The Graven Image

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Chapter VII

A Bushman’s Fancy

The obvious drawback of the back-block life is its monotony; but to Jeanette personally, weary as she was of joyless gaiety, and bored through and through by conventional pleasures, this was anything but a drawback. Yet the monotony was intense. When the first days had grown into the first weeks, the retrospect was like a blackened glance over the cropper, across the Gunbar plains—a dead level and neutral tint, with the hot sun shining impartially upon every acre. Here and there, in the life as on the run, there was certainly a break, of a kind; but the breaks were slight in both cases; they only seemed to emphasise the monotony of the whole. The hours in the shady verandah (whichever that happened to be) with one’s work, or a book, or neither: the other hours in a saddle and sun, with a slow ride home in the rosy evening: the last hour of all, with generally a little music, and always the scent of pines; these made even, glowing days upon which Jeanette, for one, looked back with tranquil joy. And then there were the specks upon the
plain. There was the day when the two girls, out by themselves, were caught in the worst dust-storm of that summer, and nearly stifled. Another day Jeanette was at her uncle’s side when one of the young ones broke its bridle, and both of them bolted from one gate to the next; a matter of five miles, which took the mischief out of them, and made the hot wind roar in Jeanette’s ears; but she never opened her white lips until the danger was over. This was the kind of life. And Jeanette fell in love with it. What was better, it liked Jeanette, and was making a new girl of her.

The several affections which the girl had gained during the first week did not stand still there. It was not natural that they should. They ripened day by day, and quite openly, save in the single case of Martin. The surrender of Martin was his own private concern. Even Daisy\textsuperscript{10} never dreamt of it in these early weeks; and as for Jeanette, her sweet content would have been at an end had the faintest suspicion crossed her mind. It cannot be wise to run so very dark in a thing of this kind; few men are strong enough to keep it up for long; and a crude climax, at best, is but a question of time. But that time had not yet come; Martin swore it should not come for indefinite ages; and, meanwhile, his suppressed feelings had the very best effect upon him. There was room for improvement in him still, but far less room than of old, and not so long ago. He never could have been anything but a good fellow; but he was altering visibly, and all for the better. He was as a slice of fine oak, sawn, planed, and polished: the
smoother he became, the easier it was to see his noble grain. Kind, polite, genial and attentive, Jeanette had thought him, and even blamed herself for not having thought him all these things just at first; but as for being in love with her—neither she, nor Daisy, nor the Boss, nor Debenham, nor any living soul except Martin himself, had the remotest idea of that.

The Boss, indeed, could almost have wished to see Martin taking greater notice of her, or rather, a different kind of notice; but there was plenty of time for that; and, for the present, the father took the keenest delight in watching a warm, clinging affection grow up between Jeanette and Day. The girls were inseparable; and what a splendid thing this intimacy must be for them both! Daisy had a sister at last—the need of her life, to her father’s thinking; and, as for Jeanette, a healthy, flighty, hare-brained little girl, who had seen nothing of the world, was an ideal companion for an older girl, who had seen rather too much of it, and was embittered and disappointed before her time. An odd thing was, that Daisy, after several words of the closest intercourse with Jeanette, knew no more of that embitterment and disappointment than her father had been able to tell her before Jeanette arrived. Yet Jeanette, Day assured him, had ever a sympathetic ear for her confidences—and they never seemed to pain her.

In point of fact, Jeanette was extremely anxious to meet Henry Flood, for many reasons. But, during her first two months at Gunbar, Flood was never able to get away from
the small, drought-ridden station of which he was managing overseer. Whereat Jeanette thought Daisy should have been much more disappointed than she was.

The last and least considerable of Jeanette’s conquests—to count neither Sammy nor the inane Macdonald, who paid Jeanette foolish compliments, and asked pointless questions about Home—was the boy Debenham. He became a confirmed worshipper, but an inoffensive one, even to Martin. He reposed in Jeanette his most private confidences. He would often tell her of the hair’s breadth by which he had missed the Army, after having tasted the sweets of it in the Auxiliary Forces; of the fine goings on of himself and the other Subalterns, during the one month he had devoted to the Queen’s service; and altogether what a Devil of a fellow he had been. He made more sacred confidences than these; and Jeanette tried to keep her countenance and to sympathise with the boy as much as she thought was good for him; so the new chum swore by the newer chum, and worked harder just to stand well with her, and became thus an improving member of Gunbar Society.

