

It was a new sensation for Albert to be troubled by anything beyond his own immediate affairs and he didn't care for it. Riding home over the mountain on Friday evening his thoughts kept reverting to his friend alone all night at the creek. The poor bastard wouldn't even know how to make himself comfortable on a bed of bracken by digging a hole for his shoulders. Or how to light a fire with a handful of bark when the night turned cold, as it did quite early on the Macedon plains, even in summer. No doubt about it, something had got under Mike's skin. Just what, Albert didn't understand, but there it was. Perhaps all the nobs like Mike's family in England were on the barmy side. Or was there really something in all this flamdoodle about looking for the lost sheilas that made sense? Albert himself had once known an unreasoning urge to go to the Ballarat Races and put a whole five pounds on an outsider that



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but better key

came romping home at forty to one. Perhaps Mike felt like that about finding the sheilas. For his part he was bloody well sick of the sheilas . . . probably dead long ago, come to that . . . He hoped Cook had kept something hot for his tea tonight. And what in Hell was he going to say to the Boss? Thus uncomfortably musing Albert trotted slowly home on a loose rein.

Darkness was filling the avenue with fragrant glooms and mysteries when he turned in at the gates of Lake View. After unsaddling Lancer and hosing him down in the stable yard, he made his way to the kitchen, there to be cheered by generous helpings of warmed-up steak and kidney pudding and apricot tart. 'Best go and see them inside,' Cook advised. 'The master's in a regular state with you being so late and all - what have you done with young Michael?'

'He's all right. I'll go when I've finished me tea,' said the coachman, helping himself to more tart. It was after ten o'clock, and the Boss was alone in the study playing patience with the French windows open onto the verandah when Albert coughed loudly and knocked on the leaded pane.

'Come in, Crundall. For God's sake, where's Mr Michael?'

'I have a message from him, sir. I -'

'Message? Didn't you come home together? What the blazes has gone wrong?'

'Nothing, sir,' said the coachman, frantically seeking the appropriate fib which he had been concocting while he was eating the apricot tart, and now eluded him under the old boy's accusing blue eyes.

'How do you mean, nothing? My nephew never told us he intended to be out for dinner?' At Lake View being absent for a meal without due notice was almost worthy of capital punishment. *clash*

'He didn't intend to be out that long sir. The fact is, we left it a bit late starting for home and Mr Michael reckoned he'd stay the night at the Macedon Arms and ride home tomorrow.'

'Macedon Arms? That miserable little pub near the Woodend Station? Never heard such nonsense!'

'I think, sir,' said Albert, gaining confidence as all good liars do, 'he thought it'd save any inconvenience this end?'

The Colonel snorted. 'Considering Cook has been keeping his dinner hot for a good three hours.'

'Between you and me,' Albert said, 'Mr Michael was a bit done in after that long ride in the sun this morning.'

'Where did you go?' the Colonel asked.

'A fair way. It was really me put the idea into his head to take it easy and stop the night in Woodend.'

'So it was your brilliant idea, was it? The boy's all right, I suppose?'

'Right as rain.'

'Let's hope the Arab's properly stalled for the night - if they have a stable down there - very well, then, you may go. Good night.'

'Good night, sir. Will you be wanting Lancer tomorrow?'

'Yes. I mean no. Dammit. I can't make any arrangements for Saturday until I've seen my nephew. We're expected to tennis at Government Cottage.'



Although he normally fell into instant dreamless sleep the moment his head touched the pillow, Albert passed the rest of the night in a succession of disturbing dreams in which the voice of Michael kept calling for help from regions always inaccessible. Sometimes it came drifting in through the tiny window from the lake, sometimes in moaning gusts from the avenue, sometimes almost beside him, close to his ear – 'Albert, where are you, Albert?' – so that he actually sat up in bed, sweating and wide awake. For once it was a positive relief when the sun rose, filling his little box of a room with orange light, and it was time to get up, put his head under the pump and see to the horses.

Directly after breakfast and without a word to anyone – not even his good friend Cookie – he pinned a note on the stable door, saddled up Lancer and set off over the Mount for the Picnic Grounds. 'Home soon' he had written with deliberate intent to deceive and delay. No sense in getting everyone's fur flying up at the house when it might well be the truth that Mike at this moment was trotting quietly home within a few miles of the Lake View turn. Reason insisted there was no cause for alarm. Mike was an experienced rider who knew the track yet against all reason a nagging fear persisted.

