Bark House Days

Fullerton, Mary E. (1868-1946)

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“I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born;
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn.”

—THOMAS HOOD.
TO THOSE WHO BELONGED TO THE OLD DAYS

NOTE

Two hitherto unprinted sketches have in the present edition been added to those that appeared in the first edition published in Melbourne, and which has long been out of print. Acknowledgments are again made to the proprietors of the “Australasian,” and “Leader” respectively for permission to re-publish those of the sketches that originally appeared in their journals.
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Bark House Days
THE old house is no longer there. The structures of pioneer days are not for permanency. We were born in it, the whole wild, shy, little seven of us, and when it began to tumble and lurch itself out of plumb, hands, I know not if desecrating or reverent, were laid upon it, and it was demolished.

I have heard of the building of the old house from my mother, till I imagined that I remembered the actual putting together of those bush timbers. I saw my father, a little grey of whisker—early so—bending to the rough timbers with adze and saw to shape them to something like fitness for the part they were to play in that wonderful architecture. I saw, too, in imagination, Uncle William, acting as “handy man” to father; he not knowing about building so well; his brief pioneering experience having been confined to a shop in the town, which they now call the city. I made uncle a trifle grey, too, as he was when actual memory of him supplanted the imaginary.

They did it in a fortnight or three weeks at most, so my mother used to say. They are tenacious chroniclers of details, these pioneers, especially the
women, whose common round was circumscribed by a belt of bush, and to whom a small incident, from the infrequency of incidents, was pages of life. But the building of the first home in the wilderness is not a small incident: the coming to it from a yet more inadequate tent meant much.

My father intended to get on, to subdue the scrub, to woo the virgin soil of his selection, to move on to finer things in the way of a house; so, strapping on his sapling riders over the bark roof with his strands of green hide, he had told mother, and often afterwards. From what I know of her, she looked on brave enough, but wistful for the days when her home should have more of art about its shape and make. But why, she perhaps thought, did father set in the ground such vast upstanding logs for verandah posts? The Philistines were safe under that verandah, though Samson were about. I remember their girth. We played hide-and-seek behind those posts later. We used to run round and round them, too, till the world spun with us. Were they not set there for the unborn us? There must, indeed, have been haste in the building of that old house. It is authentic memory now which tells me of trees within reach of it that on windy nights made our elders speak of possibilities. It was long before they were all cut down, one by one, for, dangerous or not, there were many trees further off, and a wilderness of scrub to be got rid of first, so that the crops might grow—also to feed the unborn us. Truly those pioneers did have to think of us; we came very quickly, and we clamoured so when we came.

One tree I mind—I catch my father's phrase—bent so towards the house that my mother's nervousness in a windy season insisted that it must go. Claribel was toddling soon, I think. So my father went at it. Uncle, with his long arms and legs, and his lean, resolute English face, had been a climber after birds' nests of old, and now a proof was demanded of his powers. He had to climb the leaning tree, and tie ropes on the limbs on the house side of it, so that in falling it should be directed the other way. It must be memory now, the thing's so clear with me. I was about three—a silent, noting youngster. There was my father, chopping, chopping, cautiously, stepping back from the tree every now and then, and eyeing its branches, it creaking and rocking a little. There were uncle, and old Angus, the "working man," pulling on the ropes with a "yo-ho." Angus had been a sailor, mother explained, and "yo-ho" was a sailor's word when he pulled a rope, just as the tattoo on his arm belonged to a sailor. Jack said he wanted to be a sailor, and mother smiled absently. There we were, Jack and mother and I, away to the stump by the front gate for safety. Mother was holding me, and anxiously keeping Jack near her, lest his excitement should get the better of him. Every time the tree swayed she gripped us both. It was down at last, safe and away from the house. I don't remember any more about it, I
think, till Claribel and I pulled a lump of crumbling bark off the yet lying trunk for mother's baking fire, and a lot of spiders sent us running like little Miss Muffit. Ah! that was long ago. But the house—I wander in my reminiscences, as the old pioneers are said to do. Can it be that I'm becoming an old pioneer myself, of the second period? That's possible, for the time of which I speak just now is very far in the past. It was the beginning of the settlement of those old districts to which came the broken-fortuned men from the gold-fields. The surface, they said, will give us what the deep earth failed to yield. The house of my memory was all of stringy-bark, and a framework of bush timber. If not beautiful to the eye—though of its defects we small ones were not conscious—it was cosy in winter, and cool in summer. The heavy, thick sheets of bark kept the fierce sun at bay, as we realized later when the era of the iron roof set in. And if here and there, for want of sufficient lap in the first place, or from some other cause, there was a chink in the bark wall, still it could be and was filled up or covered over.

My mother pasted newspapers over the bark walls two or three times a year; she did it till there was a thick layer that began to peel itself off. I remember the joy of the first doing; though it was not joy to her, especially when she came to the rough side of the bark in the skillion rooms. It peeled and peeled, and she had to have more and more paste, till the flour ran out, and we had potatoes for a day or two, till more flour could be got. The day, I say, was a joy to us, revelling in a scene of paste and muddle, but, looking back, I know my mother to have been a saint that she did none of us meddlers an injury, nor screamed to high heaven against the poetry of pioneering. She did neither of these things as I recollect, but had a transformed house when my father came at night, to stare amazed.

It was cosy, I say, at night, when the bush wept or howled without, or when the frost polished up the stars. The fire-place occupied almost all one end of the front room—parlour was too ostentatious. Great logs roared, the more wood disposed of that way the better, and gave us merry thoughts; glowed, and gave us the queer dreams of childhood, as we sat on the home-made hearth-rug. Old fireplace, with your ample hobs, your uncouth, dangling chains and pothooks, beside your brightness it was that I first made the acquaintance of Topsy, of Tiny Tim, of Robinson Crusoe, and of many more of the life-long friends of the inner me.

How white were those hobs, though only pipeclayed. I remember the uprooted tree, discovered on a Sunday walk to the hill paddock, that yielded the wherewithal for the joy of a "clean hearth," if not the "rigour of the game." Home we carried the first instalment of pipeclay in our handkerchiefs, and though it was Sunday, and the Puritan in the family blood,
the rough stones and their mud surface might not remain till to-morrow.

My mother laid on the first coat, and when the newly lit fire dried it, it was wondrous. The whole room was aglow, the brighter and cleaner for it. It was always white afterwards; I can smell it yet, a pleasant earthy smell. How my mother smiled, looking into the fire that Sunday night, “Little Folks” forgotten on her knee till we nudged her to its pages. She soon transformed the floor, too, and by constant labour kept it smooth and fresh, the wonder of the occasional stranger and the emulation of the neighbour woman. Yes, the old room was comfortable and pleasant, and, if I have known grander parlours, never have I known one that was more truly a retreat from the strain of things. There were home-made chairs, father-made chairs, chairs upholstered by my mother with some disused crimson curtains she had rummaged from a box of old-time grandeurs. Such an effect! It tutored our savage little souls, the crimson chairs on the white floor, the firelight playing over it all. The walls almost white, too, with the newspapers, relieved here and there by pictures from “The Graphic.” I remember the “Sea King's Daughter,” with her fair face and blue eyes, condescended to smile upon us for years from above the rude red-gum mantelshelf, and Stanley greeted Livingstone over the sofa.

At night in bed, we saw the stars through an occasional chink—the “unascended stars”—or heard the 'possums scrambling on the roof, or emitting their “whiff whiff” from the boxtree nearby, the last one left standing, and covered all over with their quaint scribblings; or when the mopoke hooted to the moon we grew fanciful till we floated into the palace of sleep, away from the plain bark walls of our little room.

No house stood for long bare, digged round, or left with the scrub to the door. Man made a garden early, and he that is pioneer again and again in the world retains that instinct. Where they all came from, the simple flowers, I cannot remember; from neighbours established before us, I suspect, except such as came as seeds in letters from friends afar, who, through the blessed if infrequent post, had touch with our remoteness. There was a laburnum at the back; it had achieved a shade before I remember it, which in the afternoons was a pleasant flicker on the kitchen window. There was a gooseberry bush at the back, too, that always betrayed us by tearing the letter “L” in our pinnies when we went near it.

In the front there was a shrub—I have never known its name. We called it “Mrs. Seymour's Shrub” because one of that name had brought it as a little plant to my mother. She had, I remember, a plant of rosemary in exchange. Flowers were current coin in the settlement in those days. What one had, all came to have. The sweet-scented verbena we called father's bush. The only time he wore a flower was when he gathered a spray of it as
he passed on his way to the gate. But that was only to church on Sunday. It
was his one betrayal of sentiment, so far as flowers were concerned. It put
him in mind of his mother, he would say, fingering his spray fondly. How,
or why, we did not know; but it seemed strange, and awed us a little.
Father's mother, how old she must be!

Mother had many sentiments—daisies, violets, buttercups and primoses,
and, last of all, a daffodil; these gathered England about her. She talked
with far-away eyes of things before God had made us, out of the dust on
the road to the township, the only road and the only dust we knew. How
her talk engages imagination and memory! Forty years after, wandering in
the native home of her and of these things, I have remembered and
understood her feeling.

I have been back to the site of that old house and garden. And it is now
only a site. Not a timber of the house remains, but in the garden a still-
suggested mound that was once the beflowered grave of many pets; and by
the broken fragments of the paling fence an aged aloe. “Adam's Needle,”
we called it; it had seemed somehow to belong to Sunday school, and to
“man's first disobedience.”

The cruel spikes our fancy had played about, half in wonder, half in fear;
they belonged to the pain of the world in some sense. We were nursed by
the stern ethics of the day to such childish, yet unchildlike, imaginings. But
fear did not keep us from yielding to the temptation to put our petty records
upon the broad, thick leaves of the formidable aloe. Still there, uncouth,
unreadable, are the obese initials of our little swarm—a scattered swarm
now.

Just one I make out of these obscure letterings; the one legible, the one
indelible, A.H. And he, of us all, is the one who passed while yet youth
was with him, to that House and Garden in which the old pioneers are one
by one assembling.
I HAVE sometimes wondered why they built the old schoolhouse in that stretch of bush the settlers have still left in its primitive state, because of its barrenness. Not a child of those who went to it daily but had a fair walk to reach it. The settlement was a selvage running along the river valley, skirting the hills that hugged the valley in a kind of jostling embrace, as though trying to push it back to the water's edge. From this selvage of rich farm land came the children that filled the forms of the old schoolhouse. That is to say, old now; it was new then. A fine place we thought it, roofed with the first galvanised iron that had come to that district from the limitless world without, of which Melbourne stood, to us, as the centre. We had never seen galvanised iron before; we had known only bark as a covering for rafters. The settlers, in their haste, and because of the difficulties of transport and the pressure of profitable work, had contented themselves with humble enough houses; a kind of superior mia-mia structure generally did service, though one remembers that the early houses, crude as they were, were generally comfortable.

I remember when the Spearys got a sawn-timber ceiling and floor in their best room; it was a nine-days' wonder; an audacious, even a mysterious circumstance. The Speary boys, who were really grown men, with fluffy
whiskers, had noisily enough cut the material for this improvement to their home in a pit they had made for the purpose in the bush beyond the creek. The old sawpit we had played in later, sometimes, when we strayed unusually far into the bush. Claribel had, on one occasion, brought away some of the sawdust for her doll that was leaking badly. Still it was a kind of mystery, that ceiling and floor in the Spearys' best room, despite our knowledge that they had not come there by supernatural means. To us younger ones, that is. To the elders, who had seen much before getting jammed into that nook on the far edge of the wild, it was perhaps only an audacity, and a sign that progress could come to the wilderness as elsewhere. It was a foretaste of things to be.

They went and admired Spearys' room, and we went too. We smelt the green wood, sappy and tangy, and sweeter than when it was whole. My mother praised it all when we got home to our earthen floors. My father tended to disparagement; he had enough work ahead without rushing into imitation just then. The wood would shrink, he said, and knives and scissors be lost down the cracks of the floor. The Spearys were proud of it; Mrs. Speary dressed better, it was said, to live up to it; and I know, beyond doubt, that Lucy Speary began to put on airs on the strength of it. We had quarrelled, she and I, about some trifle, and she pushed me with a contemptuous sniff—"You haven't got a board floor."

But, for the schoolhouse, the splendour of its roof and general structure, this bold step forward of the Spearys' had in no way prepared us. The day the school opened I remember well. It was a beautiful spring morning, and when we came over the hilltop that gave us a sudden vision of the new building, our eyes were positively dazzled by the beauty and brightness of the roof flashing in the sun. It was symbolic of the irradiation of learning on ignorance; of knowledge on innocence. But it was too sudden, our first introduction to that sight. Fortunately for our understanding, the processes of instruction within the school proved to be of a more graduated and gradual nature. Our eyes ached at the whirl of stars the sunlight made of that roof under which we had been impatient to assemble, and we hung back. It seemed like going into the world, and we had not realised it. The boys pushed on promptly. "Not a bad-looking place," said Fred, patronisingly, to hide the thrill it had given him. Nearer, we saw a round chimney of black iron, and the walls outside painted like father's dray. No, not like father's dray, for that was red, but the dray was the only thing we had that wore a coat of paint. The walls of the school were white, or nearly so, and flashed at the addresses of the sun almost as brightly as did the roof that we lost sight of presently at closer approach. Inside, the building was cleaner than any school I have since seen, or ever think to see, unless I
become an inspector of new buildings of the kind. It was white from the hands of the creator. It awed us, not that our homes were dirty—who so clean as the wives of the pioneers? But this was so new, so white.

I was one of the little ones, and had a place allotted me on a form when we were sorted out. I thought it lovely to sit in a row; we never sat so at home. Anyhow, to sit with strange little girls is much more interesting than to sit with one's sisters. The forms were one above the other; a gallery of them along one side of the school. The gallery was full of children all grown along the selvage of creek. Some of them I knew, some of them I did not know; there was not much visiting except among near neighbours.

At first I was too shy to notice my surroundings or my companions; then I began to look about me. The rest of the space, except where our hats and bags hung, was taken up by desks with ink-wells let in at regular intervals, and there were new slates lying in rows, and beautiful pencils with coloured paper pasted round them. We in the gallery had no slates and pencils; how I wished we had. There was a blackboard on an easel in front of us, which I found later was to be a kind of collective slate for the gallery; the teacher wrote on it, and we learned from it. In front of the scholars' desks was the teacher's, a wonderful piece of furniture I thought it. I nudged Claribel, next me, and whispered, “See the chest of drawers.” I'd heard of chests of drawers, though we hadn't one. But though this had a long drawer under the lid that lifted up, we soon learned it wasn't what I'd thought it to be. The lid sloped, and the teacher wrote on the sloping part, sitting on a high stool. Later, I discovered that, besides paper and things of that kind which she kept in her desk, it was the receptacle for confiscated articles belonging to us children. I brought my favourite alley one day—we played at home with boy cousins, and had what are usually thought to be masculine tastes in games—to show Daisy Speary, who needed impressing, and that found its way into the teacher's desk. It was a week before I gained courage to ask for it, and then I didn't ask; it was Dick who did so. But Daisy was clumsy to let that alley drop, and roll as it did, and leap down the gallery steps, so that not even the most lenient teacher could ignore it. Dick asked for it when he was seeking recovery of his 'possum-skinning knife, which had been confiscated, too, when caught in the act of nicking his desk. For we were human children, and with aboriginal proclivities, sins or not, I cannot pretend to say. Know, then, that the virgin freshness of that dazzling interior—of the exterior, too—was before long transformed to a very work-a-day appearance. There were originally but carefully drawn maps on the walls, but soon, perhaps in a spirit of imitation, there were freehand maps in black miniature prodigally splashed about desks and floor, as well as more upon the walls than the Department
vouched for. Nay, even the ceiling, I believe, shared the speckled condition of the rest, for there are such things as squirts where the objective is out of arms' reach.

Those who sat next me, and those around me, I gradually took stock of as that first day wore on. Everything was to be begun. The children had to be sorted; in the first place they were drafted according to size. It was the only plan till something of our accomplishments was known. Somewhat small for my age, I was first placed on a lower form of the gallery. That was tentative, till the next test was applied; information as to our ages was then sought. That sent me to a row higher up. Lastly, places for many of us were changed again, when the educational test was put. Some of the bigger ones came down, and some of the dots were given the importance of a seat at one of the desks. It was really an examination of our parents, as well as of us. Some of the parents had given their children a good start, while waiting for the erection of a school in the settlement. There were others of the parents who, through lack of time, thought, or educational capacity, had done nothing in the way of teaching their children. It was a painful hour for some of us; a triumphant time for others, that period of final winnowing.

I remember seeing, with amazement, Jim Speary, one of the brothers who had sawn the wonderful timber, pass from a higher desk to a lower one, amongst lads of seven or eight, to begin his A.B.C. His fluffy whiskers looked strangely out of place amongst the babies around him. His embarrassment would have touched the hearts of any but children. We read shame in it, and a tendency to rebellion, but, mean little primitives as we were, we were all a-grin. It put us at our ease as no other thing had done that morning. Looking back now I am ashamed, though we were, perhaps, but as most children in our cruelty. Extreme youth does not instinctively regard as above laughter, fear or pain the first elements of tragedy, as Aristotle long ago laid it down.

The long limbs of Jim Speary, seeking to coil themselves into the small space available under the low desk in which he found himself, aroused our secret mirth, as well as the fact that one to whom we tiny ones had been disposed to look up merely because of his size should not know his alphabet. The teacher was a more fully developed human being than any of us, however, and she quickly and charitably readjusted her system of classification. She recognised that in placing us, after all, size must be considered as well as educational qualification. She put the bigger children, literate or illiterate, at the highest desk in the school, and, we soon observed, administered to them a mixed curriculum. No doubt that wise plan kept some of them from going back to the plough. Ignominy before grimacing urchins is not to be endured by the self-respecting who can turn
a straight furrow.

What a task our teacher had! We were a queerly mixed group of urchins; more of us than one might think, from that narrow selvage of river-flat. It grew children abundantly; there were one hundred and four of us written down on the roll that day. How well I remember the strangeness of some of the names as I heard them for the first time! Those of neighboring children, because quite familiar, seemed fit and good. “Shadrack Speary,” for instance, and yet “Edith Graham” turned me to smiles and peeping looks. Some of those names, how familiar they became later in the companionship of work and play, in the many incidents of praise and blame that made up our school-life, as these things make up school-life everywhere, whether it be lived within renowned classic walls or in the environment of a bush State school.

I doubt if again, after that first day, the whole one hundred and four of us were all under the school roof at once. Amongst the universal instincts of children is, perhaps, to be classed the truant-playing instinct; and where can truant be so happily and profitably played as in the Australian bush, and where are there so many allurements to play it? Our frequent falls were venial, and who would not have fallen? It was a point of honour, for one thing, never to let a snake, once seen, escape us, and what could we do but wait for one that had escaped into a hollow log, to emerge and receive the quick despatch? It was, I say, a code of duty, and if the day on which such an adventure occurred had promised to present some knotty problem in arithmetic to us, that was merely coincidental. Eve was beguiled of a serpent, and we would avenge her.

School, as the unknown, was a place to be flocked to; school, as the daily objective, ceased to excite our curiosity. Besides truancy to keep us from its portal, there was work at home, always plenty of it, on the soil of that selvage. It was astonishing the potatoes that were annually produced along that strip of flats, and there was a theory amongst our elders that young hands are most expert in potato-picking. Fathers of the pioneer type regarded it as child's work; the hired men had long backs, and, besides, disdained it; if young folk had backs, which was doubtful, they never ached. Even school was preferable to most of us, but none ever played truant from homework for all that; it wasn't feasible. There were many home duties that called for a break in our attendance at school; parents had not had time to get used to the idea that the State had a prior right to the working hours of their children, and so, when there was a push of work on the farm, the teacher had to rush the children along for the examination when she had the opportunity. It was hard on us, the opposing theories of parents and Government, regarding our brains and hands, and I feel in my
bones that it was hard on the teacher under a system of results. Poor, hard-worked, passing race of pioneers; there were many things that were hard on you, too, and we forgive you for causing us aching backs, ay, and sometimes aching heads, too!

The teacher battled on; it was in truth, a battle, parents and children both often pulling against her, while she sought to bring her little gang of primitives in learning and in manners up to standard. There were shy and bold ones of us; fast and slow; defiant and pliable; and all to be brought to a prescribed level. I close my eyes at this distance of time and place, and see again that little old school, dirty enough before my day with it was done—and now, I hear, the prey of the ants—and I see again the familiar desks and faces. I con again the dog-eared book, and add up the sum that refuses to come inside rules. I hear the buzz of the younger ones repeating what to me, in my higher estate, is trivial and easy, so that they all seem dunces. I note the easy performance of the classes above me, and hear myself sigh, wondering if I can ever do as they do with the vulgar fractions.

I see again the afternoon sun striking through the western windows; beating on our weary, dronish heads and tired forms. I watch again, and again fly into a world of my own with them, the midgets of the sunbeams whose world has no desks, no tasks, whose knowledge is feeling and dream.

And I see again, too, the fair-haired teacher, young, and with such violet eyes—they made a secret poet of me—going from class to class, from task to task, indefatigably, amongst her first generation of scholars. I see her sometimes now amid other scenes, still bearing youth and hope and vigour in her heart, still having heart and hope for humanity, young and old, and I wonder how it was that we left her these things. And I also wonder, sometimes, if we did not teach her something, little monsters though we were. There must have been something in us; some compensation from intercourse with us. We failed at least, to break her heart, or sour her; both we and the succeeding generations of us. It may be that she found a satisfaction in her ministry; even a reciprocity of gifts.

It brings back youth, and the long, long thoughts of youth, to dwell upon it all. These thoughts come stealing upon me, as the scents of the bush used to come floating in, and as the sunbeams used to fall on the western windows of that old schoolhouse so long ago.
THE first church we used to attend was not a church at all. Service was held at a neighbour's house, where we assembled on one Sunday morning a month. I don't think I remember the first time I went. I was too young, I expect, for that, but my recollections go back to a very sleepy little girl, dutifully trying to listen to a sermon about the plagues of Egypt. Suddenly one would awaken from force of will, or a private nudge or whispered injunction from one's mother. Looking around with a guilty feeling after such a happening, I have seen other dozing young folk making pillows of their mothers. We were sleepy, I know, because of the country custom of rising early, a custom that was not relaxed on Sunday mornings; rather, folk rose earlier on church morning, I think. There were so many odds and ends of jobs to be done before we might dress and be off, that it meant early rising. There were the milking and other outside things that must be done on Sunday as well as weekday; and also the midday dinner had to be urged forward a few points further than had been done on Saturday night.

One member of the family in our household always stayed to cook the dinner. When I got big enough I took my turn; not unwillingly, for one could read in snatches while watching the pots: a thing one could not do in
church: there were too many eyes to see one's page, and no healthy child cares to read in church or elsewhere the books approved by one's elders. I had “Nick Whiffles,” a kind of Kit Carson tale, for my Sunday morning's company. The book lasted me about a year, I think, for when church is only once a month, and you are one of four to take the turn at home, and that practically the only time you are quite alone, it takes some months to get through a forbidden book. A louder sizzling than should proceed from the oven, and the sudden boiling over of a vegetable pot, are also interrupting incidents to be reckoned with.

When the Sunday school began, superhuman arrangements were made about the dinner. A cold meal was instituted, with hot vegetables, which my brother, dashing ahead on horseback, would have nearly cooked when we drove up. My father had been brought up strictly in Calvinistic usages; he was more than reconciled to the cold dinner, though I remember hearing a neighbour comment adversely on the practice which his wife, too, had sought to institute. “Not for me,” said he. “One's stomach before one's soul. I can show you Scripture for it.” But I never heard the text or texts by which he proved his principle.

The Sunday school lasted more than an hour, and was held in the same room before the commencement of the church service. This meant our going earlier than the elders, and having to walk, the rest driving in time for the church. I think that must be the period at which my sleepiness became pronounced; it meant, besides the earlier rising, walking two miles over a hilly road. I reflect that I got my “golden texts” hard, and most of my Scripture training, too—not all, perhaps. We had, and still have, an old-fashioned leather-covered Bible at home that was used frequently in the home circle. It has in the front of it a picture of our first parents, and on the flyleaf the handwritten records of events put there by our last parents. There are set forth the births of us children chronologically; Claribel a year and three days younger than I, a fact I had on more than one occasion to turn up for her chastening. In front of the record of these proud events was written, in my mother's hand, on top of the page, the year and date of her marriage—a kind of sign manual of our legitimacy, I suppose. Dick and Claribel and I used to look with half awe, half dislike, at the pictures of the old patriarchs that were scattered between those leather covers. I remember we scratched the face of Abraham, because of his cool preparations for the offering up of Isaac, and Claribel disliked Moses because his beard was like that of Owen, the old man who did odd jobs about the place, and of whom we were for some reason frightened.

There were eight of us who used to go to that Sunday school—four girls of our family, and four boy cousins. Once we were chased back when
midway between our boundary fence and the McDermott's, by some wild bullocks of McDermott's. Claribel had on a red frock, and we blamed her for it, though really we had no serious objection to being sent back, once we were safe inside our own fence again, where Dick discoursed learnedly to us on the fury of cattle against red. As long as Claribel had that dress, he suggested, it would not be safe for us to come again. I fancy the dress must have been discarded, or the bullocks put on other pastures, for I know that we were packed off to Sunday school again next Sunday. The Sunday school was conducted by local people, except on the fourth Sunday of the month, when the minister came and took charge of the class of older children. Fred was in that class, and was never quite sure whether it was a distinction to be proud of, or a doubtful blessing, because the minister used to ask the class a good many questions about the subjects of the whole past month's lessons. On other days the class had nothing to fear; it was taught then by Charles Andrews, the State schoolteacher of Black's Hill, whose methods were exceedingly superficial. We young ones soon discovered, in fact, that Mr. Andrews had only assumed the pious office because a young lady neighbour had the class of little girls who sat on the form at the end. His eye, it was noticed, was oftener fixed on the profile of Miss Creswell than on us or our books. It was an admirable arrangement, under cover of which alleys and "glassies" were able to change hands unnoted, and 'possessing experiences might be related without let or hindrance. The little girls found it out first; it was Claribel, I think, who diagnosed the reason for Mr. Andrews' glaring abstraction as to what was passing in his class. The girls were inclined to be interested in the romance. Claribel had begun to read surreptitious books, and informed us coming home one day that "Miss Creswell's fair face was glowing like a roseleaf under the ardent gaze of Mr. Andrews." Fred, I remember, guffawed at that, and cut a somersault on the grass; his hymnbook flying. In any case, the romance didn't appeal to the boys except as a diverter. They had, I know, a kind of contempt for Mr. Andrews, apart from this reprehensible weakness of his. He had been known to swear outside the store at the township on one occasion. Phil McDermott had heard him. So in the downright way of children we had decided that Mr. Andrews was not fit for the sacred office he assumed; indeed, I used to think of him when the minister preached from a particularly Presbyterian text about doom, as he sometimes did.

