The Graven Image

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Chapter II
Too Highly Strung

Gunbar homestead was at its best by moonlight. It was built on a sandy pine-ridge; at noon, when the pines trod in the middle of their own contracted shadows, the sand became too hot to set foot in if one could avoid it; and all day long an acre or so of corrugated roofing glared and crackled in the sun. This was not all one roof: half of it covered the main building, which was oblong, and entirely surrounded by a broad marginal verandah: the rest was divided between the store, the kitchen, the laundry, the chaff-house and the cast-house, and the blacksmith’s forge. Except the chaff-house and cast-house, which were under one roof, all these were separate buildings. Though only “the house” was of any size, the buildings formed a kind of barrack square, in which the pines stood sentinel; all the walls were of sun-burned pine-logs, and most had been whitewashed. As the roofs were white too, and all of them steep and low, the effect, in the heat of the day, was a great and oppressive glare. But night-time—with a moon—chastened all that.
The moonlight lay like cream upon every roof; and the pines ran into the purple sky like skewers, their shadows rolling across the yard in ribs, and so into the verandah and up the white wall. So, though the “run” was of no account as regards scenery, there was some little charm about the station itself, on a moonlight night; and when the moon got up just as it was time to begin to listen for the buggy wheels, both the Boss and his daughter were glad to think that the place was looking as attractive as it could.\footnote{7}

These two were waiting patiently in the verandah. Daisy, in a white dress, which helped the moonshine to light up her pretty face, looked just what she was: a bright, fresh, and engaging little girl. What the moon did here was to make Daisy’s hair and eyes as black as ink; in daylight they were merely brown. The girl was complaining that, until the other day, she had never even heard of her cousin Jeanette: the father was attempting to point out that he was the one to complain, if anyone.

“Your cousin and you, Day, never having heard of one another, never need have heard. Now with your aunt and me it is a very different matter. We were the only children; think of yourself and Martin; we were as fast friends as you two are. Suppose Martin went away tomorrow, and you had no word of him until sometime next century; that would be your aunt and I over again; but mind, I don’t lay all the blame on her, I hold myself to blame too. Jeanette will be all the more welcome, anyway.”
“Had you—quarrelled?” the girl asked, getting out the last word with difficulty. It was a queer impediment she had before words with a consonant: an incurable failing: but one that was not altogether disagreeable—in Daisy. “Martin and I—squabble sometimes. But—twenty years!”

“No, there was no quarrel,” said her father (who had a mild, even way of speaking). “We only fell out of touch after her marriage; perhaps her marriage had something to do with it; but never mind. We corresponded for some years after I came out here, but at long intervals, and it gradually fell through. It makes me all the more glad to have Jeanette, though!”

“It must!”

“I only wish they were not quite so rich as, I fear, they are,” went on the squatter, sighing. “I don’t know what your cousin will think of us and our simple ways, Daisy! She may have expected to find us very rich too—that is the Home’s notion of the squatter, I hear. I only hope we shall be able to keep her a good long time. If her lungs are wrong it was the very place to send her to; and they wasted no time about sending her, which is where most people make the mistake; only—she must stay a good long time, if she is to be cured.” After a slight pause he added: “But I don’t fancy it’s only her lungs.”

“What do you—f-fancy it is, daddy?”
William Joy emptied his pipe, and began cutting up a fresh charge. “I don’t fancy; I know,” he said. “My sister has written and told me, though not very sympathetically, I must own. And look here, my little girl! You are engaged, and you’re very happy over it, eh?”

“You know I am! How can you ask that, Daddy?”

“Because, my love, I don’t want you to talk too much about it to your cousin. It is rather hard on you: you have never had another girl to confide in, and I know what you girls are; nevertheless you mustn’t do it unless she is very inquisitive. There are reasons why it might hurt her to hear too much about Henry Flood and all your happiness. There, I am not going to say another word; you must guess the rest, if she doesn’t tell you herself. In any case I think I wouldn’t say anything about it to Martin: I have only hinted at it to you, Day dear, so that my little girl may feel her way and cause no pain.”

There was no need to say more to Daisy; her father knew that; for he knew his daughter. But he did not know, as the girl leant back in her chair and fondled her engagement ring and let its diamond glitter to the moon, that in her eyes a halo had suddenly fallen upon the fancied head of Cousin Jeanette. He did not know that a certain garment, worn of pride and stiffness and the most painful propriety, in which the Colonial girl had dressed the English one of her imagination, had fallen clean away before its time. He did not
know that he had touched a magic spring in his little girl’s heart, and sent it straight out to the unknown cousin! They talked no more. The squatter struck a match and lit his pipe. The red light glowed upon a kind, strong face, embedded in bushy brown hair turning grey, and with a green shade pushed upward from the eyes in this mild, harmless light, and resting on the fine forehead. The average bushman of these parts, a person not easily pleased, would have told you that William Joy was as good a man as he looked, and the best Boss in the back-blocks—which means and includes nearly everything, from the average bushman.

