The Graven Image

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Chapter I

Young Australia

“...And pray why are they called Jumping Sandhills?”

It was the first time Jeanette had spoken [on] that stage. At the outside, it was only the third or fourth question she had asked all day. Wagga Jim, the driver, seemed duly sensible of this. He dropped the whip with which he had pointed out the sandhills—dropped it smartly upon the three leaders in turn. Then he answered gingerly:

“Why do we call ’em Jumping Sandhills, Miss? Why, because that’s what they looks like, as we gets near ’em. It isn’t them as jumps, d’ya see? It’s us, the ground being that up-and-down like, just here. But watch ’em, Miss, and you’ll see they’re changing shape all the time. See? Well then, that’s how they come by their name.”

Wagga Jim did not feel at his best in this explanation. He was a well-known character in those parts, but none who knew Jim (save those on the coach) could have believed how ill at ease he had been all day. The awkward propinquity
of the young lady fresh from Home, who had stuck to her box-seat since day-break, had disconcerted him in many ways, but in none so much as by an obvious handicap in his pleasure of expressing himself. This made him glad to pause, though conscious that he had not done himself justice, and temporarily dissatisfied with his existence. But to see whether he had made himself at all intelligible (which seemed incredible, all restrictions considered) he glanced down at the young lady—to find that the young lady was glancing up at him. This was another thing she had not often done: it made Wagga Jim perspire, and run through his recent words in distrustful retrospect. Yet intrinsically there was nothing alarming in Jeanette’s glance. It was, in fact, as soft as sunshine on a hazy morning: for, with a Home girl’s exaggerated antipathy for sand and flies and glaring sun, she had thrown some yards of gauze over her broad-brimmed hat, gathering it in, balloon-like, round her neck; and Jim might have seen from her lips and eyes (which was all he could see clearly, through the veil) that she was smiling. But he was not reassured until she spoke—when her tone was graciousness itself.

“It really is not a bad name,” she said. “Those sandhills do seem to be bobbing about.”

Jim, in his relief, flogged in turn each of the raw-boned five that formed his team. Then he pointed again with the whip.

“There, then! Did you see that, Miss?”
“What?”

“That roof with the sun on it—she’s dipped out o’ sight—no, there she is again!”

“I see it,” said Jeanette.

“That’s the stage.”

“How far off, please?”

“Four more miles.”

Jeanette leant back with a sigh of relief. In spite of her veil, the deep unbroken blue of the sky, the ferocity of the sun, and the widespread glare of the yellow, sandy, plains had combined to make her head ache sadly. She had endured twelve hours of it—since five o’clock in the morning—on this jolting coach and over these rough Bush roads: she was thankful the end was near. She tired a little easily still: she had not yet regained her old strength, though the month was January, and it was in the previous August that she had grazed eternity. Now her journey did not end at Jumping Sandhills; there was a further drive, and a very long one (twenty-five miles, according to Wagga Jim), before Jeanette could reach her destination; but, at the stage, somebody from her uncle’s station would meet her, with some vehicle; and that would be relief enough, after twelve hours of the heavy, leather-swung, multi-laden coach and the society of Wagga Jim—whosoever the somebody might be. Jeanette trusted this would be her uncle himself. That uncle had not
only turned out to be alive himself; the old feeling for his sister had also survived a generation of silence: he had written at once, and in a strain that sent Jeanette’s heart out to him months before she followed in the flesh. Leaning back now, with her tired eyes closed, Jeanette tried to picture him, and his son, and his daughter, and everything that was his; she had been doing this, off and on, for several miles; she did it now for the last time, yet in a new way—nervously. Her heart was failing her at the last moment! In her travels it had never quailed: but transition is not a serious state. It was now over, her travels were at an end. Here she was to stay for months and months. It would be a new life to her, one totally different from all her past life. At the door of the new life, her knees trembled. If only she could peep through the key-hole! A mere notion of what was coming would have been everything now! It was like Jeanette: her thoughts could be trusted to take queer twists at wrong moments; and here, at the very last moment of all—though confident and cheerful up to the last but one—she was filling her soul with forebodings, as fast she could, to make up for lost time!