Moving at an easy canter, Lancer was soon on the soft going between tall forest trees, where Albert's practised eye noted the damp red surface of the seldom-used track showed no hoofmarks other than their own of yesterday. At every turn he craned forward in the saddle expecting to see the pony's snow-white crest as the Arab came swinging towards him out of the ferns. On the highest point of the

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track where the forest thinned out he pulled up Lancer under the same tree where he and Michael had stopped yesterday morning. Across the plain the Hanging Rock rose up in violent contrasts of midday light and shade. Barely glancing at its now familiar splendours, his eye swept the empty shimmering plain for a patch of moving white. The descent on dry slippery grass and loose stones, even for an animal as surefooted as Lancer, was slow. As soon as he had finally slithered on to the plain and felt the level ground under his four feet he was off again like the wind. They had just entered the belt of light timber on the fringe of the Picnic Grounds when the big horse propped so violently that his rider nearly lost a stirrup, at the same time letting out a long rasping whinny that went echoing through the glade like the wail of a foghorn. It was answered by another, only fainter, and within seconds the white pony, without a saddle and trailing a rope halter on the ground, came trotting towards them out of the scrub. Albert was only too glad to sit comfortably back in the saddle and allow the two horses to lead the way back to the creek.

It was cool and pleasant in the shade of the blackwoods by the pool where at first glance everything looked much the same as when the two young men had parted there last night. The ashes of Mike's fire ringed the stones of the fireplace, his hat, with a parrot feather stuck in the brim, hung from the same overhanging branch. Nearby, the pony's admired English saddle rested on a smooth stump. ('Could've thrown a bag over it,' reflected Albert with professional concern, 'with all them magpie droppings. And why didn't the bugger have the sense to wear his hat?')



He's not all that used to the Australian sun in February...') For some unaccountable reason, Albert's doubts and fears of the last few hours now gave place to a sense of irritation, even of anger. 'Blast the bloody young fool! I wouldn't mind betting he's gone and lost himself somewhere up there on the bloody Rock... Hell, I shouldn't have got meself mixed up with all this...' However, mixed up with it he was to the extent of crawling laboriously in and out of the scrub and bracken in search of fresh tracks leading towards the Rock.

There were any number of footprints to choose from, including Albert's own of yesterday. The narrow imprint of Michael's riding boots was easily picked up on the loose soil. Trouble was going to start when they faded out amongst the stones and rubble on the Rock. He had only been following Michael's trail for fifty yards or so, when he noticed another set of footprints, only a few feet away, almost parallel to the others, but coming downhill towards the pool. 'Funny thing that... looks like he went up and come down again the same way... Jeez, what's that over there?'

Mike was lying on his side, slumped over a tussock, with one leg doubled up under him. He was unconscious; deathly pale, but breathing. He must have tripped and fallen heavily over the tussock – perhaps broken some ribs or an ankle. There was nothing to account for the cut across the forehead, nor the scratches on his face and arms. Albert had enough practical experience of broken bones not to attempt to move him into a more comfortable position. He did, however, manage to pillow the head on some fresh bracken, fetch water from the creek and wipe the dried blood from the pale dusty face. The brandy flask was still in the jacket

pocket – he withdrew it gingerly and forced a few drops between the other's lips. The boy moaned without opening his eyes as the liquid dribbled down his chin. How long had Mike been lying here on the ground, beset by ants and hovering flies? The skin felt clammy under Albert's hand and altogether the poor bugger looked in such a bad way he decided to waste no more time and go immediately for help.

Of the two horses, the Arab was the freshest. Lancer could be trusted to remain tied up and docile in the shade for several hours. In a few minutes he had the pony saddled and bridled and was out on the Woodend Road. He had only gone a few hundred yards when he caught sight of a young shepherd with a collie dog, strolling across a paddock on the other side of the fence. When the shepherd was close enough to hear what Albert was shouting at him, he shouted back that he had just said goodbye to Doctor McKenzie of Woodend, who had been delivering the shepherd's wife of a son. With large orange ears flapping against the light, the proud father cupped two red paws together and bawled into a rising cloud of dust, 'Nine pounds seven ounces on the kitchen scales and the blackest hair you ever did see.' Albert was already gathering up the Arab's reins. 'Where is he now?'

