The Graven Image

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Chapter III

“Bushed”

Men do not know the luxury of tears; some have endured the bitterness and shame of them; but none, it is to be hoped, take to them for consolation. A man had far better take to the bottle. The taste for tears is exclusively feminine, and must remain so. Quite possibly, however, it may be a capital thing to cry yourself to sleep, occasionally. It may soon correspond to the masculine “night-cap,” and, if it does, it must be a far better thing for the head next morning. On the whole, a case might be made out for crying oneself to sleep, and Jeanette Burtrand, for one, might be called in to prove it. When she woke for the first time at Gunbar her heart was light, quite as light as it ever was now. Something that she had envisioned overnight seemed inconceivable on waking: moreover, with the sun in her room, she could not understand how she had ever considered the idea for a moment, even though she had been worn-out and over-strung by travel and fatigue and the sense of strangeness among strange friends. In any case she had dismissed that idea be-
fore going to sleep, and she did not recall it now to examine its merits under a microscope.

Jeanette awoke with her head in a splash of sunshine. This was afterwards her excuse to Daisy for breaking faith by not waiting for that promised cup of tea, which was brought eventually to an empty room. Could one be expected to sleep calmly on, with the Riverina sun on one’s pillow, and exaggerated Home fears of sunstroke in one’s head? Jeanette put this very plausibly; and because her freshness and animation and colour, this morning, were simply amazing, after last night, Daisy forgave her. But this was at breakfast. Jeanette had then been up and at large an hour and a half.

Her room was at one end of the house, and opened upon one end of the verandah; the sun struck her window obliquely; and, had Jeanette but waited, the verandah eaves were bound to intervene as the sun rose higher, changing shine to shade. But Jeanette had no patience. She dressed and crept out. And she was quite delighted with what she saw.

Not that the homestead looked its best; it only did that under the glamour of moonlight. But for the moment there was strong sunshine with neither great heat nor a glare; and as yet the shadows were long and many; and a pleasant breeze was blowing through the pines. It all struck Jeanette as very fresh and attractive, this morning: last night it had not struck her at all.
She stood in the verandah outside her room, at the end of the house. On one hand was the station yard, with the pines bending in the breeze, and the wheel-marks of the night before cut deep in the heavy sand. The front verandah (round the corner to the right) faced the yard: the back verandah (round the corner to the left) overlooked an open space, which was cut into strips by a wire fence, and closed in by the edge of a dense, growing forest of young pines and hop-bushes. The long verandahs were connected at each end by short ones, and in the middle by the broad passage which bisected the house, and also kept it cool. At Jeanette’s end this was the only door. This closed on her once more after her first look round. For, right opposite, was the horse-yard; and the sliprails were down; and a young man was within, saddling a horse. The young man was Debenham, whom Jeanette had not noticed the night before. He was saddling the night-boss, to run up the other horses from the horse-paddock. Jeanette stayed in her room until he had ridden off. Then she came forth, turned her back on the station yard, squeezed through the wires over against the back verandah, and struck off boldly among the young pines and the hop-bushes.

The spirit of adventure was upon her. What she proposed was a little private tour of exploration, which might be aimless, but would at any rate be independent. And she struck into those young pines and the hop-bushes with the sublime confidence of inexperience. She had no idea how far the tim-
ber extended; but she liked it very much; she went on. She thought the scent of the pines delicious, and the silence in their midst suggestive. There was something intensely satisfying in the real solitude which she seemed to reach in five minutes: she realised more keenly than she had yet done that she was indeed in the bush at last. It was a less grand Bush than that of her dreams; but also it was a less conventional one. She could not pick up four pine-cones and throw them at a kangaroo or emu, a snake and a parrot respectively; this morning, in fact, she happened upon none of these types; but she felt she was in Australia, all the same.

She went on and on. The sun was now rather in front of her, now a little behind her; but this, of course, she did not notice. You never think of such things when you are fresh from Home. “Presently,” said Jeanette, “I’ll turn back; there is no hurry.” She did not add that there was no difficulty, for the idea of a difficulty never entered her innocent head. At last she did turn back. And then the fun began.

