

KEY use !!

A restless windy night on the Mount was followed by a calm windless dawn with residents still asleep in brass bedsteads under silken coverlets waking to the tinkle of fern-fringed streams and the scent of late flowering petunias. On the Colonel's lake the waterlilies were just beginning to open as Mike let himself out of the French windows of his room and crossed the croquet lawn, heavy with dew, where his Aunt's peacock was taking an early breakfast. For the first time since the events of last Saturday he felt almost light-hearted. In such an exquisitely ordered world the Hanging Rock and its sinister implications were a nightmare, thrust aside. In the avenue of chestnuts birds were awake and calling, hens cackling from a fowl yard. A puppy barked with joyous insistence on rousing the entire neighbourhood to greet the new day. A thin curl of smoke rose from the Fitzhubert kitchen where a servant was already making up the fire.

Vernacular.

Michael, suddenly aware that he had gone without breakfast, hoped that Albert had remembered to fix up some lunch. Arrived at the stables he found the coachman tightening up the girth of the white pony. 'Good morning,' said Michael in his pleasant English voice; the upper class Englishman's ritual good morning to any human being encountered before nine a.m. from Bond Street to the Blue Nile. Albert's response was equally characteristic of his class and country. 'Hi! You! Hope you had the sense to get yourself a cuppa?'

'It doesn't matter,' said Michael, whose knowledge of tea making was limited to a spirit lamp and silver tea strainer in his Cambridge rooms. 'I've brought my flask filled with brandy, and matches. You see, I am beginning to know something about the Bush. Was there anything else?'

Albert gave him a fatherly grin. 'Only our tucker in the billy with a couple of mugs and a clasp knife; some clean rags and a drop of iodine. You never know what we might find once we start looking . . . Jeez . . . don't look so bloody miserable. It's your own idea . . . And two lots of chaff. You can tie this one on your saddle. Woa there, Lancer. He's a bit lively first thing in the morning, aren't you, old boy? Right? Let's get off.'

Out on the steep chocolate road several other households beside Lake View were astir, with smoke rising from the chimneys in preparation for brass hot water cans and trays of early morning tea. The Fitzhuberts and their friends were a smug little community, well served. A sprinkling of Collins Street doctors, two Supreme Court judges, an Anglican bishop, several lawyers with tennis-playing sons

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✓ and daughters, enjoying good food, good horses and good wine. Pleasant comfortable people for whom the current Boer War was the most catastrophic event since the Flood, ✓ and Queen Victoria's approaching Jubilee a world-shattering ✓ occasion to be celebrated by champagne and fireworks on the lawns.

The two young men on horseback passed a groom sluicing himself at a pump before an ornate wooden stable, admired by Michael as 'artistic', dismissed by Albert as 'fancy crap'. A stubbly-faced milkman jogging along in a two-wheeled cart ('that poor cow was fined in Woodend last week for watering his milk'); a housemaid sweeping the steps of a trellised verandah; a gravelled drive bordered by six foot delphiniums; a chained invisible dog barking its lungs out behind a hedge of rambler roses.

USE The road wound its charming leisurely way between sleeping gardens still heavy with dew and shadowed by the upper mountain slopes. Swathes of virgin forest ran right down to an immaculate tennis lawn, an orchard, a row of raspberry canes. The lush luxuriant gardens were unlike anything Michael had seen in England. There was a heart-breaking innocence about them; a sort of casual gaiety that proclaimed them pleasure gardens, redeeming the undistinguished architecture of red roofed houses set amongst willow and maple, oak and elm. The rich volcanic soil on which roses glowed all summer long with an almost tropical brilliance was watered by innumerable mountain streams, cunningly deployed - here a ferny grotto, there a pool of goldfish spanned by a rustic bridge, a tea-house above a miniature waterfall. Mike was enchanted by this

strangely favoured country where palms, delphiniums and raspberry canes grew side by side. No wonder his Uncle hated returning to Melbourne at the end of the summer.

