ROLF BOLDREWOOD

THE CROOKED STICK; OR, POLLIE'S PROBATION

Rolf Boldrewood

The Crooked Stick; Or, Pollie's Probation

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24165820
The Crooked Stick; Or, Pollie's Probation:
ISBN http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/35165

Содержание

The Crooked Stick; Or, Pollie's Probation

CHAPTER I

The time, the close of a lurid sultry February day, towards the end of a long, dry summer succeeding a rainless winter, in the arid region of West Logan. A blood-red sun sinking all too slowly, yet angrily, into a crimson ocean; suddenly disappearing, as if in despotic defiance of all future rainfall. A fiery portent receding into the inferno of a vast conflagration, was the image chiefly presented to the dwellers in that pastoral desert, long heartsick with hope deferred.

The scene, a limitless stretch of plain – its wearisome monotony feebly broken by belts of timber or an infrequent pine-ridge. The earth adust. A hopeless, steel-blue sky. The atmosphere stagnated, breezeless. The forest tribes all dumb. The Wannonbah mail-coach toiling over the furrows of a sandhill, walled in by a pine thicket.

'Thank God! the sun is down at last; we must sight Hyland's within the hour,' exclaimed the passenger on the box-seat, a tall, handsome man, with 'formerly in the army' legibly impressed on

form and feature. 'How glad I shall be to see the river; and what a luxury a swim will be!'

'Been as hot a day as ever I know'd, Captain,' affirmed the sun-bronzed driver, with slow decision; 'but' – and here he double-thonged the off-wheeler, as if in accentuation of his statement – 'heat, and flies, and muskeeters, dust and sand and bad water, ain't the wust of this road – not by a long chalk!'

'What the deuce *can* be worse?' demanded the ex-militaire, with pardonable acerbity. 'Surely no ruffians have taken to the bush lately in this part of the world?'

'Well, I did hear accidental-like as "The Doctor" and two other cross chaps, whose names I won't say, had laid it out to stick us up to-day. They'd heard that Mr. Tracknell was going up to Orange, and they have it in for him along o' the last Bandamah cattle racket.'

'Stop the coach, the infernal scoundrels! What do they expect to do next? The country won't be fit for decent people to live in if this sort of thing is not put a stop to.'

'Well, Captain Devereux,' replied the driver, a tall, sinewy, slow-speaking son of the soil, 'if I was you I wouldn't trouble my head about them no more than I could help. It ain't your business, as one might say, if they've a down on Tracknell. He nearly got the Doctor shopped over them Bandamah cattle, an' he wasn't in it at all, only them Clarkson boys. My notion is that Tracknell got wind of it yesterday, and forgot to come a purpose.'

'So, if a gang of rascally cattle-stealers choose to stop the

coach that I travel in, I am to sit still because I'm not the man they want, who did his duty in hunting them down.'

'Now hear reason, Captain! There ain't a chap in the district, square or cross, that would touch you, or any one from Corindah – no, not from here to Baringun. The place has got such a name for being liberal-like to gentle and simple. If we meet those chaps – and we've got the Wild Horse plain to cross yet – you take my tip and say nothing to them if they don't interfere with you.'

The man to whom he spoke raised his head and gazed full in the speaker's face. The expression of his features had changed, and there was a hard set look, altogether different from his usually frank and familiar air, as he said, 'Are you aware that I've held Her Majesty's commission?'

The driver took his horses in hand, and sent them along at a pace to which for many miles they had been strangers, as they left the heavy sand of the pine-hill and entered upon the baked red soil of the plain.

'I'm dashed sorry to hear it now,' he said slowly. 'Some people's mighty fond of having their own way. Yes, by God! I was afeared they'd block us there. They're a-waiting ahead near that sheep break – three of 'em. That's the Doctor on the grey. Blast him!'

With this conclusively fervent adjuration, Mr. Joe Bates pulled his horses into a steady yet fast trot, and approached the three men, who sat quietly on their horses near a rough timber fence which, originally constructed for counting a passing flock of

sheep, partly obstructed the road.

Captain Devereux looked keenly at the strangers, then at the driver, as he drew forth a revolver of the latest pattern.

'Listen to me, Bates! I can make fair shooting with this at fifty yards. When they call on you to stop, draw up the team quietly but keep them in hand. Directly I fire, send your horses along. It is a chance if they offer to follow.'

'For God's sake, Captain, don't be rash,' said the young fellow earnestly. 'I'm no coward, but remember there's others on the coach. Once them chaps sees Tracknell ain't a passenger, they'll clear – take my word. You can't do no good by fighting three armed men.'

'Do as you're told, my good fellow,' returned his passenger, who seemed transformed into quite another personage from the good-natured, easy-going gentleman with whom he had been chatting all day, 'unless you wish me to believe that you are in league with robbers and murderers.'

Joe Bates made no further remonstrance, but drew the reins carefully through his hands in the method affected by American stage-coach drivers, as he steadily approached the spot where the men sat, statue-like, on their horses. As the coach came abreast of them the man on the grey turned towards it, and, with a raised revolver in his hand, shouted, 'Bail up!'

The leaders stopped obedient to the rein. As they did so Captain Devereux fired three shots in rapid succession. The first apparently took effect on the rider of the grey horse, whose right

arm fell to his side the instant after he had discharged his pistol. The second man staggered in his seat, and the horse of the third robber reared and fell over on his rider, who narrowly escaped being crushed. At the same moment, at a shout from the driver, the team started at a gallop, and taking the road across the plain, hardly relaxed their speed until the hotel at the angle of the Mackenzie River was in sight.

Looking back, they caught one glimpse of their quondam foes. Two were evidently wounded, while the third man was reduced to the grade of a foot-soldier. There was, therefore, no great probability of pursuit by this highly irregular cavalry force.

'By George! Captain,' said the driver, touching up the leaders with renewed confidence as he saw the outline of the roadside inn define itself more clearly in the late twilight, 'you can shoot straight and no mistake. Dashed if I could hit a haystack without a rest. The Doctor and one of the other chaps fired the very minute you did. One ball must have gone very close to you or me. I felt pretty ticklish, you bet! for I've seen the beggar hit a half-crown at twenty yards before now.'

'I believe he *did* hit me,' said Devereux, coolly putting his hand to his side. 'It's only a graze; but we'll see when we get down. I scarcely felt it at the time.'

'Good God!' said the kind-hearted young fellow. 'You don't say so, Captain? There's blood on your coat too. We'll have a look as soon as we get to Hyland's.'

'It's a strange thing though,' continued Devereux, 'that unless

you're hard hit you never know whether a gunshot wound is serious or not. It's not my first knock, and I certainly shouldn't like it to be the last, after an engagement of this nature. However, we shall soon see.'

Something was in the air. As they drew up before the inn door, the customary group awaiting one of the great events of bush life was noticeably swelled. A confused murmur of voices arose, in tones more earnest than ordinary events called forth. The driver threw his reins to a helper, and took the landlord aside.

'We've been stuck up, and there's been a bit of a brush with the Doctor's mob. They've got it hot, but the Captain's hit too. You send a boy to Dr. Chalmers at Hastings township, and that darkie of yours to the police station. The Captain had better get to bed. The mails are right and the passengers.'

The hotelkeeper, beyond a brief and comprehensive dedication of the false physician to the infernal powers, forebore remark, and so addressed himself to the practical alternative, that within five minutes two eager youngsters, one black and one white, were riding for their lives towards the points indicated, brimful of excitement not altogether of an unpleasant nature, as being the bearers of tragical tidings, and thus to be held free from blame – indeed, to be commended – if they did the distance in less than the best recorded time.

Inside the hotel the bustle was considerable. The bar was crowded, groups of men surrounded the inside passengers, who had each his tale of wonder and miraculous escape to relate. 'The

Captain had behaved like a hero. Knocked over one man, broke the Doctor's shoulder, and dropped the third chap's horse nearly atop of him. If there'd only been another revolver in the coach they'd have took the lot easy. All the same, they'd just as well have let them have what they'd a mind too. They only wanted to serve out Tracknell, and when they found he wasn't there they'd have gone off as like as not. If the Captain was hurt – as looked likely – his life was worth all the bushrangers between here and Bourke, and a d – d bad swop at that.'

'Well, but some one must fight,' said a pot-valorous bar loafer, 'else they'd take the country from us.'

'That's a dashed sight more than *you*'d do, in my opinion,' retorted the speaker, who was a back-block storekeeper. 'We can do our share, I suppose, when there's no other show. But we should have been all safe here now if we'd taken 'em easy – a few notes poorer, but what's that? The police are paid for shooting these chaps, not us. And if the Captain never goes back to Corindah, but has to see it out in a bush pub like this, I say it's hard lines. However, Chalmers will be here in an hour – if he's sober – and then we'll know.'

The sound of galloping hoofs in less than the specified time caused every one to adjourn to the verandah, when the question of identity, as two figures emerged from a cloud of dust, was quickly settled by a local expert. 'That's the doc's chestnut by the way he holds his head, and he's as sober as a judge.'

