Hornung Ernest William

A Bride from the Bush

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A LETTER FROM ALFRED

There was consternation in the domestic camp of Mr Justice Bligh on the banks of the Thames. It was a Sunday morning in early summer. Three-fourths of the family sat in ominous silence before the mockery of a well-spread breakfast-table: Sir James and Lady Bligh and their second son, Granville. The eldest son – the missing complement of this family of four – was abroad. For many months back, and, in fact, down to this very minute, it had been pretty confidently believed that the young man was somewhere in the wilds of Australia; no one had quite known where, for the young man, like most vagabond young men, was a terribly meagre corespondent; nor had it ever been clear why any one with leisure and money, and of no very romantic turn, should have left the beaten track of globe-trotters, penetrated to the wilderness, and stayed there – as Alfred Bligh had done. Now, however, all was plain. A letter from Brindisi, just received,

explained everything; Alfred's movements, so long obscure, were at last revealed, and in a lurid light – that, as it were, of the bombshell that had fallen and burst upon the Judge's breakfast-table. For Alfred was on his way to England with an Australian wife; and this letter from Brindisi, was the first that his people had heard of it, or of her.

'Of course,' said Lady Bligh, in her calm and thoughtful manner, 'it was bound to happen sooner or later. It might have happened very much sooner; and, indeed, I often wished that it would; for Alfred must be – what? Thirty?'

'Quite,' said Granville; 'I am nearly that myself.'

'Well, then,' said Lady Bligh gently, looking tenderly at the Judge (whose grave eyes rested upon the sunlit lawn outside), 'from one point of view – a selfish one – we ought to consider ourselves the most fortunate of parents. And this news should be a matter for rejoicing, as it would be, if – if it were only less sudden, and wild, and – and – '

Her voice trembled; she could not go on.

'And alarming,' added Granville briskly, pulling himself together and taking an egg.

Then the Judge spoke.

'I should like,' he said, 'to hear the letter read slowly from beginning to end. Between us, we have not yet given it a fair chance; we have got only the drift of it; we may have overlooked something. Granville, perhaps you will read the letter aloud to your mother and me?'

Granville, who had just laid open his egg with great skill, experienced a moment's natural annoyance at the interruption. To stop to read a long letter now was, he felt, treating a good appetite shabbily, to say nothing of the egg. But this was not a powerful feeling; he concealed it. He had a far stronger appetite than the mere relish for food; the intellectual one. Granville had one of the nicest intellects at the Junior Bar. His intellectual appetite was so hearty, and even voracious, that it could be gratified at all times and places, and not only by the loaves and fishes of full-bodied wit, but by the crumbs and fishbones of legal humour – such as the reading aloud of indifferent English and ridiculous sentiments in tones suitable to the most chaste and classic prose. This he had done in court with infinite gusto, and he did it now as he would have done it in court.

"'My dear Mother'" (he began reading, through a single eyeglass that became him rather well), – "'Before you open this letter you'll see that I'm on my way home! I am sorry I haven't written you for so long, and *very* sorry I didn't before I sailed. I should think when I last wrote was from Bindarra. But I must come at once to my great news – which Heaven knows how I'm to tell you, and how you'll take it when I do. Well, I will, in two words – the fact is, *I'm married*! My wife is the daughter of 'the boss of Bindarra' – in other words, a 'squatter' with a 'run' (or territory) as big as a good many English counties.'"

The crisp forensic tones were dropped for an explanatory aside. 'He evidently *means*– father' (Granville nearly said 'my

lord,' through force of habit), 'that his father-in-law is the squatter; not his wife, which is what he *says*. He writes in such a slipshod style. I should also think he means that the territory in question is equal in size to certain English counties, individually (though this I venture to doubt), and not – what you would infer – to several counties put together. His literary manner was always detestable, poor old chap; and, of course, Australia was hardly likely to improve it.'

The interpolation was not exactly ill-natured; but it was received in silence; and Granville's tones, as he resumed the reading, were even more studiously unsympathetic than before.

'"Of my Bride I will say very little; for you will see her in a week at most. As for myself, I can only tell you, dear Mother, that I am the very luckiest and happiest man on earth!"' ('A brave statement,' Granville murmured in parenthesis; 'but they all make it.') '"She is typically Australian, having indeed been born and bred in the Bush, and is the first to admit it, being properly proud of her native land; but, if you knew the Australians as I do, this would not frighten you. Far from it, for the typical Australian is one of the very highest if not *the* highest development of our species."' (Granville read that sentence with impressive gravity, and with such deference to the next as to suggest no kind of punctuation, since the writer had neglected it.) '"But as you, my dear Mother, are the very last person in the world to be prejudiced by mere mannerisms, I won't deny that she has one or two —*though, mind you, I like them!* And, at least, you may

look forward to seeing the most beautiful woman you ever saw in your life – though I say it.

"'Feeling sure that you will, as usual, be 'summering' at Twickenham, I make equally sure that you will be able and willing to find room for us; at the same time, we will at once commence looking out for a little place of our own in the country, with regard to which we have plans which will keep till we see you. But, while we are with you, I thought I would be able to show my dear girl the principal sights of the Old Country, which, of course, are mostly in or near town, and which she is dying to see.

"'Dear Mother, I know I *ought* to have consulted you, or at least told you, beforehand. The whole thing was impulsive, I admit. But if you and my Father will forgive me for this – take my word for it, you will soon find out that it is all you have to forgive! Of course, I am writing to my Father as much as to you in this letter – as he will be the first to understand. With dearest love to you both (not forgetting Gran), in which Gladys joins me (though she doesn't know I am saying so).

"'Believe me as ever,
"'Your affectionate Son,
"'Alfred.'"

'Thank you,' said the Judge, shortly.

The soft dark eyes of Lady Bligh were wet with tears.

'I think,' she said, gently, 'it is a very tender letter. I know of no man but Alfred that could write such a boyish, simple letter – not that I don't enjoy your clever ones, Gran. But then Alfred

never yet wrote to me without writing himself down the dear, true-hearted, affectionate fellow he is; only here, of course, it comes out doubly. But does he not mention her maiden name?'

'No, he doesn't,' said Granville. 'You remarked the Christian name, though? Gladys! I must say it sounds unpromising. Mary, Eliza, Maria – one would have rather liked a plain, homely, farm-yard sort of name for a squatter's daughter. But Ermyntrude, or Elaine, or Gladys! These are names of ill-omen; you expect de Vere coming after them, or even worse.'

