

# **Kirkham's Find**

Mary Gaunt

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# Kirkham's Find

Mary Gaunt

## CHAPTER I. "LIFE IS SO DULL"

"It is not for man to rest in absolute contentment. He is born to hopes and aspirations, as the sparks fly upwards, unless he has brutified his nature, and quenched the spirit of immortality, which is his portion." SOUTHEY.

"Nancy!"

"Well!"

"What's the good of sitting there saying 'well' when you know I want you?"

A pretty girl with golden brown hair and laughing blue eyes closed her book and, rising leisurely from the log on which she had been seated, crossed the orchard and joined her sister under the apple tree.

"What do you want?"

"Those hives are just full of honey, don't you think I might take some?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I thought the book said bees ought to have enough left to feed them through the winter."

"But it's only November. There are six months till the winter."

"And how are you going to take the honey?"

"Smoke the bees or something. That wretched book only tells about frame hives. Where am I go to get money for frame hives?"

"Oh! gin cases do well enough, I think," said Nancy, cheerfully. "If you don't like them you can sell honey and buy others."

"That's just it, I want to know how I'm to get the honey, and then, when I've got it, I want to know how I'm to sell it."

Phoebe Marsden was taller than her sister, and, so said the little world of brothers and sisters, not nearly so pretty, in fact not pretty at all. She was older too, more than two years older, almost twenty-four, and the eldest of the family. The younger ones looked on her as quite an old maid, and she herself felt her life, as far as any happiness or pleasure to herself went, was nearly over. She was nearly a quarter of a century old, a great age, so said her world, for a single woman, and she was inclined to think the world had no use for her.

"Mother will buy it from you. You know she said she would."

"Yes, I know. Poor mother," and Phoebe laughed scornfully. "She'll give me about a penny a pound, and pay me when she has the money. It'll come dribbling in, and I'll feel myself a brute for taking it, especially after the boys have eaten all the honey."

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Nancy was a little afraid of the bees, but she saw Phoebe had a discontented fit on, and settling herself down on the grass at full length, prepared to listen, and if possible console.

"It's about that I'm afraid. I told you before, Phoebe, it isn't the least good in the world trying to do anything for yourself. Why can't you let things alone, like me?"

"Because — because," there was almost a sob in the elder girl's voice, "what on earth is to become of us? It seems to me we get poorer and poorer, father gets less and less to do, and the family expenses get heavier and heavier. Just look at those boys growing up."

"I do look," said Nancy, "with sorrow."

"Not a penny have I had this month."

"Nor me. Look at those becoming shoes. Don't they look sweet," and she drew her petticoats up and looked down at her feet. Whether they were pretty feet or not and matched the rest of their dainty owner it was impossible to say, for those shoes were in the last stage of decrepitude, the leather showed wrinkled and cracked through the blacking, and there was a deplorable split close to the toe of the left foot. Nancy looked at them a little dolefully.

"Somebody will have to buy me a pair of new ones. Talk about 'travelling on your uppers'! And mother will sigh and look as distressed as if the bottom had fallen out of the world, and as for father — well, it's no good; I'd rather go barefoot than face father. He makes me feel as if I hadn't a right to exist at all."

"I don't think we have," sighed the elder girl. "How can you take it so coolly, Nanny?"

"What is the good of worry, worry, worry? Phoebe, you're just as bad as mother. It's the loveliest day — just look at the sunshine. I've actually hit on a book I haven't read more than once before. I don't think there's anything particular to do, or if there is, father isn't here to reprove me for idleness, so I'm just going to loaf and enjoy myself."

"How can you? I wish I could. Do you really feel happy, Nancy?" and her elder sister looked down on her wistfully.

"Happy?" Nancy lay back on the grass, and pillowing her head on her arms looked up at the patches of bright blue sky which peeped through the branches of the apple tree — "happy? Why, of course I do. Don't you?"

"No," sighed the elder, "no, never."

"You're older than me, I suppose," said Nancy, vainly trying to find some reason for this uncomfortable state of affairs.

"I've always been old, I think," said her sister. "When I was quite a little girl I was always too old to do the nice things the rest of you did, and if you did anything wrong I got scolded because I was the eldest and ought to have looked after you better, or exerted a better influence, or something of that sort. Oh dear! it's a mistake to be the eldest."

"I don't know, I believe I'd have been contented enough even if I had been in that unhappy position."

"I believe you would. How is it, Nancy, you always manage to be cheerful, while I — well I — "

"You are not — no, indeed you're not. You're very much the other way just now."

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Phoebe cast another mournful glance at the gin cases that did duty as hives, then slipped down on to the grass beside her sister. She did not lie down though — there was nothing indolent about Phoebe.

"There seems nothing in the world to look forward to."

"Don't look forward, then. I'm sure it's very nice here."

"When father comes home tonight he's sure to be depressed; we shall be told that he hasn't earned five pounds this week, and if this goes on — "

"Oh, Phoebe, don't bother! What do you listen for if it makes you feel bad?"

"I listen of course — I must. I know there's a certain amount of truth in it. So do you. His business is falling off; there are so many younger men coming on, and really I don't know that there is room in Ballarat for so many stock and station agents."

"Oh, it will all come right in the end. Things always do."

"You always say that, Nancy, but what will we do if they don't?" Nancy laughed.

"Oh! all men rub along somehow. Where's the good of worrying? You'll spoil your beauty."

"I haven't got any."

Candidly speaking Nancy did not think her sister had. She did not admire her face herself, but she did not want to hurt her feelings, so she laughed gently and said —

"What a goose you are to believe all the boys say! I believe you think yourself quite hideous."

Phoebe nodded her head and blinked her eyes in a vain attempt to keep the tears back. It is cruelly hard on a young woman to have to acknowledge to herself that she is ugly.

Beside Nancy's sparkling eyes and fresh complexion her sister's pale face looked sallow; her dark hair, though abundant, was dull in hue; her heavy brown eyes were too deep-set, and her whole face wore a sad and discontented air which alone would have spoiled far greater beauty than she possessed. Her figure was good and she was tall, and had she had but that place in the world which she was always longing for, there would have been many to call the eldest Miss Marsden a handsome woman. But at home, father, mother, sisters, brothers, all considered and frankly said she was plain — hopelessly plain, said her mother, who could not conceive of a good-looking woman over five feet five, which necessarily meant large hands and feet.

When Phoebe was eighteen she had already fixed her fate in her mind.

"She will be an old maid," she told her only sister, plaintively. Mrs Marsden was a woman who must confide in somebody, her husband for choice; but, as she said, there were some things one could not tell a man, he would not understand, and so she overflowed to her sister on the rare occasions on which they met. "She'll never marry. I don't see that I can do anything with Phoebe."

"I believe some men might call her handsome," said Mrs Carrington, thoughtfully, "if she were well dressed."

And that was the only commendation poor Phoebe had ever received, and even that she had never heard, and Mrs Carrington was away in England now, and had forgotten all about her.

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The family thought Phoebe plain, and she was plain; it was almost cause and effect. How could she be good-looking in the face of such adverse opinions? Besides, even her aunt had said, "if she were well dressed," and she was never well dressed and never likely to be.

Nancy had more than a suspicion of Phoebe's struggle with her tears, and suddenly lifting up her head rolled herself into her sister's lap and put a caressing arm round her waist.

"Phoebe, you old silly, I don't think you are ugly."

"I — I — Nancy, it isn't that. I know I'm ugly, but I don't believe I'd mind so much if I was a man."

"A man! Phoebe!"

"Or could earn a decent living for myself. It's the same thing, isn't it?"

"But how could you earn your own living? It's silly to talk like that."

Phoebe looked down at the pretty face on her knee, and wound her fingers through the sunny curls with a sigh.

"We can't live on for ever like this, you know. Father and mother will die some day."

"Phoebe!"

"Well, they will. Mother is forty-six and father is over fifty."

"Oh, Phoebe!"

Nancy was shocked. Such conversation seemed to her brutal. The two girls somehow, though they had had the same training, could not help looking at life from diametrically opposite points of view.

"Yes, I know you are shocked," went on the elder, now thoroughly worked up, and bent on expounding her ideas, even though it was to no purpose, "but suppose father did die, what would become of us all?"

"It is cruel to talk about such things!"

"It would be still more cruel if they happened, which I hope they won't; but still, suppose they do? Stanley couldn't keep us and won't be able to keep himself for a good many years to come."

"Oh, Stanley will get married as soon as ever he can afford to," said Nancy. Stanley came between the two girls, and was, in his second-year laws, an authority to all the household on the ways of the world, for did he not live in Melbourne, and had he not for his allowance more money in one year than the girls had in four? Phoebe felt a little bitter towards her eldest brother. If he from his position outside the home circle, with his supposed knowledge of the world, had had a good word to say for her, had given her one word of praise, her position among her younger brothers and sisters would have been materially improved; but he did no such thing. She did not happen to come up to his ideal of physical beauty, so he uncompromisingly pronounced her ugly; she had views on various subjects, and had expressed her disapproval of his noble self very freely when he missed his second year — and he posed as one who should be admired — therefore he revenged himself as he had the power to do.

He explained to his mother that his eldest sister was just the sort old maids are made of. Fancy a fellow marrying a girl like that, plain as a pikestaff, and gives herself airs — fugh! Nancy, in his opinion, was all right, some

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fellow was sure to come along and marry her, but Phoebe —

All of which had filtered through not only to the girls themselves, but to the rest of the family, and Phoebe's happiness was not increased thereby; and even though she admitted the truth of the unkind speech, she did not love the brother who had made that speech the more for it.

"Well, Stanley might manage to keep himself, but what would become of mother and the rest of us?"

"What nonsense you do talk!" said Nancy, settling herself more comfortably on her sister's lap. "Father isn't going to die until he's quite old — when we are all grown up."

"Even then — ," began Phoebe, but her sister cut her short.

"Then the boys will all be earning their own livings, and we will be all married."

"You may — I suppose you will — and so will Nellie; but what's to become of Lydia and me?"

"You'll get married too."

"The boys say I won't," said Phoebe gloomily, "and they say Lydia is just like me. Poor little Lyd!"

"Oh! what is the good of minding what the boys say? Of course you will get married!"

"Who can I marry?" asked the elder. "No one ever cared about me, no one ever does care for me. The few men we know all like talking to you and never take any notice of me."

"We don't know any worth troubling our heads about."

"There, I told you so!" with gloomy triumph. "If we don't know any men how are we to marry them?"

"Oh, I don't know. Husbands come down the chimney for good girls, you know."

"It's not fair! it's not fair!" burst out Phoebe, passionately; and she pushed her sister aside, and rising to her feet began pacing up and down under the apple tree. "A woman's just a useless thing, to sit still and do nothing but look pretty until some man comes along and says, 'I think you're rather good-looking, it pleases my majesty to marry you.'"

"Don't you be afraid," a mocking man's voice came from behind, "there's no fear of any one accusing you of looking pretty, and still less of any fellow asking you to marry him."

"Stanley!"

Phoebe turned quickly with flushed face and glowing dark eyes, and for just that moment her brother thought that that face gave the lie to his words, but he did not acknowledge it even to himself.

"You needn't trouble your head, my dear," he said with brotherly candour, "no one's at all likely to marry you. You are just cut out for the old maid of the family."

"That's just exactly what I've been saying." It wasn't, but under the circumstances strict accuracy could hardly be expected. "And as I'm to be an old maid, I don't want to live a life like this always. I might as well have a little money or something to do in the world."

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"Something to do in the world — bah! It's enough to make a fellow sick to hear a girl talk like that. You're as bad as the awful females at the shop."

"Some of those awful females, as you call them," said Phoebe, mockingly, "have left you far and away behind. Look at Miss Wilson, a full-blown B.A., and you only in your second year!"

"Miss Wilson be hanged! What does a girl have to do but grind?"

"I wish — "

"Oh yes, I know you. But let me tell you, all the decent fellows think like I do, and all the decent people too. Do you ever see a girl from good society up at the University? No, of course you don't. Decent girls have more sense. I know the sorts of girls I like, and there are lots and lots of chaps like me."

"Come, then," said Nancy from her lowly position on the grass, "tell us what she is like." For Phoebe, as usual in an encounter with her brother, was silenced by his scornful insinuations — insinuations which at the bottom of her heart she believed to be true: that she, being so much less attractive than the majority of girls, had no right to judge the world of women from her point of view.

"Well, a girl ought to stick at home. She oughtn't to bother her head about Latin and Greek. Who wants his wife to know anything about mathematics? My wife's going to dance beautifully, and she must play and sing, and she might paint a bit — just enough to decorate the drawing-room. And then if she can cook a bit and sew a little, that's all I want."

"Moderate, certainly."

"She'll have to be pretty, of course. Ugly women ought to be shut up or smothered or something. Blest if I see what use they are."

"What about ugly men?"

"Oh, a man don't matter; but I say, you girls, are you aware that I've come all the way from Melbourne, driven out the seven miles from Ballarat, and I'm as hungry as a hunter."

"Are you, really?" asked Nancy, laughing. "I suppose you didn't bring that perfect girl along with you to wait on you?"

"Don't be a fool, Nancy! I never said you were ugly" — and the slight emphasis on the "you" did not escape the elder girl's notice — "I only said — and all fellows, decent fellows with any sense, think like me — that all this talk about higher education for women is all bunkum. No fellow likes a learned wife. Let the women stick at home and mind their houses. A nice girl's pretty sure to get married in the end; what does she want spoiling herself earning her own living?"

"I was thinking about the girls who aren't nice," began Phoebe.

"Hang the girls who aren't nice!"

"By all means, if you can do it," said Phoebe, politely sarcastic. "But I do believe there are some girls in the world who don't want to be only a reflection of a man. Wasn't the world made for women as well as men?"



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But he could not understand her. He was not a bad fellow at bottom, he meant kindly enough, but he was young and egotistical, and he was most firmly imbued with the idea that the world was most certainly made for men, and women should only look on it through men's eyes. Besides, his eldest sister irritated him. She was hopelessly plain, in his opinion she ought to accept that fact and sink quietly into the background. It was hard enough on him, he thought, to have a plain old maiden sister, without her asserting herself and even by inference lecturing him, who, if he was not good in the schools, was certainly one of the best athletes at the Melbourne University.

"I wish you wouldn't talk such infernal rot," he said, "I'm sick of it! You are only talking about things you don't understand in the least."

"It is my life," thought Phoebe, but she did not put her thoughts into words. He would not have understood. It was a woman's business to sit still and look pretty, and wait what Fate would bring her. If the future were good to her, then she should have praise and petting in plenty; but if it were not, then she should be treated as if it were her own fault. But practically she could do nothing to alter her life. The thought weighed heavily on her this bright summer afternoon, and took the sunshine out of the day for her.

"Well" — Stanley felt he had wasted quite enough time over a sister, even if she were a pretty one — "well, isn't one of you girls going to get a fellow something to eat?"

"Phoebe will, I daresay," said Nancy, lazily; "she's just burning to show her usefulness in the world."

"Well, here's a chance for her," said her brother, and Phoebe flashed round angrily. He thought her ugly, he thought ugly girls ought to be put out of the way, he wounded her without the slightest thought — why, then, should she wait on him? Angry words rose to her lips and died away there. What was the good of quarrelling? He didn't understand, not one of her little world understood her. She supposed there must be something radically wrong in her composition, evidently she was not like other girls. If Nancy would not get Stanley something to eat she must, and she went into the house with as good a grace as possible, which after all was not very good, and made him tell his mother that evening that Phoebe was more unbearably old-maidish than ever — a remark which in time reached the culprit's ears, and did not materially add to her peace of mind.

Nancy did not stir. She understood her brother in one way far better than her sister did. He would not like her any the less because she gave herself little airs and did not wait on him hand and foot, and she had none of Phoebe's earnest desire to do the right thing. As she had explained to her sister, she had no object in life save to get through it pleasantly, and this was just the right sort of afternoon for a loaf in the garden. Soon it would be too hot to be out of doors, but today, lying here on the grass under the apple tree, it was perfect.

A high hedge hid the house from sight, and no one was likely to disturb her, therefore she closed her eyes and prepared to make the most of it. She couldn't read. The soft wind blew the leaves over and lost her place, it made her arm ache to hold up the book, the drowsy hum of the bees — poor Phoebe's bees — was in her ears, and from the paddock behind came the sound of children's voices, softened by the distance. It made her feel sleepy. Those children were chasing the ducks again, she reflected, and wondered lazily if Phoebe would hear them and put a stop to it. Then her eyes closed, it was so pleasant here under the tree, and when Phoebe came back, after providing her brother with afternoon tea, she was fast asleep.

Phoebe sighed discontentedly. She had had no tea herself, not that she did not like it, but because, except on rare occasions, the family finances did not run to it, and now it was an added grievance that her confidante should be in the land of dreams. Then the children's voices caught her ear, the unlawful nature of the occupation struck her, and she went across the orchard to investigate. It was not in Phoebe to shirk any duty, however unpleasant, and Nancy was left alone to sleep her sleep out.

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The shadows grew longer and longer. Mr Marsden's buggy came home, and was received with much yelling and shouting by the children; she was dimly conscious that the nursery tea-bell ran furiously, and also conscious that it was her turn to look after that meal, but still she did not rouse herself. She was not called, it was all right. Phoebe, in her own ungracious fashion, had probably taken her place, and Nancy settled herself comfortably to sleep again. Then a leaf or two dropped softly on to her face and on her ungloved hand, and she started up wide awake in a moment.

"Good gracious! What --- "

"Fairly won, by Jove! Miss Nancy --- fairly won! That's a pair of gloves to Ned."

"It isn't! I --- . How dare you!"

Nancy sat up rubbing her eyes, angry and startled, but not so angry but that she remembered to pull down her skirts over her feet to hide those worn-out shoes from the eyes of the two young men who were standing over her.

"Don't be cross, Miss Nancy," said the taller of the two; "we've been waiting so long for you to wake, Ned here felt he had to try other means."

"Then he -- he -- "

But Ned Kirkham looked down on her with grave, dark eyes, and she forgave him on the spot, or rather she expressed her belief there was nothing to forgive.

"I know you wouldn't; would you, now?"

"Of course not. Allan here dropped some leaves on your face. I wouldn't be so impertinent."

"I knew it," said Nancy, in gleeful triumph. "There now, Mr Morrison!"

"It's all very well to say, 'there now,' Miss Nancy, but you don't know what catastrophe might have happened if I hadn't been here to look after this young cousin of mine. You --- "

"I've been asleep all the afternoon. One might as well do that as anything else, I think. You never told me you were coming, else --- "

"Else you would have stayed awake?"

"Oh, I didn't say that," said Nancy, who was wishing she had on her evening shoes, the only decent pair she had left, and felt it to be a real grievance that she had been caught in such shabby ones. "But how did you come? Over the fence?"

Ned Kirkham nodded, and Allan Morrison asked ---

"Do you think the governor'll object?"

"He won't know," said Nancy, philosophically. "Now you are here, won't you sit down?"

Morrison, who was an older man than his cousin, Ned Kirkham, by seven or eight years, accepted the invitation and took a seat close beside her, while the other man, folding his arms, leaned up against the apple tree in such a position that he could carefully scan the fair face beneath him. She blushed a little under his steadfast gaze, but it

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did not discommode her much.

"I am sorry to say," began Morrison, gravely, "there's been a sad catastrophe."

"I thought your presence averted that," said Nancy, mischievously.

"I? I wasn't there," said Morrison, who had completely forgotten the chaff of a few minutes ago, "I wish to the Lord I had been. Ned and I were burning off at the other end of our place, and the confounded jumbucks got into your wheat."

"Your sheep in our wheat! Oh, goodness, gracious me!"

"It is 'oh, goodness gracious me!' with a vengeance. Looks as if about forty thousand of them had been revelling in it. There were only fifty really, but -- but -- "

"They had a real good time," said Nancy, smiling.

"They did indeed. And your kids, when they drove them out -- "

"Had a real good time too. Yes, I know what our children are when they get the chance of being useful."

"Well, they did trample the crop a good deal," said Morrison; "but the question is, what is to be done? Ned and I thought we'd better come and see when your father will be at home. We must offer him compensation, you know."

"For the boys trampling the wheat?"

"If the sheep hadn't been there the boys wouldn't have gone after them."

"And if the fence had been properly mended, as it should have been, the sheep wouldn't have trespassed at all. What are you going to do? See my respected parent, and abuse him for not having his fence in proper repair?"

"Well, you know," said Morrison, who was a Scotchman, and believed in his own rights, "that fence is just rotten."

"I know, I know. It's tumbling to pieces and we ought to have a new one, and we have not a penny piece to do it with. Oh, I've heard the story over and over again, and I'll hear it again tonight."

"Will your father be very wrath, Miss Nancy?" asked Kirkham.

"I don't know that it will make much difference," said Nancy, with a little grimace, "he's always cross. I don't know why we mind telling him about any fresh disaster. We ought not to really, because if the bottom had fallen out of the world bodily he couldn't be worse than he was this morning."

"And you suffer. Poor little girl!" said Morrison, sympathetically, but the tender look that came from Kirkham's brown eyes went straight to her heart.

"After all, I'm not the one to be pitied," she said. "I retire and leave mother or Phoebe to bear the brunt. Phoebe is the one who takes things to heart."

"Don't you?"

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"No, of course not. Where is the good of worrying? Phoebe has views, and is always wanting to do something for herself."

"Lord! She don't know what she's asking," said Morrison. "Ned and I could give her a wrinkle or two."

Nancy glanced up at Kirkham's gloomy face.

"Why? Aren't things going well with you?" she asked, sympathetically.

"Well? Good Lord, no! We've about bottomed, I think. The wood is the only thing that pays on the wretched place. We always buy our sheep dear and sell cheap, the cows ain't no good, the horses die, the pigs — " He paused in the catalogue of woes and threw up his head despairingly.

"Well," said Nancy smiling. "I'm glad the wood pays."

"Yes, but my dear child," — Morrison was very much in earnest — "We don't want to live out the rest of our lives as splitters."

"Oh, but times will mend."

"Mend!" Kirkham's face was gloomily hopeless. "There's not much chance of mending, I'm afraid."

"Then what will you do?" Nancy's voice caught a touch of the prevailing gloom.

"Do? We'll — Ah, how do you do, Miss Marsden?"

Phoebe, coming silently across the grass, shook hands with both men and looked reproachfully at her sister.

"It's all right, Phoebe," said that young lady cheerfully. "I haven't been arranging a clandestine meeting with two young men, if that is what you are thinking. They have come over with sorrow to announce a fresh disaster to the family. Their sheep have been in the twelve-acre again, and we're just consoling each other in our poverty-stricken condition."

"Really, Miss Marsden," said Morrison, "I'm awfully sorry — "

"Never mind," interrupted Phoebe, "I know all about it. The children have just been telling father."

"And — Is he very vexed?"

"Vexed? I don't know. Something went wrong in town, and — "

"We're all on the doorstep of the Benevolent Asylum," interrupted Nancy, flippantly. "There now," turning to Kirkham, "you needn't worry about it any more. Our wheat never is any good somehow. If it manages to grow up all right, it gets spoiled when they reap it, or it gets left out in the rain, or something. It's lucky the bread supply does not depend on us."

"We go the wrong way about it," sighed Phoebe. "I wish to goodness father would let me manage just for a year and ask no questions. I know I could make it pay."

"Could you, Miss Marsden?" asked Morrison, sceptically. "It's more than Ned and I can, then. All those blessed sheep are down on their knees with foot-rot, and we are just thinking of chucking up the whole thing, bag and

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baggage."

"Going away?" cried Nancy in dismay, while Phoebe merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course," she said, "it was just madness to take Bandara, poor swamp land like that, what could you expect? If you must go in for cockatoo farming, you ought to have taken the Hill Farm up above there."

"Listen to Phoebe," mocked Nancy — "talking as if she were a land agent at least."

"Well, she talks common sense, anyhow," said Morrison, "as I know to my cost. But I'd been so long in the back blocks that the green grass looked awfully attractive. I never guessed what a glue-pot it would be in the winter."

"Take the Hill Farm now," suggested Phoebe, pleased at the modicum of praise she received from her hero, and Nancy eagerly seconded her.

"Oh, yes, do. It's to let cheap to good tenants." But Morrison shook his head.

"It's no good," he said. "We don't want to be cockatoo farmers all our lives, and that's what it would mean. Ned could have done as well as this in England without leaving his own people."

Nancy's eyes stole shyly to Kirkham's face, and much to her relief did not read there any signs of great regret at having left the old country. And Morrison went on —

"We want to make our fortunes."

"Lucky people," sighed Phoebe. "I only want to make my own living, but there doesn't seem to be the ghost of a chance."

"Well, no, you are a woman, you see," said Morrison, watching with a pang the other two exchange glances, "some one else has got to do that for you."

Phoebe sighed. No one understood her, not even the man to whom she gave the highest place in her small world. He talked to her, but he watched her sister's bright face the while. Then he sighed at what he read there, and the elder girl echoed the sigh. There was evidently something wrong in the scheme of creation.

"Well, what are you thinking of doing?" she asked, after a pause given up to bitter reflections.

Morrison hesitated, and looked doubtfully at his cousin.

"It's a wild scheme," he said at last. "There may be a mint of money in it, or it may all end in smoke, and the next time you see your friends they'll be tramping the country looking for work, with swags on their backs and quart pots in their hands."

"All right," said Nancy, "come along this road, and we will give you tea and come and pour it out for you."

"But you will succeed. I know you will succeed," said Phoebe.

"Won't you tell us what it is? It seems to me almost anything would be better than stagnating here right out of the world."

"It's a deal further out of the world where we propose to go," laughed Morrison. "Don't scoff, and I'll tell you."

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, we won't scoff," said Nancy, "but I can't see what you want going at all."

"You read about the gold discoveries at Dowden's Creek, up in the north?" said Morrison, and Phoebe nodded her head — she always read the papers. "Well," he went on, "I know that country, and I know some like it just two hundred miles to the west. If there's gold at Dowden's Creek there's gold in the Boolcunda country, I'll take my colonial oath on that."

"But," objected Phoebe, "there was very little gold at Dowden's Creek. It was soon worked out."

"I know the man who discovered it," said Morrison, warming to his subject, "and he cleared twenty thousand pounds before ever the rush took place. Now twenty thousand would just suit Ned and me to a T. We ain't greedy. Five hundred a year certain would just give us something to go upon, and, of course, we'd make more than five hundred."

Nancy opened her eyes.

"Oh, yes; five hundred a year would be very nice, if you could get it; but it just seems to me a wild goose chase."

"No, it isn't; indeed it is not. Is it, Miss Marsden?" cried Kirkham, appealing to Phoebe, in order to convince her sister. "That's generally the way gold has been found before, only you must keep the secret. We must be first in the field."

"Yes; mum's the word," said Morrison. "Just you wait, Miss Nancy, till you see the wealthy gold-diggers returning laden with the spoils. You ought to promise us a triumphal arch and a band, at the very least."

"Oh, I'll promise you," said Nancy, laughing to try and hide the fact that the tears were very near the surface, "only I'm afraid you won't deserve it. You'll forget all about us, and never come back any more. Why don't you take the Hill Farm, and be content with enough to live on?"

"Because we're sick to death of cockatoo farming, and we are going to make a bid for fortune. It's neck or nothing this time, I can tell you."

Both men sighed, as if it were already decided it should be nothing, and the girls echoed that sigh. What would their life be like when these, their next-door neighbours, the only decent young men within reach, as Nancy openly said, were gone?

But neither could put their thoughts into words. The shadows had grown longer and longer; it was manifestly near the hour when the elder members of the Marsden family had their evening meal; but even careful Phoebe forgot for once to notice the flight of time; all four stood silent for a moment, then the older girl said, gravely —

"If there's any chance of succeeding, I really think you ought to go."

"Yes, I —" began Morrison. Then, with a sudden change of tone, "Oh, I say, here's your father."

Nancy scrambled to her feet, forgetful for once of the shabby shoes, and both girls looked round uneasily. They were doing nothing morally wrong, yet both started apart guiltily. In truth, Mr Marsden was not an easy man to deal with. He strode across the orchard with long, quick strides, his downbent head never raised, yet both girls were horribly conscious that those keen blue eyes of his had taken them and their companions in long before they had perceived his long, thin figure coming towards them. That would have been all right if only he would have come up and spoken, but both felt, too, that he would, if not stopped, pass on without taking any notice, and probably later on they would hear from their mother how much their father disapproved of their conduct in talking

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to young men in a clandestine manner in the orchard. Nancy wished helplessly the earth would open and swallow her up, and Phoebe stood still, with a sullenness that had something of despair in it. Morrison saw their difficulty and stepped across their father's path.

"Good evening, sir," he said. "My cousin and I came over to see you."

"Indeed," said Mr Marsden, coldly. "I don't usually see people in the orchard."

Nancy raised her eyebrows for Kirkham's benefit, and Morrison went on, steadily and civilly.

"It was about those blessed sheep, sir. I'm sorry."

Mr Marsden never stopped in his walk for a moment, and a flush of shame mounted to Phoebe's cheek as she saw he had to follow after her father to make himself heard. Nancy gave a sigh of relief.

"That's done," she said to Kirkham. "I do hope he won't be outrageously rude to poor Mr Morrison. I've long given over trying to tame the savage beast. When I find he's in one of these sweet tempers I just retire and leave the coast clear."

"Nancy!" remonstrated her sister.

"Oh, it's all very way to say 'Nancy,' in shocked tones, Phoebe, but it's no good pretending father is sweet or amiable, or even decently civil, is it? Mr Kirkham has eyes. You don't call that good old English manners, do you, Mr Kirkham?"

Kirkham laughed. He himself was certainly glad to see his cousin beard the lion in his den. After next month the old gentleman's tantrums wouldn't affect him one way or the other. He was sorry for the girls though, and did his best to smooth matters over for them.

"Old gentlemen, even in England, Miss Marsden," he said, with a smile, "sometimes get out of temper, and make things unpleasant for — for — "

"Their daughters, and their daughters' friends," said Nancy. "There's one thing about father, he is abominably rude to you, but it must be constitutional; he can't help it, he'd be just the same to the Prince of Wales or — or St Michael and all the angels. I hope and pray it isn't hereditary. I've fancied of late I've seen signs of it in Stanley. I'm afraid I'll have to remonstrate with him on the subject."

Kirkham looked over his shoulder. Through the fruit trees he could see the persistent Morrison had at last succeeded in cornering Mr Marsden in the extreme end of the orchard, where the only alternative was to stand and listen or to turn and hurriedly retrace his steps.

Phoebe watched them, too, uneasily. Then a bell up at the house rang out loudly, and Nancy turned to Kirkham.

"That is our tea," she said. "We really must go for it at once. Father will be back in a minute, and I wouldn't walk up to the house with him for worlds. Oh, dear! it's going to be such a lovely moonlight night. I wish I could ask you in and we could sit on the verandah and talk, but — "

"Thank you very much, Miss Nancy, for the kindly thought." Kirkham looked his pleasure. It was not very often his lady love was so gracious to him. "I suppose I may walk up to the house with you, mayn't I? I don't suppose your father would be best pleased if he saw me getting over the fence."

## Kirkham's Find

At the house door Phoebe hurriedly bid him good-bye and entered. She was uncomfortably conscious that her sister wanted a word alone with him, and yet was fearful lest her father should come up and catch them before he was gone. Phoebe's name, as Nancy often said, should have been Martha, she was troubled by so many things.

But for once in a way the same thought had occurred to Nancy, and she cut her adieux remarkably short.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked, laying a detaining hand on her arm.

"Goodness knows," said she, carelessly, though in reality she was as anxious as he. "Come over some day, in the evening. If it's fine, you are pretty sure to find Phoebe and me in the orchard. And --- there, I really must go. Mind you come." And she vanished into the house, while the young man, not desirous of second interview with the house's master, hurriedly made his way along the drive to the front gate.

## CHAPTER II. THE UNATTRACTIVE MEMBER OF THE FAMILY

"I mean to be somebody, and to do something useful in the world," said the eldest of five brothers. "I don't care how humble my position is, so that I can only do some good, which will be something. I intend to be a brickmaker; bricks are always wanted, and I shall be really doing something." -- HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

The schoolroom, or breakfast-room, as it was indifferently called at Weeroona, was a plainly furnished room, the floor covered with linoleum and the chairs of Austrian cane pattern, the couch was anything but a couch of ease, and the only other furniture in the room was a book-case, which Mr Marsden was wont to stigmatise as 'hideously' untidy. Phoebe sometimes made desperate efforts to reduce it to order, but her father on these occasions either took no notice of it at all or grumbled at the way in which she arranged the books, and then her struggles after law and order suffered a relapse, and she allowed the children to work their wicked will upon it.

She was just at present in a state of relapse, and the room, bare as it was, certainly looked as if it wanted some kindly hand to reduce it to a state of comfort. The Marsden family lived there. They had both a dining-room and a drawing-room, well and comfortably furnished, but they very seldom sat in them, unless, in the winter-time, when occasional fires were lighted to keep the damp and mildew out. The breakfast-room was the living room, that was part of Mrs Marsden's economies.

She was already seated at the head of the tea-table, surrounded by the teapot and half a dozen cups and saucers of the common white-and-gold pattern. Her best service only saw the light on rare occasions. She was a little woman, below the ordinary height, with a look of Nancy in her faded, fretful face, but her eyes were dark as Phoebe's own, and her hair, too, though plentifully streaked with grey, had once been black as the proverbial raven's wing.