There was one of the teachers, though, whom we just as definitely knew to be fit to point the way she led. That was Jessie McDermott, the eldest daughter of the house. I was in her class, and knew her a little, shyly, outside as well. She died when she was but twenty-seven; true to the best, hers was a beautiful life. If we whom she taught haven't kept the letter of
all she used to say to us on those Sunday mornings so far away, not one of us, I am sure, has ever quite forgotten or lost the spiritual precipitate of her inculcations. It was sublimated Presbyterianism she taught. What the others taught was just Presbyterianism. There she used to sit, one with us, as it were; nothing of the pedagogue about her, and yet our guide. Grey eyes that smiled, or, many a time, even there, nursed humour, as when Lucy Speary ventured the assertion that the whale swallowed Noah to save him from the flood.

Outside, she was full of humour. She it was, I remember, who gave me my first impulse to comedy, and when she came, as she did later, to look to me for understanding of her sallies, proud, indeed, was I. But in Sunday school, of course, she was usually grave enough in her little human talks with us bush children.

I used sometimes, to look at Jessie McDermott, and think of what I'd heard my mother say, that it was only her spirit that kept her alive, she was so frail. She did die later; but though her brief life ended, the influence of it still hangs over many a spirit. Outside, she never taught directly; but there was a ministry about her life. It was strange the effect she had on all sorts of people, even people with whom she had never had direct touch. I remember a post and rail splitter who had had but an occasional word with her as she rode along the road where he worked, who said when she died—"They're the kind that go." Hers was the first dead face I looked on. We Sunday school children went to see her. An image of peace she was, so that the tranquillity of her aspect comforted us. I almost wondered why, because our grief till we had been admitted to her presence had been so great. "Old Mac" cried after he had been in the room; I remember seeing him coming out. I had not much liked the old man before, and it made me wonder, with a kind of respectful awe, that such a queer, not-much-account old man should shed tears.

"Old Mac" used to come to the church services, and we Sunday school children knew that he used purposely to come early to play foolish tricks upon us. He would come into the room where we were, and would sit near our class, leaning on his knotty stick; presently he would lean forward, and pull the flowing hair or tweak the ear of one of us, and then stare at his stick, as though absorbed. No child would giggle at last, and, though his joke had long ago become a nuisance, Old Mac continued to repeat it, and without variation.

From first to last, we had church services for nineteen years at the McDermotts'. For that time we gathered in the largest room in their house, kept unfurnished for that purpose, except for rows of chairs and forms. And for that length of time, too, they entertained the minister on his
periodic visits to the district. We built a church at last. With scotch caution, every penny was in hand before brick was set on brick. They did it well, but cheaply, too, for the young men of the place carted the bricks and timber, and helped with much of the construction. There it still stands, and will stand, by the old box-tree, staring aggressively to the road. The site was owned by the McDermotts’ old shepherd, Jack Carter, of the days when their station was a sheep run. When old Jack died, and was taken a long way to the nearest cemetery in a buggy, he left to the church the acre and a half whereon stood the hut of his retirement. He had never gone to church, so far as I can remember; but it is often the Jack Carters who in their wills remember the church of their fathers.

There was a great wrangle as to where the building should be erected. Some objected to the Jack Carter site, as too far from their own doors. Roderick Wallace was implacable; he registered a vow never to darken its doors, because the Carter faction had carried the day. And he kept his word, shocking the district by taking to burning-off on Sundays; he, a churchgoer all his life, and his father, as he had often previously boasted, an elder of the kirk in Scotland. The burning-off stood, to the younger generation at least, as the open sign of Roderick Wallace's alliance with a darker power.

There was a wonderful tea-meeting when the church was opened. “Swiss-roll” had just come within the ken of the local housewives, and was on the tables in plenty. It was a great feast, for, though there were songs and speeches as part of the celebration, the feasting was the chief consideration. The local minister and the visiting ministers all sat at one table, and it was whispered that they had not shown much tact in doing so; every matron had hoped to have at least one of the guests at her table. Roderick Wallace unexpectedly sent a contribution of some dainty-looking pastry kick-shaws for the tea-meeting, though neither he nor any of his family came to it. He was proud of his wife's skill in cake making (she was the daughter of a confectioner), some whisperers said, seeking an explanation of the matter. Our younger ones washed up in the marquee while the real meeting was going on in the church. Our own minister made the financial statement amid applause that came out to us. There were some very serious jokes in the speeches of the other ministers, and between it all the church was launched, and a fine little building it was. The lamps, hanging down the aisle, were the finest in any church for twenty-five miles around, someone said; and the pulpit, which was really a reading-desk, was a credit, though it might with advantage have stood a trifle lower, as our minister was rather short.

Oh, the old times! Though from association, I grew fond of the new
church building when it was new no longer, my thoughts go most persistently back to the big room at the McDermotts'. The walks across those hills, despite red frocks and aggressive bullocks, are meet for happy memories. They were sown with bluebells, those hills, all the year, it seems in looking back. Yes; it must have been always spring there. I seem to remember flowers always, though a vision of dry grass fitfully intrudes, and even a circling of crows from arched ribs, and crickets screaming in the cracked volcanic soil. It is momentary, that picture—an illusion. Come when you would, in tenderness of spring, glare of summer, or chill of autumn, over the rounded brow of the hill above the gentler slope, where the McDermotts' house stood, there was spread afar a purple vista of primeval nature at her grandest. Many a time, in later years, have I stood in fancy in a dip of that rolling hill, above the house, and touched again the vanished days, that even, while they passed, seemed as permanent as those towering mountain peaks, blue and immutable before me.
IV

JUST as the valley had received a too ample sowing from Nature's hand, so the hill rising baldly and blandly out of it, had been niggardly treated in the matter of big timber. Never, I imagine, had there been many trees, great or small, on its grassy undulations; just here and there an hospitable box or gum for bird and tree-loving beast. One tree, in particular, I remember; it was a real veteran, pipy enough of bole to nest many a 'possum and parrot; green enough of branch to screen from heat or storm many a temporary tarrier. It was a royal tree. When we learned at school about the Druids beneath the spreading oaks, I used to transport that old tree to the ancient landscape, and set the traditional scenes under its boughs.

It had a history though of its own, that fine old box. Its trunk bore strange hieroglyphs; the illiterate, prehistoric signatures of roving aborigines, cut in by their tomahawks. Whether to reach some unwitting 'possum in its hollow or to bring the savage nearer to heaven, one could only guess. But there they were, those strange foothold scars almost grown over in the puckered way in which Nature sews up the wounds in her soft flesh. I have dreamed of corroborees there under that tree with a free rein to fancy. Claribel and I ran away one night at dusk from its umbrageousness from strange forms and strange sounds. Childhood has a quick appreciation of uncanny things. We were laughed at for our imaginings; older people lose the acuter sense that is with them early; they thought us fanciful; we knew they were dull.
Once we discovered a very fascinating bit of evidence as to the blacks having been somewhere in the past beneath the old tree. It was more than the nicks that they had left as a record. It was an actual tomahawk that marked their Stonehenge. We found it one day when trying to establish a garden under the old tree. We had the relic for years. I don't know what finally became of it. White fellows are as bad as black fellows for losing things. My father gave us a dissertation on the method of its making; how the blacks grew a handle into it, as into all their primitive tools; in their lazy way content with Nature's slow and silent forging, where we, the impatient, rush to glowing fires and anvils. It was lore that charmed us; in its nature as fascinating as anything of the Druids; it was something that the children of the future, even the bush children, will have to take on trust.

There were other things besides peeping 'possums and preening birds that shared our love of the old gum. Never was there such a tree as that for bees when it flowered; it gave honey-burdens to thousands. The boughs were murmurous all the bright days, and we knew where the bees came from that filled their hexagons with that richness. Ay, we had that transformed box-tree blossom with our breakfast on winter mornings, dripped golden and glistening from the spoon on to the wholesome home-made bread. There was no adulteration of anything in those days for us; we were too near the source, too intimate with the processes. It is hard to leave that old box-tree, it's so dear to me still. One might almost say of it in Miltonic phrase as of the small humans of my play hours, that we “were nursed upon the self-same hill.” My botanical lore is not great. I don't know how long such trees should live. It may be that it has stolen a march on Nature, and has exceeded its span. Anyhow, there it still stands to this day, defying the elements, and providing a diminishing shelter for surfeited cud-chewing cattle.

There was in my childhood's days a sturdy native grass along that hillside; a grass that refused to be displaced by all the later sowings of fine imported herbages. It held its own bravely amongst the interlopers, and when they were sparse from hot Decembers it was robust and tufty, flinging itself forth from its native soil in spite of all things. On the higher hills, more distant, the grass used to burn up and drive away in dust beneath the breath of summer, leaving bare the parched, cracked ground, with its swarm of harsh crickets to every crack; leaving, too, unsheltered, the hosts of other creeping things to complain of their lot in their own ungodly fashion. Or it may be that this vocal life of the volcanic hills was rejoicing that its stern summer environment was congenial to its adaptive nature; but in our appraisement of things in those days we were led rather by fancy than by science. The cicadas, with their harsh, unoiled notes, were
scolding, and nothing that the useful knowledge of the schoolbooks later taught us conflicted with that fancy.

It was the most beflowered hillside that we knew, that bountiful slope where the old box-tree stood. Never have I seen of our own clear-hued variety so many bluebells as came there magically every October. They were like Wordsworth's daffodils; and, like his daffodils in subtler respect, too, they have given me many a time since “the harvest of a quiet eye.” In October the grass itself was in full bloom, waving richly in the breeze, and all amongst it “blue ran the flash across.” No other flower contended with the bluebells for first place in the eye there; they were too manifold in their fluttering battalions to suffer eclipse, even by the pressing hordes of clover bloom, or any other of the wilder things known to us by names invented at the dictation of our own fancy. Some of these varieties I have since recognised, endeavouring to justify huge polysyllables in the Botanical Gardens. Poor, sweet, be-Latined things. A beautiful spot still, that annually renewed hill slope. Perhaps I had something of the poet in me as a child, or heaven lay about me there? I remember lying in the October grass amongst the others of our little group, and hearing Dick, who by nature had an eye to the practical, call the dancing garment of the hillside “good feed,” and I recollect how, with all my heart—and not without a touch of priggishness—I pitied him.

We could in children's fleet way be at the house in two minutes when we played on that hillside. It was in the days when one ran more often than one walked. We got the wind on the hill whenever it stirred, and we loved it. I have wondered since wherein the charm lay in running against the wind in sheer elemental love of contending with it, were it zephyr or hurricane. Since then I have come to associate wind with dust, and it may be that that has lost me the charm of it, though I suspect that hurling oneself against battling elements is a love that one loses with the coming of long skirts.

There was a queerly fascinating spot farther along the oval backbone of our hill. It was something of an adventure going so far. There was an unshapely brush fence to climb, on the far side of which lay the land of adventure. The hill changed there abruptly from its grassy blandness to a rugged rockiness, crowned finely in a huge chaos of rocks that some giant convulsion had flung there long before the era of King Billy's tomahawk, no doubt. It was a terrible, a delightful place; there were narrow spaces between the ungainly masses of heaped-up stone, and dark little passages into which you peeped. Always some glowing eye looked back at you. The wild, shy, mountain things of our own land were not enough with which to people this rocky region; we dipped into our romances and into the dragon
lore of our knowledge for suitable denizens for such a splendid and awful
place. There were little tracks trodden by the pattering feet of innocent wild
things, tracks that led us from the dividing fence to the terrible region.
There were lion tracks, and the darkest passage under the biggest heap of
rocks was a tiger's lair. Dick had seen the tiger, but we had only heard it
growl, till one day he showed it to us clear enough, “burning bright” in its
lair. There was a sheep's shinbone at the entrance. We all saw the tiger that
day, one by one heroically peeping, holding to each other, in running
attitude. With rare temerity, we set traps later on, keeping well together and
speaking low, except when the question as to who should own the skin
came up. I fancy the tiger must have heard that debate, and been warned
thus of our designs upon him. At least the question of the ownership of his
skin never became a “live” one, if I may put it so. The tiger retired to his
apocryphal existence again.

We used on our birthdays to have picnics on the hill, on such of the
birthdays at least as fell in the autumn and winter of the year. In summer
the orchard or the creekside naturally claimed us for such festivities.

A slope is, perhaps, not an ideal place for spreading a table, but we
rejoiced at overcoming such difficulties as the hillside presented in that
respect. It was possible always to keep the dishes fairly level by propping
them on the “down-side” with a chip. Dick's birthday was in the mellowest
time of the year; in the height of the apple season. It was always a point of
honour with us to have at his feast samples of every variety our orchard
grew, and they were many. It was no less a point of honour for the hero of
the occasion personally to consume an apple of each variety provided. It
was, indeed, a mercy that my cousin's nativity occurred in the mellowest
season, otherwise one of those gay, irresponsible feasts might have ended
for him in a manner recalling the tragedy of Tommy Jones and his sister
Sue.

Annie, the eldest of the girls of us, was a born cake-maker and baker. I
fancy she came to the earth with recipes for fancy baking already in her
head; there was no teaching about it, at any rate. The first time she broke
into cake-baking was one afternoon when our mother was visiting a
neighbour. We younger ones, who had brought to Annie the light sticks for
her baking fire, stood in awe at the delightful result of her magical
performance. Some of her cakes did not survive long enough to cool, for
the boys, informed by some strange sixth sense, arrived as the cakes came
from the oven. It established a reputation, that afternoon's baking, for
Annie, and a new respect was hers; a cake-baker compels youthful
homage. We gave ours freely, and like the quality of mercy. Especially as
one of the numerous birthdays of the party approached did this
spontaneous homage flow out toward our older and superior member. She was generous, and always rose to “hundreds and thousands” and icing for the cake festivals. She never, as I recollect, condescended to threaten reprisals for any of our sins, but the mere significant mention of “birthday” would send anyone of us flying to do her bidding at any time. A gift such as hers carries with it a corresponding power.

Oh, those old birthday feasts, when nothing was to mar their joy! I remember no wet day to spoil any one of them; all things waited upon us, regal young barbarians that we were: sky and air and earth, abundance and daintiness of food, strong, healthy appetites, and good digestion. We have come to the time—those of us who are still of time—when birthdays come and go, making no ripple upon our calendar, or, if remembered at all, with a kind of pensiveness, the pensiveness that comes to those who have rounded the higher slope of life's long hill.

A strange thing befell me one day playing on that hillside; the thing's not strange, but the result. It began my growing up. At our play a fiery ant suddenly stung me, sending a thrill of pain through all my body. I had, I remember, the quick passing sympathy of the others. But child sympathy is like a gust; and besides, those with me knew that a bulldog ant's sting is a small matter. But my pain was keen; the creature had stung me on a vein, I suppose. Fred rubbed the reddened leg with some soft, tender fern frond, the panacea with us for such hurts. And then to their game again. I sat apart; and the hour is always distinct with me as that of my first realisation that I was I. The others were sorry, so I reasoned, but they played on; the pain was mine, mine alone. I think I was about seven years of age. But through the physical hurt I became conscious of my isolation—of “the loneness of my ego,” as the jargon of to-day would have it. I had no name for the feeling then, of course; only the sense of loneliness.

The bright beauty of the afternoon struck a sadness through me, the calls of the others to me to come back to the game jarred on me. I sat on alone, the physical pain, I think, quite gone, but a deeper one holding me. I could see my mother moving about outside the house in the distance. That made the realisation sharper; not even she had felt the fiery sting: she did not even know about it. Only I. I have wondered if such realisations in young children usually come first through physical pain. I heard a mother say once that she never realised sharply that her child was a separate individual, a rounded and distinct being in itself, till she helplessly saw it in pain. And there must come a time, far or near, when the child, too, realises that. If very young, the knowledge will most likely come through physical pain or delayed, it may come through the sharp processes of mental or spiritual suffering.
The hour went—and the mood. I do not remember when or by what circumstance another such came, but in recent years, when the hidden life is stirred, and the isolating sense holds me, there sometimes comes before me, sharp and distinct, the scene and sounds of that bright afternoon on the hill so many years ago.
IT was a tangled forest of growth and undergrowth; of the standing and the fallen: of the living and the dead, that valley in my first remote recollections of it. There was a time, indeed, when only a narrow track through the scrub led from the house to the creek by way of the raspberry-grown backwater. I have said before that we children were forbidden to go to the creek alone across that six or seven hundred yards of venture. But there was a time even earlier than that at which we would not have attempted the journey without the escort of an elder. For one thing there was the legend of a wild pig, the kind which the barons of old used to hunt, and roast whole. How that legendary pig was transported to that valley of the antipodes in these modern times we never troubled to inquire. Miracles are common when one is six or eight years of age. It gave us a wholesome dread of the scrub-covered flats, and in that way doubtless performed its mission. The real dangers were snakes, which were possibly responsible for the wild pig myth. For snakes there were in plenty; seldom a day passed without at least one being killed. Many a peril did that divinity that doth hedge innocent childhood avert. Once I trod on a snake on the track, but that same divinity decreed that the serpent's head should be under my heel.
Whether from fear or valour, I stood rooted there till someone unwound the lashing thing from my leg and killed it section by section. I lived on the fame of that adventure for long. I remember feeling a pleasurable vanity in hearing the incident recounted to interested, though possibly sceptical, visitors. Annie had a pony, the first pet of value that any of us possessed in the first lean days of pioneering. It got lost amongst the tangles of the unfenced valley, and only after months was the poor thing found, reduced to bones and hide, between some high logs, where, beguiled by some foolish curiosity, it had gone, and being there, had not been able to get out.

That was the sort of land that had to be cleared and prepared for the plough by the indomitable settlers along that whole river valley. I heard the wise ones say later that the Government charged them a pound an acre for the land, and Nature an added exaction of forty. She certainly had clad those flats well with tree and scrub and fern. Many an age had she laid down her sowings by the tillage scheme of gravitation, of flood waters, and all those other wonderful and inexhaustible powers of hers whereby the earth is made ready for man. And then man, to do his own sowings, had to remove Nature's, necessity stopping at no desecration, no waste. We had the privilege of seeing—I know now that it was a privilege—and, indeed, of helping in the undressing of the loam, and the taking from it of man's first fruits. They were potatoes, those first fruits, I recollect, and unless you have seen and intimately know the potato of the virgin soil, you cannot appreciate the dithyrambs toward which my pen trembles. They burst in a shower, those potatoes, large, finely shapen beauties, from the many-pronged forks that threw them up from the tangy, fern-rooted soil. Always autumn it seemed on those flats—that is, when it was not winter there. So thickly they grew, and so befoliaged were the tall trees, so dense was the scrub between them, with the sun-swallowing ranges close beyond them, that truly the place was always dank and dewy, even when the soil on the volcanic hills nearby gaped for moisture. I have a host of memories of magpie notes, half cheery, half pensive, in the blue, smoky air when we took tea to the workers in the afternoons; memories of the jackasses making their sudden swoops from watching-posts of stumps and trees, tame in their daring for the upturned worm. I have known a bird narrowly escape guillotining under the spade in its eagerness for the wriggling mouthful. The tussock fires ever burning were things to make one dally. There is nothing so bewitching as a tussock fire on a still autumn afternoon, with streamers of mist from the river that is always near, tying true lovers' knots with the streamers of smoke from the fires, low and lazily drifting. Claribel nearly fell into one of those tussock volcanoes once, when, loitering in our tea-carrying duty, we were adding to its smoke and flame
some litter. She was in puffy cinders to the boot-tops, and had blistered feet and singed curls.

There is an especially romantic period in the turning from green to dry of ring-barked gum-trees, especially the spectral white gum of the long, clean stem. The time is when the loosened bark half detaches itself from the trunk, and goes a-flapping in the wind. It is a weird and deep delight to native ears and eyes that sound, that sight. We knew what the strange sound of winds in half-dead timbers were well enough, but we got many a romance of fear and wonder out of it. We have sometimes deliberately on gloomy evenings worked ourselves into eerie moods, to hearing strange cries of tortured ghosts from those mystic flats; sounds that made us run homeward, stumbling and tumbling in our haste. It was this flapping of the loosened bark that in other moods became the bridle-reins of the wind driving the trees. There was nothing our fancy was not equal to in those days, ere the “prison house” shut us in. There was, though, a very practical use to which the dry and curling bark, at last come to the ground, was sometimes put. My mother liked it better than anything else when she wanted a quick fire for baking small cakes. Many a large bundle of the light stuff used we to bring her for that purpose; our sweet and crisp reward not far away.

Many a harvest was gathered in of root and ear and pod ere the valley stood an actually cleared sward, unpunctuated by obstinate blackened log or deep-fanged stump. For years the plough continued to go round the obstacles that were toughest to dispose of; many a time a hidden root has sent the holder of the old single-furrow plough spinning from his furrow. Hooper came one day to my mother, hand at side, but not with laughter, a gapped shear, a twisted coulter, and a snapped rib or two, for him had been the result of coming against the impregnable. Hooper, I remember, declared himself to be all right after a cup of tea—which ran to several — and showed himself a believer in Nature’s surgery. “She made the ribs,” he said, presently going back to his interrupted furrow; “let her cure them.” They rather liked difficulties, those men, and many a tale could I tell of the pitting of human will against resisting stump or tree in the clearing of those flats. There was one log that my father used to say had been there before Noah, a water-soaked, moss-grown mammoth, the embodiment of obstinacy; a log that man and horse and plough and scythe had gone round for many a year. At last it met its Waterloo in encountering a strange, wild-looking man, whom no one knew as other than “Andy.” He was a terrifying-looking creature; mad, the others said; speaking to no one in the huts; muttering to himself constantly, and going barefooted to his work on the rigorous winter days. He had a contract to destroy this long-weathered
log. We children used to pass wide of the queer figure, where day by day he smote the monster with axe and wedge. Sometimes he sawed, sometimes dug beside it, and always he burned, stoking his fires with smaller logs piled against the huge one. They said that he rose muttering at night, and went out to his fires, stoking and levering. And so it was worn away at last, and the queer St. George, having slain his dragon, vanished I know not where. He had been six weeks, but then Nature had been much longer growing that grim tree, and longer, too, mossing and drenching it fallen, with a thousand rains.

Dick once hid himself in an old hollow fallen trunk by the first barley paddock, and was lost for several hours. He had, I remember, constituted himself the keeper of an elder brother's marbles, and had been by their angry owner threatened with the policeman. By one of those strange coincidences that sometimes occur in real life, as in fiction, the policeman from the distant township happened to call that day at my cousin's home, and the conscience-stricken one, assuming the worst, had fled. Possibly fear would have kept him in the hollow log all night, though he confessed to Claribel and me after that there were terrible sounds in the log, and that snakes had slid across his face and spiders had crawled all over him. The fires kindled by the elders in all directions, and all the shouting and the search would not have discovered the lost, who was not lost, but hiding. It was Hooper who remembered seeing in the afternoon a small form making its way through the scrub. He searched in that direction; found, reassured, and brought the wanderer home. Claribel and I consented to make a hero of Dick after that for a time, and to take his escapade at his own high valuation. He had bragged of the snakes and the spiders as being quite good house-fellows, and we, having in our romantic imagination had him dead by a hundred tragic means while he was missing, were ready to listen and believe. I have since discovered that it is not unusual for mere naughtiness, if it be sufficiently invested with the romantic, to pass for the heroic. As for my young cousin, he enjoyed the rôle while we consented to allow him to play it. It brought him quite a lot of good things, and relief from his small duties.

My father built a wonderful shed. It was made of logs closely set together, and had a roof of maize-stalks piled on to a great depth. It was an idea of his own to use what was at hand rather than go farther afield to the bush for material. The roof served well; the rain never came through, and that shed was a noble wet-day place for us young ones. We used to smuggle forbidden books in there or, with legitimate ones among the hay or the harness, study in our own way the lessons set for children's use by Dr. Aiken and Mrs. Barbauld —books only displaced by the Royal Readers
when we went to school. Many a golden hour did we spend there. There it was from sheer desire to do something new that Claribel cut off my curls, and I cut off Claribel's. We did our reaping not as the men in the paddocks did theirs, but just here and there took a swathe where fancy and the scissors led. My mother took a gloomy view of our handiwork, and did her reproachful best to make a level sward of our hackings. I know Claribel cried—for she loved her curls—when she looked in the glass and realised that our sport had spoiled her beauty. For me to be rid of the hair-ribbon that always got into knots it hurt to pull loose was a ready compensation. But then I never was vain, like Claribel.

In the first cleared corner over the backwater paddock my father established a vegetable garden. It was his pious desire to keep us out of mischief, but I look back on that vegetable garden and its tyranny of weeds with bitterness. Had it not been for my early capacity for story-telling, and thus whiling away the tedium of extricating tender onion stalks from clasp of “hog weed,” and rescuing young carrot stalks—and you know how spindly they are!—from the overshadowing sorrel, I think we should many a time have succumbed to despair. As it was, if the story loitered, or failed in interest, Claribel would get fits of desperation at the length of the row ahead, and would make a wild assault on weeds and vegetables alike. I remember that once in this mood, when we were planting turnip seed, she poured the whole stock-in-trade into about a yard of space, forgetting that Nature would soon reveal the lazy trick. When we got to one end of that little plot of ground it was always time to begin again at the other. In that fertile soil reposed asleep, or came by some mysterious undeliberated means, legions of every kind of weed-seed known to naturalists. The weeds rose up and mocked us while we laboured with hoe and hand to evict them. We used to take young baby Jack with us to this toil, and set him on the ground to watch us. He was a handsome excuse, when one got tired, to go home. Indeed, looking back now, I realise that our labours in that vegetable garden did more to discover the original sin of our natures than any good that “keeping us out of mischief” accomplished.