'What *is* a squatter, Gran?' asked Lady Bligh abruptly.

'A squatter? I don't know,' said Gran, paring the ham daintily as he answered. 'I don't know, I'm sure; something to do with bushranging, I should imagine – but I really can't tell you.'

But there was a set of common subjects of which Gran was profoundly and intentionally ignorant; and it happened that Greater Britain was one of them. If he had known for certain whether Sydney (for instance) was a town or a colony or an island, he would have kept the knowledge carefully to himself, and been thoroughly ashamed of it. And it was the same with other subjects understanded of the Board-scholars. This queer temper of mind is not indeed worth analysing; nevertheless, it is peculiar to a certain sort of clever young fellows, and Granville Bligh was a very fair specimen of the clever young fellow. He was getting on excellently at the Bar, for so young a man. He also wrote a little, with plenty of impudence and epigram, if nothing else. But this was not his real line. Still, what he did at all, he did more or less

cleverly. There was cleverness in every line of his smooth dark face; there was uncommon shrewdness in his clear gray eyes. His father had the same face and the same eyes – with this difference added to the differences naturally due to age: there were wisdom, and dignity, and humanity in the face and glance of the Judge; but the nobility of expression thus given was not inherited by the Judge's younger son.

The Judge spoke again, breaking a silence of some minutes: —

'As you say, Mildred, it seems to have been all very wild and sudden; but when we have said this, we have probably said the worst there is to say. At least, let us hope so. Of my own knowledge many men have gone to Australia, as Alfred went, and come back with the best of wives. I seem to have heard, Granville, that that is what Merivale did; and I have met few more admirable women than Mrs Merivale.'

'It certainly is the case, sir,' said Granville, who had been patronised to some extent by Merivale, Q.C. 'But Mrs Merivale was scarcely "born and bred in the Bush"; and if she had what poor Alfred, perhaps euphemistically, calls "mannerisms" – I have detected no traces of any myself – when Merivale married her, at least she had money.'

'Your sister-in-law may have "money," too,' said Sir James, with somewhat scornful emphasis. 'That is of no consequence at all. Your brother has enough for both, and more than enough for a bachelor.'

There was no need to remind the young man of that; it had been a sore point, and even a raw one, with Granville since his boyhood; for it was when the brothers were at school together – the younger in the Sixth Form, the elder in the Lower Fifth – and it was already plain which one would benefit the most by 'private means,' that a relative of Sir James had died, leaving all her money to Alfred.

Granville coloured slightly – very slightly – but observed: —

'It is a good thing he has.'

'What do you mean?' the Judge asked, with some asperity.

'That he needs it,' said Granville, significantly.

Sir James let the matter drop, and presently, getting up, went out by the open French window, and on to the lawn. It was not his habit to snub his son; he left that to the other judges, in court. But Lady Bligh remonstrated in her own quiet way – a way that had some effect even upon Granville.

'To sneer at your brother's inferior wits, my son, is not in quite nice taste,' she said; 'and I may tell you, now, that I did not at all care for your comments upon his letter.'

Granville leant back in his chair and laughed pleasantly.

'How seriously you take one this morning! But it is small wonder that you should, for the occasion is a sufficiently serious one, in all conscience; and indeed, dear mother, I am as much put out as you are. Nay,' Granville added, smiling blandly, 'don't say that you're *not* put out, for I can see that you *are*. And we have reason to be put out' – he became righteously indignant –

'all of us. I wouldn't have thought it of Alfred, I wouldn't indeed! No matter whom he wanted to marry, he ought at least to have written first, instead of being in such a violent hurry to bring her over. It is treating *you*, dear mother, to say the best of it, badly; and as for the Judge, it is plain that he is quite upset by the unfortunate affair.'

'We have no right to assume that it is unfortunate, Gran.'

'Well, I hope it is not, that's *all*,' said Gran, with great emphasis. 'I hope it is not, for poor Alfred's sake. Yet, as you know, mother, he's the very kind of old chap to get taken in and imposed upon; and – I tell you frankly – I tremble for him. If he is the victim of a designing woman, I am sorry for him, from my soul I am! If he has married in haste – and he has – to repent at leisure – as he may – though this is trite and detestable language, I pity him, from my soul I do! You have already rebuked me – I don't say unjustly – for making what, I admit, had the appearance of an odious and egotistical comparison; I will guard against conveying a second impression of that kind; yet I think I may safely say, without bragging, that I know the world rather better than old Alfred does. Well, I have, I will not say my fears, but my dreads; and I cannot help having them. If they are realised, no one will sympathise with poor dear Alfred more deeply than I shall.'

Lady Bligh looked keenly at her eloquent son; a half-smile played about her lips: she understood him, to some extent.

'But what if your fears are *not* realised?' she said, quietly.

'Why, then,' said Gran, less fluently, 'then I – oh, of course, I shall be delighted beyond words; no one will be more delighted than I.'

'Then you shall see,' said Lady Bligh, rising, with a sweet and hopeful smile, 'that is how it is going to turn out; I have a presentiment that it will all turn out for the best. So there is only one thing to be done – we must prepare to welcome her to our hearts!'

Granville shrugged his shoulders, but his mother did not see him; she had gone quietly from the room and was already climbing (slowly, for she was stout) the stairs that led up to her own snuggery on the first floor. This little room was less of a boudoir than a study, and more like an office than either, for it was really a rather bare little room. Its most substantial piece of furniture was a large unlovely office-table, and its one picture was framed in the window-sashes – a changeful picture of sky and trees, and lawn and river, painted this morning in the most radiant tints of early summer. At the office-table, which was littered with letters and pamphlets, Lady Bligh spent diligent hours every day. She was a person of both mental and manual activity, with public sympathies and interests that entailed an immense correspondence. She was, indeed, one of the most charitable and benevolent of women, and was to some extent a public woman. But we have nothing to do with her public life, and, on this Sunday morning, no more had she.

There were no pictures on the walls, but there were

photographs upon the chimney-piece. Lady Bligh stood looking at them for an unusually long time – in fact, until the sound of the old church bells, coming in through the open window, called her away.

