful, and great was the groaning and the lamentation when they were not allowed on deck for three whole days in succession.

The fourth day broke without wind, although the sea was still very rough. But, having gained permission to go on deck, the three younger boys were out, steadying themselves by anything which came handy, and vastly enjoying the fun of seeing other people lurching about in all sorts of funny antics, all involuntary ones of course.

Then suddenly something happened which might easily have been a tragedy. Rumble and Billykins were rounding the curve of one of the lower decks, when a heavy sea struck the vessel as she pitched nose first down into a deep valley of foam, and a stout old lady, who had been rashly trying to ascend the stairs to the upper deck, was hit by the shower of spray and knocked off the stairs. She must have fallen with great violence, and would probably have been very badly hurt, had it not been for Rumble, who ran in to her, as if she had been an extra big cricket ball which he was trying to catch. Of course she descended upon him with an awful smash, and nearly knocked the wind out of him, and equally of course they both rolled over together, and were drenched by the showers of spray. But he had broken her fall, and although she was badly shaken there were no limbs broken, as there must have been had she fallen with full force on to the slippery boards. A steward who was passing ran to pick up the old lady, while a passenger sorted Rumble out from under the old lady's skirts, and, draining some of the water out of him, held him up so that the air might revive him.

Meanwhile Billykins, who had been a horrified spectator of his brother's rash heroism, and had remained speechless until Rumble was picked up, burst into the very noisiest crying of which he was capable, and, standing with his legs very wide apart and his mouth as far open as it would go, howled his very loudest, the sound of his woe speedily bringing a crowd to see what was the matter.

"I don't think that he is very much the worse for his fall, only a little bit dazed by having the old lady come flop down upon him; but if he had not been there to break her fall, it is quite likely that she would have broken her neck," said the gentleman who had picked Rumble up, as he handed him over to the care of Nealie.

"Poor, poor boy, how frightened he must have been when she fell upon him!" cried Nealie, who thought that the whole affair was an accident, and had no idea of Rumble's bravery.

Then Billykins promptly stopped howling to explain, which he did in jerks, being rather breathless from his vocal efforts.

"Rumble saw her fall, and rushed in to save her. It was just splendid heroism—the sort that gets the Victoria Cross; but so dreadful hopeless you see, because she was so big, and she came down flop on the top of him, and he was just—just extinguished, you know, like the candle flame when we used to put the tin extinguishers on them when we lived at Beechleigh."

"I'll be all right in a minute, only my wind is gone," gasped Rumble, who looked rather flattened, and was not at all pleased to find himself momentarily famous.

The old lady's daughter, a thin, angular person with a long nose, rushed up at this juncture, and, seizing upon Rumble, hugged and kissed him in the presence of everyone, declaring that she would always love him for having saved her dear mother's life in such a noble fashion.

"I am wet through, Nealie; help me to get into dry clothes," panted Rumble, struggling to escape from this unexpected and wholly unwelcome embrace.

Nalie rose to the occasion, and swept him off to their own quarters, where Rupert met them and undertook the task of getting him rubbed down and into dry clothes as quickly as possible, while Nalie went back to the deck for news of the old lady.

Everyone was full of praises of Rumble's action in breaking the old lady's fall; but Nalie was secretly uneasy as to whether he had received more damage from the impact than had at first appeared. So, when she had been assured that Mrs. Barrow, who apparently weighed about fourteen stone, was only shaken, and not otherwise hurt, she hurried back again to satisfy herself that Rumble was sound in wind and limb.

She found Rupert hanging the wet garments up to drain, and was talking to him about Rumble, when the door of the boys' cabin was pushed open and they heard Rumble calling to them in a tone of such dismay that a sudden cold shiver went all over Nalie, making her turn white to the lips.

"Something is wrong; come along, Nalie," said Rupert curtly, and he turned to limp toward the door of the cabin, which stood ajar.

But Nalie passed him with a fleet tread, and, pushing open the door, stood on the threshold transfixed with surprise. It was not clear to her what she expected to see, her one thought being that Rumble must certainly have been much more hurt than they had imagined.

What she did see was Rumble sitting on the lower berth partly dressed, and holding a letter in his hand, a letter which had a stamp upon it which had not been through a post office, but that even at the first glance struck her as having a familiar look, a something she had seen before.

"Rumble, what is it? What is the matter, laddie?" she asked in the very tenderest tone of which she was capable; for there was that in his face which warned her the trouble was one of magnitude.

"I don't expect that you will any of you ever be able to forgive me, and I haven't a word to say in excuse, and however I came to be such a goat I can't think," he replied in a shaken tone as he held the envelope out for her to take.

But even now she did not understand, and only stared at it in a stupid fashion, then read the address aloud in a bewildered tone:

"DR. PLUMSTEAD,
"Hammerville,
"Clayton,
"New South Wales,
"Australia."

"What letter is it?" asked Rupert in a shocked voice. He was standing close to Nealie now, and looking to the full as amazed as she did herself.

"It is the letter that Mr. Runciman wrote to tell Father that we were to be sent out to him," replied Rumble in a hollow tone. "Don't you remember that we asked to be allowed to post it ourselves, just because we were so afraid that he would forget to write it unless we waited until it was done? And now it is just the same as if it had never been written at all."

Twice, three times, Nealie tried to speak, but no sound came, and she plumped down upon the berth beside Rumble with a shocked bewilderment upon her face which was dreadful to see.

"Don't look like that, Nealie; buck up, old lady, we'll find a way out of the muddle somehow," said Rupert, slapping her on the back, with a harsh laugh that had a weird sound; it was so far removed from merriment.

But Nealie only shook her head, as much as to say that it was quite beyond her power to do anything in the way of bucking up just then, and they were all three staring at each other in dismayed silence, when there came a rush of feet outside, and the door was flung open by Don, who was followed by Sylvia and Ducky, while Billykins, still snorting heavily, brought up the rear.

"Billykins told us how brave Rumble had been in saving the life of that fat old woman——" began Sylvia, then stopped suddenly, scared by the look on the faces of the three; then she asked in a hushed tone: "Oh, whatever can be the matter! Is Rumble very badly hurt?"

"I am not hurt at all, except in my feelings," replied Rumble, who was nursing his old jacket, as if it were a troublesome infant which he had to put to sleep.

"Was she horrid to you? And after you had saved her life, fourteen stone of it?" demanded Sylvia, with a stormy note in her tone.

"It is not the woman at all," here Rumble waved the old jacket with a tragic air. "The fault lies with me, and you had all better know about it at once, and if you decide to disown me for the future, I can't complain, for I deserve to be sent to Coventry for evermore."

"Oh, drop your figures of speech, and tell us in plain English what the trouble is all about!" exclaimed Sylvia impatiently. "Nealie looks as if she had seen a ghost, and Rupert is glum, so out with it, Rumble, old boy, and own up like a man."

"I have owned up," he answered gloomily, and again he waved the old jacket to and fro, then hugged it closely in his arms again. "When I changed my clothes I thought that I would put this jacket on, though it is rather tight across the back, and I always hate wearing it for that reason. I have not put it on since the day we all went down to the Paddock to ask Mr. Runciman to send us to Australia. We stopped eating cakes in the housekeeper's room, you remember, and then when he had written the letter he sent it to us to put in the post as we came home. It was given to me. I put it in my pocket, and here it is!"

Sylvia gasped as if a whole bucket of water had suddenly been shot over her from some unexpected quarter, and then she burst into a ringing laugh, and clapped her hands. "Oh, what a joke! Then I suppose that Father has not a notion that his family are on the way to make him happy?"

"That is about it, and whatever we can do to get out of the muddle is more than I can imagine," said Rupert in a strained tone, while his face looked pinched and worn from the burden of worry that had suddenly descended upon him.

"Do?" cried Sylvia. "Why, of course we shall just do as we are doing, and go straight forward, until we reach Hammerville, when we will walk in upon dear Father some fine evening, and announce our own arrival. Nothing could be simpler, and we shall give him the surprise of his life, bless his heart! There is no need to look so tragic that I can see."

"But we must tell the captain, and there will be a great fuss. He will very likely keep us on board ship until Father can reach Sydney to claim us," said Nealie in a voice of distress.

"We won't tell the captain; he is as meddlesome as an old woman!" cried Sylvia, who very much resented the commander's kindly meant endeavours to take care

of them.

"He would not let us go ashore at Cape Town, and I did so want to go to the top of Table Mountain, and see for myself what the tablecloth was made of," said Don in an aggrieved tone. His ideas of distance were rather vague, and he had an impression that half an hour's brisk walking from the docks at Cape Town would have landed him on the top of the mountain.

"No, we won't tell the captain, we certainly won't," put in Billykins, with a mutinous look on his chubby face. He had had his own views on the way in which he had meant to spend the time ashore, and having one shilling and threepence in his pocket, to spend as he chose, had laid out a pretty full programme for the occasion.

"We won't tell the captain; I don't like him, because he calls me Goosey instead of Ducky," pouted the youngest of the family, who had had her feelings very much hurt on more than one occasion, and was simply thirsting for revenge upon the disturber of her peace.

"Do you hear? The majority have decided on silence," said Sylvia triumphantly, as she sat down by the side of Nealie, and slipped her arm round her sister's waist.

"Oh, I don't know what to do, and it was dreadful of Rumble to forget!" cried Nealie, and at the reproach in her words Rumble fairly doubled up, muttering, in a resigned fashion:

"Lay it on, and spare not. There is one comfort about the beastly business, you cannot blame me more than I blame myself."

"It might have been worse," said Sylvia, who always championed Rumble through thick and thin. "And of course no one expects quite so much from a poet as from a more ordinary person. People with teeming ideas are always rather absent-minded I find; it is one of the penalties of the artistic temperament. I suffer from it myself, and Rumble is far cleverer than I am."

"I don't know about that; you have got the colour sense, even though you don't seem to get the hang of perspective," said Rumble, looking visibly cheered. "When I begin to sell my poems you shall have the money to have lessons in art, old girl, for I fancy you are worth developing."

"I hope I am," rejoined Sylvia, tossing her head with a saucy air. "But I am afraid that the process will be rather delayed if it has to wait until your poetry brings the money for doing it, for everyone says that there is no money in poetry. Now,

Nealie, darling, do cheer up and be happy; poor Rumple will have no peace at all while you look like that."

"I will try; but you must give me time. But I am so disappointed, for I had hoped that Father would be at Sydney to meet us," answered Nealie, with a sigh.



CHAPTER V

The End of the Voyage

Rumple found himself immediately popular, because of his prompt and spirited action in doing what he could to save the old lady. But, like a good many other people upon whom greatness descends, he had to pay a rather heavy price for his popularity, and when it came to being kissed by the old lady and her daughter every time they appeared on deck, he began to ask himself savagely if it were quite worth while to be regarded as a hero of the first class.

Two or three days of kissing and hugging were enough for him, and then he took to subterfuge, and whenever the old lady or her very angular but kindly daughter hove in sight, Rumple bolted like a frightened rabbit, taking to any sort of cover which came handy.

The stewards, entering into the joke of the thing, co-operated with great heartiness, and for the remainder of the voyage there was no more elusive person on board than Rumple Plumstead; so the old lady and her daughter were forced to lavish on the rest of the family the tenderness they felt solely for the boy, who loathed their indiscreet petting.

"Rupert, where is Rumple?" asked Nealie, coming on deck one afternoon a day or two before they expected to reach Fremantle.

"I haven't an idea. Come to think of it, I have not seen him since breakfast. Where can the young rascal have got to?" exclaimed Rupert, starting up in dismay. He had been so engrossed in a book all the morning that he had taken very little notice of what was going on around him. He had certainly had to intervene once in a spirited encounter between Don and Billykins, who had taken to what they called wrestling, but which in reality amounted to a lively round of punching each other black and blue. Both small boys were considerably upset at being stopped in this entirely novel diversion, and declared that Rupert was neither public-spirited nor sporting to put a veto upon it; but he was firm, and threatened to send one of them to bed if they did not desist, and so they had been forced to find some other occupation.

But where was Rumble?

Enquiry elicited the alarming fact that he had not been seen at lunch, and for a healthy boy, especially one with a Plumstead appetite, to be absent from a meal meant that something must be very wrong indeed.

An active search through the vessel was at once organized; but when, after half an hour of brisk hunting, no trace of Rumble could be found, Nealie grew seriously alarmed, a horrible dread coming into her heart that he had in some way tumbled overboard.

She was running along the lower deck in search of one of the officers, to whom she might tell her fear, when she almost tumbled into the arms of the jolly fat purser, who had been so kind to all the children during the weeks of voyaging.

"Oh, Mr. Bent, we have lost my brother Rumble; he has not been seen since breakfast, and I am most dreadfully afraid that he must have fallen overboard!" she cried, the sharp distress in her tone showing how keen was her anxiety.

"Tut, tut, Missy, he could not have done that in broad daylight without someone seeing him," replied the purser, who always treated Nealie as if she were no older than Rumble or Sylvia.

"Are you quite sure?" she asked anxiously.

"Quite! A big ship like this is all eyes in the daytime, you know, and to-day there have been men at work on the railings ever since breakfast, so there is no danger at all that anything of that sort can have happened. But I wonder where the young rascal can be? I seem to remember having seen him nipping round somewhere this morning. Let me see; what could I have been doing?" and the purser screwed up his face until there was nothing of his eyes visible.

"Oh, please try to think where it was that you saw him, and then we may be able to find him!" cried Nealie, clasping her hands in entreaty.

"Let me see." The purser opened his eyes and glared about him, as if he expected to find the record of the morning's doings chalked in big letters somewhere on the clean deck. "First thing after breakfast there was that affair of the linen having been miscounted. It is funny how some folks are born without any sense of number. Then there were the cook's lists to be gone through. I remember seeing the boy then, for he lent me a pencil when mine broke. Now, what was I doing after that?"

"Oh, make haste, Mr. Bent! Please make haste to remember!" pleaded Nealie,

feeling as if she would really have to take hold of this slow-witted man, and shake the information out of him if he did not hurry up a little.

"I've got it!" ejaculated Mr. Bent, slapping his sides with resounding whacks. "The next thing I did was to go down to the cold storage with the second officer. We must have been there for nearly an hour, for I know I was chilled through and through by the time we came up again, and I have not seen your brother since."

"Then I am quite sure that Rumble must be down in the cold-storage place, and he will be frozen stiff by this time. Oh, fly, Mr. Bent, and let him out, for think how awful his sufferings must be!" cried Nealie, seizing the purser by the arm to drag him along. She had been down in the cold storage herself, and shivered at the recollection of the Arctic chill of the place, although she had been hugely interested at seeing the stacks of frozen provisions which were there to be preserved for daily use on the voyage.

There was no need to tell Mr. Bent to hurry, as he strode away to his own particular den to get the keys, and then, with Nealie running close behind him, made his way down, down, down, until the storeroom corridor was reached.

The cold-storage rooms were at the far end, and when he thrust the key into the lock, Nealie could have screamed with the anguish of her keen apprehension.

Mr. Bent thrust open the door, and then both of them cried out in amazement, for the place was brilliant with electric light, and Rumble, covered from head to foot in hoar frost, as if he had just stepped out of the Arctic regions, was lifting boxes of butter from the shelves, and then lifting them back again, as hard as he could work.

"I'm about tired of this," he managed to drawl out in a would-be casual tone, and then he suddenly collapsed in a limp heap in Nealie's arms.

Quickly they lifted him out into the warmth of the corridor, and then Nealie started chafing his cold hands and face, while Mr. Bent replaced the butter boxes on the shelves, then, turning off the electric light, came out and locked the door behind him.

"Now I should like to know what monkey trick you were up to when you went and got yourself locked in a place like that?" he said in an angry tone as he bent over poor Rumble, unwinding a lot of sacking from the boy's shoulders, and slapping him vigorously to quicken circulation.

"Oh, you will hurt him dreadfully if you beat him like that, and I am quite sure

that he did not mean to do wrong!" burst out Nealie in red-hot indignation, as she pushed away those vigorously slapping hands, and gathered Rumples's cold, limp figure into a warm embrace.

"Bless you, Missy, I was not doing it to hurt him, only to make his blood flow quicker, and save him a bit of misery later on. If he has been in mischief, he has had to pay quite dearly enough for it, without any more punishment. It is lucky for him that the freezing plant is out of order to-day, and we have only been able to keep the place just down to freezing-point. If it had been as cold as it is sometimes, it might have been too late to save him, poor fellow," said Mr. Bent, pushing Nealie gently aside, and starting on his slapping with more vigour than before.

"I wasn't in mischief; I only bolted in there because the door was open, and I wanted to get clear of Miss Clarke, who was being shown round the storerooms by one of the officers," said Rumples feebly. "She always will kiss me, don't you know, and I just can't stand it. I was crouching behind a case of things at the farther end, when to my horror the light went out, and a minute later, before I could yell, the door slammed. I did yell then for all that I was worth, but I could not make anyone hear, and it was so long before I could grope my way to the door, for I was at the farther end, you see, and I turned silly with funk at the first."

"I don't wonder at that, poor darling!" murmured Nealie, lavishing endearments on him, which he accepted all in good part, although he had been so hotly resentful of Miss Clarke's openly expressed affection. She was the daughter of the fat old lady, and he disliked the pair of them so heartily that his one desire was to put as much distance as possible between them and himself at all times and in all places.

"Well, laddie, it is a good thing for you that you were born with your share of common sense, for you seem to have gone the right way to work to keep from being frozen," said Mr. Bent, as he rolled the sacking into a bundle and tossed it into a corner; then, slipping his arm round Rumples, lifted the boy to a standing posture.

But he would have promptly fallen again if they had not supported him on either side, for his feet were thoroughly chilled, and he was so tired that he seemed to have no strength at all.

"I was a long time finding the electric light, but when I did come upon it, and pressed the button, I felt ever so much better," said Rumples, as his rescuers

helped him to climb the stairs. "And I knew that I must not stand still; but there was so little room to walk about that I had to lift cases from the shelves and put them back again. I found that great piece of sacking, and when I had wrapped it round my shoulders I felt a little warmer; but it was more than a little nippy, I can tell you, and it made me think of the January mornings at Beechleigh, when the old pump used to freeze up and we undertook to thaw it out for Mrs. Puffin before breakfast," said Rumble wearily.

At this moment the others, headed by Sylvia, came rushing down upon them, and Rumble was at once overwhelmed with enquiries and congratulations. But Nealie was so concerned at his desperate weariness that she insisted on his going to bed at once.

"You must have some hot soup, too, and then you will get warm quickly and go to sleep," she said in the careful, elder-sisterly manner which always came uppermost when any of them were in any sort of difficulty.

"I don't want any soup or mucks of that kind, but I should be glad if I could have a piece of dry bread or some hard biscuits, for I do not mind admitting that I ate half a pound of butter to keep out the cold, and I feel rather greasy inside," said Rumble, puckering his face into a grimace as Rupert hustled him off to their cabin to put him to bed.

"What made you do that?" demanded Rupert sternly, for this partook of the nature of thieving, and the juniors had to be reprov'd for any lapse from strict morality.

"The Esquimaux eat blubber to keep out the cold, and as I had no blubber, and did not like to break open one of the lard pails, I just took the butter. Do you expect that Mr. Bent will mind?" asked Rumble anxiously. "I have got enough money to pay for it if he gets waxy, but of course I have had no lunch, and, seeing that the shipping company have got to keep me, I do not see that it matters much whether I eat half a pound of butter for my meal or whether I have two goes of meat and three of pudding. Hullo, who is that?"

The exclamation was caused by someone pounding on the door for admittance, and when Rumble found that the someone was the ship's doctor, great was his wrath at the coddling which Nealie had supposed to be necessary for him. But the doctor roared with laughter when he heard about the butter, and Rumble was so far mollified by his mirth as to be beguiled into laughing also, after which he was rolled in blankets and promptly went to sleep, not rousing again until the following morning, when he appeared to be none the worse for his adventure

among the ice.

But someone must have dropped a hint to the indiscreet Miss Clarke and her mother, because from that time onward they left Rumble in peace, so far as kissing was concerned, although they seemed to be just as fond of him as ever.

The seven were all getting just a little bit weary of voyaging when at length the boat entered the fine harbour of Sydney, and berthed among the other vessels at the Circular Quay.

Then, indeed, things became exciting, and although they knew that their father had not had the first letter which had been sent to him, there was still the probability that he had received a later letter from Mr. Runciman, and that he might be among the crowd who were waiting to board the liner when she came to her berth, beside the big vessel from Hong-Kong.

They were gathered in a group forward, and were eagerly scanning all that could be seen of the shore, when one of the stewards came hurrying up to say that a gentleman had come on board for Miss Plumstead, and was at that moment waiting to see her in the dining saloon.

"Oh, it must be dear Father; I am quite sure of it!" cried Nealie, and, seizing Ducky by the hand, she hurried away down to the big dining saloon, followed by the other five.

Very different the big room looked to-day from the time when they had seen it first. Then the tables were spread for a meal, and decorated with flowers and fruit; now everything was in confusion, the tables were bare, or heaped with the hand baggage of departing passengers, and there was an air of desolation over all, such as is seen in a house from which a family are flitting.

But Nealie had no eyes for details of this sort at such a moment, as she clattered down the steps, holding Ducky fast by the hand. When she reached the bend, from whence she had a full view of the room, she saw a tall, grey-haired man, very sprucely dressed, standing at the end of the third table.

"Oh, it is Father!" she cried, half-turning her head to let the others know; and then, taking the last three steps at a bound, and dropping her hold of Ducky's hand, she rushed with tumultuous haste along the end of the room, and flinging herself upon the man, who had turned at her approach, she cried joyfully: "Oh, my dear, dear father, how glad we are to see you!"

But even as her arms closed around his neck a chill doubt seized her, and the next moment the astonished gentleman had drawn himself away from her grasp,

saying hurriedly:

"My dear young lady, I am not your father."



CHAPTER VI

A Real Friend

"Oh, oh, I am so sorry——" began Nealie in breathless apology, but got no further, being at that moment swept aside by Sylvia, who fairly flung herself into the gentleman's arms, crying shrilly:

"Daddy, my darling Daddy, I should have known you anywhere, although I was such a tiny kiddy when you went away!"

Again the amazed stranger tried to protest; but although his lips moved, no sound was audible, for at this instant Don and Billykins reached him in company, and the impact of their embrace was sufficient to momentarily deprive him of the power of speech, while Rupert seized his left hand, sawing it up and down like a pump handle, and Rumpie patted him on the back, leaving Ducky no chance at all saving to dance round and round, yelling at the top of her voice.

"It is Father, dear Father, and he does not know his little Ducky at all!"

"Oh, hush, hush! We have made a mistake, and it is not dear Father at all," cried Nealie. And there was such genuine distress in her tone that the gentleman, who had been feeling decidedly ruffled at this boisterous onslaught, was at once sorry for her.

"Are you Miss Plumstead, and did you expect to meet your father here?" he asked kindly, while Sylvia slipped her arms from his neck and looked very confused, for it is not pleasant to rush about the world hugging the wrong people, and her blushes were a sight to see as she stammered out an incoherent apology for her blunder.

The boys had dropped away from him and stood in a bewildered group, while Ducky ceased her jubilant outcry, and it was left to Nealie to explain the situation and ask why it was that he had asked to see her.

"My name is Wallis, of the firm of Peek & Wallis, transport agents, Sydney," said the stranger as his hand stole up to settle his ruffled tie, which Sylvia's

greeting had half-pulled unfastened. "Mr. Melrose sent me a cable from Cape Town, asking me to meet this boat and to be of service to you in any way that I could. He said that he had given you a letter of introduction to my firm. Is that so?"

"Oh yes, and I have it here in my bag!" said Nealie, pulling open the little bag she wore slung from her shoulder and taking from it an envelope addressed to Messrs. Peek & Wallis.

Mr. Wallis looked relieved at the sight of the letter, as it made the position quite clear, despite its brevity, for it was really very short, and ran as follows:—

"Kindly supply Miss Plumstead with a horse and wagon for the journey to Hammerville, Clayton, and if she cannot pay you I will.

"Sincerely yours,

THOMAS MELROSE."

"But of course our father, who is a doctor at Hammerville, will send you the money for the horse and wagon when we reach him," said Nealie, with the proud little lift of her head which had its due effect on Mr. Wallis, who had a great respect for most things which were straight from England, and who had already decided that Nealie was, to use his own expression, "no ordinary young lady".

"Of course," echoed Mr. Wallis politely, but without anxiety. In any case his firm would not suffer, as Mr. Melrose had undertaken to see them paid, and so he was prepared to be very kind indeed to this family who had made the comical mistake of supposing him to be their father. "And now I suppose that you would like to go ashore at once and have a look at Sydney before you start on your journey?"