She looked up from her knitting as Phoebe entered.

"Where's your father?" she asked. "Late, as usual. Cook's made some scones, and they'll all be quite cold if he doesn't come at once."

"Never mind," said Phoebe, whose mind was relieved by hearing Nancy's footsteps following her down the passage. "I don't suppose he will eat the scones. He will say they are indigestible. He is in the orchard, and he must have heard the bell, because I was there, and I heard it quite plainly. But Stanley and Nellie aren't in yet."

"Oh, they'll come. I don't mind about them, but I don't like your father to be late. I know you were in the orchard, because -- well, your father is very vexed about it."



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"About what?" asked Nancy, appearing on the scene to defend herself.

"About your being there talking to those young men. He saw you from the road as he was coming in." Nancy made a mental note of that for future use. "And he's very vexed. It is just like servant girls, he says."

"What is?" asked Nancy. She was not in the least afraid of her mother.

"Why, meeting young men like that. Leaning over a fence, and talking to them, instead of — "

"Coming into the drawing-room, and sitting prop chitty on two chairs, I suppose. Well, if father sees any harm in what we did this evening he must be looking for it, that's all I can say. Besides we weren't there so very long. I was sound asleep on the grass by myself most of the time."

"So bad for you," murmured Mrs Marsden, and Nancy went on unheeding —

"Then Mr Kirkham and Mr Morrison came over — "

"And your father doesn't like them getting over the fence," put in Mrs Marsden.

"Just to tell us that their sheep had got into the twelve acre, and if you see anything wrong in that, why you had better make arrangements to keep us locked up in our rooms for the remainder of our lives," finished Nancy, bringing her defence to a triumphant conclusion.

"They should come up to the house and ask for me," commented the mother, feebly. "As your father says, it's not proper for young girls — "

"You don't call Phoebe a young girl, surely," put in Stanley, entering and taking his seat at the table. "I thought everybody knew she was comfortably settled on the shelf. Anything decent to eat? Give us a chop, Phoebe."

Phoebe took her seat at the bottom of the table and, raising the dish cover, began serving.

"Very well, mother," she said, for once making capital out of her brother's rudeness; "if I'm on the shelf I should think I might do whatever I please without anybody making remarks. And there was no harm in our talking to those two men in the orchard."

"The wonder is they cared to stop and talk to you," said her brother, who somehow could never resist teasing his sister. To do him justice, he hardly understood how cruel his remarks were. "But I suppose it was Nancy they came after, eh Nan? Jack says they're both awfully mashed on you."

Nancy tossed her head and laughed a denial, which deceived nobody, least of all her sister. It was true, she knew, most true. Stanley knew it, at any rate thought it most probable, she herself saw it, even young Jack saw it, and she sighed to herself as her father entered the room and took his seat in dead silence.

None of his family ever talked before Mr Marsden. He had a way of catching them up short and effacing their small efforts at conversation which effectually crushed them into silence. They felt it hard, but probably none of them felt it so keenly as he did himself. According to his lights he was a good father, but whether he asked too much or was too severe, or what it was he could not have told himself, but he did not succeed in gaining the confidence of his children. At the sound of his footstep all laughter was hushed, in his presence all conversation was reduced to awkward attempts, stilted and uncomfortable, on the part of all, to appear at ease. Probably the only one of his family who sympathised with him was the one he cared least about, his eldest daughter. So often she herself was shy and awkward, so often she felt ill at ease, never did it seem to her she said the right thing

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when she did speak, that she sympathised with her father, thinking he was in like ease; for which sympathy, had he known it, he would not have thanked her one jot. Personally he thought a great deal of his bright and lively second daughter, who did not appear to care what she said to him. Like the rest of her family he thought Phoebe clumsy and plain, stupid and uninteresting, and he could not forgive her that she was in his eyes a plain likeness of himself. Everybody said, "Her father's daughter," and he was not flattered.

Now the tea went on in dead silence. Nancy would not have minded a little more joking about her admirers, but such a subject was not to be thought of with their father present, and after one or two ineffectual attempts at conversation on Phoebe's part, attempts which were so clumsy, so palpably forced, they made the rest of the party shiver, she gave up the effort and betook herself to her own thoughts which were anything but pleasant.

They all saw it. Both Allan Morrison and Ned Kirkham were in love with Nancy, her pretty sister. How hard it was, how hard. The blood crept into her dark face as she thought of Allan Morrison's laughing eyes. Why was all the tenderness in them for Nancy, all the laughter for her? He might like her, perhaps he did, but he loved her sister. She saw it in a thousand ways. No man had ever loved her, not one. She thought bitterly how extremely unattractive she must be, for it did not seem to take much to make a man love a girl, judging by Nancy. She kept turning it over in her own mind all tea-time, till she unconsciously sighed so heavily that Stanley, in spite of his father's presence, burst out laughing.

"Good Lord! Phoebe, I hope you feel better."

"What? Why?"

"Sighing like a furnace. You must be in love."

"You have nothing to sigh for," sighed her father, heavily. "You have your bread and butter in your mouths before you ask for it. What can you have to sigh for?"

Phoebe pushed away her chair and rose from the table. What indeed? Was it nothing to be condemned to forty years of life unloved, uncared for, to know one's self unattractive and ugly, to be a thing of naught in the world, penniless and likely to be penniless all the days of her life? It was not a little thing she felt as she wandered away into the garden, and watched the moon rise through the trees. It was a full moon and the night was fairly warm for that part of the world, for even on the hottest summer days the nights up on the hills round Ballarat are not hot, and tonight she was glad enough to draw a shawl round her head and shoulders. The moonlight had a great charm for her. She liked to sit there quietly and watch the red moon grow silvery as she rose up above the trees, to imagine the many scenes that old moon looked down upon and would look down upon when she had done with this weary life. It was such a lovely world, such a grand world, so full of glorious possibilities for every one, every one, that was, but herself and poor little Lydia, who they all said was exactly like her. And even Lydia as yet was not conscious of her shortcomings, she played with the other children and was content. Their father would give the boys a good education, and they would go out into the world; they would have at least a chance of making their way, what would she not give to be a boy. Women, unless they were pretty, as her brother had said, were clearly a mistake, they weren't wanted in the scheme of creation. Nancy would marry. She wondered whom. Would it be Ned Kirkham? She rather thought Nancy preferred Ned Kirkham to anybody else in the world just now, or would it be Allan Morrison? She thought she might have either, and Allan Morrison, well Allan Morrison was such a good fellow, so different to other men somehow, she liked to hear him talk, like to hear the sound of his voice, why was he so different, and why — oh why?

The silly old moon was getting dim and the outlines of the trees were all blurred — but it was a hard thing that she should be so unattractive, so unlike other girls; no wonder he preferred Nancy, and Nancy thought no more of him than she did of the wretched little telegraph operator down at the Neparit post office, who, as not being in exactly the same social plane as his adored one, worshipped at a discreet distance. She valued him no more than

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she did the telegraph operator, and treated him in exactly the same way, and she, Phoebe, would give — but she had nothing in the wide world to give anybody, and first a great scorn of herself filled her mind and then she pitied herself, and the trees grew more blurred in outline than ever.

"Well, Phoebe, why what's the matter? You're a regular waterworks."

Phoebe started and lifted her face, all tear-stained in the moonlight, to her sister's gaze.

"Whatever are you crying for now?" went on that young lady, seating herself on the grass beside her.

"Everything is so uncomfortable." Phoebe broke down and cried unrestrainedly now, and Nancy opened her eyes in wonder.

"Of course it is, and always has been, and always will be, as far as I can see; but there's no earthly reason that I know of why you should cry about it. You're always preaching bravery and cheerfulness and all the rest of it, and saying how much you would like to be a man; a nice sort of man you'd make!"

"If — " the poor preacher mopped her eyes and tried to keep down her sobs, "if I were a man it would be different. I would know I could get out of it some day and I'd work like — like — . There would be something to work for."

"You are selfish, always thinking about yourself."

This was a new view of the case, and Phoebe wiped her eyes and prepared to consider it.

"You never see me doing that," went on Nancy, virtuously.

"You never need to. Somebody else always considers you."

"I don't see that there is a pin to choose between us. They consider you just as much then. We are in exactly the same position."

"Are we? No, we are not. You're pretty and I'm plain."

"Phoebe, I'm just sick of all that stuff. I'm not pretty, or if I am I don't see that makes a bit of difference." Even a pretty woman likes to think it is something more than her mere beauty that is attractive in her. "I know what you are worrying over. Just because Mr Kirkham and Mr Morrison seem to like me best. Well, I don't think it's because they think me pretty," went on Nancy, in a severely judicial tone. "They do like me, I think. I suppose it's something in my manner."

"I know you're right," sighed Phoebe, loyally. "I know they more than like you, and it isn't only because you are pretty."

"Well, then, you have the same chances as me, and why don't you take them instead of crying over things here by yourself. You know they say people make their own happiness. You say that yourself."

"You ought to have something to go upon first, I think," sighed Phoebe.

"You start by being pretty and knowing it."

"You're rude," said Nancy; but Phoebe went on —

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"And that gives you a standing. It's so much easier to talk comfortably to a man when you know he is thinking you are pretty than if you know is looking at you and thinking how plain you are."

"You are a silly old goose, Phoebe."

"I'm telling you the exact state of the case. Ask any plain girl and she'll tell you it is the truth. If you start a girl in the world ugly, clumsy, badly dressed, and in every way unattractive, she's not at all likely to improve. She is sure to get snubbed, and each snub will make her worse than she was before. It's a shame, it's a cruel shame." Phoebe started to her feet as she warmed to her subject. "Only give that girl something to excel in and she would begin to think a little more of herself and improve in everything."

Nancy lay back on the grass and laughed.

"Well, upon my word, Phoebe, that is the way you excel. You have no idea how well you look standing there with that shawl draped around you. Your figure must have been meant for wraps of that description, I think. And if you could see your eyes just now, you'd never say you were plain again. You make yourself plain by looking so mournful and being so sure you are ugly. Why, your eyes had quite a sparkle in them just now. If any man saw your dark eyes flash like that he would never look at my wishy-washy blue ones again."

"Oh, Nan," the fire died out of Phoebe's face as she sat down beside her sister, "you say that just to please me."

"I don't; it's true," said the younger girl, "only you never do make yourself interesting to any one but me. If you only did go in for something, anything, any of those wild fads of yours, and didn't mind people thinking you eccentric, or what they said, I do believe you would be happy and good looking and attractive too."

It was an inspiration on Nancy's part. For once in her life she had thoroughly realised the emptiness of her sister's life, and without thinking her careless words would have much weight with the stronger nature, she gave her candid opinion of the best remedy that lay within reach. If only Phoebe would leave off minding what people thought of her Nancy felt sure she would be happier, and Phoebe seized the idea as a drowning man catches at a straw.

"Do you really think so?"

"Indeed I do," said Nancy, earnestly, somewhat amused, too, at being taken so seriously.

"Then I tell you what, I promise you, Nan, I'll never grumble again, however bad I feel. I'll just set to work at something. Yes I will. I'll go in for bees regularly. I shan't mind what father and mother say. I'll just see if I can't make some money out of them; enough to dress decently, perhaps enough to make a living out of altogether."

Nancy laughed merrily.

"Well, you are a funny girl, Phoebe! One minute you are crying because you are not beautiful and all the rest of it, and the next you are comforted by the thought of bees."

"One minute crying for the moon," sighed Phoebe, "the next building a castle of bee hives, and a castle in the air too. It's rather a poor sort of look out, I'm afraid, but any how it is all I have got, so I suppose I will have to make the best of it. There is a lot of honey in those hives; don't laugh, there really is, Nancy. I'll sell it, and put the money away and buy more bees and hives. I think that is the only way to succeed."

"Who will you sell the honey to? Mother?"

## Kirkham's Find

"No." Phoebe sat up straight and considered the matter seriously. "No, it's not a bit of good doing things in that way. Nan, I'm going in for it regularly, going to make my living at it, if I can. I won't be a lonely, desolate old maid if I can help myself. I want a little money if I can manage it. And it is not a bit of good taking mother into consideration. I couldn't take money from her. I'll sell it, if I can to the grocer, or even send it to Melbourne if I get better prices there. That man I bought the bees from told me it paid to sell honey at 3 1/2d a pound, and then of course there is the wax, that is worth, I believe, about 10d a pound, but I don't really know much about it yet; but you see, Nancy," Phoebe's face began to look quite cheerful in the moonlight, "I really think there ought to be something in it."

"Phoebe! One minute down in the depths of woe, and the next — "

"Oh, I'm not in the seventh heaven quite, just yet. But, really, just think how delightful it would be to have even a pound that you could do exactly what you liked with without accounting to any one for it."

"After all, though," said Nancy, fearing this castle was being built too high, "you can't expect bees to bring you in a fortune."

"No, of course not. But suppose I could make enough to start something else, a farm of my own, perhaps. Don't you think if you and I had this place to live on and no other expenses — "

"We would be rich! What fun it would be!"

"Well,listen." The moonlight shone down on the earnest face, and her sister once more asked herself how it was they all called Phoebe plain. "If I had a hundred a year clear, or even a hundred pounds clear, I could afford to take the Hill Farm, and I'm quite sure I could manage it, and not only make both ends meet, but have a little over as well."

"Phoebe!"

"Well, have you any objections?"

"Me? Oh, no. Only I don't see how you can do it. Why, it will take you years to get a hundred pounds!"

"Well, I may just as well be getting that hundred pounds as doing nothing. I suppose father will always give me twenty pounds a year for my dress? It isn't much, but I can manage; and all the money I make I'll put into the savings bank."

"Oh!" Nancy looked at her sister wonderingly. "And — but it will take you years to get a hundred pounds, won't it?"

"I haven't an idea. But suppose I sell each hiveful of honey for five shillings. Surely I ought to get that?"

"It seems a good lot," said Nancy, dubiously. "And it will take hundreds of hives to make even fifty pounds."

"Exactly two hundred, and then of course the hives will go on increasing, and so will the money in the savings bank, if it stays there long enough."

"But, oh, dear, it will take you years and years!"

"I may as well be doing that as anything else. If things go right each year will bring me more stock, and if I'm only independent by the time I'm fifty I will be better off at any rate than I am now."

## Kirkham's Find

"Fifty," sighed Nancy. "Six and twenty years hence. Oh, Phoebe, how can you look so far forward? We may all be dead and buried by then, or I don't see why you shouldn't get married. Almost every girl gets married in the end."

"Look here, Nan." Phoebe was not near tears now, but she was very grave; no thoughtful good woman gives up hope of love of husband and children lightly, and Phoebe was the last woman in the world to look at things from a conventional point of view. "I'm not going to pretend to you I would not like to be married. I would like it very much indeed, provided I married the right man. But you know what the boys say — "

"The boys," interrupted Nancy contemptuously; but Phoebe went on bravely, though there was a slight tremble in her voice —

"There's a certain amount of truth in what they say. You said so yourself. Now, if I'm not attractive to any man, is it at all likely the man I would like to marry will ask me? I would like to be married for love; love like Esmond had for Beatrice, or — or like Romeo had for Juliet, you know. You ought to be better up in that sort of thing than I am. And — since I can't have that, I'll do the best I can to be happy without. Nancy, even if I could, I do think it would be a shameful sort of thing to marry just for a home; to make a sort of business of choosing a husband, like the boys do in choosing a profession," and the resolute dark eyes looked straight up at the round moon, now high in the heavens.

"I don't know," said Nancy, doubtfully, "a girl doesn't exactly choose a husband like that. The man falls in love with her, and you don't know how different that makes you feel towards him," and Nancy's face was all smiles and dimples in the moonlight.

"I use my eyes, though, and see," said her sister, with the ghost of a smile. "It's not so satisfactory, but you must admit that lookers-on see the most of the game. Some men have fallen in love with you and you liked them a little for it; but none of them had a penny piece, and so — and so — "

"And so I couldn't say 'yes,' as I should have done long ago, just to be out of this, if they had."

"There! You may say what you like, Nan, but it is shocking that a woman in our class should have to marry for a home. If you had something you liked to do; if you were quite independent, and had, perhaps, just a little money, you would set a much higher value on yourself, and you would not marry until you were in love, and you would be very certain that you were in love, too."

"Oh, Phoebe," laughed Nancy, "what queer notions you have. I don't believe they would answer at all. I expect I will get married some day, and I expect I will be in love with my husband; and, somehow, I can't help thinking that will be better than bothering about your old bees till I'm about fifty."

"I wasn't meaning you," said her sister. "I was thinking about myself. I may as well have something to work for, even if I don't attain it for a quarter of a century. But you, you are lucky. Of course you will marry the man you love, especially if he is — "

"Don't Phoebe, don't."

"Why not, Nan? Is he Ned Kirkham?"

Nancy hid her face on her sister's shoulder.

"Oh, Phoebe, do you think he cares for me?"

"Yes, dear, I do. I am sure of it. They all care for you, Nancy. How can they help it?"

## Kirkham's Find

"I," whispered Nancy, "I only want him to care, but, oh dear, what is the good even if he does? He hasn't got a penny piece."

"You're both so young," said her sister, stroking her hair; "he'll make money, why shouldn't he?"

Nancy sighed.

"He never told me he cared," she said.

"I don't think it needs to be told, it's so plain that even the children see it. You ought to be satisfied," and in her turn Phoebe sighed, for the children had seen more than that, and it hurt her even to think of Allan Morrison's love. She could not help being glad her sister, this all-conquering sister, should not return his love; and yet she was unreasonably angry because she treated it as a thing of naught.

"Phoebe," Nancy recovering her usual equanimity, raised her head, "were you ever smitten?"

"How should I be? No man ever cared about me."

"I don't know, they might. Mr Morrison said to me only yesterday you had such a nice face, just the face he would like to see bending over him if he were sick or sorry. He said you looked so strong and comforting. So, you see, you have an admirer after all."

Even in the moonlight Nancy saw how painfully her sister flushed.

"And my admirer fell in love with you, Nan. That's not much good to me, is it?"

"You don't care, do you? You're not a bit smitten with Allan Morrison, are you? Why, his hair is red, and he is the most clumsy fellow I ever saw."

"No, of course I'm not," said Phoebe, but her voice was not quite as careless as she would have liked to have had it. "I don't care a bit. I'm going to work hard at my bees and, if I possibly can, be a fairly well-to-do old maid. There is nothing else for me to look forward to, and -- "

"Girls, girls, why ever don't you come in? What can you be doing in the garden at this time of night," their mother's fretful voice was calling to them from the verandah, and Phoebe rose up with alacrity. She was thankful for anything that might turn Nancy's thoughts into another channel. That young lady followed more slowly. She had discovered Phoebe's secret and was turning it over in her own mind.

So Phoebe had fallen in love with big Allan Morrison, had she? Poor Phoebe. That was why she had been so discontented lately, so extra discontented. And Allan Morrison was in love with her little self, she was quite certain of that. She might doubt Kirkham's love, she cared too much to be certain; but of Morrison she had not a shadow of a doubt, and Phoebe was in love with him. How strange! And Nancy followed her sister into the house and listened with deaf ears to her mother's many reasons why they should not go out into the garden in the evening.

## CHAPTER III. PLEASURE OR PAIN?

More discontents I never had  
Since I was born, than here  
Where I have been, and still am sad.

HERRICK.

The little church at Neparit was only a weather-board building, roofed with corrugated iron, and the heat inside on a summer's day was stifling. It was hot even when it was empty, and now when it was full it was ten times worse. They were a tolerant folk those cockatoo farmers who lived up in the ranges and Church of England, Presbyterians, and Wesleyans, all held their services in turn in the same building, and all attended impartially. The Marsden family always went regularly, much to Phoebe's disgust. She did not like walking two miles to church through the heat and cold, and she held it a hardship to have to attend the Presbyterian and Wesleyan services. Besides, she worked so hard at household matters during the week; there was always so much needlework to be done, so much mending and making for the numerous family, that she looked forward to Sunday as a day of rest, a day which she might have to herself to read and think, and this going to church made it as full as any other day, for the solitary servant they kept went away in the afternoon to see her own family and the two eldest girls of necessity took her place. All Phoebe's Sunday, as she grumbled, was taken up with setting meals and clearing them away again. She would not have minded the Church of England service, but the others — they were a real hardship. However, Mr Marsden had decided that it was only right his family should set a good example, and accordingly, however unwillingly, they did so. They certainly made a goodly array of boys and girls, filling up quite two of the seats, the back row under Phoebe's guardianship not quite so well behaved as the front, which their father had under his own eye. It was the Church of England's turn this November Sunday, and within the altar rails behind the desk, that did duty both as reading-desk and pulpit, stood one of the mild young men whom the Church at times seems to enlist by the dozen simply because they are pious, and for no other reason whatever. He was not a forcible member of the Church Militant, and he droned on gently, wiping his damp forehead every now and then in an apologetic way. The congregation were in no way interested in him. They had all come to church, like the Marsden family, because it was the correct thing to do, and having got there they settled themselves as comfortably as the hot weather would permit and gave their thoughts up to the consideration of their crops and their flocks and their herds. Phoebe did, or tried to. She knew all the prayers off by heart, she had long ago given up listening to Mr Thompson. He did read in such an astonishing manner, and put the emphasis in such palpably wrong places, that she had come to the conclusion that she was in a more Christian frame of mind afterwards if she did not listen. The Scotch minister was wont to talk to them in commonplace terms of the very things that were filling the minds of most of them, became personal, and even mentioned by name any man whom he thought was neglecting his duty by leaving his fences unmended or his cattle improperly cared for, or who was getting rich at the expense of his neighbour. He was a homely man who had no dignity about him, and his talk of homely things carried a certain amount of weight with it. And the Wesleyan minister hurled anathemas around with great impartiality and a wonderful earnestness that held his congregation spell-bound and even reduced the more emotional to tears; but Mr Thompson, like many another Church of England clergyman in the colonies, had no gifts of any description, he was a man who would have failed to make a decent living in any other walk of life, and was consequently starving, mildly and humbly, on £75 a year in the Church. Phoebe felt a certain amount of pity for him; he was worse off than she was herself, she thought. What could he hope for? Certainly she had not much, but if those bees — she had expended a whole shilling on a new pamphlet the day before in Ballarat, and she had never found time to look at it yet, but still she had gathered from the casual glances she had stolen that bees might be far more profitable than she had ever dreamed. She intended to devote the whole of sermon time to its perusal; but here was this slow young man only got as far as the first lesson and stumbling helplessly through the Bible in a vain effort to find the place. He had it wrong too. Phoebe did not, as a rule, pay much attention, but she was pretty sure that the story of Absalom did not come somewhere in the last Sundays after Trinity. But what did it matter? It was so hot and the boys were so restless, while Nancy at the other end of the pew was just as bad. Phoebe began to be anxious lest her father should turn and see that her sister, instead of paying attention to her devotions, was letting her eyes wander all round the church and fidgeting quite as much as the little boy beside her. She knew what was the matter, had she not seen it the moment they entered the church. The two young men from Bandara were not there. They were as regular attendants as the Marsden family themselves, a matter which Mrs Marsden always mentioned as being greatly to their credit, but which both Nancy and Phoebe set down as cause and effect. If Nancy's pretty face were not there in its corner so regularly, would those young men have turned up to listen to droning Mr Thompson? Phoebe answered the question in the negative, promptly, for it is not



## Kirkham's Find

in the nature of mankind, at any rate of young mankind, to listen to the mild admonitions of a mild young man whose education does not pretend to be half as good as their own, and who is as much their inferior physically as he is mentally. No, Phoebe set the attendance of those young men down at about its right value, and then unprofitably fell to wondering if they would have come to see her if Nancy had not been there. With a sigh she decided against herself, and tried to fix her thoughts on her new speculation and grow rich in imagination on the proceeds of her bees, but it would not do. She would not look round as her sister was doing, but she could not prevent herself watching that sister's face. There was a slight movement at the open door, and Nancy's face told Phoebe, like an open book, that the one she had been expecting so long had come at last. Yes, Mr Kirkham had come, she was as sure of that as if she had seen him with her own eyes, but had his cousin accompanied him? Nancy's face did not tell her that. She had a little battle with herself; he did not come to see her and the sooner she forgot him the better; she would not turn round. Having arrived at which wise conclusion, she turned at once and met a pair of smiling blue eyes looking straight at her own. She blushed, she was so glad, and then grew hotter still, as she told herself it was only because she was her sister's sister she received that smile, which was doing herself a grave injustice, for Allan Morrison, if he did not love her, had a great respect and liking for his lady love's sister.

And the parson droned on over the story of Absalom: "And his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away."

"Deuced mean of that mule," muttered Stanley Marsden, in an audible whisper, and his little brothers found the remark so extremely funny they gurgled and choked and reduced their sister to the verge of despair. Mr Marsden heard, as she feared he would, and looked round with a frown; he would never make allowances for laughter and irreverence in church, however irresistible the cause, and the boys dropped down on their knees and buried their faces in their pocket-handkerchiefs. Their father frowned heavily at his eldest daughter, and having made her feel she was thoroughly responsible for the iniquities of her brothers, turned and listened with ostentatious interest to the concluding words of the lesson. Phoebe was boiling over with rage now. How was it she was held responsible whatever went wrong? Even now, when she was wholly innocent, it was always her fault, always, always, and Stanley, the cause of it all, calmly pulled away at his incipient moustache with an expression of angelic innocence that irritated her beyond bearing. Every one was singing the *Te Deum Laudamus* to a tune only known to the Neparit Church folks, and she stood up with the rest, but she opened her pamphlet and slipped it inside her prayer book. Why should she wait for the sermon? These prayers were not likely to do her any good. She had known the time when she had prayed with fervour for some change, something that should make her happier, but of late that mood had passed. She did not believe now that an answer to her prayers would come, unless, as the Scotch minister had said last Sunday, she made some effort to help herself. "God helps those that help themselves," he had quoted from that very reading-desk where the other young man was now struggling with the second lesson, and she came to the conclusion that the only way to help herself, to ensure the answering of her prayers, was to study her book now when she had the chance. It was a little effort to fix her attention, too, for the thought that Allan Morrison was close behind her would intrude itself upon her mind. The parson and his reading did not trouble her in the very least, but Allan Morrison she could not put out of her mind, could not help wondering whether he would walk home with her as he had last Sunday. She had been so awkward and stupid too, for she had felt all along that it was only because she was Nancy's sister he had done it, and she could not think of anything to say. She had felt her own want of charm terribly, indeed it is only given to the most accomplished woman of the world to be charming under such circumstances, and Phoebe's knowledge of the world was of the crudest. And now today it would be the same thing over again. No, it should not. She would be nice to him, as nice as she knew how; but he should not be first with her. She would think about the bee farm, that should be first. She would tell him about it, and if he was not interested, then he could do the other thing. She would not care, and she would not think about him.

They sang a hymn — Phoebe had a little lost her place in the service — and then the young man started on his sermon. He was not a wise young man, and he chose a text out of Revelations and began a disquisition upon the war in heaven, the war between Michael and his angels and the dragon. What it all meant he did not seem exactly

## Kirkham's Find

to understand himself, and he certainly did not throw any light upon the subject for his hearers. And Phoebe, with a mighty effort, gave all her attention to the book upon bees. The parson's monotone soothed her somewhat and she read on, forcing at first the interest which grew as she read. So it was a real thing she had been planning for herself; quite possible she might succeed, with care she could succeed and she would. The only difficulty was the first outlay. And she immediately began to consider ways and means with such earnestness that she was surprised by the sermon coming to an abrupt conclusion — she had long ago forgotten about Michael and his army — and the congregation rising with a relieved sigh to its feet. And during that half-hour, it was over half an hour, for she looked at Stanley's watch, she had not once thought of Allan Morrison. She felt it was a distinct improvement and sighed with thankfulness, perhaps she would not find it so hard to forget him if she had something interesting to do in life. And she left the church with a smile on her usually grave face; for once church had done her good, albeit her prayer book had been a book on bees.

Ned Kirkham joined Nancy outside. She had expected that. And now what would the other man do, would he join her or would he walk with Stanley? She hoped he would go with Stanley, she told herself, she didn't want to play second fiddle; besides, they would have to walk home through the paddocks, and her shoes were not as nice as they might have been. If she walked with him she would have to let her skirts cover her shabby shoes, while if she went with one of the boys she might hold them up as high as she pleased, whereas if she let them down it meant getting them full of grass seeds, which would take at least half an hour to pick out. Yes, she would rather walk alone. Lydia came and hung affectionately on her arm, and she told herself she was glad. Then Jack called the younger girl away, and some one else took the place beside her.

"You look very blooming today, Miss Marsden."

She knew Allan Morrison's voice without turning her head, but a remark like that did not please her, why should he call her blooming when she knew well enough he must think her plain, especially in this blue and white spotted print, which was the last thing in the world to suit her dark complexion.

"Why do you mock me?" she said, some of the vexation she felt appearing in her voice.

"Mock you! Why -- "

"Yes, mock me. You know you don't think me a bit good-looking. You know," she went on hurriedly, somewhat ashamed of her own vehemence. Phoebe had never spoken her thoughts out to any man in her life before, "you know you don't think I'm a bit the style you call blooming, and you are laughing at me."

"Laughing at you," the kindly laughing blue eyes looked straight into hers, good honest eyes they were, "laughing at you. Why, Miss Phoebe, nothing could be farther from my thoughts. I did think you bright and happy this morning, brighter and happier than I have ever seen you look before, and so I called you blooming, that's all. Is it a very great offence?"

"No, no, of course not."

"And really I don't know why you should say I don't think you good-looking? You needn't libel me."

"You? It's me, I think. I daresay you'll laugh at my stupidity, Mr Morrison," she went on, flushing to the roots of her hair, "but it really is a very hard thing to be the plain elder sister, and I can't help worrying over it," and then she wished with all her heart she had not spoken.

But Allan Morrison seemed to understand her.

## Kirkham's Find

"Yes," he said. "I think that would be quite natural. But are you the plain elder sister? Does anybody say so but yourself?"

"Anybody? Why, all of them."

"What! You don't mean to say you take to heart what your brothers say? Why, they only do that to tease you!"

"My glass tells me it's true," she said, ruefully, still somewhat ashamed of talking thus freely to a young man, and yet glad to get an outside opinion.

"Then your glass does not tell you the exact truth, or you don't read its remarks aright, which is more probably the case. I know what's the matter with you, you know. You will put yourself on the same plane as your sister when you are so different."

"She is pretty, isn't she?" said Phoebe, loyally.

"She is," said the man beside her, with a sigh. "But, Miss Marsden, you have many advantages that you don't seem half grateful enough for, and you don't seem to appreciate at all. Now, will you let me be a little personal, since we have got upon this subject. It seems to me you don't think half enough of yourself. You let those brothers of yours sit upon you in the most abominable manner. Now, look here, don't you know you really have a fine figure, you ought to carry yourself a little better and look as if the world belonged to you more, and — "

"I'm so tall," sighed Phoebe.

"Exactly. It's a great thing if you only manage it better. But you will persist in looking as if you were ashamed of the fact. If you looked as if the world belonged to you every one else would admire you."

"And if I were better dressed, I suppose?" said Phoebe, getting interested in this open discussion of her merits and demerits.

"Well, of course, I think a fine-looking woman always pays for being well-dressed. I'm not going to say she doesn't."

"And I'm so poor."

"Oh, we're all poor. But you know you might do better than you do. You always put on your clothes as if it didn't matter a bit what you wore. Now, Miss Nancy always looks spick and span. Why don't you wear pretty colours like she does?"

"Nan looks such a dainty little thing in her pinks and blues, it's worth the trouble of getting them up. You don't know what a bother it is to get up dresses. It never seems worth while to bother about myself. I'd never repay the trouble."

"Do you mean to say you get up Miss Nancy's dresses and don't bother about your own?"

"Well," said Phoebe, apologetically, "she has such dainty little hands, you know; I don't like her to spoil them, and washing and ironing does spoil them, you know."

He looked at her curiously. If he had only thought of her as Nancy's eldest sister before now — a separate interest was awakening within him.

## Kirkham's Find

"And what about yours? Doesn't it spoil yours too?"

"Oh, mine, it doesn't really matter about mine. There isn't anything to spoil. The boys say I've got a fist like a leg of mutton."

He looked at her hand, cased in shabby dark blue silk gloves. It was large but not unshapely.

"There you make a mistake. Your hand is right enough. A tall woman like you don't want a tiny little hand like Miss Nancy's. Now, Miss Marsden, do take my advice and don't think me horrid cheeky for giving it. Just you think a lot of yourself, and don't let those young brothers of yours bounce you. You dress in pretty things too, and do your hair becomingly, up on top of your head, I think, instead of a knob behind, as if it were ready for the wash, and you see how much better looking your glass will tell you you look."

Phoebe looked at him shyly.

"You really won't think badly of me for talking like this. I never did it to any one before."

"Badly of you, of course not. I think it's very kind of you to take me into your confidence, and I shall be awfully flattered if you follow my advice."

"I will," said Phoebe, gratefully. "You see if I don't."

"You'll have to begin at once, then," he said. "Do you know we have sold the place and are going to clear out tomorrow fortnight?"