One of the photographs was of the Judge – an excellent one, in which the dear old gentleman looked his very best, dignified but kindly. Another was a far too flattering portrait of Granville. A third portrait was that of an honest, well-meaning, and rather handsome face, with calm dark eyes, exactly like Lady Bligh's; and this was the erratic Alfred. But the photograph that Lady Bligh looked at longest, and most fondly, was a faded one of Alfred and Granville as mere schoolboys. She loved her two sons so dearly! One of them was much changed, and becoming somewhat spoilt, to phrase it mildly; yet that son was rather clever, and his mother saw his talents through a strong binocular, and his faults with her eyes at the wrong end of it; and she loved him in spite of the change in him, and listened – at least with tolerance – to the airings of a wit that was always less good natured, and generally less keen, than she imagined it. But the other son had never changed at all; even his present fatal letter showed that. He was still a boy at heart – a wild, stupid, affectionate schoolboy. There was no denying it: in his mother's heart the elder son was the best beloved of the two.

And it was this one who had married with so much haste and mystery – the favourite son, the son with money, the son who might have married any one he pleased. It was hard to choke

down prejudice when this son was bringing home a wife from the Bush, of all places!

What would she be like? What *could* she be like?

CHAPTER II
HOME IN STYLE

'He must be mad!' said Granville, flourishing a telegram in his hand.

'He must be very fond of her,' Lady Bligh replied, simply.

Granville held the telegram at arm's length, and slowly focussed it with his eyeglass. He had already declaimed it twice, once with horror in his voice, once with a running accompaniment of agreeable raillery. His third reading was purely compassionate, in accordance with his latest theory regarding the mental condition of the sender.

'"Arrived both well. Chartered launch take us Gravesend Twickenham; show her river. Join us if possible Westminster Bridge 3 o'clock. – Alfred."'

Granville sighed.

'Do you comprehend it, dear mother? I think I do, at last, though the prepositions *are* left to the imagination. He has saved at least twopence over those prepositions – which, of course, is an item, even in a ten-pound job.'

'You don't mean to say it will cost him ten pounds?'

'Every penny of it: it would cost you or me, or any ordinary person, at least a fiver. I am allowing for Alfred's being let in rather further than any one else would be.'

'At all events,' said Lady Bligh, 'you will do what he asks you; you will be at Westminster at the time he mentions?'

Granville shrugged his shoulders. 'Certainly, if you wish it.'

'I think it would be kind.'

'Then I will go, by all means.'

'Thank you – and Granville! I do wish you would give up sneering at your brother's peculiarities. He *does* do odd and impulsive things, we know; and there is no denying the extravagance of steaming up the river all the way from Gravesend. But, after all, he has money, and no doubt he wants to show his wife the Thames, and to bring her home in a pleasant fashion, full of pleasant impressions; and upon my word,' said Lady Bligh, 'I never heard of a prettier plan in my life! So go, my dear boy, and meet them, and make them happier still. If that is possible, no one could do it more gracefully than you, Gran!'

Granville acknowledged the compliment, and promised; and punctually at three he was at Westminster Bridge, watching with considerable interest the rapid approach of a large launch – a ridiculously large one for the small number of people on board. She had, in fact, only two passengers, though there was room for fifty. One of the two was Alfred, whose lanky figure was unmistakable at any distance; and the dark, straight, strapping young woman at his side was, of course, Alfred's wife.

The meeting between the brothers was hearty enough, but it might have been more entirely cordial had there been a little less effusiveness on one side – not Granville's. But Alfred – who

was dressed in rough tweed clothes of indeterminate cut, and had disfigured himself with a beard – was so demonstrative in his greeting that the younger brother could not help glancing anxiously round to assure himself that there was no one about who knew him. It was a relief to him to be released and introduced to the Bride.

'Gladys, this is Gran come to meet us – as I knew he would – like the brick he is, and always was!'

Gran was conscious of being scrutinised keenly by the finest dark eyes he had ever encountered in his life; but the next moment he was shaking his sister-in-law's hand, and felt that it was a large hand – a trifling discovery that filled Granville with a subtile sense of satisfaction. But the Bride was yet to open her lips.

'How do you do?' she said, the olive tint of her cheek deepening slightly. 'It was awfully nice of you to come; I *am* glad to see you – I have heard such lots about you, you know!'

It was said so glibly that the little speech was not, perhaps, exactly extempore: and it was spoken – every word of it – with a twang that, to sensitive ears like Granville's, was simply lacerating. Granville winced, and involuntarily dropped his eyeglass; but otherwise he kept a courteous countenance, and made a sufficiently civil reply.

As for Alfred, he, of course, noticed nothing unusual in his wife's accents; he was used to them; and, indeed, it seemed to Granville that Alfred spoke with a regrettable drawl himself.

'You've got to play showman, Gran,' said he, when some natural questions had been hurriedly put and tersely answered (by which time they were opposite Lambeth Palace). 'I've been trying, but I'm a poor hand at it; indeed, I'm a poor Londoner, and always was: below Blackfriars I was quite at sea, and from here to Richmond I'm as ignorant as a brush.'

'No; he's no good at all,' chimed in the Bride, pleasantly.

'Well, I'm not well up in it, either,' said Gran, warily.

This was untrue, however. Granville knew his Thames better than most men – it was one of the things he *did* know. But he had a scholar's reverence for classic ground; and in a young man who revered so very little, this was remarkable, if it was not affectation. Granville would have suffered tortures rather than gravely point out historic spots to a person whose ideas of history probably went no farther back than the old Colonial digging days; he would have poured sovereigns into the sea as readily as the coin of sacred associations into Gothic ears. At least, so he afterwards said, when defending his objection to interpreting the Thames for his sister-in-law's benefit.

'What nonsense!' cried Alfred, good-humouredly. 'You know all about it – at all events, you used to. There – we've gone and let her miss Lambeth Palace! Look, dear, quick, while it's still in sight – that's where the Archbishop of Canterbury hangs out.'

'Oh,' said Gladys, 'I've heard of *him*.'

'And isn't that Cheyne Walk, or some such place, that we're coming to on the right there?' said Alfred.

'Yes,' said Granville, briefly; 'that's Cheyne Walk.'