Nelialie hesitated and looked at Rupert, who, however, did not seem disposed to help her out; and so again it was she who had to do the explaining, which was quite right and proper, seeing that she was the eldest and had always mothered the others.

Then, because Mr. Wallis was elderly, and looked kind now that he had had some of the starch taken out of him by Sylvia's rapturous hugging, she decided that it would be better to take him into confidence concerning their dilemma.

"You see, it is like this," she said, boldly taking the plunge. "Captain Moore would not let us go ashore at Cape Town, because we were under his care, and we are so afraid that he will not let us disembark until Father comes to fetch us,

and we are not at all sure that Father knows we have come."

"You mean that he would not know the boat was in, or that he did not know by which boat you were to travel?" asked Mr. Wallis in perplexity; for to him the situation was certainly novel.

"We are not sure that he knows we are in New South Wales," said Nealie, speaking very slowly and distinctly, under the impression that Mr. Wallis must be either deaf or stupid, or perhaps a little of both. "Our guardian, Mr. Runciman, wrote to tell Father that we were being sent out here to him, and he gave us the letter to post; but by an accident it got no farther than my second brother's pocket. He is very poetical, and that of course makes him very absent-minded. We did not find the letter until we were some days away from Cape Town, and then, after a consultation, we decided that we would not cable from Perth and we would not tell the captain, but we would give dear Father the surprise of his life by walking in upon him one fine day."

"I should think that it would be a surprise, and it is possible that it may be more than a little inconvenient to him; for you see houses here are not so commodious and roomy as houses in England, and there are six—no, seven of you," murmured Mr. Wallis, wondering what Dr. Plumstead would feel like when this troop of jolly, hearty young people walked in upon him. Still, confused as he had been by the onslaught of their riotous greeting, Mr. Wallis could not help admitting to himself that it had been very delightful to feel the clasp of Sylvia's arms about his neck, and he could not help wishing that he had children of his own to love him in that tempestuous but wholly delightful fashion.

"I expect that Father will be so charmed to see us that he will not think anything about the inconvenience of our numbers," put in Sylvia confidently; but a chill little wonder crept into the heart of Nealie as to whether it might not have been better to have waited in England until their father had said whether he really wished for them to come and join him in this distant land. However, it was too late now for regrets of this sort, and the only thing to be done was to go forward, and to be happy while they could. It was this feeling which made her say to Mr. Wallis:

"Do you think that Captain Moore will be willing to let us go off the ship with you? We are so very tired of being on board."

"I should think you must be; that is how most people feel by the time they reach Sydney. We are so far away from Europe, you see, and a long voyage is bound to be tedious," he answered kindly; and then he told them that he would go and

interview the captain at once about the matter of their going. Meanwhile they were to wait in the dining saloon for him, as he would certainly not find it easy to hunt for them in the confusion which at present reigned on board.

"What a dear he is, bless his heart!" cried Sylvia, dancing lightheartedly up and down between the tables; then seizing upon Billykins for a partner she whirled round and round, while Don and Ducky joined forces to take their share of the fun, and Rumble bobbed, bowed, then spun round and round without any partner at all, and dancing with more energy than discretion was constantly falling foul of the chairs, which were screwed to the floor and swung round upon pivots.

Only Nealie and Rupert stood apart, talking rather anxiously about the future and wondering whether their scanty stock of money would suffice for all the needs of the journey. Rupert had been rather lamer than usual during the last few days, owing to an accidental slip on the stairs. This lameness was one of the private worries of Nealie, for she did not believe that he need be lame if only the weak foot and ankle were properly treated. However, her father would doubtless see that the dear eldest brother had all the care that was necessary, and so until they reached Hammerville she would just have to leave the matter where it was.

Mr. Wallis, coming back from his interview with the captain, thought that he had never seen a family more radiantly happy than this company of boys and girls who were skipping and prancing up and down the long room, bumping against each other in sheer gleefulness of heart.

But at sight of him they instantly subsided into outward quiet, coming crowding about him to know how his errand had sped.

"The captain says that he will be very pleased to let you go ashore with me——" began Mr. Wallis, and then found he could get no further until the noise of a rousing three times three, led by Rumble, had died away, for he could not make himself heard above such a noise.

"No more cheering until Mr. Wallis has finished, please," said Nealie firmly, as she laid her hand in a restraining fashion on the shoulder of Rumble.

"I was going to say," continued Mr. Wallis, "that I should have been very delighted to have taken you out to Mosman's Bay, where my home is, but unfortunately the house is at present shut up, as my wife is away visiting her mother at Auckland, in New Zealand, and I am staying at my club in the city, where no ladies are admitted; but I can put you up at a nice quiet hotel where you will be quite comfortable; indeed I told Captain Moore that I would do so."

"You are most kind, and we are very grateful," said Nealie in a rather hesitating tone. "But I am afraid that we cannot afford to stay much at hotels, for Mr. Melrose told us they were very expensive, and if we are not careful our money will not last us until we reach Hammerville. There are so many of us, you see, and we all want so much to eat that our food bills must of necessity be very expensive."

Mr. Wallis waved his hand with a deprecating air. "Of course, of course, and it is really a very fine thing to be hungry; I often wish that I could get up a vigorous appetite myself, but I can't. I hope that while you are in Sydney you will consider yourselves my guests; it will be a very great pleasure to show you some of the sights of the city. Suppose you stay over to-morrow—we can get a large amount of sightseeing into that time—and then the wagon shall be ready for you to make an early start. The captain understands that you are to be my guests, and that is why he is willing to let you come ashore with me. Please collect the baggage that you want to take with you, then I will give orders for the remainder of your luggage to be sent to the hotel. We ought to get away as quickly as we can, so that no time may be lost."

There was no stopping the cheers this time, and Nealie put her fingers in her ears because of the noise, but Mr. Wallis looked actually pleased at the commotion he had evoked; and then there was a great rush for the cabins, where each one had a bag or a bundle ready.

"What a delightful sensation it is to find firm ground under one's feet!" cried Nealie, as she walked with a springy step by the side of Mr. Wallis.

"I expect it is; but all the same you will be wise not to do too much walking at first, for land is apt to prove very trying to the person who has just arrived after a long voyage," replied Mr. Wallis, who had noticed how lame Rupert was, and guessed that the boy would rather suffer any torture than admit that walking was painful. He had his reward in the look of dumb gratitude Rupert gave him when a roomy carriage had been secured, and they were all packed in as tight as sardines in a tin, with Don and Billykins sharing the driver's perch, and making shrill comments as they went along.

First of all they were driven to the hotel, which was a very homely sort of place, with a motherly manageress, who would insist on kissing the girls, although happily she stopped short at that, leaving the boys with a mere handshake. She was English herself, so she said, and just ached for a sight of the old country, which made her welcome so warmly everyone who came straight from England.

Mr. Wallis wanted them to have luncheon then, but as they all stoutly declared that they could not touch a mouthful of food of any kind, and as it was really early for lunch, he took them off, on a tram this time, to see something of the city.

He took them along George Street, which, following as it does the lines of an old bush trail, winds and wriggles in a way that was more suggestive of Canterbury in England than of a great colonial city. Sometimes they rode in electric trams, sometimes they had a carriage chartered for their use, and then again it was an omnibus which had the honour of their patronage, and Nealie privately wondered how much it cost Mr. Wallis to take them round that day, for he would let them pay for nothing themselves, declaring that he would not have his privilege as their host infringed in any way.

They had lunch in a grand hotel in Wynyard Square, and afterwards went to see the residence of the Governor-General; but imposing as were the battlemented walls and magnificent staterooms, the greatness of the place was not so impressive to the seven as was the General Post Office, and they were made completely happy when Mr. Wallis took them right to the top of the building, so that they might look out over the city from the windows of the room under the clock chamber of the great tower.

It was small wonder that they were so tired, after such a round of sightseeing, that they had to decline Mr. Wallis's kind proposal to take them to a dramatic entertainment, which was being given that night in the town hall.

Ducky, Don, and Billykins were all three so fast asleep, when they arrived back at the hotel where they were staying, that one of the waiters had to be called to help carry the sleepers in and up to their bedrooms, and as they could not be roused for supper they were just left to have their sleep out, and the four elders had cakes and coffee on the balcony overlooking Pitt Street.

"I wonder what dear Father is thinking about to-night," said Sylvia dreamily, as she sat in a wicker chair, with her feet upon another, feeling at peace with all the world.

"Perhaps his ears are burning, and he is wondering who is talking about him; although a man with seven children may always feel pretty certain that one or more of the seven have got their thoughts upon him," replied Rumble, who was nibbling the end of a stumpy pencil and lovingly fingering a dirty little notebook. He was just then very undecided as to whether he would write a sonnet to his father or start on a history of Sydney. Mr. Wallis had told him so many stories of

the old Botany Bay days that he felt quite primed for a very ambitious book indeed.

"I am wondering who is going to drive the horse," said Rupert, whose foot was aching badly, and consequently making him feel very depressed and unfit to cope with difficulties which might be looming in the near distance.

"I shall, unless you especially yearn for the business," said Nealie quietly, and then her hand stole into his with such a complete understanding of how he felt at that moment that he blessed her in his heart, and said to himself that she was a brick of a girl, and that it was worth while to be her brother.

Somehow Nealie always understood without words when Rupert felt as if life were something too big to be lived, and then she would fling herself into the breach, and let him feel that she was quite ready to hold up the heavier end of every burden.

"The poor animal will not cherish any illusions about the charms of running away after it has had the pleasure of dragging us and our baggage for a few score miles. I think that we ought to have a pair," put in Sylvia in a dreamy tone; she was getting very sleepy, only it seemed too much trouble to go to bed just yet.

"Oh, we cannot have two horses; think what a worry it would be!" exclaimed Nealie. "Mr. Wallis said that one would be quite sufficient, as we did not need to travel very fast. He said that one horse, if it were well fed, could always draw a ton weight on a decent road, and we should not weigh a ton, I should hope."

"Not far short of it, by the time baggage and wagon have been weighed in, as well as the seven of us," said Rupert, and then he called out that Rumble was asleep. The first paragraph of the projected History of Sydney had been too much for the aspiring young author, who was snoring with his nose on the grubby little notebook.

"We cannot carry him to bed, and I am afraid that the waiters will form a very poor opinion of us if we ask them to do it, so we must wake him if we can," said Sylvia, jumping up and starting on a vigorous shaking of her younger brother.

"It is of no use, dear; he will not wake up, and you and I must just drag him into his room as best we can," said Nealie, interposing to prevent Rumble from being shaken and bumped any more.

"What a set of children ours are!" cried Sylvia impatiently. "If once they drop asleep there never seems any possibility of waking them before the next morning."

"It is not more than a year ago that Mrs. Puffin and I carried you up to bed one night when you had fallen asleep downstairs," replied Nealie, with a laugh. "I remember that we stuck fast in the narrow part just outside Aunt Judith's door, and we could not get up or down; indeed it looked not improbable that we might have to leave you there until morning, climbing over your sleeping form every time we wanted to pass up or down. Then Mrs. Puffin had a happy inspiration, and, acting upon it, we slid a sheet under you, and, Rupert coming to our help, we dragged you up the last four steps by sheer force of arm."

"I remember it," laughed Sylvia. "That was the time when I dreamed that I was tobogganing down the Rocky Mountains, and when I woke up next morning, and found how badly I was bruised, I thought that it really must be true, and no dream at all. How shall we carry him, Nealie? Will it be easier to join hands under him, or to haul him out feet first?"

"Feet first, I think," she answered. "It is not safe to join hands under sleeping persons, because you have no hand free to catch them if they sway. If you will carry his feet, I will take his shoulders, and we will soon have him on his bed. Then I think we had better go to bed also, for it would be tragic if we fell asleep; we should have to stay where we are all night, because there is no one strong enough to carry us;" and Nealie's laugh rang out, as if she had not a care in the world, and was promptly echoed by Rupert and Sylvia.



CHAPTER VII

The One-armed Man

The seven had hardly finished breakfast next morning when Mr. Wallis arrived. Surely never had an elderly gentleman taken to sightseeing with the avidity displayed by this one, and every one of the seven Plumsteads voted him to be "a jolly decent sort".

His first move this morning was to take them across the harbour in a steam ferry to a small jetty opposite the Circular Quay, where they transhipped to a tiny tug which took them to Farm Cove, round Clark Island, and past the other sights of that most wonderful harbour; and all the time he told them thrilling stories of the early days of the Colony. He told them of the voyage of Captain Phillips, who set out from Portsmouth in May, 1787, and arrived, with eleven ships, in Botany Bay in January, 1788, only to find that Botany Bay was by no means what it had been represented, and, instead of the land being a series of beautiful green meadows sloping gently up from the shore, there was nothing but swamp and sand.

"What an awful voyage! I don't think that we will complain about our few weeks on board after that!" cried Sylvia, who was sitting close to Mr. Wallis on the deck of the tug, while Rupert sat on the deck at his feet and Rumble hovered in the background, all of them intent on getting all the information they could about the new and wonderful country to which they had come.

"The voyage now is nothing but a pleasure trip compared with what it used to be in the days of the old sailing vessels," said Mr. Wallis, who was immensely flattered at the attention given to his stories. He had always been very fond of telling people things, only the trouble was that so few seemed to care for what he had to tell; but these children simply hung on his words, and so he was inspired to do his very best to satisfy their thirst for information.

"Botany Bay is south of Sydney Harbour, isn't it?" asked Rumble, producing the dirty notebook and preparing to take notes on a liberal scale.

"Yes, and because it is so open to the east there is no protection from the Pacific swell. Captain Phillips saw that it would be impossible to found a colony there, and so he set out with one of his ships to find a better harbour farther along the coast," went on Mr. Wallis. "And it is said that a sailor named Jackson discovered the entrance to what is now known as Sydney Harbour, and it was named Port Jackson in honour of him."

"I wish that I could discover something that could be named after me," said Rumble with a sigh. "Port Plumstead, or even Mount Plumstead, would have an uncommonly nice sound, and I do want to be famous."

"There is fame of a sort within the reach of everyone," answered Mr. Wallis quietly.

"What sort of fame?" asked Rupert quickly. He had been very silent before, leaving it to the others to do most of the talking.

Mr. Wallis smiled, and his middle-aged countenance took on a look of lofty nobility as he said slowly: "We can each impress ourselves on our fellows in such a way that so long as life lasts they must remember us because of some act or acts for the good of suffering humanity, and that, after all, is the fame that lasts longest and is at the same time most worth having. We can't all be explorers, you know, for there would not be enough bays, mountains, and that sort of thing to go round; but there are always people in need of help, pity, and comfort."

"I wanted to be a doctor," said Rupert in a voice that was more bitter than he guessed. "But who ever heard of a lame doctor? Everyone would be howling for the physician to heal himself."

"There is no reason why you should not be a doctor that I can see: not if you do not mind hard work that is," said Mr. Wallis. "I have known lame doctors and hump-backed doctors too; indeed one's own disability would serve to make one all the more keen on doing one's best for other people. In the Colony, too, there is not the money bar that exists in the old country, because anyone can rise from the gutter here to any position almost that he may choose to occupy, and you are not in the gutter by any means."

"Not quite," replied Rupert with a laugh, and a lift of his head like Nealie.

The tour of the harbour took so long that they did not get back to the city until the afternoon, and then their kind host carried them off to tea at the Botanical Gardens, which were one of the finest sights that any of them had seen. Ducky

fairly screamed with delight at the lovely flowers, while Don and Billykins could hardly be induced to leave the ornamental waters where the water fowl congregated looking for food.

Nealie and Mr. Wallis came in search of them when tea was ready, and found them absorbed in watching a toucan from America and a rhinoceros hornbill from Africa, which appeared to have struck up a friendship from the fact that they were both aliens.

"Come to tea, boys; you can inspect those creatures later if you want to," said Mr. Wallis.

"I say, Nealie, what does the toucan want to have such a long bill for?" asked Billykins, slipping his arm through Nealie's as they walked back to the tearooms together.

"Perhaps he did not want to have a long bill, but having it must needs make the best of it," she answered, with a laugh, then suddenly grew grave with pity and concern as a man with his right coat sleeve pinned across his breast passed them at the place where the path grew narrow. They all knew that for some reason it always made her sad to see a one-armed man, although she took no especial notice of people who had been so unfortunate as to lose a leg. Mindful of this fact, Billykins was trying to divert her attention by talking very fast about what he had seen; but twisting his head round to see if the maimed stranger was leaving the gardens or taking the other path which led by a picturesque bridge round to the other entrance to the tearooms, he was surprised to see him stop and speak to Mr. Wallis, who was walking behind with Don.

"Did you see that man with one arm, who passed us just now and spoke to me?" said Mr. Wallis, joining Nealie and walking by her side.

"Yes, I saw him," she replied, her voice rather fainter than usual, while some of the fine colour died out of her cheeks.

"His is a most interesting and unusual case," went on Mr. Wallis. "He is one of our very rich men now, and the funny part of it is that he declares he owes all his prosperity to the loss of his limb, which, but for a mistake of the doctor's, he need not have lost at all."

"What do you mean?" she asked, stopping short in the path and staring at him with parted lips, her face so ghastly white that he asked her anxiously if she felt ill.

"No, no, it is nothing, thank you, but I want to hear about that man. It sounds

most awfully interesting; and won't you tell me what his name is?" she said, turning such a wistful gaze upon him, that it seemed to him there must have been some sorrow in her life, although she laughed in such a cheery, lighthearted way as a rule.

"Reginald Baxter. He is English, and came out to this country about six or seven years ago. His people are very aristocratic, but poor as church mice, and they were so terribly upset at his disaster they practically cast him off; but he seems to have no false pride himself and no unnecessary notions of his own importance; but he is a veritable king of finance——"

"What is that?" demanded Don; but Billykins was watching Nealie with a close scrutiny, and he had his fists clenched tightly as if he were meditating some sort of revenge upon the innocent Mr. Wallis for the pain he was giving her in talking about the one-armed man.

"A king of finance is a man who has a natural gift for managing money and making it increase. I should not wonder if you develop a cleverness in that way yourself when you are a little older," said Mr. Wallis, who was a keen student of human nature and had already amused himself by mentally forecasting the future of the seven.

"Perhaps I shall," answered Don stolidly. "Anyhow I don't mean to be poor when I grow up, for I shall just go without things until I get a lot of money saved, and Mr. Runciman used to say that money made money, and if a man could save one hundred pounds the next hundred would save itself."

"Well done, Mr. Runciman, that is sound philosophy!" said Mr. Wallis, and was going to expound the art of money making still further when there came a sudden interruption from Billykins.

"Can't you talk about something else, please? You have made Nealie cry by going on so about that one-armed man. She never can bear to talk about them, and you didn't see that she did not like it," he said in a shrill and very aggrieved tone.

"Miss Plumstead, I am truly sorry. I had no idea that I was saying anything to pain you. Please forgive me!" said Mr. Wallis in a shocked tone, for Nealie's face was covered with her handkerchief, and by the heave of her shoulders it was easy to see that she was crying bitterly.

"Oh, it is nothing, quite nothing, and I am very silly!" she said nervously. "But somehow I never can bear to see men who have lost their limbs. It is so sad and

hopeless, because, of course, they can never be the same again, and life must be so very sad."

Mr. Wallis laughed in a cheerful manner. "I don't think that you would consider Reginald Baxter a very sad man if you knew him. As I said before, he looks upon the loss of his arm as his entrance into freedom, and it would be hard to find a happier man, I should think. But let us go in and find some tea, and think no more about such matters."

Tea was such a merry function that no one had much time to notice that there was something wrong with Nealie, although she was so very quiet that Rupert asked her once if she did not feel well.

"Oh yes, I am quite well, thank you; only perhaps a little tired," she replied, smiling at him in a rather wistful fashion; and then, as Sylvia claimed his attention, he forgot about it, and there was so much to see and to hear, with so many details of to-morrow's journey to discuss, that it is not wonderful he did not even remember Nealie had said she was tired.

Later in the evening, when they were back at the hotel, the younger ones had gone to bed, and Mr. Wallis had gone away after bidding them a most affectionate good night, Nealie said abruptly: "There is something you ought to know, Rupert, that I have always hated to tell you."

"Then don't tell it," put in Sylvia lazily. "I think that half the misery of the world comes through having to do unpleasant things, such as going to bed when you want to sit up, and in having to get up by candlelight on a dark morning in winter when you would far rather take your breakfast in bed."

"What is it? A trouble of some sort?" asked Rupert, with a start, for he was remembering Nealie's low spirits at teatime and wondering where the trouble came in.

"Yes," said Nealie shortly, and then hesitated as if not sure where to begin.

"Well, you can enjoy it together, if it must be told, but I am going to bed, for it seems to me almost like a sacrilege to spoil such a beautiful day as this has been with even a hint of anything unpleasant," said Sylvia, getting out of her easy chair in a great hurry. Then she said in quite a pathetic tone, as she kissed Rupert: "I wonder when we shall have easy chairs to sit in again; don't you?"

"I don't see that it matters very much; I am not gone on that sort of thing myself," he replied briefly; and then he turned to Nealie, asking in a tone of grave concern, as Sylvia hurried away to bed: "Is it anything about Father,

Nealie?"

"Yes," she said faintly. "That is to say, it is about the trouble that came before Ducky was born; you remember it?"

"I never knew more about it than that he made a mistake, some medical blunder, for which he would have to live more or less under a cloud for the remainder of his professional life. I thought it was all that any of us knew, and Aunt Judith hated to have it mentioned." Rupert's tone was fairly aggressive now, for he was quite abnormally sensitive on this subject of his father's disgrace, which had indirectly cost his mother her life and had plunged the family into poverty, and bereft them of their father also.

"Mrs. Puffin told me all about it one day soon after Aunt Judith was taken ill," said Nealie, her voice quivering now with emotion, for it was terrible to her to have to talk of this thing which had thrown such a shadow over their lives.

"How did she know?" demanded Rupert hotly, thinking how hateful it was that a servant should know more about their private skeleton than they knew themselves.

"Aunt Judith told her," replied Nealie; and then she burst out hotly: "But indeed there is nothing to look so shocked about in the affair, Rupert. If Father did make a mistake, it was not so serious as it might have been; and I think that it was altogether wrong to hush it up as it has been. There are some things which are all the better for being told, and I am quite sure that this is one of them."

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely. "I should think that a mistake of that kind should be buried as deep as possible, for who would be likely to trust a doctor who might make blunders that might cost a man his life?"

"It was not a life-or-death blunder in that sense, but only one of maiming," said Nealie hastily. "Father wanted to take off a man's arm to save his life; but the family, and I suppose the man himself, would not hear of it, for the man was heir to someone's property, an awful pile it was; and the someone—she was a woman—said that her money should never go to a man who was maimed. So of course the man's family would not hear of it, and they would not have another doctor called in either; and things went on, the poor man getting worse and worse, until one day Father declared that he would throw up the case, because he would not be responsible for the man's life. Then the man said that it could be taken off if Father liked, only it must be done without his people knowing anything about it, which was easy enough, seeing that he was being nursed at his lodgings. Father sent for another doctor to come and administer the chloroform, and he performed

the operation himself, as the man was too bad to be moved eight miles to the nearest hospital. There was a frightful week after that, when Father simply gave up everything to pull the poor fellow through. He did it too, and the relatives did not know until he was out of danger that the arm had been amputated."

"Whew, what a story!" said Rupert, mopping his forehead, on which the perspiration stood in great beads. "I think that Father was a hero, because he acted up to his principle—the true doctor principle—of saving life at no matter what cost to himself. But I don't mind admitting, now that I know the truth, that I have always been afraid of hearing that story, because I had got the impression that there was something really disgraceful behind."

"Poor Father has had to suffer as bitterly as if he had made the most ghastly blunder imaginable," said Nealie sadly. "The man's people had a lot of influence, although they were not really wealthy, and when they found out that the arm had been taken off they simply hounded Father down as if he were a criminal. He was boycotted in every direction, and in the end he had to get out of his practice in a hurry. Then Ducky was born, and Mother died; and there would have been no home for us at all if Aunt Judith had not opened her house to take us in."

"Poor Father!" murmured Rupert, and then he thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and sat staring at the floor, frowning his blackest, until, a sudden thought striking him, he sat up straight, and asked abruptly: "What made you dig all that up to-day, after keeping it to yourself so long?"

"Because I met the man whose arm Father cut off," replied Nealie quietly.

"You did? Where?" demanded Rupert savagely, and looking as if he would like to go and have it out with the man there and then.