The shadow of a pine-top lay on Daisy’s bosom like a barbed spear-head dipped in ink. With her chin pressed into her dress, and lids ajar, Daisy watched this shadow: it stirred: it shortened: it dropped into her lap: the moon was riding high, and the minutes passing. She was beginning to feel a little drowsy, between the spear-head, which fascinated her eyes, and Jeanette the unknown, who gripped her mind, when a gate clicked far in the distance. Daisy sprang up, and her father, who was in the act of filling a third pipe, dropped it and listened. The buggy wheels were not audible, however, for the ridge was heavy with sand; but the lamps shone through the pines, and grew big; and in a minute all was over. At least, the squatter and his son were lifting down the luggage from the back of the buggy, and the two girls were standing in the moonshine, hand in hand.

“How awfully tired you must be!” whispered Daisy.
“I am afraid I am, rather,” Jeanette said, with the frankness of real fatigue. She seemed very white and frail, with the pale light upon her. She had no eyes for the pines and their sharp black shadows, and the baby village of log-cabins, bleached and softened by the moon. She was too tired, it seemed, to take pleasure or interest in a scene which, at the moment at all events, was quite picturesque, in its way. The woman who was not a character, but was otherwise substantial, blocked up the laundry door-way, and stared; the Chinaman cook stared out of the kitchen window; a young fellow came running out of the store to make himself useful, also staring, and he ran; but Jeanette took notice of none, and in a moment she was gone with Daisy into the house.

“She seems terribly tired!” The Boss spoke anxiously, as he and Martin waited in the dining-room, where supper was ready, for the girls.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Martin answered, rather carelessly. “From the Nine Mile she’s never opened her mouth; I think she must have been asleep; but before that we had found something to say to each other, and she seemed fit enough.”

“Well?” said his father, involuntarily, and in a peculiar tone.

“Oh, she’s all right,” retorted Martin, sublimely unimpressed; “she seems very pleasant; and she’s not bad looking either, by any means. Of course she’s a thorough new chum—Home prejudices in fine preservation, I can see—
and ready to find us a set of clowns: she seemed surprised to hear we see a book or two, now and again! But that’s the usual thing. It’s generally curable. And I half fancy she means to make the best of us; for she was really very civil.”

“Are you sure the prejudices are on her side?” asked William Joy, glancing at his son from under the shade which he had drawn down over his eyes. He added: “I have only seen her for an instant, but she reminds me very much of my sister as I like to remember her. Your aunt never looked so white and delicate, though. We have our work cut out to make a new girl of Jeanette!”

This seemed sadly true when the girls reappeared. In the lamplight, with her things off, Jeanette looked paler than ever. She was also a little disappointing. She would eat next to nothing (which was almost offensive, considering all things), and she scarcely spoke at all. Granted that she was quite tired out, she might yet have made some pretence of animation, for the Joys’ sake. Jeanette made none. She was *distrâte* and awkward—which was not her way at all. They soon came to know that it was not her way: they never knew her again as she was this first evening: and after, when they found that she had been quite unlike herself then, they found also a satisfying explanation in her fatigue, and in her inability, just at first, to stand fatigue.

At the time they thought her uncomfortably shy or stiff—it was hard to say which—and they talked a little among
themselves to put her at ease. After supper, for example, the Boss examined the contents of the mail-bag, purposely as though no stranger had been there.

“It isn’t much of a mail,” he said to Martin. “Did nothing come loose?”

“No; there was a parcel for Jack, though, which I gave him as we drove through.”

“A parcel for Gunbar Jack? How odd! It’s the first time he has ever had anything by the mail since he has been here.”

“What did it look like?” said female curiosity through the lips of Daisy.

“It felt like a book,” said Martin. “I didn’t tear the paper, nor yet hold it up to the light. How inquisitive you are, Day!”

The Boss turned to Jeanette. She seemed interested. How firmly interested she was no one dreamt.

“Gunbar Jack is an institution here,” he said. “You must see him some day, though you won’t if he can help it. He is a confirmed solitary, but the best stockman on the run. What’s more, we think he has seen better days, and has a history; you don’t know, Jeanette, how many of these fellows have histories, and have seen better days! What, are you off? Well, perhaps it’s the wisest thing. You must just sleep better than you ever slept in your life before, and if you don’t, pitch into Daisy. You’re in her hands. Goodnight, my dear Jeanette!”

The girls went, but Daisy returned almost immediately.
“I’m going back to say goodnight and blow out her—c-candle,” she explained. “Oh—daddy! She is so sweet! But I somehow don’t think she is quite—pleased with things!”

“She is tired, my child,” said the squatter. “You would be tired too, and you are far stronger than she is.”

“Well,” said Daisy, “I’ll show her all over in the morning. She’s b-bound to be interested. Then, Martin, will you run up the filly you broke for me—Barmaid—like a good fellow? She says she has ridden a good deal at Home. You n-need not laugh! Why shouldn’t she be able to ride as well as I can? She says she used to ride in London, and I t-told her we could put all London into a couple of our paddocks, and that seemed to interest her. But everything is sure to interest her, and amuse her too, when she settles down; I know it would me, I should f-find it all so new, and such fun; and don’t you think she will—daddy?”