'In his cradle, I reckon,' said the shepherd, his simple mind centred exclusively on the lusty babe.

'Not the kid you fool – the Doctor!'

'Oh, him!' The shepherd grinned and waved vaguely towards a bend in the empty road. 'In his gig he is. You'll catch up with him easy with that pony of yours.' Whereupon the collie, to whom life and death were all one on




this pleasant summer afternoon, took a playful nip at the Arab's off hind leg that sent him flying down the road in a cloud of dust.

Doctor McKenzie's gig was soon overtaken and heading back towards the Picnic Grounds. Michael was still lying exactly as Albert had left him. After a brisk professional appraisal the old man got to work on the cut forehead, producing dressings and disinfectant from a shiny black leather bag. Oh, those little black bags of hope and healing – how many weary miles were they carried under the seats of gigs and buggies, jolting over the paddocks and unmade roads. How many hours did his patient horse stand waiting under sun and moon for the doctor to come out of some stricken weatherboard cottage carrying his little black bag? 'No serious damage that I can see,' Doctor McKenzie was saying as he knelt over Mike on the tussock. 'The ankle's badly bruised. Probably he's had a fall somewhere up on the Rock. And a touch of the sun. The important thing is to get him home to bed as fast as we can.' On a makeshift stretcher contrived from the Doctor's all-purpose buggy rug (one side imitation leopard, the other shiny black waterproof) and two straight saplings Mike was expertly hoisted on to the gig. 'Leave it to me young man – I've had thirty years of experience fitting 'em in so they don't spill out on the road.' He was amazingly gruff and efficient, amazingly gentle for one who had been up half the night wrestling with the shepherd's wife's reluctant nine-pounder.

Albert mounted the pony and, leading Lancer on a halter, much to that splendid animal's disgust, rode on slowly ahead of the gig. It was close on midnight when the

little procession turned into the avenue at Lake View. The Colonel, to whom a message had been despatched several hours ago from Woodend, was pacing up and down outside the gates with a hurricane lamp. His wife on learning that Mike was safely on his way home had allowed herself to retire to bed. Doctor McKenzie, an old family friend, leaned over the side of the gig. 'Nothing to be alarmed about, Colonel. Sprained ankle, cut forehead. Badly shocked.'

In the hall a housemaid hovered with cans of hot water and fresh linen. Michael was put to bed with an eiderdown and hot bottles and after a sip of warm milk had opened for a moment a pair of haunted eyes. 'The boy's been through hell,' the Doctor decided. Aloud he said: 'Now mind, Colonel, absolute rest, no visitors and no questions – at least not until he starts to talk himself.'

The Colonel spluttered, 'What I want to know is why the Devil Mike was left at the Hanging Rock all night on his own?' After a day spent in alternating fits of rage and secret fears he was nearing explosion point. 'Damn you, Crundall, what was all that poppycock you told me last night about Mike staying at the pub in Woodend?' 

'Now, then, Colonel, no good crying over spilt milk,' the Doctor interrupted. 'The boy's safe and sound in his bed and that's all that matters. As for Crundall here, you can thank your stars he didn't waste any time in going for help.'

Albert was stubbing the toe of his boot against the leg of the dining-room sideboard, with a face of stone. 'It was like this. Your nephew was set on going to the Picnic Grounds on Friday to have another look for them girls. No, I don't know *why* any more than you do. When it was



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time for us to go home he was still mooching about on the Rock and wouldn't come home. I done my best to make him change his mind. And if you don't bloody well take my word for it you can get yourself another coachman.' After a few seconds' pause in which Albert had said affectionate good-byes to the Arab and the cob, given Lancer a last rub down and was looking for a bit of horsebreaking in parts unknown, the Colonel held out his hand. With a stab of something like pity Albert saw that it was the shaking hand of a very tired old man. 'You believe what I been telling you?'

'I believe you, Crundall . . . you gave us a devil of a fright, though. Better eat some of that chicken.'

'I'll see to my horses first and have a bite in the kitchen before I turn in.'

'Have a whisky then?'

'Not for me. I'll be off now. Good night, sir. Good night, Doc.'

'Good night, Crundall, and thanks for your help today.'

