

Boothby Guy

Sheilah McLeod: A Heroine of the Back Blocks



Guy Boothby

**Sheilah McLeod: A
Heroine of the Back Blocks**

«Public Domain»

Boothby G.

Sheilah McLeod: A Heroine of the Back Blocks / G. Boothby —
«Public Domain»,

Содержание

PROLOGUE	5
CHAPTER I	11
CHAPTER II	19
CHAPTER III	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

Guy Boothby

Sheilah McLeod: A Heroine of the Back Blocks

PROLOGUE

VAKALAVI IN THE SAMOAN GROUP

Looking back on it now I can recall every circumstance connected with that day just as plainly as if it had all happened but yesterday. In the first place, it was about the middle of the afternoon, and the S.E. trade, which had been blowing lustily since ten o'clock, was beginning to die away according to custom.

There had been a slight shower of rain in the forenoon, and now, standing in the verandah of my station looking across the blue lagoon with its fringe of boiling surf, it was my good fortune not only to have before me one of the finest pictures in the South Pacific, but to be able to distinctly smell the sweet perfume of the frangipani blossom and wild lime in the jungle which clothed the hillside behind me. I walked to one end of the verandah and stood watching a group of native girls making tappa outside the nearest hut – then to the other, and glanced into my overflowing copra shed, and from it at the bare shelves of the big trade room opposite. The one, as I say, was full, the other sadly empty, and for more than a week I had been bitterly lamenting the non-arrival of the company's schooner, which was supposed to visit the island once every six months in order to remove my gains and to supply me with sufficient trade to carry me safely through the next half-year. The schooner was now ten days overdue, and I had made sure she would put in an appearance that morning; but the wind was failing, and it was, therefore, ten chances to one against our seeing her before the next forenoon. I was more than a little disappointed, if only on the score of the company I should have had, for you must understand that it was nearly six months since I had seen a white face, and even then the face was only that of a missionary. But, in common fairness, I must confess that that missionary was as different to the usual run of his cloth as chalk is to cheese – a good fellow in every way, not a bit bumptious, or la-di-dardy, or fond of coming the Oxford scholar-and-a-gentleman touch, but a real white man from top to toe. And my first meeting with him was as extraordinary as anyone could imagine, or wish for. It's a yarn against myself, but as it shows you what queer beasts we men are, I may as well tell you about it. It happened in this way: —

About ten o'clock one fine spring morning I was coming down the hillside behind my house, and, according to custom, pulled up at the Big Plateau and looked out to sea. To the north and south nothing was in sight, but to the eastward there was a tiny blotch on the horizon which gradually developed into a small fore-and-aft schooner of about fifty tons. When she was level with the island she worked steadily up the reef until she found the passage through the surf; then, having edged her way into the lagoon, came to an anchor opposite my house. Seeing that she was going to send a boat ashore, and suspecting some sort of missionary mischief from the cut of her jib, down I went to the beach and got ready to receive her.

The craft she was sending ashore was a double-ended surf boat, and a well-built one at that, pulled by two Solomon boys, and steered by a white man in a queer kind of helmet that I believe they call a 'solar topee' in India. The man in the helmet brought her up in first-class style, and was preparing to beach her just in front of where I stood when I held up my hand in warning.

'Who are you, and what do you want here?' I asked, looking him up and down.

'I'm the new missionary at Futuleima,' says he, as bold as brass, 'and as I had a couple of spare days at my disposal I thought I would come across and talk to the people on this island. Have you anything to say against it?'

'Not much,' I answered, feeling my dander rising at the cool way in which he addressed me, 'but what I *do* say I mean.'

'And what is it you mean, my friend?' he asked.

'I mean that you don't set foot ashore if I can prevent it,' I replied. 'You understand me once and for all. I'm the boss of this island, and I'm not going to have any of your nonsense talked to my men. I'm civilising 'em on my own lines, and I won't have you interfering and shoving your nose in where it ain't wanted.'

'I'm afraid you speak your mind with more candour than courtesy,' he said, mopping his forehead with a snow-white pocket-handkerchief which he had taken from his pocket.

'You think so, do you?' I cried. 'Well, you just set as much as your little toe on this beach and you'll see that I mean it!'

'So I'm to choose between fighting you and going away with my errand unaccomplished?' he answered, still as cool as a cucumber. 'Do I take you properly?'

'That is my meaning, and I reckon it's a bigger one than you can digest,' I replied, like the hot-tempered fool I was. 'Let me tell you, you're not the first of your breed that has tasted my fist and gone away with his appetite satisfied.'

'Then since it is to be the Church Militant here on Earth, and there's no other way out of it, I suppose I must agree to your proposal,' he said, after a moment's thought, and forthwith jumped out of the boat on to the beach. 'But let it be somewhere where my boatmen cannot see. I don't know that the example would be altogether beneficial to them.'

As he stood on the beach before me, Heaven knows it was a poor enough figure of a man he made. He was not as big as me by a head and a half; for I stand close on six feet in my socks, and am bigger in the beam than the ordinary run of men; besides which, I am always, of necessity, in the pink of condition. To think, therefore, that such a little whipper-snapper should contemplate fighting me was too absurd. I stood and stared at him.

'You don't mean to say you intend to put your fists up?' I cried, letting him see how astonished I was.

'That I do!' he said, and bidding his men wait for him he led the way up the path to the jungle at the back of the station house. 'Since you deem it necessary that I should introduce myself to you in such a strange fashion, I feel it incumbent upon me to do so. Besides, I want to teach you a lesson you will not forget.' Then, stopping short in his walk, he felt the muscle of my right arm critically and smiled. 'You'll be a man worth fighting,' he said, and continued his walk.

Well, here I was in a mighty curious position, as you will understand. Having seen the plucky way he had jumped ashore and taken me up, right in my teeth, so to speak, I felt I had made a precious fool of myself in being so ready with my challenge. He was a man and not a monkey, like most of his fraternity, and he might have converted every nigger in the South Pacific for all I should have cared. I wouldn't have stopped a man like him for all the world, for I reckon he wouldn't have taught 'em anything shady for the life of him. But there was no hope for it now, so I walked up the path beside him, as meek as a new-born lamb, till we came to an open patch at the base of a small waterfall.

'This should suit our purpose, I think,' he said, taking off his helmet and coat and placing them beneath a tree. 'If you're quite ready, let us get to business.'

'Hold on,' I cried, 'this won't do. I've changed my mind, and I'm not going to fight you after all! Missionary or no missionary, you're a man, and a proper sort of man too; and what's more, you shall waltz every nigger on this island backwards and forwards in and out of Purgatory as often as you please, for all I'll say you nay.'

'That's very kind of you,' he answered, at the same time looking me in the face in a curious sort of fashion. 'Nevertheless, for the good of your own soul, I intend that you shall fight me, and at once.'

'I won't, and that's the end of it,' I said.

'You will, and immediately,' he answered quietly. Then, walking up to me, he drew back his arm and hit me a blow in the face. For a second I was too much surprised to do anything at all, but, recovering myself, I lifted my fist and drove it home under his jaw. He went down like a ninepin and rolled almost over, but before I could say 'knife' he was up and at me again. After that I didn't stop to consider, but just let him have it, straight from the shoulder, as fast as he could take it. Take it he did, like a glutton, and asked for more, but it was sickening work for all that, and though I did my best to give him satisfaction, I found I could put no heart in it.

When I had sent him flying head over heels in the grass for the sixth time, and his face was a good deal more like an underdone beefsteak than anything else, I could stand it no longer, and I told him so. But it made no difference; he got on to his feet and ran at me again, this time catching me a good one on the left jaw. In sheer self-defence I had to send him down, though I loathed myself as a beast of the worst kind for doing it. But even then he was not satisfied. Once more he came in at me and once more I had to let him have it. By this time he could hardly see out of his eyes, and his face was streaming with blood.

'That's enough,' I cried, 'I'll have no more of it. I'm a big bully, and you're the best plucked little fellow this side of Kingdom Come! I'll not lay another finger on you, even if you knock me into a jelly trying to make me. Get up and shake hands.'

He got on to his feet and held out his hand.

'All things considered, this is the queerest bit of proselytizing I have ever done,' he said. 'But somehow I think I've taught you a lesson, my friend!'