'How can you tell that?' queried a wondering passenger.

'Why, easy enough. Doc.'s not man enough for the chestnut except when he's right off it. When he's betwixt and between like he takes the old bay mare. She stops for him if he tumbles off, and would carry him home unsensible, I b'leeve, a'most, if she could only histe him into the saddle.'

The medical practitioner referred to rode proudly into the inn yard unconscious of the critical ordeal he had undergone, and throwing down the reins of his clever hackney, walked into the house, followed by the respectful crowd.

'Bad affair, Hyland,' he said to the landlord. 'Which room? No. 3? All right! I'll call for you as soon as I look the Captain over. It may be nothing after all.'

Entering the bedroom to which the wounded man had retired, he found him sitting at a small table, smoking a cigar with his coat off and busily engaged in writing a letter. This occupation he relinquished, leaving the unfinished sheet and greeting the medico cordially. 'Glad to see you, doctor. Wish it was a pleasanter occasion. We shall soon know how to class the interview – Devereux slightly, seriously, or dangerously wounded has been in more than one butcher's bill. One may hold these things too cheap, however.'

'Take off your shirt, Captain; we're losing time,' said the doctor; 'talk as much as you like afterwards. Hum! ha! gunshot wound – small orifice – upper ribs – may have lodged in muscles of the shoulders. Excuse me.' Here he introduced a flexible shining piece of steel, with which he cautiously followed the

track of the bullet. His brow became contracted and his face betrayed disappointment as he drew back the probe and wiped it meditatively in restoring it to its case. 'Can't find the bullet – gone another direction. Take a respiration, Captain. Good. Now cough, if you please.'

'Do you feel any internal sensation; slight pain here, for instance?' The Captain nodded affirmatively. 'Inclination to expectorate?'

'Yes.'

'Ha! much as I feared. Now put on your shirt again; and if I were you, I'd get into bed.'

'Not just yet, if you'll allow me; we had better settle this question first. Is the matter serious – you know what I mean – or only so so?'

'You're a strong man, Captain, and have seen all this before. I shall tell you exactly how the matter stands. This confounded lead pill, small as it is, has not taken the line I hoped it had towards the shoulder or lumbar muscles. It has turned inwards. You have been shot through the lungs, Captain, and, of course, you know the chances are against you.'

The wounded man nodded his head, and lit another cigar, offering the doctor one, which he took.

'Well! a man must go when his time comes. All soldiers know that. For my wife's sake and the darling of our hearts' I could have wished it otherwise. Poor Mary! It might have been avoided, as the driver said; but then I should have had to have changed

natures with some one else. It is Kismet, as the Moslem says – written in the book of fate from the beginning of the world. And now, doctor, when will the inflammation come on?'

'Perhaps to-night late; certainly to-morrow.'

'I may smoke, I suppose; and I want to write a letter before my head gets affected.'

'Do anything you like, my dear sir. You can't catch cold this weather. Take a glass of brandy if you feel faint. No, thanks! none for me at present. See you early to-morrow. I'll tell Mrs. Hyland what to do if hæmorrhage sets in. Good-night!'

The doomed man smoked his cigar out as he gazed across the broad reach of the river, on a high bluff of which the house had been built. 'Done out of my swim, too,' he muttered, with a half smile. 'I can hardly believe it all to be true. How often a man reads of this sort of thing, little expecting it will come home to himself. Forty-eight hours, at the utmost, to prepare! How the stars glitter in the still water! To think that I shall know so much more about them before Saturday, most probably at any rate. What a strange idea! Poor Mary! what will she do when she hears? Poor darling! expecting me home on Saturday evening, and now never to meet on earth. Never, nevermore! To think that I kissed her and the bright, loving little darling Pollie – how she clung round my neck! – for the last time! The last time! It is hard, very hard! I feel a choking sort of feeling in my chest – that wasn't there before. I had better begin my letter. The letter – the last on earth.'

He flung away the fragment of the cigar, and sat down wearily to the letter which was to be the farewell message of Brian Devereux to his wife and child. How dear they were to him – reckless in some respects as his life had been – until then, he never knew before. He sat there writing and making memoranda until long after midnight. Then he lit one last cigar, which he smoked slowly and calmly to the end. 'They are very good. I may never get another. Who knows what the morrow may bring forth? Good-night, my darlings!' he said, waving his hand in the direction of Corindah. 'Good-night, sweet fond wife and child of my love! God keep and preserve you when I am gone! Good-night, my pleasant home, its easy duties and measureless content! Good-night, O earth and sea, wherein I have roamed so far and sailed so many a league! Once more, darlings of my heart, farewell! A long good-night!'

And so, having an instinctive feeling that the hour was at hand when the injured mechanism of the fleshly frame, grandly perfect as it had hitherto proved itself, would no longer provide expression for the free spirit, Brian Devereux, outworn and faint, sought the couch from which he was never to arise. At daylight he was delirious, while the frequent passage of blood and froth from his unconscious lips confirmed the correctness of the medical diagnosis. Before the evening of the following day the proud, loyal, gallant spirit of Brian Devereux was at rest. He lies beneath the waving desert acacia, in the graveyard by the river allotted to the little town of Hastings. He was followed to the grave by

every man of note and position in a large pastoral district; and on the marble tombstone which was in the after-time erected at the public cost above his mortal remains are included the words: —

'Sacred to the Memory of Brian Devereux,

late Captain of H.M. 88th Regiment,

who was mortally wounded by bushrangers

while making a gallant and successful defence

Honour to the Brave!'

So fell a gallant man-at-arms, obscurely slain – ingloriously in a sense, yet dying in strict accordance with the principles which had actuated him through life. There was deep, if not ostentatious, sorrow in his old regiment, and more than one comrade emptied his glass at the mess table more frequently the night the news came of the death of Brian Devereux, whom all men admired, and many women had loved.

Brave to recklessness, talented, grandly handsome, the darling of the mess, the idol of the regiment, the descendant of a Norman family long domiciled in the west of Ireland, he had always exhibited, commingled with brilliant and estimable qualities, a certain wayward impatience of restraint which at critical periods of his career had hindered his chance of promotion. A good-natured superior, on more than one occasion, had reported favourably on differences of opinion scarcely in accordance with the canons of the Horse Guards. At length a breach of discipline occurred too serious to be overlooked. In truth, a provoking, unreasonable martinet narrowly escaped personal discomfiture. Captain Devereux was compelled to send in his papers, to the despair of the subalterns and the deep though suppressed discontent of the regiment.

Sorely hurt and aggrieved, though far too proud for outward sign, he resolved to quit the mother-land for the more free, untrammelled life of a new world. The occasion was fortunate. The sale of his commission, with a younger son's portion, sufficed at that time to purchase Corindah at a low price, on favourable terms. Adopting, with all the enthusiasm of his nature, the free, adventurous career of an Australian squatter, he married the fair and trusting daughter of a high Government official – herself a descendant of one of the old colonial families of distinction, – and bade fair, in the enjoyment of unclouded domestic happiness and the management of a confessedly improving property, to become one of the leading pastoral

magnates of the land.

But who shall appease Fate? The bolt fell, leaving the fair, fond wife a widow, and the baby daughter fatherless, whose infantine charms had aroused the deepest feelings of his nature.

After the first transports of her grief, Mrs. Devereux, with the calm decision of purpose which marked her character, adopted the course which was to guide her future life. At Corindah she had tasted the early joys of her bridal period. There her babe had been born. There had her beloved, her idolised husband – the worshipped hero of the outwardly calm but intensely impassioned Mary Cavendish – pleased himself in a congenial occupation, with visions of prosperity and distinction yet to come. She would never leave Corindah. It should be her home and that of his child after her. Her resolution formed, she proceeded to put in practice her ideas. She retained the overseer – a steady, experienced man, in whom her husband had had confidence. She went over the books and accounts, thus satisfying herself of the solvency and exact position of the estate. This done, she explained to him that she intended to retain the establishment in her own hands, and trusted, with his assistance, to make it progressive and remunerative.

'Captain Devereux, my poor husband,' she said, 'had the greatest confidence in you. It is my intention to live here – in this place which he loved and improved so much – as long as there is sufficient for me and my baby to live on. I shall trust to you, Mr. Gateward, to do for me exactly as you would have done for

him.' Here the steady voice trembled, and the tears that would not be suppressed flowed fast.

'I will do that and more, Mrs. Devereux,' said the plain, blunt bushman. 'Corindah is the best station on the river, and if the seasons hold middling fair, it will keep double the stock it has on now in a few years. You leave it to me, ma'am; I'll be bound the run will find a home and a snug bank account for you and missie for many a year to come.'

