

The reader taking a bird's eye view of events since the picnic will have noted how various individuals on its outer circumference have somehow become involved in the spreading pattern: Mrs Valange, Reg Lumley, Monsieur Louis Montpelier, Minnie and Tom – all of whose lives have already been disrupted, sometimes violently. So too have the lives of innumerable lesser fry – spiders, mice, beetles – whose scuttlings, burrowings and terrified retreats are comparable, if on a smaller scale. At Appleyard College, out of a clear sky, from the moment the first rays of light had fired the dahlias on the morning of Saint Valentine's Day, and the boarders, waking early, had begun the innocent interchange of cards and favours, the pattern had begun to form. Until now, on the evening of Friday the thirteenth of March, it was still spreading; still fanning out in depth and intensity, still incomplete. On the lower levels of

Mount Macedon it continued to spread, though in gayer colours, to the upper slopes, where the inhabitants of Lake View, unaware of their allotted places in the general scheme of joy and sorrow, light and shade, went about their personal affairs as usual, unconsciously weaving and interweaving the individual threads of their private lives into the complex tapestry of the whole.

Both the invalids were now progressing favourably. Mike was breakfasting on bacon and eggs and Irma had been pronounced by Doctor McKenzie well enough for some gentle questioning by Constable Bumper, already advised that the girl so far had remembered nothing of her experiences on the Rock; nor, in Doctor McKenzie's opinion or that of the two eminent specialists from Sydney and Melbourne, would she ever remember. A portion of the delicate mechanism of the brain appeared to be irrevocably damaged. 'Like a clock, you know,' the doctor explained. 'A clock that stops under a certain set of unusual conditions and refuses ever to go again beyond a particular point. I had one at home. Never got beyond three o'clock on an afternoon . . .' Bumper, however, was prepared to call on Irma at the Lodge and in his own words 'give it a go'.

The interview had begun at ten a.m. with the policeman in the bedside chair, nicely shaven, pencil and notebook at the ready. By midday he was sitting back with a cup of tea and expressing his gratitude for an abortive two hours that had yielded precisely nothing. At least nothing in the official sense, although he had appreciated being sadly smiled at now and then by one so young and beautiful. 'Well, I'll be off now, Miss Leopold, and if anything does happen to pop



into your mind just send me a message and I'll be up here in two flicks of a duck's tail.' He rose to go, replaced the rubber band round the blank pages of his notebook with a reluctance not entirely official, mounted his tall grey horse and trotted slowly down the drive towards his one o'clock dinner in low spirits that even his favourite plum pie did nothing to dispel.

On the following Saturday afternoon, the Macedon grapevine reported the arrival of another visitor at the Lodge: a lady, pretty as a picture in lilac silk, in a buggy and pair driven by a foreign gentleman with a black moustache who had asked the way to Lake View at Manassa's store. Everyone on the Mount knew that Mrs Cutler was caring for the heroine of the College Mystery, rescued on Hanging Rock by Colonel Fitzhubert's handsome young nephew from England. The latest turn of events was juicy enough to set the village of Upper Macedon gossiping and guessing all over again. It was rumoured that the nephew had broken all his front teeth scaling a sixty-foot precipice. That he was madly in love with the girl. That the lovely little heiress had sent to Melbourne for two dozen chiffon nightdresses and wore three strings of pearls in bed at the Lodge.

In point of fact the heiress's formidable pile of morocco leather luggage stood as yet unopened in Mrs Cutler's vestibule. And who but la petite, thought Mademoiselle fondly, could look so beautiful, so chic, wrapped in a faded Japanese kimono? The venetian blinds were drawn against the green garden light that rippled on the whitewashed walls of the bare little room and on the immense double bed with

its patchwork quilt, seemingly afloat in a sea cave. The soft summer air caressed and healed like water. They wept a little, embraced long and tenderly, abandoning themselves after the first impassioned greetings to the silent luxury of sorrow shared. There was so much to be said, so little that ever could or would be said. The shadow of the Rock lay with an almost physical weight upon their hearts. The thing was beyond words; almost beyond emotion. Mademoiselle was the first to return to the tranquil reality of the summer afternoon, drawing up the blinds with a reassuring click, of the present peace of the garden beyond. The weeping elm at the window was murmurous with gossiping doves.