'You have,' I answered, humbly, 'and one that I'll never forget if I live to be a hundred. I deserve to be kicked.'

'No! You're a man, and a better man, if I'm not mistaken, than you were half-an-hour ago.'

He said no more on the subject then, but went over to the little pool below the waterfall and bathed his face. I can tell you I felt pretty rocky and mean as I watched him. And any man who knows my reputation among the Islands will tell you that's a big admission for Jim Heggartone to make.

After that he stayed with me until his bruises disappeared; and when he went away I had made a firm friend of him, and told him all the queer story that I have set myself to tell you in this book. Ever since that time he's been one of my staunchest and truest pals on earth, and all I can say is if there's any man has got a word to say against the Rev. William Carson-Otway, he had better not say it in my hearing – that's all.

But in telling you all this I've been wandering off my course, and now I must get back to the afternoon of the day when I was awaiting the arrival of the schooner *Wildfowl* with a cargo of trade from Apia. As I have told you the wind had almost dropped, and for that reason I had given up all hope of seeing anything of her before morning. But, as it happened, I was mistaken, for just about sundown she hove in sight, rounded the bit of headland that sheltered the bay on the eastern side, and, having safely made the passage, brought up in the lagoon. Her arrival put me in the best of spirits, for after all those months spent alone with natives, I was fairly sick for a talk with a white man again. Long before her anchor was down I was on the beach getting my boat into the water, and by the time the rattle of the cable in the hawse-hole had died away, I was alongside and clambering aboard. I shook hands with the skipper, who was standing aft near the deck-house, then glanced at another man whose back was towards me. By-and-by he swung round and looked me in the face. Then I saw that it was Dan Nicholson of Salfulga Island, on the other side – the biggest blackguard and bully in the Pacific, and I don't care where you look for the next. An ugly smile came over his face as he recognised me, and then he said very politely, —

'And pray how do we find our dear friend, the Rev. James Heggartone, to-day?'

'None the better for seeing your face, Dan Nicholson,' I answered sharply. 'And now since you're here I'll give you a bit of advice. Don't you set your foot ashore while this boat's at anchor, or, as sure as you're born, I'll teach you a lesson you'll not forget as long as you live.'

'As you did that poor, soft-headed Futuleima missionary cuss, I suppose,' he answered, turning a bit red and shifting uneasily on his feet. 'Well, having something else on hand just now, I don't think I'll trouble you this time, beloved brother.'

I saw that he had taken the hint, so I could afford to forgive the way he spoke.

After a bit more palaver I got my budget of letters, which I put into my pyjama pocket, and then, accompanied by the skipper and supercargo, went ashore. We strolled up to the station together, and while they sat and smoked in the verandah I hunted up some food and set it before them, with the last two bottles of gin I had in the store. I am a strict teetotaler myself, and have been ever since the events I have set myself to tell you about occurred. It was mainly the drink that did that bit of mischief, and for the same reason – but there, whatever the reasons may have been, I don't see that I need bother you with them till they come into the story in their proper places. This yarn is not a temperance tract, is it?

While they were at their meal I wandered outside to look through my mail. Two of the letters were from the trading firm I represented at Vakalavi. One was from Otway the missionary, warning me of an intended visit, another was a circular from an Apia storekeeper, enclosing a list of things a man in my situation could never possibly require; but the fifth was altogether different, and brought me up all standing, as the sailors say. With trembling hands, and a face as white as the bit of paper I'm now writing on, I opened it and read it through. Then the whole world seemed suddenly to change for me. The sun of my life came out from behind the cloud that had covered it for so long, and, big, rough man as I was, I leaned my back against the wall behind me, feeling fairly sick with thankfulness. What a moment that was! I could have gone out and shouted my joy aloud to the world. The one thing of all others that I had longed for with my whole heart and soul had come at last.

I remained where I was for a while, thinking and thinking, but at the end of half-an-hour, having got my feelings under some sort of control, I went back to the verandah, where I found my guests smoking their pipes. Then we sat talking of mutual friends and common experiences for something like an hour, myself with a greater happiness in my heart than I had ever felt in my life before.

Living as I had lived for so long, the only white man on the island, with never a chance of hearing from or of my old Australian world, it may not be a matter for surprise that I had many questions to ask, and much news to hear. Since the schooner had last come my way great changes had occurred in the world, and on each I had to be rightly and exhaustively informed. The skipper and supercargo were both fluent talkers, and only too eager to tell me everything, so I had nothing to do but to lie back in my chair and listen.

Suddenly, in the middle of the narrative, a woman's scream rang out on the night air. Before it had finished I had jumped to my feet and run into the house, to return a moment later with a Winchester and a handful of cartridges.

'For God's sake, man, what are you going to do?' shouted the skipper, seeing the look upon my face, as I opened the magazine of the rifle and jammed the cartridges in.

'I'm going to find out what that scream meant,' I answered, as I turned towards the verandah steps.

'Be careful what you're up to with that rifle,' he said. 'Remember two can play at that game.'

'You bet your life,' I replied, and ran down the steps and along the path towards the bit of jungle on the left of the house.

Out on the open it was all quiet as death, and I knew exactly why. I entered the thicket pretty cautiously, and before I had gone ten yards discovered what I had expected to find there. It was Dan Nicholson sure enough, and one glance showed me that he held in his arms buxom little Faauma, the daughter of Salevao, the head man of the island. By the way he was standing, I could tell that she had been struggling, and, from the tilt of his right arm, I guessed that his fingers were on her throat, and that he was threatening to choke her if she uttered another sound. I moved out of the undergrowth and took stock of him.

'So this is the way you attend to my instructions, is it, Mr Nicholson?' I said, kicking a bit of dead wood out of the way, and bringing my rifle to the port in case of mischief. 'Look here, I don't want to shoot you on my own grounds, when you're, so to speak, my guest, but, by God, if you don't put those hands of yours up above your head and right-about-face for the beach this very instant, I swear I'll drill you through and through as sure as you're born. You understand me now; I've got nine deaths under my finger, and all of 'em waiting to look into your carcass, so, if you turn round as much as an inch, you're booked for Kingdom Come.'

He never said a word, but dropped the girl right there, and put his hands up as I had ordered him. 'That's right, I said. 'Now march.'

Without a word he turned to the rightabouts and set off through the scrub for the beach. I followed behind him, with the rifle on my arm ready to come to the shoulder at an instant's notice. The surf rolled upon the reef like distant thunder, the stars shone down upon the still lagoon, and through the palm-leaves I could just discern the outline of the schooner.

'Now, sir,' I said, when we arrived at the water's edge, 'I'll have to trouble you to swim out to yonder vessel. Don't say no, or dare to turn round; for if you disobey me, you're dead pig that instant.'

'But I can't swim,' he cried, grinding his teeth so savagely that I could hear him yards away.

'That be hanged for a yarn,' I said quietly. 'You swam well enough the day Big-head Brown fired you off his lugger at Apia. Come, in you go, and no more palaver, or you and I will quarrel.'

'But I shall be eaten by sharks,' he cried, this time meaning what he said very thoroughly.

'And I wish them joy of a dashed poor meal,' I answered. 'Come, in you go!'

With that he began to blubber outright like a great baby, and while he was doing so I couldn't help thinking what a strange situation it was. Picture for yourself two men, with the starlit heavens looking down on them, standing on the edge of a big lagoon, one talking and the other blubbering like a baby that's afraid of the water. I was about tired of it by this time, so I gave him two minutes in which to make up his mind, and promised him, in the event of his not deciding to strike out then, that I'd fire. Consequently he waded in without more ado, and when I had seen him more than half way out to the schooner, I put the rifle under my arm and went back to the house.

My guests had evidently been listening to our conversation, and at the same time amusing themselves with my gin bottles.

'You seem to have turned mighty strait-laced all of a sudden, Mr Heggartone,' said the skipper, a little coldly as I came up the steps and stood the rifle in a corner.

'You think so, do you?' I answered. 'And why so, pray?'

'It was only a native girl at the best calculation,' said he. 'And, in my opinion, she ought to think herself mighty well honoured to be taken notice of. She ain't a European queen or an extra special female martyr, is she?'

'I reckon she's a woman, anyhow,' I replied. 'And no Nicholson that ever was born, or any other living man for the matter of that, is big enough to play fast and loose with the women of my island while I'm about! So don't you make any mistake about that, my friend.'