Between Mr. Gateward and Corindah Plains, 'the best run on this side of Mingadee,' as the men said, the promise had been kept. The years had been favourable on the average. When the dire distress of drought came there had been a reserve of pasture which had sufficed to tide over the season of adversity. Besides this, Corindah was decidedly a 'lucky run,' a favoured 'bit of country.' When all the land was sore stricken with grass and water famines, it had springs which never ran dry; 'storms' too fell above Corindah; also strayed waterspouts, while all around was dry as Gideon's fleece. In the two decades which were coming to an end when Pollie Devereux had reached womanhood, the rigid economy and unwavering prudence with which the property had been managed had borne fruit. The credit balance at the bank had swelled noticeably during the later and more fortunate years. And Mrs. Devereux was known to be one of the wealthiest pastoral proprietors in a district where the extensive run-holders were gradually accumulating immense freeholds and colossal fortunes. A temporary check had taken place during the last most

unfortunate season. No rain had fallen for nearly a year. The loss of stock on all sides had been terrific, well-nigh unprecedented. Mrs. Devereux, rather over-prudent and averse to expenditure (as are women mostly, from Queen Elizabeth downwards, when they have the uncontrolled management of affairs), had felt keenly the drawbacks and disasters of the period.

'I wonder if we shall get our letters to-morrow, mother,' said Pollie Devereux to that lady, as they sat at breakfast at Corindah on one clear, bright autumnal morning. 'Things do really happen if you wait long enough.'

'What is going to happen?' asked the elder lady dreamily, as if hardly aroused from a previous train of disturbing thoughts. 'We are all going to be ruined, or nearly so, if the winter proves dry. Mr. Gateward says the cattle never looked so wretched for years, and the poor sheep are beginning to die already.'

'Mr. Gateward is a raven for croaking; not that I ever saw one, but it sounds well,' replied the girl. 'He has no imagination. Why didn't he send the sheep away to the mountains before they got so weak, as Mr. Charteris and Mr. Atherstone did? It will be all his fault if they die, besides the shocking cruelty of slow starvation.'

'He is a conscientious, hard-working, worthy man,' said Mrs. Devereux. 'We should find it difficult to replace him. Besides, travelling sheep is most expensive. You are too impatient, my dear. We may have rain yet, you know.'

'I wish I had been a boy, mother,' replied the unconvinced damsel, drumming her fingers on the table as she looked wistfully

through the open casement, festooned by a great trailing climber, to where the dim blue of a distant mountain range broke the monotony of the plain. 'It seems to me that none of the men we know have energy or enterprise enough to go beyond the dull round of routine in which they have been reared. Sheep and cattle, cattle and sheep, with a little turf talk for variation. They smoke all day, because they can't talk, and never think. Surely new countries were not discovered or the world's battles fought by people like those I see. I think I should have been different, mother, don't you?'

'I am sure of that, my darling,' answered the mother with a sigh, patting the girl's bright abundant hair as she rose in her eagerness and stood before her. 'You put me in mind of your father when you look like that. But you must never forget that the world's exciting work is rarely allotted to women. The laws of society are harsh, but those of our sex that resist them are chiefly unhappy, always worsted in the end. My girl cannot help her eager, impatient heart, but she will never despise her mother's teaching, will she?'

'Never while life lasts,' said the girl impetuously, throwing her arm round the elder woman's neck, and burying her face in her bosom with childlike abandon – 'not when she has an angel for a mother, like me; but I *am* so tired and wearied out with the terrible sameness of the life we lead. Though I have been here all my life, I seem to get less and less able to bear it. I am afraid I am very wicked, mother, but surely God never intended us to

live and die at Corindah?'

'But you will be patient, darling?' said the mother tenderly, as with every fond endearment she soothed the restless, unfamiliar spirit newly arisen from the hitherto unruffled depths of the maiden's nature. 'You know I had intended to take you to Sydney for the summer months, if this terrible season had not set in. But when – '

'When the rain comes, when the grass grows – when the millennium of the pastoral world arrives – we may hope to have a glimpse of Paradise, as represented by Sydney, the Botanical Gardens, and the Queen's-birthday ball. That's what you were going to say, mother darling, wasn't it? Poor old mother! while you're fretting about those troublesome sheep, poor things, that always seem to be wanting water, or grass, or rock-salt, which doesn't happen to be procurable – here's your ungrateful, rebellious child crying for the moon, to make matters worse. I'm ashamed of myself; I deserve to be whipped and sent to bed – not that I ever was, you soft-hearted old mammy. Besides, isn't this delightful unknown cousin, Captain Devereux, coming some fine day? He's a whole chapter of romance in himself. I declare I had forgotten all about him.'

The foregoing conversation was held in the morning room of the very comfortable cottage – or one might say *one* of the cottages – which, with a score of other buildings of various sorts and sizes, heights and breadths, ages and orders of architecture, went to make up Corindah head station. Perhaps the building

referred to had the highest pretension to be called 'the house' – inasmuch as it was larger, more ornate, and more closely environed with flower-beds, shrubs, and trailing, many-coloured climbers, all of which bore tokens of careful tendance – than any of the others. As for the outward appearance of the edifice, it was composed of solid sawn timber, disposed outwardly in the form of horizontal slabs, lined more carefully as to the inner side; the whole finished with gay, fresh wall-papers and appropriate mouldings. A broad, low verandah ran around the house. A wide hall, of which both back and front doors seemed to be permanently open, completely bisected the building. Wire stands, upon which stood delicate pot-plants of every shade of leaf and flower, gave a greenhouse air to this division. At a short distance, and situated within the enclosed garden, was a smaller, older building of much the same form and proportion. This was known as 'the barrack,' and was delivered over to Mr. Gateward and such bachelor guests as might from time to time visit the station. This arrangement, which often obtains in bush residences, is found to be highly convenient and satisfactory. In the sitting-room smoking and desultory, even jovial conversation can be carried on, together with the moderate consumption of refreshments, around the fire, after the ladies of the household have retired, without disturbing any one. In summer the verandah, littered with cane lounges and hammocks, can be similarly used. In the event of an early departure being necessary, the man-cook of the junior establishment can be

relied on to provide breakfast at any reasonable, or indeed unreasonable, hour.

On several accounts Corindah was looked upon as a representative station, one of the show places of the district. It was a stage which was seldom missed by any of the younger squatters who could find a convenient excuse for calling there, upon the journey either to or from the metropolis. It was a large, prosperous, naturally favoured tract of country, a considerable and increasingly valuable property. It was managed after a liberal, hospitable, and kindly fashion. Mrs. Devereux, though most unobtrusive in all her ways, permitted it to be known that she did not approve of her friends passing the door without calling; and they were, certainly, treated so well that there was no great inducement to neglect that form of respect. There was yet another reason why few of the travellers along the north-western road, friends, acquaintances, or even strangers, passed by the hospitable gate of Corindah. During these eventful years Mary Augusta, generally spoken of as 'Pollie Devereux' by all who could claim anything bordering upon the necessary grade of intimacy, had grown to be the handsomest girl within a hundred miles of the secluded spot in which she had been born and brought up.

And she was certainly a maiden fair, of mien and face that would have entranced that sculptor of old whose half-divine impress upon the marble will outlast how many a changing fashion, how many a fleeting age! Tall, lithe, and vigorous,

yet completed as to hand and foot with an exquisite delicacy that contrasted finely with the full moulding of her tapering arms, her stately poise, her rounded form, blue-eyed, tawny-haired, with classic features and a regal air, she looked like some virgin goddess of the olden mythology, a wood-nymph strayed from Arcadian forests ere earlier faiths grew dim and ancient monarchs were discrowned.

CHAPTER II

The heiress of Corindah had been carefully educated in a manner befitting her birth, as also the position she was likely to occupy in after-life. Governesses had been secured for her of the highest qualifications, at the most liberal salaries. Her talents for music and drawing had been highly cultivated. For the last three years of her educational term she had resided in Sydney with a relative, so that she might have the benefit of masters and professors. She had profited largely by instruction. She had read more widely and methodically than most young women. Well grounded in French and Italian, she had a handy smattering of German, such as would enable her, in days to come, either to perfect herself in the language by conversation or to dive more deeply into the literature than in the carelessness of youth she thought necessary.

These things being matters of general knowledge and common report in the district, it was held as a proved fact by the wives and daughters of her neighbours that Pollie Devereux had got everything in the world that she could possibly wish for. Agreed also that, if anything, she was a great deal too well off, having been petted and indulged in every way since her babyhood. That she ought to be only too thankful for these rare advantages, whereas at times she was discontented with her lot in life, and professed her desire for change – which was

a clear indication that she was spoiled by overindulgence, and did not know what was for her real good. That her mother, poor Mrs. Devereux, ought to have been more strict with her. These well-intentioned critics were not so far astray on general principles. They, however, omitted consideration of one well-established fact, that amid the hosts of ordinary human beings, evolved generation after generation from but slightly differing progenitors, and amenable chiefly to similar social laws, strongly marked varieties of the race have from time to time arisen. These phenomenal personages have differed from their compeers in a ratio of divergence altogether incomprehensible to the ordinary intelligence.