“I hope so,” said the Boss gravely. “Run away and say goodnight to her.” He had an uncomfortable feeling that a Bush-bred little optimist of eighteen was not exactly in a position to enter into the feelings of an older girl from Home.

“She won’t be able to ride,” laughed Martin; “we shall have to teach her!”

Jeanette’s little room was at one end of the house, and opened, as did all the rooms, upon the verandah. It had one quaint feature: it was newly papered for Jeanette—with the Melbourne Argus! A “self-colour” of the most subtle tint,
with dado and frieze complete, could not have charmed Jeanette so much: she was on the look-out for novelty: she desired novelty very keenly indeed, and in everything; but she had barely noticed this novelty as yet. She had noticed very little so far. Daisy found her lying very still, gazing passively at the candle.

“What do you see?” asked Daisy, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “The old country?”

Jeanette did not answer.

“Come!” Daisy said, authoritatively. “I’m going to blow out that candle, and you’re not to stir—m-mind, not to stir—till I come to you in the morning with some tea.”

Jeanette drew her eyes from the candle and fixed them upon Daisy. Her head was slightly raised, in a questioning way: one plait of her long light hair lay over her shoulder. “Tea?” said she. “In a pannikin?”

Daisy recoiled a little. “What can you be thinking of, Cousin Jeanette?”

Jeanette smiled; but her eyes were grave and big and inquisitive.

“I was thinking of the tea I had at the Nine Mile. I had been wondering how anybody can live so far from everybody else, in a hut by himself; and then you say the man there has seen better days! Won’t you tell me about him? I’m really interested.”
Interested! So soon! The station girl was fairly delighted, yet sorry, for all that was known about Gunbar Jack could be told in a dozen words.

“I don’t even know his name,” she said. “Of course he has a name in the station books, but it is sure to be a f-false one.”

“Why so?” asked Jeanette quickly.

“Because he has not always been what he is now. We are all quite sure of it! He must have been something very different once. You can tell it from his voice alone—you heard him speak, didn’t you?”

“I only heard him say ‘Good-night’!” Her tone was faint. Her hand had stolen out and was playing nervously with the match-box.

“There are lots like him in the Bush,” continued Daisy, in her matter of fact way. “It’s a common thing in sheering-time, when we have heaps of men at work, one way and another, to find one or two who have obviously been brought up as well as we have, if not better—it’s quite a common thing, and the most romantic thing left in Bush life, which I fear you’ll find not romantic at all. Gunbar Jack is perfectly happy at the Nine Miles hut, I believe, and we certainly like having him there, for he is the best hand with sheep daddy has ever had. He is periodically unsteady, you know—they all are, when they have earned good cheques—but he is too good a man to send off for that reason. And we feel sure he has—why, you’ve put out the light, Jeanette!”
Jeanette had in fact dabbed the match-box down on the wick, and they were in darkness.

“Yes, dear. My eyes are tired. But I want you to go on, and tell me some more. I am—interested.”

Her tone was hard—yet pitifully weak. Daisy was rather puzzled, but said: “I fear there is no more to tell you. But he has been here for years, and is likely—“

“Years?” cried Jeanette.

“Yes, two or three, which is a long time, let me tell you, for a man to stop on one station.”

“Do you think he came as a new chum?”

“Rather not! He couldn’t have been a new chum, he knew too much, and Martin thinks he must have been out here since he was a young man. That’s when the tragedy was, I suspect. He looks quite forty now. Dear me, he might be flattered if he heard us talking!”

“I couldn’t help being interested,” said Jeanette, in a new tone, and in the past tense. “Yet you say it is quite a common thing to discover gentlemen among the men?”

“Oh, quite.”

Now they were in darkness; they could not see one another’s face; but all at once the bed shook violently, and Jeanette was sobbing as though her heart would burst. The other girl
jumped up, stumbled to the pillow, knelt, and slipped a cool
hand under her cousin’s head.

“Dearest Jeanette! What—can be the matter?”

Jeanette gulped through her choking tears: “Nothing! Nothing except that I am so tired—and nervous—and stupid! Nothing else! Have you never—felt like that?”

Daisy made no answer, but laid her own head on the pillow, and let her cool cheek touch Jeanette’s feverish face. Thus she waited, until the sobs went down like the waves of a still pool wherein a crag has tumbled; but she did not speak first: it was Jeanette who whispered at last, in a voice of shame:

“It is just the travelling, and the excitement, and the deeply worn-out feeling! It was not your story of that poor man—that had nothing to do with it! But oh, Daisy, I am weak and nervous and silly, and how you must despise me! But, dear, you will find me another girl in the morning; I was never like this before; I never shall be again. So you’ll forget about it, and you won’t tell a soul, will you, Daisy? I knew you wouldn’t! Thank you: leave me now, dear: good-night!”

Daisy kissed her, and went quietly from the room. After she had gone, Jeanette took from under her pillow a little case, and, dark as it was, pressed her lips passionately to a very old photograph of David Auburn. And after that, very peacefully and quietly—almost happily—this queer girl cried herself to sleep!