

a sense
of calm
x or der

Manmade improvements on Nature at the Picnic Grounds consisted of several circles of flat stones to serve as fireplaces and a wooden privy in the shape of a Japanese pagoda. The creek at the close of summer ran sluggishly through long dry grass, now and then almost disappearing to re-appear as a shallow pool. Lunch had been set out on large white tablecloths close by, shaded from the heat of the sun by two or three spreading gums. In addition to the chicken pie, angel cake, jellies and the tepid bananas inseparable from an Australian picnic, Cook had provided a handsome iced cake in the shape of a heart, for which Tom had obligingly cut a mould from a piece of tin. Mr Hussey had boiled up two immense billycans of tea on a fire of bark and leaves and was now enjoying a pipe in the shadow of the drag where he could keep a watchful eye on his horses tethered in the shade.

The only other occupants of the Picnic Grounds were a party of three or four people encamped some distance away under some blackwoods on the opposite side of the creek, where a large bay horse and a white Arab pony were lurching from two chaffbags beside an open wagonette. 'How dreadfully quiet it is out here,' observed Edith, helping herself lavishly to cream. 'How anyone can prefer to live in the country I can't imagine. Unless of course they are dreadfully poor.'

'If everyone else in Australia felt like that, you wouldn't be making yourself fat on rich cream,' Marion pointed out.

'Except for those people over there with the wagonette we might be the only living creatures in the whole world,' said Edith, airily dismissing the entire animal kingdom at one stroke.

The sunny slopes and shadowed forest, to Edith so still and silent, were actually teeming with unheard rustlings and twitterings, scufflings, scratchings, the light brush of unseen wings. Leaves, flowers and grasses glowed and trembled under the canopy of light; cloud shadows gave way to golden motes dancing above the pool where water beetles skimmed and darted. On the rocks and grass the diligent ants were crossing miniature Saharas of dry sand, jungles of seeding grass, in the never ending task of collecting and storing food. Here, scattered about amongst the mountainous human shapes were Heaven-sent crumbs, caraway seeds, a shred of crystallized ginger - strange, exotic but recognizably edible loot. A battalion of sugar ants, almost bent in half with the effort, were laboriously dragging a piece of icing off the cake towards some subterranean larder

dangerously situated within inches of Blanche's yellow head, pillowed on a rock. Lizards basked on the hottest stones, a lumbering armour-plated beetle rolled over in the dry leaves and lay helplessly kicking on its back; fat white grubs and flat grey woodlice preferred the dank security of layers of rotting bark. Torpid snakes lay coiled in their secret holes awaiting the twilight hour when they would come sliding from hollow logs to drink at the creek, while in the hidden depths of the scrub the birds waited for the heat of the day to pass...

Insulated from natural contacts with earth, air and sunlight, by corsets pressing on the solar plexus, by voluminous petticoats, cotton stockings and kid boots, the drowsy well-fed girls lounging in the shade were no more a part of their environment than figures in a photograph album, arbitrarily posed against a backcloth of cork rocks and cardboard trees.

Hunger satisfied and the unwonted delicacies enjoyed to the last morsel, the cups and plates rinsed at the pool, they settled down to amuse themselves for the remainder of the afternoon. Some wandered off in twos and threes, under strict injunctions not to stray out of sight of the drag; others, drugged with rich food and sunshine, dozed and dreamed. Rosamund produced some fancywork, Blanche was already asleep. Two industrious sisters from New Zealand were making pencil sketches of Miss McCraw, who had at last removed the kid gloves in which she had absently begun to eat a banana with disastrous results. Sitting upright on a fallen log with her knife of a nose in a book, and her steel-rimmed spectacles, she was almost

too easy to caricature. Beside her Mademoiselle, her blond hair falling about her face, was relaxed at full length on the grass. Irma had borrowed her mother o'pearl penknife and was peeling a ripe apricot with a voluptuous delicacy worthy of Cleopatra's banquet. 'Why is it, Miranda,' she whispered, 'that such a sweet pretty creature is a school-teacher - of all dreary things in the world . . . ? Oh here comes Mr Hussey, it seems a shame to wake her.'