"A one-armed man passed us in the Botanical Gardens, and Mr. Wallis told me that a doctor had cut off his arm by mistake, and that the man's name was Reginald Baxter; then I knew that it must be the man on whose account Father had to suffer so badly."

"Did he—did he look very poor?" asked Rupert in a hesitating manner; for if the man had to lose his inheritance as a penalty for losing his arm, it did seem as if the poor fellow should be pitied.

"He looked as well off as other people, that is to say, he was dressed in an ordinary way; but Mr. Wallis told me that he was one of the richest men in the city—a king of finance, he said he was," replied Nealie.

Rupert gave a long whistle, and then rose to his feet, yawning widely. "So Father

didn't balk the business so badly after all!" he said, and then went to bed.



CHAPTER VIII

The Start

"I say that this is just ripping!" cried Rumble joyously.

He was sitting under the tilt of a light wagon with Rupert, the two small boys, and Ducky, while Nealie and Sylvia occupied the post of honour in front, and guided the steps of the big horse which was to draw the wagon to Hammerville.

Nealie held reins and whip in quite a professional style, and if she was nervous she took good care to say nothing about it. She had, before starting from the yards of Messrs. Peek & Wallis, ably demonstrated her ability to manage a horse by unharnessing this very animal and leading it into the stable. Then leading it out again she had harnessed it with her own hands, backed it carefully into the shafts, and finished the processes of hitching to in a smart and workmanlike manner.

The others wanted to assist her; but as she had to take the responsibility, and sign the books of the company, she preferred to do the whole thing herself, although she promised that one or more of them should always help her at the harnessing and unharnessing when they were on the journey.

"Yes, it is ripping!" echoed Sylvia. "But do you know, I was simply shaking with nervousness when Nealie was harnessing, for I was so afraid that she would make some awful blunder, and that they would refuse to let us have the horse and wagon, for I knew that I could not have stood the test as she did; and then, too, these colonial horses seem to have such a good opinion of themselves, and they carry their heads with a swagger that is entirely different from the meek, downtrodden air of the Turpins, and Smilers, and Sharpers of the old country; and their names are as bumptious as themselves. Fancy a horse being named Rockefeller! I vote that we call the dear creature Rocky for short. What do you say?"

"Not a bad idea!" cried Nealie, who was flushed and triumphant at having passed the test imposed on her by Mr. Wallis before he would allow her to take the

responsibility of the horse and wagon. Rupert's lameness had been the bar to his being in charge, and if Nealie, or, failing her, Sylvia, had been unable to harness and unharness without danger to themselves, then it would have been necessary to send a driver with them, which would not merely have added to the expense, but would have imposed a most uncomfortable restraint upon them.

Mr. Wallis had sent a reliable man to see them clear of the city and beyond the area of the electric trams; then, once out in the country, and provided with a map of the route to be traversed, the driver bade them good morning, and they were absolutely on their own.

"I wonder how far we shall get to-night?" said Rupert, who was in charge of the map, and had been promptly nicknamed the "route boss" by the others.

"We ought to get to Kesterton—Mr. Wallis said so," answered Rumble, who had charge of the provisions, and was at that moment sitting upon the grub box, which had been thoughtfully filled for the start by Mr. Wallis.

"I don't mind where we get to by night—no, I mean sundown, for that is what Australians say—but I do hope it will soon be time to open the grub box, for I am getting most fearfully hungry, and I expect the horse is hungry too," said Ducky, who was in high feather this morning, and full of the oddest little jokes, with quips and cranks of all sorts. She had kept up a fire of small jokes with Don and Billykins ever since the start, for she was wildly excited because she was going to see her father, who of course could not possibly know her until he was told who she was.

"You can have food now, and I know there are some lovely sandwiches on the top of the box, for I saw the woman at the shop pack them into their place above those tins of tongue," said Nealie; "but I have had strict orders to feed Rocky only at sunrise, noon, and sundown, and the noon meal is to be a slight one, and I am going to obey orders."

"How shall we get the horse and wagon back from Hammerville to Sydney? Will it have to be put on the rail?" asked Rumble, who had not heard, or else had forgotten, the final instructions which had been given to his sister.

"We have to hand it over to the nearest agent of the company, and he lives about twenty miles from Hammerville on the nearest point of the railway," replied Nealie.

"Do you mean that the railway does not go nearer than twenty miles from Hammerville?" cried Sylvia. "Why, the place must be quite at the back of

beyond!"

"That is just about where it is, my dear; and if you thought that it was going to be a second Sydney, why, you are in for a pretty big disappointment, I am afraid," said Rupert, who was still poring over the map. "Hammerville is a mining place, although it is not quite clear to me yet what kind of mining is done there, and it seems to have sprung into existence within the last six or seven years. This Gazetteer affair says that it is a very healthy place, and bound to develop into a city of the first importance; only, so far as I can see, it is not very big yet, though doubtless it will receive a mighty impetus of growth when it has the honour of sheltering us. Only I don't mean to stay there very long;" and as he spoke Rupert folded up the map, putting it in his pocket with a satisfied slap, then sat looking out between the shoulders of Nealie and Sylvia, a happy smile curving his lips.

Life had taken on a new aspect for him since the real truth of his father's story had been made known to him, and already he had made up his mind that he was going to be a doctor, if by hard work he could pass the preliminary tests and win a scholarship that would let him climb the ladder of learning without expense to his father. Mr. Wallis had told him the way to set about obtaining his heart's desire, and it would not be a little thing which would turn him back, now that he knew there had been no real dishonour in his father's professional downfall. While the others ate sandwiches, and chattered like magpies about what they would do when the night camp was made, Rupert sat absorbed in day-dreams, building castles in the air, and making up his mind as to how he would go to work in good earnest directly Hammerville was reached.

The horse was good and fresh, the road was plain before them, and Nealie forged ahead so intent on her business that she paid little heed to Rupert's silence or the noisy chatter of the others.

The day was very hot, and they rested the horse for two hours in the middle of the day, unharnessing the big creature, and washing his face with as much care as if he had been a human being; then, after he had had the regulation amount of water, he was tied to a tree and fed, after which the seven had a merry meal from that well-filled grub box and some tea from a real billy, which they boiled over a fire of sticks that had been gathered by Don and Billykins.

The suburbs of Sydney extend so far that they could not be said to be free of them yet; there were pleasant villas with ornamental grounds and a riotous wealth of flowers dotted here and there along the road. Great stretches of land were under vegetable cultivation, and the seven had been vastly interested to see

Chinamen with long pigtailed hanging down their backs walking up and down between rows of potatoes, peas, and cauliflowers, letting in water from the irrigation channels, and turning it this way or that with the twist of a naked foot.

The noonday halt was on a patch of ground just off the road, which looked like private land with the fence broken down; but no one came to complain of their resting there, while there was water and shade, and the spot seemed to be made on purpose for their requirements.

"What a jolly place this would have been for the night camp! I doubt if we shall find a spot so suitable when evening comes. What a pity we cannot stay here!" said Sylvia regretfully; the heat had made her lazy, and it did not seem worth while to go farther and to fare worse when they had such a lovely spot to rest in.

"We ought to do twenty miles a day at the very least, and we have not done more than ten as yet, so we must push on a little farther," replied Nealie, standing up and stretching her arms above her head. Quite privately she was saying to herself that she would love to camp just then and there, for between sightseeing and excitement she was feeling rather worn out. But it did not take much arithmetic to know that if they only went ten miles in a day's journey they would be nearly a month on the road, and at that rate their money would certainly not hold out, for there were seven of them to feed, and even the horse would cost money for food later on, as the animal would need corn or oatmeal to keep it in good form for drawing the wagon.

So she resolutely put away the temptation to camp at that most convenient spot, and, calling Rumble to help her harness, she set about the preparations for a start.

The zest of travel had gone from all of them, however, and they went forward in languid silence, while the heat and the dust seemed literally to choke them. Then came a long hill, which appeared to stretch for miles in front of them.

"I am going to walk for a time," said Nealie, as she sprang down and went to the head of the horse, and the others tumbled out also, except Rupert and Ducky, and they trailed along in the little shade cast by the side of the wagon, and declared that it was less tiring to walk in the dust than to be cooped up under the tilt of the wagon.

"We ought to be looking for a camping place soon, for of course we shall be rather longer getting things into shape on the first night," said Nealie, and then Rumble and Sylvia begged to be allowed to go forward and find a place which seemed suitable for the purpose, and on their promising not to leave the road,

Nealie said they might go.

The way still led upward, and between the trees they could still get glimpses of the waters of the wide harbour, although a few miles farther on the road would turn inland, and then they would have to bid goodbye to the sea.

Billykins trudged along by the side of Nealie, doing valiant things in the matter of leading the horse, but Don trotted on just in front, looking for a camping ground, which he found presently in a little hollow by the side of the road, not far from a house, where water could be begged for themselves, and also for the horse: a great convenience this, because they seemed to have left the region of little roadside streams, and they had seen no water since noon.

"I wonder why Sylvia and Rumble do not come back. Do you think that they can have lost their way?" Nealie asked Rupert, when he came to help her unharness the horse, after the wagon had been drawn into position at the side of the road.

"If they have, they will soon find it again when they turn round to come back," said Rupert in a casual tone; but secretly he was very much worried because they had not come back, and would promptly have gone in search of them if his foot had not ached so much as to make walking out of the question.

Don, Billykins, and Ducky worked very hard at getting supper ready, but everyone was more or less anxious, and no one really enjoyed things, until, just as they were going to sit down to supper without them, the wanderers appeared. They were very tired, and dreadfully shamefaced at having stayed away so long that all the burden of supper preparations was thrown on the others.

"We don't mind that; only we were so worried because you were away so long," replied Nealie, who had been looking rather white and worn, but who was smiling now that the worry was at an end.

The night was delightfully fine, and they grew very merry as they sat round the supper fire. It really seemed a shame to turn in; but, mindful of the early start which would have to be made next morning, Nealie said they really must go to bed.

It was one thing to talk of turning in and quite another to do it, however. The three girls were going to sleep on the floor of the wagon, but when the mattress was unrolled there seemed no room at all, and so much twisting and turning was necessary, before there was room for the three of them to lie down, that a good part of the night was taken up in getting comfortable; indeed they might not have been able to sleep at all if it had not been for Sylvia's brilliant idea of lying in

what she called the head and toe position; that is to say, her head and Nealie's feet shared the same end of the mattress, while Ducky, being so many sizes smaller, was accommodated somewhere about the middle.

Down below, the boys had more room and less comfort. A tarpaulin spread over the shafts of the wagon made a sort of tent in front, there was more sailcloth draped round the wheels and the back part of the wagon, while a waterproof sheet spread on the ground served as a sort of floor on which to spread two mattresses. But, as Rumble said, it was very hard, and it was a night or two before they were really comfortable.

The novelty of the thing kept them from complaining, however, and there was not one of the seven who would have changed their quarters for the most comfortable bed that was ever invented. It was great fun to lie listening to Rocky munching alongside, and to fall asleep with the out-of-door feeling, and the stars looking in from the rift in the canvas covering.

But it was still greater fun to wake next morning, to wash in a bucket, and then to hurry round, getting breakfast in the crisp, fresh air of the early morning. It was going to be tremendously hot later on, so breakfast was hurried over, and the start made before the cool breeze of the sunrising had entirely died away.

It was the real start this morning, for the road turned inland from the sea, and there was not one of the seven who did not feel as if they were saying goodbye to an old friend when the last gleam of blue water was hid from sight, and the hills, clothed with olive-green foliage, bounded the horizon.

EARLY MORNING IN CAMP

EARLY MORNING IN CAMP

But it was not in their nature to be sad for very long, so ten minutes later their laughter was ringing out once more, and they set their faces towards the unknown with the cheerful determination to make the best of things which always marked their doings.

Rumple had retired to the rack at the back of the wagon, because he wished for quiet in which to write a poem to celebrate the occasion, and the others forgot all about him until they drew under the shade of a grove of trees for the noonday halt, when, to their extreme consternation, it was found that Rumple was missing.



CHAPTER IX

In a Strange Place

Rumple opened his eyes and stared about him in amazement. He was lying in a room which had big pink vases on the mantelpiece, a blue firescreen, and a green paper on the walls. There was a centre table, too, which was piled with books and strewn with photographs. There was one—the portrait of a man—which had a silver-gilt frame, and stood in the place of honour, and Rumple gazed at it in amazement, wondering where he had seen it before.

"Why, I do believe it is Mr. Melrose!" he cried in a shrill voice.

"Better, are you, dear?" asked a voice at his side, and he twisted his head, to see a woman, not yet middle-aged, with a kindly face which matched her voice.

"Have I been bad?" he asked in a wondering tone, and then, suddenly remembering, he called out anxiously: "Why, where are the others?"

"Who are the others, dear? You were lying alone on the road when we found you; and when we first picked you up we thought that you were dead," said the woman.

"Just my luck!" cried Rumple, with a groan. "I sat at the back of the wagon—on the rack behind, you know—so that I might have some quiet, because I was turning out a little poem. Then I remember that I got sleepy, and I suppose that I fell off; only I wonder that it did not wake me up."

"We think that you must have stunned yourself with the fall, and we should have sent for a doctor, only he lives fifteen miles away, and we had no horse that could do the journey just then, and we had to wait for a few hours to see if you would be better," said the woman; and then she asked again: "But who were you with, dear, and how was it they went on and left you lying all alone in the road, you poor child?"

"Why, that was because they did not know that I had fallen off, of course," said Rumple hastily, for there was so much reproach for the rest of the family in her

tone that he was instantly on the defensive on their behalf.

"Then I expect that your mother will be in a fine state of mind about you," said his hostess, who was fussing round him much after the fashion in which a motherly hen would fuss round a brood of chickens.

Rumple hastily explained then that he had no mother, and detailed the journeyings of his family, while the good woman stood with her hands uplifted in horrified amazement to think that a lot of irresponsible children should be left to wander about the world in such an unprotected fashion.

"We are used to looking after ourselves, and Nealie is nearly grown up. She does not have her hair hanging down her back now, because it makes her look so much more responsible, now that she wears it in a bunch on the top of her head," explained Rumple.

"And you say that you have one of Peek & Wallis's wagons? Why, they are most dreadful particular sort of people, and they always want money down and no end of security besides; no blame to them either, seeing how bad some people are about paying their just debts," said the woman, with so much surprise in her tone that Rumple felt it necessary to explain a little further.

"Oh, Mr. Melrose cabled from Cape Town to Mr. Wallis, saying that he would be security for the paying of the wagon hire. Mr. Melrose is a gentleman whom we met on board ship, a very nice person indeed; but it seemed so funny to see his photograph here," and Rumple waved a languid hand towards the portrait in the silver frame. His head was aching furiously, and he felt very weak and shaken from the fall; but he had to make some sort of explanation about himself, and it seemed almost like a certificate of respectability to be able to claim acquaintance with a person whose portrait had the place of honour in the house.

"So you know Cousin Tom, do you? I know he has been to Europe lately, although we have not heard from him since he got back. But now that I know where you have come from I must send off to the road and have a notice stuck up, so that your sister may know where to find you;" and the good woman was bustling out of the room, when Rumple stretched out an imploring hand to stop her.

"If you please, can't I go with the somebody, and then Nealie will not have to worry about me, and it will save such a lot of bother?" he said, with so much entreaty that the woman hesitated; but seeing how pale and shaken he looked she decided that his family would have to take a little trouble on his behalf, and said so.

"You will have to lie still for a few hours, for you are more shaken than you realize; but we will stick a notice up on the side of the road, to let your people know where to find you, and then they can camp here for the night, so as to be ready to start on again first thing to-morrow morning," she said, and then hurried away to post a messenger off to the main road, which was two or three miles away, while Rumpel lay staring about at his new surroundings. The ceiling and walls of the room were of canvas, and the furniture was good of its kind, but dreadfully crowded. There was a piano, too, but the dust lay so thickly on it that he decided that the family were not very musical, or else that they were too busy with other things to have much time for relaxation. There was a deep veranda in front of the window and a lot of flowers planted in pots and tins. Beyond the veranda he had glimpses of a gorgeous garden, with sweetpeas, marguerites, queer-looking cactus plants, blazing-red geraniums, and a coral tree in full bloom.

"I wonder if Father will have a garden like this at Hammerville?" he muttered to himself, with a keen pleasure in all the riot of blossom that was to be seen from his sofa, and then he lay quite still trying to make some verses about the garden, and at the same time wondering lazily what the others were doing, until he fell asleep and did not wake until milking time. He felt so much better then, and he was so furiously hungry, that he decided to go on a voyage of discovery to see for himself what the outside of his haven of refuge was like.

The yard outside was a scene of pretty lively activity. The cows were just being fastened for milking, that is to say they were tied by the head, each one to her stall, and then the hind leg was strapped so that there could be no danger of the animal kicking the pail over.

There were several people moving about, and just at first Rumpel did not see his hostess; but presently he heard a shrill voice cry out: "Mother, there is the little boy out and running about!"

Rumpel felt considerably ruffled by this remark, which was not strictly true, for he was not really a little boy now, at least not compared with Don and Billykins, and he certainly could not be accused of running about when he was merely leaning against the garden fence and looking into the cowyard.

Then the elderly woman detached herself from a group of cows and came bustling up to the fence, exclaiming at sight of him: "Well, well, you look a sight better than before you went to sleep. How are you feeling now, dear?"

"I am dreadfully hungry," admitted Rumpel, looking up into her kindly face with

a smile, and thinking how much better she would look if she did her hair like Nealie, instead of dragging it into a knot at the back of her head; but really her face was so kind that her hair did not matter very much either way.

"Hungry are you? That is right. Here, come into the kitchen with me and have something to eat straight away, for we shan't have supper until the milking is done and the creatures seen to for the night. It will take another hour or more, and you have had no dinner."

Rumple followed his hostess into the kitchen, which was canvas-walled like the best parlour, but many sizes larger and so much more comfortable that Rumple decided it looked really beautiful, while the smell of new-baked bread and cakes made a fragrance very delightful to a hungry boy.

There was a wood fire smouldering on a great open fireplace, and raking the embers open the good woman put a toasting fork into Rumple's hands and bade him toast scones for himself. He was invited to put the butter on for himself also, and there was milk to drink in a big mug close beside him. So the next half-hour passed pleasantly enough.

But when his hunger was satisfied Rumple began to worry about the others and started for the cowyard once more in order to see if any news of the wagon had arrived. Truth to tell, he was feeling very guilty because of all the trouble he was giving, for he knew that Rupert and Nealie would be very worried and anxious concerning him, and the journey would be delayed also.

He had discovered that the woman who had found him lying in the road and had brought him home was a Mrs. Warner, that her husband was away from home that day on business, and that all the people moving about the cowyard were the sons and daughters of the house, with the exception of an old black fellow who had only one eye.

The milking was over and the cows had all been turned into the home paddock for the night, but now a strange humming noise made itself heard on the quiet air.

"Why, what is that?" asked Rumple as one of the young Warners passed him, bowed under the weight of two heavy pails of sour milk for the poultry.

"That is the separator. Do you want to see it at work?" asked the boy, with a friendly grin. He was a few years older than Rumple and scorched to a berry-brown by the sun.

"What is a separator?" demanded Rumple, whose knowledge of farming was of a

rather antiquated description, Beechleigh being about twenty years behind the times.

"It is the thing that parts the cream from the milk. Go into the dairy and have a look at it," said the youth, nodding his head in the direction of a long, low shed that had been built into the side of the hill, and which was so covered with creepers that it looked almost like a part of the bank.

Away went Rumble, nothing loath. Something fresh always appealed to him, and in this new land fresh things were meeting him at every turn.

Fascinated, he stood watching the machine, the cream pouring from one spout and the milk from the other, while a rosy-faced Miss Warner turned the handle, and another Miss Warner, with pale cheeks and quite a stylish air, bustled about the dairy putting things straight for the night.

"If you please, have you seen or heard anything of our wagon?" asked Rumble, when at length the separating was done for the night and both girls were busy clearing up.

"No, we haven't; but Bella and a friend are going to walk out to the road after work to see if they can find out anything for you," said the stylish sister, and Bella, the red-cheeked one, gurgled and choked with amazing enjoyment, and said:

"My friend indeed! La, Amy, how neatly you always put things!"

They all went in to supper after that, but Rumble, who had eaten so many scones and so much butter that he would not be hungry for a long time to come, sat on the step of the veranda and stared out at the darkening night, feeling a little homesick for the others.

Then away in the distance he heard the slow rumble of wagon wheels, and a moment later a clear voice rang out on the still air:

"Steady, Rocky, steady, old fellow, or you will upset the whole show into the ditch!"

"It is Nealie!" yelled Rumble in an ecstasy of joy. "Mrs. Warner, our wagon is coming, for I can hear my sister Nealie calling to the horse."

"Now that is downright good news. Come, bustle about, girls, and get some more supper ready, for the poor things will be nearly starved by this time, I should think!" cried the hospitable mistress of the farm.



CHAPTER X

A Fright at Night

"There he is, there he is!" squealed Ducky in the shrillest of trebles as Rumples started to run along the dusty track up which the wagon was advancing.

"Oh, you blessed boy, how could you have the heart to give us such a fright?" cried Sylvia, who had been walking at the side of the wagon and now rushed forward to fling her arms round Rumples and hug him until he was nearly smothered.

"I'm awfully sorry, truly I am, but I didn't know anything about it; and I tell you I just felt bad when I woke up in Mrs. Warner's parlour and she told me that she had picked me up in the road and thought at first that I was dead," explained Rumples, with an air of gloomy importance; for in spite of the sorrow he felt at having given the others so much anxiety there was a thrill of satisfaction at having figured in such a fashion. To be picked up for dead had a good sound with it, and might serve as quite a big incident when he wrote the story of his life.

"Oh, my dear, I will never let you sit upon the rack out of sight again unless you are tied fast to the seat!" cried Nealie, who by this time had jumped down from the wagon and was hugging him in place of Sylvia, who had been pushed aside.

"Or we might tie the frying pan and the tin billy round his neck, and then there would be such a rattle when he fell that we should be sure to hear and could pick him up at our leisure," said Rupert. There was a quiet drawl in his tone which meant that his foot was more painful than usual; but Nealie had been so occupied with her anxiety on Rumples's account that she had little time for watching her eldest brother, who never said a word about himself, however bad he might feel.

"I shall not do such a stupid thing again of course, but it might have been worse," said Rumples. "This is a jolly place: no end of cows, and a real separator; you put them in at the top, the milk I mean, not the cows, and they come out cream one side and milk the other. Mrs. Warner is jolly too, and oh! what do you

think, she is cousin to that Mr. Melrose who left the ship at Cape Town, and sent the cable to Mr. Wallis."

By the time Rumble had managed so much of explanation the horse and wagon had halted outside the cowyard, and Mrs. Warner came rushing out to greet the arrivals.

"I am really glad to see you; we don't get many visitors in these lonely places, you know, and so company is always a treat. I am afraid that you must have been rather scared when you found your brother was missing, but when he was able to tell us how it all happened we sent off a notice to be stuck up at the side of the road as soon as possible."

"It was most kind of you to be so thoughtful," said Nealie. "Only the trouble was that we had found out Rumble was missing, and we had come back on our tracks, right past the place where the notice was posted, and we had nearly reached the cutting where they are going to make the railway. We halted there, because we knew that when we passed that place before Rumble was with us, and after we had been there about half an hour a man came riding up from the way we had come, and he asked what was the matter that we were so down on our luck; so we told him that one of our brothers was missing, and then he said that he had seen a notice up at the Four-Mile Corner, that stated a boy had been found lying in the road, and had been taken to Warner's Farm, in the Holderness Valley, but he was not hurt."

"I had that bit put to keep you from being scared," said Mrs. Warner, nodding her head in a vigorous fashion. "I guessed that you would be feeling pretty bad, and so I just told Tom to put it in big black letters that the boy wasn't hurt."

"It was most kind of you!" said Nealie, flushing and paling. "I do not know how I should have had the courage to find my way up here but for those last words, and I am so very, very grateful to you for being so kind to Rumble."

"Tcha!" cried Mrs. Warner, making a funny clicking noise with her tongue. "Come in and have some supper, all of you; though where we can put seven of you to sleep is more than I can say, for we are pretty full with our own lot; but we will manage somehow, don't you fret."

"Oh, but, please, we have our own supper things, and we always sleep in the wagon; that is, we girls sleep in the wagon, and the boys have two mattresses underneath, so we never have to trouble anyone," said Nealie hastily.

"What a fine idea!" cried Mrs. Warner, holding up her hands in astonishment. "It

makes you so independent of hotels and that sort of thing; besides, these wayside houses are not many of them suitable places for young people to stay at. But you are not going to eat your own supper when you come to see me, not if I know it. Come along into the kitchen, all of you, there is plenty to eat, only you have caught us all in the rough."