She had lost her bearings. Of course, she had lost them long ago; but it took her some little while to realise her loss, even now; she could not quite believe it until she came to a fence which was not the fence she had squeezed through. Then the raw truth came home, and Jeanette was discomfited, as indeed she deserved to be. The pines ended at the fence: the fence was on the edge of a vast plain: the plain, as a matter of fact, was a part of the biggest paddock on Gunbar. Jeanette’s brisk spirits ran down like a watch when
the mainspring breaks. But after all! It was too absurd: she could not be very far from the homestead: she would be back there in a minute or two, no doubt, if she stepped out. She did step out, leaving the fence at right angles; but she did not get back to the station in a minute or two, or yet in twenty. The sun grew warmer, and Jeanette became very warm indeed; she felt that she should be late for breakfast, and cut an ignominious figure on the first morning. She walked quicker and quicker—in a dead straight line, she thought—in the most glorious curve, had she but known. She became hot and cross and painfully anxious. When at last she came suddenly upon Martin—so suddenly as almost to walk into his arms—tears, and no sweet ones, were not far from the surface.

“Good morning!” said Martin, shaking hands with a broad grin; “and—thank Heaven! I believe they’re organising a search-party to find you alive or dead!”

“Am I late for breakfast?” Jeanette asked abruptly, perceiving that he was chaffing her, and feeling in no mood for nonsense.

“Well, you won’t be—as it happens,” Martin replied. “You’d have been late for supper, I suspect, if I hadn’t stumbled across you. You’ve gone and got bushed, Cousin Jeanette!”

“What’s that?”

“Lost in the bush—we call it ‘bushed.’”
He laughed outright. He could not see that it was no laughing matter to her—that she was lost and put out. Men seldom see these things in time. He saw it a moment later, when Jeanette strode away from him with a reddening cheek. And then he ran after her.

“That is not the way,” he said in a nicer tone. “Stick to me, and we’ll be back in five minutes. These pines are awfully puzzling, I know.”

Jeanette felt really angry. She thought he had been rude. But she was forced to follow him; and he led her in the very last direction she would have taken—which made her all the more angry with herself, and consequently with him too. She maintained a haughty silence. He, however, as they came up to the homestead, gave her the benefit of some practical Bush hints; only very civilly, for he saw that he had vexed her; and no one likes to vex a petty girl (except another pretty girl), and Jeanette was prettier this morning than she had been last night.

“You should always go by the sun,” said he. “Mark where the sun is next time you go into the pines; then keep him in his place: it’s the only thing to do. Out on the run men have perished through not marking the sun—and through crossing fences. The paddocks are so big—the one next this is seven miles by six! The rule about fences, when you get mixed up, is never to cross one; follow him down, and he’s certain to lead to a gate and a track in the sand.”
Jeanette thanked him, and, the next moment, was being kissed and scolded by Daisy, who ran from the verandah out to meet them. Then they all went in to breakfast; and Day and her father were so good-tempered and sensible about this preliminary escapade of Jeanette’s, which had really given them an uncomfortable hour, that the girl’s annoyance died a natural death in a few minutes. Martin had the wit to joke about it no more. Instead he turned his attention to Debenham; for it was Martin’s normal state to be making fun of somebody (a new chum, for choice), in his rough, good-natured, obvious way; and no one had ever pointed out to him seriously that this was a bad habit.

As for this Debenham, this Jackeroo, he was not at all a bad boy, though his record was scarcely brilliant. He, indeed, as Martin had put it, had been refused admittance to the British Army at every known door save that of of the common private, where he had not knocked: so his people had pressured him to the Colonies. He was young and tender; he had many affectations. He affected a military mien, for he had served a month with a militia regiment, and, when he first came out, he rode with his stirrups very long, and would not rise in them. He talked furiously of the Service. He also had difficulties with his letter r. But these things were not so conspicuous as when he first came out. Gunbar was having a wholesome effect upon him. The fellow had learnt to keep the books, to mind the store, to run up the horses in the morning, and to deserve his rations and a small salary for
various other services; and he had very nearly learnt to pronounce his r’s—when Martin Joy was within earshot. Martin hustled him a little too much, perhaps; but the boy took it in good part; and, what was more, it was the very thing the boy needed.