Whence originating, the fact remains that each generation of mankind is liable to be enriched or confounded by the apparition of individuals of abnormal force, beauty, or intellect. Neither does it seem possible for the Attila or the Tamerlane, the Semiramis or the Cleopatra of the period to escape the destiny that accompanies the birthright, whether it be empire or martyrdom, the sovereignty of hearts or the disposal of kingdoms. In spite of all apparent restraint of circumstance, the unchangeable type, dormant perhaps for centuries, reasserts its ancestral attributes.

Such, will be the course of Nature. The 'mute inglorious Milton' is the poet's fiction. He is not mute, but bursts into song, which, if a wild untutored melody, has the richness of the warbling bird, the power of the storm, the grandeur of heaven's

own wind-harp. The 'Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood' remains not in the stern world of facts the patient hind, the brow-beaten servitor. He leads armies and sways nations. To the soldier of fortune, who smiles only on the battlefield, and comprehends intuitively the movements of battalions, book-knowledge is superfluous and learning vain. He finds his opportunity, or makes it. And the world of his day knows him for its master.

> 'Till the sun turns cold,
> And the stars grow old,
> And the leaves of the Judgment-book unfold,'

And the queen of society, what of her? Like the poet, *nascitur non fit*, she is born not manufactured. Doubtless, the jewel may be heightened by the setting, but the diamond glitters star-like in the rough. The red gold-fire burns in the darksome mine. Pollie Devereux, her admirers asserted, would have ruled her *monde* had she been born a nursery-maid or an orange-girl. Her beauty, her grace, her courage, her natural *savoir-faire*, would have carried her high up the giddy heights of social ladders in despite of all the drawbacks which ever delayed the triumph of a heroine.

Still, the while we are indulging in these flights of imagination, our bush-bred maiden is a calmly correct damsel, outwardly conventionally arrayed, and but for a deep-seated vein of latent ambition and an occasional fire-flash of brilliant unlikeness, undistinguishable from the *demoiselles bien-élevées* of eighteen

or twenty that are to work such weal or woe with unsuspicious mankind. In a general way this young woman's unrest and disapproval of her environments merely took the form of a settled determination to explore the wondrous capitals, the brilliant societies, the glory and splendour of the Old World – to roam through that fairy-land of which from her very childhood she had eagerly read the legends, dreamed the dreams, and learned the languages. 'Eager-hearted as a boy,' all-womanly as she was in her chief attributes, she could not slake the thirst for change, travel, and adventure, even danger, with a draught less deep than actual experience. If she had been her father's son instead of his daughter, the inborn feeling could hardly have been stronger.

When she thought of leaving her mother, in whom all the softer feelings of her heart found their natural home and refuge, she wept long and often. But still the passionate desire to be a part of all of which she had read and dreamed, to see with her eyes, to hear with her ears, the sights and sounds of far lands, grew with her growth and strengthened with her strength. As the months, the years rolled on, it acquired the power of fate, of a resistless destiny for good or evil; of a dread, unknown, controlling power, which beckoned her with a shadowy hand, and exercised a mysterious fascination.

That there are men so formed, so endowed with natures apart from the common herd of toilers and pleasure-seekers, no one doubts. It is equally true that there are women set apart by

original birthright as clearly distinct from the tame tribes of conventional captives. But society, to strengthen its despotic rule, chooses to ignore the fact, preferring rather to coerce rebellion than to decorate distinction.

The eventful days leading slowly, but all too surely, towards the tragedy which is too apt to follow the idyllic course of our early years, fleeted by; a too peaceful, undisturbed period had arrived. Another morning broke clear and bright, as free from cloud or wind, mist or storm wrack, in that land of too changeless summer, as if winter had been banished to another hemisphere.

'Oh dear!' exclaimed Pollie, as springing from her bed she ran lightly to the open window, and drawing up the green jalousies gazed wistfully at the red golden shield of the day-god slowly uprearing its wondrous splendour above the pearl-hued sky-line, while far and near the great plain-ocean lay in dim repose, soundless, unmarked by motion or shadow. 'Ah me, how tired I am of the sight of the sun! Will it never rain again? How long are we to endure this endless calm? this bright, dismal, destructive weather? I never realised how cruel the sun could be before. As a child I was so fond of him, too, the king of light and warmth, of joy and gladness. But that is only in green-grass countries. Here he is a pitiless tyrant. How I should delight in Europe to be sure, with ever-changing cloud and mist, even storm! I am aweary, aweary. I have half a mind to ride out and meet the coach at Pine Ridge – I feel too impatient to sit in the house all day. What a time I have been standing here talking or thinking all this

nonsense! I wish I could help thinking sometimes, but I *can't* if I try ever so hard. Mother says I ought to employ myself more; so I do, till I feel half dead sometimes. Then I get a lazy fit, and the thinking, and restlessness, and discontent come back as bad as ever. Heigho! I suppose I must go and dress now. There's no fear of catching cold at any rate. Now I wonder if Wanderer was brought in from Myall Creek?'

Acting upon this sensible resolution, and apparently much interested in the momentous question of her favourite hackney having been driven in from a distant enclosure, failure of which would have doomed her to inaction, Pollie's light form might have been seen threading the garden paths; after which she even ventured as far as the great range of stabling near the corner of the other farm buildings. Here she encountered the overseer, Mr. Gateward, when, holding up the skirts of her dress so as to avoid contact with the somewhat miscellaneous dust which lay deeply over the enclosure, she thus addressed him —

'Good-morning, Mr. Gateward! Do you think it will ever rain again? Never mind answering that question. Russell himself knows no more than we do, I believe. What I *really* want to know is, did they bring Wanderer in from the Myall Creek? because I *must* ride him to-day.'

'Yes, Miss Pollie, the old horse came in. I told them not to leave him behind on any account. There's no knowing what may happen in a dry year. Very well he looks too, considering. You'll find him in his box. We'll soon have him fit enough. He's worth

feeding if ever a horse was, though chaff's as dear as white sugar.'

'I should think he was, the dear old fellow. I knew you'd look after him, and I wasn't mistaken, was I? I can always depend on you.'

'You'll never want a horse, or anything else you fancy, Miss Pollie, while I'm on Corindah,' said the veteran bushman, looking tenderly at the girl. 'What a little thing you was, too, when I first know'd you; and what a grand girl you've grow'd into! I hope you'll be as happy as you deserve. You've a many friends, but none of 'em all will do more for you than poor old Joe Gateward, 'cept it might be Mr. Atherstone. That's what I'd like to see, miss – '

'Never mind Mr. Atherstone; you're all so good to me,' said the girl, blushing, as she took the hard, brown hand in hers and pressed it warmly in her slender palm. 'I feel quite wicked whenever I feel discontented. I *ought* to be the happiest girl in Australia. Perhaps I shall be when I'm older and wiser. And now I must run in. I want to put fresh flowers on the breakfast-table; but I must first go and say good-morning to dear old Wanderer.'

She dashed off to the loose box, and opening the door, gazed with sparkling eyes at the good horse that stood there munching his morning meal of chaff and maize with an appetite sharpened by weeks of abstinence from anything more appetising than extremely dry grass and attenuated salt-bush.

'Oh, you darling old pet!' she cried, as she walked up to his shoulder, passing her taper fingers over his velvety face and

smooth neck, silken-skinned and delicate of touch even after the trials of so hard a season. 'And your dear old legs look as clean as ever! Was it starved and ill-treated in that nasty bare paddock? Never mind, there's a load of corn come up. I know who'll have his share now, however the rest may come off. Now go on with your breakfast, sir, for I must get mine, and we'll have a lovely gallop after lunch.'

The grand old hackney, nearly thorough-bred, and showing high caste in every point, looked at the speaker with his mild, intelligent eyes, and then waving his head to and fro, as was his wont when at all excited, betook himself once more to his corn.

The day wore on slowly, wearily, with a dragging, halting march, as it seemed to the impatient maiden. The sun rose high in the hard blue sky, and glared, as was his wont, upon the limitless pastures, dry and adust, the pale-hued, melancholy copses, the fast-falling river, the forgotten creeks. The birds were silent; even the flies held truce in the darkened rooms – there was a deathlike absence of sound or motion. Hot, breezeless, unutterably lifeless, and for all less vigorous natures relaxing and depressing, was the atmosphere. To this girl, however, had come by inheritance, under the mysterious laws of heredity, a type of quenchless energy, a form combining the old Greek attributes of graceful strength and divinely dowered intellect, impervious alike, as were her anti-types, to sun and shade, to fatigue or privation, to climatic influence or untoward circumstance.

'Mother,' she said, after tossing about from sofa to chair,

from carpet to footstool, the while the elder woman sat patiently sewing as if the family fortunes depended upon the due adjustment of

> Seam and gusset and band,
> Band and gusset and seam,

'I must go and put on my riding-habit. I shall die here, I'm certain, if I stay indoors much longer. I feel apoplexy coming on, or heart disease, I'm sure. Besides, there is a breeze always outside, or we can make one, Wanderer and I, on the plain.'