"But, please, we must look after Rocky, that is our horse, before we have our own supper; we always do," said Nealie, feeling as if the stormy day was going to have a peaceful ending, seeing that they were to find a supper all ready for them, instead of having to cook it for themselves.

"Tom will see to your horse, and a fine creature it is too. But Peek & Wallis always do supply good cattle; we often have their horses out here. Tom is my eldest, and he is downright smart with horses. Tom, Tom, come and lend a hand, will you?"

At the sound of his mother's shout Tom came hurrying out from the back door; but he was so dreadfully shy, when he saw Nealie and Sylvia standing by the horse, that he was just going to make a bolt for it, and pretend that he had business in another direction, only just then Nealie began to unharness the animal, setting about her task with such an air of being accustomed to it that he suddenly forgot to be awkward and nervous, walking up to the wagon and saying, in a matter-of-fact tone: "Here, Miss, I'll look to your animal, and give him his supper and a rub down, while you go in with Mother and get a feed for yourself."

"You are very kind," said Nealie, "but I will just get his supper corn from the bottom of the wagon, because you will not know where to find it, and Mr. Wallis said that a horse could not do heavy draught work on grass feed."

"I should think not," replied Tom, with such an air of knowing all about it as made his mother glow with pleasure, for Tom's shyness was a real trouble to her, she never having been afflicted in that way herself. "The horse shall have a corn feed, Miss, but it will be our corn and not yours; that will do for to-morrow or the next day."

"Of course we don't let people feed themselves or their beasts when they come here!" echoed Mrs. Warner, taking hold of Nealie and forcibly leading her into the house, while the others tramped after them.

What a crowd they made in the canvas-walled kitchen. And what a supper they ate, sitting round the table eating scones and butter, with delicious raspberry jam. Amy, the stylish sister, made a fresh batch of scones, and cooked them in the

oven, while the rosy-cheeked Bella went walking with her friend, who proved to be a good-looking young farmer, living farther up the valley.

The girls slept in the wagon that night, but the boys carried their mattresses into the big hay barn, because it threatened rain, and, as Mrs. Warner said, it was much easier to keep dry than to dry up after getting wet.

About midnight the rain came down at a pour; it rained until morning, when it came down faster than ever, and Mrs. Warner would not hear of their moving on. She said that Rockefeller certainly could not drag the wagon through the loose mud of the track, and if they got out to walk they would all catch bad colds, entailing no end of misery and discomfort on them all, and the only sensible thing to do was to stay in the Holderness Valley for another day, and the weather would be sure to be better to-morrow.

This was such common-sense advice that Nealie was very glad to take it, although she felt rather embarrassed, because it looked so much like sponging on the generosity of their kind hostess.

The younger ones were all delighted to stay, and Sylvia entered herself at once as an apprentice to the dairy business by taking a lesson in milking, and Mrs. Warner declared that when Bella was married to her friend who lived higher up the valley, Sylvia could come to the farm and fill the vacant place, earning her keep, and a good deal more besides.

The boys turned the handle of the separator, and made themselves generally useful. But Nealie went off in the rain with Mrs. Warner and Tom for a ride to the butter factory with the cream from the night before and that of the morning.

Mrs. Warner had guessed shrewdly enough that Nealie had so much responsibility in an ordinary way as to make the little trip to the factory quite a holiday jaunt.

Wrapped in a big mackintosh belonging to Amy, Nealie sat on the front seat of the wagon, between Tom and his mother, and very much enjoying the novelty of seeing someone else in charge of the horse and wagon.

The factory was a series of surprises, and she came away with her head in a whirl between cream testers, butter machinery, freezing chambers, and the final processes of packing for market. It seemed to her that the world was such a wonderful place, and the things done in it were so much more wonderful still, that she must belong to the very bottom class of ignoramuses, because she did not know how to do anything save mother her sisters and brothers, and she did

not realize that this might be the grandest and cleverest work of all.

All day it rained without a single stop, and far into the second night as well. But the morning broke without a cloud, the sun shone out bright and glorious, and all nature rejoiced because of the rain.

A start was made directly after breakfast, all the family of Warners crowding to the cowyard gate, to see the travellers start.

Putting Rupert and Ducky up in the wagon to ride, the other five walked the two miles and more to the Four-Mile Corner, because the Holderness Valley track was so soft from the rain. Even with this lightening of the load it was an anxious progress in places, and when they got stuck in a hollow they had to put their shoulders to the wheel and assist strength of collar by strength of arm.

But Rockefeller had been well fed at the farm, and he had had a good rest also, and, being in prime condition, made short work of the heavy track, landing them safe and sound on the main road.

Rumple's misadventure had let them in for quite a long delay, but it had also secured them a shelter when they most needed it, and so, as Nealie said, the balance was about even.

That day's journey was without incident, and so was the next. Then came Sunday, when they did not travel at all, but remained in camp all day, giving themselves and the horse a rest, and singing hymns as they sat under the trees in the shade. So far there had mostly been trees dotted here and there by the wayside, but on Monday morning the way grew wilder and rougher, they were getting out in the back country, and all round there was nothing to be seen save rolling downs and broad sheep paddocks, while the road stretched shadeless and glaring for miles on miles before them, and every step stirred blinding clouds of dust.

"This rather takes the gilt off the gingerbread," said Rupert, as he sat under the wagon tilt fanning himself with his hat and choking with dust.

Vast herds of cattle, being driven down to the coast to be turned into chilled beef for exportation, had been passing them all day, and these droves materially added to their sufferings because of the amount of dust that was raised. There was danger for Rocky, too, from the long, sharp horns of the cattle, as they pressed closely round the wagon in passing, and as a measure of precaution Nealie turned the wagon right round every time she saw a great drove approaching, by which means the back of the wagon had the chief impact.

Camping that night was not a very cheerful business. There was only a scanty supply of water available, food supplies were also running short, and there was a cold wind blowing, which one of the drovers had told them was going to be a "southerly buster", only, luckily for their present peace of mind, the seven did not as yet understand the true significance of the term.

The shortness of food was owing to their having expected to reach a certain point of the journey where fresh supplies could be procured. But they had been held up so many times that afternoon by the passing of cattle that they were five or six miles from the place where they had intended to stop when sundown came.

"Never mind being short to-night; we will have a good feed when we reach Ford to-morrow to make up for it," said Nealie cheerfully. Her money was holding out so much better than she had expected, thanks to the kindness of Mrs. Warner, that she was feeling quite easy in her mind about food supplies just at present.

"We will turn in directly we have eaten all there is for supper, before it has time to evaporate and leave us hungry again," said Rumble, who could always forget his woes in sleep.

"That is a downright jolly idea!" cried Sylvia, stretching her arms above her head in a sleepy fashion. The long days in the open air made her most fearfully hungry and tired, while to-day had certainly been the most fatiguing that they had had since leaving Sydney.

They were sitting round a fire made mainly of grass, to eat their supper, for no wood was procurable in the district in which that night's camp was made. There were, indeed, a few stunted sandalwood bushes and some odd clumps of spinifex; but these were so difficult to cut that they had preferred to manage with a bundle of wood which had been gathered some days ago and slung on to the back of the wagon for use in an emergency like this, and when the wood had dwindled to a bank of red-hot embers they had piled grass upon it, and so kept the fire going while supper was in progress, because the wind was so cold.

For the first time since they had started on their travels they were glad to go to their rest wrapped up in rugs and coats. Even then the boys under the wagon were so cold that Don suggested they should all lie very close together on one mattress, while the other was used as a top covering; and this arrangement made them so comfortable and warm that they were all fast asleep until they were suddenly aroused by a terrific screaming from the wagon. Then, when they started up, still drowsy with their heavy slumber, they were promptly knocked

down and trampled in the dust.



CHAPTER XI

Anxious Hours

"Help! Help!" shrieked Nealie.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" squealed Sylvia, while Ducky's screaming rose above the deafening roar that was all around them.

Rupert and Rumble fought and struggled to throw off the mattress and the canvas and the oddments of clothing in which they were entangled. They were choked and nearly suffocated, frightened almost out of their wits by the crying of the girls, to which was now added the lusty howling of Don and Billykins, who were being rolled and punched and pummelled like their elders.

It was Rumble who got disentangled first, and when his head was free, and he had managed to scramble to his feet, he gave a horrified shout of amazement; for the wagon was lying on its side, there was the sound of galloping in his ears, and everywhere he turned there was nothing to be seen but rushing cattle and tossing horns.

"POURED PAST THE OVERTURNED WAGON"

"POURED PAST THE OVERTURNED WAGON"

They had seen so much of the fierceness of the cattle on the previous day that in a minute his hand was on Rupert's head, and he was pressing his brother back into the comparative shelter given by the projecting wagon wheel.

"Stay where you are! Don't attempt to move! It can't last much longer!" he shouted, holding Rupert down by main force now, for those tossing horns were such a frightful menace, and the mob of cattle pressed close on either side as they poured past the overturned wagon in their mad flight towards the hills.

"Oh, Rumble, what has happened? Is it an earthquake?" cried Nealie, who was somewhat reassured by hearing Rumble shout to Rupert. At least the boys were all alive, though, judging by the noise Don and Billykins were making, some of them might be rather badly damaged.

"I don't think that it is anything except the cattle on the move, only they are going as if they have been pretty badly scared," replied Rumble, trying to stand up by hanging on to the wagon wheel. Then he cried out sharply: "Look out, Nealie! Get in under the tilt quick, for here come a fresh lot! Oh, I say, we shall all be smashed flat!"

It really looked as if they would be flattened out, for the next lot of cattle, charging down the steep hillside, came straight for the camp, and but for a lucky accident would most likely have gone straight over the wagon, which lay on its side. But one big bullock caught its long horns in the spokes of the wheel, the next blundered on to it and forced it to its knees, another blundered on to that, until in about a minute and a half there was piled up a most effectual rampart of struggling beasts, which effectually checked the onrush from behind, diverting it to either side.

It was to this accident that some, at least, of the seven owed their lives, for Don and Billykins lay right in the path of the stampeding herd, while Rupert, scrambling painfully to his feet, would most certainly have been knocked down and trampled underfoot.

But the noise and the confusion, the snorting, bellowing, and blowing of all those hundreds of terrified beasts, were quite beyond description. After the first frightened outcry Ducky lay still and shivering in the arms of Sylvia, who was sitting on the side of the wagon tilt, amid the ruins of crockery and the contents of the grocery box, which had been spilled all over her. Nealie had crawled to the front opening of the tilt, and, regardless of her possible danger, had succeeded in fishing Don and Billykins from the debris of canvas and torn mattress under which they were being slowly smothered, and had dragged them into the comparative safety of the overturned wagon. Then Rupert and Rumble struggled into the same refuge, and the seven sat close together, wondering what was going to happen next, while the wild uproar raged on around them, and it seemed as if the rush of cattle would never cease.

"There must have been thousands and thousands of cattle that have gone past," said Rupert, rubbing his lips with his hand before he ventured to speak, because of the thick dust upon them.

"I should think that every one of those great mobs we have been passing all day must have turned round and bolted back by the way they came," said Sylvia. "But what I don't understand is how it came about that the wagon was bowled over."

"That is my fault," groaned Nealie. "I made Rocky back it on to the slope, because I thought that we should be more sheltered from the terrible wind, and I knew that the boys would not be in so much danger of a wetting if it rained. Then the cattle, charging down the side of the hill in the dark, must have blundered up against the wagon and just bowled it over. They are so big and clumsy, you see, and when once they start there is no stopping them. Now, if the wagon is badly damaged, we shall be put to no end of expense because of my carelessness."

"But it was not carelessness if you did it for our comfort, and it is no use thinking that the wagon is badly damaged, and getting worried about it, until you know," said Rupert. "Of course we can't do anything towards finding out, or putting it straight, until morning, for we might only make matters worse, and invite more disaster still."

"Will it be long before it is morning?" asked Billykins in a voice of misery. "I am quite dreadfully cold, and most horribly hungry."

"So am I, and I wish that we were back at Mrs. Warner's," said Don in a dismal tone.

"I don't expect that it will be very long now, and if you curl up under this rug, if it is a rug, you may go to sleep, and then you will forget about being hungry," said Nealie, gripping something which felt like drapery, and dragging it towards her.

"That is my frock!" cried Sylvia. "Creep in here, close to me, Billykins, and then you will help to keep poor Ducky warm. There is room for Don too. Don't sit on more of the lump sugar than you can help, as it is very uncomfortable, I find; but if you were to eat some of the lumps, perhaps they would warm you a little, for I have heard somewhere that there is a great deal of warmth in sugar."

"I have found a lump. Will you have it, Nealie?" asked Ducky, groping in the darkness for her elder sister, and feeling that, of them all, it was Nealie who most needed comfort just then.

"I don't want it, thank you, dearie," answered Nealie, her anxieties being too heavy for sugar to alleviate.

"Here is another; and—oh, I say, I have just put my fingers into something horribly sticky! What can it be?" and Ducky stuffed her fist in the face of Billykins, for it was so dark that she could not see where she was thrusting it.

"Look out!" he exclaimed in an offended tone, then suddenly changed to a shout

of joy. "Oh, it is marmalade, and it is all over my mouth! Have you got any more of it, Nealie?"

"Of course. There was a pot in the grocery box, and I had forgotten about it, or we would have had it to help out with supper, and then it would not have been wasted in this fashion," replied Nealie, feeling that she would like to indulge in a good cry over the ruin which had come upon them.

"It won't be wasted if only I can find where that pot is. Can you guide my hand, Ducky, to find it?" asked Don eagerly.

"It seems to be all over me—the marmalade, I mean—but I don't know where the pot is, and I am most horribly sticky!" cried Ducky, who was a most fastidious little maiden.

"Where is your fist? I will suck it clean for you," volunteered Don, with such an air of brotherly self-sacrifice that Nealie burst out laughing, which was much better for her than the tears she longed to shed, and which had been smarting under her eyelids only a minute before.

For a few minutes there was great competition between Don and Billykins for the privilege of sucking Ducky's fists clean of marmalade, and, the comical side of the picture presenting itself to the little girl, she laughed as much as Nealie; then Sylvia joined in, and at length they were all making the best of things, groping in the dark for lumps of sugar and dabs of marmalade, until they lighted on some that had uncomfortably mixed itself up with the pepper, when a chorus of ohs! and ahs! sounded from the group of explorers, and everyone immediately decided that they had had enough marmalade for the present.

The cattle had all gone, and the night was entirely silent again, when Rupert said anxiously: "I wonder where Rockefeller has gone? We shall be in a pretty bad case if anything happens to the old horse."

"I will go in search of him when morning comes; the worst that could happen would be that he would stampede with the cattle, and we shall have the men in charge of the droves coming past presently," said Rumble, who had made a sort of shelter for himself and Rupert from the wreckage of the canvas which had been draped round the wagon.

"Perhaps the horse has not been upset at all by the panic of the cattle. It is not as if it had been a lot of horses rushing across the encampment in the middle of the night," said Sylvia, who had succeeded in making Ducky so warm and comfortable that the little girl was falling off to sleep again, although the rest of

them were very wide-awake indeed.

"I wish that I knew what the time is, but I don't know where to find the matches, and it is too dark to see the face of my watch," said Rupert. He was feeling the situation rather keenly, because he could do so very little to help the others, when, by right of his position as eldest of the family, he ought to have done so much.

"Don't worry about the time, dear; try to get a little sleep if you can. You will need it so badly when the morning comes," said Nealie, moving a little because she found that she was sitting in the frying pan, and she remembered that it had only been rubbed with a bit of paper after being used for frying bacon on the day before yesterday.

"I vote that we all go to sleep, seeing that we can do no good by keeping awake. We can't even sort up this mess of marmalade and pepper," said Rumble, whose tongue was still on fire from the last lick of marmalade which had been so liberally mixed with pepper.

"Someone is coming. I wonder if it is one of the cattle men?" said Rupert, thrusting his head farther out from the canvas and getting the full benefit of the cold wind which came howling and moaning out of the south.

"There are two or three, judging by the noise. Shall we hail them, do you think?" asked Nealie; but her voice had a nervous ring which gave Rupert a sudden inspiration and made him say sharply:

"No, no. If they are the cattle men they will most likely hail us, and if they are not it may be better that they should not take any notice of us. Lie low, all of you, and don't make a sound while they go by."

"I am horribly afraid that I shall sneeze, for that pepper has got into my nose!" gasped Don, then went off into a paroxysm of sneezing so violent that Billykins gurgled with laughter, until Nealie found it necessary to cover the pair of them with a cushion which she had found by groping among fragments of broken cups, lumps of sugar, and debris of all sorts.

The riders, of which there were two or three, checked their horses to descend the hill past the overturned wagon; but as they did not trouble to lower their voices, every word they said was perfectly audible through the hush of the night.

"As neat a job of stampeding as ever I saw," said a hoarse voice.

"We got them away so quietly too. That was a bright idea of yours, Alf, to make

friends with the watchman last night," said another, whose tones had a boyish ring, as if he were hardly grown up as yet.

"Alf always did understand making friends at the right time, and if I know anything about it, there was something more than whisky in that bottle from which you offered him a drink," said a third man, whose voice had such a horrid ring that Nealie could not repress a shudder, and she pressed the cushion down with a warning air upon the two boys as the beginning of another gurgle sounded from them.

"What is that in the hollow there?" demanded the first speaker, whom the others had called Alf.

"It looks like a wagon that has come to grief and been deserted," said the third man in a casual tone, and then they put their horses to a canter again and swept past the wagon without troubling more about it.

"Cattle thieves!" murmured Nealie, and there was a shaky sound in her voice which made Rupert reach up to grip her hand, as if he would give her more courage that way.

"What a mercy that the cattle charged down upon us and upset us in this fashion, or we might have had something even more unpleasant to bear," whispered Sylvia, clasping Ducky closer in her arms and feeling grateful for what at first had seemed such an awful disaster.

"Cattle thieves? But how will they manage to get clear away without the proper drovers finding which way they have gone?" asked Rupert, who had been straining his ears to discover the route taken by the men who had just ridden past.

"Here comes Rockefeller. I say, Nealie, let me ride a little way after those men and find out which way they have gone? It is a bit lighter now. I expect that the moon is getting up; there is the end of a moon that shows somewhere near morning, I know," said Rumble, then he thrust out his head and called softly to a shape which he had seen faintly outlined against the dark hillside, and he was immediately answered by a cheerful whinny, and a moment later Rockefeller shuffled up, his hobbles not permitting much in the way of pace, although he could get about sufficiently to feed during the night.

"Oh no, indeed you must not! I should be so horribly frightened lest they should shoot you or the horse!" cried poor Nealie, who had privately made up her mind that she could never let Rumble out of her sight again, because he was always

getting into pickles.

"I would let him go, Nealie. He may be able to track those men and save the drovers hours of vain searching; then in return, perhaps, they will help us right our wagon. And we shall want some help there; I can see that plainly enough," said Rupert quietly. Then Nealie gave way at once, as she mostly did when Rupert undertook to advise her, for he certainly made up in wisdom what he lacked in bodily strength.

She struggled out of the wreckage of the wagon, and, having caught Rockefeller, no difficult task, since she never went empty handed to the work, she hoisted Rumble on to his back, then, slipping the hobbles, saw the two slink off in the darkness by the way the men had gone.



CHAPTER XII

Repairing the Damage

When Rumble, perched on the back of Rockefeller, had crept quietly away into the darkness, the three elders sat straining their ears into the night for some sound that should let them know help was coming. Once or twice they spoke to each other in whispers, but for the most part they were quite silent. The two younger boys had drowsed off to sleep, while Ducky lay in a profound slumber, her warm little body seeming in some strange way to bring comfort and courage to Sylvia, in whose arms she lay. An hour dragged away, and then, to the unspeakable joy and relief of the watchers, a grey light stole over the hills, then broadened and spread until it was full dawn. There was no crimson flush of sunrise this morning, the sky was too heavy with clouds that had been blown up from the south-east; but at least it was daylight, and the comfort of being able to see what was going on made them all feel better.

The children woke up then, clamorous for breakfast. Only, as provisions were so scanty it was necessary to have a little council of ways and means straight away.

"We could make some porridge, for here is some corn-meal in a tin!" cried Nealie, who had been industriously stirring among their overturned goods and chattels since daylight came to brighten the prospect.

"But we have no wood for a fire, and we can't make porridge without a fire," objected Sylvia.

"Ducky and the boys can get us some twigs and little bits of wood from those bushes just over the hill," said Nealie. "We shall all feel better for having something warm to eat, as the weather is so uncomfortable this morning, and while they are looking after the fire we three can clear the things from the wagon in readiness for having it set right way up once more. Never, never will I be so careless again as to leave it standing on a slope at night!"

"I should not grieve overmuch about that if I were you, for I fancy the wagon being on its side last night saved us from things more unpleasant still," replied

Rupert; and then Nealie shivered and said no more about regretting her carelessness, which, after all, had not been so much carelessness as overcarefulness, because she had been so anxious that they should be stationed where the wind would not trouble them.

By the time Ducky and the boys had got a fire going, and the porridge—a kind of mush—safely on in course of preparation, the three elders had got the wagon cleared of all it contained and were ready to do their best to get it on its feet, or rather on its wheels again. But without Rockefeller to help this appeared to be a task quite beyond their power to accomplish, although they tugged and tugged with all their might.

"Whatever shall we do?" cried Sylvia in despair. "If only Rumpel would come back with the horse we might manage it."

"I know," said Nealie, and, struck with a sudden bright idea, she rushed off to the heap of properties lying at a little distance, and selecting a stout iron bar which had been used as a stay for the rack at the back of the wagon she came running back with it.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Rupert curiously, failing to see what possible help the iron bar could be to them.

"I am going to use the bar as a lever and jack the wagon up. You see, we can lift it a little piece and poke something under; there are plenty of big stones and boulders lying about that will do, and if we lift it a few feet we may then be able to drag it over; at least we can try that plan, and if it does no other good it will keep us warm, and I am most dreadfully chilly," said Nealie, who was secretly very anxious lest Rupert should get a chill in the cold wind, and was also weatherwise enough to know that it might rain at any minute now.

"The mush is ready; will you have breakfast first?" called Don, who was cook-in-chief, while the others ran hither and thither doing his bidding.

"We will get the wagon up first, and then the mush will be the reward for our exertions," replied Nealie. She was bustling about with feverish anxiety now, for she had felt a spot of rain, and it was too dreadful to think what might happen if a downpour began before their belongings could be got under shelter.

"Yes, we will get the wagon up first," echoed Rupert, for he too had felt a spot of rain and was as anxious as Nealie to get the wagon right way up once more. "Leave Ducky to look after the mush and do you two come and help us here, for every ounce tells, you know."

Don and Billykins came at a run and collected stones, which Rupert wedged under the wheel every time Nealie and Sylvia managed to jack it a trifle higher. But what hard work it was! The perspiration poured from the faces of the two girls, and Rupert panted with haste and exertion as he struggled with the stones which Don and Billykins brought in lavish abundance.

"Hurrah, she rises!" cried Sylvia in a jubilant tone.

"We can pull her up now, if we are careful!" yelled Rupert, who was to the full as much excited; and then, calling to the small boys to come and pull, the three of them hung on to the rope, putting all their strength into the task, while Nealie and Sylvia, chanting a funny refrain:

"Heave ho, my boys, heave ho,
With strength of arm, and might and main,
Heave ho, my boys, heave ho!"

bent to the task of lifting with the iron bar. The wagon shivered and trembled like a live thing, swayed, rocked, and finally with a jarring crash settled on its four wheels once more, while ringing hurrahs broke from the hard-working five, which were echoed in Ducky's shrillest treble.

It was at this moment that Rumble hove in sight again, clinging in a very undignified fashion to the neck of Rockefeller, while the old horse came on at a lumbering trot, warranted to stir up the most sluggish liver.

"What is all the row about?" he demanded, when Rockefeller, stopping short with disconcerting suddenness, pitched him off anyhow on to a pile of mattresses, tinware, and other miscellaneous properties.

"We are so delighted to see you back, for one thing, and for another we are rejoicing to have our house on wheels standing erect on all-fours," said Nealie, just stopping to give him a big hug, and then, running up to the horse, she dropped a resounding kiss on his nose, held a lump of sugar out for the wise animal to eat, and then, slipping the hobbles back on his legs, sent Rocky off to forage for himself.

"We must get these things put back before we have breakfast; for it is going to rain, and it will never do to let the bedding get wet," she said decidedly, and, hungry though they were, they came to the task without a murmur, only Ducky remained stationary at the fire, carefully stirring the mush, which was slowly cooking there.