'Let me look at you, chérie.' The wan little face framed by a fan of ringlets loosely tied by a scarlet ribbon was almost as white as Mrs Cutler's calico pillows. 'Too pale – but so pretty – do you remember how I scolded you for rubbing geranium petals on your lips? But see! I have the wonderful news for you!' On Dianne's outstretched hand an antique French ring flashed a million rainbows on the patchwork quilt and Irma's dimple came out like a star. 'Darling Mam'selle! I'm so glad! Your Louis is a lovely man!'

'Tiens! You have guessed it already, my secret?'

'I didn't guess, dear Dianne – I knew. Miranda used to say I guessed with my head and knew with my heart.'

'Ah, Miranda,' the governess sighed. 'Only eighteen and such wisdom . . .' They fell silent again as Miranda floated towards them over the lawn with shining hair. Mrs Cutler, who had taken an immediate fancy to the elegant French lady, now appeared with a tray of strawberries and cream.



'Dear Mrs Cutler! What would I have done without her? And the Fitzhuberts – how kind everyone is!'

'And the handsome nephew?' Mademoiselle wanted to know. 'Is he also kind? Oh, what a profile in the newspapers!'

Irma had nothing to say of the nephew, reported still too weak to leave his room. 'You forget, Dianne, I only saw Michael Fitzhubert once, in the distance, on the day of the picnic.'

'A woman can see everything necessary in the wink of the eye,' Mademoiselle observed. 'Tiens! When I first see the back of my Louis' head I say to myself: "Dianne, that man he is yours".'

As it happened, Mike was at this moment reclining on the lawn in a deck chair with his Aunt's carriage rug wrapped about his long legs. Beyond the sloping lawn the lake studded with open lily cups lay like burnished pewter reflecting the afternoon light. From it came the lusty cries and grunts of Albert and Mr Cutler guiding a punt through the lilypads in search of tangling water weeds. In the light blue sky that he would always associate with his Macedon summer, little woolly white clouds were sailing across the dark spikes of the pine plantation on the mountain's crest. For the first time since his illness, he was conscious of a faint stirring of pleasure in his surroundings.

'Ah, there you are, Michael! In the fresh air at last!' Mrs Fitzhubert, weighed down with parasol, cushions and needlework, had appeared on the verandah. 'Tomorrow you shall have a visitor to brighten you up. You remember

Miss Angela Sprack from Government Cottage?' The nephew however showed no enthusiasm at the prospect of a tête-a-tête with the Sprack girl, of whom he remembered nothing but the ninepin legs and a pink and white face that had reminded him of a simpering Reynolds portrait in the dining-room at Haddingham Hall.

'I can't imagine why you're so critical of poor Angela.'

'I don't mean to be critical. It's entirely my fault that I find Miss Sprack – how can I express it – too English.'

'What's all this poppycock about being too English?' asked the Colonel, emerging from the shrubbery with the spaniels. 'How the deuce can a person be too English?'

Mike however felt unequal to carrying on the argument on an international level. The visit from Government Cottage was got through somehow on the following afternoon. The Sprack girl was just what Mike had expected – the kind he was implored by his mother to make a point of waltzing with at a county ball. 'Damn it, Angie,' the Major complained as they drove down the avenue in the Vice-Regal dog-cart, 'you're a regular nincompoop. Don't you realize that young man is one of the best matches in the whole of England? Fine old family. Title any day . . . plenty of cash.'

'I can't help it if he's not interested in talking to me,' sniffed the wretched girl. 'You could see for yourself how it was this afternoon. I'm positive he dislikes me, and that's the end of it.'

'You cast-iron goose! Have you no crumb of social sense? I've no doubt the little beauty up at the Lake View



Lodge will have a try for the Honourable Michael, heiress or no.'

As soon as Michael had dutifully assisted those ghastly legs to clamber up into the dog-cart he had decided to take a stroll down to the lake before dinner. The Spracks, like all boring guests, had stayed far too long, and already the sky was flecked with sunset clouds, the lake calm and lovely in the fading light. He had just turned his back on the retreating dog-cart and was walking rather unsteadily across the lawn when his ear caught the splash of water coming from the direction of the lake, where a girl in a white dress was standing beside a giant clamshell that served as a birds' bath, under an oak. The face was turned away, but he knew her at once by the poise of the fair tilted head, and began running towards her with the sickening fear that she would be gone before he could reach her, as invariably happened in his troubled dreams. He was almost within touching distance of her muslin skirts when they became the faintly quivering wings of a white swan, attracted by the sparkling jet from the tap. When Mike sank down on the grass a few feet away, the swan rose almost vertically above the shell, and scattering showers of rainbow drops in its wake flew off over the willows on the other side of the lake.