"What?" It seemed to Phoebe as if the bright sunshine had suddenly clouded over and the glory of the day had departed. "Are you going away?"

"Yes. Ned and I can't make it pay anyhow. So we just took what we could for the farm and are going away north. I told you about it."

"Then we shall never see you again."

"Oh yes, you will. There's a loadstar I expect will fetch Ned back from the uppermost parts of the earth," and he glanced to where Nancy and Ned Kirkham were walking in earnest conversation in front. He envied Ned Kirkham, that was evident, he would have walked with Nancy if he could, and Phoebe suppressed a sigh of envy and regret. He showed her her own good points, but like the rest of the world he preferred Nancy. Well, she had known it all before, why should she grieve now. One shall have all the love while the other — well, the other had evidently got more than she expected, hearty liking, why should she not be content. She held her head up as her new mentor had directed and tried to look as if the world belonged to her, tried to hide the fact even from herself, that the only man in the world she did want, her all-conquering sister had already taken from her. It was no good crying over what could not be helped. She proposed from this time forward to turn over a new leaf and make the best of everything. This man beside her was looking longingly at her sister, still he had been kind to her and she would make him listen to her thanks.

"You must come back," she said, looking him straight in the face, and he wondered he had not before noticed how sympathetic those deeply set brown eyes of hers were, "there won't be any pleasure in improving if my master doesn't praise me for it. And even if the loadstar you talk of does not fetch Mr Kirkham back, surely that's no reason why you shouldn't come?"

## Kirkham's Find

He stood still a moment looking at her gravely. These two had fallen behind. There was no track across the paddock, which was uncleared, full of tall red gums and an undergrowth of ti-tree and bracken, and so each little party choose the path which seemed best to themselves, and they were as much alone as if none of the others were anywhere about.

"You know, Miss Marsden," he began, hurriedly, and Phoebe would have given worlds to check his confidences, but he had been kind to her and she felt it her bounden duty to do all she could for him, "you know I think that — that — would be just the very thing that would bring me back. I might have some luck if he were out of the way with his confoundedly handsome face."

"Surely," began Phoebe in wonder, and then checked herself.

He looked at her eagerly.

"Yes; well, what were you going to say?"

"That surely you don't think Mr Kirkham better-looking than you are?"

"Why, yes, of course. Any fool could see that with half an eye. Ned's a handsome fellow."

"And I've always looked on you as much the finer man, but then, you know, I'm not a fool."

"No, you're not. Thank you very much for the compliment, Miss Marsden. But whether I'm good-looking or not won't advance my case, I'm afraid. Do you think now I've the ghost of a chance beside Ned?"

She hesitated. She did think so much of him, might she not be making the wish father to the thought when she said he had not a chance beside his cousin?

"You don't wish to hurt me," he said, bitterly.

"No," she said, earnestly, "indeed I don't. How can I tell? I really can't be certain. I've seen Nancy carrying on so often before, you know. She always has had lots of admirers ever since she was a little girl, and you — well, you always give way to Mr Kirkham. Perhaps it would be different if — if — "

"If I pushed a little. No, it wouldn't. Not a bit of it. I only go in the background because I'm sent there."

Phoebe winced. He only walked with her because he couldn't get her sister, but she had decided before to make the best of that.

"I never can be certain of Nan," she said. "You — I'm so sorry."

"Thank you again, Miss Marsden. I'm sure I ought not to growl when being driven from my lady love's side gives me you to sympathise with me and soothe my ruffled plumes."

"Do I sympathise well?"

"Very nicely indeed. I want no kinder sympathy."

She held out her hand.

## Kirkham's Find

"Then we will be friends. I am sorry, I am indeed. But after all another person's sympathy in a thing like this never does much good, does it?"

He took the outstretched hand and held it in both his for a moment.

"Doesn't it? How do you know anything about it? You never got awfully gone on a fellow who never seemed aware of the fact."

She drew her hand hastily away, and the colour mounted to her forehead.

"By Jove!" thought Morrison. "Have I hit the right nail on the head by accident? Well, she'd make a jolly good wife. What a swab the beggar must be not to see it."

"It's very good of you to sympathise with me, Miss Marsden," he said, aloud. "Yes, I think it counts for a good deal to have a friend you can trust, especially if that friend is a woman. Will you do me a kindness now? I'm going right away into the back blocks, where I shan't see a decent woman for the Lord knows how long. Will you write to me sometimes and tell me how things are getting on?"

"Yes, I will," she said, "if you like. But wouldn't you rather Nancy wrote?"

He winced.

"I can't help it," he said in a low tone, almost as if he were speaking to himself, "I do care a — a — " he could find no adjective strong enough for him, "lot for her, but — but it's not the least good in the world. I couldn't trust her to write me a line. She'd promise, I daresay, bless her, but she'd forget all about it in a week. Now, I wonder why," he went on, argumentatively, "a beggar should be such a fool as to give a second thought to a girl whom he feels he couldn't trust to write to him, even if she promised," and he laughed a little bitterly.

"Every man, and woman too, for that matter, is a fool when he's in love," she said. "At least, I don't know; don't let us talk about it. I'll write to you regularly, I promise you that faithfully, and tell you all the news. Can you trust me?"

"With my life," he said, laughing. He was beginning to wonder what she would think of him and to wish he had not spoken quite so freely, and yet it was a comfort to think he would have that letter, and he felt she would keep her promise. She was a nice girl, a downright good girl. He could not understand that swab, surely if she cared for a man he must return it. She was quite good-looking enough to win any man she cared about, those eyes of hers were so sweet and sympathetic — so different from her sister's laughing ones. If only she would look at him like that — if only she would. But no — with his cousin in the way there was no hope of that, and now he had allowed this girl to guess his secret, and she evidently took almost as hopeless a view of the case as he did himself. Still he felt a little comforted. She would keep her word he felt sure, and he would not be quite cut off from the only household in the world he took much interest in.

They walked on in silence. He was a tall man, but she did not look short beside him, and when she held herself upright, Phoebe walked well.

"Miss Marsden," he began, hesitatingly, "I don't quite know how to thank you. You don't know what a lonely man I am. Ned, there, is the nearest relative I have in the world. He's got an adoring mother and an array of sisters who think there's no one like him anywhere, but I'm quite alone. There isn't a creature who cares whether I live or die."

"Oh, hush, hush," she said, "you know, you know, that can't be true. Why, your aunt and cousins — "

## Kirkham's Find

"My aunt and cousins," he laughed a little scornfully, "they look on me as the cruel tempter who enticed their darling away from his happy home where he might have been monotonously comfortable all the days of his life, and have exposed him to all sorts of unknown dangers. No, my aunt and cousins haven't any room in their affections for me."

"Why, how cruel! how — "

"No, after all, don't pity me. I really don't think I mind. They have lived in a quiet English village up among the Cumberland hills all their lives, and they're deuced slow I think. We haven't two ideas in common."

"Then what are you grumbling at?" asked Phoebe, with a smile.

He laughed, too, a little.

"It does sound rather inconsistent, doesn't it, but it isn't, really. I think when a man gets to my age, he begins to want a home of his own and some one to love him just for himself."

"I hope you will get that home, and as for the some one to love you, why — "

"The one I want is out of reach. Is that what you think?"

"Yes, I do," she said, honestly, "just at present. But really there's no placing much reliance on Nancy. She might be quite different when you come back."

"She'll probably be married to some other fellow, if I know anything about girls. Now I wonder why," he went on, "I want her so much. I believe she wouldn't make half as good a wife as you."

Phoebe flushed angrily. He had no right to talk thus lightly of her.

"I — " she began coldly, but he had seen his mistake.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Come now, Miss Marsden, I didn't mean to be rude. I only meant to remark on the cussed contrariness of things. Now, if you'd only fallen in love with me and I'd fallen in love with you, how well we'd have suited each other. But here we go flying off at tangents. I'm making a fool of myself over a little girl who doesn't condescend to remember my existence, and you — well, I suppose when I come back I shall find you married to some chap who won't suit you half as well as I should."

"No," she said, "no," and the flush deepened painfully, "there's not the smallest chance of my getting married."

A big log lay invitingly across their path, and a great clump of dark green ti-tree shaded it from the sun's rays. He caught her by the arm and pushed her down on to it, and flung himself on to the dried-up yellow grass at her feet.

"Stay a little," he begged, "it's early yet, and I never get a chance of talking to you, and goodness knows when I shall have a chance again. There's a charm about you to a happy-go-lucky fellow like me. You are so quiet and strong one feels rested by your very presence."

"Do you?" She looked down at him out of her deep dark eyes, and then because she was a little shy and uncomfortable began hastily to unfold to him her half-formed plans for the future. And he lay there plucking up handfuls of dry grass and throwing them into little heaps and listened with interest. She hesitated at first, but his approval lent her confidence, and when she had finished he caught her by both hands and held them fast.

## Kirkham's Find

"You are a plucky girl, upon my soul you are. I hope you'll succeed and I believe you will. Only go slowly, easy does it, you know."

"I don't know," she said. "Is that the way you do it yourself?"

"Me? Bless you, it's always neck or nothing with me."

"But this gold mine -- this -- "

"It's only a venture, my dear girl, that's all. If it turns up trumps, I make my fortune, and if it don't -- well, I go under like many a better fellow before me."

"You mustn't go under," she said, gravely. "What should I do if my friend did that?"

He held her hands tighter and looked up into her blushing face.

"Thank you, Miss Marsden, thank you. You are giving me something to take away with me. You don't know what it will be to think of your goodness when I'm miles away from any woman."

"And Nancy?" she asked.

"And Nancy, of course. Hang it all, do you think I'd think of her if I could help myself. But you -- you are different. Keep a corner in your heart warm for the poor chap away in the back blocks, Miss Phoebe."

Phoebe hardly knew what to say. Why was she talked to like this when he was so manifestly and openly in love with her sister.

"I'll not forget you," she said, gravely, "if that's what you mean. If I do succeed it is you who have given me the first encouragement I ever had in my life. All the others seem to think I'm hopelessly plain and stupid and fit for nothing but to be a household drudge all the days of my life."

"Nonsense. Never you let any one make you believe that again. And when you do arrive at that cosy little farm don't forget to ask a poor bushman to take a seat at your fireside."

"Take care the millionaire doesn't look down on it," she laughed, and then she rose up with a sigh. She had spent an hour in which keenest pleasure and pain had mingled, and yet the pleasure was so intense she was loth to go back to the ordinary hum-drum existence which was hers. "I must go," she said. "They'll be wondering what has become of me."

"Let them wonder."

But she shook her head.

Reluctantly he scrambled to his feet.

"Look here, I'm not going for a fortnight. We must have some more chats, eh?"

Phoebe looked down debating with herself. She did love this man, there was no doubt about it in her own mind, and to see him so often would only make the inevitable parting more bitter. Still he had been kind, and how could she say him nay when her own heart pleaded so for him.



She raised her eyes to his face.

"There is next Sunday," she said, feeling what years lay in those seven days, and more than half hoping he would want an earlier meeting, but he accepted the offer cheerfully.

"And the Sunday after, thank you so much. We'll walk home from church together then, that's a bargain. I'd like to see Miss Nancy, of course, but hang it all, the less I see of her, I guess, the better."

Phoebe said nothing, and he twisted a long blade of dry grass in his restless fingers. If she was not happy, neither was he, and he was remembering his unhappiness at this moment and she was just nothing to him.

"Good-bye, Miss Marsden, then, till next Sunday if we haven't the good luck to meet before."

"Good-bye."

He turned away without even looking at her, and she watched him a moment as he made his way among the trees and scrub, then when his tweed suit had disappeared among the tree trunks, she turned reluctantly homewards, not quite sure in her own mind whether she were not ten times more miserable than she had been before church.

## CHAPTER IV. A DISREGARDED WARNING.

What see you there  
That hath so cowarded and chased your blood  
Out of appearance?

SHAKESPEARE.

"Mine make a light. Plenty blackfellow sit down along a creek -- my word!"

"You just get along -- move off now -- move, I say."

Ned Kirkham was busy with the frying-pan cooking the evening meal, and inclined to be contemptuous of black gin in general, and this persistent black gin in particular. He had only been up north, had only joined Morrison on Baker's Creek in the Boolcunda country a week before, and was fixed in his determination to keep the blacks at a distance. Allan Morrison had gone ahead with another man to build their hut and peg out their claim, while his cousin had stopped a little longer in Port Darwin to arrange about the getting of their stores and to get another man to help them in their digging. Whether they were to make their fortunes or not still remained to be decided. The gold mine which was to do it was before his eyes now -- a heap of yellow earth alongside a windlass which stood over the shaft. A creek, which was now merely a chain of water-holes, flowed, or rather would flow after rain, at the bottom of the slope about two hundred yards away, and just a little to the right was the hut, a slab affair with a bark roof, which at present was the only sign of civilisation within a radius of many miles. Just here there was a small clearing, partly natural, partly the result of Allan Morrison's labours, but the dense scrub was all round them and closed them in on every side. It was brigalow, fresh, green, and sweet-smelling to an Australian, but to the Englishman, with the vivid, living green of his own country still fresh in his memory, dull, grey, and dreary in the extreme. Down in the creek the reeds grew tall and thick and were pleasant to look upon, but Jim Tretherick, the man Kirkham had brought up with him from Port Darwin, had shaken his head over those same reeds, and had ventured to hint to his boss that they made good cover for the blacks. Morrison received the warning with scorn.

Kirkham only objected to the blacks because, like the naval officer of the old story, he considered that "Manners none, and customs beastly," just about described them. More particularly did he object to this particular black gin

## Kirkham's Find

who was at the present moment persecuting him with her unwelcome attentions. His cousin did not sympathise with him.

"Hang it all, Ned," he said, "what the dickens do you expect? You aren't looking out for an invitation to dinner, are you, with your host in a claw hammer and a flower in his button-hole, because if you are I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. The bucks have brought us in fish and wild duck, and they've tracked our horses when they strayed, and now Webb's down with fever here's Polly cooking and making herself useful in the most charming manner."

Kirkham did not seem impressed, and his cousin went on --

"It's most important, you see, Ned, that no one gets wind of this field before we get all we want out of it. You think it's out of the world, but bless you, just let them hear in Roebourne or Port Darwin that we are in for a good thing and half the population will be here like a shot. You see it's only two hundred and fifty miles from Port Darwin, and before two months were out there would be a big rush from Victoria. There are a certain set of men there who are always on the look-out for a new gold field and don't care a cuss if they have to come half round Australia to find it. So we'll just keep quiet till we've got all we want. As for the blacks -- pooh! I don't believe there are ten bucks about, and the gins are quite useful, as I said before. Look at Polly there."

Kirkham did look at Polly leisurely running her dirty black fore-finger round the edge of the frying-pan and licking the grease off, and was utterly disgusted. Next day she was deposed from her high estate, and he himself undertook the cooking. Robert Webb was hut keeper, and that duty should properly have fallen to his share, but he was down with fever and so ill it was imperatively necessary some one should look after him, and Kirkham, being given his choice, had preferred it to labouring at the bottom of a shaft which had now reached a depth of nearly sixty feet. Tretherick and Morrison were below and at certain intervals he was expected to wind up the windlass and empty out the bucket which they sent up. The ground was very hard and they worked so slowly that he had plenty of time for everything; but he had been at it all day long and by evening was utterly disgusted and tired out. Work he was not afraid of, but this -- the romance of gold-digging was gone for ever, and he would need to make thousands out of that claim to make up for this sacrifice of life for even a month or two. A thousand times better was the cockatoo farm up in the ranges round Ballarat and the chance of seeing pretty Nancy Marsden at least once a week. This -- this was exile indeed. The heat was stifling, and though the sun was on the point of setting, his level rays seemed to have lost none of their power and, hemmed in as the camp was by the thick brigalow scrub, not a breath of air stirred. Kirkham would gladly have dispensed with the fire, but the black woman, after the manner of her kind, crouched down over the glowing embers as if it had been bitter cold. Her presence irritated him and he shook the frying-pan viciously. Polly, seeing him look at her, started off again in the blackfellows' lingo, which to him was unintelligible.

"Bungally you. My word! Mine make a light plenty blackfellow along a creek." By which she meant that he, Kirkham, was very stupid, and that she could see plenty of blackfellow down by the creek.

"Hallo, boss," called Webb from the hut. "What the dickens is all this bobbery about?"

"Baal bobbery," said Polly. "You quamby here -- plenty myall got 'em nulla-nulla, plenty white fellow tumble down."

Webb crawled to the door and leaned against the rough wall. The spell of fever and ague had passed and left him, weak and ill, it is true, but still well enough to take an interest in passing events.

"What on earth does she mean?" asked Kirkham.

"What she's saying is that there are plenty of blackfellows down by the creek, and that if we stop here they've got plenty of nulla-nullas, and they'll use them on us. Will they, old girl? This fellow got 'em plenty gun, myall

## Kirkham's Find

quamby here — plenty myall tumble down."

"You pull along a station plenty quick," suggested Polly with cheerful earnestness, unheeding his threat, and Webb laughed again.

Then there came a shout from the men below, and Kirkham drew first one and then the other up to daylight again.

"Phew," said Morrison, stretching himself, "it's as hot as blazes. How's the tea, Ned? I could eat a bullock. Hallo, Webb, are you better?"

"Pretty well, boss, for the time; but I can't shake the darned thing off; it'll be as bad as ever tomorrow. And here's Polly saying the blackfellows are coming to wipe us out."

"Are they? by Jingo! I like that! Four of us too! Well, I like their cheek!"

"Then you don't really think there's any danger?" asked Kirkham, as he bent over the fire, trying with small success to fix the billy upright.

"Danger! Pooh! Here, man, let me do it — what a duffer you are! It's easy to see you aren't accustomed to a bush life. Danger? I should just think not. Why, I haven't seen ten bucks and perhaps twice as many gins and pickaninnies all the while I've been here, and what could they do against us? One man with a gun's quite enough to settle fifty such miserable creatures, and there are four of us. Wipe us out? They know better. Here, Polly, what's the matter with you, old girl? Has the old man been giving you a taste of his waddy again?"

"White fellow pull along a station," advised Polly, gutturally.

"You pull away along a humpy, and make it up as quick as you can. Here's a bit of baccy for you, poor old girl. Now then, off with you, and make it up with the old man."

The black woman walked off in the direction of the creek, and Morrison turned to his cousin.

"Don't you be afraid, old chap. It's only a little matrimonial disturbance. Polly's lord and master has probably been overlooking her charms, and bestowing his favours on a younger and fairer wife, and the neglected one, by way of revenge, wants to bring us down on him. Oh, I know their ways. There's not the slightest danger, is there, Webb?"

"No, no. I've been up north five years, and not had a brush with the blacks yet. No such luck."

"Still, sir," said Tretherick, "the women often do give warning. I remember up at Ingle's if it hadn't been for a black gin named Lizzie — "

"You'd all have been murdered in your sleep. Oh, yes, I know; but then Ingle was a brute, and did treat the blacks shamefully. We've always been on the friendliest terms with them."

"Well, I'll keep my revolver handy, and see that the rifles are loaded," said Tretherick.

"Oh, well, there's no harm in being on the safe side," said Morrison; but it was very evident to Kirkham that the incident had made no impression on him whatever, and he himself felt reassured. His cousin was Australian born, and save for that brief spell of cockatoo farming down in the south when he had met the Marsdens, had been in the north for many years.

## Kirkham's Find

Nevertheless, Tretherick refused to sleep outside under the verandah as he usually did, and Kirkham followed his example. Morrison laughed at their fears.

"Polly's done me one good turn," he said, "if it's only frightening you two inside. I don't want any more of you laid up with fever and ague, and sleeping outside is just the way to get it."

"But you sleep outside yourself," remonstrated the new chum.

"Only when I can't help it, man, only when I can't help it. Sleep under a roof when you can get it, even if you're nearly stifled, that's my tip for this part of this world. If Webb had only taken my advice, he wouldn't have been ill now."

It was certainly hot and stifling in the little hut, and Tretherick enlivened things by lugubrious stories of cruel outrages committed by the myall blacks till Kirkham heard stealthy footsteps all round the hut, and saw dusky forms in every dark corner. He was not a nervous man, but the Cornishman's tales were very ghastly, and the black gin had evidently been very much in earnest. One by one the other three went to sleep, and he did not like to acknowledge his fear. If these men — bushmen and accustomed to the country, could sleep peacefully, why not he? and yet he could not. He kept speculating — calculating how easy a thing it would be to compass their death. To begin with, the blacks might spear the horses, which were hobbled and then turned loose to find pasture for themselves. What was to prevent them from doing that at any hour of the day or night? Nothing, certainly nothing, he answered himself, according to Tretherick it was just the very thing they would do. And then — well, they were eighty miles from the nearest station — and — and — yet those three men were peacefully slumbering round him. He got up and looked out of the door — the landscape lay calm and quiet before him in the moonlight. The moon was almost at full — a brilliant tropical moon, and it was light nearly as day. There was the claim which was to bring them untold wealth, the windlass, the buckets, the picks, and shovels, just as the men had thrown them down when they left work the evening before. The shadows were deep and dark, and he almost shouted aloud when he saw something move on the edge of the scrub. The next moment he was thankful he had not, for he recognised one of the horses, his own grey mare moving slowly down towards the reed beds which fringed the creek. He shook himself together then, and clambered back into his bunk, glad that no one else had seen him. Of course he said to himself, there was no cause for fear, and yet at the same time he decided to stay awake till dawn, when he had heard the blacks always attacked, in order to be quite sure. Having come to which satisfactory conclusion, he turned over on his side to rest more comfortably, and remembered no more till he found himself being violently shaken by the shoulders.

"What? Where? The blacks?" he asked, springing to his feet.

"The myalls? No, hang it all, man, haven't you got over that yet? Come on, old chap, lend a hand with breakfast, will you? We're bound to get up early when it's so hot, and then we can take a spell in the middle of the day."

The day passed on dully, so hot and still that Kirkham felt it a labour even to go down to the creek for water, a thing he had to do pretty often, for the household utensils of the party were extremely scanty. By noon he had entirely forgotten his fright of the night before, and in the afternoon he took a turn at digging, an occupation which so wearied him that by nightfall he was only too thankful to turn into his bunk and sleep the sleep of the just, forgetful alike of the heat and of the dangers which he fancied menaced them. He was awakened by some one moving about the hut, and sat up rubbing his eyes.

"Hallo," he said. "What's the matter?"

"Only me, boss," came back Webb's voice out of the dusk. "I've got the fever on me again that bad, and I'm that thirsty I had to get up for a drink."

## Kirkham's Find

"All right," said Kirkham, "there's some water in the bucket in the corner, and I left a pannikin on the table."

"I'm afraid, boss," said the man, ruefully, "I've knocked it over and spilt it all. There ain't a drop left. I'll go down to the creek."

"Nonsense, man, I'll go. Get back to bed."

It was getting light outside, getting light with a rapidity only known to the tropics, and Kirkham, as he stood in the doorway, watched for a moment the lines of gold and red growing brighter and brighter in the eastern sky. It was dark when he had awakened, and yet in another few minutes the sun would be up. The birds in the brigalow scrub were beginning to twitter, from the far distance he heard a bell-bird tolling like some solemn musical church bell, and over his head flew a flight of wild swans crying mournfully as they bent their way southward. It was such a still morning; not a leaf stirred, only his grey mare down by the reed beds was raising her nose in the air and sniffing curiously. The reeds, too, were strangely agitated, waving about as if a strong current of air were forcing its way through them. But there was no wind, and Kirkham idly noted the fact, and as idly wondered what it could be. They were tall reeds — six feet high at the very least. Far away in England he had watched just such another effect when his terrier had forced her way through the green corn. This must be something bigger than a dog though — the horses, perhaps, or — the black gin's warning flashed across him as he stepped out of the shelter of the hut — perhaps it was the myalls! Surely that was just the way they would come. He stepped back, and then stepped forward again. What a fool his mates would think him! These Australians would laugh at him for a coward, and besides, whatever happened they must have water. Another step forward with his eyes still on the waving reeds. He hardly liked to waken up the others just to see what after all might be a common occurrence. For all he knew to the contrary Australian reeds might be in the habit of waving and shaking like that even without a wind, and he knew very well that if it had not been for Tretherick's stories he never would have noticed it at all, and by this time would have been down at the creek filling his bucket at the water-hole. After all, too, these bushmen ought to know best; they said there was no fear, and —

Out of the waving reeds came a flight of spears — silent, swift, unerring — directed not at him, but at the poor horse, and the grey mare dropped forward on to her knees, and then fell over on to her side.

It is one thing to imagine a danger, it is another to have one's worst fears confirmed, and for a moment Kirkham stood rooted to the spot. The next he was back in the hut.

"Allan, Tretherick, Webb, wake up. For God's sake, wake up! The blackfellows are swarming in the reeds! Quick, mates, quick!"

Allan Morrison sat up and rubbed his eyes sleepily.

"Confound you, Ned," he said, "you've got those myalls on the brain, I think."

"Hang it all, Allan," he cried, snatching up his rifle, "it's solemn earnest. I've just seen them spear old Jenny."

"What! The old grey mare! The devil they did!" Morrison was wide awake in a moment. "This'll never do. The sooner we give them a lesson the better, and I thought they were all tame! There's no trusting these myall blacks!"

"Nor any other that ever I heard tell of," growled Tretherick, peering out of that square hole that did duty as a window; "give them a lesson! My word, boss, we'll be lucky if we come out of this with whole skins; the reeds are just alive with them."

They were all on the alert now; even the sick man had left his bunk and taken up a rifle.

## Kirkham's Find

He was an old bushman, and thoroughly understood the situation.

"My God!" he said, looking at the empty bucket, "we're done for this time, and no mistake. The devils are between us and the water."

"Don't funk, man, don't funk," said Morrison, who was a much younger man, besides being in good health; "we'll soon settle a parcel of niggers like them."

"I see something," said Kirkham; "shall I fire?"

"No, bless you, no. Don't alarm 'em. Let's be sure they get a good dose while we're about it. We'll pot the whole crowd as they come out into the open."

"We're pretty well off for ammunition, aren't we?" said Tretherick.

"Oh, yes, there are two cases of cartridges unopened there. Enough to see the whole tribe through. Now then, boys, here they come. Pick your man, and let fly as soon as they get well out of the reeds."

The sun was up, and it was broad daylight now. Between the little hut and the reed beds was no shelter whatever, and the short, crisp, dry grass was not above an inch or two long. Softly out of the sheltering reeds stepped ten or twelve blackfellows, long, lean, lithe men, their bodies marked by way of ornament, with ghastly white cicatrices which stood out clearly against their black skins. Three of the rifles rang out. One man dropped like a stone, a tribute to Morrison's skill as a marksman, and the rest, with a wild cry, ran back into the reeds.

"One of those fellows at least is wounded, I'll bet," said Morrison.

"But, Ned, why the devil didn't you fire?"

"They were unarmed men. How — "

"Unarmed be hanged! They were dragging their spears along with their toes — that's their little game. They're rather late, you see; they ought to have attacked a little earlier, when we'd have been sure to have been sleeping. As it is, I dare say they thought we might be awake, and so were coming up friendly fashion till they got within throwing distance."

"I thought you said yesterday — "

"Hang yesterday! Never mind what I said yesterday. Today you pot any nigger that comes within range whether he's armed or not. They're treacherous devils and not to be trusted."

"The boss has changed his tune mighty quick," muttered Tretherick to Webb. But the other man, ill as he was, only leaned against the wall and sighed —

"Oh, the water! the water! My God! what shall we do for the water?"

"Water! By Jove! that is serious!" cried Morrison. "Isn't there a drop? No. And those devils are between us and the waterhole."

"We're done for now; I told you so," said Tretherick. "It's hot as blazes, and we can't hold out a day without water."

## Kirkham's Find

"Now, man, where's the good of croaking. We must manage for the day, and tonight we can creep down under cover of the darkness. The blacks never attack at night; they're afraid of a devil devil, or something of that sort."

Kirkham said nothing. The blacks had all disappeared now, and the only sign of their presence was the waving of the reeds. Provided they stopped there he could see but little chance of their lives, for the only drinkable water for miles was in the midst of those reeds, and he felt sure the blackfellows, savages as they were, would recognise their advantage, and, even if they did not attack at night, would take care to camp round the water-hole. There were, of course, other water-holes, a regular chain of them in the bed of the creek, but these were salt as the sea itself — a not uncommon result of drought in Australia. All this Kirkham knew and knew full well; if the others were silent it was because they understood their danger quite as well or even better than he did. Webb was evidently very ill and rapidly growing worse. His thirst was distressing, but he was patient, as men must needs be patient when their necessity is so dire. Morrison ordered him back to his bunk after the first volley had been fired, and he lay there tossing and turning in the agonies of a fever aggravated by a thirst which grew every moment more unbearable. Kirkham bent over him with some words of unavailing sympathy.

"It ain't no good," said the sick man. "I can't bear it. The boss he talks cheerful enough, but he knows it's all up a tree with us — no man better. The horses is all sure to be speared, and the best thing you three can do is to make tracks for McAlister's down the creek as soon as it's dark. It ain't no good trying for the waterhold, that it ain't. The blacks won't attack at night, but they ain't such darned fools as to let us get at the water for all that."

"But it's eighty miles," remonstrated Kirkham. "You're not fit to undertake such a journey."

"Who? Me? Oh, I don't take no part in this performance."

"But we can't possibly leave you alone," said Kirkham, while the other men listened in silence. Webb was a middle-aged man, an old bushman, and his opinion on the situation was worth listening to.

"Leave me alone," he echoed. "Bless you, I'll have kicked the bucket by then, and I don't know as any of you'll fetch McAlister's. You won't have twelve hours' start, and the blacks'll be after you like winkin'. You ain't got no horses — if they ain't all speared you ain't got no time to go alookin' for 'em — and the blacks'll travel just twice as quick as you. It's all up, boss; I'm mighty afeared it is. Oh, Lord! if I only had a drink!"

Morrison came over to him. Plucky as he was, it was quite evident even to him that his over-confidence had got them into a scrape which was likely to cost them their lives. "Never fear," he said, cheerily; "we'll pull through all right. You see."

But the sick man turned his face to the wall and answered him never a word.

## CHAPTER V. FLIGHT.

Up from Earth's centre through the Seventh Gate  
I rose and on the Throne of Saturn sate,  
And many a Knot unravel'd by the Road,  
But not that Master-Knot of Human Fate.

Earth could not answer; nor the Seas that mourn  
In flowing purple of their Lord forlorn;  
Nor rolling Heaven, with all his Signs reveal'd  
And hidden by the sleeve of Night and Morn.

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

## Kirkham's Find

It was weary work waiting. The minutes seem to stretch themselves into hours, and the hours into interminable days. Not a breath of air stirred outside, the sun poured down his pitiless rays on a sweltering earth from a cloudless sky, and the heat in the little hut was stifling. It was useless to try and eat, though they had a plentiful supply of damper and salt beef left over from the night before, for their mouths were parched with thirst. Towards noon the sick man became delirious, and babbled incessantly of cool shady waterholes and running streams, and at last, getting up quietly, made a dash for the door. Kirkham, who had been expecting something of the sort, was just in time to seize him, and he and Morrison strapped him down in his bunk again while Tretherick still kept watch and ward at the door.

"Poor chap," said Morrison, quietly, to his cousin as he listened to his ravings. "I shan't be sorry when his sufferings are over."

"The blacks are gone, surely. There's not a sign of them now. Shall I make a dash for it? A bucket of water would make all the difference to us."

"Useless, old chap. You'd be speared before you got half-way to the reeds. The devils have the patience of Job, and they know they've got us safe enough. If we had water we might hold out --- but without --- Webb's suggestion is the only practicable one, and well --- even though we have twelve hours' start, you know how the beggars can track. I'm afraid there isn't much chance for us. I'm sorry, old chap, I'm awfully sorry, to have got you into such a hole."

"It's not a bit worse for me than for you."

"Well, I don't know. There's not a soul to care whether Allan Morrison goes off the hooks or not, while you --- There's your mother and sisters and Nancy Marsden --- what about Nancy Marsden?"

Kirkham turned away sharply.

"You know very well --- I mean --- it was a little rough on me, wasn't it, old man, never telling me you'd settled it all? Of course I guessed, but you might have told me, seeing I was your mate."

"Told you what?"

"Why, of course you settled it that day?"

"What day?"

"Why, the last Sunday we went home with the Marsden girls."

"Yes, but --- " Ned Kirkham hesitated. These two men had never before discussed their relations with the two girls they had been accustomed to see so often, and now that the subject was opened between them each felt shy and strange. "Yes, but --- " said Kirkham, hesitating. "Hang it all, man, you know jolly well I care about Nancy Marsden --- there's no good hiding the fact; but she --- she --- sometimes I thought she cared for me, and sometimes --- well, I'd have sworn it was you."

"Rats!"

"Well, anyhow, she talked most to you that last evening at their house."

"Yes, but that was because her father was there, and she's always shy before him. He's an awful old curmudgeon, you know, she's afraid to open her lips before him, and as you were silent I got a say in. But you walked down to



## Kirkham's Find

the gate together, and I thought — I thought — "

"You thought wrong, then," said Kirkham, though there was a dawning gladness in his heart which he dashed aside in a moment. What was the good of it all? Even if she did care it was too late now.

"You mean to say you're not engaged to her?"

"No."