But although everyone worked their hardest, the rain was coming down steadily

before they had done, and they were all rather damp when they climbed into the wagon, carefully carrying the pot of mush, which was all that could be mustered for breakfast, owing to their stock of provisions having run out.

"Now, Rumble, let us hear your adventures?" said Nealie, who was reclining at ease on a rolled-up mattress at the back of the wagon, while Rupert acted as master of the ceremonies and served out the mush in such fragments of basins as were not too smashed up in the disaster of the night, and on tin plates, his own portion being eaten from the inverted lid of the one saucepan contained in the wagon outfit.

They all made a great deal of fun of that saucepan lid, and the favourite diversion of Sylvia and Rumble was continually to ask Rupert to pass them something, because it was so funny to see him have to balance his awkward plate carefully on the top of the saucepan before he could do what was required of him.

Then Nealie came to the rescue with her question about Rumble's adventures, and at once the hero rose to the occasion, puffing out his chest with such an air of unconscious importance that Sylvia at once called him a pouter pigeon, to his great disgust; for he said it always made him feel sick to look at those conceited birds.

"Never mind the pigeons, they will keep; tell us what you did while you were away," said Rupert, eating in a great hurry, so as to get done before anyone required anything more at his hands.

"I was precious careful when I rose the hill to lie along Rocky's neck, so that anyone who noticed us would only think that it was a horse out on the feed," said Rumble. "But I put the old horse along when we went down the next slope, only I kept on the grass, for I could hear the men ahead of me, and I did not want them to know that I was following. Then there came a long hill and I could see them ever so far ahead of me, as it was beginning to get light. Luckily they disappeared over the crest of the hill before it was full daylight, or I guess that they would have spotted me, though I was lying along the horse like a sack of meal. When I got to the top of that hill, and it is something like a hill too, the sort of thing that will work the starch out of poor old Rocky if we take the wagon that way, the men had disappeared and there was no one in sight for miles and miles. Presently I saw someone coming towards me mounted on a jolly fine horse, and I felt quaky from my hat right down to my boots. Then I caught a gleam of buttons, and I was sure that it was a mounted policeman; so I cooeyed

for all I was worth and he rode up at a smart gallop to ask me if I had run away from home or what was the matter."

"What an impudent person!" cried Sylvia wrathfully.

"I don't think that he meant to be impudent," said Rumpel, shutting his eyes with a languid air. "But I suppose it is not a common thing to see a kid like me doing extraordinary things!"

"Hear him!" cried Nealie, with derisive laughter, clicking her spoon against her tin plate.

"Well, I suppose that it is a little out of the ordinary for a boy of my size to do detective work on the track of a mob like those fellows who rode past us in the night," said Rumpel, with edifying modesty. "Anyhow, he sat up and treated me with real respect when I told him what I was doing, and at once offered to take the job on for me; to which, as you may guess, I hadn't the ghost of an objection. So I told him all that we knew about them, and then I turned round and came back while he rode off after the men."

"But didn't you see anything of the cattle which bowled us over so neatly last night?" asked Sylvia.

"No, I didn't, and I can tell you it puzzled me no end, for I went miles and miles and I did not see so much as the swish of a tail," answered Rumpel, with a dramatic flourish of the broken basin from which he had been eating his portion of mush.

"Mrs. Warner told me that stampeding cattle will run sometimes for many miles without stopping, and sometimes they kill themselves by their exertions," Nealie said as she wriggled into a more comfortable position against the mattress.

"It struck me as just wonderful what a lot Mrs. Warner knew about cattle," remarked Sylvia, with a yawn. "Her knowledge made me feel quite tired; for beyond the fact that a cow had four legs, two horns, and a tail, I had never realized that there was anything to know about cattle."

"There is something to know about everything; just see what a lot Mr. Wallis knew about horses," replied Rupert.

"Yes, and about other things too; but I do wonder what he will say when he hears how nearly I wrecked his beautiful wagon," said Nealie, with a sigh, for the thought of her shortcomings worried her a good deal.

"He won't trouble, or, if he does, he knows that Mr. Melrose will see that

everything is put straight," said Sylvia.

"I do not like being indebted to the promiscuous charity of strangers, and Mr. Melrose was hardly more than a stranger to us," Nealie put in a little primly. Being the eldest, it was natural she should be a little more conventional than the others.

"Oh, Mr. Melrose likes being kind to people! Mrs. Warner told me so," remarked Rumble, with the air of knowing all that there was to be known. "He is most awfully rich, too, and he came into his money quite by a fluke."

"What is a fluke?" demanded Billykins, who was catching rainwater in the tin dish in which he had been eating his breakfast, so that he could have a wash-up after his feed.

"A fluke is what happens," explained Rumble vaguely. "It was a fluke that toppled our wagon over last night."

"There was not any money in that," said Don decidedly.

"Very much the reverse, I should say," laughed Nealie. "Think of the broken basins, the waste of marmalade and pepper, not to say anything of the damage to our clothes, and all the rest of it. There are flukes and flukes, and our kind, unfortunately, was not the sort that pays. But, do you know, I don't believe that it rains as fast as it did, and so I am going to harness Rocky, and then we will crawl ahead for a few miles; for if we stop here we shall starve, and I want some dinner."

CHAPTER XIII

In Sight of Hammerville

It was the next day but one, and Rockefeller was toiling along the heavy road outside Pomeroy, when a man in a cabbage-tree hat, red flannel shirt, and long boots rode up to Hutton's store, which stood on the outskirts of the town, and, seeing the van coming, dismounted, threw his horse's bridle over the fence, and walked towards it.

"Are you the Plumstead lot?" he asked, with a jerk of his hat towards Nealie, which was meant for politeness and accepted in the same spirit.

"We are," she answered, with a bow, wondering nervously if he were a bushranger, of which she had read so much during the voyage and yet had not set eyes on since landing.

"Which is Dalrymple Plumstead?" demanded the red-shirted individual, fixing a ferocious gaze on Rupert, who flushed and turned a trifle pale, wondering what could be the matter.

"I am Dalrymple," said Rumble, dodging round from the shady side of the wagon, where he had been walking and trying to compose blank verse about Australian roadside scenery, but not succeeding over-well.

"Why, you are only a kid!" exclaimed the man in ludicrous disappointment, falling back a step and surveying Rumble with an expression of bewildered surprise.

"It is a fault that will mend with time," replied Rumble, with such crushing dignity that Sylvia, who was sitting behind Nealie in the wagon, gurgled and choked.

The red-shirted person threw back his head with a great burst of laughter, then, thrusting out a brown, hairy hand, cried eagerly: "Well, you are plucky anyhow, every ounce of you! Shake, will you? I'm downright proud to make your acquaintance, sir, and if you have come to these parts to settle, all I've got to say

is that we are proud to have you among us."

This was quite too much for Sylvia, who choked so badly that Ducky thought she had a bone in her throat, and patted her with great concern.

But Rumple flushed up in an offended fashion, for he thought that he was being laughed at, and it made him angry, although, as a rule, he was remarkably even-tempered.

"Perhaps I should understand better if you explained your business with me," he said, puffing out his chest in what Nealie called his best pigeon manner, and which caused her to turn her head abruptly to gaze at the fence on the other side of the road, so that the stranger should not see that she was laughing so much.

"Well, I take it that you are the young gentleman that stalked the cattle thieves out by Russell Downs, and kept them from getting clear away with five hundred head of my cattle; and if that is not cause for thankfulness I don't know what is," said the man, gripping Rumple hard, and sawing away at his hand much as if it were a pump handle and the water was hard to fetch.

"Oh, they were your cattle that stampeded, and bowled our wagon over in the dead of night!" exclaimed Nealie, while Rumple turned pink with pleasure at the thought of being so much appreciated.

"No, Miss, I should say it was the other lot, which belong to Tom Jones of Hobson's Bottom, and if you want to make any claim for damages you had better send it in to him, seeing that he is much better off than I am, and his cattle are the wildest lot in the New South Wales boundary," said the red-shirted person, with such an air of wriggling out of it that the whole seven burst into a shout of laughter, and then promptly apologized for their apparent rudeness.

But he waved his hand in an airy fashion, and begged them to have their laugh out.

"And it does me good to see young things so lively," he exclaimed, taking his hat right off and bowing to right and left, as if he had received an ovation. "My name is Tim Callaghan, and I am Irish on my father's side, though I never saw old Ireland, and am never likely to."

"We are very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Callaghan, and we are quite sure that it must have been Mr. Jones's cattle that knocked our wagon over, so we will give his address to Messrs. Peek & Wallis, if there is any complaint of damage made to us about the wagon when it is returned to the owners," said Nealie; and then she asked in an interested tone; "But how did you hear anything

about it? Were you helping to drive the cattle?"

"No; if I had been I would have taken good care that there was a better watch set," replied Tim Callaghan. "I couldn't leave because my wife was ill, but I heard through the police, who sent me word that I should be fined for letting my cattle stray to the danger of other people's property, and that I should have doubtless lost the greater part of my mob for good and all if it had not been for a Mr. Dalrymple Plumstead, who rode after the thieves and gave warning to the police. There is one comfort about it, and that is that Tom Jones will be fined too, and it will do him a world of good to be taken down a peg or two. And now what can I do for you, ladies and gentlemen?"

"You might tell us which is the best place in Pomeroy to buy food, for our provision box is nearly empty, and things are so dear in these country places," said Nealie rather wistfully, for her money was running very low, and there was always present with her the dread that she would not have enough to keep them going until they reached Hammerville.

"You had better come along with me to Gil Addington's; he is about as reasonable as anyone in Pomeroy, and we are having a deal over some pigs that may help me to pull his prices down a bit for you, and they will stand a little paring off at most times," said Mr. Callaghan, who was uncommonly glad to pay his debt of gratitude in this fashion, since the cost would fall upon someone else.

"We ought to have some corn for Rockefeller too, if we can manage it," said Nealie rather anxiously. She knew that it was the poorest sort of economy to let the good horse go underfed, and ungrateful as well, seeing what a useful beast it had been. But corn for horses was a tremendous price in most of the little towns through which they had passed, and food for Rockefeller had become a very big item in the expenses.

"Want some corn for the hoss, did you say?" demanded Mr. Callaghan in a breezy tone. "Well, I don't know as I can't let you have half a bushel free, gratis, and for nothing, as they say in the old country. My wagon is in the town now, I believe, and the corn is in it safe enough, unless someone has stolen it, which isn't likely."

A queer, choky feeling came into the throat of Nealie as she drove Rocky along the main street of Pomeroy, with Mr. Callaghan riding on ahead. How kind people were to them! Of course she did not know that in common decency Tim Callaghan should have paid Rumble fifteen shillings or a sovereign for the service rendered in caring for the cattle, and that he also should have paid

something towards the damage sustained in the overturning of the wagon. Ignorance was certainly bliss in her case, and she esteemed the Irishman a benefactor indeed, when as a matter-of-fact he was doing his level best to shuffle out of his obligations.

However, he beat Gil Addington's prices down to a figure so low that Nealie worried considerably as to whether she would not be a party to a fraud if she took the goods at Mr. Callaghan's valuation, and was not even consoled when he whispered to her in a loud aside that Gil was quite sharp enough to make the next customer run up his profits for him.

Still, it was an amazing comfort to find the provision box full once more, to know that there was enough corn to last Rocky to the end of the journey, and to feel that she had still a little money left in her purse. On shipboard there had seemed to be no anxieties at all, but ever since landing she had carried a very heavy load indeed.

There were a good many miles yet to travel, and the worst of it was that, although they had a very good map of the route, which Mr. Wallis had marked for them, they had several times made mistakes, and had gone miles out of their way in consequence. And in a journey like theirs such things tell seriously in the mileage.

The weather had grown very hot again, and everyone, including the horse, was feeling the effects, while Rupert and Ducky, the most delicate of the party, were almost in a state of collapse. Rupert, according to his wont, made no complaint at all, but Ducky, who had less self-control, enquired fifty times a day how soon it would be before they could live in a nice cool house again, and have beds with sheets to them.

Sylvia did her utmost to keep these complaints from reaching the ears of Nealie, for surely the elder sister had more than enough of worry and care. Sylvia had never troubled herself about things of this sort in the days at Beechleigh, when she had been as irresponsible in her way as either Don or Billykins, but the long journey and the sense of responsibility in being so peculiarly on their own had steadied her and developed her character in quite a wonderful manner.

She rigged Ducky up a little shelter at the back of the wagon, because it was cooler there, and the dust was less. Then she would walk behind for miles, finding all sorts of things to interest the petulant little maiden, and beguile her from fretting, while Rupert sat on the front seat and drove.

By this time the boots of the most active members of the family began to show

signs of heavy wear and tear; but that really mattered very little, as the weather was for the most part dry, and they had all a spare pair to put on if those in active use became too aged to be worn.

One day which followed a succession of other hot days Sylvia paused at a little wooden house by the roadside to interview a woman who had eggs and milk to sell. Even after the purchasing was completed she lingered talking to the woman, while the wagon lumbered on along a winding road that gave peeps of exquisite beauty here and there, where a river valley opened to view.

Presently she came running to overtake the wagon, crying, in an excited fashion: "Nealie, Nealie, what do you think?"

"I think a good many things when I have time, but I have not had much lately, and so the thinking has not been done," replied Nealie, who was riding this morning because she had stockings to darn. They washed their stockings most nights, and hung them on the tilt of the wagon to dry in the morning, and then it was Nealie's business to darn them, while Rupert drove; and as so much walking induced holes and thin places in every direction, the task was one of magnitude.

"The woman at the house yonder told me that when we reached the top of the next high ground we should see the smoke of the Hammerville factories right away in the distance."

"Hurrah!" cried Nealie, forgetting her occupation, and clapping her hands, with the result that she stuck her needle into her finger with such violence that it brought the tears to her eyes and made her wince.

"And she says that last winter, when her little boy was ill, a Dr. Plumstead came out from Hammerville to see him," chanted Sylvia, whirling round on the tips of her toes in the dusty track, and flinging up her hands like an Italian dancing-girl, which made Rocky snort and plunge as if he wanted to join in the fun.

"Steady there, steady, old fellow, we don't want you bolting at this time of day!" called Rupert in a warning tone. "Control your transports, Sylvia, for the sake of Rocky's nerves, or we shall have the old fellow developing a temperature, and then what shall we do?"

"You look as if you had a temperature yourself. Do you feel bad, Rupert?" asked Sylvia, coming closer to the wagon, and speaking so anxiously that Nealie glanced quickly up from her stocking-darning to look at her brother's face.

"Oh, I'm right enough!" he answered quietly. "I feel a bit heavy, but that is because of the weather. I think we shall have a storm before night."

"Oh, I hope not!" cried Nealie in a tone of dismay.

"It would cool the air, and that would be a blessing. Don't you think it is very close this morning?" he asked, wiping his face with the hand that was not occupied with the reins.

"It is hot certainly, but so it is every day," she said, glancing up at the sky, and feeling relieved to see that there were no storm clouds hovering in sight. "Give me the reins, Rupert, and do you go astern and lie down beside Ducky. You will be cooler there, and these stockings can wait."

"I think that it is a great mistake to mend stockings at all in weather like this, for holes are much cooler than little lumps of darning cotton," remarked Sylvia.

"I don't see the use of wearing them at all. I am comfortable enough with bare feet in my shoes, and so would you be if only you were used to it," said Rumble, coming up with a sackful of grass for Rocky's midday feed on his back. The younger boys took it in turns to provide Rocky's luncheon, and to-day was Rumble's turn.

"Sylvia and I are not boys, you see, and so the same rules do not apply to us, for girls always have to observe the conventions," said Nealie, with the prim little air which she sometimes put on for the sake of her juniors.

"What are they?" demanded Billykins, who at this moment ran up from the other side. But Nealie was spared a lengthy explanation by the timely arrival of Don upon the scene, calling shrilly upon the others to come and see a snake which was swallowing a frog, and getting choked in the process.

"I suppose we ought to kill the snake," said Rupert wearily. "But personally I would rather not."

"That is how I feel; for after all we have no quarrel with the snake, and it may be a very harmless creature after all," said Sylvia. "Don't you remember that Mrs. Warner told us a great many people keep a snake in their houses in preference to a cat, just to keep the mice down."

"Well, there is no accounting for tastes," said Nealie, and then she deftly guided Rocky on to the side of the road, drawing rein under the drooping branches of a lightwood tree, where they could rest for two or three hours until the fiercest heat of the day was past.

They were not as merry as usual to-day. The heat was so great that they all wore a more or less wilted appearance.

Presently a breeze sprang up and moaned its way through the trees, and Nealie decided, with nervous haste, that it was time to be moving on. She had a great horror of thunderstorms, although she mostly kept it to herself, and to-day she was vaguely oppressed by a brooding sense of coming disaster, which was doubtless the effect of the electricity in the air.

The way at this part was very solitary. Once they passed a bark-roofed hut standing close to the road; but when they knocked at the door they found that no one was at home, and so went on their way, by no means certain that they were taking the right direction, for although the route lay clear enough before them on paper, in actual fact it was very hard to find, especially here, where there were so many roads and beginnings of roads that did not show upon the map.

After some consultation they took the road which seemed the best and the most used, and, following it, arrived in time on very high ground, from whence they had a fine view over a great stretch of country, dotted here and there with little townships and solitary stations, a rich and fertile land apparently, most of it being under close cultivation.

Thunder grumbled in the west, and the lightning played fitfully along the distant horizon.

"There is Hammerville!" cried Sylvia, flinging out her hand in the direction where tall chimneys stood outlined against a copper-hued sky.

"What a long way off!" cried Nealie, with a new note of dismay in her voice. She had thought that it would be possible to reach the goal of their journeying before the storm broke, but those chimneys were at least eight or ten miles away, and Rocky was showing signs of being nearly done up, for the hills had been heavier than usual, and the heat had been enough to try the mettle of the strongest horse.

"We had better camp for the night in the first convenient place, and then to-morrow we can arrive in style," said Sylvia, who was quite pink with excitement at the thought that when those distant chimneys were reached she would see her father again.

"I suppose that will be better; but, oh, I had so hoped that we should have reached home to-night, so that Rupert would not have to sleep on the ground any more! I am so worried about him," said Nealie, who had jumped down from the wagon, and was standing in the road trying to make up her mind which was the best pitch for a camp, always a time of anxiety for her since that night when the stampeding cattle had bowled the wagon over in their mad rush down the steep hillside.

"Let the boys have the wagon to-night, and we will sleep underneath. I should love it!" cried Sylvia, clapping her hands and whirling round on the tips of her toes, bowing to an imaginary audience, then giving a sideways skip to show the lightness of her poise.

But at that moment there was a crackle of thunder right above their heads, a blaze of lightning, and then a downpour of rain, as if the roll of the thunder had opened the floodgates of the clouds. It was no longer a question of where to camp or where to sleep. They just had to crowd into the wagon and stay there until the tempest had spent itself.



CHAPTER XIV

The Arrival

Never had any of the seven seen a storm to equal the one that followed. The thunder was almost incessant, while the lightning played in blue forks and flashes round a couple of stringy barks growing by the side of the road a little farther on, darting in and out like live things at play, until Nealie forgot half of her fear in the fascination of watching them.

Ducky had crept under the roll of mattresses at the back of the wagon, and was hiding there in the dark from the terror of the storm, while Rupert and Rumble were doing valiant service, one at either end of the wagon, in holding the curtains together, as the fierce wind kept ripping them open, letting in sheets of rain upon the group cowering within.

Rocky had been tied by his halter to the lee side of the wagon to prevent him from wandering under the trees and courting speedy destruction there. He stood with bent head and bunched hindquarters, as if in stolid resignation, although Ducky cried because he was too big to be taken into the shelter of the tilt—to be made comfortable, as she said. It was quite in vain that Don and Billykins sought to console her by saying that horses rather enjoyed being out in the rain. She was quite positive that they knew nothing about it, and told them so with brisk decision that left them without anything more to say on the subject. But the interest of the argument had dried her tears and taken away so much of her fear of the storm that everyone felt it was well worth while to have roused her to such a pitch.

It was dark before the rain ceased, and by then Rupert and Rumble were just about wet through from their efforts at keeping the rain from the others. There was no question of who should sleep under the wagon to-night, for by the time sundown came they were surrounded by about two feet of water, and although this would doubtless run off before very long, the mud which was left behind was every bit as bad as the water when considered in the light of a foundation for one's mattress.

So they all sat in chilly discomfort in the wagon, making a frugal supper from damper left over from breakfast, eked out with biscuits. Then, leaning against each other's shoulders, they tried to forget their discomfort in sleep.

Nealie had insisted that Rupert and Rumble should strip off their wet jackets and wrap themselves in blankets; but the worst of it was that Rupert was wet below his jacket, which was thin, to suit the heat of the day, and so, as might be expected, he took a violent chill, and as he had been very unwell on the day before, his condition, when morning dawned, fairly frightened Nealie. For he was blazing with fever, and talking all sorts of nonsense about his mother and Aunt Judith.

It was his constant harping on the people who had died which so worried her; because, of course, she very naturally thought that he was going to die too.

The driving on this day was left to Sylvia and Rumble, who put Rockefeller along at his very best pace, for they were all frightened at Rupert's sad plight, which was to rob their arrival of all the delight they had pictured when they should drive up to their father's house and personally announce to him the arrival of his family.

Don and Billykins trotted along the road by the side of Sylvia and Rumble, all four walking to ease the load, so that the wagon might get along faster. Ducky sat on the front seat, her small face pinched to a wistful anxiety, while Nealie knelt at the back end of the wagon trying to soothe Rupert, who lay on a mattress wildly declaring that he must get up, because his mother and Aunt Judith were in trouble and calling out to him for help.

"Will dear Father be able to cure Rupert quick?" asked the little girl, leaning forward to let her voice reach Sylvia, who walked on one side of the horse while Rumble walked on the other.

Sylvia held up her hand with a warning gesture. "Sit up, Ducky darling, or you will be tumbling off your perch, and we do not want any more disasters this trip if we can help it," she said, adding: "Of course Father will be able to make Rupert well. The poor, dear boy is only running a temperature, you know, and the shaking of the wagon aggravates it."

"Then it will only walk when we get home?" asked Ducky wistfully, with a scared backward glance over her shoulder as Rupert burst into a wild peal of laughter, and told Nealie that he had taken an engagement as a circus rider.

"What will only walk when we get home?" asked Rumble, who had noticed the

noise Rupert was making, and was anxious to distract the attention of Ducky if he could.

"Why, the temperature, of course. Didn't Sylvia say that it was running now?" enquired Ducky innocently, and then was highly indignant with Sylvia and Rumble because they burst into a peal of laughter.

"What is the joke?" demanded Don, arriving alongside in a rather breathless condition, for he had been investigating a cross track, and then had to hurry to catch up the wagon.

But by this time they were grave again, and, truth to tell, a little ashamed of having laughed so much when Rupert was so ill. Then Ducky had to be pacified, for, frightened by the nonsense her eldest brother was talking, she had begun to cry, until Sylvia hit on the grand idea of making her the postilion, and, helping her to scramble on to the back of Rockefeller, let her sit there in state, pretending to drive, while the last weary miles of the long journey slid by.

They reached the outskirts of Hammerville in the late afternoon, and stopped at the very first house to enquire where Dr. Plumstead lived.

The woman who opened the door to them declared that she did not know.

"I don't hold with doctors, and physic, and that sort of stuff, so I don't know nothing about them," she said ungraciously, and then shut the door in their faces.

"Disagreeable old thing; I hope that she will be ill and want the doctor very soon," said Billykins, shaking an indignant fist in the direction of the closed door.

"That is very uncharitable of you," said Sylvia, "and besides, she does not look as if she would be at all a good paying patient, and so it would only be a bit more drudgery for dear Father, for, of course, a doctor must go to everyone who has need of him, whether the patient can pay or not."

"Then I shall not be a doctor, for I don't want to do things for people who can't pay me," said Don; and then he ran up to a pleasant-faced girl, who was weeding the garden of the next house, and asked her if she could tell him where Dr. Plumstead lived.

"Why, yes, he has got a house on the Icksted Road, that is on the Pig Hill side of the town," she said, standing up to survey the wagon and as many of its occupants as chanced to be visible.

"Is it far?" demanded Don anxiously.

"Oh, somewhere about a mile! You must turn to the left when you have passed Dan Potter's saloon; that is right in the middle of the town, so you can't miss it. What do you want the doctor for? Is anyone bad?"