Luckily the Bride asked no questions – indeed, she was inclined to be silent – for of all localities impossible to discuss with an uneducated person, Granville felt that Chelsea and Cheyne Walk were the most completely out of the question. And that the Bride was a sadly uneducated person was sufficiently clear, if only from her manner of speaking. Granville accepted the fact with creditable equanimity – he had prophesied as much – and sat down to smoke a cigarette and to diagnose, if he could, this new and wonderful dialect of his sister-in-law. It was neither Cockney nor Yankee, but a nasal blend of both: it was a lingo that declined to let the vowels run alone, but trotted them out in ill-matched couples, with discordant and awful consequences; in a word, it was Australasiatic of the worst description. Nor was the speech of Alfred free from the taint – Alfred, whose pronunciation at least had been correct before he went out; while the common colloquialisms of the pair made Granville shudder.

'If I did not hope for such surprisingly good looks,' said he to himself, 'yet even *I* was not prepared for *quite* so much vulgarity! Poor dear Alfred!'

And Granville sighed, complacently.

Yet, as she leant upon the rail in the summer sunlight, silent and pensive, there was certainly no suggestion of vulgarity in her attitude; it was rather one of unstudied grace and ease. Nor was there anything at all vulgar in the quiet travelling dress that fitted her tall full form so closely and so well. Nor was her black hair cut

down to within an inch of her eyebrows – as, of course, it should have been – or worn in a fringe at all. Nor was there anything the least objectionable in the poise of the small graceful head, or in the glance of the bold dark eyes, or in the set of the full, firm, crimson lips; and thus three more excellent openings – for the display of vulgarity – were completely thrown away. In fact, if she had never spoken, Granville would have been at a loss to find a single fault in her. Alas! about her speech there could be no two opinions – it bewrayed her.

Presently Alfred sat down beside his brother, and began to tell him everything, and did all the talking; while the Bride still stood watching the shifting panorama of the banks, and the golden sunlight upon the water, and the marvellous green of all green things. It was practically her first experience of this colour. And still she asked no questions, her interest being perhaps too intense; and so the showman-business was forgotten, to the great relief of Granville; and the time slipped quickly by. At last – and quite suddenly – the Bride clapped her hands, and turned with sparkling eyes to her husband: they had entered that splendid reach below Richmond, and the bridges were in sight, with the hill beyond.

'I give this best!' she cried. 'It *does* knock spots out of the Yarra and the Murray after all!'

Alfred glanced uneasily at his brother, but found an impassive face.

'Come, old fellow,' said Alfred, 'do your duty; jump up and

tell her about these places.'

So at last Granville made an effort to do so; he got up and went to the side of the Bride; and presently he was exercising a discreet if not a delicate vein of irony, that was peculiarly his own.

'That was Kew we passed just now – you must see the gardens there,' he said; 'and this is Richmond.'

'Kew and Richmond!' exclaimed the Bride, innocently. 'How rum! We have a Kew and a Richmond in Melbourne.'

'Ah!' said Gran. 'I don't fancy the theft was on our side. But look at this gray old bridge – picturesque, isn't it? – and I dare say you have nothing like it out there. And there, you see – up on the left yonder – is Richmond Hill. Rather celebrated, Richmond Hill: you may have heard of it; there was a lass that lived there once.'

'Yes – what of her?'

'Oh, she was neat and had sweet eyes – or sweet, with neat eyes – I really forget which. And there was a somebody or other who said he'd resign any amount of crowns – the number wasn't specified – to call her his. He was pretty safe in saying that – unless, indeed, he meant crown-*pieces*– which, now I think of it, would be rather an original reading.'

'Alfred,' said the Bride abruptly, 'are we nearly there?'

'Not far off,' said Alfred.

Granville bit his lip. 'We are very nearly there,' he said; 'this is the beginning of Twickenham.'

'Then where's the Ferry?' said the Bride. 'I know all about

"Twickenham Ferry"; we once had a storekeeper – a new chum – who used to sing about it like mad. Show it me.'

'There, then: it crosses by the foot of the island: it's about to cross now. Now, in a minute, I'll show you Pope's old place; we don't go quite so far – in fact, here we are – but you'll be able just to see it, I think.'

'The Pope!' said Gladys. 'I never knew *he* lived in England!'

'No more he does. Not *the* Pope —*Pope*; a man of the name of Pope: a scribbler: a writing-man: in fact, a poet.'

The three were leaning over the rail, shoulder to shoulder, and watching eagerly for the first glimpse of the Judge's retreat through the intervening trees. Granville was in the middle. The Bride glanced at him sharply, and opened her lips to say something which – judging by the sudden gleam of her dark eyes – might possibly have been rather too plain-spoken. But she never said it; she merely left Granville's side, and went round to the far side of her husband, and slipped her hand through his arm. Granville walked away.

'Are we there?' whispered Gladys.

'Just, my darling. Look, that's the house – the one with the tall trees and the narrow lawn.'

'*Hoo-jolly-ray!*'

'Hush, Gladdie! For Heaven's sake don't say anything like that before my mother! There she is on the lawn, waving her handkerchief. We'll wave ours back to her. The dear mother! Whatever you do, darling girl, don't say anything of that sort to

her. It would be Greek to my mother and the Judge, and they mightn't like it.'

CHAPTER III
PINS AND NEEDLES

Slanting mellow sunbeams fell pleasantly upon the animated face of the Bride, as she stepped lightly across the gangway from the steam-launch to the lawn; and, for one moment, her tall supple figure stood out strikingly against the silver river and the pale eastern sky. In that moment a sudden dimness came over Lady Bligh's soft eyes, and with outstretched arms she hurried forward to press her daughter to her heart. It was a natural motherly impulse, but, even if Lady Bligh had stopped to think, she would have made sure of being met half-way. She was not, however, and the mortification of the moment was none the less intense because it was invisible. The Bride refused to be embraced. She was so tall that it would have been impossible for Lady Bligh to kiss her against her will, but it never came to that; the unbending carriage and man-like outstretched hand spoke plainly and at once – and were understood. But Lady Bligh coloured somewhat, and it was an unfortunate beginning, for every one noticed it; and the Judge, who was hurrying towards them across the lawn at the time, there and then added a hundred per cent of ceremony to his own greeting, and received his daughter-in-law as he would have received any other stranger.

'I am very happy to see you,' he said, when Alfred had

introduced them – the Judge waited for that. 'Welcome, indeed; and I hope you have received agreeable impressions of our River Thames.'