'My darling, it's surely too hot to go out yet,' pleaded the mother.

'It's twice as hot indoors,' retorted the wilful damsel, rising. 'I'll ride as far as the Mogil Mogil clump; you can send little Tarpot after me as soon as he gets the cows in. But a gallop I must have.'

The sun was declining as the girl rode out of the paddock gates, but no hint of coolness had as yet betokened the coming eve. The homestead was still and solitary of aspect, as a Mexican hacienda at the hour of the siesta, but for a different reason. Hot and wearisome as had been the day, every man about the place had been hard at work in his own proper department, and had been so occupied since sunrise.

In Australia, however scorching the day, how apparently endless and desolating the summer, no man, being of British

birth or extraction, thinks of intermitting his daily work from sunrise to nightfall, except during the ordinary hours allotted to meals.

So the overseer was away on his never-ending round of inspection of stock – 'out on the run,' as the phrase is – to return at, or perhaps long after, nightfall. The boundary riders were each and all on their different beats – some at the wells; others at the now treacherous and daily more dangerous quagmires surrounding the watering-places, from which it was their duty to extricate the feeble sheep. No one was at home but a small native boy named Tarpot, with whose assistance Pollie managed to saddle her loved steed. Leaving injunctions with him to follow her as soon as he should have brought up the cows, she turned her horse's head to the broad plain; and as he snuffed up the fresh dry air and bounded forward in a stretching gallop along the level sandy track, the heart of the rider swelled within her, and she wished it was not unfeminine to shout aloud like the boy stock-riders who occasionally favoured the musters of Corindah with their company.

The well-bred animal which she rode was fully inclined to sympathise with his mistress's exhilaration. Tossing his head and opening his nostrils, Wanderer dashed forward along the far-stretching level road, just sufficiently yielding to be the most perfect track a free horse could tread at speed, as if he were anxious to run a race with the fabled coursers of that sun now slowly trailing blood-red banners and purple raiment

towards his western couch. Mile after mile was passed in a species of ecstatic eagerness, which for steed and rider seemed to know no abatement. The homestead faded far behind them, and still nothing met the view but the endless grey plain; the mirage-encircled lines of slender woodland opening out north and south, each the exact counterpart of the other. An ever-widening, apparently illimitable waste, a slowly retreating sun, a sky hopeless in unchanging, pitiless splendour of hue, looking down upon a despairing world of dying creatures.

'The Mogil Mogil clump is a short ten miles,' she said, as she reined her impatient steed and compelled him to walk. 'I mustn't send along the poor old fellow so fast; he's not quite in form yet. I shall be there before the coach passes, and then have plenty of time to ride home in the cool. What a blessed relief this is from that choking atmosphere indoors!'

Another half-hour and the clump is reached. Still no sign of the stage-coach visible, as it should be for a mile or two, even more on that billiard table of a plain. The girl's impatient spirit chafed at the unlooked for delay. As she gazed upon the red sun, the far-seen crimson streamers, the endless, voiceless plain, the spirit of rebellion was again roused within her. She sat upon her horse and looked wistfully, wearily over the arid drought-stricken levels. She marked the sand pillars, whirling and eddying in the distance. They seemed to her fanciful imagination the embodied spirits of the waste – the evil genii of the Eastern tale, which might at any time, unfolding, disclose an Afreet or

a Ghoul. The thought of long years to be spent amid these vast solitudes seemed to her hateful – doubly unendurable. Before her rose in imagination the dull familiar round of all too well known duties, occupations, tasks, and pleasures, or but feeble, pulseless alternations from the mill-horse track which people call duty.

'Was I born only for such a fate?' she passionately exclaimed. 'Is it possible that the great Creator of all things, the Lord and Giver of Life, made this complex, eager nature of mine to wear itself out with aimless automatic movements, or frantic struggles against the prison bars of fate? Oh! had my father not been cut off in his prime, in what a different position we should have been! We could have afforded to travel in Europe, to revel in the glories of art, science, and literature, to look upon the theatres of the great deeds of mankind – to *live*, in a word. We do not live in Corindah – we grow.'

Overcome by the emotions which the enthusiasm of her nature had suffered temporarily to overwhelm her ordinary intelligence, she had not noticed that the stage-coach, bringing its bi-weekly freight of letters, newspapers, and passengers, had approached the clump of wild orange trees, on the edge of which she had reined her steed. The sensitive thorough-bred, more alive to transitory impressions than his mistress, aroused by a sudden crack of the driver's whip, started, and as she drew the curb-rein, reared.

'What a naughty Wanderer!' she exclaimed, as, slackening her rein, she leaned a little forward, stroking her horse's glossy

neck, and soothing him with practised address. At the same moment the four-horse team swept past the spot, and revealed the unwonted apparition to the gaze of the passengers, male and female, who, from the fixed attention they appeared to bestow upon her, were much interested in the situation. Apparently the young lady was not equally gratified, inasmuch as she turned her horse's head towards the distant line of timber which marked the line of the homestead, and swept across the plain like the daughter of a sheikh of the Nejd.

'What a handsome girl!' said a passenger on the box-seat; 'deuced fine horse too – good across country, I should say. Not a bushranger, I suppose, driver? They don't get themselves up like that, eh?'

'That's Miss Devereux of Corindah,' answered the driver, in a hushed, respectful accent, as who should say to the irreverent querist in Britain, 'That's the squire's daughter.' 'She came up here to see if the coach was coming; we're past our time, nearly half an hour. Got thinking, I suppose, and didn't know we was so close. I cracked my whip just to let her know like.'

'But suppose her horse had thrown her,' asked the inquiring stranger, 'what then?'

'Beggin' your pardon, sir, there's mighty few horses that can do that – not in these parts anyway. She can ride anything that you can lift her on; and she's as kind-hearted and well respected a young lady as ever touched bridle-rein.'

Now ever since Corindah had been 'taken up' in the good

old days when occupation with stock and the payment of £10 per annum as license fee were the only obligatory conditions encumbering the sovereign right to use, say, half a million acres of pastoral land, the adjoining 'run' of Maroobil and its proprietors had been associated in men's minds among the floating population of the district.

Both had been 'taken up,' or legally occupied, the same year. The homesteads were at no great distance from each other, so placed with the view to being mutually handy in case of a sudden call to arms when the blacks were 'bad.' More than once on either side the 'fiery cross' had been sent forth, when every available horse and man, gun and pistol, of the summoned station had been furnished.

Old Mr. Atherstone, a Border Englishman, had died soon after Brian Devereux, leaving his son Harold, then a grave boy of twelve, precociously wise and practical as to the management of stock, and a great favourite with Pollie, then a tiny fairy of three years old, who used to throw up her hands and shout for joy when Harold's pony came galloping up to the garden gate. He had watched the child grow into a tall slip of a girl, with masses of bright hair, never very neatly braided. He had seen the unformed girl ripen into a beautiful maiden, an enchanting mixture to his eye of much of the old daring, wilful nature mingled with a sweet womanly consciousness inexpressibly attractive. He could hardly recollect the time when he had not been in love with Pollie Devereux. And now, in these latter years, he told himself that

there was but one woman in the world for him – nor could it ever be otherwise.

Men varied much in their dispositions. He knew that by observation and experience. There was Bob Liverstone, whose heart (as he himself repeatedly averred) was broken beyond recovery, his prospects of happiness eternally ruined, his life blasted, because of the beautiful Miss Wharton, with her pale face, raven hair, and haunting eyes, who wouldn't have him. He broke his heart over again shamelessly within six months, after unsuccessful devotion to a blonde with eyes like blue china; and finally married a lady who bore not the least resemblance in mind, body, or estate to either of her predecessors being plump, and merely pretty, but exceptionally well dowered.

These and similar divagations of the ardent male adult Harold had seen – seen with alarm and surprise primarily, then with amused assent. For himself he could as little conceive such oscillations in his own tastes and affections as he could fancy himself emulating the somersaults of an acrobat or the witticisms of a clown. No! thrice no! For a man of his deep, dreamy, passionate, perhaps originally melancholy, nature there was but one sequel possible after the deliberate choice of youth had been ratified by the calm reason of manhood. If fate denied him this happiness, all too perfect for this world – the unearthly, unutterable bliss which her love would confer – there should be no counterfeit presentment, no mocking travesty of the heart's lost illusions. He had rightly judged that as yet the girl's feeling

for him was that of a pure and deep friendship, but of friendship only. The love of a sister, unselfish, sinless, seraphic, not the fiercer passion akin to hate, despair, revenge in its inverted forces, bearing along with it the choicest fruits that mortal hands can cull, yet joined in unholy joy, in perverted triumph to the groans of the eternally lost, to the endless torment, the dread despair of the prison vaults beneath.

Thus Harold Atherstone watched and waited – awaited the perhaps fortunate turn of events, the effect of the moral suasion which he knew Mrs. Devereux gently exercised. And she had told him that he was the one man to whom in fullest trust and confidence she could bequeath her darling, were she compelled to leave her.