"Well, I'm blessed. You are a fool. Any one — "

"How do you know she cared about me?"

"Haven't I eyes? Besides, her sister told me."

"Phoebe?"

"Yes. Why, I made sure you'd jumped at the chance."

"But there — what's the good of talking? We're pretty well done for now. But I know that girl cared for you. I've been lost in wonder that you didn't take me into your confidence. Well, if you cared a straw for her you have made a mess of it."

He sighed and, turning away, suggested to Tretherick that since their only hope lay in getting away under cover of the darkness they should take it in turns to watch, so that two at least might sleep. Morrison took the first watch, then Tretherick, then Kirkham, the others lying down in their bunks with their loaded rifles beside them, ready to spring up at the first alarm.

It was doubtful if any of them slept — Kirkham certainly did not. To begin with, his thirst was overpowering, the heat was terrible, he had lived for the last week almost entirely on salt provisions, and he had had nothing to drink since the night before. Poor Webb was raving like a lunatic now in his bunk just opposite, and if there had been nothing else that alone would have prevented his sleeping. He lay on his back and stared up at the unceiled bark roof, and wondered vaguely if they would ever get out of this. Three young, strong, well-armed men, it seemed strange they should be killed like rats in a hole by a parcel of naked blackfellows armed only with spears; and yet these bushmen seemed to have given up hope, and they knew better than he did. He watched a string of black ants diligently making their way up the wall, and wondered vaguely if they had a nest in the roof, and if so, what they would do when the hut was burnt, as it assuredly would be. A month ago he had been away in Victoria, and now he was lying here waiting for death, suffering agonies of thirst, and wondering how long he had to live. Would Nancy Marsden give him one thought? Was it true, as Allan had said, that he was the favoured one after all. Had she cared for him? If so, what must she have thought of his conduct? He had showed her plainly how much he cared, and then he had gone away and left her without one word, ready almost to believe she was engaged to his cousin. The string of ants came to a knot in the wood, and he let his attention wander just one moment to wonder whether they would go round or crawl over it. They were going straight over it — plucky little ants. And after all he might have won her, and yet he had gone away and left her without one word — fool! fool! fool!

His turn came to watch, and he stood in the doorway looking out, his eyes on the reeds and the brigalow scrub, and his thoughts away down south, going over and over again every moment of that last interview with the woman he loved.

"And so you are really going?" she had said. "It will be nice for Mr Morrison to have you to look after him in such a terrible country." And there had been a tender little quiver in her voice which he had not failed to notice and had

## Kirkham's Find

been inclined to set down to Allan's score. Then there arose in his breast for a moment a bitter feeling against his cousin. Why had he let him come? He must have known that, had he been sure of Nancy Marsden, not all the wealth of all the Australias would have tempted him to come north. A cockatoo farm with her would have been good enough for him. Yet here he was, and the chances were as ten to one against his being alive twenty-four hours hence. Only for a moment, though, and then he thought pitifully of Allan Morrison, the good-tempered, kind-hearted fellow who even now, in the hour of danger, could look cheerily on the bright side of things — and Webb — surely things were going hardly with poor Webb. His ravings had subsided to low muttering during the last few minutes, and now had ceased altogether. Kirkham turned, anxiously debating whether he shouldn't call one of the others to look to him, when to his astonishment he saw he had freed himself from the straps and was sitting up on the edge of his bunk.

"Allan," called Kirkham, and Morrison was on his feet in a moment, but Webb was too quick for them. With one spring he reached the doorway, dashed Kirkham aside, and before either of the others could stop him, rushed down the slope towards the reed-beds.

"Now," cried Morrison, as all three rushed outside, "God help him, for it's all over," and, indeed, as with one accord the reeds parted in at least a dozen places, and out came a flight of spears flung by invisible hands. It seemed to the onlookers the greater number must have transfixed the unfortunate man, but though he gave one loud cry, he staggered on and fell forward on his face not ten yards away from the reeds, out of which came another flight of spears accompanied by a yell which seemed to be echoed from behind the hut.

Though it all passed in a moment, the onlookers with one accord fired a volley, in the vain hope that some bullet might by chance find its billet.

"There goes the first of us," said Tretherick, "how long for the rest, I wonder?"

"He mayn't be dead," said Kirkham, eagerly. "Can't we rescue him?"

"He's dead enough, poor chap," sighed Morrison, "and I don't know whether to be glad or sorry he settled it that way. Poor Webb, he was a jolly good mate. He and I have worked together — oh, ever since I came into the bush."

"I'm thinkin' ye won't be long parted," said Tretherick. "We may as well make a bolt for it tonight, boss."

"Yes, as soon as it's dark. We haven't above two hours to wait."

No one lay down again, it seemed impossible to rest, and Morrison and Tretherick began making preparations for departure, filling their belts with cartridges and doing up little parcels of salt beef and damper.

"We mustn't overload ourselves," said Morrison. "Everything depends on speed, but about ten miles down I think we're pretty sure to find water, and then something to eat will buck us up a bit."

Kirkham stood still in the doorway; the dead man lay right before him. Their own chance of life was but small, and yet listening to the other two making their preparations for departure it seemed to him utterly impossible they could be so certain of their dying as their talk seemed to imply. One moment Morrison spoke of the food that was to sustain them, and the next he was asking Tretherick whether he thought it would be any good them leaving behind in the hut any record of what had befallen them.

"They'll burn the hut, certain sure," said the man. "They allus do."

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"We could bury it. McAlister's sure to be here some time next week, and if we are to be wiped out in the scrub it would be a comfort to know somebody knew all about it."

"The devils'd have it up quicker'n he would. I guess the burnt hut'll tell tale enough for old McAlister."

"Yes. Well, I'm sure nobody cares much whether I live or die, except, perhaps, the store-keeper at Port Darwin. I believe I still owe him fifty pounds on the outfit, but you, Tretherick, you've got a wife there."

"She was a bad lot, boss. She got all my savings out of me, and then bolted with another chap. I guess I won't bother about her." Morrison sat down at the rough table, and as briefly as possible wrote out a statement of the calamity that had befallen them, and then, dating it and signing his name, he put the slip of paper into a small silver box he had used as a tobacco pouch; then he took Kirkham's place.

"Write a line to your mother, old chap," he said. "I'm afraid the chances are against her getting it, but still she might, and there's no knowing whether we'll get through the scrub. Say how sorry I am to have got you into this scrape."

Kirkham sat down and took paper and pen in his hand, but his letter was brief -- almost cold it seemed to him as he read it over with a full heart. They were very dear to him -- the widowed mother who had loved her first-born, her only son, so tenderly, the bright-faced sisters whom he had petted, and who had petted him ever since they were babies together -- so dear that no mere words could have expressed the love and tenderness he felt. The tears rushed to his eyes as he thought of his mother reading this brief letter.

"Have you nearly done, Ned?" asked Allan, from the doorway, "because you know we must bury it."

He brushed his hand across his eyes.

"All right," he said, "another moment," and he took up another sheet of paper. All that his cousin had said about Nancy Marsden came back to him, all the love he had been crushing down and repressing for the last month welled up afresh in his heart. If he were dying and she had cared ever so little, then surely he might send a message.

"My darling," he wrote, "my darling, for you are my darling though I never dared to tell you so, I am dying. We are all as good as dead, they say, but I cannot die without making one effort to tell you how much I love you. If I had only told you before, would there have been a chance for me, I wonder. Good-bye, my darling. God bless you, Nancy. Good-bye."

Then he signed his name, and folding up the letter addressed it and put it in the box with the other two.

"Dig a hole," suggested Morrison, the hut, of course, had no flooring save the bare earth, "put it in, and walk backwards and forwards to destroy all traces. It's just worth trying, and that's about all. And, Tretherick, cut a good big 'Dig' on the slabs with your knife, will you? If the place isn't burnt, they'll know we've hidden something."

"No fear of the old shanty not being burnt," said Tretherick, but nevertheless he cut a big 'Dig' on the wall right opposite the door.

"Now," he said, "we're about ready. I'm pretty near done for want of a drink. Webb warn't so badly off after all. He died quick like. How long, boss, before we can start?"

## Kirkham's Find

"Not for an hour at least," said Morrison, "and then it'll be bright moonlight, but — By Jove! Look out! Here they come."

Some of the blackfellows had sneaked round to the brigalow scrub at the back of the hut, and now, dashing out, tried to take the inmates unawares, but Morrison was too quick for them. He took steady aim and shot the leader half way across the bare space, and the rest skulked back into the scrub again before either Kirkham or Tretherick had time to fire.

"That's two to one of us," said Morrison, grimly; "but the account's not square yet."

"The balance is goin' to be on the other side this trip, I'm afeard," said Tretherick.

"Oh, you be blowed! Wait till McAlister raises the country and fetches down the native police."

"But we won't see that unfort'nately," said Tretherick, and then they were all silent again.

That waiting for the night seemed to Kirkham very terrible, it was like waiting for death itself. Slowly the sun sank in the west slowly — slowly. They watched it touch the tops of the distant blue hills, then sink behind them, and darkness fell upon the land.

Allan Morrison touched his cousin's shoulder.

"Now, lad," he said, "now's our time. The moon'll be up in less than an hour, and though they say the blacks don't attack by night, still I wouldn't give much for our chances if they saw us trying to steal away from under their very noses. Now then, Tretherick, are you ready. We'll strike through the brigalow scrub and come out on the creek below the first bend."

"What about Webb?"

"He's dead, I know. Still, we won't leave him if there's a chance of life; I'll just steal down and see."

"I — "

"No, Ned better let me go. I'm more accustomed to this sort of thing than you are." And as if to put an end to further remonstrance he stole off through the darkness.

It seemed to the two waiting men an age before he was back again, but he came at last, quietly as he had gone.

"Stone dead, poor chap," he said. "I knew it. We can't do anything for him. Come along, mates, the sooner we're off the better. Now we must keep close."

It required a good deal of courage, Kirkham found, to walk across that open space in the darkness; every shadow seemed to him a lurking foe, and once in the thick, dense scrub, every snapping twig and breaking branch was a fresh danger. If they had been followed in scrub like this their doom was sealed. He kept his feelings to himself as long as he could, but at last he spoke to his cousin.

"Are you sure," he said, "there's no one behind?"

"Not yet, old man, but there will be tomorrow — a hundred."

"And we're making a path like a high road."

## Kirkham's Find

"That won't make much difference. They'd track us, I verily believe, across the bare rock. There never were such trackers as the Australian blacks."

Had he been by himself Kirkham knew he would have been utterly lost the moment he entered the scrub, but Tretherick, who led the way, went steadily on, guided it seemed by a sort of instinct, for it was pitch dark and hardly a star was visible through the intervening leaves. It was twenty-four hours now since they had had any water, and the hard walking distressed them terribly. Half the night seemed to have passed before they found themselves clear of the scrub and on the banks of the creek again. The moon was just rising over the trees, and her beams turned the big water-hole at their feet into a veritable shield of silver.

"That's the water-hole, sure enough," said Morrison. "Well done, Tretherick; I don't think we could have come straighter. Thank God for a drink."

They spelled there for a few minutes to bathe their faces and hands in the cool water, and to eat the first meal they had had that day. It put new life into them, and they went on refreshed both in body and mind.

"We'll find plenty of water all the way," said Morrison, "McAlister told me last time I saw him that he was pretty sure now that this creek was permanent; even when it doesn't run there are the water-holes, good fresh drinkable water, never less than ten miles apart."

Then they moved on again, keeping along the banks of the creek. Kirkham had all sorts of wild notions for throwing the blackfellows off the scent, but his cousin only shook his head, and assured him it would take them much longer to put them into practice than it would for the blacks to find them out.

"No, our only chance is to go steadily on. They're bound to follow us, they're bound to catch us up, but then --- well they may not attack us. It's a poor hope, but they're uncertain sort of devils, and I have heard of them following a man for days and never touching him."

The country was fairly clear of scrub and undergrowth, and along the bank of the creek the walking was not difficult save that to walk at all is always a hardship to an Australian who is unaccustomed to it. To the Englishman it came easiest, and even Tretherick, who had been nearly ten years in the colony, managed very well, but Morrison began to complain of being footsore before half the night was over.

"I'll never do it, I'm afraid, Ned," he said. "How you can walk, and on a hot night like this too!"

It was a hot night --- a still, breathless night. The white trunks of the tall gum trees stood out ghostlike and ghastly, and the long narrow leaves gleamed silvery in the light that was as bright as day, but the shadows were dark and dismal, and from the depth of the forest came every now and then the sound of a breaking branch or the cry of some night bird with startling distinctness. Towards morning they stopped and bathed in a water-hole, snatched a hasty meal from their scanty provisions, and went on again refreshed. An hour or two later, when the sun had risen with all the promise of another pitiless hot day, it began to be evident they must rest if they would ever reach the end of their journey at all, and they lay down beneath the scanty shade afforded by a lightwood tree.

"We've done about thirty miles," sighed Morrison, "and we've got about fifty more to do. We'd better sleep now we've the chance. We won't be able to once the blacks are after us."

"I'm about done," said Kirkham, "but I can't possibly sleep. I'd rather go on."

"Don't be a fool, old chap, you just try. Look at Tretherick." And, indeed, at the first suggestion of a halt Tretherick had taken of his boots and flung himself down on the dry grass, pillowing his head on his arm, and was

## Kirkham's Find

now sleeping as calmly as if he were taking an afternoon nap on a summer's day in far-away England.

Morrison followed his example, and Kirkham lay down beside him grasping his rifle and staring up at the deep blue sky that peeped between the leaves. Such a far-away sky, such a beautiful sky, such a cruel hot sky, with never a cloud to break the monotony. It was ridiculous to think he could sleep with such danger impending, with those blue eyes of the sky's looking down on him — a hundred eyes the sky had peering through those branches. Nancy Marsden's eyes were as blue but not so hard — tender, loving, sweet. What was she doing now? The difference in time was — was — . And trying to calculate the difference in time his natural weariness overcame him, and he too slept, slept so heavily that he did not waken till Morrison laid his hand on his shoulder and brought him to his feet with a start.

"What — where — ?"

"All right, old chap. I thought you couldn't sleep. It's nearly eleven o'clock, and we've no time to lose. Come on."

## CHAPTER VI. FACING DEATH.

So when the Angel of the darker Drink  
At last shall find you by the river brink,  
And, offering his Cup, invite your Soul  
Forth to your lips to quaff — you shall not shrink.

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

It was harder work walking now than it had been during the night and early morning, and even Kirkham, refreshed as he was by his heavy sleep, began to feel that the labour was telling on him. The ground was rough, large stones and rocks impeded them at every turn, and though the country was only lightly timbered, yet there was no track, and they had to make their way between clumps of ti-tree, brigalow, and lighter scrub of all descriptions. Sometimes they scrambled down into the bed of the creek to reach the water-holes, but once their canvas water-bottles were full they did this as seldom as possible, for though the water was tempting, still their lives depended on their pushing on. Their provisions, too, were getting low, for since they had to carry everything, they had brought as little as possible.

"Never mind," said Morrison, cutting them each a slice off their last piece of damper, "we must have done pretty nearly fifty miles by now, and each step we take brings us nearer safety. If we have to starve for a day, it won't do us much harm while we have plenty of water."

"I think we're safe, Allan," said Kirkham, "it's nearly four o'clock, and I see no signs of our being followed."

"No, no; don't let's begin to holler till we're out of the bush. I shan't feel safe till to-night."

"But it's getting on that way now," said Kirkham, "and I see no signs of the blackfellows."

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Tretherick, "you don't know much about them blackfellows. They'd track you down for days, and you wouldn't know anything about it. Just look at them patches of scrub, there might be twenty blackfellows in 'm for all we know."

"Don't croak, Tretherick," said Allan Morrison, "it's no good imagining things."

"Is it possible?" asked Kirkham.

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"More than possible. I'm afraid that's just what they will do. Better not walk too close together, makes too good a target for the spears, you know; and yet don't get too far apart, in case we have to fight for it. I'm afraid it's all up. I think I saw something sneak behind that gum tree."

Kirkham stopped dead, and flung his rifle to his shoulder.

"Go on," said Tretherick, catching him roughly by the shoulder; "go on, mate. For God's sake, don't take no notice. I saw yon chap a quarter an hour ago — only thing to do is to keep straight ahead. It ain't no good shooting at a tree trunk."

It was a ghastly notion to Kirkham, the thought of being followed by a foe, swift, silent unseen; from every bush, from every stone and tree trunk might come their death, and yet they were unable to strike a blow in self-defence. The effort to walk straight ahead in Tretherick's footsteps cost him more than all the anxiety of the past twenty-four hours, and looking round at his cousin he saw the beads of sweat standing out on his forehead.

"Nervous work, old man," said Allan, wiping his face. "I could manage a stand-up fight better than this, whatever the odds."

"No hope of that, boss," said Tretherick; "we'd better peg on ahead. They mightn't touch us tonight, and then we must make a push for it and reach the station before they're up with us tomorrow morning. You follow me, and we'll keep in the open as much as we can."

It was all very well to say they would keep in the open, but the country grew more rugged as they advanced, the stones and rocks were small boulders scattered thickly among the thorny shrubs, which taken together formed excellent cover for the enemy; but still the desperate men marched on in silence, there was no turning back for them. Every now and then Tretherick, with a slight motion of his thumb, indicated to the other two that he had seen a black form stealing away, but Kirkham's unpractised eye never succeeded in distinguishing it. As the time passed on he grew callous, and was able to march on with a bolder front. He looked at his watch. Half-past five. In another hour in these latitudes it would be getting dark, and they might safely hope — even Tretherick thought so — only another hour — if only —

Tretherick half turned his head.

"See that pile of rocks, boss, right ahead?"

"Yes."

"There's a ten mile stretch of plain country ahead of that. Hard as a rock the ground is, and not a bit of cover for miles round. Once we get there we're pretty safe. We can shoot anything that comes within range."

"Hurrah!" cried Allan Morrison. "I clean forgot that."

"You ain't there, yet," said Tretherick, grimly.

"Why, man, it's not a quarter of a mile off, and we've been followed for the last hour and a half."

"Longer nor that, you can bet," said Tretherick. "They travel like a house on fire, them blacks; but they're coming closer now, it's a bad sign. However, we can't do no more."

Eagerly Kirkham kept his eyes on the heaps of rocks, another five minutes and they would be abreast of it, five more and they would be safe on the open plain. The temptation was to put out all his strength and run with all his

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might for the safe haven, but Tretherick in front was walking as steadily as ever, and he turned to speak to Allan who was close behind.

"Wouldn't it be better -- " he began.

From the rocks to the right came hurtling a flight of spears, which whistled past his ears and buried themselves in the ground beyond.

"My God!" He heard a heavy fall beside him, and saw Tretherick had fallen forward on his face. He heard the crack of his cousin's rifle, but, though he raised his own to his shoulder, could see nothing to fire at.

"Are you hurt?" asked Allan. "No. That's good. Now about Tretherick."

Kirkham stooped down and raised up the wounded man.

"Are you hurt, mate?" he asked.

"Done for, boss. Run, run -- never mind me."

Morrison looked at his cousin, and stooping they raised the dying man between them, and tried to make for the rocks beyond which lay safety. They were hampered with their rifles, the man was heavy and could lend no aid himself, and before they had taken two steps another flight of spears, accompanied this time by a shrill call from the blackfellows, struck Tretherick fairly in the chest, and brought both the others to the ground. In a moment the scrub and rocks were alive with blackfellows, who evidently thought they had nothing more to fear from the white men; but the next moment they were undeceived, Kirkham had scrambled to his knees and brought his rifle to bear on the first he saw. The shot took effect and the man fell back into the scrub. At the same moment he heard Morrison's rifle behind him. Like magic the enemy disappeared, and except for the man he had shot, who lay back against a bush stone dead, there was not one to be seen. He turned round then.

"Allan! Tretherick!"

"Tretherick's done for, poor chap, and you'd better run for your life -- run, old man! They're only driven off for a moment."

"Come, then, if you're sure it's no good our waiting for this poor fellow."

"Not the least in the world. But, old chap, it's a case of save himself who can now. There's a spear in my leg and I can't keep up with you. Run, man, run. It's only thirty miles to the station, and if you can only reach the plain you'll be safe."

"Rot! As if I'd leave you!"

There was not a moment to be lost. Already Kirkham fancied he could hear the scrub rustling all round, and he bent over his cousin, and with cruel kindness dragged him to his feet. The barbed end of a spear had penetrated his right leg just above the knee. To try and drag it out hurriedly was hopeless, the only thing he could do was to break off the long shaft.

"I can't help it, I know I'll hurt you, old man," he said, hacking away at the tough, well-seasoned wood with his knife.

Morrison could not repress a groan.



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"Never mind," he said. "I can bear it. But the best thing you can do is to put a pistol in me and leave me."

Would it never break? It seemed to Kirkham, listening to the rustling behind him, that hours had passed since first they were attacked. One blade of his knife broke, and as he fumbled to open the other, Morrison raised his rifle, and a shrill scream following the report told him it had taken effect on some one. Then the other blade broke.

"The devil's in the wood," said Kirkham, flinging the useless case aside.

"Go -- go, old man," urged Morrison.

"Nonsense. Your knife, man, quick!"

He succeeded in cutting a groove round the tough spearshaft.

"Break it," said Morrison. "You can now. Oh, never mind me! Quick, it's our only chance."

With a violent wrench that sent the blood from the wounded man's face, Kirkham snapped the hard wood and again dragged his cousin to his feet.

"Now then, Allan," he said, grasping him firmly by the arm, "we must run for it."

The moment they turned their backs a storm of spears whistled round them. One passed so close to Kirkham's cheek it grazed the skin, and he gave up all for lost. Morrison hung heavy on his arm, and though before them stretched the little plain, he felt if only the blacks made a determined rush they were utterly helpless.

"Push on -- push on," gasped Allan, "while we can. They're stopping to plunder poor Tretherick."

It was even so. Behind them they could hear a yelling and shouting, but for the moment they were undisturbed, and Kirkham put out all his strength and dragged the helpless man on past the heaps of rocks right out on to the little plain already darkening before the coming night.

He looked down into his face, white and drawn with pain.

"We must stop now," he said. "You can't stand any more."

"Can't I?" said Morrison. "I must a little further. Look behind."

"No signs of them," said Kirkham, laconically. "Are we safe?"

"For the time being -- yes, I think so. Can you haul me on a little further?"

In dead silence, broken only now and then by a groan from Morrison, they went on for about a mile till they were right out on the plain, and there was no sign of any one following them; then the dead weight on his arm grew heavier still, and Kirkham looking down saw his companion had fainted. He laid him gently down on the hard, rocky ground, and kneeling down beside him, poured between his white lips the last remaining drops in his whisky-flask. He took his hand between his own and chafed it gently. What could he do? What was there to do? Two of them were dead already -- Allan looked dying, and he had no remedies at hand -- not even a drop of water now to moisten his lips. Almost he wished he could change places with him. Why should the most helpless of the lot be left? After all, though, the wound could not be mortal. With proper appliances at hand it might only be a trifle, but they were out in the bush -- thirty miles from the nearest human habitation -- surrounded, dogged by hostile savages; what chance had he of saving the helpless man -- what chance, for that matter, of saving

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himself? The light was fading rapidly, in another minute or two it would be quite dark. Ought he to use these last moments of daylight to try and extract the spear-head, or would he only make matters worse? He rose and walked up and down in his intense anxiety; behind them stretched a trail of blood -- the wound was still bleeding a little -- it was useless to try and staunch it with the spear-head still there. He bent over his cousin again, and Morrison opened his eyes.

"Rough on you, Ned," he said, "ain't it, old man? How about that spear? Could you get it out?"

Without a word Kirkham took the knife and cut out the barbed spear-head, and then with their handkerchiefs and pieces torn from their shirts he bound up the torn and bleeding flesh. It was rough surgery, and Morrison fainted under it again; but there was no time to be lost, and by the time it was done the light had faded altogether. There was nothing to be done, and Kirkham sat down beside his friend and waited. Their water-bottles were dry, the creek was nearly half a mile away -- even then he did not know how far the nearest water-hole might be. No, there was nothing more to be done, unless -- what if he were to start off for the station at once, and be back with help before morning? For a moment the idea took full possession of him. It seemed as if he had cut the Gordian knot and solved all their difficulties. He took out his watch and began to calculate. Already it was past seven. At the very quickest he could not reach the station under ten hours, and be back in, say, three at the earliest -- that would be by eight o'clock in the morning. Long before then it would be broad daylight, and -- no, that scheme was hopeless, and before his eyes rose a vision of two desolate, wounded men slowly dying of hunger and thirst, using their last remaining strength to keep off the waiting blackfellows who, as they grew weaker, grew hourly bolder and bolder. The vivid picture drew a groan from his lips which roused the other from his stupor.

"Are you there, Ned?" he asked.

"Yes, old chap. How do you feel now?"

"Done for." Then he roused himself, and said, briskly --

"You'd better be off, Ned. Keep by the creek, and you'll do it easily now. It's not quite twenty-nine miles, and if you stick to the creek you can't get lost."

"I know," said Kirkham, dully. "I've looked at it from all points, and I see it can't possibly be done."

"Nonsense, man! The sooner you start the better."

"And you?"

"Well, having a gamey leg, it's clear I must stop here till you fetch me."

"Which I couldn't possibly do before eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

"If you stop here gassing," said Morrison, with a cheerfulness that went to his companion's heart, "it'll be nine."

"Look here," burst out Kirkham, passionately, "what's the good of talking like that? You know very well I'm not going to leave you to die. I can't do it."

"Matters won't be mended by your stopping to die also."

"At daylight tomorrow the devils'll be after us. Even I could not fail to follow our tracks, your leg has bled so. Seriously now, what chance would you have against them?"

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"Seriously, they were such a pack of cowardly brutes I believe I might hold out till you came. Go, Ned, go, old chap, go! Think of your mother — think of your sweetheart. If you ever cared a straw for Nancy Marsden, go now."

"Allan," said Kirkham, under cover of the darkness, "did you care?"

"Did I? Do I? Good God! There, there, I'm talking like a sentimental baby; but, old chap," his voice was hoarse with emotion, "it's come to a matter of life or death now, so I don't mind telling you I loved her — good God, how I loved her! It's some comfort to me to know she'll have you and be happy. Go, old chap — go for her sake. Good-bye, think of me kindly sometimes."

"It's no good, Allan, I'm not going. Even for her sake, I'm not going. How could I look her in the face and tell her I'd left you to die alone?"

"Ned, your staying won't help me. Man, it's a useless sacrifice. Your going is my only chance. You may bring help in time — you probably will, if only you'll hurry. You're sacrificing my life and your own as well from a stupid idea of honour. Any one who wasn't a pig-headed fool would see that."

He struggled to his feet and leaned heavily on his cousin's shoulder.

"Don't let me have your death on my conscience. I promised your mother to look after her boy."

The unbidden tears rose to Kirkham's eyes. In his last extremity this man had no thought for himself. He had no kith or kin to watch for him, none near enough to mourn his loss, and yet he could think of another man's mother, another man's sweetheart. Kirkham pushed him down again.

"It's no good, Allan," he said, gently. "Believe me, even for my own peace of mind I can't leave you. Don't ask me again, old chap. Suppose we rest now till the moon's up and then discuss the best means of pushing on."

"Ned, I'm, useless — a log — an encumbrance that must mean death."

"Nonsense. You can shoot. We've plenty of cartridges, and I mean to pull through somehow."

"Let's cross the plain, you hoist me up a tree, and then go on. I could hold out then."

"We'll see. I'm going to sleep now."

"You're a fool, Ned," said Allan Morrison, but he grasped the hand nearest him and wrung it with all his strength. They lay down side by side, and soon by his regular breathing Kirkham knew that the weakness and weariness had overpowered his companion, and he was sleeping soundly. To him sleep would not come. One by one he watched the stars like points of gold come out in the clear velvety sky, and went over and over again in his mind the events of the last thirty-six hours. Webb was dead and Tretherick was dead. Allan was wounded, their chances of life had dwindled down to nothing at all, tomorrow would see the end. He might save himself still, the man beside him would never blame him he knew, and then he fell to speculating what life would be worth bought at such a price. And yet he could not save him — could only die with him. If their positions had been reversed, could he, he wondered, have acted as this man had done. Could he have sent another man to his sweetheart's arms with a smile on his lips? Would he have given one thought to another man's mother? So slowly the minutes dragged on — so slowly — and Allan slept calmly on undisturbed by the thought that tomorrow's dawning could only bring him a terrible death. But at least they would sell their lives dearly, he thought grimly, and they would not die unavenged. On the still, hot night air rose the quavering cry of the dingoes, and from the creek below rose the mournful wail of the curlew. Dirge-like it sounded, their dirge, and he sat up instinctively grasping his rifle

## Kirkham's Find

and watched the rim of the red moon rise slowly over the tree-tops. Then he stooped and wakened Morrison.

"Allan, I'm going down to the creek to fill our water-bottles, and then we'd better be off."

"You won't save yourself?"

"Not without you."

"You are a good fellow, Ned, and Nancy Marsden has lost a treasure of a husband."

"He's not lost yet," said Kirkham, setting off for the creek. It was more than half an hour before he was back again with the canvas water-bottles filled and flung across his shoulder.

"The creek takes a turn there," he said. "If we take to it again after we've crossed the plain it'll be time enough. Now, Allan, you must lean on me."

Morrison grasped his arm, and they began to move slowly across the plain. Very, very slowly, for it was evident by his white face and firm closed lips that it was only by the greatest effort that the wounded man moved at all. Neither spoke -- all their thoughts were centred in the one great effort to push on. Half way across Morrison paused and looked into his companion's face.

"You see," he said. "Two hours on level ground. We haven't done four miles. Is it worth it, old man? Think what it will be in the scrub!"

"We'll pull through somehow," said Kirkham, as cheerfully as he could; "suppose we spell a bit now, and give your leg a rest."

"No, no. It'll only get stiff. Let's push on, if you won't see the uselessness of it all," and they pushed on wearily.

Such a still hot night, such a perfect night, only from the direction of the creek came always the wail of the curlews, and now and then from Morrison's lips pain would wring a sigh which was half a moan and went straight to his companion's heart. Again and again they had to rest, and it was two o'clock in the morning before they were in the scrub once more. They rested there for a little, and Kirkham, scrambling down the steep bank to the creek, filled his water-bottle to bathe Morrison's leg, which was now fearfully hot and inflamed. They did not speak much, where was the use? The one man had done his best to induce the other to escape, and since he would not, no words of his, he felt, could thank him for so great a sacrifice; virtually, he was giving him his life, whether they escaped or not he had made the sacrifice, and Allan Morrison had no words in which to thank him, only with all his failing strength he pushed on. No word of complaint, no cry of pain burst from him, and his companion only knew by the weight on his arm, and his face, white and drawn in the moonlight, how much he was suffering.

But at last human endurance could stand no more, and just as the first faint streaks of dawn in the east began to pale the light of the moon, he sank down on the hard, baked earth.

"I can't go a step further," he sighed.

"A little further," urged Kirkham, "only a little further. It can't be fourteen miles to the station now."

"I can't go a step," gasped the other, and it was painfully evident that he spoke the truth. "You go -- go now. You'll yet be in time."

But Kirkham shook his head.

## Kirkham's Find

"I'll see you through, old chap," he said, as cheerfully as he could. "Don't give in yet. Take a little rest, and then we'll go on again. We can make a fight for it now till we reach the station. With every step we take there's more chance of our plight being discovered."

Morrison closed his eyes, and Kirkham lay down beside him for a few moments, and stared at the coming day. All night long he had been going over and over in his own mind every possible scheme for their escape. Things had looked black enough then, they were blackest of all now. They could but put their backs against a tree and fight till the bitter end. Instinctively he marked a tree, a tall white gum, standing alone somewhat, clear of brush and undergrowth, and close at the water's edge. That would answer their purpose; but what then? As long as they were wakeful -- as long as they had cartridges, they could keep the blacks at bay; but the children of the soil were patient, watchful, untiring, they could wait, and would wait till the white men were helpless. Their provisions were all gone, but at least they would have water, and without water they could not live. He got up and looked at the tree more closely. From the high bank above there was nothing to prevent the blacks from throwing down their spears on them; but any man standing there must needs form a fair target for their rifles. No, there could be no better place. Then he touched Allan's shoulder, for the sun was up now -- a burning, tropical sun -- and from every bush and scrub came the cry of the birds, their welcome to the newborn day. In silence Morrison allowed himself to be helped down the steep bank, and then, once with his back against the solid tree trunk, looked up in its branches.

"Couldn't you haul me up there?" he said, with a trace of animation in his tired voice. "I guess I could hold out then while you went along and fetched help. The niggers would wait round me, and I really don't think they would pester you at all. You could do it in four or five hours."

"By Jove," said Kirkham, "I never thought of that! But it's too late now. We'd better stick together till tonight, and then I can do it. Cheer up, Allan; only twelve hours -- you can hold out that long, can't you?"

The older man smiled faintly, and bent down over the water to bathe his face. He looked weary and worn, hardly capable of bearing up through the long hot day; but at least the close proximity of the water was a blessing beyond count, and Kirkham washed out and applied afresh, cool wet bandages to his wound. He could not stand now, could only lie with his back against the tree-trunk, and his rifle grasped firmly in his hand. Kirkham took up his station beside him, and so the long, dreary day began.