When she opened her eyes, it was to see why the wheels were making no noise. The reason was plain: they were muffled by the depth of sand through which they ran. The Jumping Sandhills were reached at last. Straight ahead, at the highest point, was the stage—marked principally by a pine-log and corrugated-iron Hotel. And on the shady side of the Hotel, etched in brown upon the dark-blue sky, was
a light, two-horse vehicle, with a young man sitting bolt upright and flicking away the flies.

“Is that the Gunbar trap?” Jeanette asked quickly.

“Buggy, Miss,” murmured Jim, most respectfully reproving her Home barbarism. “It’s the Gunbar buggy and Mr Martin Joy.”

Jeanette had already realised, with some disappointment, that the young man in the buggy could not possibly be her uncle. It was the next best thing to find he was her cousin. For the present, she had supposed him the groom: he wore moleskin trousers and a felt wideawake of exactly the same cut as Wagga Jim’s. So they got themselves up like that, did they! As the coach drew up Jeanette bent forward in some anxiety, and with slightly dilated nostrils, to see what manner of man the cousin was apart from his dress.

He was young enough—not much older than Jeanette herself; and nice-looking enough—but for the singular defect (in a man) of a slightly retroussé nose. He was not tall, but of a square, compressed, athletic build, with a singularly upright carriage. His eyes were quick, good-tempered and brown; and there was plenty of strength in his chin and jaw—which were beautifully shaved, Jeanette was glad to see. He wore a little moustache, of an autumnal hue and upward curves; and his hair, which was dark, had probably once been very curly indeed. No point in his appearance could well escape Jeanette’s notice: for, as he came over to the coach, and asked
her whether she was Miss Burtrand, he held his wideawake in his hand, and the sun shone full upon his bare head. Possibly the fact that he took off his hat was another pleasant surprise to Jeanette; there is (they say) no knowing the ideas of Home people concerning Colonials. Certainly Jeanette, though prepared to like her cousin very much, was also prepared for many other things: which shows that you need not be in harmony with the tone of your surroundings to imbibe a few prejudices and preconceptions.

From the moment that Jeanette set foot on Jumping Sandhills, however, it was “Cousin Jeanette” and “Cousin Martin” between these two—until the “Cousin” was heard no more.

He at once handed her into the buggy, explaining that his father had been prevented from coming by a touch of blight, to which he was subject. He then returned to the coach for her boxes. When these were aboard, and Jim had delivered over the Gunbar mail-bag, with a separate parcel for one of the boundary-riders (which seemed to pique considerably young Joy’s curiosity), the long drive began.

The road to Gunbar struck out at a right angle from the coach and stock route. It was a narrow, sandy wheel-track, running like a yellow ribbon through miles of pale-green salt-bush, much of which, however, was reduced to bunches of black stalks by recent continuous droughts. The first few miles were traversed in silence that was all but profound.
Martin had his own reasons, right or wrong, for objecting to a one-sided conversation, with the one side his: for the fact is, he was somewhat predisposed to find this English cousin stuck-up and stiff—his notion of an English girl. But it was chiefly habit that influenced Jeanette: her practice of chilling the abstract young man had become an instinct. At the same time she happened to be sufficiently occupied in her mind. She was busy (as she had been all day, more or less) in digging her vocabulary for words of sufficient acidity to do justice to the scenery when she should come to write her next letter home. She felt sure she should never unearth them. As far as her eyes could see (and her sight was long) the country was made of sodden, level, sandy plains, thinly clad with a covering of low-sized bushes—or rather, with rags and tatters that exposed more bare ground than they covered. This was their role, so it seemed to Jeanette. She admitted a half-hearted exception or two, natural and otherwise. To the left of the track, the uniform, evenly-spaced posts of an interminable wire fence dwindled into the infinite, north and south. The monotony that is broken by such features as these, must indeed be a little alarming; and so Jeanette found it. The fence was too far off for the wires to be visible; some crows, which were perched upon them, seemed perched in mid air; and these crows were the only birds Jeanette descried—she sought in vain for the gaudy features of her dreams. In the wake of the buggy rose the low, barren, glaring sandhills—a mere bump upon the plains: straight
ahead was a solitary clump of trees, which, when you came to them, were a stunted, mean, and sombre lot. Not one of them would have dared to call itself a tree in England, nor yet (as Jeanette should have known, after crossing Victoria) in many parts of Australia. The back-blocks of Riverina, at all events the Gunbar blocks and their neighbours, are really treeless: such is their nearest approach to trees, if you except an occasional belt of firs. Scrub might have made forests in Lilliput, but nowhere else. Jeanette had been prepared for better things than scrub, and better things than sand, and lineaments more lovely than miles of five-wire fencing. She had cherished her own romantic notions of the Bush—conventional notions, Cockney romance, if you like—but in any case, poor girl, she was bitterly disappointed. The Bush was her latest disillusion.

