

The creek had hardly been crossed before the Hanging Rock had risen up directly ahead of the four girls, clearly visible beyond a short grassy slope. Miranda had been the first to see it. 'No, no, Edith! Not down at your boots! Away up there – in the sky.' Mike remembered afterwards how she had stopped and called back over her shoulder to the little fat one trudging behind.

The immediate impact of its soaring peaks induced ✓
a silence so impregnated with its powerful presence that ✓
even Edith was struck dumb. The splendid spectacle, as if by special arrangement between Heaven and the Head Mistress of Appleyard College, was brilliantly illuminated for their inspection. On the steep southern façade the play of golden light and deep violet shade revealed the intricate construction of long vertical slabs; some smooth as giant tombstones, others grooved and fluted by prehistoric

architecture of wind and water, ice and fire. Huge boulders, originally spewed red hot from the boiling bowels of the earth, now come to rest, cooled and rounded in forest shade.

Confronted by such monumental configurations of nature the human eye is woefully inadequate. Who can say how many or how few of its unfolding marvels are actually seen, selected and recorded by the four pairs of eyes now fixed in staring wonder at the Hanging Rock? Does Marion Quade note the horizontal ledges crisscrossing the verticals of the main pattern whose geological formation must be memorized for next Monday's essay? Is Edith aware of the hundreds of frail starlike flowers crushed under her tramping boots, while Irma catches the scarlet flash of a parrot's wing and thinks it a flame amongst the leaves? And Miranda, whose feet appear to be choosing their own way through the ferns as she tilts her head towards the glittering peaks, does she already feel herself more than a spectator agape at a holiday pantomime? So they walk silently towards the lower slopes, in single file, each locked in the private world of her own perceptions, unconscious of the strains and tensions of the molten mass that hold it anchored to the groaning earth: of the creakings and shudderings, the wandering airs and currents known only to the wise little bats, hanging upside down in its clammy caves. None of them see or hear the snake dragging its copper coils over the stones ahead. Nor the panic exodus of spiders, grubs and woodlice from rotting leaves and bark. There are no tracks on this part of the Rock. Or if there ever have been tracks, they are long since obliterated. It is a long long time

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word choice

since any living creature other than an occasional rabbit or wallaby trespassed upon its arid breast.

Marion was the first to break through the web of silence. 'Those peaks... they must be a million years old.'

'A million. Oh, how horrible!' Edith exclaimed. 'Miranda! Did you hear that?' At fourteen, millions of years can be almost indecent. Miranda, illumined by a calm wordless joy, merely smiled back. Edith persisted. 'Miranda! It's not true, is it?' CLASS

'My Papa made a million out of a mine once - in Brazil,' Irma said. 'He bought Mama a ruby ring.'

'Money's quite different,' Edith rightly observed.

'Whether Edith likes it or not,' Marion pointed out, 'that fat little body of hers is made up of millions and millions of cells.'

Edith put her hands over her ears, 'Stop it, Marion! I don't want to hear about such things.'

'And what's more, you little goose, you have already lived for millions and millions of seconds.'

Edith had gone quite white in the face. 'Stop it! You're making me feel giddy.'

'Ah, don't tease her, Marion,' Miranda soothed, seeing the usually unsnubbable Edith for once deflated. 'The poor child's overtired.'

'Yes,' said Edith, 'and those nasty ferns are pricking my legs. Why can't we all sit down on that log and look at the ugly old Rock from here?'

'Because,' said Marion Quade, 'You insisted on coming with us, and we three seniors want a closer view of the Hanging Rock before we go home.'

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ha-ha

Edith had begun to whimper. 'It's nasty here . . . I never thought it would be so nasty or I wouldn't have come . . .'

'I always thought she was a stupid child and now I know,' Marion reflected out loud. Precisely as she would have stated a proven truth about an isosceles triangle. There was no real rancour in Marion – only a burning desire for truth in all departments.

'Never mind, Edith,' Irma comforted. 'You can go home soon and have some more of Saint Valentine's lovely cake and be happy.' An uncomplicated solution not only to Edith's present woe but to the sorrows of all mankind. Even as a little girl, Irma Leopold had wanted above all things to see everyone happy with the cake of their choice. Sometimes it became an almost unbearable longing, as when she had looked down at Mademoiselle asleep on the grass this afternoon. Later it would find expression in fantastic handouts from an overflowing heart and purse, no doubt acceptable to Heaven, if not to her legal advisers: handsome donations to a thousand lost causes – lepers, sinking theatrical companies, missionaries, priests, tubercular prostitutes, saints, lame dogs and deadbeats all over the world.