When first the blacks came up they could hardly have told, but soon after they had settled themselves came a flight of spears out of the scrub on the bank a little to the left and fell just short of them.

"Close," commented Morrison. "No, no," as Kirkham raised his rifle; "don't waste cartridges. We've only eleven left; don't fire unless they show in the open."

But at first the blackfellows contented themselves with showering spears from the scrub, till at last one, bolder than his fellows, crept along the edge of the bank just opposite them, his naked body hardly showing against the dark earth.

"You take him," muttered Morrison. "You've a better chance of a good aim than me. For God's sake, don't miss, and it'll perhaps scare the devils for the rest of the day."

Kirkham waited till he got right opposite, then raising his rifle, he fired. There was a shrill scream, and as the smoke cleared off he saw that if he had not killed the man he had at least wounded him so severely that he was unable to move away.

"That's all right," said Morrison, with a half sigh; "poor beggar, he'll be of more service to us now than if he were dead. The rest won't forget that's a place to be avoided as long as he's struggling there. They'll reckon on starving

## Kirkham's Find

us out now."

He was right. The blacks molested them no more that morning, and the long hot day stole wearily on. Long before midday Kirkham was ravenous, but he could only be thankful that thirst was not added to their other trials, and when he looked at his companion's flushed, hot face, he knew that only beside the waterhole could he have kept his senses at all. It was weary work, that waiting. It seemed as if the day would never end. First one man took the watch and then the other, and Kirkham was surprised to find he could actually sleep, sleep heavily, too, his slumber unbroken by even the shadow of a dream. The two men grew very close together as the long hours passed by, very close indeed, and opened their hearts to each other, as they would never have done save in the presence of almost certain death.

"You have given your life for me, Ned," said Morrison more than once. "I'm a lonely sort of chap, and never had any one to care for me much, and -- I -- I -- well, it won't do you much good, my gratitude, but I'm grateful all the same."

"Rot!" remonstrated Kirkham; "tonight we'll both be out of it," but the other man shook his head. He was weak and ill, and had long ago given up hope.

Midday came and the heat grew sweltering, and the branches of the tall gum tree afforded but scant shade from the burning rays of the tropical sun. Then the afternoon stole slowly on and the shadows grew longer and longer.

"Cheer up," said Kirkham as he watched the long shadow of their tree creep slowly across the water-hole. "It'll be dark in an hour."

Morrison only groaned. He was not suffering the pangs of hunger, he was too ill for that; he was simply worn out and hopeless.

"At dusk," he said, "those devils will come on again, and God knows we won't have much chance then."

Kirkham agreed with him, and turning over tried to sleep a little longer. He would save all his strength, for he had a journey before him if they succeeded in keeping off the enemy tonight. But sleep would not come now, not even a doze, so he sat up, and leaning against the tree kept watch.

And just as the sun was setting and the shadows had grown long and deep as contrasted with the bright sunlight, the place grew fairly alive with naked blackfellows, up on the bank above, down on the other side of the water-hole, swarming through the scrub all round; it seemed impossible they could ever escape. In the presence of danger Allan Morrison pulled himself together and struggled to his feet, supporting himself against the tree trunk, but though the blackfellows showed themselves freely and kept them on the alert, stealing round on every side, the lesson they had learned in the morning stood them in good stead, and they never came within range. Still it was terribly wearying, and Kirkham knew if it went on a little longer they could not hold out against it.

"Luckily," said Morrison, as if divining his thoughts, "they'll clear out as soon as it's dark."

"But they have us in a cage here."

"Still, I don't believe they'll come on. They're afraid of the bunyip so near the water."

Lower and lower sank the sun, and when at last his rim touched the horizon, the blacks, as it were, concentrated themselves for one last effort. They were not easy to see, those naked black figures, that seemed to understand how to assimilate themselves with the scrub and to take advantage of every bit of cover, but the two lonely men seemed to feel their presence all around them. There was a strange rustling in the scrub, a breath of wind sighed

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mysteriously, a twig snapped on the bank above, some pellets of earth fell down, gently, slowly, silently, as if afraid to break the stillness. Kirkham moved uneasily, and Morrison sighed heavily.

"I think," he said, "there's something in that patch of scrub just on top of the bank, Ned. If we don't do something now it's all up. You pot at the ti-tree, and I'll go for that dark shadow by the log over there."

A sharp cry followed the crack of the rifles and Kirkham knew if he had not killed his man he had at least wounded him severely, while Morrison, in the fierce joy of battle, forgot for a moment his pain and stepped out quite briskly.

"Killed my man, by Jove!" he cried. "I saw him topple over behind the log without a sound. Now we're safe till morning."

Down sank the sun behind the horizon and the darkness came swiftly upon them, sweeping over the land like a great cloud.

"We're safe," said Kirkham, with a sigh, and even as he spoke a flight of spears came whistling about them in the dusk. Morrison sank down wearily.

"It's the last effort," he said. "They've done for the night now, I guess. Now, Ned, my boy, you can be off in a minute or two. The sooner the better. I shall be right as ninepence till you come back."

It might have been so, but Kirkham utterly refused to leave him there. It seemed to him too close to the danger they had just escaped. So, supporting him, they crept slowly down the creek under the shadow of the bank. Wounded as Morrison was they had done sixteen miles the night before, and it seemed to him that if they could accomplish the thirteen that still lay between them and McAlister's together, so much the better, but not half an hour after they had left their sheltering tree, Allan let himself sink on the ground, and refused to stir.

"I can't, indeed I can't — you don't know what agony it is. Keep straight on till you come to McAlister's, and then fetch them back for me."

"But suppose I get lost?"

"You can't if you stick to the creek. Keep straight on till you come to a water-hole with a post and rail fence round it. McAlister's is just above. Hurry on. So long, old chap."

Kirkham settled his comrade with his back to the bank, filled his water bottle, and left the rifles and all the remaining cartridges beside him.

"Good-bye, old chap," he echoed, wringing his hand, and then started on his weary march down the creek.

He was ravenous, he was weary with the constant labour and watchfulness of the past three days, but the knowledge that it was nearly ended, he was nearing his goal, and safety and comfort lay there, gave him fresh strength and courage, besides, Allan's life depended on him now. He could go but slowly, for it was very dark, darker than ever down in the bed of the creek, and the pitfalls by the way were numerous. Every sound, too, made him start painfully, there was something suspicious in the croaking of the frogs, the snapping of a twig, a rustling in the bushes overhead, a splash as he passed a water-hole; all sorts of fears and fancies assailed him. He might fall and break his leg, even a sprained ankle would ruin them both; he might miss his way; he might have done that already, and go walking on up the wrong creek until the black-fellows overtook him and murdered him, as they assuredly would. He had broken his revolver on the way down from Port Darwin; he had left his rifle behind with Morrison; he was unarmed, and if he did not reach McAlister's before morning he had little difficulty in

## Kirkham's Find

foretelling his fate. How strange and solemn it was there alone in the desolate bush. The night was full of sound, too — weird, strange noises, the cry of birds and of insects, the trickling of water as it flowed gently between the stones. Then the moon rose, and the dark shadows, contrasting with the brilliant white light, made the bush more weird than ever. Once the water stretched right across from bank to bank, and he was obliged to scramble up the steep bank and make his way through the scrub, and his progress was thus slower than ever, for however thick the scrub, he dared not lose sight of the creek, knowing as he did it was his only safeguard. His bushcraft was scanty, and many were the ghastly tales he had heard of men lost in the bush. It would be easy enough to get lost, he knew. Once lose sight of the watercourse and he could not be sure of finding it again, but it was slow progress, terribly slow, and the minutes seemed racing away. Once he stepped among a herd of sleeping cattle that rose and snorted and dashed away through the scrub and fern, bellowing in fright. It was the first token he had had since they left the hut of the presence of civilised man, and he hailed it with delight; but his heart sank again as he remembered that all the cattle within a radius of eighty miles probably belonged to McAlister, and the station was — it was eleven o'clock by his watch — surely it could not be four miles off now. He was all but dead beat, but still he struggled on, now walking in the bed of the creek itself, now pushing his way through the scrub and undergrowth that fringed the bank. Twelve, half-past, and still no sign of human habitation, and he sat down at length and gave way to despair. Not fourteen miles, and he had been walking since half-past seven. Had he missed his way? had he by some wonderful mischance got on the wrong creek? could he possibly have passed the station in the darkness? Overhead in the tree above a nightjar was crying, mournfully, "Mopoke, mopoke," and it seemed to him a very dirge.

"So long, old chap." How cheerfully Allan had spoken, so cheerfully, and yet the night must have had far more terrors for him lying there, helplessly waiting; and thinking of him. Kirkham rose and struggled on again.

The creek took a turn here, and as he rounded the bend he flung his hat in the air and gave vent to a wild hurrah, for there before his very eyes in the still white moonlight lay a large waterhole — pool he would have called it — and round it ran the welcome three-rail fence. Now at last he had reached his goal, his journey was ended — there was a singing in his ears and the whole landscape swam before his eyes. With a great effort he conquered his weakness, scrambled up the bank, crossed the fence, and fairly ran as fast as his failing strength would allow towards the buildings which stood in the middle of the paddock. McAlister's station was primitive in the extreme, and consisted of three small slab huts, from the nearest of which several nondescript cattle dogs dashed out, and loudly expressed their entire disapprobation of the presence of a stranger. Then a man appeared in the doorway, sleepily rubbing his eyes.

"Why — God bless my soul! Possum! Bounder! down dogs, down! Where the devil did you come from, mate?"

Kirkham stumbled up to the doorway, and sank down on the bench which is always at the door of an Australian hut.

"The blackfellows — the myalls — " he gasped. "They attacked our camp — Morrison's — and — and — I want help!"

"The h — they did! Rouse out, boys, rouse out! Hi! Some one call the boss! Now then, look alive there. You ain't gettin' ready for a funeral this trip."

Two other men appeared on the scene, and from the other hut came McAlister and his son — two raw-boned Scotchmen — and in a few broken words Kirkham managed to tell his tale. They gave him food and drink, and while two of them went for the horses the rest eagerly questioned him, and began making hasty preparations for setting out.

"Ou, ay, a ken the watter-hole weel eneuch," said old McAlister, as Kirkham tried to describe the water-hole where he had left his cousin. "Bunyip's hole we ca' it. It's no abune sax miles frae here, gin ye ride through Rum



## Kirkham's Find

Jungle, but I'm no sayin' ye were no wise to come by the creek, ou ay, it was the right gait for ye. Come now, can ye ride back and show us whaur ye left the laddie. I'm no blamin' him, but he were unco rash, I'm thinkin'."

By the time Kirkham had snatched a hurried meal, the horses were saddled and the men ready, and they set out through the bush, riding straight through the scrub, or, as McAlister called it, Rum Jungle.

"Ye cam' no sma' round, mate," said he. "If ye'd kened the way ye could ha' been here in less than twal hours, but if ye'd attempted it it's no improbable ye'd ha' ended your days there;" a statement which Kirkham, looking at the dense scrub, believed.

A new fear took possession of him now, lest he should be unable to point out where he had left Morrison, but the men rode steadily on, and in little over an hour they were looking over the creek, and the water-hole where he had spent all the day before gleamed unfamiliarly in the distance.

"I don't know --," he began.

"That's the Bunyip Waterhole, over there," said one of the men, indicating it with his whip handle, "and you come half a mile down. Well, he ought to be somewhere about here," and he put his hand to his mouth and gave a long shrill coo-ey.

There was a moment's silence, and Ned Kirkham could hear the beating of his own heart; then the reply came back a little way further down the creek.

Weary as he was, Kirkham reached the spot first.

"Allan, Allan," he said, and his voice was choked, "thank God you're all right!"

Morrison grasped his hand, and the moonlight showed the tears in his eyes.

"It's been such a long night," he said; "but I shall be able to dance at your wedding after all, old chap."

Kirkham smiled faintly. The strain was over now, and he hardly felt able to move. Sleep was overpowering him, and he sat down on a fallen log and leaned back against the bank and closed his eyes. Dim and far away he heard the voices of the rescue party discussing the situation, the younger men eager and anxious to follow up their advantage and punish the blacks there and then, McAlister, with Scotch caution, pointing out that he and Morrison could certainly be of no assistance, and exhorting them to wait a little. He did not hear the end of it, he had fallen into a deep sleep, and was only roused by a hand on his shoulder.

"Rouse out there, mon. They hotheaded laddies are away after the myalls. But ye twa'll just come awa' hame wi' me."

## CHAPTER VII. PHOEBE DECIDES ON HER FUTURE

Were it not better,  
Because that I am more than common tall,  
That I did suit me all points like a man?

As You Like It.

"I declare, Phoebe, those bees of yours are getting on splendidly. Do you think you'll have any honey?"

## Kirkham's Find

The hives were only gin cases ranged along the orchard fence on a roughly made stand and shaded by a still rougher shingle roof, a specimen of Phoebe's skill in carpentering, but this fine sunny day in December the bees were hard at work; the sound of their humming was in the air; they seemed healthy and well; they were her very own; her little scheme seemed on the way to success, and she was happier, she thought, than she had ever been in her life before.

"Honey? Of course they'll have honey. As soon as I get my allowance this month I'll buy a smoker, and then I'll be able to look at them and see if I ought to rob them, and — I wonder if I could afford a frame hive? That's what I ought to have. But it would cost at least a guinea, besides the trouble of getting it out here. I wonder if it would pay to have it, I believe it would."

"Oh, but you want a new dress, and you haven't a decent hat, and your boots — Have you looked at your boots lately?"

Phoebe glanced down at them.

"That's the worst of it," she sighed. "I want so many things, don't I? And I'm likely to go on wanting all the days of my life as far as I can see if I don't make the effort on my own account. Nan, I must do something. I'll get the hive."

"You can't dress yourself in a hive, silly. You can't wear it on your feet."

"I'm not so sure about that." Phoebe nodded her head sagely. Those six hives of bees, all her own, had done her this much good. She was beginning to have some faith in her own opinion. Had not they all scoffed at her when she hived that stray swarm, and yet, in spite of all drawbacks, here in the third summer were there not six hives in full working order? "If honey is a marketable commodity — " she began.

"If? But you know father says it isn't. He only laughed at you."

"I'm not sure I care much what father thinks, if he'll only let me alone."

"It seems to me," said Nancy, settling herself down on the grass and returning to the subject, "you want a good deal more than you can buy with your poor little £1 13s 4d, without thinking about hives or smokers or anything else."

"It would cost so little to set me going," sighed Phoebe. "Five pounds would be wealth, and ten pounds would just give me almost everything that I wanted. It is hard, isn't it? If it were one of the boys just wanted ten pounds to give him a start in life, it would be scraped up somehow, and I don't believe it would be such hard work either. I'm sure father puts that much into shares and loses it often, and just says nothing about it; but because I'm a girl — "

"You're expected to get married."

"No, I'm not. They're always impressing on me that no man is likely ever to want to marry me."

"But they expect you to get married all the same. The boys all declare you might have Mr Davidson if you went the right way about it."

"That old thing!" Phoebe stamped her foot on the ground and the tears of mortification came into her eyes. "A common old baldheaded thing like that who hasn't got an 'h' in his vocabulary. Anybody's good enough for me, evidently. They just don't want an old maiden sister to be dependent on them. They want to get rid of me."

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, shut up, Phoebe. You know he's got plenty of money, and you could just do whatever you liked. You needn't bother about him at all."

Phoebe turned on her sister in a blaze of anger.

"Nancy, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Oh, yes, I know — lots of women talk that way, but that doesn't make any better of it. It makes it worse. It's wicked, and if only I were a good-looking, handsome woman — "

"Well, Phoebe, if you were — "

"Oh, mother, I didn't see you!"

"No, I know you didn't. You were too busy declaiming. I'll just tell you what, though, Phoebe, if you stand full in the sun like that, with your hat on the back of your head, your complexion will just be ruined. My mama used to say — "

"Phoebe don't care," put in Nancy, hastily.

All the family hated to hear their maternal grandmother quoted. She had been dead for many years, and they were not prepared to accept her opinions as gospel, and their mother did not like it if they hinted, as they not unfrequently did, that the old lady's opinions were a little out of date.

"Phoebe don't care," went on Nancy. "She thinks — "

"But she ought to care," sighed Mrs Marsden, seating herself on the grass beside her younger daughter, and surveying the elder one somewhat discontentedly, "and looks are so important to a woman. A man well sunburnt looks nice, but a woman — " Mrs Marsden shook her head. She could not put into words what she thought of a sunburnt woman. "It looks so — so common," she got out at last.

Phoebe laughed.

"Goodness me, mother, is that all? I don't mind one bit being common. It seems to me the common folks have the best of it. The girls you call common have real good times, while we, while I — " "I'm sure I don't know what you want," sighed her mother. "I suppose you're just as well off as most other girls like you, and if you want more money you've only got to — there's Mr Davidson would, I'm sure, if you went the right way — "

"other, how dare you," cried Phoebe. "You're as bad as the rest. Just because that wretched old man came out here the last two Sundays and paid me a little attention, to go on like that. It's indecent, that's what it is. You don't know how I hate — "

"But, my dear child," Mrs Marsden began, persuasively, "I just must speak to you about that. I came out on purpose."

"Then for goodness sake, mother, hold your tongue."

"Nonsense, Phoebe," said her mother, tartly, "that's not the way to speak to me. Sit down at once and listen to what I've got to say. I'm only speaking for your good."

Phoebe sat down reluctantly beside her sister.

## Kirkham's Find

"It was impossible for us to help noticing what great attention Mr Davidson paid you last Sunday. Now a man like he is is bound to mean something. He's not a young flippant — "

"He's forty if he's a day," said Phoebe, sullenly.

"Well, what if he is? It's a very good sensible age, and he evidently wants to marry you, Phoebe."

"I don't care if he does," said Phoebe, still sullen. It was no compliment to be admired by Mr Davidson. "He'll just have to want, I'm afraid."

"Phoebe, how can you be so recklessly foolish? He isn't rich, but he is fairly well-to-do, and you would be comfortably settled in life."

"I don't like him," said Phoebe, conscious how feeble the objection would sound in her mother's ears, but anxious, if possible, not to shock her.

"Oh, but you'd get to like him in time. A girl always likes a man who's good to her after she's married."

"It's so rare, I suppose," said Phoebe, bitterly. "Anyhow, I'm not going to marry any man on the chance of getting to like him afterwards."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I'm going to love the man I marry with all my heart and soul and body."

"Phoebe!" Mrs Marsden had an idea her daughter was quoting from the Bible, and she thought it was sacrilegious; she was quite sure that it was indecent for any young girl to talk like that, therefore she said again with deeper displeasure in her voice, "Phoebe!"

"Well, mother, what's wrong now?"

"I hate to hear you speak like that. Of course a woman loves her husband, we all know that. You would love Mr Davidson once you said 'yes' to him."

"Well then, mother, I'm going to love the man I marry long before I say 'yes' to him. Love don't come just because a man asks you to marry him."

"When girls are properly brought up — " began perplexed Mrs Marsden.

"Then, mother, do just suppose for a change I'm properly brought up — I'm sure you did your best — and tell me what you want?"

"I want you to be civil to Mr Davidson, not turn your back on him and leave the room like you did yesterday. It would be such a comfort to me, such a load off my mind if I knew you were comfortably settled in life."

"Poor mother," Phoebe said, pityingly; she was so conscious of her mother's hard life, she understood her difficulties so thoroughly, and she would have helped to the very utmost of her ability, but sacrifice herself in his way she could not. "I'm sorry, mother, indeed I am, but I couldn't marry Mr Davidson, even if he asked, which he hasn't done."

"But, Phoebe," cried Mrs Marsden, desperately, "what do you suppose will become of you?"

## Kirkham's Find

"Indeed, I don't know," said that young lady, with a heavy sigh; "it's a thing that troubles me a great deal."

"You know your father can't leave you anything. It's as much as we can do to manage now, and how the boys are to be started in life I'm sure I don't know. And you -- well, you're twenty-four, Phoebe, you're no longer young, and if you don't take this chance -- "

"Mother," interrupted Phoebe, bitterly, "a man at twenty-four is little more than a boy. Why must you talk as if I'm quite old, and my life was over?"

"So it is for a woman, for an unmarried woman twenty-five is old, and her life is practically over, she can't pick and choose after five-and-twenty, and you'll be that very soon. Now if you take this chance -- "

"Well, then, mother, if I take this chance, as you call it, I'll just tell you what'll happen. I'd be well-dressed, to begin with; I might travel and see something of the world; I'd be much more entertaining and at my ease when I wasn't wondering if people were noticing how shabby my boots were, and how very old-fashioned and unbecoming my dress, and you always say a young married woman is more attractive and entertaining than a girl -- "

"Indeed she is," said Mrs Marsden, with hearty assent; "you would really have a good time, Phoebe; I'm glad you're beginning to see things in their proper light. I always say you're not bad looking, you know I do, but you want to be well-dressed, you don't look well in any simple little thing like Nancy."

"And," went on Phoebe, utterly ignoring her mother's remarks, "when I become so attractive, some one would likely fall in love with me; and if he did -- I'm not accustomed to that sort of thing you know -- I'd be pretty sure to fall in love with him, and then I should certainly run away with him and -- "

"Phoebe, how dare you say such a wicked thing! I'm ashamed that a child of mine should be so wicked, so improper, so -- "

"That's just exactly what I want to avoid. I'm just telling you what would happen if I did that, as sure as the sun will rise to-morrow."

"You are talking in an unladylike, improper manner, a way in which you have no business to speak to me. I can forgive you, because I know you don't understand what you are saying."

"Don't I?" said Phoebe. "I understand thoroughly."

"Then you -- "

"Oh, I grant you it isn't pretty, but I must show you I do understand."

"No lady ever talks of leaving her husband; of loving another man; of running away with him."

"Doesn't she? She does it instead, then. At least, I should."

"Phoebe, I will not have you speak in that way to me."

"Which way? Oh, you're shocked because I talked of running away with the man I loved. I suppose you do grant, mother, there is such a thing as love in the world."

## Kirkham's Find

"Every nice woman loves her husband," admitted Mrs Marsden, cautiously, "but the way in which you talk about love, no lady, no nicely brought up — "

"Then I can't be nicely brought up," sighed Phoebe. "I can't help what you think, mother; but it's not good my shutting my eyes to the world around me, and the majority of the world ain't ladylike, or nicely brought up either. No, nobody ever fell in love with me, but I can't shut my eyes to the fact that there is such a thing in the world, and that it is a very mighty, powerful factor indeed in the lives of men and women; and I think it would be much better to bring girls up to recognise that fact, instead of ignoring it altogether, and calling it indecent to refer to it."

"Where a child of mine could have got such notions!" sighed Mrs Marsden, hopelessly, turning to Nancy for sympathy.

"They're true, mother, they're right, I feel they are. Because nobody's fallen in love with me, and nobody's likely to, because I'm plain and uninteresting, why should I deny that there is such a good thing for some women? There is, I know there is. And let me tell you, mother, you think it's shocking to talk of running away with the man you love, and living with him — "

Mrs Marsden shut her eyes, as if it were impossible for her to conceive of such a thing — as if she preferred to shut it out from her thoughts altogether.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not advocating such a thing. I'm sure it's very wrong, and somebody would have to pay in the end, probably the woman; but what I do say, and I stick to it, mother, mind, no matter what anybody says, it's a far more decent thing to do than to marry a man for the sake of getting married, of having a house and position, and enough money, of — of — I would have more respect for — "

"Stop, Phoebe," said her mother, interrupting angrily, "I know where you get those ideas from. I won't have that indecent magazine article quoted to me again."

"The ideas are in the air," said Phoebe, gloomily. "I only wish I had more opportunities of hearing about them. Well, mother, I won't say any more if you don't like it, but I had to explain to you why I couldn't marry Mr Davidson, barring, of course, the good solid reason that he hasn't asked me."

Mrs Marsden looked across at her eldest daughter. She was excited now, as she very seldom was, and her dark eyes were bright; there was a colour in her cheeks, and between her parted lips her teeth showed strong, regular, milk-white. Truly not a bad looking young woman at all, if there was nothing girlish about her. She herself had married at eighteen, and all her fresh, girlish prettiness had faded long before she was Phoebe's age; but there was nothing faded about this young woman, undeveloped, maybe, but faded certainly not.

"Well, Phoebe, you're getting on, you know, and if you won't have him what will you do? At your age you can't expect much."

"Oh, mother, why must I be old at twenty-four? I feel quite young; I feel as if I could do anything; why must I be old?" and Phoebe sprang to her feet and stretched out her strong young arms.

"Every unmarried woman is old at five-and-twenty. 'Tisn't likely she'll have any chances of marrying after that."

"There are other things in the world besides marrying, I suppose?" said Phoebe, "plenty of women don't marry; must all their lives be empty and uninteresting just because of that?"

"You said yourself the greatest good was to be loved, and you can't expect after five-and-twenty — "

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, mother, I don't think we understand each other a bit. To love and be loved I'm sure it's the best thing; but that don't often happen. If a man loves a girl tremendously, and marries her, and then finds out afterwards, as he'd be pretty sure to do, that she married him because she wouldn't have another chance after she was five-and-twenty, he — well — I don't see how his love could last."

"A good woman always loves a man who's kind to her when he's her husband," said Mrs Marsden, sententiously. "You don't understand, Phoebe."

"Don't I? Well, that's not what I mean when I talk about love being the best thing in the world; and I expect the poor man would be a bit disappointed too. He married her because she was more to him than anything else in the world; and she likes him because he's her husband, and she's a good woman, and good women always love their husbands when their husbands are kind to them. No, mother, my perfect love couldn't exist under those conditions."

"You're talking foolishly, Phoebe. You go on about perfect love, and then you acknowledge you don't expect to get it. What do you want, then?"

"I want to be able to do without marrying. I want to be somebody, to do something in the world. Well, mother, there, I really believe I just want to be able to earn my own living."

"What nonsense you talk, Phoebe; you can't do any such thing. A lady loses caste at once if she attempts anything of the sort."

"Much that would trouble me if I could only earn £200 a year."

"Don't speak in that tone."

"No, I won't, I beg your pardon," said Phoebe, penitently, "but oh, I wish I was a man. I'd be young enough then, and I'd have all the world before me."

"You'd find it very hard to earn your own living."

"Very likely; but I wonder would I find it half as hard as not earning it; as sitting still with folded hands and hearing every day of my life what a burden I am, and how impossible it is to continue that munificent allowance of £1 13s 4d a month that has to clothe me, and find me in amusements and pocket money? No, I don't think it would be half as hard. There'd be something to look forward to then; something to hope for, however hard you worked, while now — " Phoebe spread out her hands. Words could not express the dull hopelessness of her life.

"What do you want, Phoebe?"

"I don't exactly know, I wish I did. I'm sure — I'm sure I wasn't put into this world to marry a man I don't care a snap of the finger for, or have my life practically ended before it has well begun. What have I to look forward to?"

"As much as most girls, I suppose; you're so discontented you don't enjoy the things other girls do. Why, it isn't a fortnight since Mrs Moore's dance!"

"If you call that pleasure," sighed Phoebe, gloomily, sitting down on the grass again; "I danced three times out of twenty dances, and nobody took me into supper at all. I was left alone, like a pelican in the wilderness, in the ball room."

## Kirkham's Find

"Now, Phoebe," remonstrated Nancy, "Charlie Baker asked you to go into supper. I saw him, and you were quite rude to him."

"As if I could go in with that brat of a boy about up to my shoulder, making myself look utterly ridiculous! No, thank you. Besides, Mrs Moore told him to, I saw her."

"Well, Phoebe, as I told you before, you can't expect to pick and choose; and if you want to be a favourite you ought to be civil to everybody. Now, Charlie Baker will speak against you and give you a bad name, and you don't know what influence his word may have. There are his cousins, the young Moores; you like them, they're nice looking young fellows, and Mrs Moore's brothers -- in time, you know, if people spoke well of you, said what a nice sort of girl that is, they would come along and talk to you and find you really could talk, and then -- "

"And meanwhile," said Phoebe, "the time is going on, and I'll soon be five-and-twenty, when no man will look at me. No, mother, there are lots of unattractive girls in the world like me; heaps of them who don't enjoy a party a bit, only they say they do because to do the other thing would be to acknowledge they didn't get any attention, and were regular wall-flowers. Well, there isn't any sham about me. It isn't nice, but I know quite well I'm not attractive and -- "

"Phoebe, I wish you wouldn't be so blunt. If you're not attractive it's your own fault."

"No, it isn't. Do you think I like it? I don't know a more miserable feeling than sitting there knowing all the other girls are getting their programmes full, and you know well enough yours will be empty long after supper. I'm always so ashamed of myself, I feel I want the earth to open and swallow me up. And you call that pleasure! I think a ball is just one long series of mortifications to lots of girls, only they won't own up."

"You're so strange," murmured her mother. She did not like the blunt way her daughter talked, and yet to argue with Phoebe was beyond her. "I'm sure I always enjoyed balls when I was young. I always had lots of bouquets sent me: one ball, the race ball at Ashton, where I met your father, I had three, and my programme was full before I entered the room."

"How you would have hated meeting father, if you'd only known," ejaculated Nancy, flippantly.

But Phoebe paid no heed, and went on, "Then you enjoyed them, and were quite right to go, but for me it's just a farce calling it enjoyment; it's all mortification, and I'm not going to any more. The young men and girls seem to get on all right and enjoy themselves, and yet, whenever I hear what they're talking about, it just seems so feeble and silly."

"You're always wanting to talk books. It's ridiculous, as Stanley says; men don't like it."

"Well, mother, don't you think we might decide comfortably that I can't get on with men, and they'd better be left out of my future calculations?"

"Mr Davidson," murmured Mrs Marsden, as a sort of forlorn hope.

"If you mention him again," said Phoebe, decidedly, not to say rudely, "I'll just go off and see if I can't get a situation at the 'Shearer's Arms.' I know they want a cook there," and she turned on her mother such a defiant, glowing face that Mrs Marsden thought again her eldest daughter was not bad looking; and, comforted somewhat, reflected that she really was too good for Mr Davidson, and perhaps might not be quite faded when the fatal five-and-twenty was passed.



## Kirkham's Find

"Very well, Phoebe," she said, meekly and resignedly, "then, perhaps, you'll tell me what you do want? It's miserable to have you going on like this, so discontented."

"I want to earn my own living, to be quite independent; I don't care how little I earn at first, if I can go on improving, like a man. I want to earn enough to be sure of being comfortably off in my old age; to be decently dressed, you know and be able to travel about a little, and buy books and have money to give away, and — "

"Anything else?" asked Nancy, sarcastically.

"Well, no. That would about do me, I think," said Phoebe, ignoring the sarcasm. "If I didn't marry then, it wouldn't matter a bit. I'd be a great deal better off than half the women who marry because they must," and Phoebe was quite complacent over her little castle in the air, which was built on such very shaky foundations.

"It's all very well," said her mother; "it sounds all right as you put it, but the thing doesn't work out in practice."

"Oh, yes, it will."

"How then?"

"I shall try with bees."

"Phoebe! What nonsense!"

"It isn't nonsense, it's sober earnest."

"But how? I really can't afford to give you more than a penny a pound for the honey. I'm sorry, dear, because you work hard at them; but really the boys do eat it so fast, six pounds goes no way."

"I'm not going to sell it to you, mother, dear," said Phoebe, with a superior air. "I wouldn't even if you gave fourpence a pound for it."

"But, Phoebe — "

"But, mother, it's no good going in for a thing unless you go in for it on a business basis. I shall sell my honey where I can get the highest price. At the grocer's or the chemist's."

"Hammond would make an allowance on his bill — "

"No, mother," interrupted Phoebe, decisively, "this is my business — really and truly, my object in life — I wish you'd understand. For the future I shall make all my old clothes do. Yes, I know they're in the last stages of shabbiness, but twenty pounds a year won't do much towards improving my wardrobe, so I shall just spend it on bee necessities. I shall see how I can extract the honey, put it into nice clean jars, and sell it where I can get the highest price, and get cash down, too."

"But, Phoebe — so undignified, so unbecoming in a lady — I don't know what your father will say."

"Not half as undignified or as unladylike as sitting in a ballroom in shabby clothes, wondering if any one's going to have pity on you and ask you to dance, and as for father! I don't care much what he thinks. If I'm successful and well dressed it'll be all right whatever I do. At present it's all wrong, and he couldn't have a worse opinion of me."

"You know, Phoebe — "

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, yes, I know, I heard him this morning. 'Your daughters marry! Phoebe marry!' in tones of deepest contempt. You'd have thought he'd had nothing to do with our presence in this world, we don't belong to him in the least. But I don't count him in. If I succeed he'll be all right and go on as if he had prophesied it all along, and if I don't he won't be any worse than he is now. See, mother?"

"Yes, but — oh, Phoebe, I don't like it, it's so unladylike. How will you arrange about selling it? And your father will never take it in the buggy."

"I shan't ask him. Bateman, next door, I daresay will do it for me; it will only be a little at first, and when I get a lot I'll pay him for it; and as for selling it, I'll just go from one shop to another till I see where I can get the highest price."