In little ways the girls could make themselves useful. Daisy, of course, had always done so. One morning Martin came to her and said:

“If you two care about a good long ride today, you can assist the State. The tanks down south are getting low; but I want to find out how low they’ve got. I must know if the
sheep are being bogged yet, or I’m afraid they will be, before long. Now you girls might find out for me, at the Nine Mile, from Jack. I just want you to ask him if he thinks we need move any sheep this week. You could take your time about riding over, and catch him when he comes in for his snack. It’s a longish way, and if it’s too far for Jeanette, and you don’t care about it, I can send a man; only I want all the men I can get to master the Forest.”

“Jeanette won’t come,” said Daisy confidently, “it’s her mail-day, last week she missed, and she has just told me she is going to write all the morning; but for this reason she won’t mind being left; and I think I should like very much to go, Martin.”

“Sure you won’t mind going alone?”

“Did I ever mind going anywhere alone before I had Jeanette to go with me?” she asked with scorn. “Saddle Brownlock, Martin, like a dear good boy, and I’ll be ready as soon as he is.”

And she was. She was ready, indeed, a little too soon; she made too early a start; and it was not nearly “snack” time when she arrived at the Nine Mile. Gunbar Jack was still on his morning rounds, though where to meet with him it was impossible to know. There was nothing to do but to wait till he returned. So Daisy, after noting that the mid-day shadow on the south side of the hut was too narrow to shelter man or beast from the blazing sun, jogged over to an adjacent
box-clump, slid from the saddle, and tethered Brownlock among the trees. Then she walked back to the hut and calmly entered.

Huts and kruts are all very well at night, even in the warmest weather; in the daytime they fill with flies, the roof becomes red-hot, in all but appearance, the atmosphere is stifling; and the dust of the place, which the finest slush-lamp is warranted not to expose, becomes painfully conspicuous. Yet to step, from the noonday glare of the half-stripped plains, into such a shanty, is relief untold; the twilight of the place—where, as in Jack’s hut, the windows are blocked up—is as a cool lotion to your burning eyeballs; and if you shut the door, this dark deepens into darkness, pierced, however, by javelins of light from casual perforations in the corrugated roof. But Day did not go to the length of shutting the door. She spent the first few moments, and many more after, in switching the flies from her face with her little whip. Then she looked for a book or a paper; for literature of some sort is to be found, as a rule, in every bushman’s hut. Having discovered something to read, she would stand, so she thought, just within the doorway—so as not to actually to be in the hut—and pass the time somehow until the boundary rider’s return. But she found no literature of any kind whatsoever. She searched all over, almost: there was a partition at one end of the hut, behind which Jack slept, and certainly she did not look there: but after all Gunbar Jack was a solitary of solitaries, that he read nothing was no
wonder, though the discovery would add one more drop to the mystery and romance in which he was already steeped. For why did he not go mad? He saw not a soul, he read not a word; he would certainly become mad in the end. Daisy felt uncomfortable about him even now: but her curiosity was greater than her misgivings: she searched on, and, in an unfortunate moment, touched something on a shelf above her head that felt very like a book. She lifted it down, and it was not quite a book, but a sketch-block enclosed in a black portfolio.

But it was a revelation to Daisy; and it would be a revelation to them all at the homestead. Martin would now know what had been in the parcel for Jack which had interested him on the day of Jeanette’s arrival. They should all know more about Jack than they had ever known before: here was a clue to his past life. As for Daisy, who had always felt a romantic interest in the man, she stood with the portfolio in her hands and her breath quite taken away. She burned to peep at the sketches—the tapes were untied, which made the temptation terrible—but to that length she could not and would not go. She would go no further than an external examination, which showed the packet to be well-filled with detached sheets, and the block half used. She was in the act of restoring the portfolio to its shelf, when she heard the Nine Mile gate swing back upon the posts. And the next moment a dreadful thing had happened.
In her nervousness and confusion she put back the portfo-
lion very hastily, but not securely; it fell, coming open in the
descent; and the floor was littered with sketches as with a
scattered pack of cards. Daisy, hearing the gate swing open,
had felt like a burglar who hears the rate-payer cocking his
shot-gun on the stairs. But only master cracksmen would
have shown Daisy’s presence of mind. She remembered that
it often took a minute or two to shut a gate on horse-back—
always, with a young horse. It was long odds against the
youth of Jack’s horse, but Daisy accepted them, fell on her
knees, and began raking in the sketches.