'But you must wait, Harold,' she said. 'My child's nature is one neither to be controlled nor easily satisfied. I can trace her father's tameless soul in her. Poor Pollie! it's a thousand pities that she was not born a boy, as she says herself. How much easier life would have been for her – and for me!' Here Mrs. Devereux sighed.

'All very well, my dear Mrs. Devereux, but in the meantime nature chose to mould her in the form of a beautiful woman, so sweet and lovely in my eyes that I have never seen her equal, and indeed hardly imagined such a creation. She will pass through the unsettled time of girlhood in another year or two, and after that take pity upon her faithful slave and worshipper, who has adored her all his life and who will die in the same faith.'

'That is the worst feature in your case, my poor Harold,' said Mrs. Devereux; 'I am as fond of you as if you were my own son, and she loves you like a brother. You have seen too much of each other. Women's fancies are caught by the unknown, the unfamiliar: we are all alike. I wish I could help you, or bend her to my wish like another girl, for I *know* how happy she would be. But she cannot be guided in the disposition of her affections.'

'And I should not wish it,' said the young man, as his face grew hard. 'No, though I should die of the loss of her.'

The contract time of the Wannonbah mail was indulgent. The driver had no particular reason to reach that somewhat prosaic and monotoned village before the stated hour. When Wanderer slackened speed a mile on the hither side of the Corindah gate, it was with some surprise that Pollie descried a strange four-in-hand converging from another point. Wanderer pricked up his ears, while his rider looked eagerly across the plain with the intense, far-searching gaze of a dweller in the desert, as if she had power to read, even at that distance, each sign and symbol of the equipage.

'Can't be a coach, surely,' she soliloquised. 'One mail is more than enough for all our wants in the letter and passenger way. Cobb and Co. grumble at feeding their teams now, poor things! Who in the world is likely to drive four horses in a season like this? No one but a lunatic, I should think. Such well-bred ones too! I can see the leaders tossing their heads – a grey and a bay. I can't make out the wheelers for the dust. No! Yes! Now I know

who it is. Oh, what fun! I beg his pardon. Of course it's Jack Charteris. He said he was going to town. Poor Jack! I wish I was going with him. But that *won't* do. I should like to go and meet him, only then he would make sure I was interested in him. What a misfortune it is to be a girl! Now I must go in and dress for the evening, and receive him properly, which means unnaturally and artificially. Come along, Wanderer!'

When Mr. Jack Charteris swept artistically and accurately through the entrance gate and drew up before the stable range with a fixed expectation that some one might see and admire him, he was disappointed to observe no one but Mr. Gateward and a black boy. To them it was left to perform the *rôle* of spectators, audience, and sympathisers generally.

'Why, Gateward, old man, what's the meaning of this?' said the charioteer, signing to his own black urchin to jump down. 'Are you and Tarpot all the men left alive on Corindah? Sad effects of a dry season and overstocking, eh? No rouse-abouts, no boundary riders, no new chums, no nobody? Family gone away too? I'm not going to ruin you in the forage line either. Brought my own feed – plenty of corn and chaff inside the drag. Don't intend to eat my friends out of house and home this beastly season.'

By this time Mr. Gateward and the black boys had applied themselves with a will to the unharnessing of the team, so that the new-comer, who had uttered the preceding remarks, exclamations, and inquiries in a loud, cheerful, confident

manner, threw down his reins and descended from his seat without more ado.

Here he stood with his hands in his pockets, watching the taking out of his horses, a well-bred, well-matched, and well-conditioned team, never intermitting a flow of badinage and small-talk which seemed to proceed from him without effort and forethought.

'Now then, Jerry, you put 'em that one harness along a peg, two feller leader close up, then two feller poler. Tie 'em up long a post, that one yarraman, bimeby get 'um cool, baal gibit water, else that one die. You put 'em feed along a manger all ready. Mine come out bimeby.'

'I'll see after 'em, Mr. Charteris, don't you bother yourself,' said the overseer good-naturedly. 'Tarpot, you take 'em saddle-box belong a mahmee inside barracks. He'll show you, sir, – you know where the bathroom is. There's water there, though we are pretty short.'

'Deuced glad to hear it. The dust's inside my skin like the wool bales last summer. Must be half an inch of it somewhere. I've been living in it all day. Frightful season! I'm just going down to file my schedule – fact – unless my banker takes a good-natured fit. Can't stand it much longer. Ladies well? Mrs. Devereux and Miss Pollie? Not got fever, or cholera, or consumption this God-forsaken summer?'

The grave bushman smiled. 'I doubt we shall all have to go up King Street when *you* give in, Mr. Charteris! You can work

it somehow or other, whoever goes under. Besides, rain ain't far off; can't be now. The ladies are all right, and a little cheering up won't hurt 'em. Miss Pollie was out for a gallop just before you came up.'

'Then it was her I saw,' said the young man petulantly. 'Knocked smoke out of the team to catch her up, and missed her after all.'

Mr. Jack Charteris, of Monda, was a young squatter who lived about a hundred miles to the west of Corindah, where he had a large and valuable station, a good deal diminished as to profits by the present untoward season. He was of a sanguine, intrepid, rather speculative disposition, having investments in new country as well. People said he had too many irons in the fire, and would probably be ruined unless times changed. But more observant critics asserted that under careless speech and manner Jack Charteris masked a cool head and calculating brain; that he was not more likely to go wrong than his neighbours – in fact, less so, being of uncommon energy and quite inexhaustible resource. With any decent odds he was a safe horse to back to land a big stake.

For the rest he was a good-looking, athletic, cheery young fellow, in general favour and acceptation with ladies, having a great fund of good spirits and an unfailing supply of conversation, that most of his feminine acquaintances found agreeable. He was not easily daunted, and added the qualities of perseverance and a fixed belief in his persuasive powers to the list of his good

qualities.

The past masters in the science of conquest aver that the chief secret of fascination lies in the power to amuse the too often vacant and *distraite* feminine mind. Women suffer, it is asserted, more from dulness and ennui than from all other sources, injuries and disabilities put together. Consider, then, at what an enormous advantage he commences the siege who is able to surprise, to interest, to entertain the emotional, laughter-loving garrison, so often in the doldrums, so indifferently able to fill up the lingering hours. It is not the 'rare smile' which lights up the features of the dark and melancholy hero of the Byronic novelists which is so irresistible. Much more dangerous is the jolly, nonsensical, low-comedy person, in whose jokes the superior, the gifted rival can see no wit, indeed but little fun. Thackeray is true to life when he makes Miss Fotheringay unbend to Foker's harmless mirth, rewarding him with a make-believe box on the ear, while Pen, the sombre and dramatic, stands sulkily aloof.

This being an axiomatic truth, Mr. Charteris should have had, to use his own idiom, a considerable 'pull' in commending himself to the good graces of Miss Devereux, being one of those people to whom women always listened, and never without being more or less amused. But though he would hardly have sighed in vain at the feet of any of the *demoiselles* of the day, rural or metropolitan, he found this particular princess upon whom he had perversely set his heart, unapproachable within a certain clearly defined limit.

Not that she did not like him, respect, admire, even in certain ways to the extent of fighting his battles when absent, praising up his good qualities, delicately advising him for his good, laughing heartily at his good stories and running fire of jests and audacious compliments. That made it so hard to bear. The very fearlessness and perfect candour of her nature forbade him to hope that any softer feeling lay underneath the frankly expressed liking, and a natural dignity which never quitted her restrained him from urging his suit more decisively.

CHAPTER III

When Mr. Charteris had concluded his ablutions, and sauntered into the verandah after a careful toilette, he there encountered Miss Devereux, who, having arrayed herself in a light Indian muslin dress, gracefully reclined upon one of the Cingalese couches. His lonely life of late may have had something to do with it, but his ordinary well-maintained equilibrium nearly failed him before the resistless force of her charms.

Her eyes involuntarily brightened as she partly raised herself from the couch and held out her hand with unaffected welcome. He took in at one rapturous glance her slender yet wondrously moulded form, her delicate hand, her rounded arm seen through the diaphanous fabric, her massed and shining hair, her eloquent face.

'Oh, Lord!' he inwardly ejaculated, as he afterwards confessed. 'I used to wonder at fellows shooting themselves about a girl, and all that, and laugh at the idea. But I don't now. When I saw Pollie Devereux that evening I could have done the maddest thing in the world for the ghost of a chance of winning her. And to win, and wear, and lose her again, as happens to a man here and there. Good heavens' why, it would make a fellow – make – me – run amuck like a Malay, and kill a town full of people before I was half satisfied.'

But Mr. Charteris controlled those too impetuous feelings, and forced himself to remark, as he clasped her cool, soft hand despairingly while she expressed her frank pleasure at seeing him, 'Always delighted to come to Corindah, Miss Devereux, you know that. Didn't I see you near the gate as I drove up? Thought you might have come to meet me.'