'Oh, rather!' said Gladys, smiling unabashed upon the old gentleman. 'We've no rivers like it in Australia. I've just been saying so.'

Granville, who had been watching for a change in his mother's expression when she should first hear the Bride speak, was not disappointed. Lady Bligh winced perceptibly. Judges, however, may be relied upon to keep their countenances, if anybody may; it is their business; Sir James was noted for it, and he merely said dryly, 'I suppose not,' and that was all.

And then they all walked up the lawn together to where tea awaited them in the veranda. The Bride's dark eyes grew round at sight of the gleaming silver teapot and dainty Dresden china; she took her seat in silence in a low wicker chair, while the others talked around her; but presently she was heard exclaiming: —

'No, thanks, no milk, and I'll sweeten it myself, please.'

'But it's cream,' said Lady Bligh, good-naturedly, pausing with the cream-jug in the air.

'The same thing,' returned Gladys. 'We never took any on the station, so I like it better without; and it can't be too strong, if you please. We didn't take milk,' she turned to explain to Sir James, 'because, in a general way, our only cow was a tin one, and we preferred no milk at all. We ran sheep, you see, not cattle.'

'A tin cow!' said Sir James.

'She means they only had condensed milk,' said Alfred, roaring with laughter.

'But our cow is *not* tin,' said Lady Bligh, smiling, as she still poised the cream-jug; 'will you not change your mind?'

'No, thanks,' said the Bride stoutly.

It was another rather awkward moment, for it did seem as though Gladys was disagreeably independent. And Alfred, of all people, made the moment more awkward still, and, indeed, more uncomfortable than any that had preceded it.

'Gladdie,' he exclaimed in his airiest manner, 'you're a savage! A regular savage, as I've told you over and over again!'

No one said anything. Gladys smiled, and Alfred chuckled over his pleasantry. But it was a pleasantry that contained a most unpleasant truth. The others felt this, and it made them silent. It was a relief to all – with the possible exception of the happy pair, neither of whom appeared to be over-burdened with self-consciousness – when Lady Bligh carried off Gladys, and delivered her in her own room into the safe keeping of Miss Bunn, her appointed maid.

This girl, Bunn, presently appeared in the servants' hall, sat down in an interesting way, and began to twirl her thumbs with great ostentation. Being questioned, in fulfilment of her artless design, she said that she was not wanted upstairs. Being further questioned, she rattled off a string of the funny things Mrs '*H*alfred' had said to her along with a feeble imitation of Mrs '*H*alfred's' very funny way of saying them. This is not a matter of

importance; but it was the making of Bunn below stairs; so long as Mrs Alfred remained in the house, her maid's popularity as a kitchen entertainer was assured.

The Bride wished to be alone; at all events she desired no personal attendance. What should she want with a maid? A lady's-maid was a 'fixing' she did not understand, and did not wish to understand; she had said so plainly, and that she didn't see where Miss Bunn 'came in'; and then Miss Bunn had gone out, in convulsions. And now the Bride was alone at last, and stood pensively gazing out of her open window at the wonderful green trees and the glittering river, at the deep cool shadows and the pale evening sky; and delight was in her bold black eyes; yet a certain sense of something not quite as it ought to be – a sensation at present vague and undefined – made her graver than common. And so she stood until the door was burst suddenly open, and a long arm curled swiftly round her waist, and Alfred kissed her.

'My darling! tell me quickly – '

'Stop!' said Gladys. 'I'll bet I guess what it is you want me to tell you! Shall I?'

'Yes, if you can, for I certainly do want you to tell me something.'

'Then it's what I think of your people!'

'How you like them,' Alfred amended. 'Yes, that was it. Well, then?'

'Well, then – I like your mother. She has eyes like yours, Alfred, large and still and kind, and she is big and motherly.'

'Then, oh, my darling, why on earth didn't you kiss her?'

'Kiss her? Not *me*! Why should I?'

'She meant to kiss you; I saw she did.'

'Don't you believe it! Even if she had, it would have been only for your sake. You wait a little bit; wait till she knows me, and if she wants to kiss me then – let her!'

Alfred was pained by his young wife's tone; he had never before heard her speak so strangely, and her eyes were wistful. He did not quite understand her, but he did not try to, then; he varied the subject.

'How about Gran?'

'Oh, that Gran!' cried Gladys. 'I can't suffer him at all.'

'Can't suffer Gran! What on earth do you mean, Gladys?'

'I mean that he was just a little beast in the boat! You think he was as glad to see you as you were him, because you judge by yourself; but not a bit of it; I know better. It was all put on with him, and a small "all" too. Then you asked him to tell me about the places we passed, and he only laughed at me. Ah, you may laugh at people without moving a muscle, but people may see it all the same; and I did, all along; and just before we got here I very near told him so. If I had, I'd have given him one, you stake your life!'

'I'm glad you didn't,' said Alfred devoutly, but in great trouble. '*I* never heard him say anything to rankle like that; I thought he was very jolly, if you ask me. And really, Gladdie, old Gran's as good a fellow as ever lived; besides which, he has all the brains

of the family.'

'Perhaps,' said Gladys, softening, 'my old man has got a double share of something better than brains!'

'Nonsense, darling! But at least the Judge was pleasant; what did you think of the Judge?'

'I funked him.'

'Good gracious! Why?'

'He's so dreadfully dignified; and he looks you through and through – not nastily, like Gran does, but as if you were something funny in a glass case.'

'What stuff and nonsense, Gladdie! You're making me miserable. Look here: talk to the Judge: draw him out a bit. That's all he wants, and he likes it.'

'What am I to call him – "Judge"?'

'No: not that: never that. For the present, "Sir James," I think.'

'And what am I to talk about?'

'Oh, anything – Australia. Interest him about the Bush. Try, dearest, at dinner – to please me.'

'Very well,' said Gladys; 'I'll have a shot.'

And she had one, though it was not quite the kind of shot Alfred would have recommended – at any rate, not for a first shot. For, on thinking it over, it seemed to Gladys that, with relation to the Bush, nothing could interest a Judge so much as the manner of administering the law there, which she knew something about. Nor was the subject unpromising or unsafe: it was only her way of leading up to it that was open to criticism.

'I suppose, Sir James,' she began, 'you have lots of trying to do?'

'Trying?' said the Judge, looking up from his soup; for the Bride had determined not to be behindhand in keeping her promise, and had opened the attack thus early.