Every year the clearing of the flats went on, obliterating the old romance, till, burned or turned into posts and rails and slabs, every tree, except a fringe left for shade along the creek-bank, passed, leaving not a wrack behind. Many a time I have grieved to see the trees fall, for trees to their lovers are sentient things. When the hewing axe goes into their sappy flesh, do they not groan and make protest? When deprived of their life-blood, and swaying gaunt and grey in the autumn winds, are they not moaning for the green life lost? I could not take leave of that primal tangle, tracing it to the clover sward of to-day, without seeing once again in the passing of those
trees and that scrub the passing also of the shy wild things whose home and hiding they were. The foolish monkey-bear, her baby on her back, with the pretended wisdom of her gaze, looking down at one as one passed, in the lust of youth, and paused to throw at her an ineffectual missile. The bandicoot and paddy-melon, the wild-cat, the water-rat, the wombat, they were all there. Original dwellers, they all had to be scared, protesting (how feebly!), from their habitat. The trees that in the daytime held up aloft the iron-clawed koala, riding to the nod of the gale, at night were haunted by the 'possums. Gentle beasts all of them, and the kangaroos that stole to nip the springing green; they all had to go. Many a pet we had, given us by the fortunes of the chase. The joey kangaroo, fallen from the pouch of the pursued mother, learned later to follow us, devoted as a dog. We were seldom without a young 'possum, or monkey bear, confiding little creatures, and in every sense clinging. The younger dogs, ignorant of the rules of the game, sometimes harried to death one of these pets. I have memories of passionate grief over the torn body of a deer-eyed young kangaroo that fell a victim to that ignorance. I remember Claribel declaring that she would never be happy again—a sentiment I echoed and believed. To such as survived of these pets, the call of the wild inevitably came, and, despite the happiness of their domestication, some morning our pet would be missing. The wild things, however gentle, are the foes of the pioneer, who must harden his heart and turn to his shot-gun. For the encroaching kangaroo and monkey-bear there were bullets. Many a time on a winter's night I have watched my father making his bullets for this work of extermination. We used to get our tea in large boxes, with queer Chinese characters stamped all over them, and the inside of these boxes was lined with a thin lead, which, melted in an old pan, as my father did it, made bullets of any mould. Bright and glittering from the moulds they would roll, at a tap on the hob, upon the hearth, whence, with gingerly touch, we children would lift them. It was great entertainment, that bullet-making; but not its result for the poor native denizens of the valley whose home we had seized. Back and farther back to the ranges they went, such of them as escaped the cruel despatch; back they retreated for ever somewhere beyond the distant sky-line. And so was the valley won from beast and bush.
VI

WHATEVER goes, I shall never forget the old creek; it had many voices; said many things to give one in looking back the long, long thoughts of youth. Not that we knew it was making backward-reaching thoughts for us; that there was a life-long rune in its pacific murmurs, in its flood-angry roars when now and again the waters came in an avalanche down from the mountains.

There was always an air of romance about that creek; it had in it irresistible powers of appeal. It was so much our familiar, the while it always kept in reserve a store of mystery. In the cool shades of the ferny banks and their grottos, under the fragrance of its beautiful wattles and young blue-gums, with the “love-in-a-mist” hue still about their tips, how many an hour have I lain and dreamed or drifted in that state, half-thought, half-feeling, which is as truly a time of growth as are the hours spent in toil or study. It was in those hours that I most belonged to her, and she to me; that whispering creek of many voices. You could bathe childlike, in the shallows, fish in the deeper pools, picnic amongst the grots, ramble along the cobblestone strands; the every mood of childhood was met; her invitations were continual; her hospitality inexhaustible.
At first, when we were very tiny, the bend nearest home was enough for us. Exploring was forbidden, too; the creek was shallow there, safe, and to that spot we came often, a little daring, wondering that we did not now and then encounter an alligator or a rhinoceros or some other terrible creature of the story-books. We used to go over the scrubby flats, along the track where the water-sledge drew daily the barrels of water, the clear sparkling gift of the ranges. Bark roofs give a good shelter, but a poor water-supply as regards quality, unless one favours an amber fluid, like milkless tea in appearance, and with the tang of an astringent. It was a great blessing that the old creek had cut its course through that valley. Even before King Billy's traditions began it had wormed itself there between the hills. Man and beast had it for practical blessing; but for us children it had, I know, a myriad unmaterial benefits as well.

When my mind goes back, I see Claribel and myself, two venturesome mites, gathering from amongst the larger stones that scattered its beach, the chalky, many-tinted, slaty stones that came with every freshet from somewhere—just where they came from was part of the delightful mystery. There were none about locally, yet the creek had sown her bed with them always. We scribbled with these soft stones in forbidden places, on barn-doors, on doors nearer, on fences, everywhere, putting with those natural crayons our hieroglyphs, our totems, if you will, the sign manual of our uncivilised youth. They brought us joy, if they brought us also trouble, these riverbed artistries.

The white gravel and the golden gravel (for, like Tennyson's brook, our creek had golden gravel in profusion) we brought laboriously up the sloping banks where the track for the water-sledge went down. We made with it a gleaming surface on the paths of our own little garden, setting larger white stones for borders. The graves, in the cemetery where reposed, as we fondly believed, till the sound of Gabriel's trump, such of our pets as had died naturally or mysteriously, were all marked out with these same pebbles, brought to our hands by the hurrying waters of this creek of many moods. She, too, furnished, from a place jutting from the bank, the uncouth pieces of slate, whereon we carved the fond obituaries for this same plot. There was Dick's dog, resting, as a special sign that death heals enmity, over beside our veteran tabby, who finally joined the many superfluous members of the generations of her kittens that had come there from time to time in batches. In life, enemies: the hunter and the hunted; they now lay reconciled with the self-same forget-me-nots about them, and with level-handed pangyeric in their epitaphs. There was a genius of fervour and sincerity in these elegies, though it may be that under the cold tests of literary criticism they fell short in some of the qualities of good poetry.
I caught my first fish in the old creek; where else for a little inlander to drop a bent pin on a piece of string? I have always been grateful in looking back to that most obliging fish. None that I caught later, when I was promoted to real hooks, gave me quite the same thrill. It was a mountain trout, speckled and plump, and it must have put itself deliberately on my bent pin, in unselfish sympathy with youthful aspirations. There were good fish there, though not always to be caught; we often went a-fishing on warm summer nights in the succeeding years, and many a morning fry we got. But that was incidental; it was the fun of catching the fish that was the thing; the jolly brushwood fire on the strand, the bobbing corks on the water, the eager faces in the firelight, the chatter, the mosquito fighting, the sudden plump, plump of a water iguana taking to his element.

Once there was, I recollect, an exciting “catch”. It was Fred who brought ashore on his line a platypus, and it was Dick who fell into the water to his armpits in his excitement. It was the acme of romance, the catching of that duckbill. Did it not prove that the fictions of our extreme infancy had something in them? The creek was after all peopled with the strange creatures of our imaginations and the myths of the grown-ups' tales. It could not have been a more wonderful thing if we had drawn up a bunyip, or even a mermaid. We trailed the poor thing home, I remember, with the unsuspecting cruelty of children (before the era of nature study in the schools), and he died under an inverted bucket in a back shed next day, for Dick had discoursed learnedly and convincingly on his supernatural powers of spitting poison.

There came a time and a day when the exploring spirit entered into us, and would not be denied. We would follow the creek away toward its source, we imagined, getting right to its beginnings; we thought of springs bubbling and leaping from a quaggy plain between high barren ranges. Something of a small Canaan in a wilderness—a vale in the land of Moab. Our imaginings always took a Scriptural colour in those days of family Bible reading. We never reached the source, then or later, and my geography to this day has not supplied its locality. But we went a long way from human haunts that day, the four boys and the four girls of us, with all the fierce joy of pioneers. We walked in the dry parts of the creek-bed where we could, and when we could not do that we took to the hillsides. We had food as for a siege, with an exaggerated idea of the difficulties of our adventure.

“We mustn't be like Burke and Wills,” said Dick, slinging on his back a basket that made him urge a meal to lighten it ere long. It was a wonderful walk, or leaping over rocks, that, and we found delight enough, even if the mystery of the source still remained to the mountains. It was in flora and
fauna another world, all just three or four miles from where we lived. And when night came (prematurely, in that dark hill-hugged ravine) there was a fine smack of danger, even unlawfulness, in our enterprise, and the stars were out before, with bruised shins and draggled clothes, we emerged to the known again.

Later we sometimes fished and picnicked high up the stream; once we camped all night, and caught fish such as never came to the familiar places. There never were such possibilities surely; for adventures to be achieved as in scrambling over fallen logs, such fun as in banqueting with one's appetite for sauce in the glare and gloom of a campfire; such unexpected thing as a sudden eye of mystery glowing out from the dark, which, when one threw a lighted brand became a scuttling up the bark of a tree. One knew it was something furry, but we did not know, then or later, if the swift, slim thing that sped suddenly from a dark log near the fire across Claribel's foot were that which spoiled an earlier Eden.

Never in the world was there such clematis as grew along that creek embracing the light-woods and wattles, before folk got too busy clearing the banks to the water's edge, destroying tree and climber alike. What festoons of the climber would we wear when the decking mood was upon us! We loved it well in bloom, but best of all, I think, when the fluffy seed-pod stage was upon it. “Supple Jack” we called it, and supple it was, as once my aching hands found in obstinate endeavour to break a trailer of the clematis in a game where unbinding a captive was the climax.

I like the old names; there was a shrub that massed along the creek bank bearing purple flowers; we called it simply “purple bell.” The shrub had a pungent odour; my mother thought it as disagreeable as dogwood, but we children loved the flower, and used to bind branches of it about the big verandah posts of the old house at Christmas time. Clematis, too, made bold festoons for the season's decorations, and the delightful “Christmas blossom” that never forgot the flowering time. There were kangaroo apple shrubs about those creek-banks, too; Claribel once slipped into a wombat's hole in straining for a ripe “apple.” I know not if her adventures would have been as remarkable as those of Alice when she went down the rabbit's hole, but Claribel emerged too quickly to have had many adventures, though she declared that the wombat had grunted at her, a terrible grunt which thereafter it became part of a game to imitate. We used to eat kangaroo apples; they fascinated us, though we didn't really like them. Wild raspberries, too, grew along the creek-banks; when they were ripe, skinned and thorn-scratched knees were chronic with us. And many adventures with snakes we had, and shocks from quick-darting lizards that scared us, and which sometimes, I fear, in the telling became snakes. The
raspberries were worth risks, especially when by a back route to the dairy we were able to add cream to the feast.

I almost learned to swim in a pool in that old creek, where in one of its meanderings it lodged quiet and still, a fine lake in a log-sheltered bend by the potato paddock. The boys had risked their lives many a time wading into Speary's lagoon for “bottle-washer” rushes. Each of us always had a bundle of these light, coryk things under our chin to help to keep us afloat. Cold, clear mountain stream! There was little buoyancy in your waters, and I always too greatly feared their iciness about my ears. Others became swimmers bold enough, but me you always sent shivering quickly to my dressing-bower.

There was a time when the Deluge came again. Day and night a fury of rain, and though the old house stood on the highest point of the valley we began to think of overflow. Year by year the winter floods had caused the creek to nibble, nibble at the soft edges of the banks to force a wider passage-way for the urgent waters. But always they merely nibbled, and ran on. This time it was different; it was a cataclysm of rain; and on the fourth evening of the downpour the cattle were driven to the higher land for what might happen. I remember listening in the dark, after we were abed, to the thunderous roar of the aroused creek above the noise of the rain on the roof, till at last we drifted from gulfs of water into gulfs of dream.

But long had we lain awake, Claribel and I, in our little skillion bedroom, planning what we should do if the house began to float. She was for sitting on the chimney; but I was for the roof as safer. In the morning the creek was a sea, a grey, wild, hurrying sea, far as we could discern, where flotsam whirled and swirled. Trees fell with a sharp boom over the dull roar, and here and there domestic animals, swimming wildly or drifting helplessly, came hurrying past. Some came crowded on piles of débris, or floating dead. We saw it all from our higher spot, for the old house justified its stout timbers and stood firm, though we had to wade about the floors or keep to beds and tables.

It was a wonderful adventure; like something out of a book. I fancy the old creek may have been puzzled as to what it could do that it had not yet done. It had broken out into wickedness through sheer ennui of well-doing, as mortals sometimes do, to discover for themselves what wildness may be in their nature. It was audacious, thrilling; we loved the bold prank, while our elders looked askance at the intruding, muddy waters that were licking late household sanctities. We speculated, wide-eyed, as to what would next flow down the stream? How were the Murphys faring in their low flat up the bend, where the waters would be deepest? There went Milligan's fowls,
perched still in their house, and there went two pigs, looking philosophic enough on the butt of an old stack. It was the creek's joke; her comedy mood; no tragedy at all.

Here were we, the water subsiding, safe in our house, with plenty to eat, and dry enough if we kept off the floors. Adventure had come to us, actually oozing in at every seam and chink. But it was neither comedy nor malevolence. I close my eyes to the days of subsidence and sedge, and open them a month later, to early September and bounding exuberance. Plenty was over the valley; billows of greenness; the grass knotting to the knees. It had been the old creek's dramatic way of pouring opulence upon us. And, perhaps, we had become too familiar with her ways; we had thought that by long acquaintance we had discovered the ultimates of her nature. She had given us another facet of her power and mystery. Then she went back to her crystal murmurings and placid normal days; she was become again the winsome, lisping, familiar, yet ever magical, streamlet of my early childhood.
VII

WHITE cherry-blossom; that is my first recollection of it, and the red fruit with the screaming parroquets amongst it, Claribel and I lying under the trees, watching the bees on the clover, half fascinated at our nearness to them, stinged as we knew they were—had not Claribel had a swollen eye for remembrance: memory is like a cinema tale, with blanks left here and there, and the story unconsecutive. I know the cherry-blossom must have been first, the red fruit and the parroquets later, and yet my memory will have it that like the orange it was both flower and fruit on the trees on the day when we lay there amid “the buzzings of the honied hours.” It was a golden day, and my mind has made it epitomise many golden days of the year. I know we used impatiently to watch the fruit reddening, not always content to wait for the process to be completed. There was one forbidden tree once in that Eden of ours, and that fitly an apple. My father interdicted it: he was for some reason specially anxious for the mellowing of its harvest to go on. We were on parole not to take from that tree; but ever prying where the apples reddened, Dick, that legitimate son of Adam, conceived a way to taste without infringing the letter of the promise. Such of the fruit as could be reached for the experiment with a kindly confederate Eve to steady the branches, my cousin took the great Australian bite from. The fraud remained unsuspected, or rather we of it, there being no Sherlock Holmes amongst our elders; thus the leatherheads and jays, like many other creatures of bad reputation, bore the blame of one
crime of which they were innocent. As the trees grew larger, and the crop more plentiful, we made annual store of apples; there were many varieties in the garden, and 'twas idyllic autumn work gathering them for storing. A loft on the ceiling of the front room of the old house was the storeroom. It was inaccessible save by a ladder, and no one but my father went up that ladder and disbursed the sweet store whose mellow scents came sometimes temptingly to us through the manhole. There was now and then, though, a four-footed visitor to the loft, one that needed no ladder set against the wallplate to help him into the juicy treasury. The 'possums, keen of instinct, and cunning to squeeze between wallplates, got many a nibble; indeed, we have had a luminous eye in the night by the edge of the manhole looking down Pucklike upon us foolish mortals who could not guard our store.

On the far edge of that goodly orchard was the rough backwater, a place of fallen logs, and briars, and brambles; of rushes and of tussocks—a snake and lizard-haunted spot. It was one of the early forbidden places, too, because of the real dangers it held. Yet we loved to press nearer and nearer to the edge that every ploughing season was encroached more and more upon, and that all the rest of the year pushed itself back upon the aggressive ploughland. “The gadding vine,” the fast-springing ferns, and the harsh peppermint-bush that made your face smart as you came amongst it, for many a year maintained their protective hedging of that wild haunt. Jealous Nature yielded slowly that final margin close by which was a spot coveted by my mother for a flower garden. That was in the days when yet the hens and chickens went free about the doors, and made continual raids amongst the flower-beds around the unfenced precincts. At last, outwitting the barn-door marauders, we had the main flowers moved farther afield, where seldom wandered even that most incorrigible wanderer, the hen-turkey. But there were foes of other sort that made us pay hard for every blue-eyed pansy and crimson-throated tulip that blew there. The Falstaffian spirit of a wombat finally did our innocent flowers more harm in a single night than the comparatively gentle scratchings of a whole yard of poultry had done in a year. He had been very thorough-going in the devastation of our plots; not content with what was above ground of leaf, and stalk, and bloom, he must needs explore underground for roots as well. For tubers especially he had apparently a fine tooth, as Claribel, weeping over the wreck, remarked he must have thought the dahlia roots were potatoes. The wombat had a tangy meal in sooth, and we were vicious enough, standing over the wreck, to hope that good digestion had not waited on appetite so omnivorous. The burrow of the mischievous creature was by the far row of plum-trees, near the unreclaimed backwater. I am bound to say that I never
saw the brute either before or after that destructive orgy of his, though Dick and Claribel declared that they espied him up a plum-tree one evening. The pair were very De Rougemonts in zoological narrative when occasion called, and a depleted plum-tree, perhaps, did call for some explanation. Hooper set out, possibly because of such reports as these, to capture the wombat, whose depredations were real enough, however elusive his person. Hooper digged a pit. So deep was it that at last those admiring and encouraging from the brink of it could but see the dark tousle of hair on the top of his head. Then he came up out of the loam, and set us a-gathering a litter of twigs, and tussocks, and other light rubbish for an infirm covering for his pit. It was wonderfully like a sound surface when he had finished; but not the next morning or ever after was that wary animal found in Hooper's trap. He continued to thrive and molest, and his generations after him. We had dreamed of the splendid adventure of finding the great creature trapped in his own element, though Fred had all along been scornful, declaring that a wombat could scratch his way right through the earth—if put to it—in a single night. We abandoned that strenuously won flower garden finally, and for long there remained growing wild the hardier plants, blue irises, and annual self-sown hollyhocks, larkspurs, sweet-williams, and two or three virulent cactuses, a lilac bush, and a tangle of blue periwinkle mingling with the desultory raspberry vines.

The bird's calendar always told them when the early cherries began to flush, and down they came from the bush hills beyond the creek—creatures of beak and claw. Their notes of discordant delight used to herald the visit of the jays, and parroquets and leatherheads, and we were out upon them speedily with the weapons of destruction. Little good did we do, for birds foraging are even as men upon predatory expedition; they work by wary as well as by bold methods. Our orchard thieves always had a scout upon some commanding watch-tower tree, and at his word were away before the danger was near enough to be a danger. Dick used to declare that the jays especially could smell the gunpowder, and that it was only an actually loaded gun that sent them fleeing. Did one approach unarmed, or even with a stick, the birds remained, simply cocking a bright eye at the human intruder, between hoppings from bough to bough. To protect our fruit by other method we anticipated the coming of the grotesque gollygog race in our scarecrows. But even the cunning of these after the first day or two in the early cherry-trees ceased to deceive the cunning of the birds. Indeed, I have seen a leatherhead impudently using an arm of one of these parodies of the human form as a perch while he plied his dexterous bill at the fruit above him.
The orchard trees spread, and waxed prolific; they sowed the ground sometimes with those later fruits when the March winds took their cuffing way across the orchard. The peach-trees, flinging off their riotous drapery of pink, would put forth such an annual crop of fruit as defied us to consume it. It came, it blushed through the down of aromatic skin, luscious and luring, and though everyone that would came to feast of its plenty, always more ripened and fell to the earth than was eaten in that place remote from markets. There is no more exquisite fruit than that of the land of Omar; let no Burbank meddle with what is already perfection. We were proud of that rich orchard with its many rows of spreading trees, its sweep of glorious red clover—or, anon, perhaps, it was tall whispering maize that grew between the rows of trees. There was one kind of fruit that our orchard lacked, that Spearys' had. We had no cherry-plum trees; they had many. Cherry-plums accordingly became our favourite fruit, and by an unusual unanimity Lucy Speary proclaimed that it was also her favourite. She made that statement one evening in our orchard with a look of vehement repulsion at the early cherries that she had come to see, and to eat. Lucy was not a shy child, as I have before indicated. She bragged on the slightest provocation, and was inordinately vain of her own possessions. On this occasion I remember that Claribel and I repudiated all our previous praise of cherry-plums—in fact, to us cherry-plums forthwith became sour.

There were early apples first ready for a pie on Jack's birthday in late December; at least, we always cooked the first of them then, though I have a memory of Dick and Tommy Speary sitting on the top rail of the orchard fence at a time earlier than this, each assisting the ripening process by beating an apple upon the rail of the fence beside him.

Such gallons of jam as we used to make from the fruit of that orchard! I have weary recollections of stirrings by hot stove-fires on days of fierce heat, ofstonings and kernel-blanchings, of bottlings and labellings; for ours was a family that consumed an amazing amount of jam. Jam-making in literature, I observe, is always treated romantically. One thinks of Miss Louisa Alcott and other writers of gentle domesticity, but in real life—or so my experience runs—there is more woe than joy connected with the transit of the orchard crop into labelled jars. It may be that this is the fault of our climate. A fierce January morning, one may say, takes the down off the process. We used to make our aunt's store of jam, too, in later days. I remember the keen thrill of satisfaction at praise well and truly earned when my uncle, who flattered himself on being a judge of such things, would smack his lips over my latest success. There was one occasion when Dick, by volunteer service, affixed the labels to my bottlings. It was not till
my aunt had twice polished her spectacles on a subsequent occasion that it 
was discovered that, as far as the labels went, I had contributed twelve pots 
of “paddy-melon jam” to the contents of her larder.

In a quiet recess beyond a sprawling old quince-tree, whose untrimmed 
branches dropped to meet the wild vegetation of the back-water, Claribel 
and I once spent a whole day. We had brought to this sanctuary a beloved 
pet calf whose doom we had heard discussed by my father and the butcher 
that morning. Instead of going to school we had secretly led our pet to a 
seclusion where the unmerciful butcher could not discover him, when, as 
he had planned, he returned later in the day for his purchase. Fearful and 
elated by turn, we heard the hue and cry for the vanished animal that had 
been in a yard ready for his fate. Finally, one reconnoitring while the other 
remained with the tethered calf in case, if left alone, it should make a 
betraying sound, we beheld the searchers driving off another and less dear 
victim. It was a long day and a short day, that; sometimes we wished we 
had had opportunity to bring with us to our jungle our storybooks, whereas 
circumstances had allowed us to bring but our lesson-books. However, the 
same circumstances caused us to be provided with the usual lunch, and, 
with the help of several rosy apples and a hard quince or two, we managed 
very well. As for the creature for whose sake we had risked so much 
displeasure, he ate with proper gratitude and relish all the choice gatherings 
of grass we brought him, and drank quietly, as enjoined, from the old tin 
can of water Claribel got from the frog-hole in the backwater. In the 
evening our prodigal calf rejoined the rest of the herd about the time that 
we, with becoming punctuality, ostentatiously returned from school. I have 
ever yet fully analysed the moral nature of that act of truancy and all that 
attended it, but confidently I expect that the Recording Angel will have 
looked upon it with that quality which is the most spontaneous and the 
most enduring of all the heavenly virtues. Ah, Victor Valdemar! You were 
grateful, and we knew you understood. A noble and petted beast, you grew 
too fair at last to the butcher's connoisseur eye to escape the inevitable end.

Not always for bodily feasting did we seek the old orchard and its 
sweetness of shade and grass. There we came to play, or read—to be read 
to when we were very young. Under the boughs of those apple- and peach-
trees my mother read to us on Sunday afternoons “Christy's Old Organ,” 
“Ben and Kit,” and many another moving tale of childhood. There we had, 
too, the history of England, or snatches of it, we sitting on the ground and 
hearing “sad stories of the death of kings.” Under the plum blossoms, amid 
the hum of the spring-time bees, elbows on mown hay, I first found the 
magic of Shelley. I was about sixteen when his poems came to me, the gift 
of a bold voyager to town from my aunt's house. “You like poetry,” said
he, giving me this very key to a new heaven. I had had only the snatches of
the aerial spirit from the school-books—I, who had already browsed on
Milton and many another, had missed this most glorious of imaginations,
this being, who, as Thompson says, “runs wild over the fields of ether,
silps into Heaven's meadow, and goes gathering stars.” Thereafter might I
be found many an hour reading and dreaming under the fruit-trees. Many a
day thereafter about the house and paddocks would I, when alone, go
murmuring the witching verses of my poet. I remember being put to a
pretty confusion one day, when, with a mouth full of “Queen Mab,”
rounding a corner I ran full into an approaching stranger.

Autumn in an orchard! It is, perhaps, the most beautiful season of them
all. In evergreen Australia at least it must be so. The “fiery finger”
touching so little our native foliage, everywhere busy here, where, from a
sheer love of variety, the rich season splashes her yellow chromes, and
spots, and spills from all her vats till the many-coloured beauty which
precedes death is over all. The leaves of the cherry-trees in their amazing
flame were our favourite; they lay about the ground or fled with the west
wind “like an enchanter pursuing,” or quietly fluttered down one by one,
by a mystery as wonderful as the opening of the buds of spring. I know it
was the autumn orchard that gave me my first joy in colour—-the great red
and yellow apples, the russet of the pears, the bowls of the quince like pale
lamps in the evening's dimness. ’Tis a sweet place, an autumn orchard. My
old pleached garden, how beautiful you were, and are! Alas! you are not
what you were, of ambrosia, of beauty, of plenty and of charm. You are
changed, and changing, though it is not so much the hand of time that is
upon you—albeit some of your trees grow mossy—as the desecrating
hand, and the neglectful hand of the stranger. Those who know you now
have let the gaps come in the fences, have let the animals tramp over you,
and work their idle will upon your spreading branches. Still, there is beauty
through all defacement; still in the higher branches hangs in its season the
mellow harvest, and on the ground the breaking clover blooms; in the air
the singing of the bees taking the sweets for their waiting hexagons.
Changed and changing though you be, every spot holds still some hint of
those things which long ago gave imperishably their influences to me.
The Bush

IT came down close all around us, dark and stern, along the ranges, lighter timbered toward the valley, where the fertile land followed the rambling creek. The massed foliage of the ranges flowed back and back; the sombre greens made a deep blue by the alchemy of the atmosphere in distance. We used to go up the rise in front of the house on mellow evenings to see the sun set behind the ranges and the blue become purple and gold under his passing touch. It was a wonder of which Claribel and I sometimes spoke after we had gone amid those ranges and proved the blue, the purple and the gold, to be green. But the green was infinite in its variety of shadings, for the native trees that grew and hung with the mischievous mistletoe were many. The high spurs flaunted a miracle of growth from the apparently barren soil; the slopes and gullies calling to the instinct of the native cherry and blackwood had grown these beautiful trees in profusion where Nature had sown them, building them in the faultless symmetry of their kind. We went early among those barren hills for days of ramble and adventure. I have memory of a dingo, with pricked ears, and forefoot suspended in the air, watching Claribel and me stooped over a cranberry
bush miles from home among the ranges. Fleet and far he ran, meeting our eyes—no less fearful than his own—and we came home to concoct a trap for his wary feet. We succeeded only in catching a bronze-winged pigeon, which lay dead when we went for our dingo. In sorrow at this unwitting result of our cleverness we carried the creature home, and gave it the tribute of tears and a little mound among our dead pets.