Jeanette did not see this at the first glance. She sympathised with the boy most sincerely when Martin made a fool of him at the breakfast table. When Martin proceeded to describe how—talk about being bushed!—Debenham had been hopelessly bushed in the horse-paddock, and on horseback, Jeanette felt that she must either hate her cousin or cure him of his odious propensity to rough badinage. And after breakfast she approached Debenham, somewhat as a fellow sufferer (though this she would not have admitted for a moment), while the young fellow was saddling up in the horse-yard.

“You have not been out long, Mr Debenham?” said Jeanette politely.

“No,” replied Debenham, with a liberal drawl: for Martin was not in the yard. “But you’ve only just landed, Miss Burtrand, they tell me!”

“Only four days ago.”

Debenham smiled—a confidential smile. He dropped his voice, slyly. “And what do you think of Australia? A wum country—yes?”
“How so?” Jeanette asked, in no tone of encouragement.

Debenham did not quite know; but he would have known had Jeanette readily agreed with him. As it was he had to think. Then he said rather lamely: “In your case, of course, it will be different; you’re a guest, a relative, and a lady; but to me, I own, it is rather a change—after the Service.”

“Surely you mean the life up here? That isn’t quite the same as the country, you know.”

“Er—exactly! It’s the life up here that’s such a wum change—after the Service, don’t you know!”

“But wasn’t it only the Militia?” Jeanette could not help saying.

“Her Majesty’s Auxiliary Forces!” amended Debenham, mounting his steed. “That was it—a few short months ago. And would you like to hear, Miss Burtrand, what I’ve got to do today? I’ve got to go the far corner of the Forest Paddock, which is eight miles from this; there’s no water in that corner of the paddock, so of course there will be some sheep there—perhaps only a handful, which is a greater nuisance than a big mob—and it’ll take me till sundown to get them to the opposite corner, where there is water. That’s my day’s work. Before I get in I’ll be hoarse with yelling and barking at the brutes; for I haven’t a dog yet. And I started the day, mind, by running up the horses!”
Here Martin appeared upon the scene, at last, and Debenham rode off, rather hastily. He had played the fool with his r’s pretty consistently, while talking to Jeanette; and apart from this his manner had been one that he had learnt to tone down under Australian skies, though he only did so when it was likely to expose him to ridicule. Jeanette, being a new chum herself, seemed an unlikely satirist. Nor was she one [at] all. But she was not destitute of perception, and she saw that it would be a mistake to sympathise too deeply with Debenham. She also felt in favour of Martin’s chastening chaff—in the matter of Mr Debenham.

Martin had put on leggings and long spurs, and he carried a stock-whip. He told Jeanette that he was going to run up a filly for her, from a distant paddock; she thanked him; and pleasantries passed. Before going back to the house Jeanette watched Martin catch his horse, a youngster, and one of several that were now in the yard together; and he did this so dexterously, and it looked so difficult, that Jeanette wondered how Mr Debenham had managed to do as much for himself, and said so.

“Debenham?” said Martin contemptuously. “I’ve given him the mildest old horse on the place. We were sick and tired of his horses coming in without him. It was your Cavalry he was meant for, too!”

Jeanette, from the verandah, watched Martin ride away. Then some men, who had been waiting for their orders, with
pipes in their mouths, also caught horses, saddled them, and rode away. Last of all the Boss drove off in the buggy, with a pair of young ones, and a man (the blacksmith, Jeanette was told) at his side. They were all bound for different parts of the run, to work or to look after work: it was the ordinary beginning of the ordinary station day at no particular season—such as lamb-marking or sheering time—Daisy said. And Daisy had her work too: to interview Sammy, the Chinese cook, and to send for vegetables to the Chinaman’s garden in the afternoon; but for the rest of the morning, after Day was free, the two girls sat chatting in the back verandah, which, until the afternoon, was the shady one.