'You seem to think a precious deal more of the sex on your patch than we do down our way,' says he.

'Perhaps so! And what if I do?'

'Nothing, of course, but I don't know that it's a good idea to side with the niggers against white men. That's all,' he continued, looking a trifle foolish, as he saw the way I was staring at him.

'Don't you? Well, when you've had sufficient experience, perhaps you'll think differently. No, sirree, I tell you that the man who says a word against a woman, black or white, in my hearing has to go down, and I don't care who he is.'

'Of course, you've a right to your own opinions,' he answered.

'I have, and what's more, I think I'm big enough to back them!'

The supercargo, all this time, had sat as quiet as a mouse. Now he put his spoke into the conversation.

'I suppose there's a yarn at the back of all this palaver.'

'There is,' I answered, 'and a mighty big one too. What's more, if you like, you shall hear it. And then, when I've done, if it don't make you swear a woman's just the noblest and sweetest work of God's right hand, and that the majority of men ain't fit to tie her shoe laces, well, then, all I can say is you're not the fellows I take you to be.'

'Give me a light for my pipe,' the skipper said, 'and after that fire away. I like a yarn first-rate. The night's young, this bottle's about half-full, and if it takes till morning, well, you'll find I'm not the chap to grumble.'

I furnished him with a box of matches, and then, seating myself in a long cane chair beside the verandah rails, lit my pipe and began the yarn which constitutes this book.

CHAPTER I

OLD BARRANDA ON THE CARGOO RIVER, SOUTH-WESTERN QUEENSLAND

When first I remember old Barranda Township on the Cargoo River, South-Western Queensland, it was not what it is to-day. There were no grand three-storeyed hotels, with gilded and mirror-hung saloons, and pretty, bright-eyed barmaids, in the main street then; no macadamised roads, no smart villa residences peeping from groves of Moreton Bay fig-trees and stretching for more than a mile out into the country on either side, no gas lamps, no theatre, no School of Arts, no churches or chapels, no Squatters' Club, and, above all, no railway line connecting it with Brisbane and the outer world. No! There were none of these things. The township, however, lay down in the long gully, beside the winding, ugly creek just as it does to-day – but in those days its site was only a clearing out of the primeval bush; the houses were, to use an Irishism, either tents or slab huts; two hotels certainly graced the main street, but they were grog shanties of the most villainous description, and were only patronised by the riffraff of the country side. The only means of communicating with the metropolis was by the bullock waggons that brought up our stores once every six months, or by riding to the nearest township, one hundred and eight miles distant, and taking the coach from there – a long and wearisome journey that few cared to undertake.

One thing has always puzzled me, and that was how it came about that my father ever settled on the Cargoo. Whatever his reason may have been, however, certain was it that he was one of the earliest to reach the river, a fact which was demonstrated by the significant circumstance that he held possession of the finest site for a house and the pick of all the best country for miles around the township. It was in the earliest days that he made his way out west, and if I have my suspicions of why he came to Australia at all, well, I have always kept them religiously to myself, and intend to go on doing so. But before I say anything about my father, let me tell you what I remember of the old home.

It stood, as I suppose it does to-day, for it is many years since I set eyes on it, on a sort of small tableland or plateau on the hillside, a matter of a hundred yards above the creek, and at just the one spot where it could command a lovely view down the gully and across the roofs of the township towards the distant hills. It was a well-built place of six rooms, constructed of pisa, the only house of that description in the township – and, for that matter, I believe, in the whole district. A broad verandah, covered with the beautiful Wisteria creeper, ran all round it; in front was a large flower garden stretching away to the ford, filled with such plants and shrubs as will grow out in that country; to the right was the horse and cow paddock; and, on the left, the bit of cultivation we always kept going for the summer months, when green food is as valuable as a deposit at the bank. At the rear was another strip of garden with some fine orange and loquat trees, and then, on the other side of the stockyard rails, the thick scrub running up the hillside and extending for miles into the back country. The interior of the house was comfortably furnished, in a style the like of which I have never seen anywhere else in the Bush. I have a faint recollection of hearing that the greater part of it – the chairs, tables, pictures, bookcases and silver – came out from England the year that I was born, and were part of some property my father had inherited. But how much truth there was in this I cannot say. At anyrate, I can remember those chairs distinctly; they were big and curiously shaped, carved all over with a pattern having fruit in it, and each one had a hand clasping a battle-axe on a lozenge on the back – a crest I suppose it must have been, but whose I never took the trouble to inquire. The thing, however, that struck people most about the rooms was the collection of books – there were books in hundreds, in every available place – on the shelves and in the cupboards, on the tables, on the chairs, and even on the floor. There surely never was such a man for books as my father, and I can see him now, standing before a shelf in the half light of the big dining-room with a volume

in his hand, studying it as if he were too much entranced to put it down. He was a tall, thin man, with a pale, thoughtful face, a high forehead, deep-set, curious eyes, that seemed to look you through and through, a big, hooked nose (mine is just like it), a handsome mouth, white teeth, and a heavy, determined-looking chin. He was invariably clean-shaven, well dressed, and so scrupulously neat and natty in his appearance that it seemed hard to imagine he had ever done a stroke of rough work in his life. And yet he could, and did, work harder than most men, but always in the same unostentatious fashion; never saying a word more than was absolutely necessary, but always ready at a moment's notice to pick a quarrel with you, or to say just the very one thing of all others that would be most calculated to give you pain. He was a strange man, was my father.

Of my mother my recollections are less distinct, which is accounted for by the fact that she died when I was only five years old. Indeed, the only remembrance I have of her at all is of a fragile little woman with a pale, sweet face, bending down to kiss me when I was in bed at night.

Drink and temper were my father's chief failings, but I was nearly eight years old before I really found that out. Even to-day, when I shut my eyes, I can conjure up a picture of him sitting in the dining-room before the table, two large candelabras lighting the room, drinking and reciting to himself, not only in English, but in other outlandish tongues that I can only suppose now must have been Latin and Greek. So he would go on until he staggered to his bed, and yet next morning he would be up and about again before sunrise, a little more taciturn, perhaps, and readier to take offence, but otherwise much the same as ever.

That he had always a rooted dislike to me, I know, and I am equally aware that I detested and feared him more than any other living being. For this reason we seldom met. He took his meals in solitary grandeur in the dark, old dining-room, hung round with the dingy pictures that had come out from England, of men in wigs, knickerbockers and queer, long-tailed coats, while I took mine with the old housekeeper in the kitchen leading off the back verandah. We were a strange household, and before I had turned eight years old – as strong an urchin as ever walked – I had come to the conclusion that we were not too much liked or trusted by the folk in the township. My father thought them beneath him, and let them see that he did; they called him proud, and hinted that he was even worse than that. Whether he had anything to be proud of is another matter, and one that I cannot decide. You must judge from the following illustration.

It was early in the year before the great flood which did so much damage in those parts, and which is remembered to this day, that news got about that in a few weeks' time the Governor of the colony would be travelling in our district, and would probably pay our township a visit. A committee of the principal folk was immediately chosen to receive him, and big preparations were made to do him honour. As, perhaps, the chief personage in our little community, my father was asked to preside over their deliberations, and for this purpose a deputation waited upon him. They could not possibly, however, have chosen a more unpropitious moment for their call; my father had been drinking all day, and, when they arrived, he burst into one of his fits of anger and drove them from the house, vowing that he would have nothing at all to do with the affair, and that he would show His Excellency the door if he dared to set foot within his grounds. This act of open hostility produced, as may be supposed, a most unfavourable impression, and my father must have seen it, for he even went so far as to write a note of apology to the committee, and to suggest, as his contribution to the general arrangements, that he should take His Excellency in for the night. Considering the kind of hotels our township boasted in those days, this was no mean offer, and, as may be supposed, it was unhesitatingly accepted.

In due course the Governor arrived with his party. He was received by the committee in the main street under an archway of flags, and, after inspecting the township, rode up the hill with the principal folk towards our house. When he came into the grounds my father went out into the verandah to receive him, and I followed close in his wake, my eyes, I make no doubt, bulging with curiosity. The Governor got off his horse, and at the same moment my father went down the steps. He held out his hand, His Excellency took it, and as he did so looked at him in a very quick and surprised way,

just for all the world as if my father were somebody he had seen before, in a very different place, and had never expected to meet again.