"We have come to live with him; we are his children, you know," explained Don, with the engaging frankness which he could display sometimes, although as a rule he was more reserved with strangers than Rumble or Billykins.

"His children? I didn't know that he had got any!" exclaimed the girl, staring harder than ever at the wagon, although at present there was not much to see, except Ducky perched astride on the big horse that Rumble was leading, for Sylvia had retired under shelter of the tilt to make some sort of a toilet in honour of reaching the end of the journey, and Nealie was still ministering to the wants of Rupert to the best of her ability.

"That is not wonderful, because, you see, we have been living in England. But I must hurry on, and I will come to see you another day. There are seven of us, and we are just on the tiptoe of expectation about what Father will say when he sees the lot of us," said Don, with a friendly nod, and then trotted away in pursuit of the wagon, which had passed on while the girl leaned against the fence and feebly gasped, as if her astonishment were too much for her.

Dan Potter's saloon was quite an imposing place, and very tawdry with gilt adornments and coloured glass. They turned into a road at the left, according to the direction given by the girl, and then followed a road which was scarcely more than a track, and that abounded in mud puddles of a deep and dangerous sort, where the going was so bad that Nealie was forced to leave Rupert in the care of Sylvia, and come herself to guide Rocky from the pitfalls of that evil place.

There were newly finished buildings that looked as if they had been run up in the night; there were buildings in course of erection that looked as if they would tumble down before they were finished; and there were other buildings in process of being planned, but of which not much was to be seen saving a forest of scaffold poles.

"What a big place it looks," said Nealie, as with an abrupt jerk she pulled Rocky's head round in time to save him from pitching into an unexpected hole that yawned in the path. "I had somehow got the idea that it was only a little town, not much bigger than a village."

"It is awfully ugly though," replied Rumble, wrinkling his nose with an air of extreme dissatisfaction. "The man that built those houses at the end of the street

ought to be condemned to live opposite to them."

"That might not be a hard sort of punishment at all," laughed Nealie; "because, you see, if he had no eye for beauty or artistic fitness the ugliness would not trouble him, he might even take a great deal of satisfaction in thinking how nicely he had done them."

"There is no accounting for tastes," grumbled Rumble, who was really more an admirer of what was beautiful than even Sylvia, who had the reputation of being artistic.

Then he dashed off to ask a man if they were going right for Dr. Plumstead's house, and, being told that it was the next small house that stood alone, he rushed back to the wagon with his information.

"I wonder if Father will be at home," cried Billykins, with an eager look on his face. "May we run forward and knock at the door, Nealie?"

"No, no; we will all go together," answered Nealie hurriedly, while a flush rose in her cheeks, and there was a nervous look in her eyes, for suddenly she was dreading the reception they might receive.

How forlorn they really were, those seven whom no one seemed to really want! And yet how kind people had been to them in all that long, long journey from Beechleigh in England. Of course, but for that bit of absent-mindedness on the part of Rumble, Dr. Plumstead would have known that his children were coming, and then he could have had a welcome of a sort ready for them. As it was, it would be the naked truth which they would have to face, and it was the fear that perhaps he would wish they had not come that made Nealie feel so nervous, as she led Rocky along the few remaining yards of that very bad stretch of road leading to the doctor's house.

Sylvia had left Rupert for a few minutes and was hanging out of the front of the wagon. Ducky still perched astride Rockefeller's broad back, while the three younger boys were grouped close to Nealie, who led the horse.

There was a bit of rising ground before the house, and so of necessity the pace was slow; but at last they halted, and then stood for a moment as if uncertain what to do next.

"Rumble, you had better knock," said Nealie in a choked tone, and then was instantly sorry for what she had said, remembering that but for Rumble's forgetfulness there might have been no need to knock at all.

"Let me knock," pleaded Don, wondering why Nealie looked so pale, and Rumples seemed so scared.

"Yes, dear, you can knock, and Billykins will go with you," she said, with a little gasp of relief.

The two small boys dashed through the gate and up the path to the door. There had once been a garden in front of the house, but it was wilderness pure and simple now, a choked jumble of weeds, and flowers struggling for existence in the garden beds, and a wattle bush filled the air with a sweet perfume which always afterwards reminded Nealie of that moment of waiting before the house.

"There is no one at home, and the door is locked," cried Don, and then he tried to peep in the window, but was not high enough to reach the lowest pane.

"I expect he has been called out to a case," said Sylvia from her perch in front of the wagon. "Nalie, can't you send the boys to find out where Father keeps the key? I am sure that we ought to get Rupert out of the wagon as soon as possible, for he seems to get more ill every minute, poor dear!"

Ah, there was Rupert to be considered! Of choice Nealie would have remained standing out in front of the house until her father's return, however long she might have to wait, but Rupert must be cared for, and because she feared that his life might hang on his having prompt attention just now, she gave way to Sylvia's suggestion, and told Don to run to the next house to ask where Dr. Plumstead kept his key when he had to go away.

Away sped Don, nothing loath, and, entering the gate of the next garden, rushed up to the house door and knocked loudly.

The houses in this part of Hammerville were older than those of the more crowded streets, indeed it looked as if the place had started as a village at the first and then on second thoughts had grown out at one side into a busy town, while the other side remained sleepy and village-like, each abode having its own garden and orchard in the rear.

There was a minute of waiting, and then the door was opened to Don by a sleepy-looking Irishwoman, garbed in a very dirty pinafore.

"I don't want any firewood to-day at all, at all, thank you," she said pleasantly, her kindly face expanding into a genial smile.

"I have not brought you firewood, but I want to know where Dr. Plumstead keeps his key when he is called away to a patient?" asked Don, lifting his hat

with so much courtesy that the good woman was tremendously impressed.

"He has only got one key, sir, and he always takes that with him, except when he leaves it at home," she said, with a sudden change of manner, because she decided that this was one of the quality, and no errand boy, as she at first imagined.

"Can you tell us how to get in?" asked Don rather desperately. "We are Dr. Plumstead's children, all seven of us, and I am afraid that he was not expecting us at this minute, so he is not at home, you see."

"Dr. Plumstead with sivin children! The saints preserve us! What next!" cried the woman, flinging up her hands in such profound amazement that Don could not help laughing, she looked so funny.

"The what next is that we want to get into the house as quickly as possible, because Rupert, that is my eldest brother, is not well," he explained, wondering why everyone should be so amazed because Dr. Plumstead had children.

"I will let you in with my key. It fits the doctor's door, which is very convenient, because you see I do for him, and real hard work it is, for he is a dreadful particular gentleman. But sivin children, and you not the eldest! My word, what is the world coming to?"

As Don could not answer this question it had to go unanswered, and instead he waited in silence while the Irishwoman took her key from a nail in the wall, and set off across her garden, which was only one degree less untidy than the doctor's, to open the door for the children.

"Why, the others are bigger than you, most of them!" she exclaimed in still growing amazement, as she surveyed the group standing by the head of the horse. "The saints preserve us! What is the world coming to?"

Again Don had to let the question go unanswered, although it seemed to him rather rude. The woman unlocked the door of the little wooden house, which was plain and ugly, and did not even boast a veranda, then, dropping a curtsy to Nealie, she stood back for them to enter.



CHAPTER XV

A Great Shock

There was a whirling confusion in the mind of Nealie as she crossed the threshold and stood in the little room which was her father's home.

What a poor little place it was! There were only two rooms, the one upon which the door opened, and which was evidently dining-room, kitchen, and surgery rolled into one, and beyond this there was a bedroom, very bare and poor, with an iron bedstead, on which was a mattress and some dark rugs, but no sheets.

Coming straight as she did from the almost palatial comfort of the great liner and the luxury of the Sydney hotel, this poor hut struck a real note of dismay in the heart of Nealie, for the place was as poor as the poorest cottage that she had ever seen at Beechleigh or Bodstead in England.

But it was her father's home, and perhaps he had lived in such poverty in order that he might have more money to send for the support of his big family in England, and at the thought of this her heart grew wondrously soft and pitiful, for she had no idea how very small was the amount that her father had ever contributed to the support of his family since disaster had fallen upon him.

While she stood looking round, her heart growing more and more pitiful for the father whom she had come so far to see, Sylvia came bustling into the house and took her by the arm, giving it a gentle shake.

"Dreaming, are you, dear? Come and help me lift Rupert out of the wagon, and let us get him to bed as quickly as we can, for I am afraid that he is dreadfully ill. Where are the bedrooms? Oh, what a dreadfully poky little house it is!" and Miss Sylvia turned up the tip of her nose in disdainful fashion.

"Sylvia, there is only one bedroom, with one small bed in it, without sheets. Where can we put poor Rupert?"

"On that bed, of course; and if there are no sheets, we have some among our luggage, for remember we brought the best of Aunt Judith's house linen with us,

and I know where it was packed. Come along, Nealie, and let us hustle things a bit, and then we will have Rupert quite comfortable by the time Father comes home. That dirty woman who unlocked the door says she thinks he must have gone out Pig Hill way, wherever that may be."

There was no withstanding Sylvia when her mood was like this, and Nealie knew only too well that Rupert must be attended to without delay, so she followed her sister back to the wagon, where Rumble, Don, and Billykins were already hard at work unpacking the baggage which had been loaded on to the rack at the back of the wagon; and when this was all cleared away they let the backboard down. Then, while Nealie and Sylvia stood on the ground, Rumble and Don managed to lift Rupert into their arms, and with much difficulty they contrived to carry him through the garden patch into the house.

He had left off shouting and talking now, and seemed almost in a state of collapse, a condition that frightened Nealie far more than his delirium had done. There was no time just at first to look in the baggage for the sheets which had belonged to Aunt Judith, so they straightened the rugs on the hard mattress, and laid their brother down.

"It is a beautifully clean bed anyhow, and on the whole I think that clean rugs are better than fusty sheets; but of course a doctor would have his things clean," remarked Sylvia, as she patted the pillow into a more shapely lump and laid it under the head of poor Rupert.

"I am going to make a fire, and warm him a little milk; perhaps he will like it better if it is warm, and he has only had cold things all day," said Nealie, and then resolutely turned her back on the four juniors, who were so hard at work unpacking the wagon and bringing the boxes, bundles, and cases into the house.

Rockefeller had been unharnessed and turned into the doctor's paddock, which stretched away from the back of the house up to a line of hills thickly wooded. The horse was rolling with all four legs in the air, uttering equine squeals of delight, as if rejoicing in the fact of the long journey being safely accomplished. Ducky, tired of helping to unload, had perched herself on the top bar of the gate, clapping her hands in delight at the performances of the horse, which she imagined were being enacted solely for her benefit, and she grumbled quite vigorously when Billykins ran out to tell her that supper was ready and she must come in.

"We have supper every night, but it isn't every night that Rocky will cut capers like that," she said, with a swing of her plump little arm in the direction of the

horse, but upset her balance in the process, and tumbled into the arms of Billykins, who proved unequal to the strain of her sudden descent, and so they rolled over in the dust together.

"I think that you are most astonishingly clumsy," said the small maiden, scrambling up with an offended air, and not even saying "Thank you" to Billykins for having been bottom dog for the moment.

"When you want to fall off gates on to people you should choose big, fat people, and then perhaps they wouldn't give way as I did; but you really are fearfully heavy," answered Billykins, who was shaking the dust from himself as a dog shakes off the water when he comes out of a pond.

Then they took hold of each other's hands and ran back to the house, where Rumble and Don had got supper ready in the outer room, while Nealie and Sylvia were busy with Rupert in the bedroom.

The luggage had all been stowed away in as shipshape a style as possible, the wagon had been drawn in at the paddock gate, and now the place was crammed full with the big family, who were all, with the exception of Rupert, strung up to the highest pitch of excitement, waiting for their father's return.

But, having had no proper meal since breakfast, they simply could not wait until he came before having their supper.

Yet, despite the fact that the long journey was safely over, and they had reached their father's house, it was not a cheerful meal. Rupert's condition forbade any laughter or joking; besides, Nealie and Rumble looked so fearfully nervous that it was quite impossible to be even as lively as usual.

Rumble's trouble was simply and solely because of that letter which he had forgotten to post, and that had led to there being no welcome for them when they arrived. Of course it was surprising that Mr. Runciman had not written again; but then everyone knew that Mr. Runciman never wrote a letter when he could possibly shirk the task, and that was why they had been so urgent in their entreaties that he should write the letter while they waited on that momentous occasion when they went to see him to ask him to send them out to the land of the Southern Cross.

"If Father is cross because he did not know that we were coming I shall just stand up and say that it was all my fault, and that the others were not to blame at all," said Rumble to himself, and then he mentally rehearsed the little scene and the speech he would make until he forgot all about his supper, and just sat by the

table staring out through the door, which had been left wide open for the sake of coolness, and the strained look on his face made Nealie's heart ache.

On her own part she was a prey to acute anxiety, and she was dreading most of all the first look which would show on the face of her father when he knew that his family had come to him. If the look were pleasure, then everything would be possible, and nothing else would matter; but if there were dismay or regret in his expression, she felt that she would never be able to bear her life again. Sylvia had no such fears; her nature was so different from Nealie's, and she rarely troubled about things which were under the surface, and so was spared many worries and much heartache; while Don, Billykins, and Ducky were only tired of the long waiting until their father should come, and they were already beginning to yawn widely because they were so sleepy.

"Where shall we all sleep to-night, Sylvia?" demanded Ducky presently, breaking in upon quite a lengthy silence, and voicing the very question which was so sorely troubling Nealie at that moment, although she rose from the table and passed into the other room, where Rupert lay, and pretended that she had not heard the query.

"Oh, we shall manage somehow, and there is always the wagon, you know, if everything else fails!" said Sylvia vaguely; and then she sprang to her feet with a sudden eager movement, for to her strained listening there had come the sound of a horse's feet on the road, a smart trot which slackened down by the gate outside, not as if the animal had been pulled up, but had stopped of its own accord.

"It is Father!" she said in a whisper, just as if the power of audible speech had left her, and then she started for the door, followed by Ducky and the three boys; but Nealie, busy with Rupert, had heard no sound of arrival as yet.

They had lighted a lamp when the sun went down, and now Sylvia stood on the threshold, with the four younger ones crowding about her, and the strong light showing the group up in outline, although it left the faces indistinct.

The horseman had stopped and dismounted; then, leaving his horse standing where it was, he came striding along the path towards the group at the door.

Sylvia tried to speak, but the words would not come, as she stood with one hand tightly pressed against her wildly beating heart. And then, as the man halted in front of her, she saw that it was quite a young man, and not her father at all.

"It is only someone come for the doctor. How disappointing!" was her unspoken

comment, and she was just going to tell him that the doctor had not come home yet, when to her amazement he asked a question in a surprised tone.

"May I ask why are you here?"

"We are waiting for Father, but he has not come yet. The woman in the next house told us that she thought he had gone out Pig Hill way, and that he would not be long before he was back. I hope that your business with him is not urgent?" Her voice quavered slightly in spite of her efforts to keep it steady, for surely it would be dreadful if her father were called away to another case when Rupert was so badly in need of care.

"Pardon me, but I do not seem to understand," said the man, with so much bewilderment in his manner that Sylvia longed to laugh, but managed to pull herself together and to maintain a decent gravity of expression.

"We are expecting Father, that is Dr. Plumstead, home every minute, and when he comes he will find a very great surprise in store for him," she said, flinging up her head with a happy gesture, and now her laugh would have its way and rang out on the hot air, being promptly echoed by the younger ones, who stood pressed close to her on both sides.

"But I am Dr. Plumstead, and I have just returned from a case at Pig Hill," said the man.

It was at this moment that Nealie came hurrying to the door, and, sweeping the others to the right and left to make way for her, stood in front of the man, her face white as the handkerchief she held in her hand, while her breath came in troubled gasps as if she had been running until she was spent.

"Whom did you say that you were?" she demanded, her voice having a sharp, dictatorial ring.

The stranger, who had merely lifted his hat when he spoke to Sylvia, swept it off his head and held it in his hand when Nealie thrust herself to the front.

"I am Dr. Plumstead, and this is my house," he answered. "But——"

Nealie, however, cut into the explanation he was trying to make, and now her bewilderment was as great as his had been at the first.

"But Dr. Plumstead is our father, and we have come from England to live with him," she cried, and then stood staring at the man with ever-growing dismay.



CHAPTER XVI

The Next Thing to be Done

The man stepped forward then and laid a kindly hand upon her arm.

"Shall we go into the house and see if we can get to the bottom of the mystery?" he asked in such a kind tone that poor, bewildered Nealie gave way before it and suffered him to lead her into the house with which they had made so free, believing it to be their father's home, while the others trooped after them and gathered round the chair in which the man who called himself Dr. Plumstead had seated her.

"Nealie, Nealie, come quick, my head is on fire!" called Rupert from the next room, his voice rising to a shriek.

"Who is that?" exclaimed the doctor, looking, if possible, more astonished than before.

"It is my eldest brother. He is very ill, and when we reached here he was so bad that we carried him in from the wagon and put him to bed; but we did not know that we had no right here," said Nealie, her voice quavering a little, although she held her head at its proudest angle and tried to look as defiant as possible.

"I will see him," said the doctor quietly, as she jumped up to go to Rupert, and then he passed into the bedroom with her; but, finding it in darkness, came back for the lamp, and, with a word of excuse to Sylvia for leaving her without a light, picked it up and disappeared with it into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

"Sylvia, if that is my father I don't like him at all. Why, he never even looked at me; there might as well have been no Ducky!" cried the poor little maiden, who keenly resented being ignored in such a fashion.

"That is not our father at all. Why, it is only a young man; but why he is here posing as Dr. Plumstead is more than I can imagine, and, oh! where can our dear father be?" said Sylvia, who was on the verge of tears, for the day had been a

trying one on account of Rupert's illness, and, as they all agreed, the home-coming was just horrid.

"Buck up, old girl, it is never so bad that it might not be worse!" exclaimed Rumple in a nervous tone, for well he knew that if Sylvia broke down in miserable tears Ducky would at once join in, followed by Billykins, who only rarely cried, but always did the thing thoroughly when he did begin.

"Shall we have to go somewhere else for to-night, I wonder, or what shall we do?" Sylvia went on, drawing herself up and setting her teeth together until she could conquer that weak desire for tears, which would be sure to lower her dreadfully in the eyes of the boys and would do no good at all. "The house seemed embarrassingly small at first, but now that it is a stranger who is master, and not Father at all, why, the whole thing is impossible."

"We can sleep in and under the wagon, as we have done before; but Rupert can't, so I guess that we had better wait and see what Nealie decides is best," replied Rumple. But this was met with a whimper of protest from Ducky, who demanded to be put to bed somewhere at once.

"Could we not put Ducky on a mattress in the wagon, with Don and Billykins?" suggested Sylvia. "They would be quite safe and comfortable there, because the wagon is in enclosed ground and so close to the house also. Then you and I can wait round here to help if we are wanted."

"Brave old Syllie, I thought that you would find a way out of the muddle!" cried Rumple, giving her an approving pat on the back, and then he called to Don to come and help him carry a mattress out to the wagon, a difficult feat in the dark, but one which was safely accomplished after some struggles, a few bruises, and one fall that was happily not a serious one.

Then Sylvia carried Ducky out to the wagon and handed her up to Rumple, who stowed her inside on the mattress, bidding the two small boys lie down one on each side of her, and the three were sound asleep before Sylvia and Rumple had gone back to the house.

They were standing on the threshold of the dark little room, and wondering what they had better do next, when the door of the sleeping chamber opened and Nealie came out.

"Sylvia, where are you?" she cried, with such misery in her voice that Sylvia gave a groan of real dismay.

"What is the matter?" asked Rumple sharply. Of course he was solely to blame

for all this wretched business, he told himself, as none of these disasters could have happened if he had not forgotten to post that letter.

"Rupert is very, very ill, Dr. Plumstead says, and we must make a fire at once and boil water for some kind of fomentations. Could you and Rumpel do that while I help the doctor in the bedroom?"

"Of course we can. I know where the firewood is," said Rumpel hastily, heaving a sigh of satisfaction to think that there was something useful for him to do.

"If Rumpel is going to make the water hot, can't I come into the bedroom to help you with Rupert?" asked Sylvia, for Nealie looked thoroughly worn out.

"I will call you if we want more help, meanwhile you might make the poor doctor some tea, for I do not believe he has had a real meal since breakfast, and it is very hard for him to find his home invaded in such a fashion. But where are the children?" asked Nealie, looking round in a bewildered fashion.

"We have put them to bed in the wagon; they were so very tired," answered Sylvia. "Now I will get the doctor man such a nice supper that he will feel he is to be congratulated on his household of visitors, even though one of them is in possession of the only bed in the house. Oh, Nealie, what an awful situation it is, and whatever shall we do if we can't find dear Father?"

"Don't, dear, I dare not think about that or anything else until Rupert is better, and then God will show us what to do," said Nealie, putting her hand out with such an imploring gesture that Sylvia was instantly ashamed of herself, and set about being as cheerful as possible in order to keep up the courage of her sister.

"Oh, we shall get through all right of course, and after all it is just a part of our adventures; anything is better than stagnating I think, and we have not been in much danger of that lately!"

Nalie went back to the bedroom, while Sylvia and Rumpel did their very best in the outer chamber, where the confusion almost defied description. But their days of living in the wagon had fitted them for managing comfortably where anyone else would have been bothered by the muddle all around.

As it was, Rumpel's fire was burning in grand style, and the various pots and kettles on the stove were beginning to show signs of being nearly ready to boil, when the doctor came out of the inner room to get something from the medicine cupboard in the corner.

"Will you please sit down and take your supper, now that you are here?" asked

Sylvia rather timidly, for to her way of thinking this doctor had a very disagreeable face; but that was, perhaps, because she was prejudiced against him through the dreadful disappointment which had met them at the end of their journey.

"I do not think that I can stay for food just now; your brother needs me," he began, in a tone which certainly was brusque, although perhaps he did not mean it to be so.

"Oh, please, do!" she pleaded. "Because then I shall not feel so worried, and I am sure that Rupert will not take much harm for half an hour, while you will feel far more fit when you have had a meal."

"It is very kind of you to be so insistent, and I really am very hungry," he replied, smiling broadly now, for the supper which Sylvia had cooked for him from their own stores smelled exceedingly good, and she was already pouring a cup of tea out for him and doing her very best to make him feel how grateful they were to him for all his kindness to Rupert.

"But won't you sit down and have something to eat also?" he asked, as she hovered about ready to anticipate his wants.

"No, thank you, we had supper before you came, when we were waiting for Father," she said, with a choke in her voice, which made her turn hastily away and knock a tin pan over, so that in the sudden clatter he might not notice how near she was to booing like a baby.

He frowned heavily, as he wondered what the guardians of this family could have been thinking of not to write and make sure that the father was in a position to receive them, before sending seven irresponsible young people halfway round the world, on the off chance of finding their father when they reached the end of the journey.

"It has really been very hard for you, and we must do our best to help you out of the muddle," he said quite kindly, as he enjoyed the results of Sylvia's handiwork and began to feel all the better for his supper.

"Do you know where Father has gone?" she asked, putting the question which Nealie lacked the courage to ask.

"When Dr. Plumstead passed the practice over to me, eighteen months ago, he said that he was going to Mostyn, and that letters from England were to be forwarded to the Post Office there, but that nothing else was to be sent on," the doctor answered.

"If your name is the same as Father's, how would you know which were your letters and which were his?" Sylvia asked in a wondering tone, for to her it seemed of all things most strange that there should be two doctors of one name, and that not a common one, in a small town like Hammerville.

"Oh, that was easy enough! I am an Australian, educated in Germany, and I have not a single correspondent in England. But only one letter has come for your father, and that arrived about two weeks ago, so I forwarded it to Mostyn at once," said the doctor.

"Where is Mostyn?" asked Sylvia.

"It is away in the back country, about fifty miles from everywhere, I imagine. It is a boom town; that is to say, they have found gold there in paying quantities, and so it will grow like a mushroom until the gold gives out, and then, unless they come across anything else of value, it will fizzle out as rapidly as it sprang to life. It is a little way we have of doing things in this part of the world," said the doctor as he finished his supper, and then he asked, in a tone of grave concern: "Pray, where can you go to sleep? There is certainly no sense in your sitting up all night. Your sister will stay up to help me with the sick boy, and then in the morning she will want to rest, and you must be ready to take her place."

"Oh, I can sit round in a chair and doze a little when I am not wanted!" replied Sylvia in that happy-go-lucky way she had of saying things, and which as a rule no one heeded. But the doctor frowned heavily as he said: "That will not do at all; young people cannot get on without proper sleep, and you must be fresh and fit to take your sister's place in the morning, for your brother is going to want a lot of nursing to pull him through. What have you done with the younger children?"