'Well, so I would,' the young lady answered, with an air of provoking candour, 'only I had been out to see the coach and find out if they'd brought our package from England – presents that came by last mail, – I was so hot and dusty, and thought it was time to go and dress.'

'And I wanted to see how Wanderer looked, too,' quoth he reproachfully; 'you know I always think he could win the steeplechase at Bourke if you'd let me ride him and wear your colours.'

'I couldn't think of that for two reasons,' replied the girl with decision. 'First of all Wanderer might get hurt. Didn't you see that poor Welcome, at Wannonbah races, broke his leg and had to be shot? I should die, or go into a decline, if anything happened to Wanderer. And then there's another reason.'

'What's that?' inquired Mr. Charteris, with less than his usual intrepidity.

'Why – a —*you* might get hurt, Mr. Charteris, you see, and I can't afford to lose an old friend that way.'

'Oh, is that all?' retorted Master Jack, recovering his audacity; 'well, you could have me shot like Wanderer if I broke my back

or anything. 'Pon my soul! it would come to just the same thing if you ordered me out to execution before the race.'

'Now, Mr. Charteris!' said Pollie, in a steady, warning voice, 'you are disobeying orders, you know. I shall hand you over to mother, who has just come to say tea is ready. Mother, he is talking most childish nonsense about shooting himself.'

'But I never talk anything else, do I Mrs. Devereux?' said the young gentleman, running up to the kindly matron with a look of sincere affection. 'Your mother's known me all my life, Miss Devereux, and she won't believe any harm of me. Will you, my dear madam?'

'I never hear of you *doing* any foolish thing, my dear Jack,' said Mrs. Devereux maternally; 'and as long as that is the case I shall not be very angry at anything you can say. We all know you mean no harm. Don't we, Pollie? And now take me into tea, and you may amuse us as much as ever you like. I'm rather low myself on account of the season.'

'No use thinking about it,' quoth Charteris, dashing gallantly into the position assigned to him. 'That's why I'm going to Sydney to have a regular carnival, also to be in time to get the wires to work directly the drought breaks up. I can't make it rain, now can I? And I've a regular tough, steady overseer, a sort of first cousin to your Joe Gateward, with twice as much sense and work in him as I have. I mean to take it easy at the Club till he wires me: "Drought over. Six inches rain." Left the telegram all ready written and pinned up over his desk. He's nothing to do but fill

in the number of inches and sign it, and I shall know what to do. That shows faith, doesn't it?'

'But isn't it rather mad to go to Sydney with a four-in-hand and spend money, when you might be ruined, and all of us?' said Pollie.

'You are too prudent but don't look ahead – like most women, my dear young lady,' replied Jack, in the tone of experienced wisdom. 'Nothing like having a logical mind, which, I flatter myself, I possess. I always think the situation out, as thus: – If we are all going to be ruined – the odds are against it, but still it's on the cards – why not have a real first-class time of enjoyment before the grand smash? The trifling expenditure of a good spree won't make any appreciable difference in the universal bankruptcy. You grant me that, don't you? – Yes, thanks, I will take some more wild turkey. Strange that one should have any appetite this weather, isn't it?'

'Not if one rides or drives all day and half the night, as you do, Mr. Charteris,' said Pollie. 'Even talking makes you thirsty, doesn't it? But go on with the logic.'

'Did you ever see me scowl, Miss Pollie? Beware of my ferocious mood. Now we're agreed about this, that five hundred pounds, more or less, makes no difference if you're going to be ruined and lose fifty thousand.'

'I suppose not,' reluctantly assented Mrs. Devereux. 'Still it's money wasted.'

'Money wasted!' exclaimed Mr. Charteris. 'I'm surprised at

you, Mrs. Devereux. Think of the delights of yachting in the harbour, of the ocean breeze after this vapour from the pit of – of – Avernus. Knew I should find it in time. Then the evening parties, the dinners at the Club, the races, the lawn-tennis, the cricket matches! The English eleven are to be there. Why, I haven't been down for six whole months. Don't you think rational amusement worth all the money you can pay for it? Would you think a couple of years' ramble on the Continent too dearly bought if we were all able to afford to go together?'

The girl's eyes began to glow at this. 'Oh mother!' she said, 'surely we shall be able to go some day. Do you think this horrid drought will stop the possibility of it altogether? If I was sure of that I believe I should drown myself – no, I couldn't do that; but I would burn myself in a bush fire. That's a proper Australian notion of suicide. Water's too scarce and expensive. Think of the consequences if I spoiled a tank. I should like to see Mr. Gateward's face.'

And here the wilful damsel, having at first smiled at the alarmed expression of her mother's countenance, abandoned herself to childish merriment at the ludicrous idea of a drowned maiden in a bad season intensifying the bitterness in the minds of economical pastoralists with the reflection that a flock of sheep would probably be deprived thereby of that high-priced luxury in a dry country – a sufficiency of water.

Mr. Charteris laughed heartily for a few minutes, and then, with sudden solemnity, turned upon the young lady. 'You never

will be serious, you know. Why can't you take pattern by me? Let us pursue our argument. Pleasure being worth its price, let us pay it cheerfully. I was reading about the Three Hundred, those Greek fellows you know, dressing their hair before Thermopylæ; it gave me the idea, I think. Mine's too short' – here he rubbed his glossy brown pate, canonically cropped. 'But the principle's the same, Miss Pollie, eh?'

'What principle?' echoed Pollie, 'or want of it, do you mean?'

'The principle of dying game, Miss Devereux,' returned Charteris, with a steady eye and heroic pose. 'Surely you can respect that? It all resolves itself into this. I'm going to put down my ace. If the cards go wrong I have played a dashing game. If the season turns up trumps I'll make the odd trick. You'll see who has the cream of the store sheep-market when the drought breaks!'

'I admire bold play, and you have my best wishes, Mr. Charteris. You've explained everything so clearly. Don't you think if you read history a little more it might lead you to still more brilliant combinations?'

'If you'd only encourage me a little,' answered the young man, with a touch of unusual humility.

'Isn't that Jack Charteris?' said a man's voice in the passage. 'I'll swear I heard him talking about his ace. May I come in, or is there a family council or anything?'

'Come in, Harold, and don't be a goose,' said Mrs. Devereux; 'you are not going to stand on ceremony here at this or any other

time.'

'I've had a longish ride,' said the voice, 'nothing to eat, half a sunstroke, I believe, and my journey for my pains. I'm late for tea besides, though I rode hard – takes one so long to dress. If I was any one else I believe I should be cross. I think you'd better all leave me, and I'll join you in the verandah when I've fed and found my temper.'

'Nothing of the sort, mother; you take out Mr. Charteris and give him good advice, while I see after Mr. Atherstone, and recommend him to begin with the wild turkey while I get him some Bukkulla. What's the reason you've not been near us lately, sir?'

The new-comer was a very tall man, though he did not at first sight give you the idea of being much above the middle size, but Mr. Charteris, who was by no means short, looked so when they stood together. Then you saw that he was much above the ordinary stature of mankind. His frame was broad and muscular, and there was an air of latent power about his bearing such as gave the impression of perfect confidence, of physical or mental equality to whatever emergency might befall.

Mr. Charteris lingered, and seemed to question the soundness of the arrangement which divided him from the enchantress and reduced him to the placid enjoyment of Mrs. Devereux's always sensible but not exciting conversation.

'Look here, Jack, I can't have you here while I'm dining, you know,' persisted Mr. Atherstone, with a calm decision. 'You've

such an energetic, highly organised nature, you know, that calm people like me can't sustain your electric currents. I perceive by the appearance of that turkey that I'm about to dine in comfort. Pollie has gone to bring in a bottle of Bukkulla. "Put it to yourself carefully," as Mr. Jaggers says, that I have had no lunch. She will be quite as much as I can bear during such a delicate period. So out you go. Order him off, Mrs. Devereux, if you've any pity for me.'

'Well, you are the coolest ruffian, I must say,' quoth Mr. Charteris, as Pollie reappeared bearing a dusty bottle of the cool and fragrant Bukkulla. 'Mrs. Devereux, you spoil him. It's very weak of you. You'll have people talking.'

'We don't mind what people say, do we, Harold?' said the widow, as she watched him carefully draw the cork of the bottle, while Pollie sat near and placed a large hock glass before him. 'Leave them alone for half an hour. I'm sure, poor fellow, he's awfully tired and hungry. I know where he's been; it was on an errand of mine; Mr. Gateward couldn't go. Surely you can put up with my company for a little while.'

'Poor Harold!' grumbled Jack, 'he is to be pitied indeed! Mrs. Devereux, you know I always say there's no one talks so charmingly as you do, and I always say what I mean. Now isn't there something I can do for you in Sydney?'