"Oh, Phoebe!" and Mrs Marsden sighed. It was so contrary to all her notions of propriety. She felt as if Phoebe was cutting herself adrift from all decent society by even contemplating such a thing. If Mrs Marsden could have arranged the world to her satisfaction, she would have had enough money to buy herself four new silk dresses a year, with bonnets and etceteras to match, and her daughters should also have been prettily dressed in the fashion suitable to their age. They would have been pretty girls, had she had the making of them, with pretty manners, never given to slang and never, no never, given to airing such extraordinary opinions as Phoebe did. They should have been able to play a little, to sing a little, to paint a little, just enough to decorate their homes, and when they reached the ages of eighteen or nineteen, certainly before they were twenty, some nice-looking, gentlemanly young man should come along as a husband, who, if he were not rich, should at least have enough to keep them comfortably.

Poor Mrs Marsden! And the reality was so unlike her desires. She got up and brushed the grass seeds from her dress.

"Well, you can try, Phoebe," she said, with a heavy sigh, "but you ought to thoroughly understand you will utterly cut yourself off from society, more if you succeed than if you fail."

"Oh, mother! Won't you ever understand? I've been trying all this while to show you how very little charm society, as I see it, has for me."

"Well, you cut yourself off from it entirely. And if it isn't very much here in Ballarat, it is different in Melbourne. They'll never ask you to the Government House balls."

"They never do now," laughed Phoebe. "We've never got beyond the garden party."

"Well, but there was always the chance that they might. Your father is such a striking-looking man that I'm sure if the Governor saw him he'd recognise at once his right to be asked. But it's no good talking. It's nearly time for the children's tea. Whose turn is it to get it? Yours, Nancy. Then for goodness sake don't be late with it tonight. It always makes your father cross if he comes home and finds the children's tea going on," and Mrs Marsden went slowly back to the house, hardly knowing whether to be glad or not, but very certain that her mission had failed and that her eldest daughter was the most obstinate woman in the world.

"I wonder," said Phoebe, thoughtfully, "if they'd continue to ask us to Government House garden party if they knew we got the children's tea regularly. It's much worse than selling honey."

"Oh, it's so genteel," laughed Nancy. "Just genteel poverty. There's nothing unladylike in getting the children's tea, so long as you don't tell any one you do it. It's the telling as does it."

## CHAPTER VIII. HOPE DEFERRED

The thirsty land is lying scorch'd and dreary,  
O'er hill and valley and outstretched plain;  
The hearts of men are waxing faint and weary;  
God send Thy rain!

ANONYMOUS.

It was some time before Allan Morrison recovered from his wound and the toilsome journey to McAlister's station. The young fellows who had come to the rescue had punished the blacks in a summary and indiscriminate manner, riding down on the camp in the early morning just before dawn and shooting right and left, anything that came within range. That is the way they do things in the back blocks when their blood is up and there is nobody to ask inconvenient questions. And nobody at McAlister's did ask any questions when they returned at mid-day and reported the myalls as "dispersed." Morrison was too ill and Kirkham was just in that mood when he felt that nothing was too bad for the men who had so treacherously attacked them. When his cousin was well enough to be left, he and McAlister made an expedition to the scene of the disaster and found, as they expected, that the only trace of man's occupation was the hole in the ground. The hut had been burnt to the ground, and a black patch on the soil only showed where it had stood.

Kirkham went sorrowfully back again. He had put his little all into the venture and was loth to abandon it as the cautious Scotchman advised.

"It's too far oot, mon, too far oot. Bide a wee till the country's mair settled."

"Bless the man, as if it won't be too late then," said Morrison. "When all Australia is swarming there there won't be much show for us. No, I'm game to try again, Ned, if you are."

"We had a pretty tough struggle for it," said Kirkham, doubtfully, thinking of that long, weary tramp with the blackfellows dogging them.

"Oh, we weren't careful enough," said his cousin. "I thought with poor old Webb there wasn't a chance of danger. Now we know, we should start on quite a different basis. There really isn't much danger from the blacks if you're prepared for them, is there, McAlister?" he asked, appealing to one of the old man's sons who was smoking in the doorway.

"No," he said, "no. I know the old man thinks there is, but he's a canny Scotchman. If you're sure there's gold there I wouldn't mind joining you myself. We'll find it slow work growing rich here on cattle."

That settled the matter. If Sam McAlister, who knew the country better than any other man, were willing to join them, Kirkham felt he could not hang back. Besides he had put so much money into the venture he could hardly afford to give up now. He thought the matter over in all lights. He needed money badly. His little capital was all but expended, and this offered at least a chance of wealth. Yes, he would go.

"It's our last chance," he said, gloomily. "If we don't get gold, Allan, what the devil is to become of us?"

"I guess we'll have to ride tracks for the first man who'll give us a billet."

"After all there's not much else left for us to do now," said Ned Kirkham, "unless we take up land and start a cattle station of our own."

## Kirkham's Find

"Well, I suppose there's not much to stop us from taking up land, but, hang it all, man, how are you going to stock it?"

Kirkham laughed.

"Funds won't run it, eh? Well, I suppose there's nothing for it but to try that blessed claim again."

When they were alone Morrison asked his cousin another question.

"Look here, Ned, what about that little girl down south?"

"Well, what about her?" and Kirkham blushed through the sun tan on his cheek.

"Ain't you going to -- to -- propose to her?"

"How the dickens can I when I haven't got a cent to my name."

"You will have when we get that gold."

"When?" There was a slight scornful ring in his voice which made the other man assert vehemently the absolute certainty of that gold, and Kirkham asked again, "What shall I do, Allan?"

"About Nancy Marsden? Why the dickens don't you write to her and ask her if she'll have you? She will, I'll be bound. At least if her sister's to be trusted."

"But about papa? There's that to be considered, you see."

"Oh, hang papa. Time enough for that when you get her answer. Man alive, if I had your chance," and Morrison drew a deep breath.

Kirkham turned away impatiently. It was all very well for Allan to talk, but the chance was not his. He had nothing to offer, how could he write? And he marched up and down the verandah smoking furiously and trying to work out in his own mind some good way of letting Nancy Marsden know all his hopes and fears. It was impossible, he told himself forty times a day, and he told himself the same thing over again when once more they made their way to their abandoned claim on Baker's Creek and began their old work anew.

There were just the three of them this time, Kirkham, Morrison, and old McAlister's youngest son, Sam, a lad of three-and-twenty, who went in with them because, as he said, it was so deadly slow on the station, the chance of getting out of it was worth something.

It was duller here, if possible, eighty miles beyond the station. They built their hut close to the water's edge this time, remembering how dear that hundred yards had cost them before, and they cleared away every vestige of cover for pretty nearly half a mile round. But their former foes might have vanished from the face of the earth for all they saw of them, not a vestige, not a sign of them was there, and the tame blacks on McAlister's station reported that the myalls had cleared out for a hundred miles back. Still Kirkham never felt quite happy working at that claim. Down below, in the heat and darkness, he expected to find the bucket jerked up hurriedly so that he might join the others in defending the camp, and he speculated as to what would be the end supposing the blacks did attack while two of them were below and they killed the man on top. They were not profitable speculations by any means, and he did not know that it was any better when it was his turn to stop above ground. At first the cry of a bird or beast made him start, a splash in the water-hole alongside sent his rifle to his shoulder, and at early morning he would awake with the firm conviction he heard stealthy footsteps creeping round the hut. But nothing

## Kirkham's Find

happened. No myalls made their appearance, and at the end of the first week he had grown accustomed to it, and at the end of a fortnight was as careless as young McAlister himself. Siting there on the bench at the door smoking his pipe after the long, hot day was done, he grew to count on that gold as a certainty. It was the one thing that could give him all he wanted, the one thing that could send him freedom, and civilisation, and the girl he loved, and the other side of the shield was so dreary he dared only look on this one. Morrison believed in it, young McAlister believed in it, poor Tretherick had believed in it, why should not he? There seemed no reasonable doubt, and each day saw the end approaching closer.

Young McAlister rode over to his father's for the mails and brought back a pile of English letters for Kirkham, and one solitary letter with a Victorian stamp on it for Morrison, and when he had seen the postmark Kirkham was ready to barter his goodly pile for that letter. Morrison read it carefully, then tossed it over to his cousin.

"It concerns you more than me, old man. She was a good girl to keep her word and write," and he sighed as he refilled his pipe.

The sun was just setting, and his long, level beams were turning the water-hole into a lake of gold. A flock of wild duck — wild duck from the far interior, for they were not scared by the presence of man — dropped down on it, and Kirkham watched them as he took the letter from Allan's hand.

"That's a bad sign," said McAlister, watching them too. "There must be a drought out back there. I don't know but what this hole might dry up."

"Oh, you be hanged, man," laughed Morrison, "it'll more than last out our time. We'll come to the wash-dirt in another week at the rate we're going at present."

Then Kirkham opened Phoebe Marsden's letter and read it. It was a kindly, friendly letter, telling Morrison all the little news about the place she thought might interest him, but chiefly, as if she knew this topic was the most interesting of all to her correspondent, dwelling on Nancy and her doings.

"Last Friday, for a wonder," she wrote, "I went to a dance at the Moores', just because Mrs Moore wouldn't take 'No' for an answer. I can't say I enjoyed it much, my dress wasn't very nice. I daresay you will laugh at that since you are in a place where they don't think much of dress, but I'm sure you will be interested to hear that Nan wore pink and looked sweetly pretty. Mrs Moore's brother, a Mr Sampson, a very solemn sort of lawyer, who I daresay might be awfully nice if you got to know him, seemed to take a great fancy to her and regularly persecuted her for dances. His sister told me yesterday it was a case of love at first sight, and of course it would be a great thing for Nan. But then, unfortunately — I don't know whether I ought to say anything, but I expect you know as well as I do where Nan's heart went to. I used to think he was fond of her, and, of course, when two people are fond of each other there's nothing more to be said; but if he doesn't care for her, why I do think she might grow to care for Mr Sampson. I suppose you think it's early days yet for me to talk like this, but I only go by what his sister said, and I cannot help thinking it would be a great thing for Nancy. I suppose you'll set me down as awfully mercenary, but she is so pretty and does lead such a dull life and I should like to see her happily married." And then she went on to tell about her brothers and the other children, and the progress the bees were making; but the whole post might only have consisted of those few sentences as far as Kirkham was concerned.

His pipe went out as he read, the sun went down and darkness fell upon the land, and then he tossed the letter back to its owner.

"Well?" said Morrison.

"I don't think it is well," said Kirkham, and they said no more till McAlister, tired out with the day's long ride, flung himself down on the bunk and went fast asleep. Then Kirkham asked abruptly —

## Kirkham's Find

"Old man, do you think she'll marry him?"

There was no need for names, the simple pronoun was enough. Morrison thought a second.

"Not just at once," he said. "But if it goes on she's bound to. Everything is in his favour."

"Hang it all! If we'd only got the wash—dirt. Old man, do you think I've the ghost of a chance?"

"Of course, a great deal more than a ghost of a chance. You see what her sister says."

"Her sister. She doesn't mention names, she might mean you."

"Rats! She might mean Sam McAlister there, but she don't. Why don't you go in and win, old chap?"

"Why don't you?"

"I would if I was in your shoes, as Phoebe Marsden knows right well, but I'm not."

Ned Kirkham marched slowly up and down outside in the gloom listening to the mournful cry of the curlews, then he formed a sudden resolution, went inside, lighted a candle, and sitting down at the rough table wrote a letter to Nancy Marsden. Thinking it over afterwards he never could quite recollect what he said in that letter, only he knew in impassioned words he told her the whole facts of the case, told of his poverty and his hopes and implored her to have pity on him and wait for him, swore that he loved her from the first moment he had seen her and would love her, whether she would have anything to do with him or not, for the rest of her life.

Then he put a hand on Morrison's shoulder and roused him from his sleep.

"Well," he said, grumpily. It was no good his lying awake thinking mournfully of fair-haired girls down south. "Oh, it's you, is it, Ned? Well, what the devil is the matter now? No more myalls?"

"No, but look here, Allan. I've just been writing to Nancy Marsden. And I'm going to ride into McAlister's tomorrow and send it off by the mail. I'll just be in time if I start tomorrow morning."

"Oh, you are, are you? Well, why couldn't have written before we left I'm sure I don't know. Now you'll knock up the horses and won't be fit for work yourself for a fortnight at the very least."

"Hang it all! It's a matter of the greatest importance. What will all the gold in the world be to me if I lose Nancy Marsden."

"Oh, all right, old man, who's disputing the fact. Go by all means. Only don't get lost. I daresay Sam and I'll get on very well without you."

So at dawn next morning Ned Kirkham had started for the homestead, and a week later he was back again wishing with all his heart he had not written.

"What will she think?" he asked his cousin, whenever he found himself alone with him. "Suppose, suppose they say it's like my bally cheek? It is, you know, after all."

"For heaven's sake, man, don't worry. You're worse than forty old women rolled into one. If she won't have you she won't and there's an end of it, and if she will you'll be wearing yourself into fiddlestrings because you can't set up housekeeping on twopence ha'penny a day. Anyway, the matter will be settled one way or another, and perhaps

## Kirkham's Find

you'll bring your massive mind to bear on the business we have in hand. We ought to be down to the wash-dirt some time next week if I know anything about the sign."

"And that'll settle the gold business?" asked Kirkham, anxiously.

"Y-e-s," said Morrison, dubiously. "That'll settle it in a way. But even if we don't find gold just at this spot, you know, we might by following up the wash-dirt."

They had finished for the night, and Sam McAlister was cooking the evening meal while his two mates sat on the bench outside the hut door and smoked furiously. It was very hot, so hot and still that the only sound that broke the stillness was the loud stridulation of the cicada and the crackling of the fire. Not a breath of wind stirred, and it seemed to have forgotten how to rain. McAlister shook a handful of tea into the billy of boiling water, lifted the frying-pan full of slices of salt beef off the fire and put it down in front of Morrison, and then raked the hot ashes off his damper.

"Now, Morrison," he said, "if you feel like doing the gentlemen I'll cart that pan inside and put the beef on a dish, but as your own particular girl ain't here to see I think you may as well eat it as it is."

"Right you are, old man," said Morrison. "It's too hot to go inside. Here, give us over the tea. I'll sugar it," and he put his arm through the square hole that did duty as window and taking a handful of sugar out of a jar that stood on the table put it into the billy. Sam McAlister brought out tin plates and pannikins and the rough meal began.

"We're just sinking to the level of savages," said Kirkham, discontentedly, as he lifted a slice of beef out of the frying-pan at his feet on to the plate on his knee, and deftly caught with his other hand the hunk of steaming damper McAlister tossed towards him. "What on earth would they say at home if they knew what pirates we've become?"

"Oh, they'd think it quite natural. They'd be disappointed if we weren't a little different. And, hang it all, Ned, what does it matter? Style never troubled me much."

"Nor me," said McAlister, who was lying on his face with his plate between his arms and his mouth full of salt beef and damper, "only let's get that gold next week and Kirkham can put on all the frill he pleases. But I say, if we're much longer about it, we'll have to begin carting water to wash the dirt in."

"There's the water-hole there," said Morrison, indicating it with his fork.

"There it won't be long," said Sam McAlister, coolly, "if this goes on. Haven't you noticed it shrinking? In another fortnight I don't believe there'll be anything but mud left."

"Good Lord! I thought it was permanent!"

"So did I," said McAlister, "but then I didn't reckon on weather like this. I thought it was going to be pretty bad when I saw so much wildfowl, but the last chap left yesterday. At least I haven't seen any since last night."

"Where have they gone?" asked Kirkham, curiously.

"Left for the sea, my son, I should imagine. Anyhow all the birds I've noticed are flying westward, and we always reckon that a sign of drought."

"And if there's a drought --- "

## Kirkham's Find

"Well, if there's a drought I reckon we'd better go seawards too. Anyhow, this place won't be habitable much longer."

Morrison hastily finished his pannikin of tea and, pushing his plate aside, walked a few paces to the water-hole. As his mate had said the water was shrinking fast. It was there truly, a patch right in the middle of the hole shimmering in the dusk, but all around it was a rim of mud baked hard by the burning sun. Last week it had been covered with waterfowl, but now the only living things about were the great blueblack crows perched on a tree over on the other side of the creek. He had noticed the absence of the duck today without attaching any particular significance to it, but now as he walked up and down he thought the matter over in his own mind.

It was dark now, quite dark, and the clear, cloudless sky was studded with golden stars; but he did not require their light, only too well was every feature of the landscape impressed on his mind; then a bright red light shone out behind the forest and he watched the full moon rise, red as blood even when she had crept out behind the fringe of trees and was sailing out in the sky. She seemed to mark out specially that little patch of water gleaming out from its fringe of yellow, clayey mud, to italicise it, to impress upon him as it had never been borne in upon him before, the smallness of that supply of water which he had looked upon as permanent. They had used it so lavishly too, and now, why Good God! There would not in another week, in another fortnight at most, be enough for them to drink, let alone washing the gold! And another week would bring them to the wash-dirt!

"Well, old man," Sam McAlister's voice came out from under the shadow of the hut, "one week's water and a week from the wash-dirt. What do you make of it?"

"Don't know what to make of it, Sam. Give it up. What do you think?"

"Well, the blamed water might hang out a fortnight, an' it'll be mighty strong pea soup by then, if we only use it for drinking, but what's the good of that if we can't wash the gold?"

"We'll have to dry blow it," said Morrison, a little less gloomily, "it'll be beastly unpleasant, but I don't see anything else for it."

"Lord send us the gold," said Sam, cheerfully, "and hang the unpleasantness. We'll cut a dash away down south and who'll care what happened up in the north here."

"No, it won't much matter," said Morrison, and he came and laid down close against the hut out of reach of the moonbeams, and tried to fancy that a faint cool breeze was coming up from the south.

And the next day broke hot and fierce, and the next, and the next, there was no change in the brazen sky overhead, no breath of cool wind, no promise of rain, and each day the water shrank more and more, grew more muddy and unpalatable, and the three men worked with feverish energy. At least they would know their fate before the drought drove them away. It was hard work under the blazing sun, but they were young and eager, and before the end of the week Morrison was hurraing like a lunatic for they had reached the long-looked-for wash-dirt, and the end was in sight.

"It's late, old chap," said Kirkham, reluctantly; "I suppose we'd better wait till tomorrow before we see what luck's got for us?"

Morrison glanced at the red streak in the west where the sun had just vanished, and rubbed his hand across his moist forehead.

"I reckon so, old man."



## Kirkham's Find

"An' I tell you what, chaps," said Sam McAlister with conviction, glancing first at the muddy water-hole and then at his two mates, "clear we'll have to tomorrow if there's a forty-pound nugget in that there wash-dirt. Look at the water. If it's like that, I reckon the rest of the creek's just a bed of sand, and there ain't nary a drop of water between here and the old man's place — nary a drop, I'll take my colonial on that."

There was reason in what he said. Go they must, but if they found, as they fondly hoped, gold, it would be a hard wrench. Kirkham and Morrison were almost too excited to think about eating, but McAlister was of a cooler nature, and set about making up a fire and boiling the quart pot for tea, just as if the morrow might not make them owners of untold wealth.

"'Twouldn't be a bad notion," said Sam, as he opened up the last tin of beef, "to clear out right now. We could say up at the station the place was a dead failure, and the drought cleared us out. Anyhow, no one's like to come along here weather like this. We can come back after the first rain; we'll find things just the same."

"No," said Morrison, "I'm hanged if I could stand that. I'm going to see what that wash-dirt's worth if I go all the eighty miles into your dad's station without one drop of water."

"All right," said Sam, "we'll see you through. But tomorrow we've got to go. We ought to have gone yesterday."

"All right."

Morrison and Kirkham were too anxious to talk. To Sam McAlister this was just an incident. If they found gold, well and good; he would have a jolly old spree down south; but it didn't much matter; it would do just as well six months hence as now, while, if they did not find even the colour, he would be no worse off than he was before. Born in the bush and bred in the bush, he would be content to ride tracks all the days of his life; all he wanted was a little more money to make a splash with, and whether he got it or no was not of very much moment.

But with the other two it was different. They were not bushmen born and bred; they longed for the comforts and luxuries of civilisation; they had staked everything on this venture. Tomorrow — what would tomorrow bring them? If they had succeeded — If they had failed — The tinned beef was dry and unpalatable, so it seemed to Kirkham, and he turned away when Sam handed him the tin to help himself, and went and gazed gloomily over the water-hole, which was little more than liquid mud now. Morrison joined him.

"Old man, it's the most cursed luck."

"It is, Ned."

"How much cash have we left?"

"Ten pounds, all told."

"And if this turns out all right — God! it must turn up trumps — what'll we do till after the rains?"

"Ride tracks for old McAlister or anybody else who'll have us. It's Hobson's choice with us."

Kirkham groaned.

"Don't lose heart, old man," said Allan Morrison, kindly. "I know it's beastly hard on you, but there's always this hole to fall back upon. It won't take any harm standing still for the next three or four months, and then — and then —"

## Kirkham's Find

"Suppose it's no good?"

Kirkham's voice was almost a whisper.

"Don't think that — don't think that for a moment; but tomorrow'll show, anyhow. We'll get a good sleep tonight."

It is doubtful whether Morrison did sleep; it is certain Kirkham never closed an eye. It meant so much to him. Even suppose this claim promised well tomorrow, only just promised — suppose it were a certainty, he must wait at least six months for fruition, and in six months — in six months what might not happen? If Nancy Marsden would not have him, well then he might just as well go to the devil by the quickest road; but suppose she would — suppose she would, and he had to keep her waiting a year, a whole year, without seeing her. It seemed to him his blood ran cold at the thought. Sweet Nancy, dear Nancy, lovable Nancy, other men would come wooing her — oh, he knew it, he knew it. She would flirt with them, trifle with them — oh, he knew that too, dearly as he loved her, and was there not danger, might she not be won to forget him? He could hold her, he felt his power over her as long as he were by her side, but was it strong enough to stretch over these wide leagues that separated them and keep her for himself? He doubted — he doubted, and yet he would hardly acknowledge it even to himself, and he lay on the ground and stared up at the stars, golden points in the velvet sky; he dug his hands into the hard-baked soil and prayed with all his might — not because he had much faith, but because there was nothing else left to do — that tomorrow would at last bring him a gleam of hope.

And the night wore on slowly — slowly; and at last, just as he had fallen into an uneasy doze, up leapt the sun: the hot, fierce day was upon them again, and Morrison was eagerly calling to him to get up and try their luck.

There are no toilets in the bush; at least it is certain there were none on Baker's Creek that morning. Kirkham jumped up fully dressed, stretched himself, ran his fingers through his hair, pulled on his butcher boots, and joined his cousin and McAlister, who were already standing over the little heap of wash-dirt they had brought up the night before. There was no question of washing it; the water left was of the consistency of thick pea-soup, and in quantity would hardly suffice to give them a drink of tea each.

"We'll have to make shift to dry blow somehow," said Morrison, thoughtfully.

"Do you know the way?" asked Sam McAlister, "for I'm blest if I do."

"Well, I've never seen it done; but I've heard poor Tretherick tell how they used to do it up Mount Brown way."

"Mount Brown?" asked Kirkham, thoughtfully. Not that he cared in the least where Mount Brown was or what they did there; but his anxiety was so intense he was ashamed the others should see all that this gold meant to him.

"Yes, Mount Brown, up Broken Hill way. Haven't you ever heard tell of it? They don't ever look for water in that Godforsaken place, and they always dry blow. Well, here goes. First of all, I think we want a nice smooth, hard piece of ground to work up this dirt fine on."

Sam McAlister looked round.

"There's the ticket right in front of the door," he said. "We may as well do it there. The dust'll get into the drarin'-room an' spile the furniture, but as we're a-movin' at once that won't matter. Cart it along, old man."

They had no barrow, but they brought the earth along in buckets and upset it at the door; then with their spades they worked it about till it was as fine as dust.

"What now?" asked Kirkham at length, pausing to wipe his hot forehead.

## Kirkham's Find

"We want a little more wind," said Morrison, looking round. "It ain't likely to come for the wanting," said Sam McAlister. "If we can't do without it we'll have to clear — prompt, too. We're stoppin' too long as it is."

"Oh, I daresay we can manage. We've only got two tin dishes, haven't we? Well, we'll have to make shift with the frying-pan and the billy, or anything else we can lay our hands on. The idea is to put this fine earth into one tin dish, and holding it high up in the air, pour it down into another. If there's a good high wind it ought to blow all the fine earth away in time, and, after doing it over and over again till you're pretty well full up of the job, at last, you come to the gold."

"The devil you do," laughed Sam McAlister. "I hope that last's a true bill. Come on, mates, let's try our luck."

It was very hot, and it was tedious, tiring, dirty work. Soon they were covered in a thick coating of fine red dust, which got into their eyes and ears, into their hair and beards, and made them cough and sneeze as they drew it in with every breath. Kirkham and Morrison held each a tin dish and poured steadily from one to the other, while Sam McAlister made use of the only other available utensils, the frying-pan and the billy, and poured his little share from one to the other. He worked very rapidly, and soon not a particle of his earth remained save a few hard little clods, which he piled up discontentedly.

"Say, old man," he said, "it ain't no go at all. My blessed arms air nearly worked out of their sockets, and there ain't nary a sign."

"I reckon," said Morrison, out of the cloud of red dust that enveloped him and his cousin, "you worked too fast and chucked it all away if there was any. Easy does it. You don't expect to find a nugget as big as your fist."

"Well, I'm blest," said Sam, "if I don't, I guess I'd as soon tail cattle all the days of my life as do this sort of thing for tucker."

"It won't need to be near as big as your fist to mean a good deal more than tucker," said Morrison, and went on steadily at his work, while Sam proceeded to clean up the frying-pan as best he could with a view to breakfast. He had had enough of dry blowing, and concluded to postpone his further researches into the mysteries of gold mining till he saw the result of his companions' experiment.

The dust around them began to subside a little as the earth grew less and less; at last there was only a handful of dry little pellets of earth in the bottom of one of the dishes, and Morrison, sitting down on the doorstep, took it between his knees and began working it through his fingers. It was very close now; his suspense would soon be over. Begrimed with sweat and dust, Kirkham leaned up against the doorpost and looked at the little heap of earth growing momentarily less and less under his cousin's fingers.

Nothing near as big as your fist here, nothing as big as your thumb, nothing as big as your little finger. If there was untold wealth hidden in that claim to the right there, it certainly was not revealing itself to these seekers for it, even now there was a chance of a competency, and he grew sick with anxiety as he watched it slowly diminish. How could Sam McAlister whistle so deliberately as he mixed a damper with the little drop of muddy water that remained to them, how could he whistle as if there was nothing at stake? How trouble to gather sticks for a fire? Who wanted breakfast this morning? Not Kirkham, certainly, and he stooped forward and picked up a stick and crushed it to little bits between his fingers. And the earth in the pan was growing less and less. It was nearly all gone now. He nerved himself for an effort, and bent over Morrison.

"It's no go, old man." His voice sounded to himself hard and strained. "It's tailing cattle for the rest of our days?" Then, as the other made no answer, "For God's sake, put me out of my misery!"

## Kirkham's Find

"There's gold here, Ned," said Morrison, sweeping away the remainder of the earth and showing a few bright specks at the bottom of the pan, "but it ain't a fortune. It shows it's worth going on with — that's all. If we'd water, I'd be jolly well satisfied. As it is, we can come back after the first rain. It's a show; it's the colour — that's all."

"All our money gone, weeks of work in this God-forsaken place, and two men's lives for the colour," and Kirkham groaned aloud.

"It isn't so bad, old chap, it really isn't," said Morrison trying to speak cheerfully, though he regarded the specks of gold somewhat ruefully; "if we only had water and could stop I'd be more than satisfied. There's gold there, that's certain. Likely there's enough to make a pile for us three if we could only stop, as it is — "

"As it is," said Sam McAlister, "there won't be pickings for so much as a crow on the bones of all three of us if you don't eat your breakfast and start right away for the old man's. The gold won't run away; it'll stop right there, you can bet, and we'll come back after the rain. Look at Kirkham there — looks as glum, don't he, as if he'd just heard his best gal had chucked him up for the parson cos he couldn't marry her right away. Cheer up, old man; if it isn't her, there'll be another gal waiting for you. After you haven't seen a woman for a year or two you won't care a damn which it is, so long as she wears petticoats and ain't your grandmother. Come on, chaps, vittels is up."

## CHAPTER IX. NANCY'S ENGAGEMENT

O swallow, swallow, flying, flying south,  
Fly to her and fall upon her gilded eaves,  
And tell her, tell her, what I tell to thee.

Why lingereth she to clothe her heart with love?  
Delaying as the tender ash delays  
To clothe herself, when all the woods are green?

TENNYSON.

Phoebe Marsden was lying back on the grass, staring up at the bright blue sky. It was getting late, and the shadows of the trees in the orchard, the apple and cherry and plum trees, were growing longer; but the sunlight in between was bright and warm. It was a glorious season, and the sward was one mass of pink and white clover blossoms, the faint breeze brought its perfume to her nostrils, and brought too, to her ears, the busy hum of her bees hard at work for her.

That unpleasant half hour with her mother, when she had freely expressed views on the subject of marriage in general, and marriage with Mr Davidson in particular, had marked, it seemed to her, an era in her life. She had made a great stride that afternoon. Disappointments, troubles, mortifications, all these she knew quite well might be in store for her; but since that declaration of independence she had not as yet looked at the dark side of the shield. She was going to succeed — she would succeed. She had shaped in outspoken words her future course; daily it grew into fixed form in her mind, and that was a great step. She could afford to lie on the grass now for half an hour, watching contentedly the sunshine and the shadow, listening to the humming of the bees. Nancy came out and crept close to her.

"Why, Phoeb," she said, "how happy you look, and quite good-looking, too. Really, I never saw you look so good-looking before. I believe you'll end up by being the beauty of the family after all."

"I'm nearly twenty-five," laughed Phoebe; and Nancy laughed too.

"After all, a woman's as old as she looks. Phoebe, I want to tell you something."

## Kirkham's Find

"Yes, dear." Phoebe settled her arms comfortably under her head and stared at the blue sky, as it showed in patches through the cherry tree above her. "Yes, dear, what is it?"

"It's a letter from Ned Kirkham," said Nancy, shyly.

"I thought so, I was sure of it," said her sister. "What does he say?"

"He says — he says — " Nancy came close to her sister and put her lips to her ear, "he says he wants to — to — marry — me," she finished very slowly.

"Well, I told you that, long ago."

"Ah, but you don't understand. It's so different when he says it," and she drew the letter out of her pocket and kissed it softly.

Phoebe smiled at her lazily. She envied Nancy generally, but now she was building castles in the air for herself; albeit love was left out, the envy was not near so keen.

"Dear old Nan!"

"Oh, Phoebe! What am I to say to him? What am I to say to him?"

"Why, Nan! don't you love him?"

"Of course I do. You know I do. More than anything in the world."

"Then Nan — "

"Oh, but Phoebe, he's so poor! He's put every mortal thing he possesses in that claim. It's their only hope he says, and if the water in the creek gives out, they may not know whether there's — whether it's any good for months to come."

"What does he want you to do?"

"He wants me to be engaged to him," she whispered, "to promise not to marry anybody else; and then, as soon as he can, he'll write to father, and come down and marry me," and she hid her blushing face against her sister's arm. "It's such a loving letter," she whispered. "Oh, he must care a lot."

Phoebe transferred her arm to her sister's neck, and raising herself up stooped over her and kissed her fondly.

"I'm so glad, dear — you know I am."

"But, Phoebe, you haven't told me what I'm to say."

"Say! what is there to say? I don't suppose he'll mind much how you put it, so long as you wait for him. That's the main thing."

"If he gets the gold, he may be very rich," said Nancy, cuddling up to her sister in an ecstasy of delicious expectation.

"Yes, yes. Oh, he's pretty sure to get the gold! Mr Morrison would be sure to know all about it."

## Kirkham's Find

"But if he doesn't, Phoeb! Oh, he mayn't! He says himself he mayn't."

"That will be hard," said Phoebe, thoughtfully. "You'll have to make up your mind to wait then."

"He says he wouldn't ask me. It might be such a long time in that case before he had anything to offer — he couldn't ask me to wait."

"Of course he couldn't," said Phoebe. "Poor fellow! I suppose he thinks it would be an awfully selfish thing to do. But you can tell him you'll wait all the same."

"It may be years and years and years," said Nancy, with tears in her voice.

"Poor old girl! poor old girl!" kissing her gently. "Oh, I hope it won't be as bad as that."

"And he doesn't ask me to wait. Do you think he wants me to?"

"Why, of course. He'll say you're the dearest little girl in the world."

"But oh, the waiting, Phoebe! I'll get old and ugly, and perhaps he mightn't care for me when he saw me again. And suppose he never came. Suppose I was left an old maid without any money or anything."

"He'll come, Nanny, he'll come. He loves you! — oh, I saw how he loves you!"

Nancy kissed her sister gratefully. She liked to be told Ned Kirkham loved her; but still she was not satisfied.

"Mr Sampson," she began, hesitating.

"Oh, I know, Nanny; but you mustn't flirt with him so. It isn't fair, when you know you love Ned Kirkham. You ought to let him know it, too. He's a good fellow."

"He is bald," laughed Nancy, a little hysterically. "See what Ned Kirkham has saved me from. I know he would have asked me, Phoebe, and I know as well as possible I would have said 'yes.'"

