The Graven Image

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Chapter VI
An Important Surrender

“Jeanette,” said the Boss, encountering his niece before breakfast next morning, as she stepped out of her room into the brilliant sunshine, “I want you to help me—in a matter of music. Years ago, in my wife’s time, we used to go in for a little bit of a service here, on Sunday mornings. We rang that bell you see over the store there, the men trooped up from the hut, and we seated them on benches here in the verandah. I had those benches made on purpose, and they must be in existence still. Well, I read the prayers and things and my wife sat just there, in the sitting-room door-way, with her back to the congregation and the piano drawn up close to the threshold, and played the hymns. And it all went very well. I was never over-religious, I’m afraid, but I used to think that our little services were a good institution, somehow. Your aunt, of course, took higher ground; and as for the men, well, they came very regularly. Afterwards, of course, it fell through: when Day came home from school I tried to get her to take it up: but it was no use: she wouldn’t
trust herself with the hymns; for she hasn’t the light hand on
the notes that she has on the reins, I am sorry to say. But now
that you have come, Jeanette, to charm us with your playing,
and to remind me of the old years, I have been thinking, if I
could get you to help me, that I should like to begin that little
service again. So will you help me, Jeanette?”

Jeanette was touched. “With all my heart,” she said warmly.
“It will be a great delight to me.”

“Thank you, my dear. Then we will begin again next Sun-
day morning—after fourteen years! It shall be just as it used
to be, and that was very simple, quite a way of our own: our
congregation sat the whole time, to avoid the noise and
confusion of shifting the position in a cramped space. And
Day,” added the squatter, stooping to kiss his daughter,
who fluttered upon the scene at this moment, “shall lead the
choir.”

“What? When? Where?” cried Day. The matter was ex-
plained to her: in brief, but that was her own fault: for she
preferred admiring Jeanette’s habit, and examining its
texture, to receiving change for her questions. That was
Daisy’s little way. It was also her way to chatter incessantly
at the table; and this morning every word was addressed to
Jeanette direct: for the men were rather silent.

Martin, for his part, was still suffering from what Jeanette
had said about him in her letter, and to his face in the veran-
dah, the previous afternoon. She had spoken with perfect
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good-humour: but there was just a pinch of possibility in her charge; and that made it rankle. It was absurd, of course, but not absurd enough: it was just conceivable that he was too free with his chaff, confound it!

He was looking forward with mixed feelings to this morning’s ride with the girls, which had been definitely arranged overnight. Already he admired his cousin more than he would have admitted, even if he had known how much, which he did not. But he did not expect much from her in the saddle. Was she not an English girl, a feminine new chum fresh and green from the Land of Muffs? In point of fact, his wishes were at one with his expectations here: he did not want Jeanette to ride well: what he wanted—though he would not have admitted this either—was the privilege of showing her how to ride. Daisy rode admirably; she had been brought up to it. Jeanette, who could have had no such advantages in the old country, would, no doubt, be eaten up with envy and emulation; when he, Martin, would come in very handily. Fine horseman as he was, he felt himself, without conceit, to be the very man for the job. He would take her good-naturedly in hand, and would point out her faults without chaffing her too much about them: perhaps, on the whole, without any nonsense at all: and he would turn her out, after a brief period of brotherly tutelage, the equal of Daisy. He was quite confident about this; the only thing to stop him would be a want of nerve on Jeanette’s part; and it was easy to see that nerve was the last thing she
lacked. The programme was more attractive to him, again, than he would have admitted. At breakfast he went through the whole day in anticipation, heard Jeanette thanking him for his goodness at the end of it, and himself telling her, in an encouraging manner, that she would soon learn to ride. But he had decided not to chaff her, however bad she might prove; for there was no accounting for taste, and if she thought his humour boorish, why, there was an end of it. The silence of Martin is thus easily accountable; it clung to him in the horse-yard, where with his own hands he groomed and saddled the girls’ horses; and by Debenham, for one, it was highly appreciated.