Silence lasted until they came out at the far side of the clump of insignificant trees. Then young Joy said suddenly:

“I suppose you know, Cousin Jeanette, that you’ve quite upset our apple-cart, coming up like this?”

Now Jeanette hated slang that she had not been brought up to, and even the Cambridge slang (which she rather liked, from the dear boys at home) she would have resented from a stranger in this strange land. She thought of three separate replies, all more or less severe, but in the end asked merely—“How?”

“This way,” said Martin: “your mother wrote to the Boss—
I mean my father: Day and I always call him the Boss—and said for certain that you were coming out with a Melbourne family, friends of yours, people of the name of Scruton, I remember. Well, your mother thought you would stay with these people a bit, and see Melbourne; and the Boss, he thought you would write to him from Melbourne; and then he meant to go down and fetch you up. Instead of which he hears you are coming up alone, in the coach, on your own hook! He liked your independence, Cousin Jeanette. We believe in independence, out here. But we aren’t pleased to think of the kind of journey you must have had!”

Jeanette unbent.

“How good and kind you all must be! But I can only say I am thankful I have come up like this. Just fancy going five hundred miles to meet a person! I should have liked it, of course, but all the same it would have made me dreadfully ashamed and uncomfortable. And I have not been entirely on my own. Some people I met at sea were coming up to their station, which is in these parts, and they only left the coach at five this morning. So I have only been alone since then.”

Martin asked who the people were, and found he knew them. This sent the conversation up a backwater for a minute, and did good, in removing stiffness. Then Jeanette explained about the Scrutons—how it was all through Mrs Scruton’s officiousness that she had left England under her
wing, for the families had seen very little of each other in London—and how Mrs Scruton and she had not exactly hit it off on board. “You never know what a woman is until you sail with her—though I daresay she has said the same about me,” concluded Jeanette frankly. “Anyhow I would not have stayed a day under her roof for words. So now you know why I did not wait to hear from you; and you must just think what you will of me.”

“The Boss thinks you very plucky and independent—so does Day,” said Martin, with a little flick of his whip. “They didn’t think you’d be so independent, coming from the old country.”

He had a queer, impersonal way of paying a compliment—an apparent anxiety not to identify himself with the sentiment, and to make it clear that he did not do so. Jeanette thought she liked it in him, rather; it was fresh, and unlike the abstract young man, who palled on her. She liked less his last sentence. That embodied an idea with which, from observations taken at sea and on landing, she was already familiar—the idea that independence is a Colonial prerogative. She nearly spoke up about it, but thought better of that, and just asked instead: “Who is Mr Day?”

“Mr Day!” echoed Martin, intensely tickled. “There isn’t such a thing. Day is Daisy—my sister! You’ll find her all right, only I must warn you of two things: she stammers, and she’s engaged to be married. She would have come with
me today, only I left the back-seat behind, to make room for your luggage. But ‘Mr Day’ is rich!’

He chuckled derisively: Jeanette joined in the chuckle, but thought the derision a little less restrained than it might have been.

“And are there any other womenkind?” she inquired.

“Well, yes—if you count the old woman who washes the clothes. Otherwise no. The cook’s a Chinaman.” Jeanette shuddered. “But I suppose you would count Mrs Macdonald. She was in the family before I was. And she’s a bit of an original.”

Jeanette scented a Type. “Oh! I am interested. I suppose she says quaint things, and wise things, and droll things, all of which are set things—yes? And what is her trick of manner? They always have one.”

“They never have more than one,” said Martin, laughing. “But I am afraid you will be disappointed. Mrs Macdonald very seldom says anything at all. Whatever she does happen to say is never by any chance worth listening to. She is a character, because you’d expect her to be one, she ought to be one, and she isn’t one at all. That’s where I call her original.”