'Costs a packet to live up here amongst the nobles,' Albert was saying. 'Look at the staff we keep at Lake View! Me at the stables. Mr and Mrs Cutler down at the gardener's lodge. Cook and a couple of girls in the house. To say nothing of the bloody rose garden and four or five damn good horses eating their heads off all the year round.' Mike, who had never troubled to enquire into his Australian relations' finances, was more interested in looking over a trim privet hedge at a flower bed ablaze with purple and yellow pansies. Their scent drifting out on to the road was somehow the perfect accompaniment to the swimming colour and light of the waking day.

'What's the name of them thingummy-bobs?' Albert asked. 'Smell good, don't they? Pansies, that's right. They was my kid sister's favourite flowers.'

'Poor little thing! I hope she has a garden of her own now.'

'As far as I know, some old geezer took a fancy to her a few years ago and that's all I ever heard. Tell you the truth, I only seen her the once after she left the orphanage. She was a good kid though, a bit like me - wouldn't stand no nonsense from nobody.'

While they were talking Albert had pulled Lancer over to the right into a narrow lane bordered on one side by a stretch of forest, on the other by an old moss-encrusted orchard where ducks in the long grass made the horses shy. Here the homely sights and sounds of village life were

left behind. They entered the green gloom of the forest. 'Cuts off a good five miles this way. There's a rough sort of track somewhere along here that takes us right down over the other side of the Mount.' The remainder of the journey was travelled without further conversation, the track turning and twisting amongst fallen logs and running streams. Except for an occasional bird or rabbit, the only living creature encountered was a little wallaby bounding out of a clump of fish-ferns almost under Lancer's feet. Albert's two tin mugs clattered like cymbals as the big black horse rose up on his hind legs, almost bringing down the pony a few inches in the rear. Albert grinned over his shoulder. 'Scare the daylights out of the little bugger, wallabies do. You all right? I thought you would have went a sugar-doodle!'

'It would have been worth a spill to see my first kangaroo.'

'I'll say this for you, Mike. You may be a bloody fool at times, but you can handle that pony all right.' A somewhat backhanded compliment, none the less appreciated.

When they came out of the forest and on to the more thinly-wooded country on the other side, the morning was well advanced under a sky hazy with heat. They pulled up their horses in the shade and looked down across the plain below. Directly ahead, the Hanging Rock floated in splendid isolation on a sea of pale grass, in full sunlight its jagged peaks and pinnacles even more sinister than the hideous caves of Mike's recurring nightmares. 'You're not looking too good on it, Mike. No good riding this far on a

empty stomach. Get a move on and we'll have some tucker as soon as we get down to the creek.'

So much had happened since last Saturday that it was a shock to find everything exactly the same at the spot where they had lunched and Albert had rinsed out the glasses at the pool. The ashes of their picnic fire still filled the blackened ring of the fireplace, the creek gurgled as it had been gurgling ever since over the smooth stones. The horses were tethered and fed under the same group of blackwoods, the same sunlight filtered through the leaves on to the lunch laid out on a piece of newspaper on the grass: slices of cold meat and bread, a bottle of tomato sauce, a billy of sweet milkless tea. 'Hop into it, Mike, you said you was hungry.'

Far from hungry now, from the first sight of the Rock this morning he had been stricken by an aching emptiness of the spirit beyond the power of cold lamb to fill. Lying back in the tepid shade, he drank mug after mug of scalding tea. As soon as Albert had finished a hearty meal and stamped out the ashes of their fire with the toe of his boot, he rolled over on the grass with a request to be kicked on the backside in ten minutes' time by Mike's watch. Within seconds he was sound asleep and snoring. Mike went over and stood beside the creek at the place where the four girls each after her fashion had crossed it on Saturday afternoon. Here the little dark one with the ringlets had stood for a moment looking down at the water before she jumped, laughing and shaking out her curls: the thin one in the middle had cleared it without an instant's hesitation and never looked back: the dumpy fat one had nearly missed her footing on a loose stone. Miranda, tall and fair, skimmed it like a

white swan. The three other girls had been talking and laughing together as they walked off towards the Rock, but not Miranda, lingering for a moment on the opposite bank to push back a lock of straight yellow hair fallen over one cheek, so that he saw, for the first time, her grave and lovely face. Where were they going? What strange feminine secrets did they share in that last gay fateful hour?