'I have a feeling there used to be a track somewhere up there,' said Miranda. 'I remember my father showing me a picture of people in old-fashioned dresses having a picnic at the Rock. I wish I knew where it was painted.'*

'They may have approached it from the opposite side,'

* The picture Miranda remembered was 'Picnic at Hanging Rock, 1875' by William Ford, now hanging in the National Gallery of Victoria.

said Marion, producing her pencil. 'In those days they probably drove from Mount Macedon. The thing I should like to see are those queer balancing boulders we noticed this morning, from the drag.'

'We can't go much further,' said Miranda. 'Remember, girls, I promised Mademoiselle we wouldn't be long away.'

At every step the prospect ahead grew more enchanting with added detail of crenellated crags and lichen-patterned stone. Now a mountain laurel glossy above the dogwood's dusty silver leaves, now a dark slit between two rocks where maidenhair fern trembled like green lace. 'Well, at least let us see what it looks like over this first little rise,' said Irma, gathering up her voluminous skirts. 'Whoever invented female fashions for nineteen hundred should be made to walk through bracken fern in three layers of petticoats.' The bracken soon gave way to a belt of dense scratchy scrub, ending in a waist-high shelf of rock. Miranda was first out of the scrub and kneeling on the rock to pull up the others with the expert assurance that Ben Hussey had admired this morning when she opened the gate. ('At the age of five,' her father loved to remember, 'our Miranda threw a leg over a horse like a boundary rider.' 'Yes,' her mother would add, 'and entered my drawing-room with her head thrown back, like a little queen.') Juxta to down symbolism of horse-like head

They found themselves on an almost circular platform enclosed by rocks and boulders and a few straight saplings. Irma at once discovered a sort of porthole in one of the rocks and was gazing down fascinated at the Picnic Grounds below. As if magnified by a powerful telescope, the little bustling scene stood out with stereoscopic clarity

between the groups of trees: the drag with Mr Hussey busy amongst his horses, smoke rising from a small fire, the girls moving about in their light dresses and Mademoiselle's parasol open like a pale blue flower beside the pool.

It was agreed to rest a few minutes in the shade of some rocks before retracing their steps to the creek. 'If only we could stay out all night and watch the moon rise,' Irma said. 'Now don't look so serious, Miranda, darling - we don't often have a chance to enjoy ourselves out of school.'

✓ 'And without being watched and spied on by that little rat of a Lumley,' Marion said.

'Blanche says she knows for a fact Miss Lumley only cleans her teeth on Sundays,' put in Edith.

'Blanche is a disgusting little know-all,' Marion said, 'and so are you.'

Edith went on unperturbed, 'Blanche says Sara writes poetry. In the dunnie, you know. She found one on the floor all about Miranda.'

'Poor little Sara,' Irma said. 'I don't believe she loves anyone in the world except you, Miranda.'

'I can't think why,' Marion said.

'She's an orphan,' Miranda said gently.

Irma said, 'Sara reminds me of a little deer Papa brought home once. The same big frightened eyes. I looked after it for weeks but Mama said it would never survive in captivity.'

'And did it?' they asked.

'It died. Mama always said it was doomed.'

Edith echoed, 'Doomed? What's that mean, Irma?'

'Doomed to die, of course! Like that boy who "stood on the burning deck, whence all but he had fled, tra . . . la la . . ." I forget the rest of it.'

'Oh, how nasty! Do you think I'm doomed, girls? I'm not feeling at all well, myself. Do you think that boy felt sick in the stomach like me?'

'Certainly - if he'd eaten too much chicken pie for his lunch,' Marion said. 'Edith, I do wish you would stop talking for once.'

A few tears were trickling down Edith's pudgy cheek. Why was it, Irma wondered, that God made some people so plain and disagreeable and others beautiful and kind like Miranda; dear Miranda, bending down to stroke the child's burning forehead with a cool hand. An unreasoning tender love, of the kind sometimes engendered by Papa's best French champagne or the melancholy cooing of pigeons on a Spring afternoon, filled her heart to overflowing. A love that included Marion, waiting with a flinty smile for Miranda to have done with Edith's nonsense. Tears sprang to her eyes, but not of sorrow. She had no desire to weep. Only to love, and shaking out her ringlets she got up off the rock where she had been lying in the shade and began to dance. Or rather to float away, over the warm smooth stones. All except Edith had taken off their stockings and shoes. She danced barefoot, the little pink toes barely skimming the surface like a ballerina with curls and ribbons flying and bright unseeing eyes. She was at Covent Garden where she had been taken by her grandmother at the age of six, blowing kisses to admirers in the wings, tossing a flower from her bouquet into the stalls. At last she sank