'You're right about Crundall, Doctor. He's a good boy, rough as bags, but I'd be damned sorry to lose him,' said the Colonel, pouring himself a drink. 'It's this hanging about all day waiting for news gets my goat. Rather be in the firing line any time. You'll join me in a whisky?'

'Thank you, no grog for me till I get home and into my dressing gown. My wife always leaves me a bit of supper.' He had picked up the little black bag and was pulling on his leather driving gloves. 'I know of a nurse just finishing a case near here. I'll send her up in the morning if Mrs Fitzhubert's agreeable? Good. I'll call in a day or

Time

two - sooner if you want me. Meanwhile I'll give all necessary instructions to the nurse.'

Colonel Fitzhubert stood in the hall watching the gig move off into the shadows and put out the light. Outside the open door of Mike's room a night light glimmered, where a housemaid with her shoes off nodded in a chair. He poured himself a nightcap and went into the study to perform the nightly ritual of altering the date of the calendar on his desk. Saturday, 21 February. Great Heavens! It was Sunday morning! Sunday, 22 February. Exactly eight days since that infernal business at the Hanging Rock.

As soon as Albert had attended to the horses he flung himself fully clothed on his unmade truckle bed and fell asleep. He seemed to have hardly laid his head on the pillow before he was wide awake and staring at the little square of grey light at the window, with the events of yesterday, no longer confused by physical exhaustion as they had been last night, falling neatly into place like the pieces of a fretwork puzzle. Except that one of the key pieces was missing. Which was it, and where exactly did it fit into the pattern? Better start at the beginning when he had found Mike slumped over the tussock on Saturday morning. How far had he wandered before he had fallen and injured his ankle? Had he gone back to the laurel bush and started again from there? Those silly little paper flags . . . ! The next minute Albert had sprung out of bed and was pulling on his boots.

The birds were asleep in the chestnuts as he crossed the lawn still heavy with dew and slipped silently into the dark shuttered house by the side door. The housemaid



was snoring gently outside Michael's room, and from the Fitzhuberts' opposite issued the rhythmic trumpeting of male and female slumbers. Mike was lying on his back, drugged and faintly moaning. His riding breeches, badly torn and stained, were hanging over the back of a chair at the end of the bed. Albert lit a match and slid a cautious hand into the pockets. Thank God the pigskin notebook was still there! He took it over to the window and by its sickly light began slowly deciphering the scribbled entries, page by page. They appeared to begin in March of last year, starting off with an appointment at a Cambridge address, a cure for distemper, copied out from *Country Life*. Memo-Call for tennis racquet. At last, opposite a page bearing the sole item 'Worm Powders' he came upon the one he was looking for. A scrawl of crooked capitals, in pencil:

ALBERT ABOVE BUSH MY FLAGS

HURRY RING OF HIGH UP HIGH

HURRY FOUN

Here the writing petered out. When Albert had read it several times he tore out the page and put the notebook back in the breeches pocket, ABOVE BUSH, MY FLAGS, HURRY. He could feel Mike looking over his shoulder, trying to tell him that he had found an important clue high up on the Rock - so important he had been trying to write down instructions for Albert when he had passed out beside the creek, MY FLAGS. The thought of the little flags made him go over to the bed and gently stroke the limp blue-veined hand on the coverlet. 'Rough as bags, young Crundall,' so

but practical!

the Colonel was wont to label his coachman. There was nothing rough about young Crundall at this moment, tip-toeing on clumsy boots from Michael's room. Convinced that there was no time to lose, he had the Colonel roused by the sleep-sodden housemaid; the boy from Manassa's Store dragged from Sunday morning sleep and placed only half awake on the family bicycle to notify the Woodend Police Station. Meanwhile Albert himself on the strawberry cob had ridden off to join the police party at a given rendezvous on the road to the Rock. As neither Constable Bumpher nor Doctor McKenzie, who usually assisted the police, were available, Doctor Cooling of Lower Macedon had agreed to accompany young Jim (armed with a notebook and strict instructions from Bumpher to write everything down and keep his mouth shut) in a horse vehicle equipped with a stretcher and medical supplies.

The sun was high as they drove through the gates of the Picnic Grounds, Albert trotting ahead with the precious page from the notebook pinned in the pocket of his shirt. The two young men had soon picked up Michael's tracks where he had walked away from the creek early on Saturday morning. On the stunted laurel, the little white paper flags hung limp in the noonday stillness. For the hundredth time Albert took the scribbled page from his pocket, 'ABOVE BUSH MY . . .' 'Ah . . .' breathed the policeman, impressed despite his normal scorn of the laity. 'So he put them there, did he?'