"We put them to bed in the wagon. It is just outside, you know, and we thought that they would be out of the way," answered Sylvia.

"An excellent idea. Now suppose that you go and put yourself to bed with them, and they will be sure to wake you bright and early in the morning," he said, smiling now, because there really seemed a way out of the difficulty.

"But you will want someone to keep the fire in for you to-night," protested Sylvia, who did not like the idea of being sent off to bed with the children, even though she was so sleepy that she could scarcely keep her eyes open.

"That other brother of yours will do that for me. What is his name, by the way?" asked the doctor, as Rumble disappeared from the room in search of more

firewood.

"He is Dalrymple, only we always call him Rumpel, because it suits him so well and is affectionate too. But you will certainly never keep him awake. He will mean not to go to sleep, for he is really a very good sort, and crammed full of the best intentions, but he simply can't keep his eyes open when he is very tired; so presently, when you least expect it, he will just double up and fall asleep, and you will not be able to wake him up however much you try. We Plumsteads are all like that, and sometimes it is very awkward," said Sylvia earnestly.

"I will risk it; only you must go to bed now," said the doctor, laughing broadly at her description of the Plumstead weakness in the matter of popping off to sleep at inconvenient times; and then he called to Rumpel and asked him to see his sister safely into the wagon, and to keep an eye on it during the remainder of the night.

Poor Rumpel! He honestly meant to do just what the doctor asked of him, for he was just as grateful as a boy could be for what was being done for Rupert and also for the way in which the doctor was treating the girls, so he trotted backwards and forwards for another hour, bringing in wood, stoking the stove, making kettles boil, fetching water from a crazy old pump in the next garden, falling over the tangled vegetation *en route*, and getting hopelessly muddled in the darkness. Then he suddenly became so sleepy that it seemed to him he would snore as he walked about; his feet became heavier and heavier, until the effort to lift them grew beyond his power. He could not see out of his eyes, and, collapsing on to the floor between the door and the stove, he lay there, happily unconscious of everything.

The doctor found him on one of his journeys out to the stove for fresh boiling water, and would certainly have thought him to be in a fit but for Sylvia's explanation of the family peculiarity. So he only smiled to himself, and, lifting Rumpel, laid him more at ease in the farther corner of the room, covering him over with a rug; and then he went back to the bedroom, where Nealie was busy helping him with Rupert, and said, in a laughing tone: "I have just picked that brother of yours up from the floor, where he lay as fast asleep as if he were on the softest bed that had ever been made."

"Poor Rumpel! His intentions about keeping awake are always so good that it is very hard on him to be bowled over in such a fashion," said Nealie, with a wan little smile, and then for a few minutes she was very busy helping the doctor put fresh fomentations on Rupert. But when this was finished, and the sufferer lay

quiet from the comfort of it all, and there was leisure to think of other things, Nealie spoke again: "How soon will it be safe for me to leave Rupert?"

The doctor looked at her in surprise; but thinking she was tired out, and longing for sleep, he said kindly:

"You can go off to the wagon now for a sleep if you like. I should not have suggested your staying all night, only that I thought it would be good for your brother to have one of his own about him; but as he seems inclined to sleep now, it will not really matter."

"Oh, I did not mean that I wanted to go to bed!" said Nealie quickly. "This is not the first time I have stayed up all night. Whenever the children have been ill I have stayed with them. Indeed I am quite used to watching and being on guard. But I want to know how soon you think that it will be fit for me to leave Rupert to the care of Sylvia, so that I may go to find Father."

"You could not go to a place like Mostyn alone, and the best way will be for you to send and ask your father to come here for you," replied the doctor gravely.

But to this suggestion Nealie shook her head. "I heard what you said to Sylvia about Father, and I have the feeling that he needs us very badly indeed. Why did he give up the practice here?"

Dr. Plumstead hedged this question as best he could, for he simply could not tell this girl with the pathetic eyes that an old rumour had risen, which made it necessary for the doctor to go farther afield, and so the practice had been disposed of to the first person who was willing to give a little money for it.

But Nealie was shrewd enough to understand without telling, and, looking the doctor straight in the face, she asked: "Was it that affair of Father taking off the man's arm which was brought up against him?"

"Something of the kind, I think," said the doctor reluctantly. He was saying to himself how hard it was that this young girl should have so many hard things to bear when she seemed just made for joy and happiness, when, to his amazement, she broke into a low ripple of happy laughter, and softly clapped her hands.

"I thought it was that," she cried. "Strangely enough, since we landed in New South Wales I have stumbled upon the very man whose arm it was that Father took off, and someone told me that this man says it was the greatest blessing of his life that he was thrust out into the world maimed, to make his own way, and sink or swim as best he could. Now, when I have found my father I am going to ask him to communicate with this man, and to make the man set him right before

the world; for why should my dear father have to suffer so heavily for having merely done his duty, and saved the man's life in spite of everything? It is a doctor's duty to save life at all costs, and no consideration of any other kind should make him do otherwise. Father was quite sure that the man would die if his arm were not taken off, and that was why he performed the operation in spite of the disapproval of the man's friends."

"It was, as you say, his duty to do his best for his patient, and it is hard lines that he should have to suffer for just having done his duty," said the doctor. "But why can you not put this in a letter, and let me send it to Mostyn for you the first thing in the morning?"

"Because I am afraid that Father would not read it," admitted Nealie, first flushing and then paling, as she looked up at the doctor with her fearless gaze. "I think that Father is so beaten by everything that he has had to bear that he just feels as if he will give up and not trouble about anything more. So that to know all his big family have suddenly been dumped upon him will be a sort of a shock; but if I am there to assure him that we shall be more help than hindrance he may feel better about it all. Of course there are a lot of us, and we have fearfully big appetites too, except Rupert, but there are so many ways of earning one's living here that I think we shall soon be able to support ourselves, that is, Sylvia, Rupert, and I, for of course the others will have to go to school."

"You are very courageous, and I think perhaps you are right in wanting to go to your father, and if you will leave it to me I will see what arrangements I can make for your journey," said the doctor, and Nealie thanked him, feeling that bad as things were they might easily have been worse if they had not found a friend like her father's successor, who by such a strange coincidence bore the same name.

Rupert had experienced such relief from the fomentations that he lay in a quiet sleep, and Nealie, with her head on the pillow at his side, slumbered also; but the doctor had gone to the outer room, and was very busy looking up his case book and trying to make up his mind whether he dared leave his patients long enough to go with Nealie to find her father.

His private fear was that when she reached Mostyn she would find that her father had gone somewhere else. Doctors in mining camps were apt to be nomadic creatures, that is, they had to go to their patients, and it was no use to stay where the people were all well, when perhaps at some place fifty or a hundred miles distant men and women might be dying like flies from some contagious disease

with never a doctor to help them. It was life at its roughest and wildest in that back country, and he could not let Nealie venture alone in her youth and ignorance where so many perils might beset her path.

Day was beginning to dawn when he heard Rupert speaking, and then with a tap at the door he entered to see how it fared with his patient.

"I am better, thank you, and I am very much obliged to you for all that you have done for me," said Rupert weakly.

"Ah, I think that you will do now, by the look of you," said the doctor in a cheerful tone. "And now, with your consent, I am going to take your sister to hunt up your father, for I don't feel equal to all seven of you singlehanded," and he burst into a hearty laugh at his own small joke.



CHAPTER XVII

In the Thick of It

A hundred miles or more from Mostyn, right out on the sandy plains, beyond the gap in the mountains which they called the Devil's Bridge, there had been a gold find. A gold prospector had been found lying in the mulga scrub with a big nugget in his hand, while his swag, when unrolled, had shown a whole handful of lesser nuggets.

The poor wretch had found gold, but had died of thirst, and those who found him came perilously near to sharing the same fate, so keenly anxious were they to make the dead yield up the knowledge of his find, by tracing his poor wandering footprints round and round and in and out among the hillocks of sand, the clumps of spinifex, and the mulga scrub.

But one man, more human than the rest, elected to dig a grave where the dead might rest secure from the ravages of the wandering dingo, and although the others laughed at him, calling him names, and going away leaving him to do his work of mercy alone, he stuck grimly at his task, probing down between the roots of the mulga bushes to make a hollow deep enough to form a decent resting place for the nameless dead.

He was quite alone now, save for the quiet figure on the ground and a hoodie crow which was perched on a swaying branch at a little distance, watching the living and the dead with anxious beady eyes.

Down under the top layer of sand the ground was stony, and the man who dug was weak from long tramping in search of the gold he could not find. Of choice he would have gone away and left the still figure where he had found it, but it might be that some day he too would lie like this, with staring eyes that could not see the sun, and then, surely, it would be good if some kind hand would make a hole in the hot, dry ground, where his body might lie at rest until the day of days, when the dead shall rise and the earth and the ocean give back that which they have taken.

What was that?

The prospector's shovel struck something hard, something which was so much heavier than ordinary stone, and that had a peculiar ring when struck by the shovel.

He leaned forward then, and picked it up, casting a scared look round, fearful lest any of his chums had repented and come back to help him. But no, he was alone, save for the dead; even the hoodie crow had flown away because it did not seem of any use waiting any longer, and instinct had told the creature that a horse was dying by a dried-out water-hole some two miles away.

The man dug another hole after that, at some little distance, and, dragging the body there, gave it decent burial, even kneeling with clasped hands and closed eyes for a few minutes when his task was done, trying to remember "Our Father", which was the prayer he had learned at his mother's knee many years before. It was the only prayer that occurred to him then, and it was not so inappropriate as it seemed. Then he went back to the first hole that he had dug, and, carefully filling it in, made a little cross of plaited sticks, which he planted at the head of the grave that held no dead.

"I guess that will about do," he muttered to himself, and then, with a final look round, he picked up his swag, and, hoisting it to his back, set his face towards the hills and civilization once more. Tucked away in his belt he carried fragments of the stone he had taken from that first grave he had started to dig, and he meant to raise money on his expectations, then come back with horses and tools to dig up the fortune upon which he had stumbled when performing that act of mercy to the nameless dead.

He was worn out and half-starved; he had been so near to despair, too, that this tremendous find proved too much for him, and when three days later he staggered into the main street of Latimer, which was a township some fifty miles from Mostyn, he was too ill to tell anyone of what he had found, or even to get the help for himself that he so sorely needed.

Most likely he would have lain on a dirty bed at the one hotel until he died, and so the secret of that empty grave on the sandy plain would have never been revealed; but it so fell out that two other men in the township were ill with a mysterious disease which looked so much like smallpox that a doctor was sent for in all haste because of the danger to other people.

The nearest medical man lived at Mostyn, and he had not been there long, and was indeed on the point of going somewhere else, because the people of Mostyn

seemed to have no use for doctors, and only died of drinking bad whisky.

With so little chance of work the doctor was in a fair way of being starved out; so when the call came for him to go to Latimer, eager though he was for work, he had to admit that he had no horse to ride and no money with which to hire one.

But when men are desperate enough to ride fifty miles on the off chance of finding a doctor it is not likely that a trifle of this kind will turn them from their purpose. A horse for the doctor was quickly forthcoming, and he rode out of Mostyn in the company of his escort, just as the cart which was bringing the weekly mail entered the town.

"Would you like to wait and claim your mail, doctor?" asked the man who rode on his right hand.

"No, thanks; I do not expect any letters," replied the man of medicine, and a pang stole into his heart as he thought of the big family of seven motherless children in far-away England, whom he had virtually cast off, just because he was writing himself down a failure, and would not be an object of pity to his friends and relations.

If only he had known it, there was a letter for him by that mail, a letter which had come from England, written by Mr. Runciman, and posted on the very day the children sailed for Sydney. The writer confessed that he ought to have followed his first letter with a second long before this; perhaps he ought to have waited until a letter came from Dr. Plumstead before letting the children start, but there had been so many difficulties in the way of taking care of them in England, and so on, and so on, which in plain English meant that as Mrs. Runciman was not willing to have them under her roof, the harassed guardian had not known what to do with them.

But it was a long time before that letter really reached the hands for which it was intended, and then it was Nealie who handed it to her father, and at his request read it to him.

It was a horrible journey for the doctor and his escort. The demon drought was stalking through the land, there were wicked little whirlwinds to raise the sand and fling it in blinding showers on to the unlucky travellers, water-holes had dried to mud puddles, and the broad lagoons, beloved of waterfowl, were thickets of wilted reeds, with never a trace of moisture to be found anywhere.

The travellers pressed on as fast as they could go, for who could tell what grim

tragedies were taking place in Latimer since the two had ridden forth to find a doctor? There were stories of whole townships having been wiped out in ten days or a fortnight by smallpox, when no doctor had been forthcoming to tend the patients and insist on isolation and sanitation, with all the other precautions that belong to law and order.

"There are only eight hundred people all told in Latimer, and we may easily find half of them dead," said one man, with a pant of hurry in his voice, as the tired horses toiled up the last long hill into Latimer.

"But how many sick did you say there were when you left the town on the day before yesterday?" asked the doctor, who privately believed the men to be panic-stricken.

"There were two that had spots, and then there was that prospector who came in from the track across the sandy plain. He dropped like a felled ox in front of Jowett's saloon, and so they took him in there, because Jowett had a bed to spare and there was not another in the township," said the other man, who was tall and gaunt, and only about half as frightened as his companion, who was a small fat man with a tendency to profuse perspiration.

"Had he—this prospector, I mean—any spots on him also?" asked the doctor, frowning heavily. He had had more than one fight with smallpox in mining camps, and he knew by sad experience that the terror was worse to combat than the disease.

"I don't know. Folks were too scared to look, I fancy; but old Mother Twiney, who doesn't seem to be afraid of anything, said that she would see that he had food and drink until we got back, and Jowett will let the man have houseroom, for the simple reason that he is afraid to turn him out," returned the tall man.

Fully half the population of Latimer gathered to welcome the doctor when at last he rode up to the open space in front of Jowett's saloon, and half of these demanded that their tongues should be looked at and their pulses felt without delay.

But the doctor had always been impatient of shams; indeed more than one candid friend had told him that in this matter he had done himself much harm from a professional point of view, as a doctor who wants to get on can do it most quickly by trading upon the fears of the foolish.

Pushing the candidates for examination to right and left as he went, he sternly demanded to be taken at once to the sick—those who had the dreaded spots most

fully developed—and, as he was not a man to be gainsaid or put aside, old Mother Twiney was at once pushed forward to take him to the patients.

Snuffy and dirty though the old crone was, there was a gleam of true kindness in her eyes hidden away behind bushy grey eyelashes, and she hobbled off in a great hurry to a wooden building standing remote from the houses, and which had formerly been used as a store for mining plant.

"Are all the patients here?" asked the doctor, as he followed her across the parched and dusty grass.

"All but the man who was taken into Jowett's, your honour," she answered; then, sidling a little closer to him, she said in an undertone: "It is not smallpox at all; I am quite sure of it. Why, the two men are not even ill, only nearly scared to death."

"Then why was I sent for such a long way, and for nothing too?" he asked angrily, knowing well that his fee would be according to the need there was for his services.

"Hush!" breathed the old woman, and now there was keen anxiety in her manner. "Whatever you do, don't let anyone know for a few days that it is not smallpox. These men are not ill, and the spots are only a sort of heat rash, I think, but the poor fellow at Jowett's is real bad, and he would have died if he could not have had a doctor. He may even die now, in spite of all you can do. I knew that no one in the town would send for a doctor to come so far on account of a man who was ill from a complaint that was not infectious, so when I saw the other two with the spots, I just made the most of it, and because all the well people were afraid that they would catch the disease, there was no time lost in sending for you. Now you must just put them into strict quarantine, and make as much fuss as possible; then they will let you stay here long enough to pull the poor fellow round who is lying at Jowett's, and they will pay you according to the trouble you put them to," said the old woman, with a sagacious nod of her head.

The doctor frowned, but there was sound reason in her arguments, and he decided to see all the patients before committing himself to any course of action concerning them.

The two men with spots were in a state of terror that was pitiable to see, and from outward appearances might be said to be suffering from a very bad form of the dreaded scourge. True to the lines he had laid down for himself, however, he said nothing to allay their fears, only looked very grave, issued a hundred commands for safeguarding the rest of the community, and then demanded to be

taken to the other sick man, who was lodged at Jowett's.

The prospector's quarters were not sumptuous. He was merely laid in a shed recently tenanted by calves, and which had been hastily cleared for his use. The man was very ill, and Mother Twiney had not exaggerated about the gravity of his condition.

Here indeed was scope for the doctor, and instead of wearing a face of gloom, as when he examined the men with spots, his face was bright, and his tone so brisk and cheerful that it looked as if he were going to enjoy the tussle that was in front of him.

"Can you pull me through, Doctor?" asked the sufferer, looking at the doctor with lack-lustre eyes.

"I am going to try, but I don't mind admitting that I shall have my hands full," replied the doctor, who had never been in the habit of hiding from his patients the gravity of their condition.

"Well, if you do get me on my feet, I promise you a 10-per-cent commission on all I can make during the next year," said the sick man, with a sudden burst of energy, and then he called on the old woman to witness to what he had said, after which he sank into a condition of apathy, looking as if he might die at any moment.

Never since he was a young man and just starting in his profession had the doctor worked harder than for the next few days. He was happier, too, than he had been for years, and in the hush of the quiet nights, when he watched alone by the man who was really ill, he thought of his children and resolved that no longer would he shut them out of his heart and out of his life just because he had been a victim to circumstances.

He was thinking of them one night, as he strode across to the shed where the two victims from spots were beginning to recover, when suddenly he noticed another odour on the hot air; usually it was the pungent smell of eucalyptus leaves, but now it was the reek of burning timber that smote upon his senses, and turning sharply in the track he saw to his horror that there was a red glow in the sky over Jowett's. The place was on fire.

"It will blaze like matches," he groaned, and then turned to run, thinking of his patient.

But, despite his haste, the flames were shooting out through the holes in the roof of the shed where the sick man lay, by the time the doctor turned the corner by

the store.

He tried to shout a warning, and to call for help, but it was as if his voice had dried up in his throat.

No one else appeared aware of the danger. The place seemed solitary and silent, save for the hiss and crackle of the fire.

Then he heard a cry for help. It came from the inside of the shed, and dashing forward, regardless of his own danger, he groped his way in through smoke and flame, then, seizing the sick man, turned to carry him out to safety, but even in that moment was stricken to the ground with the burden he bore, and pinned there by a fall of roofing.



CHAPTER XVIII

"Father, We Want You!"

Rupert was so much better when he woke from his long sleep that the doctor told Nealie she might be quite easy to leave him to the care of Sylvia on the following day and go in search of her father if she wished.

"You will be able to look after him too, will you not?" asked Nealie wistfully, for in her heart she rather doubted Sylvia's nursing skill.

"No, I am coming with you," he answered, looking at her with a smile.

Nelialie flushed hotly and burst into vigorous protest. "Please, please do not take so much trouble for me; and besides, think of your patients, and what you may lose by being away."

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Doctors have very hard times in the back blocks, Miss Plumstead. Those who are really ill cannot as a rule afford to pay for medical skill, and everyone is too busy to have time for imaginary complaints. I have no patients at the moment that I cannot leave, except the man who lives out in the direction of Pig Hill, and I thought that I would ride over there this afternoon, and then we would start at dawn to-morrow morning. You don't ride, do you?"

"Not much, and I am sure that I could not sit on Rockefeller, because he is so clumsy," said Nealie.

"Then I will borrow Jim Brown's two-wheeled cart; but I think that we shall have to take your horse, because mine is rather worn. The track out to Pig Hill is a heavy one, and I have been there every day of late," said the doctor, and then he hurried away to see his patients in the town, while Nealie did her best to arrange for leaving the others for a few days.

There was one thing which Nealie had to do that she could not speak of to the doctor, who had been so truly good to them. Her money was exhausted save for a few shillings, and, being face to face with destitution, and not sure of finding

her father even when she reached Mostyn, she must have money from somewhere.

In her extremity she thought of Mr. Runciman, and although it would take most of her remaining shillings to cable to him, she had determined to do it.

When Dr. Plumstead had started for Pig Hill she found her way to the telegraph office and dispatched her pitiful request.

"Please send us some money, we have not found Father here.

"CORNELIA PLUMSTEAD."

But cables are expensive things, and when she came to send it she found that she would not have enough money for the whole, and had to shorten it, so that when it actually went it was more a demand than a plea:

"Send us money; Father not here."

"And if he does not send it, whatever shall we do?" cried Sylvia, who had to be told, if only for the sake of sobering her and making her more keenly alive to the responsibilities of the situation.

"He will send it, I am quite sure," replied Nealie, with a beautiful faith in Mr. Runciman's real goodness of heart that was justified in due course by the arrival of a cablegram authorizing her to draw fifty pounds from the Hammerville bank as she needed it.

But she had to start off in the grey dawn of the next morning, in company with the usurping Dr. Plumstead—as Sylvia would persist in calling him—without knowing that her need was to be met in this generous manner. It was perhaps the very darkest hour in her life, and her face was drawn and pinched with the weight of her care as she lifted it to the cold grey of the sky when she mounted into the high two-wheeled cart which the doctor had borrowed for the journey. But even as she looked, all the grey was flushed with rose colour from the rising sun, and the sight brought back her courage with a rush, so that she was able to turn and smile at the little group gathered at the door of the doctor's house to see her drive away.

"Mind you take good care of Rupert, Sylvia," she called, feeling that her next sister was really not old enough for such a heavy responsibility; only, as there was no one else to take it, of course Sylvia would have to do her best.

"I will see that she looks after him properly," said Rumble, with a wag of his

head, at which the doctor laughed; for when sleep seized upon Rumble he was of little use in looking after other people.

Don and Billykins flung up their caps and shouted hurrah as Rockefeller moved off, and Ducky joined in with her shrill treble, so that Nealie felt they were doing their very best to keep her spirits up at the moment of parting, and she could not let them think their efforts were wasted in the least; therefore she waved her hand and tried to appear as free from care as the rest of them.

After the heavy wagon, Rockefeller made short work of the light-weight cart, and went along at such a tremendous pace that Nealie would certainly have been afraid if anyone but Dr. Plumstead had been driving. His treatment of Rupert, however, had inspired her with such confidence in him that she sat smiling and untroubled while the big, clumsy, vanhorse cut capers in the road, and then danced on all-fours because a small boy rushed out of one of the little wooden houses on the other side of the town and blew a blast on a bugle right under the horse's nose.

"It really looks as if the creature had not had enough work for the last three or four weeks," said the doctor, with a laugh, as he proceeded to get pace out of Rocky in preference to pranks.

"It is a very good horse and has done us good service," said Nealie, in a rather breathless fashion, as a sudden swerve on the part of Rocky sent her flying against the doctor, and then, as she settled back into her own corner and clutched at the side of the cart to keep from being tossed out, she went on in an anxious tone: "I wonder what Mr. Wallis will say to our keeping Rocky to go this journey instead of at once handing him over to the nearest agent of the firm?"

"If he is the wise and just man that I take him to be he will say that you have done quite right," replied the doctor. "You have not reached your father yet, and you must have the horse for this extra journey, don't you see?"

Nalie shook her head as if in doubt about this sort of reasoning, and then she sat silent for so long that the doctor might have believed her to be asleep, if he had not seen that her gaze was fixed on the landscape.

The district outside Hammerville on the Mostyn track was at first mainly composed of rich pasture, mostly settled by dairy farmers, although farther away on the higher ground it was sheep farming that was most in evidence.

Twenty miles out of Hammerville the road had dwindled to a grassy track, and as they were now on the northern side of the Murrumbidgee River the country grew

very wild and mountainous, the track cut through forests which the doctor told Nealie had only been half-explored, and the hilltops were so solitary that it did not seem as if there were any people in the world at all.

But it was a well-watered country, and on every side there were brawling little streams rushing down precipitous heights or scurrying away through woody valleys, as if anxious to find the very nearest way to the sea.

By the time the hottest part of the day had arrived Rockefeller had done half the journey to Mostyn, and driving up to a lone house the doctor was so fortunate as to find a woman living there, to whose care he confided Nealie for a few hours' rest and refreshment while he took a siesta lying on the ground under the cart, which had been drawn close under the shade of the willows fringing the river at this part.

It was sundown before they reached Mostyn, and then it was only to be met with disappointment, for the doctor had been sent for to cope with an outbreak of smallpox at Latimer.

"That settles it!" exclaimed the doctor. "I shall drive you back to Hammerville to-morrow morning, for certainly I cannot take you to a disease-stricken town, and equally I cannot leave you here."