The symposium thus ostentatiously heralded did not take quite so long as might have been expected, and Pollie, making her appearance in the drawing-room apparently before its

termination, went to the piano at Mr. Charteris's instigation, and sang two or three of his favourite songs in a fashion which brought any lingering remnants of his passion once more to the surface. Mr. Atherstone was also good enough to express his approval from the dining-room, the door of which was open, and to request that she would reserve her importation from the metropolis until he came in. This exhortation was followed by his personal apparition, when the latest composition of Stephen Adams was selected by him and duly executed.

Among the natural endowments lavished upon this young creature was such a voice as few women possess, few others adequately develop or worthily employ. Rich, flexible, with unusual compass, depth, and power, it combined strangely mingled tones, which carried with them smiles or tears, hate, defiance, love and despair, the child's glee, the woman's passion; all were enwrapped in this wondrous organ, prompt to appear when the magician touched her spirit with his wand. Harold once said that in her ordinary mood all the glories of vocal power seemed imprisoned in her soul, like the tunes that were frozen in the magic horn.

Men were used to sit with heads bent low, lest the faintest note might escape their highly wrought senses. Grizzled war-worn veterans had wept unrestrainedly as she sang the simple ballads that recalled their youth. Women even were deeply affected, and could not find one word of delicatest depreciation that would sound otherwise than sacrilegious. This was one of her good

nights, her amiable, well-behaved nights, Harold said. So the men sat and smoked in the verandah, with Mrs. Devereux near them; all in silence or low, murmuring converse, while the stars burnt brightly in the blue eternity of the summer night – the season itself in its unchanging brightness an emblem of the endless procession of creation – while the girl's melodious voice, now low and soft, now wildly appealing, tender or strong, rose and fell, or swelled and died away – 'like an angel's harp,' said Harold to her mother, as she arose and came towards them; 'and it is specially fortunate for us here,' he continued, 'as the season is turning us all into something like the other thing.'

'Hush, Harold, my boy; have faith in God's providence!' replied Mrs. Devereux, placing her hand on his. 'We have been sorely tried at times, but that hope and faith have never failed me.'

'What a lovely, glorious, heavenly night!' said the girl, stepping out on the broad walk which wound amid the odorous orange-trees, still kept in leaf and flower by profuse watering. 'What a shame that one should have to go to bed! I feel too excited to sleep. That is why you fortunate men smoke, I suppose? It calms the excitable nervous system, if you ever suffer in that way.'

'Ask Jack,' said Mr. Atherstone; 'he is more delicately organised. I suppose I like smoking, because I do it a good deal. It is a contemplative, reflective practice, possessing at the same time a sedative effect. It prevents intemperate cerebration. It arrests the wheels of thought, which are otherwise apt to go round and round when there's nothing for them to do – mills with no

corn to grind.'

'I never heard so many good reasons before for what many people call a bad habit,' said Pollie. 'However, I must say, considering the hard work you poor fellows have to do at times, I think a man enjoying his pipe after his day's work a dignified and ennobling spectacle.'

'Quite my idea, Miss Pollie,' said Jack. 'I really thought my brain was giving way once in a dry season. If I hadn't smoked, should have had to fall back upon drinking. Dreadful to think of, isn't it? A mixture of Latakia and Virginia I got from a fellow down from India on leave saved my life.'

'I think we are all sufficiently soothed and edified now to go to bed,' said Mrs. Devereux, with mild, suggestive authority. 'Dear me! nearly twelve o'clock too. The days are so long now that it is ever so late before dinner is finished and the evening fairly begun.'

The parcel from England to which reference had been made on the occasion of Pollie's excursion to Mogil Mogil clump had arrived safely, and its contents been duly admired, when a letter received by the next mail-steamer contained such exceptional tidings that all other incidents became tame and uninteresting.

This English letter proved to be from Captain Devereux's elder brother, with whom, since the former's death, Mrs. Devereux had kept up a formal but regular correspondence. The members of her husband's family had proved sympathetic in her hour of sorrow. They had possibly been touched by the passionate grief

of a relative whose letters after a while commenced to exhibit so much sound sense and proper feeling. From that time the elders of the house of Devereux never omitted befitting attention and friendly recognition of the far-off, unknown kinswoman.

And now, it seems, they had despatched Mr. Bertram Devereux, late lieutenant in Her Majesty's 6th Dragoon Guards, who, from force of circumstances, reckless extravagance and imprudence no doubt, but from no improper conduct, had been compelled to quit that crack corps and the brilliant society he adorned. He had a small capital, however, several thousand pounds fortunately, the bequest of an aunt. Having decided upon a colonial career, he was anxious to gain the requisite experience on the estate of his cousin, Mrs. Brian Devereux. If she had no objection, would she lay them all under a deep obligation by receiving the young man into her family, and by acting a mother's part to one who was forced to quit home and native land, perhaps for ever?'

This last enclosure was from Lady Anne Devereux, a lady in her own right, who, much to the distaste of her friends and family, had been fascinated by the handsome Colonel Dominick Daly Devereux, one of the military celebrities of the day. In the main the tone of the letter was proud and cold; but there were a few expressions which so plainly showed the mother's bruised heart, that Mrs. Devereux could not resist the appeal.

'I fear he will be a troublesome inmate in one sense or another,' she reflected. 'He is hardly young enough to take kindly to

station life. Then again, how will my darling girl be affected by his companionship? But I can enter into a mother's feelings. I cannot refuse hospitality to my dear husband's nephew. We must make the best of it. He will not be worse, I suppose, than other newly arrived young men. They are an awful bother during the first year. After that they become like other people. I hope Mr. Gateward will take to him.'

And now the stated time had been over-passed. The *Indus* (P. and O. Service) had arrived; a telegram had been received; and Mr. Bertram Devereux was hourly expected by the mail-coach. This fateful vehicle did actually arrive rather late on the evening specified, it is true, but without having, according to Pollie's prophecies and reiterated assertions, either broken down, upset, or lost its way owing to the new driver taking a back track which led into the wilderness and ended at a lately finished tank, far from the habitations of civilised man.

As the coach swung round the corner of the stock-yard and drew up underneath a wide-branched white acacia which shaded a large proportion of an inner enclosure, the driver received a *douceur* which confirmed him in the opinion which he had previously entertained of his passenger being 'a perfect gentleman.' He therefore busied himself actively in unloading his portmanteau and other effects, deposited the station mail-bag, and without further loss of time took the well-trodden road to the township. As the eyes of his late fare rested mechanically upon the fast-departing coach, he saw little but a cloud of

dust outlining every turn of the road, amid which gleamed the five great lamps, which finally diminished apparently into star-fragments, as they traversed the unending plain which stretched northward and northward ever.

A young man, whose Crimean shirt and absence of necktie denoted to the traveller the presumed abandon of bush life, advanced from the door of a species of shop for general merchandise, as it seemed to the stranger, and dragging in the mail-bag, saluted him courteously. 'Mr. Devereux, I think? Please to come in.'

Meekly following his interlocutor through the 'shop,' as he termed it, he found himself in a smaller and more comfortable room. Looking around at the somewhat 'cabin'd, cribb'd, and confin'd' section, he answered, 'My name is Devereux. I have come to remain. May I ask which of these rooms is to be allotted to me?'

The storekeeper smiled. 'You didn't think this was the house, sir? This is the overseer's place, the barracks, as we call it in the bush. If you come after me I'll show you the way. Your luggage will be brought to you if you will leave it here.'

The new-comer had not, in truth, troubled himself to consider what Australian dwellings might resemble. He expected nothing. He had made up his mind to the worst. Therefore he would not have been in the least surprised if his aunt or cousin had issued from one of the small apartments which opened out from the larger room; had directed him to occupy another; had then

and there placed a kettle on the smouldering wood fire for the purpose of providing him with refreshment after his journey.

He therefore mechanically followed his guide through a passage and along a verandah until they reached a white gate in a garden paling, when the young man in the light raiment quitted him with this farewell precept —

'The front entrance is between those two large rose-bushes, and the first room to the right of the hall. Mrs. Devereux or Miss Pollie sure to be there.'

Proceeding along the path as he had been directed, Bertram Devereux commenced to experience a slight degree of surprise, even curiosity. He was evidently in an æsthetic region, short as had been the distance from the sternest commonplace. The borders had been carefully kept. Flowers were blooming profusely. Oranges and limes shed a subtle and powerful odour around. The stars gleamed on a sheet of water which had evidently helped to create this oasis in the desert. The whispering leaves of the banana brought back memories of tropic glories of foliage. Turning between two vast cloth-of-gold standards, the blooms of which met and clustered about his head, he ascended a flight of steps and found himself in a broad verandah furnished with cane lounges and hammocks.

The hanging lamp, which illumined a wide and lofty hall, showed ferns of various size and foliage, the delicate colouring of which struck gratefully upon his aching and dust-enfeebled eyes. A book, a few gathered flowers, lay upon a small table with

some half-executed ornamental needlework. All told of recent feminine presence and occupation.

As he lingered in observation of these novelties, a lady passed into the hall from a side-door and advanced with a look of kindly welcome.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

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