Mike was feeling stronger every day, and more certain of his legs taking the direction he chose for them. 'I do think,' said his Aunt, 'that Michael should at least pay a courtesy call on Miss Leopold. After all, Michael, you *did* save her life. It's merely a question of good manners.'

'A deuced pretty girl, too,' the Colonel said. 'At your age my boy I'd have been knocking on her door long ago with a bottle of fizz and a bouquet!'

Mike knew they were right about calling. The visit could no longer be delayed, and Albert was sent over with a note suggesting the following afternoon, to which Miss Leopold had replied, in a bold sprawling hand, on Mrs Cutler's best pink notepaper, that she would be delighted to see him and hoped he would come to tea.

It is one thing to make a calm and reasonable decision overnight – quite another to implement it in the light of day. With dragging footsteps Michael approached the Lodge. What the devil was he going to talk about to a strange girl? Mrs Cutler was beaming in the porch. 'I have Miss Irma in the garden so she can get a bit of fresh air, poor lamb.' In a little trellised arbour there was a tea table set out with a white crochet cloth and a deck chair with a heart-shaped red velvet cushion for the visitor. The lamb was sitting up in a froth of muslin and lace and scarlet ribbons under a canopy of crimson rambler roses, which somehow reminded the young man of his sisters' Valentines.

Although Mike had been told often enough that Irma Leopold was a 'raving beauty' he found himself unprepared for the exquisite reality of the sweet serious face turned towards his own. She appeared younger than he had expected – almost childlike – until she smiled, and with an easy adult grace held out a hand adorned with a breathtaking bracelet of emeralds. 'It's so nice of you to come and see me. I do hope you don't mind tea out here in the garden? Do you like marrons glacés – the real French



ones – I adore them. Deck chairs usually collapse but Mrs Cutler says this one is all right.' Delighted at not being obliged to take an active part in the conversation – in his limited experience raving beauties were alarmingly dumb – Mike lowered himself into the sagging canvas chair and said truthfully that there was nothing he liked better than tea in the garden. It reminded him of home. Irma smiled again and this time the dimple, soon to become internationally famous, came out. 'My Papa is a darling but he refuses to eat out of doors. Calls it "barbarous".'

Michael grinned back, 'So does mine,' wriggled into a more comfortable position and helped himself unasked to another marron glacé. 'My sisters love anything in the way of a picnic . . . Oh, Heavens . . . what a tactless idiot I am . . . the last thing I meant to talk about was a picnic – oh, confound it, there I go again.'

Irma 'Oh, please – don't look so unhappy. Whether we talk of it or not, that awful thing is always in my mind . . . always and always.'

'And in mine,' Mike said very low, as the Hanging Rock in its dark glittering beauty rose between them.

'I'm glad, really,' Irma said at last, 'that you mentioned the picnic just now. It makes it easier to say thank you for what you did on the Rock . . .'

'It was nothing, nothing at all,' the young man mumbled into his faultless English boots. 'Besides, it was really my friend Albert, you know.'

'But Michael, I don't know – Doctor McKenzie wouldn't let me see the newspapers . . . who is this Albert?' Michael launched into a description of the rescue on the

Rock, in which Albert figured as the hero, the master mind, ending with: 'My Uncle's coachman. Wonderful chap!'

'When can I meet him? He must think me a monster of ingratitude.' Michael laughed. 'Not Albert.' Albert was so modest, so brave, so clever . . . 'Ah, but you must get to know him . . .' Irma, however, was aware of nothing but the face of the young man opposite, flushed and charmingly earnest in praise of his friend. She was becoming a little tired of the unknown Albert when Mrs Cutler came out of the Lodge with the tea tray and the conversation turned to chocolate cake. 'When I was six years old,' Michael said, 'I ate the whole of my little sister's birthday cake at one go.'

'You hear that Mrs Cutler? You had better cut me a slice before Mr Michael gobbles it all up.' A good laugh, that's what they needed, the poor young things . . .