"I shall not go back until I have found Father," said Nealie, smiling up at him in a way that somehow robbed her words of their mutinous flavour. "And there is no need to worry about the danger of taking me to a smallpox place, because I had the complaint when I was a little girl, before I was old enough to remember, so there is no danger for me."

The doctor was very hard to convince on this score, and was even inclined to throw doubt on her statement, and to declare that she must be mistaken, as it was so extremely unlikely that a child in her position would contract the disease.

Nelialie met all his arguments in silence until he came to his doubts about her really having had the disease, and then she quietly rolled up the left sleeve of her thin blouse and showed him two distinct marks on the soft flesh above the elbow, which any doctor must know were pock marks.

"I must go until I find my father, and if you will not take me I must go alone," she said, when he left off arguing because he had no more to say; but her gaze was very wistful, for Mostyn was so much rougher than Hammerville that her heart sank very low as she thought of how rough Latimer might be.

"If you must go I must certainly go too, for I cannot let you out of my care in

places like this," he said in a tone as decided as her own.

For that one night she was lodged with a good woman who cleaned the church and school, and who kept her awake for half the night telling her gruesome stories of happenings in disease-stricken towns, such as Latimer was at that moment supposed to be. But if she thought to frighten Nealie into consenting to go back to Hammerville without finding her father she made a very great mistake indeed.

Bad as had been the journey of the doctor and his escort when he rode from Mostyn to Latimer through the fierce heat, the experiences of young Dr. Plumstead and Nealie were still worse. Rockefeller had lost the fine vigour displayed on the first part of the journey, and went at a slow trot, hanging his head and stumbling so often that Dr. Plumstead was forced into a pretty liberal use of the whip to keep the creature on his feet at all.

There was a strong wind blowing to-day, but luckily it came from behind, and so Nealie opened a big umbrella, which kept off some of the dust and also acted as a sail and helped them along. Sun, wind, and dust seemed to bring on a sort of fever in Nealie; her hands burned like coals of fire, she had a lightheaded sensation, and saw so many visions during the last miles of that trying journey that she could never after determine which was real and which was fancy of all the incidents and happenings of that long, weary day.

"Hullo, look at that smoke yonder; is it a bush fire, I wonder, or is it possible they have been having a big blaze at Latimer?" said the doctor, pointing with his whip to the crest of a long hill up which the track wound its dusty way.

"Are we near to Latimer?" asked Nealie in a languid tone.

"I think we ought to be by this time, unless we have come wrong. But what a hill! I fancy Rockefeller expects me to walk up here," said the doctor, who was secretly very anxious concerning that smoke which was hanging in a cloud about the crest of the hill.

"Shall I walk too?" she asked, wondering whether the act of walking would tend to steady her wavering fancies, and to stop that horrible tendency to lightheadedness which bothered her so badly.

"I think not; you must be quite tired enough without adding to your fatigue by scrambling along this dusty track. Hullo!"

Nalie saw a sudden swerve on the part of Rocky, then the doctor's cane came cutting through the air, and there was a great wriggling and commotion on the

dusty ground; but the doctor was so busy soothing the horse that he did not even answer when she called out to know what was the matter.

"Was it a snake?" she asked, as the cart was dragged forward at a jerk, and Rocky, prancing along on two legs, snorting and plunging, took all the doctor's skill to keep him from bolting in sheer fright.

"Yes; and I am very glad that you were not walking, for they are not pleasant creatures to meet," replied the doctor, thinking how fortunate it was that he happened to be on foot at the moment, and with a stick in his hand, for the snake was of a very deadly kind, and the horse would have stood no chance at all against the poison of its forked tongue.

Nealie shivered and sat suddenly straight up; it seemed as if the little shock had restored her in some strange way. The fiercest heat of the sun was past, and the raging of that terrible wind had dropped to a gentle breeze which blew cool and refreshing from another quarter. Indeed she would have felt quite cheerful had it not been for the menace of that smoke haze lying in a cloud along the line of the hills.

Another half-hour and they were crossing the top of the ridge, while Latimer, most snugly placed, lay on the slope of the other side. But at first sight of the town both Nealie and the doctor had burst into exclamations of horror, for it looked as if it had been burned out. A cloud of smoke from the ruined houses hung thickly over the place, and Rockefeller, with a horse's objection to facing fire, turned about on the track and showed so much disposition to go back by the way he had come that the doctor had to get down again and lead the scared creature.

Presently they saw a man just ahead of them, the first human being they had glimpsed for hours, and calling to him the doctor asked what had happened.

"It has been a fire," said the man, which, considering the smoke rising in all directions from the ruins, was rather an unnecessary explanation.

"So I see; but what started it?" asked the doctor.

"No one will admit knowing much about that," replied the man grimly, "but we have our thoughts all the same. We have got smallpox in the town, you know, and one case was lodged in Jowett's hotel. The doctor that we fetched from Mostyn said pretty decidedly that the one at Jowett's was certainly not smallpox whatever the other two might be, but some people won't be convinced, try how you will. So when the doctor's back was turned it is supposed that someone,

either by accident or design, set the place on fire where the sick man was lying. In a drought such as we are having now you may guess how the place burned. The doctor happened to catch sight of it starting; but though he ran at the top of his speed, all that he could do was to get there in time to see the place one mass of fire, and he might easily have been forgiven if he had turned his back on it then. He is made of brave stuff, though, and they said he dashed straight into that blazing place, and, with the flames and smoke all around him, he brought his patient out in the nick of time, for the whole show collapsed just as he got to the doorway, the sheets of red-hot corrugated roofing fell down upon him, and he was so badly burned that someone will have to go and find a doctor to cure up the one we've got, for I'm thinking that Latimer won't let a hero of that sort die without making an attempt to save him."

"I am a doctor; I can look after him. Just lead on, and show me where he is, will you, please?" said young Dr. Plumstead brusquely. He would have spared Nealie the ugly story if he could, but on the whole it was good for her to hear that her father had played the part of a hero. If he had only known it, the hearing was good for him too, for he had been very ready to despise the man who had given up his practice in Hammerville and rushed away because he had not the moral courage to live down a scandal. He had despised Nealie's father, too, because of his treatment of his children, and altogether had decided that the poor man was very much of a detrimental, so that this story of heroism had a mighty effect on him as he walked by the side of the loquacious person who had first given them the news; while Nealie sat perched up in the cart behind, straining her ears to catch what they were saying, and feeling so thankful that she had insisted on coming all the way that she could have shouted with joyfulness in spite of her anxiety.

The man told Dr. Plumstead that the fire had spread from building to building with such awful rapidity that it had been as much as anyone could do to get the people out of their houses, so many of them having gone to bed when the outbreak started.

"What about the smallpox patients?" asked the doctor.

"We have looked everywhere, but can't find a trace of them, and we should have thought that they had lost their lives in the fire, only the building where they lay was not touched, and they had not merely disappeared, but they had taken their clothes with them, and as much else as they could lay hands on," replied the man, and the doctor was so tickled that he burst out laughing at the story.

"It does not look as if the outbreak of smallpox could have been very serious," he remarked.

"Just what everyone is saying, and the boys are downright mad with old Mother Twiney because the old woman could not tell whether it was really smallpox or not; but, as I said, you could not expect an ignorant woman to know a disease of that sort, and we had better have a scare that ended in smoke than let the real thing gain ground without our taking any steps to stamp it out," said the man, and then he turned off short between two heaps of smoking ruins, and the doctor led Rocky, snuffing and snorting, past the smouldering fire to the cool shadow of the forest beyond.

"The doctor and his patient are in that hut yonder. It is where the smallpox patients were lying; but there was no other place, and so we had to put them there," said the man; and the doctor, turning round, said to Nealie:

"You had better get down now and wait here by the horse while I go and have a look at your father. Oh yes, I will come back for you in a few minutes, and then I shall be able to arrange with this good man about somewhere to shelter you for the night. I dare say the accommodation will not be very grand, seeing the condition of things here."

"I don't mind about accommodation, but I do want to go to my father," said Nealie, her voice breaking in a sob as she scrambled down from the cart, ignoring the hand her companion stretched out to help her, and then she stood beside Rocky leaning her head against his side, while her heart beat so furiously that it seemed to her the man who told them the news, and was still lingering near, must hear it thumping away against her side.

Would Dr. Plumstead never come? How could he be so cruel as to keep her waiting so long?

"Ah, what news have you for me?" she asked, as the doctor emerged from the hut with a quick step and a very grave face indeed.

"Nothing very good, I fear," he said quietly, and then turned to the man and asked him to see that the horse was fed and cared for without delay.

"Tell me, please, is Father very bad? I can bear anything better than suspense," she said, keeping her voice steady by a great effort.

"I think you can, and you have already proved yourself a girl of mettle; but you will want all your courage now, for I fear that you have found your father only to bid him goodbye," replied the doctor; and then he caught her by the arm and

held her fast while the first dizziness of the shock was upon her.

"I am all right now," she said, moving forward in the direction of the door, and he walked beside her, still holding her arm, as if he doubted her strength to stand alone.

There was an old woman, very snuffy and dirty to look at, but with a face of genuine kindness, who came forward to meet her, and, leading her past the first bed, where a man was lying who had a much-bandaged head, she took her to another bed in the far corner, whispering: "That is your pa, Miss dear, and you had better speak to him quick, for we think that he is going fast, poor brave gentleman!"

Going fast, and she had only just found him!

Nealie gave a frightened gasp, and crept closer, falling on her knees by the bed, and trembling so that she could hardly clasp the fingers of the uninjured hand which lay outside the thin coverlet.

"Father, dear Father, I am Nealie, your own daughter, and I have come all the way from England to find you, and to help make home again! Oh, you cannot go away and leave me now!" she wailed in passionate protest against his dying.

"Hush, Missy dear, it may scare him if you speak so loud!" said the old woman in a warning tone, for Nealie's voice had unconsciously risen almost to a scream.

The heavy eyelids opened, and the eyes looked straight into Nealie's face with blank amazement in their gaze.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice so faint that it was hardly more than a whisper.

"I am your child, dear Father; I am Nealie! We have come to Hammerville to live with you. You should have had a letter weeks ago to warn you that we were all coming, only it was forgotten to be posted," she said, being determined to take half the blame of that omission on her own shoulders, for surely it was as much her fault as Rumble's, seeing that she had never thought to remind him of the letter or to ask if it had been safely posted.

"All seven of you?" he asked, and now there was a shocked expression in his face which cut Nealie to the heart; only, for once, she was quite mistaken as to its cause, and the shocked look did not mean that he was angry with them for coming, but was solely because of what their plight would be if he slipped out of life just then.

"Yes, we are all here," she admitted, feeling more guilty than in all her life before; and then, almost against her will, her voice rose again in a passionate plea to him to get better. "Dear Father, do try and get better, for we all want you so badly!"

"I will try. All seven of you! I can't go and leave you yet!" he exclaimed, with so much more strength in his tone that Nealie was amazed at the change.

At that moment young Dr. Plumstead, who had come close to the bed, touched her on the shoulder, saying quietly: "Go and sit on that bench just outside the door until I call you in again. You have done him good already, and perhaps now we may pull him through, if God wills; but Mrs. Twiney is going to help me dress his wounds properly now, and then perhaps he will be more comfortable."

And Nealie went obediently to sit on the bench outside the door, where the air was heavy with the tarry smell of burning pine and the strong eucalyptus odours; then, clasping her hands, she prayed fervently that her father might be restored to health, so that they might let him know how much they loved him.



CHAPTER XIX

The News

"Four days since Dr. Plumstead and Nealie went away, and never a word to say what has happened!" cried Sylvia as she came into Rupert's room to see how he had slept.

"I expect they have eloped," remarked Don calmly, as he sat up on his mattress and yawned widely, stretching first one leg and then another, in order to get them properly awake, as he said; for, being at the bottom, his legs always woke up last, according to his ideas.

"What do you mean?" demanded Sylvia, with a frown. She was feeling tremendously grown-up in these days, and did not permit overmuch levity on the part of her juniors.

"Isn't that what people do when they want to get married?" asked Billykins, who was also just awake, and put his question while Don was struggling to find a definition of the word.

"But Nealie does not want to marry that usurping doctor who has taken dear Father's place!" cried Sylvia hotly, the colour flaming over face and neck at the bare idea of such a thing.

"I expect they will want to marry each other. Mrs. Brown said so," returned Billykins; and then he and Don trotted off to wash in the horse trough outside the stable door, where they had found they could get quite a decent bath without much trouble; and Sylvia bent her energies to waking Rumble, who, being a genius, was always so unwilling to get up in the mornings.

"Perhaps we shall get some news to-day," said Rupert, who, because he was feeling stronger, was very much more hopeful than he had been.

"I don't know what will happen to the doctor's patients if he doesn't soon come back," Sylvia went on in a dissatisfied tone. "You see, they are all getting better without medicine; and it is so very bad for the practice, for if once people get the

idea in their heads that they can do without doctors it is so hard to get them back to thinking they must call one in every time their little fingers ache."

"A fresh crop of patients will turn up when the doctor comes home, I expect. Anyhow, I should not worry about it, for perhaps these people would not have paid the bills, and so in reality it is money saved," Rupert said drowsily; and then he stretched his limbs in a luxurious fashion, and dropped into another doze, while Sylvia went back to the other room to start breakfast preparations. She and Ducky slept in the sitting-room now, while the four boys had the bedroom. They had taken complete possession of the doctor's house, and felt so much at home in it that it was a little difficult to imagine how he would find room for himself when he came back.

Rumple, indeed, had suggested that the doctor might occupy the wagon; but as Rupert had pointed out that the wagon would have to be yielded up to the agent when Rockefeller came back from Mostyn, the only thing was to get the stable ready for use in an emergency.

On this morning, when breakfast was over, the three younger boys and Ducky went off to finish their task of turning the stable inside out. This, was the third day they had been at work on it, and the place was looking quite clean and respectable, thanks to their very hard work. They had even ejected the carpet snake that lived there and killed the mice which levied toll on the doctor's cornbin; but the snake, like other ejected persons, was continually harking back to its old quarters, and so this morning, when Ducky rushed into the stable, the first thing which met her gaze was Slippy, the snake, curled up in a heap just inside the door, and of course there was promptly a fuss, for not all the arguments of the others about the absolute harmlessness of Slippy could convince Ducky that the creature was anything but a most dangerous foe.

She had rushed into the house and demanded the united efforts of Rupert and Sylvia to console her, and then was going back to the stable to insist on Slippy being again ejected, when she saw a wagon drawn by a fast pair of horses approaching at a rapid rate, and, having noticed with her sharp little eyes that the man sitting by the driver had only one arm, the empty coat sleeve being pinned across his chest in true warrior style, she rushed back into the house, crying shrilly: "Sylvia, Sylvia, the doctor has got a new patient coming! He has had his arm torn off in a dreadful accident, and has come to have it put on again!"

"Oh, Rupert, whatever shall we do? The poor fellow may die before help comes to him, and all through our fault in sending Dr. Plumstead to take care of

Nealie!" cried Sylvia, turning white to the lips at the thought of the horrors which were about to be thrust upon her.

Rupert stood up and gripped her hand reassuringly.

"Don't worry, old girl; just cut off into the bedroom and hide there until I am through with the business. I am not a doctor, but I know a good deal, and I think I can bandage the arm so that the man won't die. Anyhow, I will have a good try."

Sylvia made a bolt for the bedroom, and, casting herself on Rupert's bed, rolled her head in a blanket, and, stuffing her fingers in her ears, remained quaking and shivering until there was a determined clutch on the blanket, and Ducky squealed in her ears: "Sylvia, Sylvia, Mr. Wallis has come to take Rockefeller and the wagon home; only Rocky isn't here to be took, and he—that is, Mr. Wallis—has brought the man with him what made Father so poor; and now we are going to be well off again, and Father won't be under a cloud any more. Isn't it splendiferous? Just scrumptious, I call it! Oh my, but your hair is a sight! You will have to do it with Rupert's comb, and that has lost half its teeth!" and Ducky whirled round in an ecstasy of excitement, while Sylvia hastily made her long mane presentable, and then went out to speak to Mr. Wallis, quaking a little, truth to tell, from the wonder as to whether he would be angry to find that they had sent Rocky off upon another long journey which was certainly not in the contract.

But one look at Rupert's face assured her that she had nothing to be afraid of on that score, for he was looking simply radiant as he stood in earnest talk with a man who had only one arm.

"Why, I do believe that it is the very individual who upset poor Nealie so badly that day when we went to the botanical gardens in Sydney!" she exclaimed; and then she went forward, to be warmly greeted by Mr. Wallis, who claimed to be an old friend, and who at once introduced her to Mr. Reginald Baxter, the gentleman who had only one arm.

Sylvia, knowing so little of her father's professional disgrace, which, indeed, should not have been disgrace at all, seeing that he had only done his duty, was not so much interested in this meeting as Rupert, and turned again to Mr. Wallis, anxious to get it made quite clear to that gentleman that it was through no fault of theirs that Rocky had not been handed over to the agent long before this.

"It was so terrible for us all to arrive here, as we did, with Rupert ill, and to take possession of what we thought was our father's house, only to find that it

belonged to another man of the same name," she said, pouring out her words in a breathless hurry. "It seems a pity to me that doctors should be allowed to have the same name; only I suppose it can't be helped. Anyhow, it was very bad for all of us, but it was especially dreadful for poor Nealie, because, you see, she is grown up, and so the conventions had to be considered. Then he—the usurping doctor, that is—would go with her to take care of her when she went to find Father; and that was awkward too, and a little unnecessary as well, for Nealie is so well able to take care of herself. But they have not come back, and we have not heard anything from them, and we are afraid that the practice will go all to pieces if the doctor does not soon come back to nurse it a little."

"The practice will not suffer very much, I hope," said Mr. Wallis soothingly. "But I do not think you quite understand, Miss Sylvia, what good things are happening, or are going to happen, to your father. Mr. Baxter, who has come with me to-day, has had a long letter from your friend Mr. Melrose, who, you may remember, left the ship at Cape Town. It seems that when the rich relative of Mr. Baxter disinherited him, because, owing to his arm having been amputated, he was maimed, she left her money to Mr. Melrose, who really needed it much more. But Mr. Melrose did not know that your father had had to suffer so badly in the matter, and when he gathered some idea of it through meeting you on board ship, he at once wrote to Mr. Baxter calling for his co-operation in setting your father straight with the world again, and it is in order to see how this can best be done that Mr. Baxter has travelled from Sydney with me."

"What a wonderful story! Why, it sounds like a fairy tale. But does not Mr. Baxter hate my father for having been the means of making him poor?" asked Sylvia wistfully.

"No indeed! Mr. Baxter realizes that it was being thrust out upon the world which really gave him his chance, and so he is in a way as grateful to your father as Mr. Melrose; and between the two of them they will clear the way to a greater prosperity, I hope," replied Mr. Wallis kindly.

"Here comes Dr. Plumstead, but Nealie is not with him!" yelled Billykins, rushing up from a short journey to the next house, where he had been to see if the woman who did for the doctor would undertake to provide luncheon for the two gentlemen.

Dr. Plumstead was riding a horse that was certainly not Rockefeller, for it was a miserable wry-necked screw, with nothing but pace to recommend it, and a

temper so vicious that it just stood and kicked, from sheer delight at being disagreeable, when the doctor hastily dismounted and came forward to explain his solitary return.

"Your father is a hero; but, like other brave men, he has to pay the price of his heroism in suffering," said the doctor to Rupert, and then he told them all how the other Dr. Plumstead had risked his life to pull the sick man from the burning shed, and that Nealie was staying to nurse him back to health again, she, in her turn, being taken care of by Mother Twiney, who was really a good soul at the bottom, although a little lacking in matters of personal cleanliness.

"Your sister was in great trouble about you all; but I said that Rupert and I could manage to take care of you for a few days or even weeks until she is able to come back and look after you," said the doctor, linking Rupert with himself in the matter of responsibility in a way that made the boy flush with pleasure, although Sylvia wrinkled her nose with a fine disdain.

"I am quite equal to taking care of myself, and of Ducky too," she said loftily. "But of course it will be convenient to have someone to keep the boys in order."



CHAPTER XX

How It All Ended

In reality it was the prospector whose life Dr. Plumstead had saved at the risk of his own, who did most towards setting the father of the seven on his feet again and righting him in the eyes of the world, which is so quick to approve the successful man.

A word which the young doctor dropped in the ear of Mr. Reginald Baxter sent that gentleman and Mr. Wallis posthaste to Latimer, where they held private conferences with the now convalescent prospector, and the result of it all was that a company was promptly formed for the developing of a gold claim staked out round the grave which the prospector in mercy had begun to dig for the unknown dead. So rich did this prove to be that when the prospector kept his word, and paid over the proportion of his earnings which he had promised to the doctor, there was no more worry about ways and means for Nealie, who was now her father's right hand, as she had been his devoted nurse when he was recovering from his burns.

"GAVE THEM BOTH HIS BLESSING"

"GAVE THEM BOTH HIS BLESSING"

For a little while they all went to live at Latimer, in a brand-new wooden house which was made of pine trees and was fragrant of the forest in every room. But the first break in the family came when Rupert and Rumble went to Sydney to be educated.

Thanks to the skill of his father and the other Dr. Plumstead, Rupert had quite recovered from his lameness, and although he might never be quite so nimble as his younger brothers, he was no longer lame, and that was such a comfort to him that he seemed to expand into quite a different creature.

But, as Sylvia remarked to Rupert on the day before he and Rumble were to start for Sydney, they were going to have trouble with that other Dr. Plumstead, who, not content with having the same name as the rest of them, had shown a great

desire to be still closer linked to them by becoming a relation.

"It is so stupid of him to want to marry Nealie," she said plaintively. "Because I know very well that if she says yes, then I shall have to keep house for Father, and mother the rest of you, which will certainly spell ruin to my chance of an artistic career, and I am beginning to paint in quite an intelligent fashion."

"There is room for improvement," scoffed Rumble, who chanced to overhear what she said. "Don't you remember your picture of Kaffir kraals that Mr. Melrose took for mushrooms in a meadow? It will not do for you to indulge in swelled head as yet."

"I think that on the whole the mistake was rather in the nature of a compliment," said Sylvia, with a ripple of laughter. "For doubtless in the first place the Kaffirs took the patterns of their huts from some sort of fungi, and so there you are."

"Well, anyhow, Dr. Plumstead is a rattling good sort—for witness how cheerfully he put up with all of us that time we took possession of his house—and if he wants to marry Nealie I don't see what is to prevent it myself," said Rumble; but Rupert only made a grimace, which was his way of saying that he would just as soon have the question of marriage put further off into the future.

"If the man wants a wife, why can't he wait until Ducky is old enough?" went on Sylvia, in the tone of one who has a grievance.

"Why Ducky? You might aspire to the position yourself, for you are awfully nice looking!" cried Rumble, putting an affectionate arm round Sylvia and giving her a mighty hug.

"Oh, I am not going to waste my talents in such a fashion! I feel as if I had been born to greatness, and I shall achieve it some day I am sure; only it will put the clock back for a few years if I have to concentrate on breakfasts, dinners, and household things generally," said Sylvia, with a sigh, and then the talk came to an abrupt end, for Don rushed in to say that Billykins was all smashed up from a fall down a ladder at the mines, and of course there was instant confusion.

But Billykins seemed to have a charmed life, for although he was brought home in the ambulance, and groaned as loudly as a whole hospital full of patients, when his father came to make an examination of his hurts they turned out to be only a few surface scratches and a bruise or two.

"Why, I made sure that I had got a broken leg!" exclaimed Billykins, standing straight up on both feet and looking the picture of disappointment. "Are you sure there are no bones broken, Father?"

"Quite sure, my son," said Dr. Plumstead, with a laugh of relief, for he had supposed there must have been some more serious injury considering how far the boy had fallen. "But if you feel dissatisfied with my examination, here comes the other doctor, and you can ask him to overhaul you."

"Oh, he does not care for anything but Nealie!" said Billykins in a tone of deep disgust. "I expect that you will have to let them get married, Father, if it is only to stop him coming over here so often; for his patients in Hammerville will be calling in another doctor very soon if he neglects them so shamefully. Why, this is the second time in a month that he has been here."

"Yes, I expect that will be the best way," said his father quietly, and then he went out to greet the other doctor; and that same evening, when the sun went down in splendour over beyond the sandy plain where the gold reef lay, Nealie's father put her hand in that of the other Dr. Plumstead and gave them both his blessing.

Then the crimson faded through gold to grey in the sky above the sandy plain, and the shadows of night dropped down on the grave of the nameless stranger under the mulga scrub; but in Latimer the streets and shops were brightly lighted, and all the busy life of getting and having went on, as it had done in the haunts of men since the world began.

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