The Boss was preoccupied by the same charming subject that silenced his son; but the treatment of the subject was altogether different. To William Joy this fair girl was a double link with the past. Her looks reminded him of the sister of whom he had once been very fond: her music—and other graces too—recalled vividly the sweet distinction of his dead wife. But the girl had a personality of her own, which—to him at least—was lovable and charming; which came out in little ways; which stole gently on the senses, like the fragrance of a flower. The tenderness in her blue eyes, the ready sympathy in her voice, when she had said, “With all my heart; it will be a great delight to me” (to help at the little Sunday service), would have been enough, of itself, to make him love her. It was the way she had with her—that was her charm. If only he could find himself catching no more sad
and weary looks upon her face (for he was watching her always); if only he could believe that that unhappy love-affair (about which he considered his sister had written both vaguely and unsympathetically) was forgotten and done with; he would have felt not only enchanted with Jeanette, but quite comfortable about her. He did not feel comfortable about her as it was: she was fragile; she had been threatened with a terrible disease; and she seemed unhappy still.

He watched the three ride away, shortly after breakfast—Day in front, and Martin behind, at Jeanette’s side, with a watchful eye upon her; and a new light flashed upon the squatter, in which he saw Jeanette and Martin, though for an instant only. “I do wish,” said he, sighing, “that these two were not cousins!”

Then the Boss went about his own work. A new rope was wanted at the whim in the north-east corner of the run, and he preferred to take it out there himself, so that he might see how the feed was holding out, and in what trim the sheep were, in that quarter. He drove off in the buggy, with the coil of new rope behind, and Debenham, at his side as gate-opener. But the drive was a long one; and the Boss himself fixed the new rope round the drum of the whim—a difficult operation, in which anybody but Debenham would have been of some assistance—in which anybody but William Joy would have sworn at Debenham for giving none. And then the whim-driver gave them chops and damper and tea in the
hut. So that it was late in the afternoon before they got back to the homestead.

No one seemed to be about but Martin; who came across the yard to the buggy with a long face. As the small cavalcade had evidently kept to their intention of returning in time for luncheon, the Boss inferred bad things from Martin’s face and from the absence of the girls. He jumped down, leaving the Jackeroo to see to the young ones, and met Martin with a questioning, anxious look.

“What’s the matter?” he asked nervously. “Where are the girls?”

“Jeanette is resting, I believe,” said Martin, with great gloom in his voice. “I’ve no idea where Day is.”

“But what’s the matter?” persisted the Boss.

“Nothing.”

“Did Jeanette tumble off or something?”

“No,” said Martin, with a curious drawl, “No; she didn’t quite tumble off.”

“Then, my good fellow, what’s wrong with you?” cried the squatter. “Your face is as long as fifty fiddles!”

“Is it?” said Martin coolly. They sauntered side by side towards the house. Suddenly the son caught the father by the arm, and whispered excitedly:

“She can ride like blazes, dad!”
“Jeanette?”

“Yes. Like the very deuce! Who’d have thought it? You could have pushed me out of the saddle with a feather! She says she learnt in a riding-school, and then used to ride in the Row, as well as in the country. Wherever she learnt, she can ride, and no mistake about it!”

His tone was wretched, so was his face. His father fixed him with a twinkling eye. “Well?” he said. “It’s good, isn’t it? You must be glad to find she can ride already, and that you haven’t got to teach her, eh?”

“Of course it’s a good thing—of course I’m glad,” said Martin, slightly irritated.

“But you didn’t think a Home girl would—or should?—be able to do anything of the sort, by any kind of possibility! Is that it?”

Martin replied, untruly, that he had not thought about it at all. Abruptly turning, as they reached the verandah, he went back to Debenham and the buggy. Debenham, who was unyoking the young ones in a clumsy and unorthodox—but quite effectual—way, was brought to his senses pretty quickly. Martin proceeded to “wake him up,” after his own fashion (which was, however, the very thing for that boy), and rubbed it in for two or three minutes. He generally rubbed it in for ten or fifteen; this afternoon the sport was stale. The salt was gone out of Martin; he felt vaguely disgusted with his existence; he was not sure that he had any
right to exist at all. This idea was occurring to him for the first time in his life, and it was distinctly upsetting. He threw up Debenham, and went wandering through the pines with a pipe in his mouth, but with no earthly object—a thing he did not do once in a twelvemonth.