'I am not asleep, ma petite - only day-dreaming,' said the governess, propping her head on an elbow with a far-away smile. 'What is it, Mr Hussey?'

'I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss, but I want to make sure we get away no later than five. Sooner, if my horses are ready.'

'Of course. Whatever you say. I shall see that the young ladies are ready whenever you are. What time is it now?'

'I was just going to ask you, Miss. My old ticker seems to have stopped dead at twelve o'clock. Today of all days in the whole bloomin' year.'

It happened that Mademoiselle's little French clock was in Bendigo being repaired.

'At Moosoo Montpelier's, Miss?'

'I think that is the watchmaker's name.'

'In Golden Square? Then if I may say so, you've done real well for yourself.' A faint unmistakable blush belied the coolness of the French lady's 'Indeed?' However, Mr Hussey had got his teeth into Moosoo Montpelier and seemed unable to let him go, shaking him up and down like a dog with a bone. 'Let me tell you, Miss, Moosoo Montpelier and his father before him is one of the best men

in his line in all Australia. And a fine gentleman, too. You couldn't have gone to a better man.'

'So I understand. Miranda - you have your pretty little diamond watch - can you tell us the time?'

'I'm sorry Mam'selle. I don't wear it any more. I can't stand hearing it ticking all day long just above my heart.'

'If it were mine,' said Irma, 'I would never take it off - not even in the bath. Would you, Mr Hussey?'

Jerked into reluctant action, Miss McCraw closed her book, sent an exploratory pair of bony fingers into the folds of the flat puce bosom and came out with an old-fashioned gold repeater on a chain. 'Stopped at twelve. Never stopped before. My papa's.' Mr Hussey was reduced to looking knowingly at the shadow of the Hanging Rock which ever since luncheon had been creeping down towards the Picnic Grounds on the flat. 'Shall I put the billy on again for a cup of tea before we go? Say about an hour from now?'

'An hour,' said Marion Quade, producing some squared paper and a ruler. 'I should like to make a few measurements at the base of the Rock if we have time.' As both Miranda and Irma wanted a closer view of the Rock they asked permission to take a walk as far as the lower slope before tea. It was granted after a moment's hesitation by Mademoiselle, Miss McCraw having disappeared again behind her book. 'How far is it as the cock crows, Miranda?'

'Only a few hundred yards,' said Marion Quade. 'We shall have to walk along by the creek which will take a little longer.'

'May I come too?' asked Edith, rising to her feet with a prodigious show of yawning. 'I ate so much pie at lunch I can hardly keep awake.' The other two looked enquiringly at Miranda and Edith was allowed to tag along behind.

'Don't worry about us, Mam'selle dear,' smiled Miranda. 'We shall only be gone a very little while.'

The governess stood and watched the four girls walking off towards the creek; Miranda a little ahead gliding through tall grasses that brushed her pale skirts, Marion and Irma following arm in arm with Edith bumbling along in the rear. When they reached the clump of rushes where the stream changed its course Miranda stopped, turned her shining head and gravely smiled at Mademoiselle who smiled back and waved, and stood there smiling and waving until they were out of sight round the bend. 'Mon Dieu!' she exclaimed to the empty blue, 'now I know ...'