"Oh, Nan! When you don't love him! And you do love another man!"

"It's not much good having a lover away in North Australia, with no prospect of his ever coming back that I can see," and Nancy was downhearted again.

"Oh, Nancy! it is hard, I know; but as long as there is a man somewhere in the world that you do love, you couldn't think of marrying anybody else, could you?"

"N — o — o," said Nancy, dubiously. "Still, if a man is a long way off, and you don't see him for months and months, it gets to be a sort of dream, I suppose, just like you think about travelling, or being rich. You sort of understand how nice it would be if you could get it, but you ain't likely to get it, and so — "

"And so what?" asked Phoebe, for Nancy had paused.

"And so you marry the man who comes along, and get along all right," said Nancy.

"Oh, Nan! that seems to me a dreadful thing to say, when you know how Ned Kirkham loves you; and I expect he's just counting the days till he gets your answer."

## Kirkham's Find

"Poor boy!" sighed Nancy, "oh, if he were only here. Oh, I love him — I love him! you just don't know how I love him, Phoebe!"

"Don't I? Well, just write to him and tell him that. That's all he'll want."

"Oh, Phoebe! if he were only here."

"Nanny, it's really time to get the children's tea."

"Bother the tea!"

"But Nan — "

"And if one married a poor man, life would be one succession of getting children's teas."

"But this particular tea, Nan."

"Bother!" and Nancy took out her letter and began reading it again, while her sister, lying still beside her, wondered just a little did she really care for this man. How would it be if he found no gold, and she had to wait — for years, perhaps? No, though Nancy had almost cried over his letter, though she had protested, "I love him, I love him," Phoebe thought she would not give much for Ned Kirkham's chances if he did not get gold, and that soon. And she sighed, for Nancy was a dear little companion, and would make him a loving wife; but the chances were against her being Ned Kirkham's wife, she thought, and she watched the shadows grow longer and longer, and wished her sister would stop reading her lover's letter, and go in and see about the children's tea. But she made no sign.

Phoebe wondered if she were very selfish not to go. She had never had a love letter in her life, perhaps if she had she too would be oblivious to all mundane things. She was very sure, though, she would never have given a thought to another man had the man she loved but cared for her, while Nancy, for all her delight —

"Girls, girls," Mrs Marsden had come to the orchard fence, "do remember the children's tea. Your father will be home in less than twenty minutes."

Nancy looked across at Phoebe beseechingly, she still held her letter close to her face, and her sister saw that there were tears in her eyes.

Then Phoebe rose up and went towards the house. It wasn't much to do for Nancy after all.

That night Phoebe could not sleep. The blind was drawn up, and she lay watching the pattern made by the waving branches of the big pine tree outside her window on the moonlit wall. Such fantastic shapes those waving branches took, but they did not help settle her troubled thoughts.

First there was Nancy. What a queer girl she was. If any man had loved her — Phoebe — like that, she was sure she would have waited years for him, have risked everything, have been wild with happiness, that is, supposing he was a man like Ned Kirkham, a man she loved in return. Allan Morrison — she grew hot all over at the bare thought, though it was dark in her corner, away from the moonlight — yes, she would have loved him very dearly indeed, but he had never given her a second thought, and now he had gone away. She was glad he was gone. Somehow it was a relief. She could not be always on the look out for him, disappointed if she did not see him, still more disappointed if, as most frequently happened, she did see him, and he had eyes and ears for no one but Nancy. Yes, she was glad he was gone — very glad. In her heart was the craving natural to most of us to love and be loved, but she pushed it aside. It was a good thing she knew, but it was not for her. All her own family, and she

## Kirkham's Find

had no one to appeal to against them, had fully decided that no man would love her, that she was singularly unattractive, and the family faith cost her many a secret tear; but of late a new hope had taken possession of her. If she could only earn her own living, if she could only be independent, what a difference it would make. Suppose she had a house of her own -- one woman -- it would not take much surely to make one woman, with no one dependent on her, comfortable and well-to-do. A house of her own, where she could do as she pleased, entertain her own friends in her own way, make it dainty and pretty and nice and be her own mistress. The idea had great charms for her. A woman of twenty-four ought to be independent, she ought not to be in leading-strings, obliged to submit smiling to the unfavourable criticism of her younger brothers and sisters. If she were only independent she believed, she firmly believed she would be a better woman in every way, more attractive, too, probably; and if in years to come Allan Morrison were to come back and find her a well-to-do, well-dressed woman, established in her own home, who knows, he might -- he might -- Nancy would be out of the way then, and anyhow, he had always liked talking to her. And then she drew herself up sharply, and laughed aloud in the night. What lengths her dreaming was carrying her. She had decided she would give up thinking of Allan Morrison, and here she was weaving him into her dreams, making him in fact the reward of her success, and as yet she had not sold a drop of honey, and did not know whether she could sell it. Very resolutely she turned her mind to ways and means.

One pound, thirteen and fourpence, her father had given her a cheque for a month's allowance last night, with a heavy sigh and a remark that he did not know whether the bank would cash his cheque, but she might try. She had not much fear of that; she was glad enough to get the money so soon, and the remark was only one of his unpleasant little ways, one of the ways that made her long so ardently to earn her own living. Then there was seven shillings she had saved, goodness knows how, from last month's allowance; nearly two pounds, and she racked her brains to think of the best way to lay it out.

Her boots must be soled, that was imperative, and that would cost at least four shillings; and a smoker, that would cost, she thought, five shillings. Nine shillings gone of her little hoard. Then about a dress. A new dress she must have. She would dare to offer her honey for sale, but something told her to at least be as well dressed as possible. Well, she would have a new butcher blue gingham. That would suit her. She knew where she could get one at ninepence a yard; twelve yards, that would be another nine shillings gone, but she would want nothing else, she would make it herself, and use up the linings and buttons off her old dresses. Yes, that would do very well, she must only go in to Ballarat on fine, hot days, but she thought she could easily manage that. Then about a hat. Would a shilling sailor do? A shilling sailor with a band of broad blue ribbon round it? She debated this question a long time, and finally decided a shilling hat would do if only she could get one with a broad brim; she must have a broad brim to suit her face, and then she laughed to herself to think of all the trouble she was taking to impress the people she hoped to sell her honey to. And again she thought of Allan Morrison, if it had not been for him she never would have thought of taking pains with her personal appearance at all. Would it really make any difference whether she looked nice or not, but anyhow, her pride would not allow her to go untidy or shabby. And there was a whole pound of her little store laid out; with the other pound and with the money she would get for her honey should she be able to buy a frame hive? And how was she to get the honey out of the comb? This was a knotty question, and she debated it thoroughly, forgetting meantime Allan Morrison and her dress difficulties, and Nancy and her unsatisfactory love affairs, till she heard the clock in the next room strike two, and immediately decided she would give up all thought of sleep that night, whereupon, of course, she fell sound asleep and never wakened till her mother stood over her, querulously complaining that it was Nancy's turn to skim the milk, and that nobody was awake though it was half-past six, and their father had been up the last hour.

Phoebe gave one glance at sleeping Nancy. Had she too lain awake half the night thinking of her absent lover, wondering when he would come to her? Then she got up quietly so as not to disturb the sleeping girl, and skimmed the milk for her.

Her father was not particularly pleased when his eldest daughter asked to be driven into town with him. He never seemed pleased to take them into town, and yet he provided no other way of getting there.



## Kirkham's Find

Phoebe had hesitated between her last summer's worn-out print and her shabby winter dress, but the weather was not very warm and the winter dress had won the day. Still, she felt painfully shabby as she stepped into the buggy, and knew her father's disapproving eye was upon her. Her collar and cuffs were clean and spotless, but the effect of a shabby and somewhat faded purple merino trimmed with velveteen on a bright sunny day is not appreciably altered by the cleanest and most spotless of linen cuffs and collars. Her father thought her dowdy and shabby and unpresentable, and his looks proclaimed his opinion. And she herself felt downhearted. Her wakeful night had left her tired out, and there was not a trace of the hopeful light-heartedness of yesterday and the night before. It is to be feared if Mr Davidson had come along and proposed to her any time during that eight mile drive into town beside her silent father, he would have only have had to promise to dress her well for the future, to be accepted with alacrity. But, luckily for her, he did not come, and once freed from her father's overpowering presence she really enjoyed her shopping expedition. The butcher blue gingham was bought, and bought for eightpence a yard, too, so that left her with an extra shilling, and made the expenditure of one and sixpence on a sailor hat quite a saving. She was really pleased with her purchases, and then she went and spent the rest of her day with kind-hearted Mrs Moore, who seemed to like to have her sitting quietly there, allowed her to help make her children's clothes, and never by word or deed reminded her that she was a dead failure in the social world. Indeed, to hear Mrs Moore talk you would have fancied Phoebe was quite an entertaining person. She told her all about her schemes, and her friend was sympathetic, if a little surprised.

"I don't know, Phoebe," she said, "it seems a funny sort of idea. But in one way I think you're quite right. Very few women could carry it out, though. But you're very patient and persevering, and you're just the sort to succeed if anybody could. It means giving up a good lot, though. Most girls would be wanting to go to parties and tennis and young men."

"Well, I haven't got any temptations in that line, you see." laughed Phoebe.

"Well it's a good thing, just at present. There'll be plenty of time for that afterwards, when you succeed. You're young yet."

"Am I really? This is the only place ever I feel so, then. At home I feel as old as the hills."

"Now, Phoebe, for goodness sake don't go on like that. Your mother's just foolish to go on telling you you're old. You will be young when you're forty. Half the girls in this place spend their lives by deciding they won't be able to enjoy anything after they're three-and-twenty, and then, in order to make the most of life, they crowd so much dissipation into the five years between that and eighteen they're generally quite right. I don't know whether English people are the same, but Australian women certainly do their best to act up to their fixed belief that a woman is old and worn out at thirty. It is all nonsense, it really is; she ought to be in her prime. They get married at eighteen, and fancy they are on the shelf if nobody has come along by time they reach your age. It's wicked, it's positively wicked. I suppose in the old days the mothers all married so young and so uneducated, they bring their daughters up to think they ought to follow in their footsteps."

"Why, you married before you were eighteen yourself!"

"So I did. And it was a dreadful risk. I'd have married anybody with a straight nose and curly hair. Luckily those belonged to Tom, and he looked after me and educated me, and gave me all my ideas. Indeed, anything that is worth anything in me is due to Tom. But he is just one in a thousand, and I don't think others ought to run such risks. Do you, now?"

"I'm not in the least likely to," said Phoebe.

"And a good thing too. You stick to your bees. If you go into it with your whole heart, and work at it for love, you see it will make life a different thing for you. Women don't recognise that yet, but it's true all the same."

## Kirkham's Find

"You do comfort me," said Phoebe. "Mother is afraid I'll lose caste, as she calls it, and that nobody will ever care to speak to me again."

"What nonsense! You stick to your work for the next two or three years. It doesn't matter nowadays what a well-dressed, entertaining, young woman does, every one is glad to talk to her and fall in love with her too,' she added archly, as if she had divined the bitterest drop in the cup of the girl before her."

Phoebe flushed hotly.

"I'm bound to do something," she said. "It's ridiculous to talk of anybody falling in love with me, because nobody ever did, and I don't suppose anybody ever will, and you see I can't go on like this for ever. It gets harder to get anything every month, and I think father grudges the money more. Perhaps he has less, poor thing. Anyhow, you see it is a case of must with me. It won't do to be a lonely old maid dependent on my brothers."

Mrs Moore nodded her head approvingly.

"Only," Phoebe laughed a little, "you wouldn't believe how hard it is to begin. All sorts of unexpected little difficulties crop up."

"How?"

"Well, there's plenty of honey in those hives, I'm sure. I can cut out the comb by using a smoker, but how on earth am I to get the honey out of the combs?"

"How do other people do it?"

"Oh, people who sell honey usually have frame hives, and then they lift out a frame of comb and put it in the extractor. I have a little book which tells you all about it, beautifully, but it never seems to have struck it that anybody could be so benighted as to use old gin cases, or that any one could be so hard up as not to be able to raise the two pounds ten shillings for an extractor."

Mrs Moore laughed.

"Just like the cookery books, isn't it?" she said. "They will persist in telling you how to stuff a turkey with truffles, when you haven't got either a turkey or truffles, and what you really want to know is how to use up your cold leg of mutton. But can you get the honey out in the comb all right?"

"Oh, yes. I think it will look fairly well, and I'm sure it will be very good to eat."

"Well, why don't you sell it just like that for the present, till you have saved up enough to buy frame hives? My old fruit woman had some honey in the comb in her shop the other day, and it looked so nice. I daresay she would buy it from you, or, I tell you what, I'll buy it from you myself."

"No, no," Phoebe sat up very straight. "This is to be on a strictly business basis. I'd much rather sell to your fruit woman, thank you all the same."

"Very well, mind you come and tell me how you get on."

"Indeed I will," said Phoebe. "That suggestion of yours is a God-send to me. You wouldn't believe how that has been bothering me. But I'll take your advice, and I will come in and see your old woman as soon as my dress is ready."

## CHAPTER X. PHOEBE BEGINS WORK

The modern majesty consists in work. What a man can do is his greatest ornament, and he always consults his dignity by doing it. CARLYLE

Next morning Phoebe was up with the lark. She had skimmed the milk and washed the dishes, and was out among the bees before even her early rising father appeared upon the scene.

The morning was bright and fresh and exhilarating, the sun had just risen, and was peeping through the trees, making every little drop of dew on the blades of grass sparkle like a diamond. She had put on a hat with a big mosquito net veil, and a pair of gloves, and, having set her new smoker going, was all anxiety to get her first good look at her bees. It seemed rather rough and ready to turn the hive upside down, but there was no other way of doing it. She lifted it over on to its side smartly, and was pleased to find how heavy it was, put it down carefully, and puffed the smoke in among the combs. Then she felt a little despairing. She might shake out the bees into another box; she could easily with a knife cut out all that comb; but how was she to tell with her limited experience where was most honey and where most brood, and it was sheer waste to cut out the brood comb. Then she put that hive back in its place and went on to the next. All were busy and full. Some she thought would be swarming soon. There were so many bees, there was so much honey comb, there must surely be a little money in them, she thought, if only she knew how to manage properly. Then she put down the last hive, let her smoker go out, and, going into the dining-room, where the family never sat, took the tablecloth off the table and set to work on her new dress, pondering the while how best she was to manage her hives. Her father came in and grumbled at the untidiness of the yard and the lateness of the rest of the family, but she paid no attention. She was too deep in her dreams; some day she would show him how yards could be kept tidy without a single growl, and by the time her mother came in to fretfully complain it was twenty minutes past eight and Annie hadn't even begun to lay the breakfast table yet, a remark which Phoebe knew was passed on from her father, the all important dress was cut out, and the body tacked ready for fitting, and she had fully decided to cut away all the outside comb in her hives, leaving just an island of comb in the middle for the bees to begin again upon. She did not know much about it, but that seemed to her a rational way. Then she cheerfully folded up her work and went into the schoolroom to urge on the dilatory Annie, and finally to lay the table herself. And she did it so cheerfully, too, that her mother was surprised. After all, what did it matter. Perhaps in a year or two she would be rich enough to have a table of her own to lay.

In due course that dress was finished. She sacrificed the cream ribbon from her only ball dress for a sash and to trim her hat; but what did it matter, she did not intend to go to any more balls, and for the same reason she felt that her one pair of long tan evening gloves — they were not worn at all, that was one advantage of having no partners — would do admirably to finish her costume, and then she proclaimed her intention of going into town the first warm day.

The family were more doleful and dissatisfied with their lot in life than usual, for Stanley had just come home for his vacation; he had been ploughed for the December exams. The young gentleman was much aggrieved thereat, he considered it was the examiners' fault entirely. Mr Marsden was also much annoyed. Whose fault he considered it, Phoebe would have found it hard to tell, but he made the whole family suffer, and her mother would have thought it unkind to be cheerful in the face of such a catastrophe. Nancy was abstracted and anxious, thinking, thought Phoebe, about that absent lover of hers, and so it happened that only she and the children were in their normal condition. Indeed, she, full of her new hopes, was far more contented and amiable, far more forbearing and thoughtful than the children had ever found her.

"Phoebe's getting quite good-looking," said Lydia, thoughtfully, at the breakfast table, when the longed-for hot morning had at last arrived, and Phoebe in the new dress, with her hair carefully done up on top of her head, was pouring out the family coffee. "Phoeb's getting quite good-looking. I believe somebody might come along and fall in love with her after all."

## Kirkham's Find

"Go on," said Stanley, his mouth full of eggs and bacon, "girls must be getting mighty scarce then."

"Hush, Lyd," said Phoebe, looking gratefully at her nevertheless. "One isn't always thinking of getting married."

"That's lucky," said Stanley, "for some folks I know wouldn't have much chance."

"You're quite right there," said Phoebe, serenely. "Women have a way of expecting a man to keep them, don't they? And some folks at the present rate of progress won't be able to do that for many a long year to come."

She felt it was very mean of her, but Stanley was always girding at her for her want of attractions, and the only way to silence him was to carry the war into the enemy's country.

"Much you know about what other women want. You only know about enough to go pottering around those bees of yours."

"Anyhow," said Phoebe, sharply, "when I go in for a thing I give my mind to it, and do manage to know something about my job. If you applied that rule — "

"Oh, go on, I always said you were about fit to be an old market woman."

"I — " began Phoebe, beginning to be ruffled, when her father struck in crossly —

"I hate this constant wrangle, wrangle, wrangle. The place is like a bear garden."

"Phoebe!" said her mother, fretfully. She always blamed Phoebe. Stanley, she knew, would not have allowed her to blame him, and Phoebe subsided behind the coffee-pot, and was more convinced than ever in her own mind that she was doing right in making some effort for herself.

And it was not easy.

She and her father, a silent and uncongenial pair, arrived in Ballarat by half-past nine; he went straight to the office and she left the livery stables, where they put their horse up, and wandered slowly into Sturt Street, trying to brace herself for her first plunge into business. It was very hot, though it was so early; there was no wind, and the tall gum trees in the middle of the street cast long, slim shadows, and over on Warrenheip a long line of smoke rose up straight into the sky. So, a bush fire; it was only what was to be expected at this season; soon the country would be dried up, and there would be no food for her poor bees. She ought to begin at once, but it was so hard. There was the largest confectioner's shop in Ballarat, the Vienna Cafe, right opposite, and she ought to begin there. They sold honey and cakes and all manner of sweet things; they must buy from somebody — why not from her? and she crossed over and looked in the window. How could she screw up her courage? The bride cake in the window wavered and danced before her eyes, and the cherries and the strawberries, and the pots of jam and honey were mixing themselves up in one indistinguishable mass. It was such an everyday thing, a thing that was done over and over again by the majority of her fellow-creatures, why was she such a fool. Mr Sampson, her sister's would-be lover, came along, and slackened his pace as he came up with her, and she grew crimson, feeling he must divine her errand, wondering would he scorn her for it as her mother had said every man would. As he came up she turned away abruptly and entered the shop. At least she would carry herself well, as Allan Morrison had recommended, and she approached the counter, holding her head in the air.

"And what can I do for you, Miss?" asked the woman behind.

Poor Phoebe's face grew crimson, and her heart beat so that she could hardly hear herself speak. For a moment she hesitated. Should she ask for sixpenny-worth of buns and wait for another time till the shop was empty,

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perhaps? The people standing round would hear her now. Then Stanley's scornful speeches came into the mind, the general discomfort of her home life, and the conviction that she was at least suitably dressed for once sustained her.

"I wanted to know," she said, and she was surprised to find it was easier than she had thought, "if you wanted to buy any honey in the comb?"

"Section boxes?" asked the woman, as if it were a matter of every-day occurrence with her, and Phoebe was at her ease at once. "Well, he does sometimes buy section boxes. He bought a lot last month."

"No, mine's not in boxes," said Phoebe, "I haven't started them yet. I'm just getting rid of the old honey first. It's very good," she said, boldly, "very clean and nice," and she wondered where she got her confidence, "and, of course, as I want to get rid of it, I would let you have it a little cheaper."

"Have you much?"

"About two kerosene tins full," answered Phoebe at a venture. It struck her it would be very unbusinesslike not to know how much she had for sale.

"And what might you be wanting for it?"

This was business, and she began to feel happy, and to feel that selling honey was not so terrible after all, but she hadn't the faintest idea of its value.

"What do you give?" she asked, and prided herself upon her smartness.

"Well, it's hard to say. He generally buys it himself. We do give fourpence a pound for the pure honey."

"But this is in the comb," said Phoebe, hardly knowing whether that fact would advance or detract from its value.

"Some folks likes it in the comb, and some don't," said the woman, thoughtfully, rubbing her fingers up and down a glass full of sponge cakes. "I don't know whether he'd be buying, I'm sure. I might tell him when he comes in if you'd let me know the price."

"It ought to be worth eightpence a pound," said Phoebe, and then wondered if she had spoiled her chance by asking too much.

"I dunno as he'd give that," said the woman, "specially when he ain't seen it. You might bring in a sample next time you're passing. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Not today, thank you," said Phoebe, and walked out of the shop, hardly knowing whether she had failed or not.

One thing she was glad of, she had made the plunge, it would not be so difficult to ask at the next shop.

But the next shop said no, unconditionally, they never thought of buying honey in that way, and Phoebe continued her course up the street a little less hopefully, and the next shop said no, and the next and the next and the next. She began to be tired and downhearted, to realise the weariness of carrying round wares which nobody wanted to buy. Did nobody eat honey? It looked like it. Would she have to go home and confess herself beaten? Then there would be nothing at all for her to look forward to in life, nothing at all, all her pretty castles in the air were coming toppling about her ears. Stanley would be right, she was good for nothing, she might just as well make up her mind to be a household drudge for the rest of her days. But no, she would not give in, somebody must eat

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honey, somebody must buy, and she walked straight up Sturt Street and turned into every little shop on her way. It was her only chance, she would leave no stone unturned, and every little shop said no, more or less decidedly.

Opposite the hospital there was a grocer's shop, and she turned in there for a change. All her shyness had entirely departed, she did not mind asking in the least, only it was so disheartening to be refused.

The shop was empty, and the man behind the counter came smiling up to her.

"Do you want to buy any honey?" she asked, and waited for the usual reply.

"Well, no," he said, "I don't know as I do myself. But there was a lady in only this morning asking if I could tell her where she could buy honey in the comb — only this very morning. She thought maybe some of my country customers, those that brings me in eggs and butter, might have some to sell."

Phoebe's face flushed crimson. Here was a chance. But this "lady," who was she? She might ask in the shops if they would buy, but she could not hawk her wares round from door to door. She would not mind writing to her, though, if she got her address, and her face flushed and her voice trembled as she asked — "Who is she? Where does she live?" and she tried to speak as if it were a matter of perfect indifference to her, as if she had been selling honey all her life.

The grocer wiped his hands on his black calico apron, came round the counter to the doorway and pointed up the street.

"Mrs Hanson," he said, "she's a cousin of mine on the mother's side," and Phoebe's spirits rose. She would not mind bargaining with the grocer's cousin.

"Keeps a little fruit shop," he went on. "She made a bad bargain somehow, and her man hardly manages to hold up his end of the stick, so she's got to look pretty spry. Her customers has all been asking for honey in the comb it seems lately."

It was such a little bit of brightness, but Phoebe held up her head at once. Eightpence a pound! she would gladly take four-pence a pound now, only to make a beginning and sell it. She turned to her grocer friend gratefully —

"Thank you so much," she said.

"You're very welcome, miss. I hope you'll be able to come to terms with my cousin. It's a great thing for a poor struggling woman like her to keep her customers and be able to please them."

"Oh, my honey is good, I know," laughed Phoebe, cheerfully, and she turned out into the blazing sunshine again and went straight for Mrs Hanson's.

Honey! yes, three or four of Mrs Hanson's customers had been asking for it lately. She didn't know what had come over them. They never did it before.

"And how much might you have to sell?"

"About two kerosene tins full," hesitated Phoebe, because really she had not the faintest idea how much she had.

"But haven't you any in the comb?" and Phoebe, with a beating heart, because this really looked like business, and if this is the only thing you have got it is quite as exciting selling your honey as selling your book, explained exactly what she had got, and finally without hesitation asked eightpence a pound for it.

## Kirkham's Find

The woman shook her head. She was a weary, tired, fretful looking woman, and in the room behind the curtained glass door a baby kept up a perpetual screaming.

"It's too much, these hard times. I couldn't get more than ninepence—ha'penny a pound for it."

"Well," said Phoebe, "I think that is very good, considering you'll have no trouble about it. And your customers are asking for it."

"But I haven't seen it."

"It's good, I know," she said with confidence, the confidence of ignorance. "I'll tell you what. I'll send you in a kerosene tin full tomorrow, and if you don't like it, I'll take it back."

"Or perhaps take a little less," suggested the woman.

"Oh, no," said Phoebe, and she wondered where she was getting her sharpness; "I wouldn't care to sell for less. I'll take it back if you don't like it."

"Send it tomorrow, then," said the woman, opening the door behind her and calling out "hush, hush," to the screaming baby, and "Jane, Jane," to some unseen feminine who was apparently neglecting her duties with regard to that baby.

"Good morning," said Phoebe, and walked out of the shop with a light heart.

She had made the first step, she had succeeded, and it seemed as if all she most desired were within her reach. She turned back now and walked down the hot wide street, and when she met Mr Sampson held out her hand and spoke to him cheerfully. Had not Lydia said she looked quite good—looking this morning? It was the new dress, and now another new dress was quite within her reach.

"Good morning, Miss Marsden," he said, in his stiff wooden manner, which always made Phoebe wonder how he ever came to be Mrs Moore's brother. "I've just met your father. He's looking for you everywhere. I think he wants to go out home."

"Oh, dear!" Phoebe started uncomfortably. "I must go at once then. Is he at the stables?"

"He was. I don't know where he is now. I shouldn't like to say," said Mr Sampson with a faint smile, and she interpreted it to mean he was in a worse temper than usual.

"Good—bye, then," and disregarding the heat — it was past one o'clock now — she set off almost at a run. It was no light thing in the Marsden family to keep the head of the house waiting.

He was cross of course, very cross, Phoebe expected no less. He had told her when they parted he would not be ready to leave town till five, and then suddenly finding it more convenient to go at one, his temper was ruffled because she could be found nowhere.

"Come on, come on," he said when he caught sight of her, "wherever have you been? I've been sending all over the town for you. We ought to have started an hour ago."

And Phoebe restrained the answer that rose to her lips. What was the good? Her father was angry, he would be out of temper with an angel from heaven, and she was thankful, oh, so thankful, she had at least made a beginning on her own account. And after all she too was glad to go home early, she would be able now to get that honey ready

## Kirkham's Find

for sending into town at once. So if he were silent on the way out, for once in her life Phoebe did not feel ill at ease, and by the time she got home had actually forgotten she had committed any sin at all. Therefore it surprised her when she heard her father complain to her mother, as she came out on the verandah to meet them, that if it hadn't been for Phoebe, he would have been out an hour sooner.

"I didn't know, you see," explained Phoebe, cheerfully, and her mother opened her eyes in astonishment; "I never intended to turn up till five o'clock, and if I hadn't met Mr Sampson who told me father was waiting for me, I don't believe I should."

Nancy came out and raised her eyebrows. The idea of Phoebe talking as cheerfully as if she hadn't committed the serious offence of keeping the family tyrant waiting a good hour.

Phoebe gathered up her things hastily and ran into their room, there was no good in stopping to hear her own delinquencies, and Nancy followed her.

"Well, Phoebe, you look a good deal more cheerful on it than I should dare do. Fancy keeping the governor waiting!"

"It was quite an accident," said Phoebe. "I hadn't the slightest idea he would be wanting to start so early."

"Even though it was an accident, I would have been frightened, and you don't seem to mind a bit."

"Nan, I've sold my honey."

"What!"

"I have really. Eightpence a pound! Just think of that," and undemonstrative Phoebe suddenly seized her sister round the waist and waltzed round the room with her.

"But, Phoebe," began Nancy, "eightpence a pound! It's impossible."

"No, it isn't, no, it isn't. It is an accomplished fact. Do you wonder I don't mind much about father being cross. Why, it just suits me to come home early. It's just what I wanted him to do. I'll be able to get the honey all ready now and go over and see Bateman about taking it in. Nan, you don't know how nice it feels to find your time is really of importance."

"But tell me all about it, Phoebe?"

And Phoebe, nothing loth, began at the beginning and told all her anxieties, changing her dress meanwhile, and bringing the relation to a triumphant conclusion as she put her new hat away and carefully folded up the ribbons of her sash.

"And you see it's a beginning, Nan. Once I get into the swim and can afford frame hives, I'll begin to make money."

And then with one fell swoop Nancy disposed of her sister's castles in the air.

"Well, Phoebe," she said, "you are an old donkey. You are the blindest old goose I ever saw. Don't you see. Mrs Hanson is Mrs Moore's fruit woman, and she has been asking for honey there just so as to give you a helping hand."



## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, Nancy!"

Poor Phoebe. There was no doubt about it. Nancy was right. How was it she had never thought of it before. Mrs Moore had created a fictitious demand for her, that was all, and she could not hope it would last beyond a week or two. And here she had been hoping this was the beginning of better things. The tears came into her eyes and welled over on to her cheeks, as she thought of the decided manner in which all the shops up Sturt Street had said 'no' to her. And she had hoped to make her living by selling honey. What a fool she was!

"Now, Phoebe, don't cry," said Nancy. "I don't see it makes any difference. You can sell it all the same and get the money, which is the main thing."

"Yes, but — don't you see — that's not the demand which I wanted."

"Never you mind. Perhaps there will be in time. When they find how good your honey is, they will tell all their friends, and their friends will tell their friends, and that will be quite enough for you at first. You don't want the whole colony to go in for honey yet awhile. Now I'm sure that's the way you would argue yourself. Don't be a duffer."

"It's so difficult to see for yourself," said Phoebe, drying her eyes. "Anyhow I suppose I may as well sell this lot, and I've got to get it ready. Do come and help me, Nancy, that's a good girl."

Phoebe's first wild excitement had passed away. Her high hopes had received a blighting blow, but still there was a joy in getting that honey and honeycomb ready for sale. She had had everything ready some time ago, and now she and Nancy went to the first hive, used the new smoker with vigour and shook out all the bees into another box. Then Phoebe carried away the hive to the other end of the orchard and very carefully cut away the outside combs and laid them in a large flat earthenware milk dish. Then she carried back her hive, shook back the bees again, and felt proud and elated when she looked at her honeycomb. After all she thought people must want to buy this if they only saw how nice it looked.

"Are the children down the paddocks?" she asked, looking around anxiously. "They will want some if they see it, it looks so nice, and I will never have the heart to say no."

"You will be a silly if you don't," said Nancy, philosophically. "Those boys will gobble that dish up in no time and never even say thank you. You get the money and be well dressed and they will think a deal more of you than if you gave them every mortal thing you possessed and looked shabby. That's the unpleasant way with brothers, I find. Shall we put that honey in the kerosene tin?"

"No, not yet. We'll carry it into the dairy and look it all over first. I must take care, you know, that there isn't any food or eggs or bee-bread, or whatever they call it, among it."

It was very carefully looked over that honeycomb by two sets of ignorant, anxious eyes, and yet it is to be feared that Mrs Moore and her family, who, as Nancy rightly suspected, were the real purchasers of that honey, ate more than their share of eggs and pollen; but as they were none the wiser, perhaps it didn't matter. When Phoebe was satisfied it was quite clean and freed from all objectionable matter, she emptied her milk dish into the kerosene tin and went out and robbed the second hive.

It was new work to her, and even in skilled hands it would have been a long and tedious process, so that Nancy had quite lost her interest, and was tired out long before the third hive was robbed and the kerosene tin full. Phoebe weighed it carefully on the big scales in the dairy.

## Kirkham's Find

"Thirty-five pounds!" she said, triumphantly. "Only three hives, you see, Nan, and at sixpence a pound that will be seventeen and sixpence, and at twopence a pound that'll be five-and-tenpence — twenty-three-and-fourpence. My goodness, Nan!"

"I wish you wouldn't say 'my goodness,' Phoebe," said Mrs Marsden's fretful voice in the doorway. "When will you learn those sort of expressions are so unladylike?"

"Never, mother, never," said Phoebe, with a touch of impatience in her voice, "I ain't a lady any longer. I'm a honey woman. I have sold all that honey. At least I think I have. And if they take it I'm to get over a pound for it. What do you think of that?"

"But where, Phoebe? To who?" asked her mother, regardless of grammar.

"To Mrs Hanson, the fruit shop just beyond the hospital, you know," said Phoebe, somewhat unkindly enjoying her poor mother's shocked face.

They were so opposite, those two. Mrs Marsden, with her strong feeling that a lady, a woman of the upper classes, demeaned herself if she stepped outside the bounds of her home, if she strove for independence in the slightest degree, could not but be shocked that a daughter of hers should have gone from shop to shop, as Phoebe apparently had, bargaining like any farmer's wife with fowls to sell, and Phoebe was utterly at a loss to understand her mother's feelings. Those sort of feelings seemed to her all nonsense when you let them stand in the way of your comfort, and she rather delighted in shocking her mother.

"You ought to be pleased, mother," she laughed, "at seeing your daughter in a fair way to earn an honest living for herself. Think of my old age."