'As if he were a tailor!' thought Granville. 'Trials, sir,' he suggested suavely. He was sitting next Gladys, who was on the Judge's right.

'Ah, trials!' said the Judge with a faint – a very faint – smile. 'Oh, yes – a great number.'

A sudden thought struck Gladys. She became the interested instead of the interesting party. She forgot the Bush, and stared at her father-in-law in sudden awe.

'Are there many murder trials among them, Sir James?'

By the deliberate manner with which he went on with his soup, the Judge apparently did not hear the question. But Lady Bligh and Alfred heard it, and were horrified; while Granville looked grave, and listened for more with all his ears. He had not to wait long. Gladys feared she had expressed herself badly, and quickly tried again.

'What I mean is – Sir James – do you often have to go and put on the black cap, and sentence poor unfortunate people to be hung? Because that can't be very nice, Sir James – is it?'

A faint flush mounted into the Judge's pale cheeks. 'It is not of frequent occurrence,' he said stiffly.

Granville, sitting next her, might easily have stopped his sister-

in-law by a word or a sign before this; but Alfred was practically hidden from her by the lamp, and though he tried very hard to kick her under the table, he only succeeded in kicking footstools and table-legs; and Lady Bligh was speechless.

The Bride, however, merely thought that Alfred had exaggerated the ease with which his father was to be drawn out. But she had not given in yet. That would have been contrary to her nature.

'What a good thing!' she said. 'It would be so – so horrid, if it happened *very* often, to wake up and say to yourself, "That poor fellow's got to swing in a minute or two; and it's me that's done it!" It would be a terror if that was to happen every week or so; and I'm glad for your sake, Sir James – '

She broke off suddenly; why, it is difficult to say, for no one had spoken; but perhaps that was the very reason. At all events, she remembered her experience of Bush law, and got to her point, now, quickly enough.

'I was once at a trial myself, Sir James, in the Bush,' she said (and there was certainly a general sense of relief). 'My own father was boss – or Judge, if you like – that trip. There were only four people there; the sergeant, who was jailer and witness as well, father, the prisoner, and me; I looked on.'

'Is your father a member of the Colonial Bar?' inquired Sir James, mildly.

'Lord, no, Sir James! He's only a magistrate. Why, he'd only got to remand the poor chap down to Cootamundra; yet he had to

consult gracious knows how many law-books (the sergeant had them ready) to do it properly!'

They all laughed; but there was a good deal that ought not to have been laughed at. A moment before, when her subject was about as unfortunate as it could have been, she had chosen her mere words with a certain amount of care and good taste; but now that she was on her native heath, and blameless in matter, her manner had become dreadful – her expressions were shocking – her twang worse than ever. The one subject that she was at home in excited her to an unseemly degree. No sooner, then, had the laugh subsided than Lady Bligh seized upon the conversation, hurled it well over the head of the Bride, and kept it there, high and dry, until the end of dessert; then she sailed away to the drawing-room with the unconscious offender.

It was time to end this unconsciousness.

'My dear,' said Lady Bligh, 'will you let me give you a little lecture?'

'Certainly,' said Gladys, opening her eyes rather wide, but won at once by the old lady's manner.

'Then, my dear, you should never interrogate people about their professional duties, least of all a judge. Sir James does not like it; and even I never dream of doing it.'

'Goodness gracious!' cried the Bride. 'Have I been and put my foot in it, then?'

'You have said nothing that really matters,' Lady Bligh replied hastily; and she determined to keep till another time some

observations that were upon her mind on the heads of 'slang' and 'twang;' for the poor girl was blushing deeply, and seemed, at last, thoroughly uncomfortable; which was not what Lady Bligh wanted at all.

'Only, I must tell you,' Lady Bligh continued, 'it *was* an unfortunate choice to hit upon the death-sentence for a subject of conversation. All judges are sensitive about it; Sir James is particularly so. But there! there is nothing for you to look grieved about, my dear. No one will think anything more of such a trifle; and, of course, out in Australia everything must be quite different.'

Gladys bridled up at once; she would have no allowances made for herself at the expense of her country. It is a point on which Australians are uncommonly sensitive, small blame to them.

'Don't you believe it!' she cried vigorously. 'You mustn't go blaming Australia, Lady Bligh; it's no fault of Australia's. It's *my* fault —*my* ignorance —*me* that's to blame! Oh, please to remember: whenever I do or say anything wrong, you've not to excuse me because I'm an Australian! Australia's got nothing to do with it; it's me that doesn't know what's what, and has got to learn!'

Her splendid eyes were full of trouble, but not of tears. With a quick, unconscious, supplicating gesture she turned and fled from the room.

A few minutes later, when Lady Bligh followed her, she said, very briefly and independently, that she was fatigued, and would

come down no more. And so her first evening in England passed over.

CHAPTER IV
A TASTE OF HER QUALITY

Mr Justice Bligh was an inveterate and even an irreclaimable early riser. In the pleasant months at Twickenham he became worse in this respect than ever, and it was no unusual thing for the slow summer dawns to find this eminent judge, in an old tweed suit, and with a silver frost upon his cheeks and chin, pottering about the stables, or the garden, or the river's brim.

The morning following the arrival of the happy pair, however, is scarcely a case in point, for it was fully six when Sir James sat down in his dressing-room to be shaved by his valet, the sober and vigilant Mr Dix. This operation, for obvious reasons, was commonly conducted in dead silence; nor was the Judge ever very communicative with his servants; so that the interlude which occurred this morning was remarkable in itself, quite apart from what happened afterwards.

A series of loud reports of the nature of fog-signals had come suddenly through the open window, apparently from some part of the premises. The Judge held up his finger to stop the shaving.

'What is that noise, Dix?'

'Please, Sir James, it sounds like some person a-cracking of a whip, Sir James.'

'A whip! I don't think so at all. It is more like pistol-shooting.

Go to the window and see if you can see anything.'

'No, Sir James, I can't see nothing at all,' said Dix from the window; 'but it do seem to come from the stable-yard, please, Sir James.'

'I never heard a whip cracked like that,' said the Judge. 'Dear me, how it continues! Well, never mind; lather me afresh, Dix.'