class

into a full-blown curtsy to the Royal Box, half way up a gum tree. Edith, leaning against a boulder, was pointing at Miranda and Marion, making their way up the next little rise. 'Irma. Just look at them. Where in the world do they think they're going without their shoes?' To her annoyance Irma only laughed. Edith said crossly, 'They must be mad.' Such abandoned folly would always be beyond the understanding of Edith and her kind, who early in life take to woollen bedsocks and galoshes. Looking towards Irma for moral support, she was horrified to see that she too had picked up her shoes and stockings and was slinging them at her waist.

Miranda was a little ahead as all four girls pushed on through the dogwoods with Edith trudging in the rear. They could see her straight yellow hair swinging loose above her thrusting shoulders, cleaving wave after wave of dusty green. Until at last the bushes began thinning out before the face of a little cliff that held the last light of the sun. So on a million summer evenings would the shadows lengthen upon the crags and pinnacles of the Hanging Rock.

The semi-circular shelf on which they presently came out had much the same conformation as the one lower down, ringed with boulders and loose stones. Clumps of rubbery ferns motionless in the pale light cast no shadows upon the carpet of dry grey moss. The plain below was just visible; infinitely vague and distant. Peering down between the boulders Irma could see the glint of water and tiny figures coming and going through drifts of rosy smoke, or mist. 'Whatever can those people be doing down there like a lot of ants?' Marion looked out over her shoulder.

'A surprising number of human beings are without purpose. Although it's probable, of course, that they are performing some necessary function unknown to themselves.' Irma was in no mood for one of Marion's lectures. The ants and their business were dismissed without further comment. Although Irma was aware, for a little while, of a rather curious sound coming up from the plain. Like the beating of far-off drums.

Miranda was the first to see the monolith rising up ahead, a single outcrop of pock-marked stone, something like a monstrous egg perched above a precipitous drop to the plain. Marion, who had immediately produced a pencil and notebook, tossed them into the ferns and yawned. Suddenly overcome by an overpowering lassitude, all four girls flung themselves down on the gently sloping rock in the shelter of the monolith, and there fell into a sleep so deep that a horned lizard emerged from a crack to lie without fear in the hollow of Marion's outflung arm.

A procession of queer looking beetles in bronze armour were making a leisurely crossing of Miranda's ankle when she awoke and watched them hurrying to safety under some loose bark. In the colourless twilight every detail stood out, clearly defined and separate. A huge untidy nest wedged in the fork of a stunted tree, its every twig and feather intricately laced and woven by tireless beak and claw. Everything if only you could see it clearly enough, is beautiful and complete – the ragged nest, Marion's torn muslin skirts fluted like a nautilus shell, Irma's ringlets framing her face in exquisite wiry spirals – even Edith, flushed and childishly vulnerable in sleep. She awoke, whimpering

and rubbing red-rimmed eyes. 'Where am I? Oh, Miranda, I feel awful!' The others were wide awake now and on their feet. 'Miranda,' Edith said again, 'I feel perfectly awful! When are we going home?' Miranda was looking at her so strangely, almost as if she wasn't seeing her. When Edith repeated the question more loudly, she simply turned her back and began walking away up the rise, the other two following a little way behind. Well, hardly walking - sliding over the stones on their bare feet as if they were on a drawing-room carpet, Edith thought, instead of those nasty old stones. 'Miranda,' she called again. 'Miranda!' In the breathless silence her voice seemed to belong to somebody else, a long way off, a harsh little croak fading out amongst the rocky walls. 'Come back, all of you! Don't go up there - come back!' She felt herself choking and tore at her frilled lace collar. 'Miranda!' The strangled cry came out as a whisper. To her horror all three girls were fast moving out of sight behind the monolith. 'Miranda! Come back!' She took a few unsteady steps towards the rise and saw the last of a white sleeve parting the bushes ahead.

'Miranda . . .!' There was no answering voice. The awful silence closed in and Edith began, quite loudly now, to scream. If her terrified cries had been heard by anyone but a wallaby squatting in a clump of bracken a few feet away, the picnic at Hanging Rock might yet have been just another picnic on a summer's day. Nobody *did* hear them. The wallaby sprang up in alarm and bounded away, as Edith turned back, plunged blindly into the scrub and ran, stumbling and screaming, towards the plain.

authorial
voice
intuition
creates
suspense