As soon as he could escape from his Aunt's dinner table that evening, Michael went out to the stables with a kerosene lantern and two cold bottles of beer. The coachman was lying naked on his bed reading the racing tips in the *Hawklet* by the light of a candle whose wavering flame sent ripples of light across his powerful chest, tufted with coarse black hair. Dragons and mermaids writhed and wriggled with every movement of the muscular arm pointing to a broken rocking chair under the tiny window.

'It's bloody hot in here even after dark but I'm used to it. Take your coat off. There's a coupla mugs on that shelf.' The mugs were filled and at once provided swimming pools for sundry insects attracted by the candle. 'It's real good to see you on your pins again, Mike.' The old comfortable



silence took over, broken presently by Albert. 'I seen you out on the lawn today with Miss Thingummy-bob.'

'By Jove! That reminds me! She wants me to take her out in the punt tomorrow.'

'I'll tie her up in front of the boathouse and leave the pole on the table. And mind out for them lily roots at the shallow end.'

'I'll be careful. I don't want to tip the poor girl into the mud.'

Albert grinned. 'Now if it was Miss Bottle-legs, I reckon a ducking wouldn't do her no harm. Them quiet ones, Mike, is the worst. . . .' He winked and took a pull at his beer.

'By the way,' Mike said laughing, 'Irma Leopold particularly wants to meet you.'

'Oh, she does, does she? Cripes, this cold beer hits the spot.'

'Until I told her about you today she had no idea who found her on the Rock. How about coming down to the boathouse tomorrow afternoon?'

'Not on your life!' and after taking another pull at his mug he began to whistle 'Two Little Girls in Blue'.

As soon as he paused for breath, Mike said, 'Well what day *can* you make it?' But Albert, having changed into a more convenient key, had started again at the beginning with exasperating flourishes of his own invention. When at last he stopped, deflated, Mike repeated, 'Well? *What* day?'

'Never. You can count me out on that one, Mike.'

'Then what the devil am I to say to the girl?'

'That's your business.' He began whistling again, and Mike, now really annoyed, left his beer unfinished, opened

the trap door in the floorboards and descended the ladder into the darkness of the feed room below. Confound Albert! What the blazes has got under his skin?

On the following day Irma was waiting for Mike on the rustic seat in the boathouse when she heard the scrape of wheels on gravel and looking up saw a broad-shouldered youth in a faded blue shirt trundling a barrow along the path skirting the lake. He was moving so quickly that when she stood up and called from the boathouse door he was already half way to the shrubbery and out of earshot. Or might have been. She called again, this time so loudly that he stopped, turned round and slowly retraced his steps. At last he stood facing her, near enough for her to see the square brick red peasant face under a thatch of tumbled hair, the deep set eyes apparently focussed on some invisible object of interest above her head. 'Was you calling me, Miss?'

'I was shouting at you, Albert! You *are* Albert Crundall?'

'That's me,' he said, not looking at her.

'You know who *I* am, don't you?'

'Yes,' he said, 'I know who you are all right. Was you wanting me for anything, like?' The sunburned arms lay along the barrow handles, the indigo mermaids crinkled ready for flight.

'Only to say thank you for having rescued me up there on the Rock.'

'Oh, that . . .'

'Aren't we going to shake hands? You saved my life, you know.' The strange creature was plunging backwards



between the shafts of his barrow like an unbroken colt. Reluctantly he lowered his skyward gaze level with her own.

'Tell you the truth, I never give it another thought once the Doc and young Jim had you safe on the stretcher.' He might have handed her a lost umbrella or a brown paper parcel instead of her life. 'You just ought to hear what Mr Michael says about it!' The brick red features stretched to a near grin. 'Now there's a wonderful bloke, if you like!'

'Exactly what he says about *you*, Albert.'

*Albert* 'He does? Well, I'll be buggered. Excuse my language, Miss – I don't often get talking to toffs like you. Well, I'd better be getting on with me job. Ta-ta.' With a decisive flick of powerful wrists the mermaids sprang into action. He was gone, and Irma found herself almost royally dismissed.