So the shaving went on; but in the stable-yard a fantastic scene was in full play. Its origin was in the idle behaviour of the stable-boy, who had interrupted his proper business of swilling the yard to crack a carriage-whip, by way of cheap and indolent variety. Now you cannot crack any kind of whip well without past practice and present pains; but this lad, who was of a mean moral calibre, had neither the character to practise nor the energy to take pains in anything. He cracked his whip as he did all things – execrably; and, when his wrist was suddenly and firmly seized from behind, the shock served the young ruffian right. His jaw dropped. 'The devil!' he gasped; but, turning round, it appeared that he had made a mistake – unless, indeed, the devil had taken the form of a dark and beautiful young lady, with bright contemptuous eyes that made the lad shrivel and hang his head.

'Anyway, *you* can't crack a whip!' said the Bride, scornfully – for of course it was no one else.

The lad kept a sulky silence. The young lady picked up the whip that had fallen from his unnerved fingers. She looked very fresh and buoyant in the fresh summer morning, and very lovely. She could not have felt real fatigue the night before, for there was

not a lingering trace of it in her appearance now; and if she had been really tired, why be up and out so very early this morning? The stable-boy began to glance at her furtively and to ask himself this last question, while Gladys handled and examined the whip in a manner indicating that she had handled a whip before.

'Show you how?' she asked suddenly; but the lad only dropped his eyes and shuffled his feet, and became a degree more sulky than before. Gladys stared at him in astonishment. She was new to England, and had yet to discover that there is a certain type of lout – a peculiarly English type – that infinitely prefers to be ground under heel by its betters to being treated with the least approach to freedom or geniality on their part. This order of being would resent the familiarity of an Archbishop much more bitterly than his Grace would resent the vilest abuse of the lout. It combines the touchiness of the sensitive-plant with the soul of the weed; and it was the Bride's first introduction to the variety – which, indeed, does not exist in Australia. She cracked the whip prettily, and with a light heart, and the boy glowered upon her. The exercise pleased her, and brought a dull red glow into her dusky cheeks, and heightened and set off her beauty, so that even the lout gaped at her with a sullen sense of satisfaction. Then, suddenly, she threw down the whip at his feet.

'*Take* the beastly thing!' she cried. 'It isn't half a whip! But you just hold on, and I'll show you what a real whip is!'

She was out of the yard in a twinkling. The lout rubbed his eyes, scratched his head, and whistled. Then a brilliant idea

struck him: he fetched the coachman. They were just in time. The Bride was back in a moment.

'Ha! two of you, eh?' she exclaimed. 'Well, stand aside and I'll show you how we crack stock-whips in the Bush!'

A short, stout handle, tapering towards the lash, and no longer than fifteen inches, was in her hand. They could not see the lash at first, because she held it in front of her in her left hand, and it was of the same colour as her dark tailor-made dress; but the Bride jerked her right wrist gently, and then a thing like an attenuated brown snake, twelve feet long, lay stretched upon the wet cement of the yard as if by magic. Swiftly then she raised her arm, and the two spectators felt a fine line of water strike their faces as the lash came up from the wet cement; looking up, they saw a long black streak undulating for an instant above the young lady's head, and then they heard a whiz, followed by an almost deafening report. The lash lay on the ground again, quivering. Coachman and stable-boy instinctively flattened their backs against the coach-house door.

'That,' said the Bride, 'is the plain thing. Smell this!'

Again the long lash trembled over her head; again it cracked like a gun-shot somewhere in front of her, but this time, by the help of the recoil and by the sheer strength of her wrist, the lash darted out again behind her – as it seemed, under her very arm – and let out the report of a second barrel in the rear. And this fore-and-aft recoil cracking went on without intermission for at least a minute – that minute during which the Judge's shaving

was interrupted. Then it stopped, and there was a fine wild light in the Bride's eyes, and her breath came quickly, and her lips and cheeks were glowing crimson.

The phlegmatic lad was quite speechless, and, in fact, with his gaping mouth and lolling tongue he presented a rather cruel spectacle. But the coachman found an awestruck word or two: 'My soul and body!' he gasped.

'Ah!' said the Bride, 'that *is* something flash, ain't it though? I wonder I hadn't forgotten it. And now *you* have a try, old man!'

Honest Garrod, the coachman, opened his eyes wide. He knew that this was Mrs Alfred; he had heard that Mrs Alfred was an Australian; but he could scarcely believe his ears.

'No, miss – no, mum – thank you,' he faltered. The 'miss' came much more naturally than the 'mum.'

'Come on!' cried the Bride.

'I'd rather not, miss —*mum*,' said the coachman.

'What rot!' said Gladys. 'Here – that's it – bravo! *Now* blaze away!'

The old man had given in, simply because this extraordinary young lady was irresistible. The first result of his weakness was a yell of pain from the stable-boy; the poor lad's face was bleeding where the lash had struck it. Rough apologies followed. Then the old coachman – who was not without mettle, and was on it, for the moment – took off his coat and tried again. After many futile efforts, however, he only succeeded in coiling the lash tightly round his own legs; and that made an end of it; the old man gave

it up.

'Show us some more, mum,' said he. 'I've got too old and stiff for them games,' – as if in his youth he had been quite at home with the stock-whip, and only of late years had got rusty in the art of cracking it.

'Right you are,' said Gladys, gaily, when her laughter was over – she had a hearty, but a rather musical laugh. 'Give me the whip. Now, have you got a coin – a sixpence? No? No odds, here's half a sov. in my purse that'll do as well; and you shall have it, either of you that do this side o' Christmas what I'm going to do now. I'm going to show you a trick and a half!'

Her eyes sparkled with excitement: she was rather over-excited, perhaps. She placed the coin upon the ground, retreated several paces, measured the distance with her eye, and smartly raised the handle of the stock-whip. The crack that followed was the plain, straightforward crack, only executed with greater precision than before. Then she had resembled nothing so much as an angler idly flogging a stream; the difference was that now, as it were, she was throwing at a rise. And she threw with wonderful skill; for, at the first crack, the half-sovereign spun high into the air and fell with a ring upon the cement; she had picked it up on the point of the lash!

It was a surprising feat. That she managed to accomplish it at the first attempt surprised no one so much as the Bride herself. This also added in a dangerous degree to her excitement. She was now in little less than a frenzy. She seemed to forget where she

was, and to think that she was back on the station in New South Wales, where she could do what she liked.