'Good gracious, can it be?' he said to himself under his breath, but all the same quite loud enough for me to hear, for I was close beside him. 'Surely you are –'

'My name is Hegggarstone,' said my father quickly, an unwonted colour coming into his face, 'and you are His Excellency, the Governor of the colony. If you will allow me, I will make you welcome to my poor abode.'

They looked at each other for a moment, pretty straight, and then the Governor pulled himself together and went into the house, side by side with my father, without another word. Later on, when the dinner given in honour of Her Majesty's representative was over, and the townsfolk had departed, His Excellency and my father sat talking, talking, talking, till far into the night. I could hear the hum of their voices quite distinctly, for my bedroom was next to the dining-room, though, of course, I could not catch what they said.

Next morning, when his horse was at the door, and the escort was standing ready to be off, His Excellency drew my father a little on one side and said in a low voice, so that the others should not hear, —

'And your decision is really final? You will never go back to England to take up your proper position in society?'

'Never!' my father replied, viciously crumpling a handful of creeper leaves as he spoke. 'I have thought it over carefully, and have come to the conclusion that it will be a good thing for society if the name dies out with me. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' answered His Excellency, 'and God help you!'

Then he mounted his horse and rode away.

I have narrated this little episode in order to show that I had some justification for believing that my father was not merely the humble, commonplace individual he professed to be. I will now tell you another, which if it did not relieve my curiosity, was surely calculated to confirm my suspicions.

It happened that one day, early in winter, I was in the township at the time when the coach, which now connected us with civilisation, made its appearance. This great event happened twice weekly, and though they had now been familiar with it for some considerable time, the inhabitants, men, women and children, seemed to consider it a point of honour that they should be present, standing in the roadway about the Bushmen's Rest, to receive and welcome it. For my own part I was ten years old, as curious as my neighbours, and above all a highly imaginative child to whom the coach was a thing full of mystery. Times out of number I had pictured myself the driver of it, and often at night, when I was tucked up in my little bed and ought to have been asleep, I could seem to see it making its way through the dark bush, swaying to and fro, the horses stretched out to their full extent in their frenzied gallop.

On this particular occasion there were more passengers than usual, for the reason that a new goldfield had sprung into existence in the ranges to the westward of us, and strangers were passing through our township every day *en route* to it. It was not until the driver had descended from his box and had entered the hotel that the crowd saw fit to disperse. I was about to follow them when I saw, coming towards me, a tall, dignified-looking man whom I had noticed sitting next to the driver when the coach arrived. He boasted a short, close-cropped beard, wore a pair of dark spectacles, and was dressed better than any man I had ever seen in my life before, my father not excepted. In his hand he carried a small portmanteau, and for a moment I thought he was going to enter the Bushmen's Rest like the remainder of the passengers. He changed his mind, however, and after looking about him came towards where I stood.

'My lad,' said he, 'can you tell me which path I should follow to reach Mr Hegggarstone's residence?'

My surprise at this question may be better imagined than described. It did not prevent me, however, from answering him.

'My name is Hegggarstone,' I said, 'and our house is on the hill over there. You can just see the roof.'

If I had been surprised at his inquiry, it was plain that he was ever so much more astonished when he heard my name. For upwards of half a minute he stood and stared at me as if he did not know what to make of it.

'In that case, if you will permit me,' he said, with curious politeness, 'I will accompany you on your homeward journey. I have come a very long way to see your father, and my business with him is of the utmost importance.'

My first shyness having by this time completely vanished, I gazed at him with undisguised interest. I had not met many travellers in my life, and for this reason when I did I was prepared to make the most of them.

'Have you come from Brisbane, sir?' I inquired, after a short silence, feeling that it was incumbent upon me to say something.

'Just lately,' he answered. 'But before that from London.'

After this magnificent admission, I felt there was nothing more to be said. A man who had come from London to our little township, for the sole purpose of seeing my father, was not the sort of person to be talked to familiarly. I accordingly trudged alongside him in silence, thinking of all the wonderful things he must have seen, and wondering if it would be possible for me at some future date to induce him to tell me about them. At first he must have inclined to the belief that I was rather a forward youth. Now, however, I was as silent as if I were struck dumb. We descended the path to the river without a word, crossed the ford with our tongues still tied, and had almost reached our own boundary fence before either of us spoke. Then my companion moved his bag to the other hand and, placing his right upon my shoulder, said slowly, —

'So you are — well, Marmaduke Hegggarstone's son?'

I looked up at him and noticed the gravity of his face as I answered, 'Yes, sir!'

He appeared to ruminate for a few seconds, and my sharp ears caught the words, 'Dear me, dear me!' muttered below his breath. A few moments later we had reached the house, and after I had asked the new-comer to take a seat in the verandah, I went in to find my father and to tell him that a visitor had arrived to see him.

'Who is it?' he inquired, looking up from his book. 'How often am I to tell you to ask people's names before you tell them I am at home? Go back and find out.'

I returned to the verandah, and asked the stranger if he would be kind enough to tell me his name.

'Redgarth,' he said, 'Michael Redgarth. Tell your father that, and I think he will remember me.'

I returned to the dining-room and acquainted my father with what I had discovered. Prepared as I was for it to have some effect upon him, I had no idea the shock would be so great. My father sprang to his feet with what sounded almost like a cry of alarm.

'Redgarth here,' he said; 'what on earth can it mean? However, I'll soon find out.'

So saying he pushed me on one side and went quickly down the passage in the direction of the verandah. My curiosity by this time was thoroughly excited, and I followed him at a respectful distance, frightened lest he should see me and order me back, but resolved that, happen what might, I would discover his mysterious errand.

I saw my father pass through the door out on to the verandah, and as he did so I heard the stranger rise from his chair. What he said by way of introduction I could not catch, but whatever it may have been there could be no doubt that it incensed my father beyond all measure.

'Call me that at your peril,' I heard him say. 'Now tell me your errand here as quickly as you can and be gone again.'

As I stood, listening, in the shadow of the doorway, I could not help thinking that this was rather scurvy treatment on my father's part of one who had come so many thousand miles to see him. However, Mr Redgarth did not seem as much put out by it as I expected he would be.

'I have come to tell you, my – ' he began, and then checked himself, 'well, since you wish it, I will call you Mr Heggartstone, that your father is dead.'

'You might have spared yourself the trouble,' my father replied, with a bitter little laugh. 'I knew it a week ago. If that is all you have to tell me I'm sorry you put yourself to so much inconvenience. I suppose my brother sent you?'

'Exactly,' Redgarth replied dryly, 'and a nice business it has been. I traced you to Sydney, and then on to Brisbane. There I had some difficulty in obtaining your address, but as soon as I did so I took the coach and came out here.'

'Well, and now that you have found me what do you want with me?'

'In the first place I am entitled by your brother to say that provided you – '

Here my father must have made some sign to him to stop.

'Pardon my interrupting you,' he said, 'but before we proceed any further let me tell you once and for all that I will have none of my brother's provisoes. Whatever threats, stipulations, or offers he may have empowered you to make, I will have nothing whatsoever to do with them. I washed my hands of my family, as you know, many years ago, and if you had not come now to remind me of the unpleasant fact, I should have allowed myself to forget even that they existed. You know my opinion of my brother. I have had time to think it over, and I see no reason at all for changing it. When we were both younger he ruined my career for me, perjured himself to steal my good name, and as if that were not enough induced my father to back him up in his treatment of me. Go back to them and tell them that I still hate and despise them. Of the name they cannot deprive me, that is one consolation; of the money I will not touch a sixpence. They may have it, every halfpenny, and I wish them joy of it.'

'But have you thought of your son, the little fellow I saw in the township, and who conducted me hither?'

'I have thought of him,' replied my father, sternly, 'and it makes no difference to my decision. I desire him to be brought up in ignorance of his birth. I am convinced that it would be the kinder course. Now I'll wish you a very good evening. If you have any papers with you that you are desirous I should sign, you may send them over to me and I will peruse them with as little delay as possible. I need not warn you to be careful of what you say in the township yonder. They know, and have always known me, as Marmaduke Heggartstone here, and I have no desire that they should become aware of my real name.'