I do not know when the bush is most full of witchery. Her extremes of September and June have alike, for those in whose veins her sap has entered, the charm irresistible. Away on those seeming barren places, where the only path is the path that peters out, made by the inconsequential feet of the native creatures, away on those places when September flaunts incredible vistas of the softest, fairest flower on earth—the puffy, fluffy, golden wattle blossom—when all among the bending glory of it hangs the purple festoons of the sarsaparilla. Is not then the Bush the royal home of nature? Oh, the softness of touch and scent of those masses of blossom against one's face, the coolness, the sweetness—Mother Nature's kisses on her babies' faces! But she has moods, and we, her children, have answering moods to them all. I know no deeper joy than a howling peak in June, with the weird voices eerie and awful, all around and about, and over the dark brows of the range the curtain of thunder-cloud. The brooding, silent moments of the coming storm, broken by the scuttling of bird, the withdrawal of beast to its covert. And then the roar, the rush of the elements that make the environment for a tragedy where tragedy is not, unless you feel for the terror of the small things that Nature makes and breaks in her prolific and destructive way. We thought it tragedy once, two small sprites of us, caught afar in a cataclysm of storm, with whirl of flying limb and roar of thunder—“the shout of God” some picturesque phrase of our reading had called it—then the lightning and the rush of rain. We had read a story of a man who sheltered under a tree in a storm, and was found splintered like the tree where he had stood, and so we ran with drenched hair and streaming faces till into the world of fences we came, and through, or over half a dozen brush barriers, panting to the house-door.

There was another, a less deep and rugged stretch of bush, that lay between our home and the school whereto with shining faces our little group darted or dragged on its daily way. There was a track—for our avoidance, at least we were seldom upon it, for there was more interest to right and left of it. The tardy lesson-learner might walk upon the marked-out path conning his neglected lesson with a younger child for fag to keep watch-out for the snake that might be lurking among the dried leaves of the track. But the rest of us ranged abroad; there was always something to endanger the punctual arrival at the little iron-roofed school in the clearing
ahead. A young monkey-bear on its mother's back on a good stout sapling top called for capture for the home menagerie. Coats and school-bags were speedily on the ground, and two boys, hand over hand among the limbs, were soon damaging skin and bark with impartial prodigality in the pursuit. Mother bear, wiser than her foolish eyes, would urge herself to the highest fork, and all the shaking could not dislodge her. Once, after one of these attempts at kidnapping, when the main party had gone on, I remember Claribel, and Lucy Speary—who had “come our way” that day for the sake of showing Claribel her new pinafore betimes—remained about the tree where the bears sat on the swaying bough till half the morning was gone. They imagined that by beating sticks against the trunk of the sapling, and keeping the mother bear to her wavering perch, presently she would fall, and the young one be theirs. But nothing came of their lingering except confusion to two stammering little girls, who later failed to slip unobserved into their places in the class.

But sometimes we actually did capture a pet in the bush. One prickly problem that travelled its way to freedom after having resisted our cautious overtures to friendship for two days, and partaken of some millions of insects we had sedulously gathered for it, was a porcupine. It was an ungracious creature, impossible to get on intimate terms with, though we had been prepared to love and tend it as long as we lived. Dick declared that its quills held a kind of ink (some cuttle-fish story had gone awry in his mind), and after many attempts to prove his belief, resulting in a painful hand, he took a dislike to the new pet, and ridiculed our pursuit of insects on its behalf. Later on, we suspected him of being the cause of our prickly pet leaving us. He had secretly called in the services of Tiny, the bellicose little terrier of his brother A.H., to get an experimental quill for his curiosity.

That little terrier played ever a part in our bush adventures. Small of body, she had the heart of a lion. There was nothing, from a kangaroo to a snake, that she would not attack. Tiny died at last as the result of her too-great boldness with a snake. Old age had, I think, made her less nimble and expert than formerly, for many a time she had done that same feat without hurt to herself—sprung in and gripped a snake by the neck. But, like many human beings, Tiny failed to realise the decay of her special powers, and so she lay dead by a log in the school playground one evening when we came out of school—the pitcher broken at last. That was the only time I remember seeing A.H. weep—he was of the disposition to scorn the weakness of tears—when he bent over the already swollen form of his beloved friend, the little mongrel Tiny. The terrier and a wonderful pocket-knife he possessed were my cousin's two most valued belongings. The
knife was a weapon of many blades, with tweezers, a corkscrew, and sundry other things tucked away in the huge brown handle. His mother used to complain that this knife used to wear out, not only his pocket, but his trousers as well. Certainly one never saw A.H. in those days without his knife either in his hand or showing an outlined protuberance on his leg. It cut its way everywhere, that knife; I am afraid the school furniture was not unacquainted with it, and the initials of all our juvenile party were cut deeply into the bark of many a tree along the bush-track; so deeply that long after the youngest of us had ceased to attend the old school, some scaling remnants of these records remained.

Iguanas always had a hideous fascination for us, and we often met one in our rambles. We feared, yet we pursued them. It gave one a start, indeed, to hear a sudden rush and rustle in the dry undergrowth almost under one's feet, and a scramble up an adjacent tree before one could realise what was happening. Then we would prepare for instant combat. Claribel once seriously argued, when Dick was pelting one of these unlovely creatures that had taken refuge in a tree at our approach, that ugly things could not feel, and so no treatment of iguanas could be cruel. These moral sentiments were exactly to Dick's mind in view of his occupation of the moment. He looked aside to applaud and agree, and in that instant a whirr like the slash of a sword in air came near his head. The outraged animal, indignant at Claribel's derogatory remarks, had flung itself at its most active tormentor. The iguana was lost to sight instantly in a bramble near by, but my cousin stood pale and nonplussed, feeling his ear, uncertain if the sharp tail had actually struck him or not.

I have many a time wondered that no serious accident befell us in our rash doings during our ramblings in the bush. Some divinity surely flitted about us in our goings and comings. Lucy Speary used to say that an aunt of hers told her that if she escaped a danger once it was meant that she would not die by accident, and that one might, once escaping, therefore do anything. Lucy herself had been horned by a bull when she was two. She often displayed to a semi-circle of admiring children the white mark on her leg where it had been torn and sewn up. So Lucy knew, you see, and she carried out her aunt's philosophy in a way that sometimes made even the boys stare. There are those who might explain the child's conduct differently; the modern phrase might ascribe some of her reckless doings to a "love of the lime-light." In any case, it was Lucy Speary who introduced the game of "playing Kelleys" as a bush pastime at school. Two sections of us—one the police, the other the gang—would go into the bush, and desperate things would follow. The real bushrangers were then at large, and what more natural than that we should do honour to the Robin Hoods
and Dick Turpins that a kind, if melodramatic, fate had brought, as it were, to our door. On one occasion, I remember, we had, pursuing and pursued, gone so far afield at this wild sport that when the customary bell rang to assemble us for the afternoon not a child was within range, and the afternoon was well advanced before anyone, save the outraged teacher, realised that not even for bushrangers does time stand still. Oh, those combats! Of what use one's parents confiscating the book of stories of the deeds of reckless and desperate men when beyond the pile of blue mountains—comfortably far away—were roving the fascinating doers of deeds of exquisite lawlessness and daring! My sedate mind loves to reflect that it was only by force, as it were, that the police gang was ever made up for these escapades. We all wanted to be bushrangers, even fair haired little Jenny Wood, who wore a high boot and had hip trouble.

We once made a flower garden in the bush, bringing to it cultivated plants from the home garden, and transferring them with a fine faith to the barren soil. We had no particular reason for this freak, as far as I remember, except that it gave us excuse for making a high and close animal-proof wall, rather than fence, about our plot. The plants persisted in wilting or in dying outright. The only thing that had survived, when I passed the deserted place long after, was a stubby bush of “southernwood,” a plant too resolute and life-loving to die anywhere, and too pungent of taste to be eaten by anything. But while the craze lasted, we used to work hard to make that wilderness blossom, dividing our labour between petting the plants, watering them with brackish water, carried in jam-tins from a pothole near by, and tinkering at the fence.

Better success attended our efforts at transplanting bush flowers into the home garden. For years we had a flourishing variety of native plants that took gratefully and gracefully to the finer soil and more human surroundings. Carried originally from a range gully, there yet grows in Claribel's garden a three-times transplanted shrub of native musk. Mindful of its endearing history, in the present springtime I have paused beside that bush more than once to gather a tender leaf-tip, rubbing it softly between my palms to breathe in aromatic memories.

How well we knew the wildflowers of the bush; how little we knew their names! To most we gave such names as our fancy suggested. I remember dry, gravelly spots of bushland where we might gather hundreds of several kinds of orchids; some of them we knew by name as the dainty “spider” variety. We knew and loved the spider orchid long before we had heard the legend that accounts for its presence in our bush—how, being fairy dancers, and having outstayed the night at their revels, they paid the penalty by being rooted for ever. “The Grey Woman” touched them, and
they “never laughed again.” We had not that fancy about the orchids, but Claribel and I, fingerling them softly as we lay among a profusion of them on the gravelly ridge, invented, I know, curious fancies of our own about these flowers of Faery.

We used to gather strange and non-succulent provender from the bush. The gum from the black wattles along the gullies we ate with relish. It exuded profusely, we found, after the visits of the wattle-bark strippers, whom we both liked and disliked for their depredations. The tangy wild cherry, more like wood to the palate than fruit, but sweet to us because of the adventure of procuring it; the she-oak “apples,” with their inhospitable semi-prickles, and a sourness that made one's eyes pucker up the while one's resolute teeth went into them. And not least pursued, and enjoyed because of the work of getting them, were the cranberries, sickly and slimy of taste and little but skin and stone. They always grew in the greatest profusion where the soil was poorest, and where apparently the bulldog-ant preferred to make his home. Many a sting from him did we sustain when, in pulling up the little earth-gripping tendrils of a cranberry bush, we dislodged with them the earthy portals of a bulldog-ant's castle! And the bull-ants also seemed partial to the locality of the clumps of wild acacia that grew here and there about the bush, and which were particularly attractive to us because the tomtits and other small birds generally put their nests among their prickly boughs. It was a point of honour amongst us that we, only look, count and touch gently, eggs or gaping-mouthed young within those nests.

I remember that we were not always so punctilious in regard to the eggs and young of larger birds. The aggressive magpie, defending the nest at the bill's point, used to raise in us sometimes the spirit of vengeance. I have a memory of a cruel reprisal that were best forgotten, following on an angry bird having knocked off Fred's cap and brought blood from his face by a sudden blow of flying wing. We registered a solemn vendetta, the carrying out of which took the form of throwing sticks at the magpie's nest, and securing for the eggs in it the fate of Humpty Dumpty. However, many a bird pet obtained in our hours of tenderness, lived cared-for and fiercely loved; some of them, indeed, killed by kindness.

There was a little tiger cat that is remembered chiefly because of its refusal to become tame, and its general fierce ingratitude. It would scratch the hand that fed it, and spit in the face wistfully advanced to it. This incorrigible, finally escaping from its wired cage by a miracle of astuteness, scratched its way into a chicken coop, and disposed of the ten helpless occupants. Then, no doubt—for we saw him no more—he fled to the bush, “a smile on the face of the tiger.”
There is to this day no more delightful sound to my ears or scent to my nostrils than the ringing sound of axe and maul and wedge, and the glorious odour of broken green gum or box wood. There was always chopping or splitting, sawing or adzing going on in the bush about us. My father was a believer in sheds, and yet more sheds, to house everything, in Old Country fashion. And so one-eyed Mick was constantly employed timber-getting. When the air was crisp and still in the autumn afternoons we used to love old Mick's neighbourhood; to watch him while emitting the wood-chopper's approved grunt, send flying the giant chips which made us sometimes fearful for the well-being of his remaining eye; to watch him thrust back and forth the sharp-toothed cross-cut through the juicy timber, swiftly and easily, as though it were cheese. How we loved to watch, too, the bursting log as the fibres parted beneath the mighty blows when Mick's concern was slabs or posts and rails! And again, when season and sap permitted, his deft tools peeled off the shaggy bark from the stringybark's straight bole. How we loved to dance upon the sheets of it, curled, sappy-scented envelopes; to help to straighten them upon the ground for the weights to be put upon them. And then there was the stripping of the poles for the building of the everlasting sheds, in the making of which the stringybark sapling played such an important part. Many a sapling of these fell to the blows of an infant Hercules, who, for his turn, had the joy of the tomahawk, while the rest had the second-rate pleasure of stripping from the fallen the enveloping bark.

And there were always in the fall of the year the clearing-up fires; after the tree-felling in the bush there was a fine litter of branch and bark till gathered up and burnt. This “tidying-up” was a rare game, though we made a virtue of the pleasure, and sometimes exacted payment for it. What heaps of half-withered branches did we pile, waiting for the seasonable hour to fire them, when to the moonlight orgy all the family came: we danced in the glow like little savages, imperilling ourselves often enough in feeding the leaping flames with yet more withered branches. A fire in the bush on a moonlight night of chill, and the faces and forms around it of one's fellows—I know nothing of a town child's possible recreations of day or of night to compare with the delight of it! The little scamperings among the shadows that may be a 'possum or one's own dog nosing out some bush thing. The glow, the darkness, the scent of bough, the tang of smoke. We went home from it all to sleep well.

There was the taking of the wild bush honey, too; that was always done at night. I knew the bush honey before I knew that there was any other, except the kind that is always mentioned in connection with locusts in the Bible, which Claribel and I early decided must be nasty. The pursuit, and
flight, and mad return, when a bee attempted to get into one's bonnet; the gathering near, chary and wary, to watch the doings of the daring elder, veiled and gloved, with his big ladles scooping from the hollow wood the sticky, streaming masses of honeycomb, dropping it into the waiting tub. On each side of him bent the bearers of the lights that showed him his work, and whose added task it was to wipe from his neck or sleeve the bee escaped from the fumes of the saltpetre. The noise and silence of it all; the dark, the glare, the glamour. The strange movements of the bush beyond the glare; the satisfying eeriness of the scene with the moon still lingering in the tree-tops, listening to the hoot of the far-away mopoke. Visible and invisible phantasmagoria of the bush, touching every sense, ay, and ministering assuredly to something in one's being beyond the sense.
IX

THE first time I saw her I was, to be quite frank, not supposed to see, or even to hear her. I was a small child, and was to bed early in compliance with the old saw. It was a wild, wet night, I imagine in the coldest time of the year—and it can be cold in those Gippsland valleys when the furies descend from the ranges! On my drowsy ear, snuggled warm in the bedclothes, fell the robust tones of Mrs. Dwyer McMahan. “Are you in there, anyone at all?” From the gleaming square of the window the light of the kerosene lamp in the old dining-room must have suggested that someone was in. Besides, on such a night, at nine o'clock, there always was someone in; there was nothing to be out at night for at any time in those days with us—no theatrical lure, or other call, to make us leave the big log-fire. Once the day's work was done, and the tired father was able to spread his weekly paper before the glowing fire, the tired mother could get out her work-basket and the host of too well ventilated socks and stockings, what was there to call them abroad? Small fry abed, there's no hour like it in country life for the elders; for while a woman darns she may listen to news of the big world beyond the gum-trees.

So Mrs. Dwyer McMahan's query was no doubt intended to be merely formal, designed to make the door a more emphatic glimmering square than the window. My sleepy ear was quickly agog; a howl of wind gave the voice a crescendo ending; it may, indeed, have drowned some further words, though I do not think so, for, as we knew later, Mrs. Dwyer McMahan was a woman who spoke to the point. It was as unusual in those
days, especially in stern weather, for callers to come after nightfall as for any of us to be abroad. My mother made a startled exclamation, quick on the flourish of the wind, so that I caught only the tone, not the words. My father's chair groaned a little in protest against his quick movement; his paper rattled on the table.

“Upon my word,” he said, “it's Mrs. Dwyer McMahan, or I'm dreaming.” Quickly the door was wide, and a stream of light flashed out through the verandah of the big posts, gleaming on some object more solid than the darkness around.

“Take this kid, Stephenson; we're dr-renched.”

“What on earth?”—but action checked speech. My father had a wet bundle in his arms, from which proceeded an expostulatory cry. The bundle, still protesting with its elemental might, was quickly in my mother's arms, and she inside the door again with a lamp glass smoked and cracked. She had a dim outline of the bigger bundle descending like a black avalanche on my father, less like a woman than a solid shape of night.

Mrs. Dwyer McMahan was characteristic, even with chattering teeth. “I'll go in, you give the mare a feed, Stephenson.”

Then Claribel and I, on elbows, heard a soft squelching of horse's hoofs, and the snorting sigh of the beast that feels its day's work is over and its reward at hand. The horse was led away to shelter.

“I'll dr-rench the place if I come in as I am,” the Amazon voice from the door proclaimed. “I'll dr-rop the shawls and my skirt here,” and in a moment Mrs. Dwyer McMahan was out of her over-wrappings.

My mother protested. “Never mind, never mind; come to the fire, you must be frozen, such a night as it is!”

“I'm chilled a bit; but the kid, is he dr-ry?” The burry voice was capable of tones of solicitude, for, as we knew later, the big heart under the homespun bodice was tender as a child's. Babe and horse—or the mare, as she always said, before herself!

The child was warm, even steamy, under the wet things, and its mother had it in a moment, while our mother ran to the big box for garments for it. When she got back to the fire its mother had it against the homespun bodice, and its sorrows were forgotten in a quickly-coming sleepy satisfaction. The little toes were peeping at the fire; and it was a sensuously contented little atom, no longer questioning. My mother had, I think, done three or four things at once—the kettle, already partly hot, was swinging on the crook, and she was pulling off the guest's boots and stockings, which were wet, though she had been mounted. Two feet as fine and big as ever grew in Ireland, were toasting on the hob in a trice, till my father's
slippers encompassed them, and they had, perforce, presently to withdraw
themselves a trifle from the furnace of the coals. We always had huge back
logs of yellow box; dry, and perhaps a bit pipy, so that as our short
evenings wore on, jets of smoke that escaped at the ends gave place to jets
of flame escaping from within. Then, as from my stool on the hearthrug I
had often observed, the log was conquered along its whole length.

On this night the burning of the back log had proceeded well, and the fire
was accordingly a fine spectacle, as well as an institution of comfort. The
next thing was Mrs. Dwyer McMahan's hat. I think my mother felt some
reluctance about divesting her of that—whether from shyness I cannot say;
but, instead of laying hands upon it, as she had done with the stout boots,
my mother only suggestively remarked its wetness. Mrs. Dwyer McMahan
instantly spared a hand from her operations with the infant to remove the
hat. She gave it a shake over the fire with a gesture like cracking a whip, so
that the shower of water that leapt from it sizzled on the coals, and the
almost somnolent infant gave a jump. It was a wonderful hat. How well I
came to know it later, for though this was its owner's first appearance in
our home it was by no means her last. And so long as she came, if my
powers of observation were not at fault, that same hat adorned her head.
We identified her afar by it; no less than by the mare, “Poll.” It was a
structure, rather than a hat—tall, ample, independent, like its owner.

But supper first. The babe was laid temporarily on the sofa; his supper
done. What a smell of bacon and a sizzling of frying eggs came to us,
aching on our elbows! And did ever a woman eat more?

They talked a long time, those three; I know we were awfully sleepy, and
yet, of course, we were bound to listen. The smell of the bacon wafting in
to us through the cracks of the wall made us hungry too, I think. I've said
we were bound to listen; but we did more than that: we peeped too, else
how did we know so well all that happened? The ear has its limitations.
There was, in fact, a hole in the bark wall, small, as though bored by an
auger, and almost in a line with our faces as we lay in bed, which made it
possible for us in turn—strictly in turn, mind you—to see into the dining-
room. This was not the first time we had spied through it when visitors
were there, and we in bed. We were able to see how well Mrs. Dwyer
McMahan's face and form matched her voice. a huge head and face,
looking strong, and square, and capable—and more too, that we could not
define, which turned now and then, almost fronting us, caused us to
withdraw the eye guiltily from the peephole. We liked her, somehow; in
our child's short-cut way to things, we knew her a diamond, though rough.
And so she proved to be; though in her intercourse with people she was
lacking in manners and in courtliness generally. She had not cultivated the
social arts — despised them, I fancy. She was even rude, perhaps; but when people understood that it was only “Mrs. Dwyer McMahan's way,” no one thought of being offended. Later, when she came to our house, she would order us children about in a brusque way, telling my mother she was too easy with us. Yet we liked her; and whenever the white plume showed itself over the hilltop we would run in gleefully to announce a welcome guest's arrival.

She sat, that first night, with her broad lap spread; she had declined a skirt of mother's as being hopeless about the waist; so there she sat, in her red-and-black striped petticoat, as a matter of course, conversing with my father and mother. Indeed, one found later that, skirt or no skirt, that black-and-red petticoat was always very evident. When, dismounted in her riding habit, she held the skirt high, the petticoat showed a bright colour note. In the press of early morning work at home it was said she appeared invariably in this garb, moving about indoors and out, superintending things. Never a jest was raised amongst the men. Mrs. Dwyer McMahan was really respected.

Mr. Dwyer McMahan was a poor, sick man, compelled to sit about the house. It was said he coughed all the time. Their house was a queer old shanty of a place, away in the Gippsland ranges. Everyone knew it, and stayed there the first night of the through trip. Travellers flung their saddles off and turned their weary horses out, and that's all there was about it. It was Liberty Hall, that house by the roadside; there was always something to eat and a bed. Perhaps that was why Mrs. McMahan regarded as a place to be stayed at as a matter of course, any house she happened upon in her travels, if occasion suggested a halt. And travel she did; for even in the wilds something there must be coming in to keep the cupboard replenished, and to her it fell to win that something, as well as to disburse it. The place itself was poor; the ramshackle old house of the Dwyer McMahans was in a dip among the stony quartz-bearing ranges that lay all around it. The garden refused to flourish on a diet of gravel and pipeclay; it was a house site, that spot, not a garden site, and the soil refused to be wooed by vegetation, standing firm to its auriferous principles.

And so the masculine possibilities of the woman were brought out by the circumstances of her life. She saw a possible living for her sick man and her young family; but it needed head and hands, and some courage and endurance, to win it. A fainter heart than hers would have found impracticable the line of bread-winning that presented itself, but Mrs. Dwyer McMahan showed the white feather only in her hat, as a local wag once remarked.

It was her first trip down-country on the new enterprise, when she came
to our old house on that wild night, with her young infant, because, elements or no elements, he was too dependent to be left behind. Mrs. Dwyer McMahan knew my father. His journeyings often took him along the backbone of those steep ranges, so blue from our door; so green at closer sight, and yet so inhospitable to the traveller amongst them. Many a time he had thawed his chilled limbs before her fire, and satisfied his hunger with the rough, wholesome fare of her board. And so we knew her well by hearsay, all of us, before that night when her sturdy voice burst on our home. It was to my father she came, at the start of her enterprise. “Stephenson,” she called him, using his surname as she did with all the men she met, as though she had not time or patience for social flourishes. It was typical of the woman; her speech was not fine, but I think her life was.

“I knew you could put me in the way of getting a few bullocks for a start, Stephenson,” she said, toasting her striped knees by the fire. “I have Shelverton at home to do the butchering; I'll do the buying and droving myself. I'm a better judge of a beast than any of them. There's trade along the mountains; Jamsie can pack the beef to the people.”

That was her scheme, and she worked it out. Jamsie was her eldest boy, and Shelverton one of those handy men who when away from strong drink can turn their hands to anything. The type originated in the digging days. My father saw the scheme was sound, and said so.

I remember that when Mrs. Dwyer McMahan set off for the ranges on the fine bright morning that followed the fury of the night, she had with her several prime young bullocks from our paddocks. We watched her critically selecting them, with my father hoping, I remember, that a certain handsome young animal that had been a pet in his calfhood would not be chosen. Alas for such hopes! The lady butcher was too shrewd to pass a good thing. Our beautiful “Valdemar” (named from some hero of our reading) went forth presently in front of her whip.

After that, with our house as a stopping-place en route to market, if not her journey's end, Mrs. Dwyer McMahan came many a time through the years that followed. No weather deterred or detained her; she came late and early; stayed a night when she could, or was away after a meal. The drenched infant thrrove, and no longer occupied the pommel; he helped Shelverton at home, I know, and later took Jamsie's place in the meat delivering, for her boys married young. Her man died and was tucked away with a wooden railing round him in six feet of gravel, somewhere along the range near their house. Still she came and went, always with the white plume, the mare Poll, the striped petticoat, flicking her knee with her riding whip as she walked from the last gate to our house. Strong, confident, self-reliant, a true soul and a brave one. The family grew and vanished, and at
last old age and circumstances brought her “down country,” as she always called our part of the world. And so she came to live out her days in a little cottage not so far from my old home but that we might see her sometimes, for Mrs. Dwyer McMahan had won, by long association and her sterling worth, an affection from us. But before she came to her cottage I had gone away from mountains and lowlands alike. Little did I hear of her for years; still less did I see. Then, a year ago, with a flying half-hour to spare before my train left, I went to look on her face again.

She knew me at once, for I was less changed than she, and I fell to talking of old times, as incorrigible as she from her greater age, for reminiscences. We recalled that long-ago night, and I burred her own r's at her till she laughed, though something glistened on her cheek, too. It belonged to thoughts of battles long ago, when life was action, not waiting. I confessed, to chase the tear, how, on that ancient night, Claribel and I had peeped at her in a long alternative vigil through the knothole in the bark wall. In the midst of the restoring laugh, there was the click, click, of cloven hoofs, and the crack of a whip on the road outside. She ran to the door as at a call to arms, I following. “A fine beast, that roan,” she commented, as the cloud of dust rolled behind the passing herd. And in the old eyes was an eager light of pleasure, as the eyes of an old-time belle will shine at the flash of jewels.

Last week I picked up a country paper, and read that Mrs. Dwyer McMahan, undaunted, faithful fighter, devoted wife and mother, had passed away to somewhere far, far beyond the ranges.
There are games common to childhood everywhere, and others that seem to be suggested to special groups of children by their environment. I have early recollections of both. The “hide-and-seek” that Cain and Abel no doubt invented was our heritage; and we had as well many original pastimes suggested by the material about us. One of these sports was bullock-driving; another that I remember was playing at pack-horses. Bullocks and horses in human service were familiar to us, and it would have been strange had the sight of animals in harness not given us the imitative impulse. We made of ourselves beasts of burden at these games, bearing willingly the whip of a driver who took his office seriously. The whip was not, however, of a very terrible character, having generally for thong a strip of the under-part of stringy-bark, tied to a long stick. If the driver were expert he could crack it successfully, but more often than not, at the first flourish the lash would fly off the handle, just as he so jocund drove his team afield. We used to bring a rare lot of light wood for my mother's fires in a wooden cart made by my father out of an old packing-case furnished with wheels of small circumference from sawn-off logs. It was a vehicle inelegant enough, but serviceable and joy-giving. We used to draw lots, I remember, to decide who should be driver of the team. Dick would hold the lots in his hand, and it is to me still a mystery how it was that the law of chance so frequently favoured the holder of the lots. When we played at being pack-horses, the wood we carried was in bundles on our backs, as we saw the men load the horses when preparing them for the trips
up the mountain track, whither our father's team went frequently in front of
the whip of a hunch-shouldered driver. These were certainly games
suggested by our environment, as I have since seen the children of miners
in an up-country town setting forth with their picks and shovels and “crib
tins” to the play that was their father's work. Ours was a world specially
designed for such games as these, indoors or out. There were barns and
sheds everywhere, and haystacks and standing crops, and farther afield the
ambush about the creek, and the bush itself. I remember once tunnelling
into a haystack so deeply to make a good hiding of it, that I was almost
smothered; and once Fred hid himself so recklessly amongst some bags of
chaff in a barn that after a time, in response to his involuntary movements,
an avalanche of bags descended upon him, so that all the ambushed ones
within hearing of his muffled cries had to emerge from their several
hiding-places to render the struggler first-aid.