'What do you know?' asked Greta McCraw, suddenly peering up over the top of her book, alert and factual, as was her disconcerting way. The Frenchwoman, seldom at loss for a word, even in English, found herself embarrassingly tongue-tied. It simply wasn't possible to explain to Miss McCraw of all people her exciting discovery that Miranda was a Botticelli angel from the Uffizi . . . impossible to explain or even think clearly on a summer afternoon of things that really mattered. Love for instance, when only a few minutes ago the thought of Louis' hand expertly turning the key of the little Sèvres clock had made her feel almost ready to faint. She lay down again on the warm scented grass, watching the shadows of overhanging branches moving away from the hamper containing milk

and lemonade. Soon it would be exposed to the full glare of the sun and she must rouse herself and carry it into the shade. Already the four girls must have been away for ten minutes, perhaps more. It was unnecessary to consult a watch. The exquisite languor of the afternoon told her that this was the hour when people weary of humdrum activities tend to doze and dream as she was doing now. At Appleyard College the pupils in the late afternoon classes had to be continually reminded to sit up straight and get on with their lessons. Opening one eye, she could see the two industrious sisters at the pool had put away their sketchbooks and fallen asleep. Rosamund nodded over her embroidery. By a sheer effort of will Mademoiselle made herself count over the nineteen girls under her care. All except Edith and the three seniors were visible and within easy call. Closing her eyes, she permitted herself the luxury of continuing an interrupted dream.

Meanwhile the four girls were still following the winding course of the creek upstream. From its hidden source somewhere in the tangle of bracken and dogwood at the base of the Rock it approached the level plain of the Picnic Grounds as an almost invisible trickle, then suddenly for a hundred yards or so became deeper and clearer, running quite swiftly over the smooth stones and presently opening out into a little pool ringed by grass of a brilliant watery green. Which no doubt had made this particular spot the choice of the party with the wagonette for their picnic. A stout bewhiskered elderly man with a solar topee tipped over a large scarlet face was lying fast asleep on his back with his hands crossed over a stomach swathed in a

Search of Michael + Albert

scarlet cummerbund. Nearby, a little woman in an elaborate silk dress sat with closed eyes propped against a tree and a pile of cushions from the wagonette, fanning herself with a palmleaf fan. A slender fair youth – or very young man – in English riding breeches was absorbed in a magazine, while another of about the same age, or a little older, as tough and sunburned as the other was tender and pink of cheek, was engaged in rinsing the champagne glasses at the edge of the pool. His coachman's cap and dark blue jacket with silver buttons were thrown carelessly over a clump of reeds, exposing a mop of thick dark hair and a pair of strong copper-coloured arms, heavily tattooed with mermaids.

Although the four girls following the endless loops and turns of the wayward creek were now almost abreast of the picnic party, the Hanging Rock remained tantalizingly hidden behind the screen of tall forest trees. 'We really must find a suitable place to cross over,' said Miranda, screwing up her eyes, 'or we shall see nothing at all before we have to turn back.' The creek was getting wider as it approached the pool. Marion Quade produced her ruler: 'At least four feet and no stepping stones.'

'I vote we take a flying leap and hope for the best,' said Irma, gathering up her skirts. 'Can you manage it, Edith?' Miranda asked.

'I don't know. I don't want to wet my feet.'

'Why not?' asked Marion Quade.

'I might get pneumonia and die and then you'd stop teasing me and be sorry.'

The bright fast-flowing water was crossed without mishap, to the obvious approval of the young coachman

Michael + Albert Significance

who had greeted their approach with a low penetrating whistle. As soon as the girls were out of earshot and walking away towards the southern slopes of the Rock, the youth in riding breeches threw down the *Illustrated London News* and strolled down towards the pool. 'Can I lend a hand with those glasses?'

'No, you can't. I'm only giving 'em a bit of a lick over so Cook won't rouse on me when I get home.'

'Oh . . . I see . . . I'm afraid I don't know much about washing up . . . Look here, Albert . . . I hope you won't mind my saying so, but I wish you hadn't done that just now.'

'Done what, Mr Michael?'

'Whistled at those girls when they were going to jump over the creek.'

'It's a free country as far as I know. What's the harm in a whistle?'

'Only that you're such a good chap,' said the other, 'and nice girls don't like being whistled at by fellows they don't know.'

Albert grinned. 'Don't you believe it! The sheilas is all alike when it comes to the fellers. Do you reckon they come from Appleyard College?'