Albert in his short life had slept in a variety of places where Mike would never have closed an eye: under dubious bridges, in hollow logs, empty houses and even the bug-infested cell of a small town lock-up. He slept deep and fitfully anywhere, like a dog, and was even now standing up refreshed and tousling his hair. 'What sort of a bump of thingummy-bob have you got?' he wanted to know, producing a stub of pencil. 'If I make a bit of a plan can you follow it? Where do you want to start?'

Where indeed? As a child Mike used to play hide and seek with his sisters in a little civilized wood, crouching in the dark shelter of rhododendrons or a hollow oak. Once in sudden panic after too long waiting to be found he had come running out to find the seekers, who, fearing him dead or lost forever, had sobbed and blubbered all the way home. For some reason he found himself remembering it all now. Perhaps the end of the Hanging Rock affair would be something like that. The thought, uncommunicable even to Albert, would not be denied: a search with dogs and trackers and policemen was only one way of looking, perhaps not even the right way. It might even end, if it ever did end, in a sudden unexpected finding that had nothing to do with all this purposeful seeking.

It was arranged that each of the young men should take a given area on Albert's plan, searching with a special regard for caves, overhanging rocks, fallen logs or anything capable of affording the slightest shelter to the missing girls.

As a particular opening in a clump of trees at the southwest end of the Rock had been identified by several witnesses present when the girl Edith had come running towards them, crying and dishevelled, on the afternoon of February the fourteenth, Albert now elected to take over his part of the search from this point, and accordingly set out whistling to make a careful examination of the lower slopes where it was rumoured there had once been a forest track long overgrown with bracken and blackberries. No sooner was his faded blue shirt out of sight between the trees than Michael had stopped walking. Albert chancing to look back over his shoulder wondered if the poor bugger was feeling crook. A wild bloody goose chase if ever there was one...

Actually, his friend was listening to the murmuring life of the forest welling up out of the warm green depth. In the noonday stillness all living creatures except man, who long ago renounced the god-given sense of balance between rest and action, had slowed down their normal pace.

Fronds of curled brown velvet snapped under his touch, his boots trod down the neat abodes of ants and spiders: his hand brushing against a streamer of bark dislodged a writhing colony of caterpillars in thick fur coats, brutally exposed to midday light. From a loose stone, a sleeping lizard awoke and darted to safety at the clumping monster's approach. The rise grew steeper, the undergrowth denser. The gentle youth, hard breathing, his yellow crest

damp on his glistening forehead, pushed on through the waist-high bracken, with every step cutting a swathe of death and destruction through the dusty green.

Behind him, perhaps fifty yards below, lay the pool: directly ahead a thinly-wooded incline. Somewhere here, perhaps on this very spot, Miranda had led the way through the patch of bracken and plunged into the dogwood, as Mike himself was doing now. As the vertical façade of the Rock drew nearer, the massive slabs and soaring rectangles repudiated the easy charms of its fern-clad lower slopes. Now outcrops of prehistoric rock and giant boulders forced their way to the surface above layers of rotting vegetation and animal decay: bones, feathers, birdlime, the sloughed skins of snakes; some with jagged horns and jutting spikes, obscene knobs and scabby carbuncles; others smoothly humped and rounded by the passing of a million years. On any one of these awesome rocks, Miranda might have pillowed her bright weary head.