I make serious claim to our having, if not invented, at least developed in
pursuit of this same game of hide-and-seek the art of camouflage so much
heard of to-day. To find Red Riding Hood in our wood, where most objects
suggested her, was a pretty puzzle for a searcher. Annie's striped pinafore
swishing forth from a scrub clump by no means proclaimed, though it
suggested, the immediate presence there of Annie herself. Nor did the
crown of Dick's hat peeping above a fallen log necessarily mean that the
curly head and mischievous brown face of its owner were reconnoitring
below it. I remember to this hour the experience of literally seeing stars
where stars were not. The perils of blind man's buff played on a half-
cleared landscape where abound stumps of felled trees as high as one's face
are not to be minimised. To come with bandaged eyes hastily into contact
with one of these is to bring about the immediate necessity for a bandaged
nose. Blind man's buff is more suited to an environment where nothing
more solid than chairs and tables is to be encountered. It was a bitter day
for my tomboy pride that on which it was borne in upon me that there is a
tyrranny of garments—that the child of the skirted sex is, becoming subject
to the skirt, thereby tamed. Moral lectures from certain aunts used to the
more “correct” ways of little town girls had in their sundry administerings
failed to curtail the athletic ventures of Claribel and myself. There was not
a tree, dared by the boys, along whose limbs we too had not swung and
clung. A lengthened frock was the real reformer. It was, though, a bitter
day when a trammelling skirt reduced me to inferior place in the matter of
“vaulting with the pole.” Tournaments of this diverting exercise Dick and I
often had, and for long I could clear a height at which he boggled or
brought down the barrier. And then a new skirt of more generous length
brought me my Waterloo. Was it, I wonder, symbol and epitome of much
in woman's race in life? I rebelled sorely, I know, and smarted at my cousin's derisive and triumphant laughter when my flying sails brought my downfall. It was the same in running. I was no more the peer of the boys, and for a year or so had the further chagrin of seeing Claribel, my yet unfettered junior, surpass me in such sport.

Very early we came to cricket—or cricket came to us. I cannot remember how old I was when I first stood defending an old kerosene-tin from the onslaughts of a rag ball. That A. H. of whom I have before spoken was a born cricketer; he gave us the lore of it, not, I fancy, as a drilled-in lesson, but bawled to us bit by bit as the exigencies of the game in progress necessitated. The boys admitted us willingly enough to what in those days at least was regarded by divine right as exclusively a masculine game. We were grateful, knowing this, till experience lessened our gratitude, as we began to notice how much in the field we were, running, running after flying balls amid stentorian urgings to yet swifter flight; how seldom bowling, or with the bat. We mutinied at last, Claribel and I and our two younger of the non-cricketing sex. Whereupon the astonishing discovery was made that no kerosene-tin was for long safe when I, ball in hand, opposed it. It was a disconcerting discovery to Dick especially when, on my first essay, amid a barbaric roar from his brothers, the “wicket” he guarded tintinnabulated his defeat. And thus from inglorious scouting, from stopgaps and makeshifts, we were promoted on our merits to the glory of full-fledged cricketers on equal terms with the boys. I remember a black eye from a smart ball once, and bruised shins often; but who cared when glory went with such wounds? Claribel and I finally achieved the great distinction of taking part in a full-dress match on a prepared sward, and with the actual regulation tools of the game.

There was one great occasion on which we all gave demonstration of our skill and prowess. It was on a birthday of the assertive Dick, when to “sports” he had arranged in his own honour certain relatives were bidden. Besides the cricket match there were general sports all more or less strenuous and designed to call forth the applause of the admiring elders, whose part it was to show their amazement and approval, and incidentally to provide and spread the goodly picnic under the “grand-stand” box-tree. It was as if we had prepared and rehearsed for that day from the hours of our infancy. The games, great and small, important and trivial, were gone through as the culmination of a long apprenticeship. Our repertoire was interrupted only by the picnic (no irrelevancy that!) and ended by nightfall. We ran through the whole gamut, it seems to me, and used every muscle of our bodies in the display. It was a great day, and stands out in my memory—with its aftermath of aches. Fred had a sprained ankle for his
remembrance. Tree-climbing being on the sports list he must, in scorn of older folks' warnings, go to the extreme end of a half-rotten limb of the gum-tree he had scaled. The law of gravitation did the rest. My uncle supplied the befitting philosophy, while he bound a handkerchief round the injured leg, congratulatory that it was not a fractured bone.

There was a waterhole that lay—or, should one say, that stood?—neutrally midway between our house and the home of my cousins in a paddock where rushes and tussocks introduced one to its brink. This old pre-historic waterhole was never known to dry up, and was haunted by things of interest, both imaginary and real. Eels of a coarse flavour lived in its depths, and sometimes consented to take the worm dropped to them at our peril no less than at the peril of worm and eel. Such was the waterhole, fear of whose mythological monsters kept us, as toddlers, I verily believe, from a watery grave, thereby justifying the pious fraud of our elders in so peopling it with the brutes of fable. Its existence lent suggestions for aquatic sports of various kinds. Mossy logs of antiquity, deliciously risky for a venturing foot, thrust up their pachydermatous backs here and there over its surface. Wildfowl used to come and flirt tentatively with its reeded edges. There were willows planted modernly, and native vegetation planted ancienly. There were water-lilies and duckweed on its murky waters, and lush islands of rushes here and there well away from its edges. There the domestic geese and duck fancied an unmolested reign, being of insular tastes—especially in the laying season. Instinct perhaps it was that suggested to them that, deposited there, their eggs had a better chance of becoming the oar-footed young of their dreams; fluffy babies, capable, when their time came, of reaching the big world past the sedgy shore. But instinct, doing its best for the preservation of the species, could not provide against the ingenuity of young human despoilers. Many a nest's contents we got, unaddled still by brooding, and bore them home. We had for such ventures a wonderful raft, which usually allowed itself to be cumbrously paddled to the desired island. As often as not it threatened to turn turtle or otherwise take itself and its passengers from the face of the waters. Then the bright eyes of danger would look suddenly forth at the hardy mariners aboard, and tense moments would follow. More than once a cold plunge had been the rower's fate, while the rest of us, according to the depth of the water where the disaster occurred, cheered, jeered, or feared from the margin. To gain the alluring water-lilies, too, many an embarking on that rude raft was undertaken; our mothers loved to set the sweet blooms in a shallow dish of water for indoor adornment, and that afforded excuse enough for any rashness in the enterprise of obtaining them. Little they ever knew how near to tragedy our pious desire to consider the lilies at
close quarters sometimes brought us. There were times when an unwary pair of wildfowl made temporary home at that waterhole; and more than once we abstracted their eggs from the secret nest, and made a foolish hen foster-mother to strange wild creatures that soon, turning like divining rods to their true element, made her a thing of nerves. Later, with fierce ingratitude, such broods invariably further followed their nature by taking to the bush.

We used to stilt-walk about a certain quaggy portion of the waterhole paddock. Certainly to walk in that part at most seasons of the year, even in stout boots, would have meant wet feet, but across that rushy, reedy patch no road ran anywhere, and nothing but the spirit of childhood called us there at all, by stilt or foot. Still, there we went. I remember one day taking a “short cut” to my cousin's house by that route. I had been sent to borrow some sugar. Whether my errand required hasty execution I do not remember, but I made my marshy detour on my stilts, and left them hidden somewhere before my journey’s end, proceeding by their cumbersome means again on the return trip with my borrowed sugar. I reached home muddy and sugar-less; some will-o’-the-wisp of that marsh sprited away my sweet burden; but, then, what can one expect when one's stilts go suddenly deep into crabholes?

We had, under the teaching of other children, once we started to go to school, a whole galaxy of new games; that is, games new to us, though old as childhood, most of them. Of these I do not speak; there was never the romance and fascination about them as there was about those learned or invented by our isolated selves. It makes children inventive to have to create their own pastimes from the nature about them, and there is a great and simple joy, as I have found, in making your own toys, or in seeing them made by more dexterous hands. When I grew older I refused to be lured from long allegiance to a rag doll—whose beloved features my mother had originally drawn in ink—by the pink-cheeked beauty of a fine wax creation presented to me by a visiting aunt. Earlier than that, my first doll, I have been told, was simply the knotty little root of a native gum-bough. On this wooden head I poured my infant oblations for many a day and night. Were I not chary of serious philosophy, I might here enter upon a dissertation in favour of childhood being kept more intimately the friend of simple things, rather than being encouraged to become the restless, dissatisfied seeker after more elaborate distractions.

Some of our games we found in action on the school playground. It seemed like a purloining to us; we were their inventors—or thought we were. I remember that in regard to some of these games we compromised as to our exclusive right to them only so far as to play them on the road to
or from school. Top-spinning—our originals had been made from cottonreels—was one of these, and marbles was another. For many a day I had my right thumbnail worn to tenderness from “firing” my marbles from it. It was long before I could use my knuckle for that purpose as the boys and Claribel did. What rings we made on the dusty road! How many semitrances we played to finish a game against time! What searches in heather and fern for lost “alleys” and “glassies”! What squabbles over the ownership of “taws”! What doughty battles, what streaked faces and dirty hands! and the worst of it—or the best—was that while other games had their seasons and came and went by tacit ordination with the phases of the calendar, marbles lasted the whole round of the year!

I do not remember cards in our home; our Puritan ancestry saw to that. I remember seeing the labourers with a pack sometimes, and wondered what the charm and what the sin of them might be. I always liked puzzle-games, and Claribel and I invented many of a transparent sort; and anagrams and cryptograms had their turn on the winter nights, as we were promoted to a later sitting-up hour. I began quite early to air my cleverness in literary puzzle-games in the column set apart for them in some of our papers and magazines. Very proud was I when my name appeared as a prize-taker in some contest of this kind. I fear I made myself rather insufferable to Claribel and Dick about it, for they had small skill in such things. When we had circle enough by the addition—a frequent thing—of the cousins beyond the waterhole paddock, we played such simplicities as “proverbs” and “consequences,” games of my mother's girlhood. In the latter game, attended by all the adjectives complimentary and uncomplimentary that occurred to us, Claribel and Dick were invariably brought into romantic juxtaposition. But though so often joined by this conspiracy on the part of the rest of us, Fate, or the good angel of each, in the after-dealings with my sister and cousin, contrived to disregard the lead. More sophisticated (a matter again of lengthened skirts) we grew still further away from the primitive sports that held us earlier. The 'teens sapped their charm. We reached the sadly sophisticated level of “charades,” and even of tiny dramas. Childhood perished thus, amid the sands of sentimentalism and of melodrama.
XI

A VISITOR passing or lingering was an event to us in our remoteness; it was a challenge too, the appearance over the hilltop of pedestrian or rider. Over that eminence, silhouetted as he advanced against the clear horizon behind him, came the stranger to our door. There was no other approach to our stringy-bark castle save for the rare adventurer who, from the trackless bush westward, might find our primitive dwelling. Through the panels leading off the high road—uncleared and ill-defined enough itself, the track for king and commoner alike was down the sharp steepness of the black volcanic soil of the old hill that rose suddenly out of the loamy valley whereon stood that bush home—“the house where I was born.”

I have said that the coming of a visitor was a challenge, and it was so to our shyness and curiosity, and to that dash of the social instinct that is in us all, even the most alien, farthest from “humanity's reach.” And shy we were, and curious, too, as any legitimate children of Eve should be. My earliest recollections include a picture of Claribel and myself crouched in the old garden by a squat laburnum bush watching the minister linking his horse's bridle to the staple in the corner-post of the verandah. There was a spot by that post trodden by the restless feet of the waiting horses of our restful visitors. People paid long visits in those days, and left without haste. I have wondered since if it was the conversation—amiable gossip much of it—or the interminable tea-drinking, that made calling in that part of the old Queen's reign and Empire so protracted an affair.
That old minister and his brown horse with the long tail—as though it were ungodly to interfere with Nature's furnishing—how kindly was the man! how welcome his visits! How he found time for their leisureliness, infrequent though they were, I do not know. He had a charge wide as a dukedom, broad as a principality, and rougher than either. Wild, hard tracks the long-tailed brown carried his devoted master over—missioner, indeed, that master; his best work, perhaps, that outside the pulpit; those visits to the remote cabins of the pioneers, to whom he came as a glad touch from that very actual world beyond—the city, or the places the settlers had known before the scrub had closed like a curtain about them. He has the pride of place in my fond memoirs, the dear, kindly, so-human man who came to talk of heaven, and remained to chat of earth to my parents, wistful of the ways and doings of men. He brought books too. From a stout bag of oil-cloth strapped in front of his saddle came to our eager eyes the bright-covered “Chatterbox” and the blue beauty of the boards of “Jessica's First Prayer.” There was always some treasure left with us, sometimes in exchange for the silver coin from my mother's scant personal store, sometimes as the gift that the heart that delights in children's delight cannot withhold. The “Band of Hope” and the “Children's Friend”! What Sunday afternoon reading they made till the brown horse with the oilcloth bag stamped his feet again by the verandah post!

From the sanctuary of the drooping laburnum bush, despite shyness, we always emerged, for that most challenging visitor prevailed. If our stammering tongues had for a few minutes to engage in considering the infant Samuel, or the Vision of Belshazzar (it was before the days of Sunday school with us), were we not compensated for the ordeal of catechism by the treasure of a story-book whose matter was more modern if not more authentic?

There were more visitors ahorse than afoot coming over the steep hilltop in those days. The tracks did not invite long walks; people rode or stayed at home for the most part. The mothers went abroad but seldom; the clinging young generation saw to that. A plump infant in arms and two dragging at the skirt, on a tussocky, uneven track, does not make for afternoon foregatherings among scattered neighbours. These were the days before wheels had come to the rescue, and while large families amongst the young settlers was a rule still honoured by observance. But there were some few near neighbours in that place of small selections who contrived to get now and then into each other's company, the smallest members of their brood with them. They made these visits to the neighbouring women in that hour or two between the washing up of the midday dinner dishes and the
preparation of the evening meal. When the little ones came to our house
with their mothers we emerged shyly enough to do our social part. How
strange may shy children be, tucking their faces away from the company in
their mother's skirt, and eating their cake half aside and furtively when the
call was irresistible. I remember an occasion when Jean M'Dermot,
afterwards so clever and bold at school, came with her mother to visit us.
Lucy Speary, in whose being the elements of shyness had not been mixed,
was with us, too, that day. Lucy pushed Jean into the shallows of the
waterhole where we were having a game of frog-catching. Unabashed,
Lucy laughed at the result of her attempt to initiate the shy one into the
rough and tumble of her own childhood ethics. Claribel and I took the
immersion of Jean seriously, feeling, I suppose, the onus of our position of
hostesses of the two between whom the unfortunate episode had occurred;
yet we were uncertain in our inexperience as to what was demanded of us.
We took our dripping visitor to her mother. Then, according to a rapidly
evolved ethic, formed in her sinless and unlettered heart, Claribel
impulsively took the blame of having pushed the sufferer into the water.
Lucy was too amazed, and Jean too shy, to speak, and so it went at that
with a rousing reprimand and homily to Claribel.

There were the occasional stranger-callers, agents and their ilk. These
ubiquitous beings apparently leave no place unvisited—possibly they are
even to be found amid the “reaches of the moon.” There was one tea-agent
whom I remember. He was a mixture of simplicity and guile. I knew this
from the verdict of my elders. Like most children we accepted people on
the surface seeming, and this gentleman was charming—extraordinarily
charming. He praised our looks till Claribel tossed her curls with
consciousness and my mother frowned.

Nevertheless the man went away with an order for a huge chest of tea.
It was in this chest that the fact of his guile was revealed. My
neighbouring uncle had also succumbed to the persuasive, wiles of the
gentleman, and received a large quantity of tea which “displeased his
palate.” The brew had a tang like wattle-bark, so we heard our elders aver
in indignant agreement. To us, when bemilked and besugared, it seemed
much as any other tea that we had known; the infant taste is not critical in
such matters.

That visitor did not reappear; possibly unfriendly thoughtwaves from that
district went out to him warningly, for he had sold his shocking commodity
to almost everyone along the valley.

We had sometimes, too, another kind of agent, as persuasive, but in the
result leaving us a more honest delight. He was known as the “book man,”
and was, I really believe, one of the world's greatest orators. He would
pour forth such profuse strains of premeditated art upon the beauties and benefits of the volume he had in hand that one wondered how such a desirable work required to be hawked around the remote places of the world. I fancy folks about that neighbourhood used to order a copy of whatever book he was vending, to bring the man's flow to a semi-colon, if not to a full stop.

Through him from time to time came some valued additions to our old bookshelf—“Foxe's Book of Martyrs,” which Dick and I used to make ourselves “creep” by reading, came in this way. I think my uncle and father had the joint ownership of it, and it went to and fro between the two houses. So, too, “The World's Wonders” and an American medical work, which my aunt finally hid because my uncle used to imagine that he had ulceration of the stomach after a dip into the book. There was a fascinating chart of the human interior, too, I remember, in this volume; Claribel and I thought it a very vulgar picture, but somehow or other we were often drawn to take a peep at it. The finest thing the book agent ever brought was a musical album. Forerunner of the gramophone! I can hear you now, ticking out your mandoline-like notes with appalling precision. We used to “play” it to visiting children, pitting it as a source of entertainment against the Spearys' stereoscope, which showed views of Melbourne as though snow were over the city. Pages of relatives, and of my mother's old friends, from their cardboard prisons, were from time to time compelled, unwillingly enough, no doubt, to listen to those lamentable strains.

There came one evening a very wonderful man; he was a travelling tailor, I think. I remember chiefly the blackness of his beard and the huge tooth—a shark's, he told us—set in gold, that he wore as a scarf-pin. He came at dusk, and as a matter of course remained for the night; unwrit laws of the bush have decided it so. After tea, the “black man,” as Claribel and I whisperingly called him, “read our heads.” A more virtuous family of children of brilliant, intellectual promise surely never before graced a settler's home! Our parents must since have had their hours of rue at our failure to fulfil the scientific predictions of our agreeable guest. Word of the interesting doings at our fireside somehow percolated to the ears of our cousins across the paddock, and soon Dick was glowing in the knowledge that a brilliant future for him was lying perdu under that curly hair of his. Indeed, he began to trade upon that future forthwith by suggesting that his superiority exempted him from the little daily tasks allotted to him, till in self-defence it became necessary for Fred to shake his too credulous brother from the pedestal whereon he had been set.

There were no Afghan or Indian hawkers in those days; but to a place remote from shops it was natural that the itinerant vendor of clothing
should penetrate. A man from a distant town used periodically to find his way to our wilds with a covered waggon load of drapery of all sorts.

The mountain came to Mahomet since Mahomet could not go to the mountain. He was a boon and a blessing to the mothers of wild bush children, and a lively trade that hawker would ply! To keep us clad meant liberal purchasing, and round that big waggon, with its boxes of drapery spread open for our mother's inspection, we would joyfully flock. It was an unstaled, if recurring, event, that visit of the hawker's cart: our one touch with finery and with fashion, and I doubt not our elders enjoyed it too. There were the comparatively uninteresting boxes containing the house and table linen; the men's mercery—which brought the wearers of coloured shirts and moleskin trousers from the flats—and the more interesting and dainty things for feminine adornment. Many a delighted “Oh!” would we utter at the sight of the gay ribbons, the soft laces that the obliging hawker, with all the arts of Bond or of Bourke Street, would display to tempt my mother's slender purse. It was an hour to remember, that occasional beauty feast among the kickshaws of Fashion—albeit, as some hinted—fashion of an antecedent date. How disappointed we were when, passing by the more dainty fabrics, my mother, in quest of school dresses for her tomboy girls, would select (with our unwilling approval) the modest print or homespun.

Now and then it would happen to us that a relative from the city—that wonderful terra incognita, Melbourne—would come to stay with us for a week or two. Such preparations for the great event—the fit and proper reception and treatment of the honoured visitor! We polished up everything, we children, and tidied inside and out the house in fine style. With befitting zeal we raked up the scattered wood-heap, and pulled up the grass tufts from the gravel of the back-yard. It was an event that titillated us finely; the pleasures of anticipation, the compunctions of shyness were ours in equal proportion. We were proud, and we were humble, and when we sought to be most at ease, were most nervous. There was the rivalry, too, of the cousins over the paddock. They had a “spare room” in their house; we had none, but there were certain compensations about our home, such as a finer and better-kept flower garden, and ripe fruit. These things we would duly balance against the undoubted weight of the “spare room.” The visitors being impartially related to each household, it used to end in their impartially dividing their time between the two families. They seemed so grand with the touch of town about them, those aunts and girl cousins! I was so self-conscious, so diffident of myself, so admiring of them, that I never quite enjoyed their sojourn with us. I had a gaucherie from nervousness that made me hold myself badly, and spoiled my best intentions. My shyness was an actual pain when it made me silent; a
disadvantage when it made my speech flounder. But oh, the worship I have felt, peeping afar from a crack in the door at a dignified and quite splendid kinswoman dressed in silk, and with an air of fineness that fitted her so well! Self-banished, I would watch her from my humble coign seated there by the fireside, her head against the crimson cushion of my mother's homemade rocking chair, her court about her. Dick—who always followed the guest everywhere, greedy of glory—with his familiar ease squatted beside her on the hassock where her slim shoe-tip rested, and Claribel surreptitiously feeling the softness of her delicate scarf. And the elders grouped about hearing her account of things long lost. How I envied the something in those others—the something that allowed them that social ease, the something I had not, and the absence of which made me an immolated Ishmael when I most longed to be of the circle. That same shyness it was that caused me once for a whole week to avoid meeting face to face one of these visitors of my kin, till caught at last too late to beat an actual retreat, I sheltered ignominiously under the table, where, ostrich-like, I sought to hide myself between the hanging fringes of the old red repp table cover. . . . And yet there are those to whom I have since told the story who have doubted the possibility of its being true.
An Important Happening

IT was more than an ordinary Red Letter Day in the settlement, that on which the young children of the district were vaccinated. It was a perfect orgie of lymph.

Live however remotely one may, the law will find one out, and enforce its exactions. Little fear was there in that far place of an outbreak of smallpox, yet the regulation regarding its prevention extended even there. It was, I believe, Lady Mary Wortley Montague who first introduced the idea of vaccination into Britain. A plague on the house of Montague, or so our parents might have said. A notice had been sent to every settler along the valley, requiring that his children, or such of them as had not already been vaccinated, should be presented for that purpose at the house of a centrally situated neighbour. Here followed the date and the hour at which people were to attend. It has been indicated already that the folk of the valley had sown plentifully for the next generation.

Almost every household there had several children to present for the ceremony. Never before, since the first arrival there had driven into the rich loam the first peg, had a doctor attended locally to minister to the community in this fashion. Indeed, the appearance there of a medical man
for any purpose was a rarity. We were naturally a healthy community, too busy to be ill, too busy also to imagine ourselves so. Even when an infant arrived, the women managed amongst themselves. That is till later; when the steady increase justified it, a prototype of Mrs. Gamp, sure of continuous work, settled in the district. That this lady was not diplomaed mattered nothing. Heaven blessed her work, so that she was able to declare that her sum in addition always came right.

As for the vaccination of their infants, parents had been supposed to attend periodically for that purpose at the nearest town where a doctor lived. That was thirty miles distant, and so the requirement was systematically ignored, thus it was that only the older children of the Spearys', and a few others born before the days of the settlement, were able to show the curious white mark upon the left arm which was the record of their parent's obedience to the law's demands. We had often admired Minnie Speary's "mark," and she was ever ready to display it, and to discant upon it. She pretended to remember all about it, and was very proud of the distinction it conferred upon her. We had envied her experience, and here we were suddenly flung upon the necessity of receiving upon our own persons the same sign manual. Our parents were not so pleasantly titillated at the prospect as we were; indeed there was, strangely as we thought, a good deal of grumbling among them on the matter; murmurs about "Government fad" and suchlike tags of complaint came to us. But the law was at our doors, so to speak, and obedience to it was the only virtue.

Claribel had a frock for the event, hastily "run up" from an old silk gown of our mother's; the child, being "a tear-away," seldom had "a rag to her back"— I give the phrases as I heard them spoken. Claribel, as I have indicated, had a natural love for finery, but her pleasure in regard to the impending outing had been seriously dashed by a sudden volte face on the part of Minnie Speary. That young lady recanted her former alluring representations regarding "the man with the needle." She asserted that being vaccinated was a terribly painful experience, that one's blood gushed out in spurts when the doctor stuck the needle into one's arm, and that later the arm swelled to the size of a pillow. She described to us how she had kicked and screamed, even turning aside in her agony from bribes of lollies. Finally they had had to hold her down... A sanguinary recital that poisoned the excited anticipations of Claribel, causing in their place the darkest forebodings.

It took a good deal of reassurance from our parents, and a more careful bridling of their own views on the subject of vaccination, to get Claribel submissively into the pretty new frock on the important morning. I was by
no means comfortable in my own mind either as to what was about to befall me, but a stoical pose I had assumed at the time had to be lived up to; I dared not show any trepidation, not even when I saw myself suggestively clad in my short-sleeved frock instead of in the newer long-sleeved one. I consoled myself. After all, nothing very dreadful could be coming to me, for was not my mother taking for the same performance my younger sisters and brother? I decided against Minnie Speary's later story.

I have called the event an orgie, and the name not ill describes it. The doctor arrived at the neighbour's house at about eleven a.m., and his labours amongst us extended to the sunset of a long November day. True, he had to pause midway in his operations, and wait for the arrival of the mailman with a fresh supply of the mysterious “lymph,” which seemed to be as important a factor in the performance as the needle itself.

It was at the house of Mrs. Grey that we were assembled, and it was some time before the hour appointed, early as that was, when the first comers arrived. Most people came in vehicles of some kind, chiefly drays, and spring-carts. But there was one buggy there. It was the first buggy that we had seen, and it seemed a very grand affair indeed. The buggy belonged to Mrs. Darling, who lived in a distant township, and she had her infant with her. The child, we learned, had been vaccinated before, but it had not “taken,” and so was to be done again. This coming to our ears soon after our arrival at Mrs. Grey's, routed the fears of Claribel once more. It was surely something really agreeable for Mrs. Darling to go to so much trouble to have it performed on her baby again.