'You need not fear. I shall not tell them,' said Redgarth. 'As for the papers, I have them in this bag. I will leave them with you. You can send them across to me when you have done with them. I suppose it is no use my attempting to make you see the matter in any other light?'

'None whatever.'

'In that case, I have the honour to wish your lor – I mean to wish you, Mr Heggartstone, a very good evening.'

As he spoke I heard him buckle the straps of his portmanteau, and then I slipped noiselessly down the passage towards the kitchen. A moment later his step sounded upon the gravel and he was gone.

On the Thursday following he left the township, and we saw no more of him. Whatever his errand may have been, never once during his lifetime did my father say anything to me upon the subject, nor did I ever venture to question him about it. Perhaps, as he said, there is something behind it all that I am happier in not knowing. So far as I have ever heard such skeletons are generally best left in undisturbed possession of their cupboards.

After that we resumed the same sort of life as had been our portion before his arrival.

This monotonous existence continued undisturbed until the time of the great flood, which, as I have said before, is even remembered to this day. It occurred at the end of a wet season, and after a fortnight's pouring rain, which continued day and night. Never was such rain known, and for this reason the ground soon became so thoroughly saturated that it could absorb no more. In consequence the creeks filled, and all the billabongs became deep as lakes.

In order to realise what follows you must understand that above the township, perhaps a couple of miles or so, three creeks joined forces, and by so doing formed the Cargoo River, on the banks of which our township was located. There had been heavy rain on all these creeks, and in consequence they came down bankers, united, as I have just said, and then, being penned in by the hills and backed up by the stored water in the billabongs, swept down the valley towards the township in one great flood, which carried everything before it. Never shall I forget that night. The clouds had cleared off the sky earlier in the evening, and it was as bright as day, the moon being almost at the full. I was having my supper with old Betty in the kitchen when suddenly I heard an odd sort of rumbling in the distance. I stopped eating to listen. Even to my childish ears the sound was peculiar, and as it still continued, I asked Betty, who was my oracle in everything, what she thought it meant. She was a little deaf, and suggested the wind in the trees. But I knew that this was no wind in trees. Every moment it was growing louder, and when I left the kitchen and went through the house to the front verandah, where I found my father standing looking up the valley, it had grown into a well-defined roar. I questioned him on the subject.

'It is a flood,' he answered, half to himself. 'Nothing but water, and an enormous body of it, could make that sound.'

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before a man on horseback appeared round the bend of the hill and galloped up the path. His horse was white with foam, and as he drew up before the steps he shouted wildly, —

'The flood is coming down the valley. Fly for your lives.'

My father only laughed — a little scornfully, I thought — and said, in his odd, mocking voice, —

'No flood will touch us here, my friend, but if you are anxious to do humanity a service, you had better hasten on and warn the folk in the township below us. They are in real danger!'

Long before he had finished speaking, the man had turned his horse and was galloping down the track, as fast as he had come, towards the little cluster of houses we could discern in the hollow below us. That young man was Dennis O'Rourke, the eldest son of a Selector further up the valley, and the poor fellow was found, ten days later, dead, entangled in the branches of a gum tree, twenty miles below Barranda Township, with a stirrup iron bent round his left foot, and scarcely half a mile from his own selection gate. Without doubt he had been overtaken by the flood before he could reach his wife to give her the alarm. In consequence, the water caught her unprepared, she was never seen again, and only one of her children escaped alive; their homestead, which stood on the banks of the creek, was washed clean off the face of the earth, and when I rode down that way on my pony, after the flood had subsided, it would have been impossible to distinguish the place where it had once stood.

But to return to my narrative. O'Rourke had not left us five minutes before the rumbling had increased to a roar, almost like that of thunder. And every second it was growing louder. Then, with a suddenness no man could imagine who has never seen such a thing, a solid wall of water, shining like silver in the moonlight, came into view, seemed to pause for a moment, and then swept trees, houses, cattle, haystacks, fences, and even large boulders before it like so much driftwood. Within a minute of making its appearance it had spread out across the valley, and, most marvellous part of all, had risen half way up the hill, and was throwing a line of yeast-like foam upon our garden path. A few seconds later we distinctly heard it catch the devoted township, and the crashing and rending sound it made was awful to hear. Then the noise ceased, and only a swollen sheet of angry water, stretching away across the valley for nearly a mile and a half was to be seen. Such a flood no man in

the district, and I state this authoritatively, had ever in his life experienced before. Certainly I have not seen one like it since. And the brilliant moonlight only intensified the terrible effect.

Having assured himself that we had nothing to fear, my father ordered me off to bed, and reluctantly I went – only to lie curled up in my warm blankets thinking of the waters outside, and repicturing the effect produced upon my mind by O'Rourke's sensational arrival. It was the first time I had ever seen a man under the influence of a life-and-death excitement, and, imaginative child as I was, the effect it produced on my mind was not one to be easily shaken off. Then I must have fallen asleep, for I have no recollection of anything else till I was awakened in the middle of the night by the noise of people entering my room. Half-asleep and half-awake I sat up, rubbing my eyes, and blinking at the brightness of the candle my father carried in his hand. Old Betty was with him, and behind them, carrying a bundle in his arms, stalked a tall, thin man with a grey beard, long hair and a white, solemn face. His clothes, I noticed, were sopping wet, and a stream of water marked his progress across the floor.

'Take James out and put the child in his place,' said my father, coming towards my bed. The man advanced, and Betty lifted me out and placed me on a chair. The bundle was then tucked up where I had been, and, when that had been done, Betty turned to me.

'Jim,' she said, 'you must be a good boy and give no trouble, and I'll make you up a nice bed in the corner.' This was accordingly done, and when it was ready I was put into it, and in five minutes had forgotten the interruption and was fast asleep once more.

As usual, directly there was light in the sky, I woke and looked about me. To my surprise, however, for I had for the moment forgotten the strange waking of the night, I found myself, not in my own place, but on a pile of rugs in the corner. Wondering what this might mean, I looked across at my bed, half-expecting to find it gone. But no! There it stood, sure enough, with an occupant I could not remember ever to have seen before – a little rose-leaf of a girl, at most not more than four years old. Like myself she was sitting up, staring with her great blue eyes, and laughing from under a tangled wealth of golden curls at my astonishment. Her little pink and white face, so charmingly dimpled, seemed prettier than anything I had ever seen or dreamed of before; but I did not know what to make of it all, and, boy-like, was inordinately shy. Seeing this, and not being accustomed to be slighted, the little minx climbed out of bed, and, with her tiny feet peeping from beneath one of my flannel night-shirts, came running across to where I lay. Then standing before me, her hands behind her back, she said in a baby voice – that I can hear now even after twenty years, —

'T'se Sheilah!

And that was my introduction to the good angel of my life. Five minutes later we were playing together on the floor as if we had been friends for years instead of minutes. And when Betty came into the room, according to custom, to carry me off to my bath, her first remark was one which has haunted me all my life, and will go on doing so until I die.

'Pretty dears,' she cried, 'sure they're just made for each other.'

And so we were!

It was not until some time later that I learnt how it was that old McLeod and his baby daughter came to be under our roof that night. This was the reason of it. The man and his wife, it appears, were but new arrivals in the colony, and were coming out our way to settle. They were finishing their last day's stage down the valley when the flood caught the bullock dray, drowned his wife and all the cattle, and well-nigh finished the father and child, who were carried for miles clinging to a tree, to be eventually washed up before our house. My father, standing in the verandah, heard a cry for help, and waded out into the water just in time to save them. Having done this he brought them up to the house, and, as there was nowhere else to put her, I was turned out and Sheilah was given my bed.

Next morning a foaming sea of water cut us off from the township, or what few houses remained of it, and for this reason it was manifestly impossible that old McLeod could continue his journey. I remember that poor, little motherless Sheilah and I played together all day long in the verandah,

as happy as two birds, while her father watched us from a deep chair, with grave, tear-stained eyes. In the death of his wife he had sustained a grievous loss, from which somehow I don't think he ever thoroughly recovered.

Three days later the water fell as rapidly as it had risen, and as soon as it had sufficiently abated, McLeod, having thanked my father for his hospitality, which I could not help thinking had been grudgingly enough bestowed, took Sheilah in his arms, right up from the middle of our play, and tramped off, a forlorn black figure, down the path towards the township. As far as the turn of the track, and until the scrub timber hid her from my gaze, I could see the little mite waving her hand to me in farewell.