Jeanette liked this. “Do you read any books?” she asked quickly, with unconscious pleasure and astonishment in her tone.

“There are one or two volumes in the back-blocks,” he answered; and this she did not like.
“Who else is there on the station?” she asked presently.

“The Jackeroo. Have you heard of the animal?”

“No,” said Jeanette, innocently. “Is it anything like a—a kangaroo?”

“Not just,” said Martin, dryly. “It’s a different kind of animal, it’s English; you must get ready to sympathise with ours, being a new chum yourself. It’s a young gentleman who’s sent out from Home to learn squatting. It has generally been a failure at Home, so you send it out here. In this case it failed to get into the Army, front door and back, and its name is Debenham.”

Jeanette said no more. She did not like his chaffing manner. Very few women can stand chaff, and with those who can it is altogether a question of moods, and a ticklish question too. But no woman could stand it when physically tired—and Jeanette was as tired as she could be. Under the circumstances she took the chaff of this complete stranger (in all but blood) in a remarkably amiable way; but the very fact that he was completely strange to her, while it really did make his badinage a little uncouth, inclined her to condone it on the ground of its originality. The abstract young man had never ridiculed her, much less at a first meeting. He had flattered her. This Colonial cousin was another order of being. His abstinence from flattery was total, and, Jeanette told herself, refreshing. She liked it in him: but she liked it a little less than she thought she did: for she was a woman, after all.
Chaff is a thing of which the supply is infinite, while the demand is infinitesimal. No one is very anxious to be chaffed about anything except a boy of seventeen about a woman of twenty-seven. Martin Joy supplied chaff wholesale, also broadcast, also gratuitously; and the quantity of the supply injured the quality, rather. It was a little rough. This was a fault (and one of which his best friends wished to have him cured) in one of the manliest and smartest young men in New South Wales.

His total abstinence from needless civilities was due to something else: the simple fact that Jeanette was newly out from Home, and consequently full of stock prejudices against the Colonists. These he met with prejudices of his own against Jeanette. Young Australia is ever thus, a little too ready to run out and meet disparagement more than half way—a little self-conscious. Its bicep is big, and its knuckles hard; but it is too eager to take its coat off: its moral skin is tender.

The buggy stopped suddenly. It was now dark, though but a few minutes since the sun had gone down, like a lamp, over the brink of the plain. Martin got down to open a gate, and Jeanette drove through. When they were travelling again, he told her they were now on [the] Gunbar run.

“And how far is it the homestead?” Jeanette asked.

“From here? Fourteen miles. But it’s only five miles to the next gate, and there you’ll get a pannikin of tea—tea made in
a ‘billy’—a really, typical, station experience for you, Cousin Jeanette!”

“Indeed! It sounds very nice. But who lives at the next gate?”

“Gunbar Jack, one of the boundary-riders. I have a parcel for him, by the bye. He looks after the fences and tanks and sheep in this paddock and the next, and his hut is close to the gate. We call the hut the Nine Miles because it’s just nine miles from the homestead. I told him to have the tea ready, and to bring us out a pannikin each as we went through—real bushman’s tea, mind you, without milk.”

It was intensely dark. Martin had lit the lamps; they threw fan-shaped splashes of light on the yellow track, before the wheels; but beyond the horses’ ears all was black. Jeanette was dozing when they reached the gate. Martin shouted, a door opened, stamping a panel of light upon the wall of darkness (from the size of it, some twenty yards away, on the right), some one came out and opened the gate, and Martin drove through. Jeanette was very sleepy. Martin handed her a pannikin, and she sipped the tea—which she did not like at all—without listening to the few syllables that passed between the two men as Martin handed the boundary-rider his parcel. She felt drowsy, and thoroughly done up by her long drive in the sun and wind. She even nodded over her pannikin. When she opened her eyes the lamp on her side shone upon moleskin breeches, leather leggings and belt,
and a section of Crimean shirting. She could not see the man’s face, for the night was impenetrable, but she touched his hand in giving him back the pannikin. Then the man said “Good-night, sir,” and Martin whipped up the horses.

Jeanette spoke no more until the station lights were in view. Before then the moon had risen.