Of course it was all Jeanette! What business had she to be able to ride? It was against the rules of the game. The rules of the game, in the Bush, do not concede to the new chum the ability to shoot, or to ride, or to crack whips, or to descry sheep across two or three miles of plain. These are Colonial prerogatives, and you had better not pretend to infringe them. New chums are inclined to pretend a bit, perhaps; it does them no harm to be distrusted; but it was not a case of pretence with Jeanette. She rode abominably well; she had cleared some stock-yard fences as though screwed to her saddle—an extreme test which her insolent ability had goaded Martin into applying; and she could also see sheep where Daisy could see only sand and sky. All this was unfair and irregular, on general grounds, but it was positively hard upon Martin, who had looked forward, with unconscious relish, to coaching her up in these things. No wonder he felt bitter about it, and the more since, at the time, he had been surprised into unheard-of compliments. In the pines, aided by black tobacco, he tried to soothe himself with insincere conviction that at any rate she was fearfully conceited about her riding—as, of course, a Home girl would be. But, in nine cases out of ten, when you begin fancying that the fair
admires herself inordinately, it means that you admire her
yourself rather more than you suspect. And Martin’s case
was one of the nine.

The worst of it was, that he was not sufficiently master
of himself in personal intercourse with her. Out on the run,
for example, he found that he had flattered her ridiculously,
when he rode in retrospect the morning’s ride. To counter-
act this, he thought he would let her down a little at dinner;
and if she repeated her criticism of his style of “teasing,”
it would only reveal the fine old crusted English arrogance
that ran in her veins, and required cupping. Yet, when the
time came, he found himself not only being desperately
civil to her, but eagerly winning her smiles, raking them in,
and locking them up in the affairs of his heart. For which
he hated himself all that night, all the next day, and on into
Sunday—but kept up the play, all the same. His heart began
to itch, then his brain, then his fingers; and had Debenham
been but half a match for him, Martin would have gone with
him to some quiet spot among the pines, and fought himself
into his right mind. As it was, the fight was reflexive. And
in himself Martin took off his coat to the toughest foreman
he had ever faced in his life: who, in fact, thrashed him. For
Martin was beaten, and in an early round. On Jeanette’s first
Sunday evening, he gave way, once and for all, to a fasci-
nation which he felt to be as unconscious on Jeanette’s side
as it had certainly been resisted, strenuously though vainly,
on his.
It was in the course of the revival of the little station service, held in the verandah. Martin had been watching with much curiosity the faces of the station hands, who were come in force from the men’s hut. Lamps were hung in the verandah, and there was plenty of light on the tanned faces. Their expressions were interesting. Curiosity, and an obvious weather-eye for the humorous, stamped them just at first, but soon froze to a stolid rigidity which covered an infinity of scorn, and remained so up to the first hymn. That hymn acted as a thaw; it loosened curiosity—but fresh curiosity, whose object was no longer the service, but she with the shining hair, who touched the keys so softly and cleverly, and led the hymn with her own sweet voice. All eyes dwelt upon her when the hymn was over; she was sitting in the doorway with her back to all; but when she slightly turned her head, to listen, they could see the curve of her cheek and chin. The lamp-light shone upon her hair. Martin watched the men intently; he was familiar with them all, in a masterful way; he was intimate with their language; yet it seemed to him—very likely it was all his heated imagination, but it did seem to him—that their faces softened as they watched her. A corresponding softness came over his own spirit. Then he too could only gaze at her, and he never took his eyes from her shining head until the men had clattered out of the verandah and into the soft sand and the darkness, and their subdued voices were dying away. And by then it was all most hopelessly over with Martin Joy.
“How n-nicely Jeanette did it all!” Day whispered, using
the weakest word in the language, and emphasising its
weakness with her absurd stammer. “She played so well,
and sang so charmingly—yet she d-doesn’t profess to sing,
and has brought no songs. Oh, how sweet and good she is!
How thankful and glad we ought to be that she has come!
She has only been here four or five days, yet she has won all
our hearts, hasn’t she, Martin?”

“Speak for yourself!” said Martin, with a rough laugh.

It might be all over with him, and he might know this
now, but that was no reason why any other should know
it. Yet if only she had been a little less pleasing: if only Day
and his father had liked her a shade less: what a difference it
would have made to Martin! For then, though he could not
teach her to ride, he might have been her staunch consistent
champion as well as her good-natured, brotherly mentor.