'Jeez, did you think they was growing on it?'

In silence they plodded uphill, following the bruised and broken fern, the doctor a little way behind, picking



the man of M

View of M

his urban way in too tight boots of Sunday tan. 'Beats me,' said the policeman, 'how a new chum got himself up here at all.'

'Some of the English are all right in the Bush when they've been out here for some time,' Doctor Cooling conceded.

'This one has more bloody brains and guts than any of us three put together,' Albert said.

'All the same,' said the Doctor, whose temper was fraying in proportion to the rapid swelling of his feet, 'I have a feeling we're on a wild goose chase. Stands to reason, nothing of any importance could have been lying around on the Rock until yesterday, without someone having seen it long ago.' Albert rushed to the defence of his friend. 'You don't know Mike, Doctor. He wouldn't have wrote down what he did without he'd found something.' But the doctor, unimpressed, had already selected a smooth rock for a seat and was unlacing his boots. 'Just blow your whistle, Jim, if you come across anything and I'll follow you up.'

Albert and Jim were nosing about in the scrub like terriers. 'See that piece of bush where it's broke off? Still green. That's where Mike must've went into the scrub Saturday morning.' It was. They began climbing again, following the mounting trail and loudly cursing the hidden rocks and holes under foot. 'What's that he says in the note about a ring? Diamonds, would you think?'

Albert snorted. 'Ring of stones, more like.'

Jim, however, rather fancied the idea of diamonds. 'One of those college girls was an heiress and don't you

forget it, Albert. We policemen are trained to look at every angle in a case of this kind.'

'You better look where you're going, young Jim, or you'll be over the edge - that rock ahead is the one they call the monolith.'

'I'm aware of that,' said the policeman, tripping over a loose stone, 'and those two big boulders up there are called the Balancing Boulders, for your information.' Level with the monolith, Mike had apparently struck off sharp to the left. High in the cloudless sky the saw-toothed ridge of the topmost peaks glittered like gold.

'Pretty, isn't it? Make a nice postcard - crikey, what's that over there, on the ground?'

Doctor Cooling had just dozed off when he awoke to the urgent shrilling of the police whistle, drew on his boots and began climbing towards the source. His progress was excruciatingly slow even with the help of Albert, who had come belting downhill white in the face and babbling incoherently of a body, and was now dragging him through the scrub and dreadful rocks. When they arrived at the Balancing Boulders, Jim was laboriously compiling his notes and measurements - 'Looks to me like we're too late, Doctor. Pity.'

'Aw, shut yer trap,' Albert growled. He would have given a pound to go into the scrub and be sick. The little dark one with the curls was lying face downwards on a ledge of sloping rock directly underneath the lower of the two boulders, with one arm flung out over her head, like a little girl fallen asleep on a hot afternoon. Above the bloodstained muslin bodice swarms of tiny flies clustered.



Sig?

The much-publicized ringlets were matted with dust and blood. 'It's a miracle if she's still alive,' the doctor said, kneeling beside the body and laying firm professional fingers on the flaccid wrist. 'By Heaven, there's a pulse beat . . . she's alive all right . . . faint but unmistakable.' He rose stiffly to his feet. 'Crundall, you go down for the stretcher while Jim stops here with me and finishes his notes and I get her ready to move . . . You're certain you haven't touched her or shifted anything, Jim?'

'No, sir. Mr Bumper's very particular about touching a corpse.' Doctor Cooling said sternly, 'Not a corpse, young man. A living, breathing girl, thank God! Better check up on your notes before we do anything.'

There were no signs of a struggle, or any violence. The girl, so far as the doctor could see without a thorough examination, was apparently uninjured. The feet, strange to say, were bare and perfectly clean, in no way scratched or bruised, although it was later established that Irma was last seen at the Picnic Grounds wearing white open-work stockings and strapped black kid shoes, none of which articles were ever recovered.