'Dash it all, Albert, I've only been in Australia a few weeks – how should I know who they are? As a matter of fact I only saw them for a moment when I heard you whistle and looked up.'

'Well you can take my word for it,' Albert said, 'and I've knocked about a fair bit – it's all the same if it's a bloody college they come from or the Ballarat Orphanage where me and my kid sister was dragged up.'

First intro to M+A

Michael said slowly, 'I'm sorry, I didn't know you were an orphan.'

'As good as. After me mum cleared out with a bloke from Sydney and me dad walked out on the two of us. That's when we was clapped into the bloody orphanage.'

'An orphanage?' repeated the other, who felt himself listening to a first hand account of life on Devil's Island. 'Tell me - if you don't mind talking about it - what's it like to be brought up in one of those places?'

'Lousy.' Albert had finished the glasses and was neatly putting away the Colonel's silver mugs in their leather case.

'Lord, how revolting!'

'Oh, it was clean enough in its way. No lice or anything except when some poor little bugger of a kid gets sent there with nits in its head and Matron gets out a bloody great scissors and cuts off its hair.' Michael appeared fascinated by the subject of the orphanage. 'Go on, tell me some more about it . . . Did they let you see much of your sister?'

'Well, you see, there was bars on all the windows in my day - boys in one classroom, girls in another. Jeez, I haven't thought about that bloody dump for donkey's years.'

'Don't talk so loud. If my Aunt hears you swearing she'll try and make Uncle give you the sack.'

'Not him!' said the other, grinning. 'The Colonel knows I look after his horses damn well and don't drink his whisky. Well, hardly ever. Tell you the truth I can't stand the stink of the stuff. This 'ere French fizz of your Uncle's will do me. Nice and light on the stomach.' Albert's worldly wisdom was unending. Michael was filled with admiration.

'I say, Albert - I wish you'd cut out that Mr Michael stuff. It doesn't sound like Australia and anyway my name's Mike to you. Unless my Aunt's listening.'

'Have it your own way! Mike? Is that short for the Honourable Michael Fitzhubert what's on your letters? Jeez. What a mouthful! I wouldn't recognize mine if I was to see it written down in print.'

To the English youth whose own ancient name was a valued personal possession that travelled everywhere with him, like his pigskin valise and well-filled notecase, this somewhat startling observation needed several minutes of silence to digest, while the coachman surprisingly went on, 'My Dad used to change his name now and then when he got in a tight corner. I forget what they signed us up at the orphanage. Not that I bloody well care. As far as I'm concerned one bloody name's the same as another.'

'I like talking to you, Albert. Somehow you always get me thinking.'

'Thinking's all right if you have the time for it,' replied the other, reaching for his jacket. 'I'd better be harnessing up Old Glory or your Auntie's fur will be flying. She wants to get off early.'

'Right-o. I'll just stretch my legs a bit before we go.' Albert stood looking after the slim boyish figure gracefully clearing the creek and striding off towards the Rock. 'Stretch his legs is it? I don't mind betting he wants another look at them sheilas . . . That little beaut with the black curls.' He went back to his horses and began stacking the cups and plates into the Indian straw basket.

The four girls were already out of sight when Mike came out of the first belt of trees. He looked up at the vertical face of the Rock and wondered how far they would go before turning back. The Hanging Rock, according to Albert, was a tough proposition even for experienced climbers. If Albert was right and they were only schoolgirls about the same age as his sisters in England, how was it they were allowed to set out alone, at the end of a summer afternoon? He reminded himself that he was in Australia now: Australia, where anything might happen. In England everything had been done before: quite often by one's own ancestors, over and over again. He sat down on a fallen log, heard Albert calling him through the trees, and knew that this was the country where he, Michael Fitzhubert, was going to live. What was her name, the tall pale girl with straight yellow hair, who had gone skimming over the water like one of the white swans on his Uncle's lake?

same
scene
of
foreshadowing
as end
to chapter 1

Key Michael
stuff