Fortune favours the ready of resource much more than
the merely brave (who are apt to be blundering), and the
next sound Daisy heard was plain language from Jack to his
horse. So the inspired animal was giving trouble at the gate!
The forcible words were music to Day. Swiftly, but not care-
lessly, she slid the sketches into the pocket: they were mostly
rough things of the hut, outside and in, and the gate, and
the box-clump, and a saddled horse—rapid, clever studies
one and all, but not such as would have detained Daisy’s
attention by any circumstances. As it was they flew through
her fingers into the pocket, and twenty seconds would have
seen them all in—had not one sketch stuck in her hand. She
could not let it go like the rest. It was a young girl’s face, with
eager eyes, and an aureole of lightly-pencilled hair. Daisy’s
eyes dilated. She was a woman, and this was a woman, and
with death for the penalty she must stare one moment more.
Her fascination proved fatal, the door darkened, the boundary-rider confronted her.

Some sketches were still on the floor. The portfolio slipped from the girl’s hand, but in the other hand she retained unconsciously the sketch which had thus undone her. She did not get up, but leant back, still kneeling, and gazed up piteously at Gunbar Jack—a coppery figure on the threshold, with the strong light at his back.

She stammered terribly, but got no further than a reiterated first person singular, and was on the very verge of tears.

“You knocked them down by accident,” said a deep grave voice from the door, as stating a fact; “and you are being so very good as to pick them up again; am I not right, Miss Joy? Then please get up. Thank you for getting together so many of—these things. I will pick up the rest.”

“I did not knock them down!” cried Daisy miserably. “I took them down. I was hunting for something to read while waiting for you—I came with a message. It felt like a book, but I never opened the portfolio, honestly I didn’t! I was putting it back on the shelf, when I heard you, and got flurried, and it fell, and they all came out. Oh! I am so very, very sorry! I had no business to hunt for anything to read!”

She had stammered in a way that defies suggestion.

“Pray don’t say anything more about it, miss,” said Gunbar Jack, in the ordinary manner of a working man to-
wards his master’s daughter; his former tone had been more nearly one of equality. He had not moved: the lintel over the door stamped the blue sky no more clearly and rigidly than did the figure under it.

“But you must be angry!”

“No, miss, I am not that; I am only rather sorry that you should have found out this—this weakness of mine. I had not gratified it for years; it was only the other day I went down to Melbourne for these things; and what put it in my mind to touch a pencil again, I can’t tell you. But I made up my mind that none of you in at the homestead should know about it. And now that you have found out, miss—”

He hesitated. Daisy assisted him with a timid “Well?”

“I shall come for my cheque tomorrow,” said the man quietly.

“What!” cried Daisy, in sheer dismay. “Leave the station because of this?”

“I made up my mind to do so if any of you found out;” he added “miss,” after a moment’s pause.

Daisy jumped to her feet and crossed the hut. “You must not do it,” said she solemnly, “and, what is more, you need not: for I’m going to make you a promise—I won’t say a single word about the sketches to a living soul!”

“Honour bright, Miss Joy?”
“I promise most faithfully.”

“Thank you, Miss Joy. Then I may stay on a little longer.”

“I am so glad!”

Her bright, fresh face was raised to his—but it was not very bright at the moment. Her brown eyes had filled with sympathy, and seemed ready to fill with tears. He looked in them wistfully, then moved right into the hut, so that she might pass out if she would; but she did not do so; the light was now on his face; she could not help looking at him.

He took her gaze, and laughed a little bitterly.

“Yes, I know I am a mystery to you all,” he said touchingly; “and to you I shall now be a greater mystery than ever.”