Jim Grant was dropped off at the Woodend Police Station to give in his report to Bumper as soon as he returned. It was late on Sunday afternoon when the still unconscious girl was carried by Albert and Doctor Cooling into the gardener's lodge at the Lake View gates, and there installed in the best bedroom under the care of Mrs Cutler, the gardener's wife. In Mrs Cutler's long calico nightdress smelling of lavender and kitchen soap she lay with closed eyes on the vast double bed under a patchwork quilt,

female but watch key!

looking as Mrs Cutler remarked to her husband later, 'for all the world like a little doll.' The fine cambric petticoat drawers and camisole, 'all trimmed with real lace, poor lamb!' were so torn and dusty that the good woman took it upon herself to put them under the copper where they were burned on Monday morning. Greatly to Mrs Cutler's surprise the lamb had been brought in just as she had been lying on the Rock, without a corset. A modest woman, for whom the word corset was never uttered by a lady in the presence of a gent, she had made no comment to the doctor, who had simply assumed that the girl had very sensibly gone to a school picnic minus that tomfool garment responsible in his opinion for a thousand female complaints. Thus the valuable clue of the missing corset was never followed up nor communicated to the police. Nor to the inmates of Appleyard College where Irma Leopold, well known for her fastidious taste in matters of dress, had been seen by several of her classmates, on the morning of Saturday the fourteenth of February, wearing a pair of long, lightly boned, French satin stays.

The body was unblemished and virginal. After careful examination Doctor Cooling pronounced the girl to be suffering from nothing more serious than shock and exposure. No broken bones, and only a few minor cuts and bruises on the face and hands. On the hands, especially, the nails were badly torn and broken. There was a possibility of concussion, compatible with bruising in certain areas of the head; nothing much, but he would like another professional opinion. 'Well, thank God for that!' said Colonel Fitzhubert, on pins and needles in the tiny front passage.

autorial view + perspective 121

Sig  
+ dear God!



So cute!

Peace + happy!

Dig? Class

'As far as my wife and I are concerned Miss Leopold can stay here until she's well enough to be moved. Mrs Cutler's a first-rate nurse.'

At sunset, when Doctor McKenzie dropped in to take a look at Michael on his way home, he went down to the Lodge for a consultation with Doctor Cooling, who was just taking his leave. 'I agree with you, Cooling,' said the old man. 'It's a miracle. By all ordinary text book standards, the patient should have been dead long ago.'

'I'd give my head to know what happened up there on the Rock,' Cooling said. 'And where the dickens are the other two girls? And the governess?' It was arranged that Doctor McKenzie should take over the patient along with Michael Fitzhubert, whose nurse would be available for any extra services that might be necessary. 'They won't be necessary,' Doctor McKenzie smiled, 'I know your Mrs Cutler, Colonel. She'll do this job on her head. And enjoy it. Rest. That's the main thing. And if possible, when she regains consciousness, peace of mind.'

Doctor Cooling had driven off at dusk, well satisfied. 'All's well that ends well, Doctor, and thanks for your help. Sort of case that might easily have turned out a bit tricky. We'll soon be reading all about it in the papers, no doubt.'

Doctor McKenzie, however, was not so confident. He went back into the bedroom and stood there looking thoughtfully at the pale heart-shaped face on the pillow. There was no telling, especially with the young and tender, how the intricate mechanism of the brain would react to severe emotional shock. Instinct told him she must have suffered damnably, if not in body, in mind, no matter what

Time

Happy!

had or had not occurred at the Hanging Rock. This wasn't, he was beginning to suspect, an ordinary case. Just how extraordinary, he didn't yet know.

For Mike, the timeless days melted imperceptibly into timeless nights. Sleeping or waking it made no difference in the dim grey regions where he was forever seeking some unknown nameless thing. Invariably it vanished just as he drew near. Sometimes he would wake and touch it as it brushed past, only to find himself clutching at the blanket on his bed. A burning pain in his foot came and went, gradually lessening as his head grew clearer. Sometimes he was conscious of the smell of disinfectant, sometimes of a drift of flowery scent from the garden. When he opened his eyes there was always somebody in the room, usually a strange young woman who seemed to be dressed in white paper that crackled when she moved. It might have been the third or fourth day when he fell at last into a deep dreamless sleep. When he woke up the room was in darkness except for a pale incandescent light given off by a white swan sitting on the brass rail at the end of his bed. Michael and the swan looked at each other without surprise until the beautiful creature slowly raised its wings and floated away through the open window. He slept again, awoke to sunshine and the scent of pansies. An elderly man with a clipped beard was standing beside the bed. 'You're a doctor,' said Mike in a voice for the first time recognizably his own, 'what's wrong with me?'