Mike was still stumbling and climbing with no particular plan in mind when he was halted by a faint but unmistakable cooe at his back. He had lost all count of time and looking over his shoulder was surprised to see the Picnic Grounds diminished to a patch of pink and gold light between the trees. Again he heard the cooe, louder and more insistent. For the first time since leaving Albert at midday he remembered his promise to rejoin him at the pool no later than four o'clock. It was already half past five. From a pigskin notebook in his pocket he tore out several leaves and carefully stuck them on to the twigs of a bush of mountain laurel, where he left them hanging in

the calm evening air like little white flags, and retraced his steps down to the creek. Albert awaiting him with a mug of tea had nothing of any interest to report: had seen nothing out of the ordinary and was itching to get back to Lake View and his evening meal. 'Jeez, I began to think you was lost. What the hell was you doing up there all that long?'

'Just looking . . . I put some little flags on a bush out of my pocket book so I could find it again.'

'Smart Alec, aren't you? Well, drink up your tea and we'll get a move on. I swore blind to Cookie I'd get you home for dinner at eight.'

Mike said slowly: 'I'm not going home. Not tonight.'

'Not going home?'

'You heard me, didn't you?'

'Stone the crows! Have you gone off your rocker?'

'You can tell them up at the house I'm staying the night in Woodend. Any bloody lie you like so long as there's no fussing.' Albert was looking at him with a new respect. Incidentally, it was the first time he had heard Mike using what he called 'language'. He glanced up at the pink and glowing sky and shrugged. 'Be dark soon. Have a bit of sense. What's the good of you stopping here all night on your Pat Malone?'

'That's my business.'

'Beats me what you're looking for but you won't find it in the dark, I can tell you that much.' Now Mike really was swearing, with passionate conviction. At Albert, the police, bloody so-and-so's who kept poking their noses into other people's affairs, bloody so-and-so's who knew

damn all about every bloody thing just because they were Australians -

'You win,' Albert said, walking off towards the horses. 'I'll leave you the rest of the tucker, what there is of it, and the billy. There's a bit of feed for the pony still in your bag.'

Mike said awkwardly, 'I'm sorry I called you all those names just now.'

'Aw, you done right . . . if that's the way you was feeling . . . well, ta-ta, I'll be hitting the trail. And mind you put out the fire before you leave tomorrow. I don't fancy spending me week-end fighting bush fires at Hanging Rock.'

Lancer was impatient to be off and Albert cantered off over the flats towards the Mount. He knew exactly where to hit the turn off between two gum trees and was soon out of sight.

Across the level golden plain long shadows were crawling out of the forest, over the thin lines of post and rail fences, a few scattered sheep, a windmill with motionless silver sails catching the last of the sun. On the Rock, darkness stored all day in its fetid holes and caves seeped out into the twilight and it was night. Albert was right, of course. Mike knew perfectly well that he could do nothing until dawn came. At what hour in this strange land did the sun rise? He fetched some bark, rekindled the dying fire and by its fitful light reluctantly ate some of the meat and bread. Behind him, the Rock pressed unseen against the starless sky. A few yards away a shifting patch of white came and went as the Arab drank at the creek. A pile of bracken fern made a fairly comfortable bed although the night air had set him shivering the moment he lay down.

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He took off his jacket and folding it across his body lay on his back looking up at the sky. Only once in his life had he slept in the open - on the French Riviera with a party of Cambridge friends who had lost their way somewhere on the hills at the back of Cannes. There had been stars and vineyards and nearby lights, rugs for the girls and fruit and wine left over from the day's excursion. Remembering what had then seemed a pinnacle of high adventure he thought how ridiculously young he must have been for his eighteen years.

Presently he dropped off into a wakeful dream in which the ring of the Arab's hooves on a loose stone was the housemaid throwing back the shutters of his room at Haddingham Hall. Still only half awake he hoped Annie wouldn't pull up the blinds yet, and awoke to the black, closely-drawn curtains of the Australian night. He fumbled for the matches and saw for a flickering moment the face of his watch beside him on the ground. It was still only ten o'clock. Wide awake now and aching all over he threw a broken branch on to the fire and lay watching the crown of dry leaves flaring up in showers of sparks reflected in the pool.