'Now that you've seen I can do that,' she cried to the lad, 'stand you with your back to the wall there, and I'll take your hat off for you!'

The answer of the dull youth was astonishingly wise; he said nothing at all, but beat a hasty retreat into the safety of the saddle-room.

She turned to the trembling Garrod. 'Then you!'

Even as he demurred, he saw her hand go up. Next moment the whipcord hissed past his face and there was a deafening report in his right ear, and the next a fearful explosion just under his left ear, and many more at every turn and corner of his face, while the poor man stood with closed eyes and unuttered prayers. It was an elaborate substitute for the simpler fun of whipping his cap off, the unhappy creature being bareheaded already. At last, feeling himself still untouched, Garrod opened his eyes, watched his opportunity, and, while the lash still quivered in mid-air, turned and made a valiant bolt for shelter. His shirt was cut between the shoulder-blades as cleanly as though a knife had done it, but he reached the saddle-room with a whole skin.

'Ye cowardly devils!' roared the Bride, now beside herself – her dark eyes ablaze with diabolical merriment. 'I'll keep you there all day, so help me, if you don't come out of it!' And, in the execution of her threat, the long lash cracked in the doorway with terrifying echoes.

At that moment, wildly excited as she was, she became conscious of a new presence in the yard. She turned her head, to see a somewhat mean-looking figure in ancient tweed, with his back to the light, but apparently regarding her closely from under the shadow of his broad felt wideawake.

'Another of 'em, I do declare!' cried the Bride. And with that the lash cracked in the ears of the unfortunate new-comer, who stood as though turned to stone.

The blue sky, from this luckless person's point of view, became alive with the writhings of serpents, hell-black and numberless. His ears were filled and stunned with the fiendish musketry. He stood like a statue; his hands were never lifted from the pockets of his Norfolk jacket; he never once removed his piercing gaze from the wild face of his tormentor.

'Why don't you take off your hat to a lady?' that lunatic now shouted, laughing hoarsely, but never pausing in her vile work. 'Faith, but I'll do it for you!'

The wideawake then and there spun up into the air, even as the half-sovereign had spun before it. And the very next instant the stock-whip slipped from the fingers of the Bride. She had uncovered the gray hairs of her father-in-law, Sir James Bligh! At the same moment there was a loud shout behind her, and she staggered backward almost into the arms of her horror-stricken husband. Even then the Bride knew that Granville was there too, watching her misery with grinning eyes. And the Judge did not move a muscle, but stood as he had stood under her fire, piercing

her through and through with his stern eyes; and there was an expression upon his face which the worst malefactors he had ever dealt with had perhaps not seen there; and a terrible silence held the air after the mad uproar of the last few minutes.

That awful stillness was broken by the patter of unsteady footsteps. With a crimson face the Bride tottered rather than ran across the yard, and fell upon her knees on the wet cement, at the Judge's feet.

'Forgive me,' she said; 'I never saw it was you!'

CHAPTER V
GRANVILLE ON THE SITUATION

It was in the forenoon of the same day that Granville entered abruptly his mother's sanctum. Lady Bligh was busily writing at the great office-table, but she looked up at once and laid down her pen. Granville threw himself into her easiest chair with an air of emancipation.

'They have gone!' he ejaculated. If he had referred to the British workman or to the bailiffs he could not have employed more emphatic tones of relief; so Lady Bligh naturally asked to whom he did refer.

'To the happy pair!' said Granville.

'They have gone to town, then?'

'To town for the day.'

Lady Bligh took up her pen again, but only to wipe it, deliberately. 'Now, Granville,' she said, leaning back in her chair, 'I want you to tell me the truth about – about whatever happened before breakfast. I don't know yet quite what did happen. I want to get at the truth; but so far I have been able to gather only shreds and patches of the truth.'

Granville rose briskly to his feet and took his stand upon the hearthrug. Then he leant an elbow on the chimney-piece, adjusted his eyeglass, and smiled down upon Lady Bligh. One

easily might have imagined that the task imposed upon him was congenial in the extreme. Without further pressing he told the story, and told it succinctly and well, with a zest that was vaguely felt rather than detected, and with an entire and artistic suppression of his usual commentaries. The mere story was so effective in itself that the most humorous parenthesis could not have improved it, and Granville had the wit to tell it simply. But when he reached the point where the Judge appeared on the scene Lady Bligh stopped him; Granville was disappointed.

'I think perhaps I have been told what happened then,' said Lady Bligh; 'at all events I seem to know, and I don't care to hear it again. Oh! it was too scandalous! But tell me, Gran, how did your father bear it? – at the time, I mean.'

'Like a man!' said Granville, with righteous warmth. 'Like a man! With that vile whip cracking under his very nose, he did not flinch – he did not stir. Then she whipped his hat from his head; and then she saw what she had done, and went down on her knees to him – as if *that* would undo it!'

'And your father?'

'My father behaved splendidly; as no other man in England in his position and – in *that* position – would have behaved. He told her at once, when she said she had not seen it was he, that he quite understood that; that, in fact, he had seen it for himself from the first. Then he told her to get up that instant; then he smiled – actually smiled; and then – you will hardly believe this, but it is a fact – he gave his arm to Mistress Gladys and took her

in to breakfast!'

Lady Bligh sighed, but made no remark.

'It was more than she deserved; even Alfred admitted that.'

Lady Bligh did not answer.

'Even Alfred was knocked out of time. I never saw a fellow look more put out than he did at breakfast. He had warned us to prepare for "mannerisms," but – '

Granville made a tempting pause. Lady Bligh, however, refused to fill it in. She was engrossed in thought. Her line of thought suddenly flashed across Granville, and he caught it up dexterously.

'As for the Judge,' said he, 'what the Judge feels no one can say. As I said, he behaved as only he could have behaved in the infamous circumstances. But I did see him steal a quiet glance at Alfred; and that glance said plainer than words: "*You've* done it, my boy; this is irrevocable!"'

Lady Bligh was drawn at last.

'This is very painful,' she murmured; 'this is too painful, Granville!'

'Painful?' cried Granville. 'I grant you it's painful; but it's the fact; it's got to be faced.'

'That may be,' said Lady Bligh, sadly; 'that may be. But we ought not to be hasty; and we certainly ought not to make too much of this one escapade.'

Granville shook his head wisely, and smiled.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.