*TIME* It was exactly three o'clock. There is no single instant on this spinning globe that is not, for millions of individuals, immeasurable by ordinary standards of time: a fragment of eternity forever unrelated to the calendar or the striking clock. For Albert Crundall, the brief conversation by the lake would inevitably be expanded, in memory, during his fairly long life, to fill the entire content of a summer afternoon. What Irma had said, and what he had answered, were relatively unimportant. In actual fact, the very sight of the dazzling creature whose star-black eyes his own had sedulously avoided, had almost deprived him of the power of speech. Now ten minutes later in the damp seclusion of the shrubbery he sank down on to the empty barrow and wiped the sweat from his hands and face. He had plenty of time in which to recover his mental and physical

equilibrium, since he knew, with absolute certainty, that he would never speak to Irma Leopold again.

Albert had no sooner disappeared through a gap in the laurel hedge when, with the precise timing of three wooden figures on a Swiss clock, Mike came out of the house and Irma – there is always a little wooden lady – appeared at the boathouse door. She stood there watching him hurry towards her, limping a little, over the dappled grass. 'At last I've met your Albert.' Mike's honest face brightened as it always did at the mention of Albert.

'Well? Wasn't I right?' Dear Michael! Marvelling that the clumsy brick red youth could command such adoration, Irma stepped into the waiting punt.

The weather continued warm and sunny and there were daily outings on the placid lake, soothed by the musical box tinkle of the mountain stream. In expansive green seclusion, the Fitzhuberts lay on long wicker chairs watching the season fade. The air in the Lake View garden was preternaturally still this summer. They could hear the bees murmuring in the wallflower bed under the drawing-room window and now and then Irma's light laughter drifting out over the lake. Beyond the oaks and chestnuts one of Hussey's wagonettes went creaking by on the steep chocolate road, scattering the pigeons on the lawn. The white peacock slept, the two spaniels dozed all day in the shade.

Together Michael and Irma had explored every inch of the Colonel's rose garden, the vegetable garden, the sunken croquet lawn, the shrubberies whose winding walks ended in delicious little arbours, ideal for the playing of childish games – Halma and Snakes and Ladders – on



straight-backed garden chairs composed entirely of cast-iron ferns. There is no need for anything much in the way of conversation, which suits Mike very well. When Mrs Fitzhubert comes upon them holding hands on the rustic bridge she sighs. 'How happy they look! How young!' And asks her husband, 'Whatever do those two find to talk about all day long?'

Sometimes Irma finds herself chattering as she used to do long ago at school, for the sheer delight of tossing out words into the bright air, as children enjoy sending up a kite. Unnecessary for Mike to answer, or even to listen, so long as he is there beside her, leaning over the rail with a lock of thick hair falling over one eye with every turn of his head, and aiming endless pebbles at the gaping mouth of the stone frog in the pool.

Now in the late afternoon the little lake grew cold under the slanting shadows and a few yellowing leaves floated amongst the reeds. 'Darling Mike - I can't bear to think that summer is almost over and no more rows on the lake.'

'Just as well,' Mike said, expertly nosing the punt through the lily pads. He grinned. 'Actually, the old punt isn't safe to take out again.'

'Oh, Mike! . . . Then it is over.'

'Oh, well - it's been good fun while it lasted.'

'Miranda used to say that everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place . . .'

Mike must have been leaning too heavily on the pole. Irma could hear the water gurgling under the rotting floor boards as the punt lurched clumsily forward. 'Sorry . . . did I splash you? Those confounded lily roots . . .'

swan

At the landing stage the lilies were already closed and secret in the half-light. A white swan was rising gracefully out of the reeds ahead. They stood for a moment watching it flapping away over the water until it disappeared amongst the willows on the opposite bank. It was like this that Irma would later remember Michael Fitzhubert most clearly. Quite suddenly he would come to her in the Bois de Boulogne, under the trees in Hyde Park; a lock of fair hair hanging over one eye, his face half turned to follow the flight of a swan.

That night the mountain mist came rolling down from the pine forest and lingered far into the morning. At the Lodge the view of the lake from Irma's window was blotted out and Mr Cutler went off to see to his glasshouses, predicting an early winter. At Manassa's store an occasional customer calling in for the morning paper enquired with flagging interest, 'Anything more about the College Mystery?' There wasn't - at least nothing that could be remotely classed as news on Manassa's verandah. It was generally conceded by the locals that the goings-on at the Rock were over and done with and best forgotten.

A last row on the lake. A last light pressure of a hand . . . Unseen, unrecorded, the pattern of the picnic continued to darken and spread.

forshadowing

use in Apple & pear