'You've had a pretty bad fall and hurt your ankle and knocked yourself about a bit. Looking better today though.'

'How long have I been ill?'



‘Let’s see. Must be five or six days now since they brought you back from the Hanging Rock.’

‘Hanging Rock? What was I doing at Hanging Rock?’

‘We’ll talk about it later,’ said Doctor McKenzie. ‘Nothing to worry about, my boy. Worry never did a sick man any good. Now let’s have a look at your ankle.’

While the ankle was being bandaged Mike said, ‘The Arab. Did I fall off?’ and fell asleep again.

When the nurse brought his breakfast next morning the patient was sitting up and asking loudly and clearly for Albert.

‘My, we are getting better quickly! Now drink up your tea while it’s nice and hot.’

‘I want to see Albert Crundall.’

‘Oh, you mean the coachman? He comes up here every morning to ask after you. Such devotion!’

‘What time does he usually come?’

‘Soon after breakfast. But you’re not allowed visitors yet, you know, Mr Fitzhubert. Doctor McKenzie’s orders.’

‘I don’t care what his orders are. I insist on seeing Albert, and if you won’t deliver my message I’ll jolly well get out of bed and go down to the stables myself.’

‘Now, now,’ said the nurse with a professional smile that turned her into an advertisement for toothpaste. ‘Don’t go getting yourself all worked up or I’ll get the blame.’ Something about the strangely glittering eyes of the devastatingly handsome youth made her add, ‘Eat up your breakfast and I’ll fetch your Uncle.’ Colonel Fitzhubert, summoned to the bedside, came tip-toeing in on eggshells with a face suitably lugubrious for a sickroom and was

overjoyed at seeing the patient actually sitting up, and with quite a high colour. ‘Splendid! Looking almost yourself this morning, isn’t he nurse? Now then, what’s all this I hear about wanting visitors?’

‘Not visitors. Only Albert. I want Albert.’ His head fell back against the pillows.

‘Over-tired – that’s what we are,’ said the nurse. ‘If my patient gets talking to that coachman his temperature will go up for certain and I’ll be getting what-for from Doctor McKenzie.’

‘The girl’s not only a plain Jane but an ass,’ the Colonel decided, aware of currents beyond his understanding. ‘Don’t worry, Mike, I’ll tell Crundall to come up and see you for ten minutes. If there’s any trouble, nurse, I’ll take the blame.’

At last Albert was here beside him, smelling of Capstan cigarettes and fresh hay and settling himself into the bedside chair as if it were a restive colt ready to turn and bolt under his weight. He had never before been an official visitor to a sickroom and was at a loss how to begin a conversation with a disembodied face cut off at the chin by the rigidly folded sheet. ‘That bloody nurse of yours . . . Went for her life soon as she saw me coming.’ It was as good a kick-off as any. Mike even gave a faint grin. The tide of friendship flowed between them. ‘Good for you.’

‘Mind if I smoke?’

‘Go ahead. They won’t let you stay long.’ The old comfortable silence settled down between them like a cat on a communal hearth and they were at one. ‘Look,’ Mike said, ‘there’s a lot I have to know. Until last night my head



was in such a muddle I couldn't think properly. My Aunt came in here and started talking to the nurse - I think they thought I was asleep. Suddenly it all began to sort itself out. It seems that I went back to the Hanging Rock on my own, without telling anyone but you. Is that right?

'That's right. To look for the sheilas . . . Take it easy, Mike, you don't look too good on it yet.'

'I found one of them. Is that right?'

'That's right,' Albert said again. 'You found her and she's up here at the Lodge, alive and kicking.'

'Which one?' Michael asked in a voice so low Albert could hardly hear. The lovely face - lovely even on the stretcher as they had carried her down the Rock, was always in his mind now. 'Irma Leopold. The little dark one, with the curls.'

The room was so quiet that Albert could hear Mike's heavy breathing as he lay with his face turned to the wall. 'So you've nothing to worry about,' Albert said. 'Only to hurry up and get well . . . Stone the crows! He's passed out! Where's that bloody nurse got to . . .?' The ten minutes had expired and she was here at the bedside, doing something with a bottle and spoon. Albert slipped past her through the French windows and made his way to the stables with a heavy heart.

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