But some who came had not even a dray or spring-cart for their conveyance thither. There were the Watts, for instance, who lived twice the distance from the Greys' that we did who came in state in our big new dray. They had had to walk, and Mr. Watt was losing a day from his grass-cutting, as he explained many times in the ensuing hours, in order to carry the two-year-old boy Simmy on his back to what he referred to as “this foolery.” On the journey he had also been obliged to make a crossing of stones over the creek, and to carry the baby over as Mrs. Watt was inclined to a “swimming head.”

Fortunately it was a fine day, for the accommodation of Mrs. Grey's house was much overtaxed by the great influx of people. We overflowed freely to verandah and garden. I fancy that in some respects, notwithstanding the long day's fag with refractory children, our mothers enjoyed the gathering at the Greys'. It was not often that so many of them met together—indeed, there were neighbours brought face to face upon a common errand that day who had never met before.

Such talk as there was among them! So many exchanges of experiences
old and new, such public chats, such private confidences among the women. I know that my mother tried her next batch of bread upon the principles employed by Mrs. Lavender in yeast-making, and that she gave a good harvest-field cake recipe ("receipt" they called it in those days) to Mrs. Blore. We children hung about with open eyes and ears. I know that I heard many a conclave in which my mother had part, and that I received a vast amount of information about a vast variety of matters—some of them beyond my comprehension. I remember, for instance, asking my mother later what Mrs. Blore had meant when telling the story of her own vaccination she had said that she had been done on both arms, adding that the doctor at the time had been "half seas over"—a very mystifying phrase that was.

Quite a number of the fathers were present that day, making public acknowledgment of their responsibility for their offspring. Mr. Grey was kept busy escorting newcomers to the barn to see his fanners, a new purchase; this machine was supposed to clean grass-seed as no fanners in the world had ever before done. I fancy that the gentleman had a good deal of free labour performed in the winnowing of his rye grass-seed that day, for each and every neighbour of them must have a turn at the handle himself. Those men were critics who took nothing for granted.

So many people gathered together; it seemed rather like being at church, yet it was different, because that day one was allowed to play. And as well there were people there whom one never saw at church. Mr. Lavender was there with his three children to be vaccinated, and we knew that they had not been christened—a thing commented upon much by their neighbours. Mr. Lavender had called christening "humbug," it had been said, but evidently he didn't think vaccination "humbug," for as well as bringing his family for that operation, Mr. Lavender was heard to say that he intended to ask the doctor if he couldn't be done himself "as a precaution." He was, during the following month, going to Melbourne for some farm machinery, and he had been reading in the *Weekly Times* that two coloured sailors at Sandridge had been discovered to be suffering from the small-pox. Whether Mr. Lavender was vaccinated that day or not, I do not remember, but his three children were, and each of them showed plainly enough that the performance was greatly objected to. They were the three first victims of the day's orgie, and each in turn rent the air, or as much air as there was in Mrs. Grey's congested parlour, with its yells. The cries came to the verandah alarmingly, and thoroughly demoralised the innocents awaiting their turn there.

"Now, now," we heard their mother, and the doctor soothing.

Lucy Speary plucked at Claribel's arm, and the two vanished. I stood my
ground, though I would dearly have liked to retreat also to the thicket of acacia that received the pair. But there was that inconvenient reputation for stoicism to be thought of.

I think the doctor performed first upon the younger children, for it was well into the afternoon before, for me personally, was set at rest the question as to whether the operation of vaccination was painful or not. In the end I was rather scornful of those of my peers who had made a fuss about it. The thing hurt a little, but not more than a mosquito bite, not so much as the sting of a March fly. Swaggering a little, I went in search of Claribel, who was again missing. Her first essay at hiding had ended at sight of the picnic that was set in the shrubbery for the company. That temptation was not to be resisted, and she and Lucy had emerged from the acacia umbrage. But they had slipped away again. The second flight had been farther afield than the shrubbery, and some of the bigger boys had had to scour the dog-wood patch in the lower paddock before the pair was found.

It was as they were being inveigled back to the danger zone that I met them with my braggadocio account of my experience of “the man with the needle.” “But why did some of them cry?” Claribel was suspicious, and I was fain to suggest that it was the doctor himself of whom they had been afraid. “He has teeth, and one eye larger than the other, but he hurts hardly a bit,” I assured. Nature had certainly not been kind to the doctor, for as well as the strange eye and the prominent teeth, the gentleman had a huge nose. An alarming man to approach timid children to do with them—Heaven knew what!

Poor Mrs. Grey, what a day for her that was! She had no children of her own; it had been remarked that she had sometimes said that she wished that she had a dozen. That day she was as the Old Woman Who Lived in the Shoe as regards the number of children on her hands. The Greys evidently regarded themselves in the character of host and hostess, and had made many preparations for the entertainment of their young guests. When our first shyness was gone we took advantage of these provisions on our behalf. The term “took advantage” is capable of more than one meaning; certain it is that a second meaning was given to it sometimes during that day by the more forward of the juveniles. Mr. Grey had provided for one thing, a fine swing. From a horizontal branch of a box-tree near the garden, all day long the ropes went to and fro, a child seated between them. There was generally some clamouring among the candidates for the next swing; whose “turn” it was sometimes becoming a matter of heated debate. Lucy Speary, in charge of two smaller ones, would allow neither of them on the swing, alleging that it was dangerous. It was observable however that she
herself was willing to risk a fall as often as possible. Indeed, finally Lucy did get a big tumble; she went face downward in the dust, due I suspect, to a calculated push from Jimmy Wood, who was manipulating the ropes at the moment. Lucy's nose bled violently, and between tears, blood and dust she was such a sorry object that Mr. Grey, coming upon the scene, decided to dispense with the swing altogether.

Resisting the entreaties of a wistful chorus, he forthwith climbed the limb to undo the ropes. By some mischance he presently lay in the dust where Lucy had fallen, but in Mr. Grey's case there were no tears, or blood, though plenty of dust. We thought it rather fun to see a big man sprawling, and it put a great strain upon our natural politeness to keep our shy smiles from developing into downright laughter.

The abolition of the swing sent the children adventuring in search of other entertainment. Some of them found the gate into the vegetable garden, and poured into the enclosure, overrunning the trim beds. Jenny Wood speedily made herself sick by eating too many blushful tomatoes, and a highly pungent vegetable which turned out to be garlic. Nothing there escaped "sampling," and some wry faces accompanied this dinner of herbs; not all within that garden was suitable provender for the rankest vegetarian. Later, the unlatched gate was found to have allowed to the banquet a less fastidious eater than any of us were. No one admitted responsibility for the gate when Mr. Grey (not so fond and indulgent of children perhaps as his wife was) demanded in a high voice how the sow and her brood had got the opportunity to demolish his lettuces and beet.

My observation of these and other happenings of the day (I will not say my own part in them) caused me to ponder furiously upon a remark made by my aunt to my mother on the homeward journey that evening, "Mrs. Grey," she said, "has had the bloom rubbed off her ideals concerning the angelic nature of children."

It was over at last; the wolf that had postured to Little Red Riding Hood had gobbled up the last child, the whole infant population of the district was well and truly vaccinated. But wait! there was the aftermath, and it was the aftermath that proved on the whole the greater ordeal for the parents —and for some of us too. Feverish petulance was the mildest consequence. I remember my own inflamed arm that would knock itself against things.

Mr. Seymour "wrote to the Department"—whatever that might mean, we wondered—about his Joe. Some rash had appeared on the child. The doctor attended at their house, and the father's complaint had a consequence other than had been looked for. The doctor pronounced the rash to be in no wise caused by or related to the vaccination, and examining their other boy he
discovered that it was necessary to revaccinate him.

Reporting this outrage to my father, our neighbour remarked that he considered the whole business to be “an unwarrantable interference with the freedom of the individual,” a fine sonorous sentence that I learned by heart, and used afterwards to repeat upon occasions, appropriate and inappropriate.
XIII

I DO not remember the circumstances of her coming, I simply remember that one day she seemed to appear suddenly in our kitchen—the kitchen of the second stage of the pioneering, when a stove had replaced the old camp oven, and other chattels had evolved correspondingly to a state of comparative convenience and grandeur. Coming pell-mell into that region of cookery from school one evening, Claribel and I stood amazed at the apparition that confronted us—that is, if anything so stout and solid as Minnie Grave could be called an apparition. Minnie stood looking at us, sleeves above elbows, and a large white apron covering her front. She had arrived and become domiciled all in the day. Very much at home she was already, apparently, for she seemed so much mistress of the kitchen that we sensibly felt ourselves intruders, and paused after the first impetuous advance. She had an air of authority about her, though later we found that, as the common phrase has it, her “bark was worse than her bite.” Encountering our abashed looks on this occasion of our first meeting, Minnie disarmed our fears with a smile that dug dimples in her plump cheeks, and made her look the soul of good nature. She entered upon her reign of order at once, however, and a glance of meaning at our boots
caused us to step back to the scraper outside the door. Minnie Grave's idea of order was, we found, much like that of Aunt Dinah's. When her kitchen—or “kitching,” as she preferred to call it—was newly cleaned for the day we might enter it only gingerly, and touch nothing in it without permission. That interdiction obtained for about an hour after the daily brushing and scrubbing was done; after that, and before, one might make what chaos of the room one pleased. But for that hour the kitchen was a region sacred to order, and to the maker of the order.

Dressed in her afternoon print dress—always a striped print, for her taste ran to stripes—like Mrs. Glegg's, Minnie would sit on a chair by the table end, facing the window, in perfect idleness, her hands in her lap, a very queen. The one-fire stove bright, and a fireplace that would have rejoiced even Sarah Battle by its spotlessness, the tins on the shelves polished to shining, the floor scrubbed, Minnie enjoyed herself with a perfect contentment, surveying the gleaming result of her labours. The former meal done with, the next meal—there always is a next meal looming in a country farm-house—prepared for the stove, why not the hour of ease for the cook, and, if the cook preferred it, an ease literally of idleness, still why not? I have since wondered why Minnie at such times did not prefer to get away from the scene of her labour instead of abiding among the pots and pans, polished bright though they were by her red, industrious hands. I can only conclude that Minnie Grave was a devotee to the daily round, and found its environment a soothing inspiration. Only when she had a whole day off did she put away the apron—badge of her calling. What Minnie did on those days off we learned later, and it will be no indiscreet violation of the sanctity of her private affairs (it's all so long ago) if I reveal presently what occupied her at those times of recreation.

But I have left Claribel and myself standing stock still on the doorstep after our hasty backing to the forgotten scraper, school-bags still upon our shoulders, gazing at the new invader of my mother's hitherto uncontested haunt. I see Minnie now, her “five foot nothink”—as Hooper once proclaimed her height to be, after measuring against the washhouse door-jamb—her hair plastered flat to her head and switched into a tight nob at the back, never a tendril of that straight black hair escaping from its rigid confines. It was a very rectitude of hair. The face that looked complacently at us with the smile creating deeper dimples at each moment was amazingly flat and wide. There was the merest little dab of a nose, much like an infant's. Her black eyes made the face seem fierce; it was they, I think, that had made us retreat; but the mouth belied the eyes, telling the truth emphatically enough as to the good nature of its owner. The chin, too, had a wonderful cleft in it, like a dimple out of bounds. We were friends at
once after the interrogating stare on both sides; we accepted Minnie on her chin value, so to speak. We were now joined by Annie, and two peeping cousins, who always reached our kitchen door on their return from school, before their own. There was a peeping face at an inner door, too—our mother's enjoying our surprise. It was a kind of conspiracy, this coming of Minnie to take over the work of the house for a time. They laughed at our surprise, and good understanding was cemented at once by sweet hot cake all round. The boys, devouring theirs with ardour, declared “she's not a bad sort.” And so Minnie was accepted, the basis of our judgment being, as I hint, not all aesthetic.

We were actually proud, presently, of Minnie's advent to our household. I remember boasting, though naturally a modest child, to Lucy Speary, at school, that “our Minnie” made better cakes than her mother did, which statement Lucy rebutted by the simple argument of a pinch. . . . But Minnie could do much more than cook. Never have I seen a tornado in being, but I imagine that one in action would not ill resemble Minnie. The dust would speed before her as Sennacherib's army sped before the destroyers. She could not “abide dirt and dust,” and waged a continual war against it. There was a youth who was getting out the autumn crop of potatoes that season, and who came periodically to the kitchen for his victuals, which Minnie served out to him. This youth had a remarkable squint. I remember that vividly, because his was the first squint I had ever seen. He was a fop in his way, and always dressed up quite grandly when he came to the kitchen on this errand. I recollect hearing my mother once remark slyly to my aunt on an afternoon when they drank tea together, that “it amused her to see Peter in his salmon-coloured tie and tight blue coat, trying to look “unutterable things” at Minnie.” I did not know what “unutterable things” might be, but, watching on the next opportunity, I thought that Peter did look queer, talking to Minnie and looking bashfully in another direction. We children, in the barbaric way of childhood, called the poor youth “Squinty Eye” without thought of offence. We soon found that to Minnie we might not speak of him thus. Here we stumbled upon a puzzle of quite psychological perplexity, which we wrestled with in solemn and serious conclave. There were present at this conclave Annie, Claribel, myself (plase aux dames), Little Jack—who was of no use in the debate at all, and whose presence I only mention because of its irrelevancy—Fred, Dick, and that A. H., the first of our group to cross the Blue Divide. In this problem, Annie's seniority had telling effect. She was a whole two years my senior, and though Fred was older than she, it is apparent that it is sex that counts in some things. Why should Minnie snap at us for calling Peter “Squinty Eye” when she herself sometimes said very rude things to Peter—things that
confused and hurt the youth, as we could see?.. In some moods she was kind to him but as often, when he came for his victuals, she railed at him, for “messing the kitchen floor” before the man's boots were over the threshold. “Splodgin' over my clean floor like a roanoseros.” Peter would get very red in the face and stamp his boots afresh on the door-mat. It was indeed a puzzle. Claribel's testimony capped it. She had seen Minnie making the new necktie that Peter wore last Sunday. Then it was that Annie's seniority declared itself. “Silly,” said she, “can't you see they're in love?” And perhaps it was so, for why did Minnie eventually marry Peter of the queer eyes unless they had, despite their oddness, drawn her heart? . . . But that was long after.

There was sometimes in evidence, apart from Peter, a susceptible and sentimental side to Minnie's somewhat bovine nature; it was this side that reigned when she put off the white apron and made holiday. She never took a holiday except when there was to be a ball, and then she rested all day, to be ready for the exertions of the night. Dances to Minnie Grave were a business; she loved them, and went long distances to take part in the pleasure she best loved. A dance was to her what a new Charlie Chaplin is nowadays, to her prototype, except, perhaps, that Minnie's zest was greater because the opportunity to indulge was less frequent. She would travel twenty miles—riding, or by wheels, in any fashion—and there was never lacking a swain to escort her. Our childpart in these excitements consisted in watching Minnie robe herself, and in lending assistance at critical moments during that operation. But she only dressed at home when the ball was a local one; when it meant a ride or drive to a distance Minnie carried her fine things in a bandbox. But to see her dress! I conclude that the next best thing to being a beauty is to think oneself one. Such pirouetting before my mother's big mirror, in the best light the house afforded; such creakings of corsets—tight-lacing days those —such rustlings of petticoats and furbelows, so many prunings and preenings as went to the adorning of Minnie! My mother's hands were always called into service, while we did minor lady's-maid duties. Though we never, as I say, had the joy of actually seeing Minnie amid the ensuing scenes of conquest, we used to hear all about the happenings.

The youth Peter having gone to some distant place, it was no part of Minnie's idea to hang her heart on the willows. She corresponded with him faithfully—did I not know every turn of his queer handwriting on the envelopes that I bore from the mailbox to her so often? For many months his letters came after hers ceased; and, cease after a time they did, for no other reason apparently than that, as Minnie expressed it, “she couldn't be bothered.” And letter-writing to Minnie really must have been a bother.
The evening her letter to Peter was written was a strenuous one for her. With sleeves rolled high above her plump elbows, the kitchen table scattered with writing paraphernalia, she would sit laboriously at her letter. She used highly scented paper, and spoiled a good deal of it in the process of writing. I would recognise that perfume as belonging to Minnie's love-letter paper now, were I to come into contact with it—clinging, heavy, I think I didn't like it. I knew all about that letter-writing, because I had to be on hand to help with the spelling. I would rush through my “homework,” pleased and rather important at helping Minnie with her private correspondence. She would even appeal to me to suggest items of news, and many a bit of Peter's letter has been mine in idea and phrasing. I don't know how these passages dovetailed into Minnie's own style, or whether Peter ever detected the hand of another in the epistles from his *inamorata*. But they ceased, those letters of double authorship, and it was only later that Minnie and Peter came together again.

Minnie had what was called “a pleasing voice,” and was always in demand at the balls and parties where dance was interpolated with song. “The Gipsy's Warning” was one of her contributions, generally followed by “Gentle Annie.” These she sang to us, too, many a time, and the voice, as I remember it, was not a Melba's. On Sunday evenings we all sang from my mother's favourite, Wesley's selection, and from Moody and Sankey's. I can hear Minnie's voice now, “Holding the Fort.” But those dances (I return to them as she did). They were excellent hearing, the little jealousies and heart-burnings, as well as the happier passages. There was one, I remember, from which Minnie arrived home before daylight—an unheard-of thing. A rift had come into the lute which, widening rapidly, had resulted in the lights (candles on wall brackets) being blown out and the candles confiscated by an offended youth, with whom the belle of the ball had refused to dance. And so, in darkness, they had to break up the revelry by night. All these things were of the newly-dawned social life of the primitive place—a social life that came into being by the natural needs of the growing up generation born there. We ourselves were too young, and in any case our parents too puritanic I suspect to give us any part in these things, except the joy of Minnie's chronicle, a chronicle of doings in which, it has since struck me, the lady herself was not a supernumerary. In the story of the outraged youth and the confiscated candles, for instance, it was Minnie herself, the implacable belle of the ball, who would not dance, and so brought darkness down. If hers was not a face to fire the topless towers of Ilium, it was surely but from lack of opportunity.

That was the year the racehorse Darriwell won the Melbourne Cup. I recall the name because so many Darriwells sprang up suddenly about us.
A young bull calf, a puppy and a cat at least we had, and about the district a confusion of horses named after the illustrious one. The fame of the racehorse filtered to us through the medium of the workingmen of the place, whose conversation at the approach of November, and through it, was full of strange, turfy terms, rather shocking to the ears of the more serious. But that year, when Minnie was in the midst of her reign, domestic and social, there was especial interest and excitement in the racing season. A bullock driver living near had won the £1,000 sweep in Tattersall's. This man became suddenly the centre of interest, and without loss of time began to play the double rôle of prodigal and Lothario. In the latter character he swept the romantic Minnie Grave off her feet, and for a time in the former rôle his presents were showered upon her. To our delighted ears she poured forth stories of the gentleman's wonderful doings, actual and prospective, and showed us certain dazzling articles of jewellery purchased for her adornment by his wealth and admiration. And then suddenly something happened. We never knew what, but Minnie's wonderful jewellery, which had increased in beauty at every gift, was made into a parcel and packed off by one of the farm-boys, as though it were a pair of old boots, to the Darriwell hero. There were some tragic days when Minnie wept constantly, and made many blunders about her work. During this sad period she found some consolation in pouring into the ears of us children stories hinging upon the faithlessness of men. These were entirely in the abstract, but tacitly we knew their source of being. Whether warned by our seniors or by our instincts I do not know we refrained from indicating that we suspected any personal application in these woeful tales of perfidy. Claribel, who had been responsible for the name of Darriwell bestowed on the puppy and kitten of a few months previously, during the heyday of the romance, changed the names of both. I shall always regard that action as illustrating the tactfulness that belongs to a delicate nature.

Ah, well! there's poetic justice in real life sometimes; the bullock driver wasted the remnant of his thousand pounds with deliberate speed, and, shorn of his trappings, rumour began to breathe many unlovely things about his name. The dénouement, indeed, has in it all that art could wish, and what life does not always give. Minnie, missing the man of moral squint, eventually gained the other, whose obliquity of vision was merely physical.
XIV

WHAT hours we used to spend in the garrulous society of the labouring men on the old farm; how happy we were fraternising with Jim, the pig-feeder, or absorbing the oracular wisdom of One-eyed Mick the while he made the axe ring: in such society we were assured of two things—a subject of real interest, whether it were the bold digging days of Victoria, or moving adventures by stranger floods and fields; secondly, that the delight of the story would not be minimised by the appendage of a moral homily. Mick, and Jim and their peers were no Æsops—the old fable-writer must, according to our experience, have been an uncle. One's relations have a knack, I have observed generally, of spoiling a narrative by a moral postscript that is much in the nature of an anti-climax. Moreover, when our graver elders discoursed to us we were obliged to listen in silent deference; we were not privileged to interrupt. Now, One-eyed Mick never reproved us for our manners when we broke in upon his recital with impatient questions, urging him, when dallying on the edge of his climax, to “hurry up.” The severest reproof he ever administered to our eagerness was, “Don't ask no questions and you won't be told no stories.”

Oh, the deeds of derring-do that we drank in from the lips of this romantic fellow and his ilk! How hard and strange must have been the
circumstances that had brought such heroic darers of fate as they had been to the necessity of drudging about our flats in the performance of obscure and unromantic chores! In spite of the gallant past, their extraordinary native capacity for large things, they had come to such poor ways! The prodigal son himself, for example had not known greater vicissitudes than had befallen Mick. But, unlike the hero of St. Luke's story, Mick wasted his substance without regrets. They drifted on, these men, never long in one place; taking life easily and with a Mark Tapley jollity—here to-day and gone to-morrow. Men learned a cheery philosophy in the hazards of the goldfields from which most of these swagmen, coming in search of a job, had wandered. The El Dorado done, the pirate ship sailed upon its last voyage on lawless seas: what may a man do but trim his life to new and quiet ways?

There was one man who for a season drove our singlefurrow plough. This was when I was very small and very credulous; but even I came at last, by much hearing of them, to notice that Tommy's stories had remarkable variations. Like the narratives of most of those tale-tellers in moleskin, his stories were usually personal, and of a character laudatory of the central figure. Tommy lacked a finger, a fact interesting and question-provoking in itself. In all he must have furnished Claribel and myself with twenty different accounts of how the mutilation befell him—accounts ranging from a drastic attack upon the unfortunate member with his own knife after a snake-bite, to a blood-curdling struggle with a brigand, during which the brigand took toll of Tommy's finger, and Tommy took toll of the brigand's head. No wonder the discrepancies in the man's narrative puzzled us; but when we frankly drew his attention to his contradictions, the unblushing comment would be, "That's true, too; it happened in several different ways." But variety lends charm, 'tis said, and it was no wonder that, like Oliver Twist, we always wanted more. No wonder, either, that the very tame themes of visiting lady friends, told with "rotatory thumbs on knees," failed to rival seriously the loquacity of these fine fellows.

There was one of these itinerant toilers who was with us many times. He, of them all, in his own person, suggested the picturesque things of which he talked. He was a delightfully lawless-looking man, Hooper, albeit quiet and unaggressive, and from my knowledge of him he never uttered a word to us children that Mr. Podsnap's Young Person might not fitly have heard. He talked little, though, and not readily, contenting himself mostly by looking the character others more commonplace aped in their tales. Hooper, in our eyes, might have been of any dark, foreign race—a Spaniard, a Mexican, even a Turk. In occupation we made him a Corsair—"linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes"—I was tasting my first
joy in Byron at the time. Claribel insisted on a noble origin, and a dark sorrow in youth that had made of Hooper a desperate wanderer. Thus we made stories about him for ourselves; now he sailed the Spanish Main; again he plumbed with Captain Nemo the depths wherein lie the bones of Clarence, and many another being of fact and fiction. I have since seen Hooper's very self the central figure of the bandits in the picture of The Brigands in our Gallery—the pale face, the dark, flung-back hair, the boldly picturesque presence of that romantic figure were Hooper's. As a mild-mannered tiller of the soil, he always carried a terrible knife at his belt, slipt in a sheath attached to the red scarf he wore round his waist. The knife was chiefly for ornamental purposes, as far as we saw. When it was put to use it was simply to cut the "meditative weed" or release a too-tight bowyang. But the knife was in keeping with our melodramatic reading of Hooper's past, and was fascinating proof of his lawless character. Though our imagination was pleasurably stimulated by all this, we had a half-fear of the man. The red sash, the dark, gleaming eyes, the mass of hair and beard—were they not terrible enough? We hovered about him as we returned to the pages of Kit Carson and of "Pirate Desborough." Once Hooper made an urgent call on the humanity of Claribel. We had taken his tea to the paddock where he was mowing oats, and found him in distress with an oaten husk in his eye. With the red handkerchief twirled at the corner, our gentle bandit was endeavouring to dislodge the intruding particle. Claribel has never ceased to boast of that brave act of hers, though in faith (was I not witness to it?) her first impulse had been incontinently to bolt, when poor Hooper, his distressed eye in fine frenzy rolling, claimed her humanity. I admit that I was passing scared myself, and was glad that the arresting call was to Claribel. She, making a virtue of the obvious necessity, did his bidding with the twirled handkerchief, while the sufferer rolled his marauder eye in truly fearsome manner. He was a grateful patient, poor Hooper, for I remember that on his next visit to the township he brought home for Claribel a beautiful handkerchief with the whole story of "This is the house that Jack built" in picture and verse upon it.

It was always the older men who appealed to us; the younger ones who tarried on our farm a while from their vagabondage were full of their themes of sport, and did not interest us greatly. But most of those who came were past their youth, as I have suggested—disillusioned gold-diggers who, sinking deep for gold—mercurial in men's fingers in those days—had come later to till the surface of the ground for other men's harvests. We loved the stories of the "roaring fifties." There was Ned, for instance. What tales he could tell of quartz "dripping with nuggets"; of winnings and of losings! He had a scar on the wrist just under the leather
band he wore tightly against the hand. He used to push this band obligingly aside to display the scar, and tell us about it when we took his afternoon tea to the paddock. There was an enthralling story of the Eureka Stockade attached, as it were, to that scar—a story that we never tired of hearing or Ned of telling. Tommy, one day, sprawled suddenly on the stubble as the result of a sneering remark about “Bill Adams and the Battle of Waterloo,” while Ned was embellishing for our satisfaction the details of his personal part in the stockade affair. Ned had a temper as well as huge muscles.

I was a favourite with the men, being even then a reader of the newspapers. I constituted myself the medium by which the huts were supplied with the weeklies as soon as the house was finished with them. There was old Edward, than whom no one of them all could with more gusto clear a dish of pudding. Without the last week's Leader for his Sunday reading, Edward was indeed an object of tidied-up desolation. He was omnivorous in all things, and in all things jealous of his prestige, and ticklish, too, about his age. The Californian gold rush was but yesterday with him, for he needs must, where all men had been adventurers, have had part in those spacious days, and yet assume the youthful jauntiness befitting a man who was not unsusceptible to the charms of Minnie Grave.