That week McLeod purchased Gregory's farm on the other side of the township, and installed himself in the house on the knoll overlooking the river, taking care this time to choose a position that was safely out of water reach. Once he had settled in, I was as often to be found there as at my own home, and continued to be Sheilah's constant companion and playmate from that time forward.

And so the years went by, every one finding us firmer friends. It was I who held her while she took her first ride upon the old grey pony McLeod bought for the boy to run up the milkers on. It was I who taught her to row the cranky old tub they called a boat on the Long Reach; it was I who baited the hook that caught her first fish; it was I who taught her the difference in the nests in the trees behind the homestead, and how to distinguish between the birds that built them; in everything I was her guide, philosopher and her constant friend. And surely there never was so sweet a child to teach as Sheilah – her quickness was extraordinary, and, bush-bred boy though I was, it was not long before she was my equal at everything where strength was not absolutely required. By the time she was twelve and I sixteen, she could have beaten any other girl in the township at anything they pleased, and, what made them the more jealous, her beauty was becoming more and more developed every day. Even in the hottest sun her sweet complexion seemed to take no hurt, and now the hair, that I remembered curling closely round her head on the morning when we first became acquainted, descended like a fall of rippling gold far below her shoulders. And her eyes – but there, surely there never were such eyes as Sheilah's – for truth and innocence. Oh, Sheilah, my own sweetheart, if only we could have foreseen then all the bitterness and agony of the rocky path that we were some day to tread, what would we not have done to ward off the fatal time? But, of course, we could not see it, and so we went on blindfold upon our happy-go-lucky way, living only in the present, and having no thought of the cares of the morrow. And the strangest part about it all was that, thrown together continually as we were, neither of us had taken any account of love. The little god had so far kept his arrows in his quiver. But he was to shoot them soon enough in all conscience.

To say that my father forbade my intercourse with the McLeods would not be the truth. But if I said that he lost no opportunity of sneering at the old man and his religion (he was a Dissenter of the most vigorous description, and used to preach on Sundays in the township) I should not be overstepping the mark.

I don't believe there was another man in the world who could sneer as could my father. He had cultivated that accomplishment to perfection, and in a dozen words would bring me to such a pitch of indignation that it was as much as I could do to refrain from laying violent hands upon him. I can see him now lying back in his chair in the old dining-room, when he was hearing me my lessons (for he taught me all I know), a book half-closed upon his knee, looking me up and down with an expression upon his face that seemed to say, 'Who ever would have thought I should have been plagued with such a dolt of a son!' Then, as likely as not, he would lose his temper over my stupidity, box my ears, and send me howling from the room, hating him with all the intensity of which my nature was capable. I wonder if ever a boy before had so strange and unnatural a parent.

CHAPTER II

HOW I FIRST LEARNED MY LOVE FOR SHEILAH

It was the morning of my eighteenth birthday, and, to celebrate it, Sheilah and I had long before made up our minds to ride to, and spend the day at, the Blackfellow's Cave – a large natural cavern in the mountains, some fifteen or sixteen miles distant from the township. It was one of our favourite jaunts, and according to custom we arranged to start early.

For this reason, as soon as light was in the sky, I was astir, took a plunge in the creek, and then ran down to the paddock and caught the horse I intended riding that day – a fine, well set-up thoroughbred of our own breeding. And, by the same token, there were no horses like ours in the district, either for looks, pace, stamina, or pedigree. What my father did not know about horse and cattle breeding no man in the length and breadth of Australia could teach him. And a good bushman he was too, for all his scholarly ways and habits, a first-class rider, and second to none in his work among the beasts in the stockyard. All I know myself I learnt from him, and I should be less than grateful if I were above owning it. But that has nothing to do with my story. Having caught my horse, I took him up to the stable and put a first-class polish on him with the brush, then, fastening him up to the bough-shade to be ready when I wanted him, hurried in to my breakfast. When I entered the room my father was already seated at the table. He received me after his usual fashion, which was to look me up and down, smile in a way that was quite his own, and then, with a heavy sigh, return to his reading as if it were a matter of pain to him to have anything at all to do with me. When we were half through the meal he glanced up from his book, and said, —

'As soon as you've done your breakfast, you'd better be off and muster Kidgerree paddock. If you come across Bates's bull bring him in with you and let him remain in the yard until I see him.'

This was not at all what I had looked forward to on my birthday, so I said, —

'I can't muster to-day. It's my birthday, and I'm going out.'

He stared at me for nearly a minute without speaking, and then said with a sneer, —

'I'm sure I very much regret that I should have inadvertently interfered with your arrangements. Miss McLeod accompanies you, of course!'

'I am going out with Sheilah! Yes!'

Again he was silent for a few moments – then he looked up once more.

'As it is your birthday of course you consider you have an excuse for laziness. Well, I suppose you must go, but if you should chance to honour the father with your society you might point out to him that, on two occasions this week, his sheep have been on my frontage.'

'It's our own fault; we should mend our boundary.'

'Indeed! And pray how long have you been clear-headed enough to see that?'

'Anyone could see it. It's not fair to blame Mr McLeod for what is not his fault.'

'Dear me! This perspicuity is really most pleasing. An unexpected Daniel come to judgment, I declare. Well, at anyrate, I'll give you a note to take to the snuffling old hound and in it I'll tell him that the next beast of his I catch on my property I'll shoot. That's a fair warning. You can come in for it when you are starting.'

'I shall not take it.'

'Indeed! I am sorry to hear that. Your civility is evidently on a par with your industry.'

Then, seeing that I had risen, he bowed ironically, and wished me a 'very good morning.'

I did not answer, but marched out of the room, my cheeks flushed with passion. Nothing, I knew, gave him greater pleasure than to let him see that he had hurt me, and yet, do what I would, I could not prevent myself from showing it.

Having passed through the house, I went into the kitchen to obtain from Betty, who still constituted the female element of our household, some provender for the day. This obtained, I saddled my horse, strapped a quart pot on to my saddle, mounted, and rode off. As I passed the front of the house I heard my father call to me to stop, but I did not heed him, and rode on down the track to the ford, thence, through the township, to McLeod's selection.

And now a few words about the latter's homestead – the house which has played such a prominent part in my life's drama. I think I have already told you that it stood on the top of a small rise about a quarter of a mile above the river and looked right up the valley over the township roofs, just in the opposite direction to ours. In the twelve years that McLeod had lived there he had added considerably to it – a room here and there – till it had grown into a rambling, disconnected, but charming, old place, overgrown with creepers, and nestling in a perfect jungle of peppermint trees, gums, oranges and bamboos. The stockyard, for the selection carried about five hundred cattle and a couple of thousand sheep, was located at the back, with the stables and Sheilah's poultry-yard; and it had always been one of my greatest pleasures to be allowed to go down and give the old man a hand with his mustering or branding; to help Sheilah run up the milkers, or to hunt for eggs in the scrub with her when the hens escaped and laid outside.

Reaching the slip panels I jumped off and tied my horse to the fence; then went up the shady path towards the house. Bless me! how the memory of that morning comes back as I sit talking now. The hot sun, for it was the middle of summer, was streaming through the foliage and dancing on the path; there was the creeper-covered verandah, with its chairs and old-fashioned sofa inviting one to make oneself at home, and, last but not least, there was Sheilah standing waiting for me, dressed in her dark green habit and wearing a big straw hat upon her pretty head.

'You're late, Jim,' she said, for, however much she might spoil me, Sheilah always made a point of telling me my faults, 'I've been waiting for you nearly half-an-hour.'

'I'm sorry, Sheilah,' I answered. 'I could not get away as soon as I expected.'

I did not tell her what had really made me so late; for somehow, even if I did think badly of my father myself, I had no wish that other people should do so too.

'But I am forgetting,' she continued, 'I ought first to have wished you many happy returns of the day, dear old Jim, and have scolded you afterwards.'

'Somehow I never seem to take offence however much you scold, Sheilah,' I said, as we left the verandah and went round by the neat path to the stables.

'Then it's not much use my trying to do you any good, is it?' she answered with a little laugh.

We found her pretty bay pony standing waiting at the rails, and when she was ready I swung her up into the saddle like a bird. Then mounting my own horse, off we went down the track, through the wattle scrub, across the little bubbling creek that joined the big river a bit below the township, and finally away through the Mulga towards the mountains and the Blackfellow's Cave.