When the first glimmer of daylight showed up he was already boiling the billy for tea. Gulping it down with a morsel of dry bread which some sugar ants were endeavouring to drag bodily into their hole, he gave the pony the last of the chaff and was ready to start. Many days later, when Bumpher was firing questions at him all over again, he realized that he had no definite plan of action when he had crossed the creek and begun walking towards the Rock.

Only a compulsion to go back to the little bush with the flags and begin the search again from there.

It was another glorious morning, warm and windless as yesterday. After the endless wakeful night it was a positive relief to be forcing his chilled body through the waist-high bracken. The stunted laurel was easily located by the scraps of paper, now limp with dew. A parrot flashed through the trees ahead where magpies were gurgling in full-throated morning joy. Veiled in lacy green of fern and foliage, the formidable buttresses of the Hanging Rock were not yet in view. A few yards from where he had stopped to extricate one foot from an apparently bottomless cleft a little wallaby came hop-hopping out of the ferns on a zig-zag course that suggested some kind of natural track. There were certain things that animals knew more about than people – Mike's cocker spaniel for instance was aware of cats and other enemies half a mile away. What had the wallaby seen, what did it know? Perhaps it was trying to tell him something as it stood looking down at him from a ledge of rock. There was no fear in its gentle eyes. It was easy enough to hoist himself up on to the ledge but not to follow the little creature's leaping progress through the scrub where it disappeared. The ledge where he now found himself abutted on to a natural platform of striated rock ringed with stones, boulders and clumps of wiry fern, shaded by straggling eucalypts. Here he was forced to rest, if only for a moment, his leaden legs. His head on the contrary was less like a head than an air balloon, tethered somewhere above his aching shoulders. The well drilled body accustomed to its hearty British intake of eggs and bacon, coffee and porridge was

loudly complaining, although its owner was not conscious of hunger – only beset with a windy longing for gallons of ice cold water. A sloping rock offered a meagre shade. He laid his head on a stone and fell instantly into the thin ragged sleep of exhaustion, waking with a sudden stab of pain over one eye. A trickle of blood was oozing on to the pillow. The pillow was as hard and sharp as a stone under his burning head. The rest of his body was deathly cold. Shivering, he reached out for the coverlet.

At first he thought it was the sound of birds in the oak tree outside his window. He opened his eyes and saw the eucalypts, their long pointed silver leaves hanging motionless on the heavy air. It seemed to be coming from all round him – a low wordless murmur, almost like the murmur of distant voices, with now and then a sort of trilling that might have been little spurts of laughter. But who would be laughing down here under the sea . . . ? He was forcing his way through viscous dark-green water, looking for the musical box whose sweet tinkling voice was sometimes behind, sometimes just ahead. If only he could move faster, trailing useless legs through the green, he might catch up with it. Suddenly it ceased. The water grew thicker and darker; he saw bubbles rising from his mouth, began to choke, thought, 'This is what it feels like to drown,' and woke coughing up the blood that was trickling down his cheek from the cut on his forehead.

He was wide awake and stumbling to his feet when he heard her laughing, a little way ahead. 'Miranda! Where are you? . . . Miranda!' There was no answering voice. He began running as well as he could towards the belt

of scrub. The prickly grey green dogwood tore at his fine English skin. 'Miranda!' Now huge rocks and boulders blocked his path on the rising ground, each a nightmare obstacle to be somehow walked around, clambered over, crawled under, according to size and contour. They grew larger and more fantastic. He cried out: 'Oh, my lost, lovely darling, where are you?' and raising his eyes for an instant from the treacherous ground saw the monolith, black against the sun. A scatter of pebbles went rolling down into the chasm below as he slipped on a jagged spur and fell. A spear of pain jabbed at his ankle, he got up again and started hauling himself up on to the next boulder. There was only one conscious thought in his head: Go on. A Fitzhubert ancestor hacking his way through bloody barricades at Agincourt had felt much the same way; and had, in fact, incorporated those very words, in Latin, in the family crest: Go on. Mike, some five centuries later, went on climbing.