No more curious figure ever trod those virgin flats along the creek than “Old Angus.” Angus was neither old nor young, I think, yet he was one of those men it is hard to imagine were ever children—or even youthful. He wore a grey “jumper” reaching to the knees, and one saw but that and the blurred eyes looking dimly forth from the wilderness of hair that covered his head and face. A blasting-accident he told us—have I not said how greedy we were for first clauses? —had almost destroyed his sight. Still, Angus was a great reader; mere newspapers did not satisfy him, or books of passing moment. With spectacles and a powerful magnifying glass—how we loved the loan of that by which to pore upon the infinity of a caterpillar or a blade of grass!—Angus spent his spare time with “The Origin of Species” and “The Descent of Man.” I remember it was jocularly said the man himself looked not unlike a “missing link” in his hairiness and primitive attire. He is the only man of the swag-carrying fraternity I have ever known who bore about with him such literature. The volumes, not long published then, were expensive to buy, and looking back I reflect that only a deep love of their profound themes could have caused the itinerant Angus, half blind and wholly poor, to weight his swag with such books. Darwin's was a strange name to my ears then, and in my later reverence for the bringer of the new cosmos I have wished that I had been of an understanding age when that shaggy old idolater of his, book and magnifying glass in hand, descanted upon the great discoveries. As it is, I
have a hazy recollection of unintelligible words, stumblingly uttered, as Angus gave them to my mother, or, his poor sight failing, of his coming to her with the book, to read some enthralling portion. She, poor soul, regarded the theories of those pages as impious, and I know that only kindness for the man's infirmity set her, notwithstanding her faltering repugnance, among those ungodly pages.

There was Peter, who always sang hissingly through his teeth while he milked old “Blackie,” our first cow, and who never sang at any other time. He declared that “Blackie” put the music into him. Poor “Blackie”! And Frank Murphy! What memoir of those times would be complete without mention of him? He bent eternally over a potatofork in the mellow autumn afternoons. What a pride he took in laying the potatoes, as he dug them, in neat rows for the pickers-up! His recreation was a short pipe and a long fishing-rod. These things were his “glass of wine.” Full many a dish of fine blackfish Frank provided for our breakfast—his pleasure was in the catching, not in the eating of them. He had some kind of magic that lured the fish to his hook when no one else could land one. Then there was Speckly George—just “Speckly George”; his surname, along with that of many another of those wanderers, was hopelessly lost under the spontaneous intrusion of a picturesque nickname. “Speckly George” had a hobby, too. Nearsightedly he would bend over a piece of machinery, mending or making for pastime when not as part of his day's work; he never spoke, but of machinery; his soul—if he had one—was caught securely in the cogs. He was a mute, inglorious Stephenson, a Watt guiltless of a steam engine. Poor “Speckly George,” his monomania sent him at last to “Yarra Bend,” where, as was gruesomely said, he walked round and round in a circle all day, whim-horse to his own imaginary invention.

I remember a young horsebreaker, who later deliberately broke his own neck, as I heard them tell. It was somewhere up-country after a drinking bout. He was a fair-haired, innocent youth when he first ran our little “Jewel” in the long-shafted cart. It seemed an unforgettable tragedy to us, that suicide of one we had known, and it is so to me still. It haunted me at night, and Claribel and I would clutch each other, thinking of the rope and all.

What endless work the procession of the seasons demanded of the labourers on that virgin soil, producing its ever-springing harvest of intruding vegetation that sought to oust the interloping that the settler brought to supplant it! The natural primal owners of the soil—inheritors of it from far Darwinian eras of time—they died hard, springing, it seemed, almost under the eradicating blade. What a forest of hands, a myriad of
muscles went from first to last to the clearing, the sowing, the harvesting, the making, and repairing of that little span of fertile valley land during the days of my recollections. And since those who laboured there were rovers smitten with the inconsequence of *wanderlust*, moving on, and ever on, it is no wonder that when I look back it is a long procession that I see filing across the changing face of the old spot. They were of those days, those labouring men, and of my picture of my childhood, rough, yet kind, full of virtues and of faults; and they take their due place in the commonalty of those impressionable years.
**Red-Letter Days**

IN these times there are no red-letter days, the days I still have a childlike longing for, perhaps because they never come! The old-time Red Letter Day has, I fear, really gone out with the primitive and simple life of the pioneer outback years; or it has flown farther and farther into the wilds, even as the emu and the lyre-bird have retreated before the invading sociabilities of man. Where I am now, the occasional day does not exist; the unceasing surfeit of events, of entertainments, has killed it: sophistication has made it a thing of yesterday. With it has gone the keenness of one's palate for the anticipation of happenings, the delight in participation, and the sweet joys of never-fading retrospect. The picture-house unreality alone would have made an end of it. There are those who say that it is childhood's zest that gives the glamour, the rosy hue to occasion: that sets the colours in the memory and the imagination faithfully to last through the more critical years. But I know it is not so; I know that such days have power to find us young if they had but elbowroom in our calendar. Such an one caught me unawares, but responsive, not long since, in an aloof place where rustics sported. And Claribel says so, too; and she knows; she has had even more than I of the over-plus of sociabilities, and
of mental confectionery on her daily dish. Yet the occasional great day, caught in its passing on a country green, found her in the sudden experience ready to meet it with the old-time thrill of heart and rhythm of toe.

Our first Red Letter Day of the Bark House era was, as my remembrance goes, very much a domestic one. It was a Christmas Day, when issuing from a bustle of preparations, dressed in our finest clothing, we, and the family of my aunt, set forth in our respective chariots—commodious drays drawn by “Nugget” and “Dolly.” Our destination was the home —more primitive even than our own bark castle—of a bachelor friend of my father's, newly settled near us. 'Twas a great ride that, over the bumpy bush-track, the ups and downs of which sent us anon into each other's arms from our improvised seats. There was a wealth of late bush-flowers, which, as the red-letter spirit had entered into our pliant parents also, took us often to the ground and into the bush about us for the trailing garments of glory. We were all decked when we arrived at the journey's end, and so were old “Nugget” and “Dolly,” the geniuses of the wheels. The sturdy draughts stepped proudly with their festoons from collar, winkers and saddle; from all and any part of their gear that would offer a buckle or a crevice. We were a holiday party when we reached the loftily perched home of John Parker, away in the back hills. What a climb it was to the house from the last pinch where the vehicles had to be left; but when we arrived what a world lay spread beneath! We gasped with delight, for it was our first seeing of the blue distant wonder that was the prelude to the ocean. It might have been the sky at which we gazed, for the moment silent upon the peak; only it was not the sky, but the mystical sea come by magic almost to the feet of the little inlanders. The blue of the sky melted into the glimmer of the water or the water into it. There were puffs and wisps of smoke from steamers about the Entrance, as our host told us, giving a realistic touch to the marvel, and making it for our elders—one with the story of romance and of reminiscence. Of the more mundane joys of the feast of that day I remember best the huge plum-pudding—proudly proclaimed as the work of our wifeless but competent friend. My mother and aunt praised it while they ate; our synonym for praise was our appetite. Like Adam Bede, we each had “twice o' puddin',” and I fancy it was only the interpolatory shake of my aunt's head that held Dick from falling into the indiscretion of a third supply of the be-raisined beauty. It was a wonderful day, even though it held the inevitable mishap—if so slight a thing as a fall into the creek from a sharp declivity can be counted such. Dick—did I not say it was his shin that suffered?— was rather important, displaying in the aftermath a leg much decorated with sticking plaster (supplied by our host, who was ready
for any emergency), a limb already veteran in the matter of honourable scars.

The leaping mind refuses to be chronological; the next Red Letter Day from the past is well away from my mere infancy, and sees me crowned by eight summers, and, to be literal, an extra winter, since I was an autumn comer to this planet.

There had straggled into being, a mile or two away from us, a township, which in a haphazard fashion perched itself on either side of the little creek that here ran among steep hillsides. Sociability and business demanded a neighbourly crossing of the stream, and a bridge had “been built for the ratepayers”—I heard my uncle phrase it so. The opening of this bridge for general traffic—heretofore we had known but cobble-stones—made occasion for a real Red Letter Day. To the celebration came everybody. We children saw there more strangers at once than we had seen in all our lives before. There was, of course, a feast; my mother and all the other matrons of the district had baked and boiled for that. There were hams and turkeys, and tarts and cakes, and I know not what else. I tasted my first grapes at that feast, in a place that grew none. As I remember the purple spray allotted to me, those grapes were by no means sour, though Lucy Speary, seated beside me, having devoured her own share, tried to persuade me that they were. The oldest lady inhabitant of the place opened the bridge. We had a vantage spot, and saw the ribbon cut that stretched across its approach; we saw the bottle of wine broken as well. Claribel was shocked at that, it seemed such a violent action, the breaking of glass, and such a wasteful one to a soul frugal as hers. The folks laughed, we saw, when old Tommy, who worked for us, and who was making holiday with the rest, evidently also frugal of soul, edged up and secured a drop of the unspilled wine from the broken bottle. That was the first time I heard a speech made. Claribel and I, resplendent in new hats and frocks, all made from a silk dress of my mother's city days, heard it from our seats in a spring-cart, wherein we had, like Timotheus, with other diminutives, been “placed on high.” The “local Member” it was who made the speech. I remember only the grey beard, the emphasising hand, and a phrase or two. “This auspicious occasion,” he said it several times, as though he liked the sound of it as much as Claribel and I did; only Claribel saying it afterwards had it “suspicious,” which made Dick laugh, though he never ventured to set her right. The speech made a great impression upon us; not the matter of it, but the fact of it. I made a speech myself soon after this at Fred's birthday picnic on the hillside; and we all “hip-hipped” after it as the Member and the people had done at the opening of the bridge.

Going to school on the first occasion made a Red-Letter Day, though it
held its fears, too, and the importance of the event faded into the light of common days later on by a toofrequent repetition. Then the coming of a city relative to visit us, or the going away of one after a sojourn with us. In this last the excitement was dashed with some natural pensiveness. We had somewhat spectacular ideas of farewelling parting guests. Till the top of the long hill put them on the high road, swallowing them up into the strange world again, we waved to the visitors from the roof of my aunt's dairy—the point that gave them longest to our view, and us to theirs. Fred and A.H., to outdo the smaller, feeble fry, on one occasion of this kind, hoisted from the dairy roof the counterpane from their mother's bed upon two poles in valedictory honour of their favourite aunt—one who had left them rich in “marbles,” not that that, of course, had anything to do with their affection for her!

There were horse races now and then in the M'Dermots' big paddock, and some fine reckless riding on a track that circled deftly round among the red-gum trees. The spectators watched the proceedings from the centre of the wide ring from such “grand stands” as stumps and fallen logs. We all used to go with our parents to this “fixture,” as Peter M'Gregor called it; we used to wonder at the word. These were the only horse-races our parents approved, and that, I fancy, because they were under the auspices of some Presbyterian people, and were innocent of the usual vices. At any rate, if there was betting or gambling carried on at those sports it was not known to the sedate, or to the very young. I remember on one of those occasions an amateur jockey was thrown in a race, two horses galloping over him before he could scramble clear, which he finally did quite scathless. Dick, Claribel and Fred, imitating the performance later, failed to repeat it exactly; Dick, in consequence, receiving a blow on the head from the foot of one of the horses leaping over him—actually from the heel of one of Claribel's stout school shoes.

When one goes into the psychology of the Red-Letter Day—or the human psychology that makes such days stand forth from the ordinary calendar—one finds that even in the least eventful life there are numbers of them. There was for us, for instance, the day when a new member of the family arrived—an event always as mysterious as unexpected, and of as cogent interest to us, whether happening in our aunt's house or in our own—and it used to occur impartially turn and turn about in each family. The coming of itinerant callers and other breakers-in upon the even tenor of our quiet life, I have before spoken of. The great Red-Letter Days were those which projected us outward as it were, taking us into the communal life. They meant a going out; the adventure of meeting our neighbours rather than some mere domestic happening. I could talk much of trifles
belonging to the latter category, even of the milestone events that happen to one's inner being. . . . But for the present I am for the more physical adventures. Nothing more important, or, I should say, nothing that made us feel more important, happened to our childhood than the incidence of a sweeping attack of the measles that sent all the juveniles of the household down like nine-pins, and served in the same way our young cousins and playmates across the paddock.

The mad pranks played in convalescence are my chief recollections of this time. I faintly recollect that I felt ill, and have memory of seeing myself, in a hand-glass, strangely speckled, but all that must have soon passed, and the rest was fun. I have no doubt that our two mothers regarded it all otherwise, when I remember the fugitive fittings out of bed, and the premature and clandestine games with our afflicted young cousins, who were likewise supposed to be safe in their beds a long paddock-space away from us.

In more advanced times there was the opening of the Mechanics' Institute. That was a great occasion! We saw people dance for the first time on a real polished floor, in real set dances, and to “proper music”—not to the strains of a concertina or other such simple instrument to which the labouring men used to swing round sometimes in the evenings. Indeed, I found myself, embarrassed and incapable, on the floor at the Mechanics' ball. Tom Speary pulled my shy feet along, and whirled me about somehow, for a few minutes to drop me giddy beside his sister Lucy, who laughed at me in a fine superior way, she being, despite her youth, a seasoned devotee to those old dances no longer known in this age of jazzing. There were, of course, always the annual socials when once the church had been built. These used to seem exciting affairs, though looking back I fancy that our lack of sophistication may have given a glamour to the festivities not altogether inherent in their nature. I remember that even at the time some of the speeches, after the feasting part of the celebration was over, used to tire us. I have memory of trying to stifle a yawn on an occasion when our minister was making what was called “the financial statement,” and wondering how it was that the older folks seemed so interested. I remember, too, that we came to know, after several of these socials, what joke one of the visiting ministers was going to tell next, before the joke actually came. Claribel and Dick came to some trouble on one occasion for mimicking, in the presence of my aunt, one of the divines who had lent his oratory to our church social, and whose native Scots dialect had not been unduly adulterated by a more cultured accent. There were, of course, rivalries, and a few ruffled feelings in connection with those socials now and then. I remember being struck when still very young
by the fact that Christians (in the special sense) had tempers as well as wicked folks, when Mrs. Speary spoke rudely to Mrs. M'Dermot, because all the visiting ministers had sat at Mrs. M'Dermot's table at the tea meeting. Claribel, commenting on the incident afterwards, thought that Mrs. Speary was not “redeemed,” whereupon Dick gave her certain Scriptural texts calculated to confound such drastic reasoning. We were all great little theologians in those days, brought up, as Nat Jones, the horse breaker, used to say (with a shade of contempt), “between the leaves of the Bible.”

A Red-Letter Day was that on which I first went for a trip to the city. My childhood was almost past before that happened, and it fell that I had formed an inflated idea regarding some things, and in the experience there was much dissipating of romantically conceived notions. I was a stranger in a strange land on that first visit to the world of streets and crowded houses, and, disillusioned, I was glad to set my feet upon soft grass again, and to feel the quiet of the trees about me. Yet for all that the visit to the city gave me glimpses and sights, suggestions and impulses, that added much to the gatherings of my secluded days. And so its mark is on my calendar.

It was long in that old place of my early home before any of the native born young people were old enough to be married. But marriage, like death, is bound sooner or later to come wherever there are human folk. When Molly Speary got married there was a wonderful party at her parents' house. Everyone was there to the smallest infant, and there was such a night of fun as never before was known in that part of the world. It seemed that people who had long forgotten how to dance rediscovered the lost art under the inspiration of Dave Sparrow's violin, and forthwith seized and taught the mazy mysteries to others who never had known them before. And the speeches, the feasting, the songs! The roast sucking pigs were all that art can add to nature; the wit of the speeches had scarce a fine finish, and the songs had in the rendering perhaps less of melody than of good fellowship and sentiment. But what of that! “On with the dance” was the order of the night. As for the singing, it was generally the older people who ventured, and the oldtime songs, to which they turned lip and heart. Mood and moment gave a forgotten courage, and the forgotten song came to lips long used to prose. I remember Mrs. Hamden's eye—she such a matter-of-fact soul when one went on an errand to her house!—shining with a tear, as, seated with her youngest on her lap, she sang that old song with the refrain, “the beating of my own heart was the only sound I heard.” I remember, too, Mr. Marsden, whose voice was rough beyond most others when he shouted to the plough horses, becoming very soft and tender to
“Annie Laurie.” I remember also George Rendle, who had a blue anchor on his wrist, and who used to tell us when we asked him about it, that it was a “birth-mark”—though what that was we did not know. I remember him singing something about “Yo Ho, Boys,” and pretending to pull ropes in the air to such effect that he had to repeat the performance three times. I remember much more also. I remember, in fact, everything that took place at that party, even to the burning of my eyes when we faced out to the cool, keen air to go home at daybreak. . . . And Molly Speary's eldest daughter is now “a woman grown and wed,” and Molly herself a grandmother.
SHE lived with a bachelor brother in a slab house about a mile and a half distant from our home. It was however such a wet flat that lay between the two houses, that going to Miss McGregor's was quite an adventure. But for all that my mother, accompanied by some of us young ones, often presented herself at the wide doorway of the McGregor establishment. There were attractions at that house. . . . But first of all a word as to the way thither. That portion of the valley as already suggested had received more than a fair share of the soakage of the hills, and beside the ordinary rank growth of that region there were in that part of it several large permanent swamps where flourished rushes and tussocks of immense size. Duckweed, redshank and "bottle washers" thrived about the shallows, and waterfowl might always be seen (or at least heard) among those ambushes. Fallen trees with half-submerged limbs sprawled in the tangles from which a strange dank smell arose.

A frog concert party was always in session somewhere in the swamps, and right weird music it made. There was every known kind of frog in that jungle, and all vocal. As well, each frog played some sort of instrument, mostly something stringed and twangy, though there were some basses and
drums as well, and thin-toned contraptions, very shrill and teetery—specially used, I suspect, by the tadpoles. We liked to linger about that place, and to listen to the strange sounds on our way to Miss McGregor's, though always a little jumpy for it was well known that a bunyip had now and then been seen in the most frog-haunted part of this marsh.

Cranes and shags—for some reason we called these last Moscovy Ducks—were everlastingly to be seen there, the cranes elegantly balanced upon one leg, thoughtful among the red-shanks, their legs aptly mimicking the colour of the surroundings; the shags, foul and unfriendly, knowing themselves Pariahs, lurking farther afield.

Here and there a black stump or a half-charred tussock showed where Mr. McGregor had been trying to carry his clearing operations into the very fastnesses of the wilderness. But the marsh repulsed; it was many years after the rest of his flats had been broken into sweetening furrows, before these swampy patches ceased to be the home of aquatic birds, beasts and plants.

The track, such as it was that led to the McGregors', skirted this quaggy place, but in the winter time the swamps were wont to spread, and to impinge upon the path until what had been dry land was treacherous quagmire. How we used to leap from tussock to tussock, now and then mistaking a duck-weeded surface of water for solid ground, and getting sadly messed in consequence! I remember my mother once saying to Miss McGregor after having made one of these perilous passages to the house beyond the swamps, that the thing was a test of friendship, and Miss McGregor agreeing that it was, for she often braved wet feet and bedraggled skirts to visit us.

The McGregor house was approached by a fine orchard, culminating in a shrubbery that extended to the wide-portalled door. The orchard always seemed to have very attractive fruit upon its trees. The McGregors' apples and pears hung late, and amid naked branches I have seen quinces like incandescent bowls aloft in the twilight of an autumn evening. “Never gather your pip fruit till the frosts begin,” Mr. McGregor used to say. Had he been deliberately philanthropic to the jays and leatherheads of the nearby ranges he could not have conceived a more hospitable watchword. As one opened the rickety gate that led to the orchard, cries from bird thieves went up, and insolent yellow eyes reproached half fearfully the interrupters of a spread feast.

The shrubbery had in it all sweet-smelling things, and as it seemed they were always a-bloom. Laburnums yellow as the quinces, elderberry trees with their flowers of sickly aroma, currant bushes, lilacs, oak-leafed geraniums, sweet-scented verbenas, and about the feet of these, fox gloves,
sweet williams, and shy-eyed pansies and hearts-ease, and under a native
musk bush, and a bold laurelstina, umbrella'd among their own leaves for
still greater retirement, grew English violets. Among, and over the larger
shrubs, scrambling to reach door and window lintel, were honey-suckle
and periwinkle—the last, the only thing there of unpleasant odour, but not
so till one crushed a leaf. What a shrubbery that was! My aunt and my
mother loved to take a sprig of the currant bush home with them to be used
as an adjunct to the tea brew, and now and then Miss McGregor supplied
them also with some laurel leaves, these I think were used to flavour
blancmange.

The wide-portalled door was consistently wide open, so wide then was
the space from post to post that an elephant might have entered the room
beyond it without grazing a flank, and so high it was too that a giraffe
going in might have kept his head raised. Suchlike freakish imaginings as
to the possible uses to which that doorway could be put, came sometimes
to Claribel and me. Indeed we were as riotous in our fancies about that as
the vegetation without was in its growth. Dick once pertinently inquired of
Miss McGregor why they had such a wide door. The question was ignored
by our hostess who was of the period and the belief that rude little boys
should in that way be snubbed. But for all that the thither side of the wide
door held hospitality of a comprehensive kind.

The McGregors were Edinburgh folk, and Edinburgh folk under
whatsoever alien skies fate may cast their later lot, remain Edinburgh folk.
Heart, memory, and tongue are loyal to Auld Reekie. I have, through my
father's race something of the Scot in my blood, but definitely I trace my
love for Scotland, its history and traditions from my early associations with
the McGregors, especially with Miss McGregor.

She loved to pour forth to a sympathetic audience her memories, and the
wealth of lore she possessed about the old grey town—and beyond it. Of
the history of her land she discoursed with fervour, and with a decided
viewpoint. The foundations of the lady's being had been laid down in
Presbyterianism. Had not her father been an elder of one of the Edinburgh
kirks—I'm ashamed to have forgotten what kirk it was, so well coached in
the fact as I have been.

Miss McGregor had no more patience with “wrong viewpoints” than had
Jenny Geddes. The “historic mile” she had footed along almost daily in her
girlhood, and it had steeped its influences deep. The dour John Knox was a
gospel in himself, but so subtly fashioned, and so varied are the strands that
make up the most soberly-knit soul, as dearly held in Miss McGregor's
heart was Bonnie Prince Charlie; Mary Queen of Scots was a beatification
rather than a woman, though some more critical of that unfortunate queen,
have found a very human and faulty side to her.

Sir Walter, man and writer! How much poorer I should have been had I gathered my knowledge of and feeling for that great man from a less panegyric source! Miss McGregor's rhapsodical lips gave the plus—the romance. And with that did she not also give us the soul of the bonnie hills of Highland and of Lowland? The statue in Princes' Street, Arthur Seat, the Castle; all these things I saw with the eye of a conducted imagination at Miss McGregor's fireside full thirty-five years before my physical eyes actually rested upon them.

And Burns? Reverence there ran to idolatry. Miss McGregor was not alone in that; never have I known a sober Scot who could talk of the Lad of Ayr and remain sober. We had a long loan from the house of the wide door of a margined copy of the “Poems.” Hard reading for a small Australian even when thus helped. On the whole we preferred to hear Miss McGregor's rendering with spoken annotations. But for all that the loan volume gave us a bigger Burns than we had known, for we found that Miss McGregor had Bowderlised her idol. Claribel and Dick giggled over the poem about the lady's bonnet in church, and “Holy Willie's Prayer” had an unholy fascination for me. My mother's mere Englishness was disposed to make her wonder that a lady of Miss McGregor's circumspect mental and spiritual port, should possess a book that made so light as that one did of the overindulgence in malted liquors. But such a criticism she dared not utter.

“Good Words” in the brick-red covers of the monthly parts, grew year by year more bulky on the shelves in the McGregor parlour. They had begun to grow there from the date of the McGregors' arrival in the district, indeed the earlier bundles dated from the time of their leaving Scotland. All neatly sorted, and arranged in piles on the shelves, read, conned, and remembered! Those sacred pages, what good things they contained; what solid things too. “Sermons preached before the Queen at Balmoral” by the editors (in turn), Drs. Norman and Donald McLeod. How dignified in tone, how well shapen (rather unreadable nevertheless to a young Sassenach (born south). One skipped through those pages of the beloved magazine, wondering somewhat at the deference paid by the Almighty (through the lips of his servants) to Good Queen Victoria. Truly an anthropomorphic Deity.

But there were the things that we revelled in between the covers of the books borne home along the swampy track from time to time. Many a fine story, remembered to this day by some of us, many a travel article that thrilled in an age when all the world of men did not run about this globe of ours. Ah, so many wonderful tours we stay-at-homes took while gathered
about our own hearthrug!

Miss McGregor was an established “old maid,” one of the few in that district of the (then) supposedly forlorn sisterhood. She must have been nearly forty when we first knew her, an age which from the low altitude of our own years seemed quite old. I imagine that Miss McGregor had never been a beauty; her features were large and roughly-made, her complexion swarthy, and she was stout and squat of figure. Her disposition was assuredly pleasanter than her face, or she would not have been so popular with us. . . . Ah “old maid”: but Jack found his Jill.

The minister visiting at our house one afternoon threw a bomb. He had just come from uniting Miss McGregor in Holy Matrimony to a “confirmed bachelor” who lived farther up the valley. No one had suspected the romance that was taking place under our very eyes; chiefly no doubt because wooer and wooed were so “unsuspectable.” He was a man of retiring disposition, and of few words; when he spoke it was of last year's crops, or of the prospects for the next season's. Women he had seemed to avoid. I remember once when he was helping with our harvest, this man of Miss McGregor's had hurt a finger, and rather than submit to my mother binding it up, his shyness had caused him to go for days with a dirty and ensanguined rag about the injury. An unpropitious pair for Cupid, yet he (if it were not propinquity—who surely is an entity too) flung the noose about them.

No wonder that the minister's bomb reverberated along the valley; the news surprised us all, and according to our years and our outlook, we debated it. Claribel and I knew of nothing in “Lady Revelstone's Lovers,” or in “The Handsome Heir of Gilderdane” (our favourite books of the hour) that could throw any light as to how this thing had occurred. Romance, we were discovering, assumes many and strange forms.

At any rate Miss McGregor was no longer Miss McGregor, though it was some time before her new name tripped feathly from people's lips. Indeed my aunt seemed strangely unable to un-McGregor the lady, she was like the folk in “Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch,” to whom Miss Hazy always remained Miss Hazy despite the addition of a husband. But unlike the romance in Mrs. Hegan Rice's story, Miss McGregor's matrimonial venture was a success. If the affair lacked some of the elements that our youthful sentimentality demanded should accompany such matters, the marriage of our friend had many blessings attending it—a good home was, I know, one asset. And that home had a wide door too, wide enough at least to allow the passage through it of her old friends. And to “Miss McGregor's” new home we went, and continued to bear away from her keeping, bundles of the brick-red covered “Good Words” that she had
taken there with her.