It was a breathless morning – the beginning of a typical Australian summer day. In the trees overhead the cicadas chirped, parroquets and wood pigeons flew swiftly across our path; now and again we almost rode over a big silly kangaroo, who went blundering away at what looked a slow enough pace, but was in reality one that would have made a good horse do all he knew to keep up with him. Our animals were in splendid trim and, in spite of the heat, we swung easily along, side by side, laughing and chattering, as if we had never known a care in our lives. Indeed, I don't know that we had then. At least not as I understand cares now.

About ten o'clock we halted for half-an-hour in the shadow of a big gum, and alongside a pretty water-hole. Then, continuing our ride, we reached the Blackfellow's Cave about mid-day.

How the cave received its name must remain a mystery; personally, I never remember to have seen a black fellow within half-a-dozen miles of it. In fact, I believe they invariably avoided it, being afraid of meeting 'debil-debils' in its dark and gloomy interior.

On arrival, we hobbled our horses out, lit a fire, and, as soon as we had procured water from a pool hard by, set our quart pot on to boil. This done, we made tea, ate our lunch, and then marched in to explore the cavern. It was a queer enough place in all conscience, cave leading from cave and passage from passage, and for each we had our own particular name – the church, the drawing-room, the coach-house, and a dozen others. Some were pitch dark, and necessitated our lighting the candle Sheilah had brought with her, others were open at the top, enabling us, through the aperture, to see the bright blue sky overhead. From one to another we wandered, trying the echoes, and making each resound with the noises of our voices. The effects produced were most weird, and I could not help thinking that any black fellow who might have penetrated inside would soon have collected material for 'debil-debil' yarns sufficient to last him and his tribe for generations.

At last, having thoroughly explored everything we made our way out into the open air once more. By this time it was nearly three o'clock and a terribly hot afternoon. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves, while the parched earth seemed to throw back the sun's scorching rays with all the fierceness of a burning-glass. It was too hot even for the birds, and though we could hear the monotonous cawing of crows in the distance, and the occasional chatter of the parakeets, not one was visible; indeed, when an old-man kangaroo hopped on to the little plateau before the cave's mouth, and saw us, it was nearly half-a-minute before he could find sufficient energy to hop away again. The cicadas were still busy in the trees, and in the dead atmosphere their chirrup seemed to echo half across the world.

When it was time for us to think of returning home, we crossed to where our horses were standing idly whisking their tails under a big gum, and having saddled them, mounted and started on our journey. We had not, however, proceeded more than five miles before thick clouds rose in the sky, driven by a strong wind that rustled the dry twigs and grass, and sent the dust flying about our ears like so much small shot.

Suddenly Sheilah brought her pony to a standstill and began to sniff the wind.

'What is it?' I asked, stopping my horse and looking round at her. 'What do you smell?'

'Burning grass,' she answered. And as she spoke I got a distinct whiff of it myself.

'There's a fire somewhere,' she said; 'I hope it's not coming our way.'

'It is probably on the top of the ranges,' I answered. 'And the wind's funnelling it down to us.'

For some time we rode on in silence, the smell growing stronger and stronger as we progressed. Overhead, dense smoke was floating towards us, while the air was becoming momentarily hotter.

'It is a fire, and a big one,' I said, pulling my horse up again and signing to Sheilah to do the same. 'The question is whether we are wise in going on, without first finding out which way it is coming.'

'It's somewhere in the gully ahead of us,' said Sheilah. 'Let us proceed as far as we can.'

Accordingly we rode on, the smoke getting every moment thicker, and the heat more powerful. Presently we reached a slight eminence, from which we knew we should be able to command a good view of the gully we were about to enter. As we ascended the little rise, however, something caught my eye, and I turned and shouted to Sheilah —

'Round – round, and ride for your life!'

As I spoke I wheeled my horse and she followed my example – but not before we had both seen a thin line of fire run through the dry grass not fifty yards from where we stood. Next moment there was an awful blaze behind us, and our terrified horses were dashing down the gully, as fast as they could lay their legs to the ground. It was perilous going, over rocks and logs, across rain chasms and between trees, but heedless of anything we rode on at breakneck speed, knowing that we were racing for our very lives. And the flames came after us with the fury and noise of an express train. When we had gone about a hundred yards I looked at Sheilah. She was sitting back in her saddle, her mouth firmly set, steering her terrified and almost unmanageable pony with all the skill and dexterity of which she was mistress.

As we turned the corner I looked back and saw that the fire had stretched high up the hills on either side, while it was also sweeping down the valley behind us with terrifying rapidity. Fast as we were going, the flames were overtaking us. What were we to do to escape? The heat was so intense that it was sapping every atom of strength out of the horses, and one crash into a tree, one stumble in a hole, one little mistake and the result would be an awful and agonising death. On all sides were terrified animals – cattle, horses, sheep, kangaroo, emu, wallabies, dingoes even, all like ourselves flying for their lives, while overhead thousands of birds flew screeching before the hot blast. I endeavoured to keep my horse by the side of Sheilah's in order to be ready to help her in case of accident, but it was almost an impossibility. Seeing that we might be separated I called to her.

'Steer to your left, and if possible try to reach the cave.'

She nodded to let me see that she understood, and then on we went as before. Strong man as I was, the heat behind, the choking smoke and the awful glare all round were almost more than I could bear, and I dared not think of their effect on Sheilah. But whatever her sufferings may have been, she was riding as carefully as if nothing out of the common were occurring.

Leaving a little bit of open ground we plunged into the scrub again, but had not gone twenty paces in it before an awful thing happened. Sheilah's pony, who for the last hundred yards had been going very heavily, now put his foot into a hole and went down with a crash, throwing the girl over his head a dozen feet or more. With a cry of terror I pulled my horse to a standstill, and jumped off, but Sheilah lay as if she were dead, her legs curled up under her and her head curiously twisted round. The pony was screaming with agony where he had fallen. What was to be done? There was not an instant to be lost. Dragging my own frightened horse over to where she lay, I picked her up. She was unconscious and for a moment I thought the fall had broken her neck. Then I turned to her poor pony, who by this time had struggled to his feet. One glance told me the worst. He had broken his off fore leg and it was useless counting further on him for assistance. Here was a terrible position. As far as I could see only one thing was to be done. The flames were drawing closer and closer – there was scarcely time for thought. A large log lay near at hand. I backed my horse against it, and then lifting poor Sheilah in my arms, placed her on his wither and climbed into the saddle. Being only a youngster and very high-spirited, he did not take very kindly to this curious proceeding, but I forced him to it with a strength and determination I did not know that I possessed, and then, holding Sheilah in my arms, off we went again, leaving her own pony to meet his fate from the on-rushing flames.

If my ride had been difficult before, I will leave you to imagine how much more perilous it was now that I had not only to guide my horse in order to escape low hanging branches and other dangers, but at the same time to hold Sheilah in her place. She lay with her pretty head hanging over my arm, as white and still as death.

On – on we dashed for our very lives. The pace had been fast before – now, even with the additional burden my animal had to bear, it was terrific. But I knew we could not be more than a couple of miles at furthest from the cave. If he only could keep it up till then, it was just possible we might be saved.

But even as this thought passed through my brain I felt his powers begin to fail. The old elasticity was quite gone, and I had to rouse him with my voice and heel. Oh, how awful seemed my utter helplessness – my life, Sheilah's life, her father's happiness, all depending on the strength, pluck and endurance of an uncomprehending animal. I called him by name; in an ecstasy of fear I even promised him perpetual ease for the rest of his equine existence if only he would carry me as far as the cave. And then it was, in that moment of despair, when death seemed inevitable for both of us, that I discovered that I loved Sheilah with something more than the brotherly affection I had always supposed myself to entertain for her. Yes! I was a man and she was a woman, and with all the certainty of a man's knowledge, I knew that I loved her then. On, on brave horse and give that love a chance of ripening. On, on, though the clammy sweat of death bedews and paralyses thy nostrils, on, on, for on thy courage and endurance depends the happiness of two human lives.