“We are interested by you,” the girl said frankly; “we always have been; for we have always seen that you were a—a—”

“Never mind what! If I was once, I am not now, nor have I been for years. Look! Have I ever spoken to you before? Not a word, I think, though we have seen each other often enough. So you are the first lady that I have exchanged one word with for months and years. Think of that! I touched a lady’s hand once—somebody your brother drove this way from the Sandhills, some weeks back—and it seemed to burn my hand! So it will burn my brain tonight to remember that I have been talking to you—to a lady once again. Yet don’t go! Now that I have opened my mouth, I would like to
try one word or two more—if you’ll listen.” He had spoken with sudden intensity.

She nodded: for she could not speak. He had seated himself on the edge of the table, and pulled off his wideawake. She had never hitherto seen his face save in the shadow of that penthouse brim. His hair was black and matted; his eyes were also black; and they were dull and mournful, as though the soul’s fires were long ago burn out.

“I shall not come in for my cheque tomorrow, as I said I would,” he continued; “but I am coming in sooner or later. And then I shall never come back to Gunbar. Don’t mistake me; this is not to be the old thing over again; this time I am going for good—for good! I am going to try to pull myself together again, Miss Joy. For months I have been making up my mind to this: I take months where I used to take minutes; but then I never kept my resolutions: it took me months to decide to send for that portfolio, and that was the first light breaking in upon me. And now I cannot bring myself to leave this all at once; for, can you believe me, I have grown to love this hut and my solitude? Never mind how I came to it: here my old life died, and here I am beginning to think I see my way to a fresh start. Do you think I am too old for that? Maybe I am younger than you think. I can’t be sure of myself, I daren’t make sure of myself, but perhaps, before long, I shall be leaving Gunbar for ever!”
“Do!” faltered Daisy. The tears were running down her cheeks. “Make up your mind quickly, and do as you say. Oh, speak to my father about it! He will help you with all his heart!”

“No!” said the man, with a sudden change of tone. “I will speak to nobody. God knows why I have spoken to you!”

“You need not fear that I shall repeat one word.”

“I know! Yet I would unsay every word!”

He dropped on one knee, and began gathering those sketches that still lay in the dust. He blew the dust from each as he put it away. While he was doing this, Daisy suddenly—and quite accidentally—remembered to put Martin’s questions; he answered promptly, as though no other converse had passed between them; and then she handed him the sketch of the girl’s head, which had been between her fingers all this time. He had carefully pouched all the other sketches; but no sooner was this one in his hands, than he tore it into little pieces, with a short laugh. It was also a harsh laugh, and his hands were trembling.

“I’m glad you gave me that, Miss Joy! It had no business with the rest. They were poor enough, but at least they were from the life, and might one day be useful; but this was from fancy only; it was a bushman’s fancy, Miss Joy!”

Daisy went off for her horse; but the boundary-rider ran past her, fetched him, and helped her to mount. She rode
slowly back. She would have galloped—if only she could have told Jeanette, and Martin, and her father, of the extraordinary words she had heard. But she had promised not to repeat one word; she had volunteered that promise; it must be kept. Then her woman’s mind caught fast in the one thing which, most of all, had piqued her woman’s curiosity: that young girl’s face, with the hair and eyes, became pencilled large in the sky—on the sand—wherever Daisy looked. Gradually it reminded her of some one. Of whom? At last she knew. But no! It was like yet unlike.

If only she could tell Jeanette about this—about this sketch, nothing else! All the way home she wondered if she might; she desired to be ultra-conscientious in the matter; for she was not entirely satisfied with her part in the last scene. She ought never to have meddled with the portfolio at all—she ought never to have touched the man’s belongings. She had a shrewd idea that Jeanette would not even have set foot within the hut. But that was the other extreme.

Once home, however, Miss Daisy thought no more that evening of Gunbar Jack or of his sketches: for lo, there was a letter from Henry, brought by the mail-boy; and Henry was coming to see her at last—after weeks and weeks and weeks.

“Oh, Jeanette!” she cried, running to her—awkwardly enough, in her habit—with the open letter. “He’s coming! He will be here on Sunday, quite early. You’re going to see him at last, my d-dear!”