Time, and wifely influences, humanised her unsocial mate, making him in later years our friend too. He never became a talker, but better than that he was a good listener to his wife's favourite themes. On occasions I have been present when there was discourse at his fireside of Scott, of Bur-rns (how she rolled the “r”) of Prince Charlie, or of John Knox. At such times I have observed a quiet twinkle in his eye, a humorous smile playing over his definitely English features.
The Old Bookshelf

ALL the books that had been saved from many vicissitudes were on the three little shelves that fitted into the niche on one side of the wide chimney of the livingroom. The sofa stood under the shelves, and in very early times formed a handy mounting-place for a book-curious child. Many a time, there must have been footmarks left on its clear chintz covering: old-fashioned it was, that sofa of red-gum wood, and polished by my father's hand. The books reachable over the polished arm of that old sofa were a wonderland to an eager brain. They brought, indeed, many worlds to us without our going out adventuring.

That isolated little library, when one got within its pages, was not without some claim to being what the sale catalogues might call “well-selected.” The selection had been made by a process of elimination; the books on those shelves represented the irreducible minimum of much gathering, and many sheddings of change and travel—the changes and travels of our parents in the nomadic days of early Victoria. Those dim and faded covers held volumes prized as often for their associations as for their contents; they as often, perhaps, reflected the taste of the giver as the taste of the
recipient. And yet, thrown together in that sense by chance, and kept for reasons of sentiment, it was, I reflect, an extraordinarily good little library.

I must have explored the shelves early. I can remember the joy, first presided over by my mother, of dividing the long words into syllables, and so getting the sound if not always the sense, out of them. Poetry was, I remember early a delight to my ear, even much of it that was above my understanding. It was the first music I knew—that and the winds singing down the chimney or sighing through the sheoaks on the hillside. Beauty of sound at least entered into us, and gave us many a rhythmic hour, though the truth, embodied in the tale was not always understood. It was I suspect, much like reading a mystic might be to-day to the grown-up understanding, though we had more of joy possibly, and less of puzzlement. There was much sentimental poetry in some of these books, the authors of which had a fame only of the album and valentine order. Such books had my mother's name in them, the cause of their embalmment there being, visibly enough, sentimental. There was one in particular of these sweetmeat books which appealed to Claribel and me. It was a large, flat album, on the delicately-tinted pages of which were mounted gay valentines, displaying sportive or plaintive Cupids—to our imagination babies made ready for the bath! There were arrow-pierced hearts with languishing sentiments subscribed. It seemed that a whole galaxy of swains had been desperate about my mother, but later we knew that that was merely the way of the young men of the sixties or thereabouts. None of them ever died so far as I have heard, from unrequited affection; neither have the ladies of the period been noted as bigamists or polygamists in any sense. It was a beautiful book, that scrap-album, and a mine of interest on a wet day. We knew eventually what was on each page ere we turned the leaf, but the knowledge never staled the book. It reeked of early Victorian sentiment from cover to cover. And such beautiful handwriting as it was! the men's like copperplate, uncorrupted by the hurry of to-day; the women's delicate, as though writ by a fairy's pen. It taught me, that book, that poets and the inspirers of poets were not a mystic race apart. How could I miss that fact in reading these odes to the eyebrows of the woman who tucked me up at night? It made poetry a homely thing and yet conversely gave a romantic value to the guardian of my days, moving quietly about her household tasks.

It did more, and perhaps a less valuable thing: it set my little feet a-toddling amongst the perilous feet of poesy. I put it so without punning intent. Such ardent verses I wrote, modelled on those of that album—verses to imaginary beings, beings unresponsive to the asseverations of my tortured heart! All this was at a time when I had ceased to need the chintz-covered sofa as a ladder to the bookshelf—I may have been 11 or 12. My
verses were relished by Claribel; I am grateful to her to this day, remembering this. Annie more matter-of-fact, bluntly dismissed them as “trash,” and was consequently deprived henceforth of the privilege of hearing them.

The little shelves had a few stories upon them, of a really enthralling nature, and while the rage for them lasted, it ran through us like a fever—the dull-covered, much travelled books were oftener in their places than heretofore. It was a temporary decline in taste, that rage for the “Family Herald” kind of reading, it staled the literature that hitherto had charmed. I don't know how it began; it just came; the mood does not belong, I suspect, to accident at all, but has actually a deep psychological basis. It put Claribel and me, I know, out of tune with our boy cousins for the time being. Dick's rage was for wild adventures round the pole at the time, and Jules Verne had just suggested the reign of frightfulness by his wonderful submarine. These things and Fennimore Cooper's scalps were all very well; but we were for other regions and interests, too, and so Dick, out of alignment with us, had to carry his enthusiasm elsewhere.

As we ceased to go to the old literary fountain-head—the bookshelves in the chimney corner—for our reading, so, too, we ceased to keep our books in ordinary places. The volume we were reading reposed between times, it might be, in a sheltered log over the hill-top by the mail-box. What a long time it used to take in those days to post the letters with which we awaited the passing mailman!—he came early or late, according to the interest of our tale. A native cat or a hare sometimes jumped out at us from the hiding-place of “So Fair, So False,” and the “Duke's Secret,” and between rainy days a mouse had nibbled the most exciting part of “For Her Only” as it reposed deep in the hayloft of the old barn. Now and then we lost by confiscation a half-read tale. I remember coming upon my father one day—how he found it is a mystery—reading with a smile unusual to him a paper-covered treasure, entitled “Heart for Heart.” The book remained in his care, but only after a discussion bordering upon argument. If I wanted love stories, there was Romeo and Juliet, or Ophelia. He went on helping his memory by a visit to the shelves in the corner, which caused him to pass from Shakespeare into biography and history, and finally to Scripture. I felt that anyone who could be satisfied with the unembellished story of Jacob and Rachel could not appreciate the situation. How we obtained all this absorbing literature I cannot remember; but I recollect that we were first introduced to its fascinations by a girl much older than ourselves. She knew life through this medium, and to us appeared an oracle. I fear, from certain whispers that have since come to me, that real life has for her long ago roughly corrected this innocent delusion of Minnie Speary's.
But all this is of our aberrations, and not of the shelves at all. I know that Claribel and I returned to the books that stood for good taste as well as for respectability. And before we had turned aside to the flesh-pots of melodrama we had tasted of faery and of much else. To go back to the days when our reading was helped out by laborious spelling and the hand-in-hand delight of accompanying pictures, the first story-book that I really remember was an old "Peter Parley's Annual." It was a soiled, water-stained volume—my mother's ship was wrecked at the Heads, and most of their belongings had lain a full week in a flooded hold. There were several pages of dragons—that's the acutest memory—illustrating some terrible story of times when dragons were apparently as familiar as iguanas were to us. They were an old style of iguana, in fact, but more terrible. The dragons did not stop at robbing hens' nests; they spat flames at people who incurred their displeasure, and did all sorts of awful things. The red eyes, fangs, and claws of these creatures got into our dreams sometimes, and I know there was a period when Claribel was afraid to go into our bedroom in the dark. There were many wonders in that book; tales with moral tags attached to them about children who did not obey; little girls who were vain. This last Claribel finally tore out of the book in a fit of chagrin, for it had a habit of pointing an allusion whenever she had a new ribbon or frock.

There was also a book of fairy-tales containing many stories I've not since seen. Some of them, I recollect dealt with the subject of evil step-mothers and sadly misused step-daughters.

We had a "History of England," of which the first volume was missing, and until I went to school, aged eight, I had not heard how the race of kings and queens (and incidentally of soldiers and citizens) came to England. Of the volume we had, the best-loved part was that about Henry VIII., because he was the most terrible person in the book. His fat face with the plumed hat turned up at one side always evoked our childish abuse, and declarations of how we would have served him for his Bluebeard habits. Little savages! It was the "eye for an eye" dictum with us! Standing in the courtyard of the Tower of London, and looking on the inscription shown there on a brass tablet, I remembered that old print in the history-book of the chimney corner many years after. There are named amongst others, two of Henry's beheaded wives, and the place is shown as "the saddest spot in England."

There was a number of religious books on those shelves. There had been an era of sermon-publishing before and during the youth of our parents, and terrible evidence of it was preserved there. Such dreary pages! such boring, unilluminating discourses! Their chief object must have been to make people aware of the wretchedness of this world. And the print of
those books was always small; the paper yellowed; the lines close set. Printed sermons were surely in the interest of the oculist. There were books of meditations, of prayers, of reflections (mostly gloomy reflections), and there was “Kitto's Bible Readings,” in five volumes; the works of Josephus; several “lives” of divines, with scattered pictures of funny, bewigged men. We passed such books over, wondering sometimes to see one or other of them in the hands of our elders on Sunday afternoons. I have, indeed, wickedly wondered if that had not something to do with my father's tendency to drop off to sleep on Sunday afternoons. But “Pilgrim's Progress” lured us always; that breathless romance and adventure of the spirit, written by the tinker of Bedford, who had an art lacking in all the learned divines on the shelves.

The only other book in this section in which we were interested was Spurgeon's “John Ploughman's Talk”—a book very popular in those days among the Nonconformists. Its breezy style of presenting otherwise possibly uninteresting matter to our understanding made it acceptable for the Sunday evening after-tea hour.

Of the few novels of this company of books was “Uncle Tom's Cabin.” This book, too, had been in the hold of the wrecked ship, and bore some traces of its adventure. It was dear to us, also, by the history of its coming there. It was my mother's book; yet not wholly hers. Just published when her people were leaving the Old Land, the book was the rage in London: a friend gave them a copy to read on the way out. It was then to have been passed on to someone in New South Wales, vaguely supposed to be near Melbourne, but of no definite address. The book was never applied for by anyone in Australia Felix, and so remained with my mother. This was one of our earliest stories, and was read aloud to us in the evenings by our parents in turn. I had a childish pose. That which might cause Claribel to lapse into tears was quite incapable of affecting me. When she, on the hearth-rug, dissolved at the death of Eva, I contrived to remain dry-eyed. It was Old Prue's tale in Aunt Dinah's kitchen that finally sent my head down.

In Dickens—who came later, when I could read aloud to the circle—I remember that we often succumbed to the pathos which critics have nowadays discovered the great Englishman had in excess. But we found this pathos too in “Ouida” (surreptitiously read); the death of Cigarette in “Under Two Flags” was to us not less distressful than the end of Desdemona or of Juliet. Who, I wonder, is the most reliable authority on what should move us to tears in art—the unseasoned reader or the case-hardened critic? How well-remembered are the books read in early youth, especially those read aloud as ours were read; each night's portion discussed the following day! How real to us were the characters of
Dickens, and what a gallery of them were limned out for us by the jolly log fires of that wide hearth on those uninterrupted evenings of long ago! Truly a joy for ever! How we loved them and lived with the characters, peopling familiar spots with them!

Of biography, nothing stands out like the Boswell's "Life of Johnson," that stood bulkily on the top shelf. That I read mostly to myself to the murmur of summer bees in the old orchard. I thought it then the best biography in the world, and so I still think it, and in this at least I have the world with me. The dear old man! All his ugly person, his bearish ways, I loved; he seemed like a whole world to me. I don't know of any more ample book. I fancy the one biography on those shelves was well-chosen; it was such an expanding book. Stay! there was another biography—leaving aside several tiresome self-chronicles of fanatical-faced divines which found place there. I was led to "Moore's Life of Byron" through the charmed gates of the romantic, and the passionate poetry of the poet himself, whom Moore so idolised. Byron's poems, because of the dim unpleasing cover that compassed them, for long escaped my attention.

But when I explored—you must go to Keats' sonnet on Chapman's "Homer" for my feelings! Chin in hand, many a time on the summer grass, I lay responding to the throb of that fiery heart. And then Moore's "Life" telling such human things about the man—with all its repressions as I afterwards learned. Still to me, at least, there is for ever the man between those pages of his friend's writing. I care for no other aspect. It gives the only Byron we ought to want; passionate, faulty, audacious enough, and nothing worse. Claribel and I knew half of "Childe Harold" in those days, and much of his "Don Juan" too. We took no hurt. The fascination was certainly not an evil one. It is apparent that we had no idea that the book was taboo to children, for I was found reading it in innocent enjoyment one day by a relative of severe mind, and after that the book disappeared from the shelves. The explanation when I pressed, was as puzzling as the confiscation.

The satiric "English Bards" used to delight me almost as much as the inspired doggerel of "Don Juan" and set me emulating it. It was something altogether new; and later—in my early 'teens—I played the sedulous ape to it. In the absence of literary persons among my circle, I spitted on my puny spear some among my ordinary friends and acquaintances. There was no malice, only an itching to imitate what had delighted me so much; but the attempt becoming known to my elders, and I fear also to some of the satirised, it was speedily frowned on, perhaps wisely; indulgence in satire, either by word or by pen, I have since observed, is not a shortcut to good will.
It was later that Shelley came to me; but none till he came ever rivalled the writer of “Childe Harold” and the “Bards.” From the first there was another mighty book upon those shelves—a book that was never removed or tabooed. It was, according to the fly-leaf, “A token of esteem to Robert, leaving for Australia, 1852. From his brother Samuel.” My father had kept it through many vicissitudes both for the giver's sake and the author's. The organ voice of Milton was held in those covers. “Few books” it is said, “make a close reader.” By the time I was eleven I had read “Paradise Lost” three times. Rather a queer feat for a child I since find. Perhaps the secret was that Milton came to me self-selected, not as the set task he is to many young students. . . . The majesty of the epic always swept me on and on. But the reading had a strange result. Had she known, whose hand took away my Byron, she had better left me the “Don Juan” than the Satan who became such a hero to me! Doré had not contributed to the making of my father's volume of Milton; it was much later that I saw the terrible illustrations of the unhappy outcast, Satan. But one's own imagination pictured the epic terror of the greatest parts of the poem vividly enough without the aid of the artist. I know I used to dream of the “nine days he fell,” and awaken, clutching the bed-clothes. It hurt the teachings I received at the Sunday school, the Miltonic emphasis of the grandeur of the villain of the story. It was long before I came back to the first idea I had been given of the fiend who lost us Eden . . . perhaps I have never quite recovered the earlier impression. The Puritan Milton overreached himself.

Great little shelves, those that took charge of my mental toddlings! I cannot, after the “organ voice,” speak of the lesser tones that in moods contributed to one's being. After all, the divinity that brought, and kept together when many were left, or lost in travel, that handful of books, had a kindly prevision of the needs and the loves of the unborn little ones whose curious fingers should open; whose eager eyes should pore upon their pages. The niche where the shelves were! It surely was a gateway for us from the dear world of the familiar green trees and material things, to that wider world—the inheritance of each for the entering—the realms of gold.
IT is not given to everyone to remember lastingly, unjostled by other events of the kind, the coming of the first stranger to one's doorstep. To me, the parting of the curtain of the bush to admit John Parker to our home stands distinct. I was but three and a half, so a backward counting tells me, and his coming seems almost my first memory. Claribel and I, looking up from our play, saw a tall stranger emerging to the open from what was to us the pathless wild. So tall he seemed, and so fair, with his long, flowing beard of ruddy gold! Later, reading gave him the character of a certain Viking in a book of Norse tales. Later, again, he became Arthur in our further reading—always some exalted figure, for he was well loved of us. He was at that period probably more like one of Bret Harte's heroes in his picturesque digger's attire; but of these we knew nothing. Tall and spare of frame, and fair of face, for all his weatherings, John Parker was not at that time, or later, an unheroic figure. He had a long leg and a long stride; when he moved he was animation from head to foot, and his mind was alike of a liveliness and vigour that made him a striking personality to young and old. As we grew older, and knew the inner man of him more, it was to find there the same uprightness as characterised his outer aspect. He was a man of sterling rectitude; of an ancestry that bore no paltering with truth. Nor
would he tolerate in his intercourse the small change of the ordinary social pretences that go unwhipt by most.

But I set out to tell of his first appearance in our lives, from which he was never again far. Claribel and I stared, and ran doorward, with the surprising news, told amid tumblings and gaspings. My father happened to be in the house at the moment, and he went striding forward. Strangest thing of all, to him the stranger was no stranger! An ejaculation of surprise, and the two struck hearty palms. I can see John Parker now as, peeping, I saw him at that moment. The wide slouch hat off, the hair long and flopping forward, to be impatiently flung back with a quick motion of the hand, kept from falling across his eyes by that or the quick jerk of the head. We saw that gesture then, and heard the hearty, high-pitched voice. He let fall his swag at the verandah post, and never again were he and swag together. He was done with wandering, and had come to our wild region to settle on the land. He became a near neighbour, and shortly no more strange to our shyness. It was not long, in fact, before Claribel and I tumbled and gasped in running to meet this so-good friend of ours. He was a man who won children; their lover always.

They had met and parted again and again on the goldfields, my father and he, in the feverish rush from place to place of the days that even then were ended. Our humble roof was his while the search for land went on, and rich entertainment was ours to sit in the evenings and hear talk of wonderful El Dorados, of fortunes won and lost. Not ours in such rich stories to find an anti-climax to buckets of glittering quartz, and dishes of pebbly gold, in the present meanness of surroundings of the tale-tellers. Romance was not ungilded by our visible poverty. We did not know it for poverty, indeed; nor had we need to question unkindly our circumstances, food and bed, playtime and freedom, and impregnable shelter and love! Well vanished, Golcondas, I to whom you were truly but a “tale that is told” have never regretted your vanishment! Claribel was soon wooed from her hassock to the adventurer's knee, for his charm drew, and the recital of his wonders was better than the tales of our books. The narrative impulse seized my father, too, who had put away these things for what was at hand. The two struck fire from each other's memories, and to the glow of the winter blaze on the hearth they flung out the fragments of their experience from that vast epic of the fifties, the dazzling whole of which will never be comprehended in one focus.

And then that phase seemed to pass. There is a gap in my recollections. John Parker was “on the land” when I next remember him. It and its fascinations captured him too, and, like my father, when he came he had ceased to talk of deep-down El Dorados. It was of the golden furrow that
he talked now, or that which would be golden when the share could be laid to it. The romance of the surface had captured him, I say, and henceforth we children had less interest in the talk, since the themes were everyday. John Parker had taken the high hills for his own, three miles away from our valley to the west, and a pile of rough country between made it seem a world away. Those long, strong arms had taken their task; he had to let in the sun to those umbrageous hills; to the gullies at foot of the sharp spurs, where there was scarcely a path amid the scrub. It was a task for Hercules, but toil he loved who had set his hand to this. He shirked not one jot of the battle with wild Nature, but revelled in overcoming. He loved difficulty and the delightful result of bending the wild to his plough.

And more than that. He loved the unconsidered increment, or that which was unconsidered by most of his neighbours. The marketable result of his clearing, sowing and gathering was not for him the whole. The letting in of beauty, the gaining of wider sweeps of view, of vistas vast and far stretching as half of England. For John Parker such by-produce of his labours was even more than the corn. The altitudes fed him, and his love of far horizons grew by what it fed on. As some men plunge their hands among the harvested grain, so John Parker would plunge his spirit into the beauty that he had made clear for his eyes by the felling of tree and bush. Every year he attacked fresh heights of the wild hills that stretched back and back from the hard-won clearing where his house stood. With mighty strokes on long, long days he had cleared the immediate green that stood like an organic wall in its thickness between his first little hut and the world beyond. And then from that the conquering of fresh fields—the task was for all his life.

He was never very practical, they said, but would spend weeks in clearing away what other hastier folk ploughed round or over. He had an inverted sense of what was most important—a value of his own as to what mattered most in a landscape, even when that landscape was a field ploughed to yield grain. He viewed his environment as an artist and poet rather than as a farmer, whose first and last thought in the circle of the year is the sprouting and the garnering of his sowings. John Parker, I know, thought first of his morning feast of purples on the regal mountains; his evening draughts of tender lights and trailing shadows over the distant plains. His enthusiasm leapt and shone in his eyes when he strode over his hills like a host of Nature, displaying the beauties of the panorama to those who came.

And as the years went on there were many who came, like “a city that is set on a hill,” that growing clearing and the fame of it could not be hid. I have chronicled elsewhere, with a reminiscent pen that trembled between
the two childhood loves of wild nature and of Christmas pudding, my first visit to that alpine region. And that was but the beginning of visits innumerable through all the succeeding years to that last year, when the native returned to find the ever-enduring hills under the touch of spring, and the man, their lover, bent with the press of years and toil.

Lover of the wild as he was in such excess, never was heart more gentle to his kind than John Parker's. He had indeed an extravagant idea of children. Wordsworth's feeling in the "Intimations of Immortality," was his rather than the more scientific attitude of this rationalistic age. There was no light and shade in his conceptions of us little ones of those days—that is to say, it was all light. He beheld us in a golden glow "trailing clouds of glory." There was no room for imperfections in his picture of us, I remember that I had rather died than that "Mr. Parker" had caught me in any meanness. That feeling begat in me a kind of secondary virtue; it tended to make "being good" habitual, for one knew not at what moment our friend's long-tailed "Nelly" might come flying to the verandah post. He was like a good "bogey," and he rode fast and came unexpectedly. He caught Claribel throwing portions of a ruined mud-pie at Dick once as a mark of her temporary disapproval. She, poor child, was almost shrivelled up in the flame of her own quick shame. He was, as I say, an extravagant idealist not only as to children, but also in regard to older folks; and yet, reconcile it who can, just as vehemently was he a believer in "original sin," according to the stern creed of the Church to which he adhered. It may be, I have sometimes thought, that he believed that the leaven of original sin was only in such members of the human family as remained outside his personal circle. True it was, in any case, that, generally speaking, there was a nimbus about the head of those whom he counted as friends—especially those of tender years. He had a large heart, and all went in. This idealising extended itself to the aesthetic sense: the children of his acquaintance were all beautiful, as well as good. No child on earth had ever before such glorious locks as the tossing brown curls that drooped over Claribel's young brow. Not the Dark Rosaleen herself had more beauteous cheeks than Muriel M—, the infant of a neighbouring friend. John Parker often drew upon the poets' rich stores for descriptions of these obscure little maidens. As for Claribel! My mother had a way of rushing in upon our friend's rhapsodies, fearful of the effect of such hyperboles of praise. Claribel became, and remained to the end—I believe owing to some fancied resemblance to Lady Byron—the most admired. A man of strangely mixed elements was John Parker. So stern, so tender—the interplay, I fancy, of natural temperament and doctrine. He was old-fashioned, too, in his romantic ideas about women, and while so much
always the general admirer that he never married, there were certain predilections almost embarrassingly pointed in his own peculiar way. He named his pet animals to the third and fourth generation for those whom he chiefly admired. Not only so, but at one and the same time half a dozen of the creatures of his doorstep would bear the one name. Thus, have I known a brood of brindled kittens, and twin lambs, all living out their blissful lives about his feet as “Muriel.” Sufficient it was that confusion was avoided by the addition of numerals. I remember, on one occasion we came upon him in grief over the untimely death in the third month of her age of “Maude the 3rd”—a lamb sweet in itself as a pastoral of Wordsworth's.

There were those who sometimes jestingly complained that there was not a chair to be sat upon without careful inspection in John Parker's house, so many lazy pets there were. One, indeed, had to walk circumspectly approaching the door, for the rush of gentle creatures whose confidence outran their shyness.

There was a noble horse, a great red roan creature, that loved John Parker as an equal—understood his every word and look. Rein or bit or blinker were not for him. Without restraining or guiding headgear, in regal freedom and understanding, “Donald” drew his load. Have I not heard his master declare that it was his will, if that faithful friend survived him, the horse should serve no one else, but should live out his days free and unburdened among the hills he had borne so staunch a part in clearing? That other horse of his—the long-tailed “Nelly,” that he always rode as though in a tourney—standing in the stirrups; leaning forward, his arms shot out, the long beard flying—what a creature she was! John Parker almost broke his heart when Nelly snapped a bone in her leg, and had to be shot, after long nursing of the leg in a sling. None but her owner had ever found much virtue in Nelly. She had “too much white in the eye,” Nat Jones said, ever to be reliable. But one could rely upon her for a bolt up hill and down when she espied the flip of a bridle carried behind the man's back. It was the work of hours to catch her when she took the mood; and many a wild whirling run up hill and down her owner had; and yet one heard always of her perfections.

Never was more curiously mingled than in John Parker the Calvinist and the Pantheist. He worshipped Nature and burned to her the incense of a daily devotion, and just as constantly he thumbed the pages of a stern theology. A fierce dogmatism was his. He stood by literals—by the law, and the prophets, as he saw it, and them. He condemned none that fell, and yet behind his nature's gentleness was the inflexible belief that they were born already condemned. He himself, who would succour a fly, believed hardly in a Power that doomed utterly. One comes against such walls of
granite in the gentlest of souls. His was a voice of terror to me sometimes. In the midst of genial converse, hurled, it may be, by some chance word, into violent theological discussion, I have known him to mount and ride away with raised voice and burning cheek because some godless soul had expressed a doubt of predestination, or had interrogated the doctrine of original sin. These dread words and their ideas dimly with them, came first to me from his lips in debate with my father. They made my childish heart fear, just as other kindlier gifts from him lapped us in a sense of happiness. They were awful words, and Claribel and I afterwards discussed their meaning and portent as we, uneasy of conscience, lay abed, after some venial sin of the daytime.

John Parker never missed the monthly church service held at the M'Dermots', and in the days when we were small, one or other of us always rode home on front of his saddle, perched near Nelly's neck—Nelly a model of deportment at such times. Our house for dinner or my aunt's, on those Sundays was the unfailing custom; and it was after dinner that the portentous theological discussions I have referred to always occurred. The sermon of the morning's hearing was traversed with thoroughness, and there were generally citations from some divine to support or rebut a contested point. From these we gladly slipped away, wondering, as I have always wondered since, how our elders found substance in such dry themes.

Claribel and I liked John Parker best when he “talked poetry,” and he had a head and a heart full of it. Mostly he confined himself to authors of an earlier date, but could come easily from Young's “Night Thoughts” to Longfellow, or Tennyson's early poems; from Goldsmith he would rove to Bryant. It was Bryant I heard him quote with tremulous feeling once upon a beautiful evening. It was in later years, and we stood upon one of the topmost hills beyond his house. Around us the world lay melting into evening's magic-darkling, yet clear. Across the opaline sky toward the distant lakes was flying one wildfowl, a dark speck in the wide, clear expanse. Not unlike a prophet with his long, greyed hair and beard, and all like a poet, John Parker stood hat in hand, his hair backward flung, hand pointed to the solitary bird. Standing thus he repeated the American poet's beautiful lines, “To a Waterfowl,” from its opening, “Whither 'midst falling dew,” to the verse ending, “lone, wandering, but not lost.” There his voice quavered, and he broke off. That scene and all it held comes back to me now when the short line reaches me: “John Parker passed away early this morning.”