By this time the wind had risen to the strength of a hurricane and this could only mean that the flames would travel proportionately faster. They could not be more than half a mile behind us now at the greatest calculation, and the cave was, perhaps, half that distance ahead. It was a race for life with the odds against us, but at all hazards, even if I had to lay down my own to do it, I knew that Sheilah must be saved. Looking back on it now I can truthfully say that that was my one and only thought. On and on we went – the horse lurching in his stride, his powers failing him with every step; and yet we dared not dismount, for I knew that I could not run fast enough with Sheilah in my arms to stand any possible chance of saving her.

At last we turned the corner of the gully, and could see before us, scarcely more than a hundred yards distant, the black entrance to the cave. I looked round, and as I did so saw a narrow tongue of fire lick out and seize upon the grass scarcely fifty yards behind us. Great beads of sweat rose upon my forehead; blisters, caused by the intense heat, were forming on my neck; my hat was gone, and my horse's strength was failing him with every stride. God help us, for we were in desperate straits. And only a hundred yards lay between us and safety. Then I felt the animal under me pause, and give a shiver – he struggled on for a few yards, and then down in a heap he went without more ado, throwing us gently from him in his fall. Death was surely only a matter of a few moments now. However, I was not going to die without a struggle.

Springing up I again took Sheilah in my arms, and set off with her as fast as I could run towards the cave. Short distance though it was, it seemed an eternity before I had toiled to the top of the little hill, crossed the plateau, and was laying my precious burden upon the ground inside the cave. Then I fell beside her, too much exhausted to care very much what became of me. As I did so, I heard the fire catch great trees outside, and presently little flames came licking up almost to the entrance of the cave where we lay. Still Sheilah remained unconscious, and for some few moments I was but little better. As soon, however, as my strength returned to me, I picked her up again and bore her through the first cave into the second, where it was comparatively light and cool. Leaving her alone here for a minute I picked my way into the third cave, where there was a small pool of spring water. From this I took a deep draught, and then, wetting my handkerchief thoroughly, hurried back to Sheilah's side. Thereupon I set to work to bathe her hands and face, but for some time without any satisfactory result. Then her eyes opened, and she looked about her. At first she seemed scarcely to comprehend where she was, or what had happened, but her memory soon came back to her, and as she heard the roar of the fire outside and felt the hot blast sweeping into the cave, a great shudder swept over her.

'Ah! I remember now!' she said. 'I had a fall. What has become of poor Rorie?'

'We had to leave him behind.'

She put her little hands up to her eyes, as if to shut out the dreadful picture my words had conjured up.

'But how did you get me here?' she asked.

'I carried you on my saddle before me till my own horse dropped,' I said, 'and then I brought you the rest of the distance in my arms.'

She closed her eyes and was silent for a minute or so, then she opened them again and turned to me with a womanliness I had never before remarked in her.

'Jim,' she said, laying her little hand upon my arm, 'you have saved my life! As long as I live I will never forget what you have done for me to-day!'

From that moment she was no longer Sheilah, my old playfellow and almost sister. She was Sheilah, the goddess – the one woman to be loved by me for the remainder of my life.

I took her hand and kissed it. Then everything seemed to swim round me – a great darkness descended upon me, and I fell back in a dead faint.

When I recovered myself and was able to move, I left her and went into the outer cave. The fire had passed, and was sweeping on its way down the gully, leaving behind it a waste of blackened earth, and in many cases still flaring timber. But prudence told me that the ground was still far too

hot to be safe for walking on. So I went back to Sheilah, and we sat talking about our narrow escape until nightfall.

Then just as we were wondering how, since we had no horses, we could best make our way home, a shout echoed in the outer cave, and we ran there to be confronted by McLeod, my father and half-a-dozen other township men who had come out in search of us. Sheilah flew to her father's arms, while I looked anxiously, I must confess, at mine. But, whether he felt any emotion or not, he allowed no sign to escape him. He only held out his hand, and said dryly, —

'This, you see, is the outcome of your obstinacy.'

Then he turned and called to a black boy, who stood outside holding a horse. The lad brought the animal up, and my father signed to me to mount, which I did, and presently we were all making our way home.

At the entrance to the township, where we were to separate, I stopped the animal I was riding and turned to Sheilah to say good-bye. She drew the horse her father had brought for her up alongside mine, and said softly, —

'Good-bye, and God bless you, Jim! Whatever may happen in the future, I shall never forget what you have done for me to-day.'

Then old McLeod, who had heard from Sheilah all about our ride for life, came up and thanked me in his old-fashioned way for having saved his daughter's life, and after that we rode home, my father and I, silently, side by side. As soon as supper was over, I went to bed, thoroughly worn out, but the stirring events of the day had been too much for me, and so hour after hour I lay tossing about, unable to sleep. At last I dozed off, only to be wakened a short while later by a curious sound coming from my father's room. Not knowing what it might be, I sprang from my bed and went into the verandah, where I had a clear view into his apartment. And a curious sight it was that I saw.

My father was kneeling at his bedside, his head hidden in his hands, praying as if his whole life depended on it. His hands were white with the tenacity of their grip on each other, and his whole figure quivered under the influence of his emotion. When he raised his head I saw that his face was stained with tears and that others were still coursing down his cheeks. But the reason of it all was more than I could tell.

Having satisfied my curiosity, and feeling somehow rather ashamed of myself for having watched him, I went back to bed and fell fast asleep, not to wake next morning till the sun was high in the sky.

CHAPTER III

WHISPERING PETE

After the events described in the preceding chapter it was a new life that Sheilah opened up for me – one as different from that which had existed before as could well be imagined. Every moment I could spare from my work (and I was generally pretty busy for the reason that my father was increasing in years and he had resigned a large measure of the management of his property to me) was spent in her company. I thought of her all day and dreamed of her all night.

For two important reasons, however, I was compelled to keep my love a secret, both from herself and from the world in general. My father would have laughed the very notion of an engagement to scorn, and without his consent I was in less than in no position at all to marry. Therefore I said nothing on the subject to anybody.

And now having introduced you to the good angel of my life, I must do the same for the reverse character.

About two years after the bush fire described in the last chapter, there came to our township, whither nobody was ever able to discover, a man who was destined to exercise a truly sinister influence upon my life.

In appearance he presented a strange individuality, being of medium stature, with a queer sort of Portuguese face, out of which two dark eyes glittered like those of a snake. He arrived in the township late one summer evening, mounted on a fine upstanding bay mare and followed by a couple of the most diabolical-looking black boys any man could possibly set eyes on, stayed the night at the grog shanty, and early next morning rode off up the hill as far as Merther's old homestead, which it was said he had taken for a term of years. Whatever its intrinsic advantages may have been, it was a queer place for a man to choose; firstly, because of the strange stories that were told about it, and secondly, because it had stood empty for nearly five years and was reported to be overrun by snakes, rats and scorpions. But Whispering Pete, by which name he afterwards became known to us (from a peculiar habit he had of speaking in a voice but little louder than a whisper) seemed to have no objection to either the rumours or the vermin, but just went his way – doing a bit of horse and cattle dealing as the chances turned up – never interfering with his neighbours, and only showing him self in the township when compelled by the exigencies of his business to do so.

It was not until some considerable time after the events which it is my purpose to describe to you now that I heard the stories, that were told about him, but when I did I could easily credit their truth. Among other peculiarities the man was an ardent and clever musician, and strangely enough, considering his brutality towards grown-up people, a great lover of children. It was well known that the little ones could do more with him in five minutes than anyone else could hope to do in a lifetime. Women, I believe, had never filled any place in his life. The following episode in his career will, I fancy give you a better notion of his character than any amount of explanation upon my part could do.

Somewhere on the Murray River, Pete, who was then running a flash hotel for squatters and skippers of the river steamers, managed to get himself into hot water with the police on a charge of working an illicit still. They had had suspicions of him for some considerable time, but, knowing the character of their man, had waited in order to make certain before effecting his arrest. One of his acquaintances, however, a man, who for some reason or another bore him no good will, put them on the right track, and now all they had to do was to ride up to his residence and take him into custody. By the time they reached it, however, Pete had been warned by somebody and had taken to the bush to be out of the way. He did not return to the neighbourhood but left South Australia forthwith, and migrated into New South Wales, where he embarked upon a new career, much to the relief of the

man who had betrayed him, whose life, as you may imagine, had up to this time been cursed with the very real fear of Pete's revenge.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.