"I would so far rather see you comfortably married," and she sighed. "How is it? Other people's daughters marry and I suppose you have the same chances as they do."

Phoebe took a board and put it over her honey, and then walked out of the dairy hanging her head in the old sullen manner.

"I don't care, mother," she said. "It seems to me a far more decent thing to sell honey, even if you have to go into shops and ask them to buy, than to go on thinking of nothing else for ever and ever except marrying. Nan, keep the key of the dairy, will you, there's a dear, so those boys won't get at the honey, and I'll go over and see Bateman about taking it into town."

## CHAPTER XI. POOR NED KIRKHAM

Some for the Glories of This World; and some  
Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come;  
Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go,  
Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

And that honey was a success. Phoebe thought she never had felt so proud and glad in her life as when Mrs Hanson handed over to her £1 3s — she forgot the fourpence — and asked her if she could let her have some.

"I sold it all that very day," she said, without a change in her dreary, hopeless tones. "There was a many a askin' for it, and I promised to try and get them some more."

## Kirkham's Find

"I can let you have about as much again," said Phoebe, trying to make her tones sound business-like, and to eliminate the elation from them. It was certainly not business to be so pleased over selling her honey. She ought to try and behave as if it were an everyday occurrence; and then she added, a little regretfully, "I'm afraid that'll be all for some time."

"Well, well," said Mrs Hanson; "when you have any more you might let me have the refusal of it. It's a new thing, you see, and it sorter takes."

And Phoebe walked down the street feeling as if the world lay before her. She would change places with no woman now. She added up the cash she had in hand, and found it amounted to £2 4s, and therefore she walked straight to the post office, and sent off a postcard to Melbourne, asking for a price list of bee requisites. Another £1 3s would bring her cash in hand up to £3 7s — more money than she had ever had in her life before, all of her own, and enough, she thought, to buy her a couple of frame hives at once.

At the end of the week she sold the rest of the honey. It was more than she had counted on, a little over fifty pounds, and consequently brought her cash in hand up to £3 17s. Now, truly, she could order frame hives with a light heart. A guinea a piece she found they would cost her, and before another fortnight had passed, and Christmas was at hand — Christmas, which to the Marsden family was always marred by the overhanging shadow of the bills the New Year would bring — she had three frame hives in full working order. Now all she wanted was an extractor, and an extractor she was resolved to have, though an extractor which costs £ 2 10s, when your cash in hand is exactly 11s, and your income is a somewhat precarious £1 13s 4d a month, is an expensive item. Her father, she was thankful to say, had taken very little notice of the new hives. One day at tea, indeed, he had asked —

"Whose are those hives?"

"Mine," said Phoebe, trembling for what might be coming next.

"Lucky for you," said her father; "you can afford to indulge your hobbies. I never can."

She wondered would he dock her allowance? If he did that, then indeed she would have to give up hope; but the same thought, perhaps, passed through her mother's mind: and though she might not approve of Phoebe's course, still she was quite aware she had very little pleasure in life, and would not have that cut off if she could help it.

"I'm sure," she said, fretfully, and yet Phoebe was grateful to her, she understood her motive, "I'm sure I wish Phoebe wouldn't spend all her money on her bees. She simply can't go out, she hasn't got a dress fit to wear; and as for boots and gloves — "

"I can't help it," said Mr Marsden, in the tone the family hated. "You spend every penny of my money among you, and more too. Well it can't go on like this long. There must be an end to it," which speech he made on an average at least once a week to his family, and it never failed to reduce them either to angry or distressed silence, according to their dispositions.

But tonight it did not damp Phoebe's spirits. She was beginning to see her way out; and after tea she strolled out into the orchard, and sat down opposite her nice clean white hives, and began to build castles in the air. She had discovered, by careful reading of the quaint American "Gleanings of Bee Culture" a few numbers of which Mrs Moore had got for her, that she had received a great deal too much for the messy mixture of comb and honey she had sold Mrs Hanson; but everybody seemed to be satisfied — Mrs Moore had told her how much they had liked it, and rallied her on making her friend pay three-halfpence a pound more than she need for it and so she felt she might be pleased and grateful for the start it had given her. Now even though she got less per pound, she thought it would be amply made up by the increased quantity; and, for once in her life, was fairly well satisfied with

## Kirkham's Find

things as they were. To be sure her mother's dictum that she was quite old troubled her a little; but at least there was this consolation in it, if she was so old, there was really nothing more to hope for, and she could sit down contentedly and wait, because a year more or less doesn't matter when you're old. At least, that was her mood tonight; tomorrow, very likely, the waiting would seem interminably long and unbearable. But tonight -- tonight, at least, the world was going well with her, and she lay back on the grass, with her hands under her head, and stared up at the golden stars.

To her, across the grass, came Nancy, and sat down beside her, resting her elbows on her knees, and her face in her hands.

"Father was nasty at tea, wasn't he," remarked the elder, without turning her head.

"It's getting unbearable," said Nancy, with a sob in her voice.

"Nanny, dear."

"Phoebe, why didn't you come to the ball last night?"

"Because, you know well enough, I like to keep in a fairly good temper; and I'd have been just as cross as two sticks if I'd gone there and sat down all night. Now you see I am as amiable as possible, in spite of my papa's rude remarks; and you went and danced all night and enjoyed yourself, and now you're done up," and Phoebe laid a kindly hand on her sister's arm.

"Oh, I danced all night; but that doesn't say I enjoyed myself."

"Doesn't it? I'd enjoy myself I know, if I danced all night. And you had an admirer, too. Stanley says Mr. Sampson -- Nancy, you oughtn't to flirt with him so, when you know you are engaged to Ned Kirkham."

"I'm not engaged to Ned Kirkham."

"What?" And Phoebe sat up in her astonishment.

"I only said I wasn't engaged to Ned Kirkham. You know there never was anything between us."

"Oh, Nancy, I thought -- "

"Spooning doesn't make an engagement; and I never as much as let Ned Kirkham kiss me. And being in love with a man doesn't make an engagement; and a man being in love with you doesn't make an engagement."

"No," said Phoebe, doubtfully, she didn't quite understand what her sister was driving at; "but when you love a man, and he loves you, and is going to marry you, that makes an engagement, I suppose, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does," said Nancy, gloomily.

"Well?"

"Who said Ned Kirkham was going to marry me?"

"Why, of course he is. He's wild to do it; and as soon as ever he gets that gold -- "

Nancy began to laugh -- a laugh that was half strangled with a sob.

## Kirkham's Find

"That gold," she said; "oh, that gold! But they haven't got that gold. And they can't even begin to look for it till the rain comes. They've — they've cleared out, and are riding tracks for some squatter up there. They've lost all their money, and just earn a pound a week and rations each," she went on, fiercely, as if she were afraid of breaking down. "I got a letter last night."

"Nanny, Nanny." It gave Phoebe an odd sort of little pain to think how grieved she would have been for Morrison if he had cared anything for her. But he didn't; and she could be glad about her bees, and not worry about him, but about Ned Kirkham.

"Oh, Nanny! I'm so sorry — I'm so sorry. And it means more anxiety and waiting, doesn't it? And it's hard for him too. You'll have to make it up to him when you're married."

"Married?" echoed Nancy, "Married? Good gracious! Do you ever expect us to be married? You must be a sanguine sort of a person."

"But, Nanny dear, in time, you know, it will come right, and meanwhile — "

Phoebe paused, because it seemed to her the time might be wrong, and really she did not quite know what to recommend her to do meanwhile. She would have waited, she would have fretted and fumed her heart out with anxiety, but she would have waited all her life for the man who loved her; but she knew Nancy was not made of the same sort of stuff.

"And meanwhile," said Nancy, choking down a sob; "I may as well marry some one else."

"Nancy, you don't know how — how indecent it seems to me to talk that way."

"Why?"

"To talk of marrying one man when you know you love another. I know you're thinking of Mr Sampson."

"Well, what if I am?" said Nancy, with a trace of sullenness in her voice. "You know you think he is nice yourself."

"Yes, I'm sure he is; but I know you don't care, not in that way, one cent for him. Why, Nan, I like him far better than you do."

"I always knew you had a sneaking affection for him," said Nancy, with a feeble attempt at sprightliness, which her sister checked in the bud.

"I would be more fit to marry him, anyway," she said, gravely; "but I wouldn't. I don't care enough for him."

"You don't know what you would do. He never asked you. A woman feels quite different then," said Nancy, brightening. She felt she had the whip hand of her sister here, for Phoebe had to acknowledge she didn't know what it felt like to be asked in marriage.

"I don't know," she hesitated; "of course I know I can't speak from experience; but it does seem to me that unless you want pretty badly to marry him at all — at least, except for pecuniary reasons, and that's a wrong reason altogether."

"My goodness! I would like mother to hear you. Wouldn't she be shocked!"

## Kirkham's Find

"I suppose she would; but I don't know what at."

"The idea of wanting to marry a man before he asked you."

"Nan, I'm right, nevertheless." Phoebe sat up straight, and brushed the hair out of her eyes. "I'm right, I feel I'm right. It will be a very good thing indeed for men and women too, when a lot of this ridiculous nonsense is brushed away. A woman can't be quite indifferent to a man all along, and then all of a sudden, the minute he asks her to marry him, be very fond of him. She can't, I tell you, or if she can, then she is not the sort of woman worth any man's marrying. And yet that is just the sort of beings women in our class are supposed to be. Oh, Nan! if we could only be independent and meet men on an equal footing, how much better it would be. Nan, dearie, if you wait for Ned Kirkham, he will know how much you love him."

"For ten years? Till I'm old and faded? He'll more likely think it was because I couldn't get anybody else, and he will bless having to take such an old thing, and wish he could have a nice, fresh young girl."

Phoebe rubbed her hand across her eyes. There was truth, too, in this bitter philosophy.

"But thirty-two isn't so very old. You needn't be faded." But she hesitated. Thirty-two seemed to both of them very old indeed. You cannot be brought up in the faith that five-and-twenty is old without feeling that over thirty is decrepid.

"Oh, it's old!" said Nancy, with decision; "so it is no good discussing that. Why, you were thirteen when mother was thirty-two."

"I often think she grew old much too soon, and -- "

"Phoebe, you are quite mad on that subject. Anyhow, I'm not going to wait for Ned Kirkham till I'm thirty-two, so it's no good talking about it."

"What will you do, then?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Marry Mr Sampson, I suppose. Fancy being Mrs Josiah Sampson! Ugh!"

"Nan! You don't care one bit for Mr Sampson, you know you don't. You are only laughing."

"Am I? Well, you'll see. He asked me last night."

"Nancy! he didn't. You ought not to have let him."

"I couldn't stop him. Anyway, he did. He couldn't speak to father today, because he had to go up to Maryborough, and won't be back till tomorrow night. But I told him it didn't matter in the least for a day or two. Only I thought I must just tell you."

"Oh, but Nancy, Nancy! how could you! And Ned Kirkham -- what about him?"

"It's much better as it is," said Nancy, defiantly; "even for him. You can't have an arrangement like that dragging on for months and years; it is too wearing altogether. I suppose he will be cut up at first, but he will pretty soon see it in the same light I do."

"Nanny," repeated Phoebe again, with hopeless insistence, "you don't love Mr Sampson."

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, don't I? How do you know that? Besides, what does it matter? Mother says she loves father, and I'm sure the result isn't to be envied."

"You don't know how much worse it might be if there wasn't any love."

"Phoebe, I think love is all just rot. After you have been married to a man a year or two it is all the same."

"It is not. I know it is not."

"You don't know anything about it. You must allow I know heaps more about men than you do."

"I know that," admitted Phoebe, "and that is what makes it worse. You go and engage yourself to a man you don't care a bit about — just because you think it is time you married."

"It is time, too. Look at my dress, look at my boots, and just look at the way the other girls are growing up. Why Lydia is nearly as tall as you, and much taller than me."

"But, Nancy — "

"Now, Phoebe, I'm sure in your heart you must sympathise with me. No one desires more heartily to get out of it than you do."

"Yes, but the road out ought not to be by marrying a man you don't care a cent about."

"It generally is for women."

"It ought not to be. Oh, Nan, think how you would feel if three months hence Ned Kirkham struck gold and was a rich man, and you were married to Mr Sampson."

"I would not like it, of course," said Nancy, a little unsteadily, "but that won't happen. Those sort of things only happen in books."

"They must happen in real life sometimes or folks would not be interested to read about them."

"Well, it won't happen in this case. You can be very sure of that."

"Well, perhaps you are right to break off the engagement. You can care for each other just as much even if you are not engaged, and he can always come back if he has got any money, and perhaps it would be just as well if you could stop caring for him. But I know you care now, Nan, I know you do, and it is wicked to talk of marrying anybody else."

"If it was you you would go on loving him and adoring him till in time he got sick of you, I suppose."

"I believe I would," hesitated Phoebe, "because it is not pleasant to own up how much you would love when no one has asked you for that love, and you know very well your listener thinks no one is ever likely to, I believe it is the right way."

"Well, I'm not built that way. I would rather leave a man in the lurch while I could than be left in the lurch myself any day."

"It is wrong. It is cruel. You don't know how miserable Ned Kirkham may be."

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, he would be miserable any way, if he don't get the gold, he will go right along being miserable wanting me, till at last he got to being miserable because he had got me. No, thank you. I prefer to end it before it comes to that."

"It is not certain to come to that."

"Pretty certain. Now, Phoebe, don't be silly. Which of us two do men like most? Why me, of course. I don't want to be conceited, they are all asses you know, but there isn't a doubt about it. They all seem to like me somehow, and I always get lots of attention, and I never consider their feelings a bit. I go right on and do exactly what I like. And you, you are always considering somebody, you — "

"No one cares for me one bit."

"Just exactly so. Men are always that way. Oh, I know the best way to manage men."

"I think," said Phoebe, slowly, "it is your pretty face and your pretty confident ways that take them. I don't believe men are so — so bad as to admire sentiments like that. A man must want to be loved, and well loved, just like a woman does, and if I were pretty and charming like you, men would like me too, and if they were real good men they would like my sentiments far better than yours."

"Well, I call that very conceited of you. But as far as I can judge they like mine at present, and I'm going to be married while they do."

"But, Nan, why must you get married?"

"Two or three excellent reasons, as I told you before. Look at my boots, look at my dress, look at the other girls growing up; life is a miserable sort of struggle for us girls anyhow, and I must get married before I'm so old nobody asks me any more."

Phoebe stood up and stamped her feet on the ground.

"They are the poorest sort of reasons, if I could only make you see it. Oh, I know it is not very happy for you at home, but wait, wait a little, Nan. It is so irrevocable getting married, if you don't care a lot for him before you are married, the chances are you will like him less afterwards. He can't always have his best manners on, you know, not all his life. And, Nan, who knows, somebody might come along whom you would like very much."

It was getting dark now, the short Australian twilight had fled, and Nancy, sitting on the grass with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, could just vaguely see her sister's tall form as she walked impatiently up and down before the white beehives. She felt dull and depressed, even a little angry. Why was Phoebe, who understood so little about it, going on like this? It was a hard thing to find the man she really cared about had no money, and no prospect of money, it was a hard thing to have to write to him and tell him they must part, and she wanted Phoebe to sympathise with her. She wanted to be kissed and cried over and petted a little. Then as to Mr Sampson, she fully intended to marry him; he was well-to-do, he could give her almost everything she wanted, and it had always seemed to her that money had been, up to the present, the great want of her life. But still she wanted to be sympathised with about that too. To have to give up a young, good-looking man for a plain, middle-aged one, at least twenty years older than herself, it was hard, and Phoebe might have been gentle with her, and petted her, and pitied her first and then pointed out Mr Sampson's many good qualities and the advantages she would reap from the marriage. But no, here was Phoebe striding up and down in the dark, going on as if it were a crime in her to think about marrying at all.



## Kirkham's Find

"Phoebe," she said at last, "for goodness gracious sake stop that and come and sit down quietly. Just supposing I don't marry now, just to please you, what will happen. Have you any idea how dead, and dull and stale everything will be, and that may go on for years and years, for all my life, as far as I can see."

"If you had an interest in life," mused her elder sister.

"There is not such a thing for a woman unless she is married. You can't give me one."

"The bees," said Phoebe, doubtfully. The bees had been so much to her during the last two or three months, but she doubted whether her sister took the same keen interest in them. They were only little insects with stings in their tails to Nancy, while to Phoebe they represented house and money and dresses and influence and independence generally. "The bees," she repeated, a little more firmly. "Nan, we will go on together, and go halves in everything."

The munificence of the offer was entirely lost upon the younger girl.

"Oh, Phoebe," she burst out laughing, "what a funny girl you are. The bees, indeed! As if I wanted your bees. Why, I couldn't be bothered with them. No, I'll just marry Mr Sampson, and I'll be a well-to-do young woman then, and I'll just see if I can't marry you off to some decent sort of a man before you have developed quite into a shrivelled old maid, peddling honey for a living. If that is all you have got to offer it settles it. I will just go in and tell mother and she will be pleased, I'm sure."

Nancy rose up and shook out her skirts.

"You will understand how right I am some day, Phoebe. I'm not saying it is pleasant, but it is the only thing to be done."

"Oh, Nan, Nan. I wish I could make you see how wrong it is before any harm comes of it."

"No harm will come of it, never fear. It is a thing that is done every day." And Nancy turned and walked slowly towards the house.

## CHAPTER XII. A DESOLATE LAND

Sun in the east at mornin', sun in the west at night,  
And the shadow of this yer station the on'y thing moves in sight.

BRET HARTE.

It hadn't rained for two years on the country 'way back' beyond Roebourne, at least so the inhabitants — few and far between, one to a hundred square miles or so — asserted, and Kirkham quite believed the statement. He doubted much its having rained then. He looked upon it as a pleasing notion used to let the stranger know that it had rained within the memory of man, and consequently might be expected to do so again within the lifetime of the most impatient, possibly within a year or two. The stockrider over at Riley's Claypan said he knew it had rained two years ago, it had rained mighty hard, and the claypan had risen and risen till he had to leave his hut and take refuge in the hills beyond, and that was last Christmas two years. He was certain of it because he'd been obliged to leave his pudding behind and when he got back there wasn't a trace of it. There wasn't a trace of the hut either, according to him. And "Sunny Days" was nearest neighbour to the Lone Hand out-station, and consequently might be expected to have some knowledge of its climatic eccentricities. But still, as Kirkham remarked to Morrison, he was fifty miles away and that might make some difference. For his part he was very certain it had never rained at Lone Hand and never intended to. Why it was an out-station at all he could not tell,

## Kirkham's Find

save that the big company who owned all the country for hundreds of miles round kept a certain number of men at work and distributed them on paper in some comfortable cool office down in Melbourne. He was certain the manager up here had no say in the matter for the folly, nay, the cruelty of keeping a solitary man on a place which would barely support one sheep to a hundred acres must be apparent to the meanest capacity.

"It's not pleasant, old chap," agreed Morrison, "but it's Hobson's choice with us. And we can clear out as soon as Sam McAlister lets us know the creek is running."

Kirkham made an impatient movement with his head. Everything depended on rain, and it looked as if it had never rained here since the creation. But there was nothing else to be done.

When they could stop no longer alongside their claim they had applied to old McAlister for work, and he, having none to give, had passed them on to the manager of the Great Western Squatting and Trading Company, which had finally ended in their being sent to out-stations of the company, Kirkham to Lone Hand and Morrison to an out-station known as Merri, though he remarked to Kirkham, he didn't suppose there was anything particularly merry about it.

"Anyhow, it's only about five-and-twenty miles off, old chap, that's one good thing," he added, but Kirkham had not been in the country long enough to look upon five-and-twenty miles as constituting quite a next-door neighbour.

"It can't be more God-forsaken than this place," said Kirkham, looking round drearily.

Certainly anything more desolate he had never conceived in his wildest dreams. There was the out-station, a single room built of corrugated iron, about twelve feet by twenty in size, with one door and one window, and to the north the roof extended a little so as to form a sort of verandah. Beside it, a little to the left, was a windmill with corrugated iron sails that pumped brackish water for the use of the stock, and made a patch of dull green vegetation just so far as the influence of its water made itself felt. This windmill was the reason of the out-station, some one had to take charge of it, and Kirkham was now that man. That, and the hut, and the horse paddock were the only signs of human habitation they had seen for miles. All around was the plain, bare and flat, grassless and treeless, with for all vegetation a sort of wiry herbage, which their neighbour, Sunny Days, informed them was dignified by the name of salt bush. It only grew in patches few and far between, and Kirkham thought the sheep would have derived as much sustenance from the wire fence round the horse paddock, but he was told they were not in bad condition, and if the wool on their backs had become very like straggly hair that was only to be expected in such a climate. The horizon was bounded by hills, hills of a curious rock formation, whose jagged tops cut clean against the hard blue sky, and yet were ever changing, for every now and again, from what cause I know not, great boulders would break off from the parent hill with a loud report, and come crashing down its sides on to the plain below. They had a weird, uncanny picturesqueness of their own, those hills, for the rocks were of various colours, white, and pink, and deep purple, and they changed ever and again as the sun moved across them. Morrison looked at them gratefully.

"If it weren't for the hills," he said, "this would be an almighty God-forsaken hole."

"The hills?" echoed Kirkham, "the hills? They're uncanny. They look as if they belong to another world. I'd rather be without them."

"Oh, would you, old man. Much you know about it. Just fancy living on this plain with nothing in sight, not a stick, not a stone, not a shrub above a foot above the ground, and the plain as flat as a table, mind you. You'd be thankful for hills of any sort after a place like that, I can tell you."

"Good Lord! What do men want to live in such a country for?"

## Kirkham's Find

"Well, we knock tucker out of it, old man. As for you and me, we're in luck to get this billet at all. And we're close enough after all to make our plans together. You can come over sometimes and sometimes I'll ride over and see you. We're our own masters anyhow, thank God, and can do pretty much as we please."

"The Australian, at least the bushman," said Kirkham, "has a curious idea of independence. He sits down in the midst of a desolate waste where there isn't a chance of speaking or seeing a fellow-creature once in a blue moon, and then he thanks God he is his own master."

Morrison laughed.

"It's one way of making the best of it, old man. Anyhow, I'll stop till tomorrow, seeing there's no one to tell me not to, and see you fairly started. And don't be downhearted when I'm gone. I guess it won't be more than six months at the most."

Kirkham looked up doubtfully at the clear, blue sky.

"If we wait for the rain," he said.

"Well, if the rain doesn't come we'll still be saving the dollars. You just can't spend money here, and in a year or two we'll have enough to start in some more get-at-able place."

In a year or two! The words rang in Kirkham's ear as he watched his cousin ride off in the haze of the early morning. A year or two! Allan Morrison talked as lightly of it — the long weary waiting — as if he had two or three lifetimes at his disposal. He was accustomed to this sort of life, Kirkham thought, and besides, there was no one waiting for him, counting the weary days, waiting, waiting, away down south there.

It seemed to him, during that first month he spent alone, he had never before realised the bitterness of waiting. But at least he did now. Not one pang, not one drop of bitterness was he spared, for he had nothing in the wide world to do the live long day but sit on an upturned box at his hut door and think. The windmill wanted so little looking after; often he had not half an hour's work in the whole day, and the rest of his time he might sit with his hands folded before him. His gun stood idle in the corner; there was nothing whatever to shoot; he never saw a living thing save a stray sheep or two from one week's end to another; he had not a book to read; he had only enough paper to write an occasional letter; his nearest neighbour, his cousin Allan, was over twenty-five miles away; and the only chance he had of communicating with his kind was if he should chance to ride over, or when the bullock dray should come round with stores, which it did about once in two months. But there was no fixed time for its coming, and if he should happen to be away they would leave the stores and pass on. The bullock dray would bring the mail, too, and that was something to be looked forward to. Indeed, it was the only thing he had to look forward to now, and his impatience grew and grew. He could not hasten that mail by the smallest effort, but he walked up and down outside his hut door on the hot evenings, up and down, faster and faster till he was bathed in perspiration, and he knew he could not hasten that mail. It was a little thing to wait for a letter a month or two; but here in his loneliness his whole thoughts centred on that coming letter. In the morning he watched the sun rise up over the jagged crests of the ranges, hot and fierce, and said to himself here was another day to be got through. He watched him cross the sky, slowly, so slowly, and sink into the plain on the west, one ruddy fierce golden glory, the one grand sight in the dreary day, and he only said to himself, "another day gone, another day nearer the coming mail," and he notched another notch in the door post which was his calendar. He had lost the day of the week; he had the vaguest idea about the date, but he never forgot that about two months from his arrival, about sixty days later, the dray with stores might be expected to arrive, and that that dray ought to bring the mail. There would certainly be letters from his mother and sisters in England; could he be equally certain of a letter from Nancy? Could he? It must be in answer to his telling her of the downfall of his hopes, or rather not their downfall, but the postponement of their realisation. What would she say? He had nothing else to think about, and he answered that question variously all day long. She would never wait, never, never; it could not be expected of her,

## Kirkham's Find

he must not be surprised if she broke off the engagement, and what would he do then? And then he knew very well he did not expect any such thing; it was surely treason to her even to let such a thought cross his mind. The good, brave, loving little girl who had written him such a tender letter, telling him not to worry, that she loved him, and would wait for him. Would she not, if she loved him, be equally tender now? What was he worrying about? If her letter came in a month, or two months, what matter? It would come sometime, and there could be no doubt what would be in it. Only she would be so grieved. Yes, that was what was troubling him, she would be so grieved; the waiting would be just as weary for her as for him, and he could not bear her to suffer. She was miserable enough at home, he guessed, it was a hard enough life; but he would make up to her for it in the future, and they would want so little, so very little to make them happy. She was not accustomed to luxury. Then he built up castles in the air about their life together. He did not ask riches now, only enough to stock a small farm, such a farm as he had despised, such a life as he had scorned only a very few months back. It would satisfy Nancy, he was sure. And then he got up and paced up and down — was he sure? It would have satisfied Phoebe, he had no manner of doubt about that; but Nancy, she might look for so much more, would she be satisfied? Would she? Would she? Of course she would. Had she not said she loved him? He took out her letter, worn and ragged at the edges now. "I love you, love you, love you, I love you," she wrote, with feminine reiteration, "There! I just can't help it. I wish I could. You don't know how much I wish I could, because I've always laughed at girls who have lovers at the other end of the world who they may see if they're lucky some time during the next ten years and can get married to about the millennium. It's very bad and unkind of you to make me so; you say I must love you a great lot, and you needn't worry or anything like that, because I will wait because I can't help myself."

He knew it off by heart, but he liked to see it in her own hand-writing. It comforted him, and if there was a strong strain of selfishness in the letter, a selfishness that thought a great deal more of her sacrifice than his, he never saw it. He was glad to read she loved him; he was even glad she did it in spite of herself. It made him feel so much more certain of her. But it made him want her too, it made the unoccupied time crawl. The hut was so bare. Corrugated iron outside glistening in the hot sunshine for twelve hours in the day, corrugated iron inside, a bare earthen floor, and for all furniture a couple of boxes, and his bed a piece of sacking spread on four sticks sunk in the ground. Could anything be more humble and unhomelike? And he must put up with this for the next six months at the very least. The stillness began to be overpowering: nothing broke it, there was hardly even a breath of wind, and he began to shrink from breaking it himself. He went about his small daily tasks softly, he never spoke aloud because the sound of his own voice frightened him; and when one day the jagged peak on the hill nearest him split in half with a loud explosion, he found his nerves so shaken by the unexpected sound, that a sudden terror took possession of him, lest he should be losing his reason, and he saddled his horse and rode off there and then to see his cousin at Merri, thanking God in true Australian fashion that he was his own master. True, the dray might be expected any day now, but there would be no good his waiting for it if he was mad. Besides, it would go on to Merri, he would very likely meet it on his way back. For he did not intend to stay above a day; how could he with that letter waiting for him? He would come back as quickly as possible, but he would go now and consult Allan. So he scrawled on a sheet of paper, "Gone to Merri. Back tomorrow. Please leave letters." But when he would have dated it he found he had no idea what day of the month it was, only a shadowy notion of the month itself, so he simply signed his name and laid the paper open on the box with a stone on it to keep it down. There was no necessity to write at all. The bullock driver and his mate would be sure to leave the letters in any case; but he was so feverishly anxious about Nancy's letter, he felt that in making some provision for its coming he was bringing it nearer to himself.

Morrison, all alone in his hut, was overjoyed to see him, and Kirkham, once in his society, hardly liked to explain the horror and fear of loneliness that had driven him thither. He said it was lonely in a hesitating sort of way, and Morrison assented.

"You'll get used to it, old man, in time. What you want is a dog of sorts. You wouldn't believe what company Lassie here is," and he thoughtfully pulled the ears of the nondescript collie who laid her head lovingly on his knee.

## Kirkham's Find

"Where did you get her?" asked Kirkham.

"Last man left her behind him. I don't believe poor Lassie was ever properly appreciated till now. She was just a godsend to me. Oh, you must get a dog, old chap. You speak to the bullock driver when the stores come round. Perhaps he'll leave you one of his. They generally have two or three curs along with them, and anything is better than nothing. I can't give you Lassie, because we have got too fond of one another to part. Haven't we, old girl?" and Lassie, pleased at being noticed, snuggled her head down between his knees, and in wise dog fashion said "yes."

"The mail ought to be in soon," said Kirkham.

"Lucky beggar, you, to have the mail to look forward to. A packet of letters for you, I suppose, from your mother and sisters, and the adored one, she'll write, of course. Oh, come old chap, what are you growling at? If I could look forward to a pile of letters like that every two months, I'd be as happy as a king."

"Won't you get any letters?"

"Who's to write to me, unless Phoebe Marsden does? She might. She's a good woman, that. I mustn't say anything against the adored one, besides, I was mighty gone on her myself not so very long ago, but upon my word I believe there's better stuff in her sister. You would never be afraid of Phoebe Marsden giving you the go by."

"I'm not afraid of Nancy," said Kirkham, coldly. "I know so well — "

"Of course, old man, of course. You know very well no one admires her more than I do. Admired her so much, in fact, I'm inclined to think I was blind to her sister's good qualities. That's all I meant. Look here, old man, I don't suppose I'll ever get a paper and you're sure to get heaps. I'll come over in a fortnight or so — I can't get away before — and you might lend me some, and tell me all the news."

"All right," agreed Kirkham, and when he started back again he found he had never explained to his cousin his horror of the great loneliness, and had only the vaguest notions of getting a dog.

And all the way back he looked out for the dray, but there was no track, and he must have passed it, for when he got back to his hut he found it had been and gone. There were the wheel tracks coming right up to the door and going out again into the wilderness, and inside were the stores, tea and flour and sugar, with a goodly share of tobacco and spices and plums, and a sight to warm the heart of a solitary man, on the box where he laid his open letter a pile of newspapers and letters. The newspapers had all been opened and well thumbed and read; one could hardly expect illustrated papers to find their way into the back blocks intact, but it was not the illustrated papers that Kirkham cared about. The letter, the letter, his letter, the letter he had cut notches in the door to keep count for, that was all he wanted. If only that letter was there they might have taken all the rest; it would be company for weeks if only that letter were all he hoped for. He sat down on the box with a sudden feeling of weakness; he was afraid, he was terribly afraid. Suppose, after all, there should be no letter — suppose the letter should be there and yet should not be all he wished. He rose up and walked outside the hut; he walked right round it very slowly, then he crossed over to the windmill, and watched the water filling quietly the trough beneath it. In some places he had heard the water from these bores rushed out violently, flooding the ground round, but this one didn't; it trickled out reluctantly; it looked as if every drop might be the last. It was hardly worth while, he thought, to keep a man here if the directors down south only knew. What was he waiting here for? The dray had come, the dray he had been watching and waiting for for the last two months, and the letters lay inside there, the letter from his little girl, and he was standing watching this water pumped up drop by drop, and now it was the letter that was waiting for him. How ungrateful he was! Would he treat Nancy herself that way had she come to him? And he turned and retraced his steps almost at a run, and, throwing the papers aside, gathered up all the letters in his hands. Such a lot there were, ten or eleven at the very least — thick ones, too; but of course it was over eight weeks since he had

## Kirkham's Find

had a letter from any one, and he knew well enough his mother and sisters would write regularly every week, and Nancy — ah, surely she would be as kind as his mother and sisters. She would understand so much better than they his loneliness and his longing, she would measure it by her own. He thought of her longing for him, thinking pitifully of him, and it brought a warm glow to his heart. Uppermost lay a letter addressed in his mother's well-known pointed handwriting; he remembered how eager he used to be to see that handwriting when he was a schoolboy, and now it held but a second place in his heart — but a very secondary place. What difference could it make to his mother and sisters if he were out of the world? Surely he influenced their lives hardly at all. And yet — he turned over letter after letter, and on every one was the well-known handwriting. All that she could do for her boy the far-away mother was doing. And he grew impatient and hot and cold all over. All these letters were from his mother; where then was Nancy's? The one he was waiting for and looking for? One by one he dropped them through his fingers on to the ground, one by one, and at last he came upon the one he was looking for, such a thin little letter, and he had waited for it so long — and only one — he looked at the post-mark; it was as old as his mother's last letter. She might easily have written more; if she had cared she would have written more; she would surely have understood his desolation and his longing; she would have wanted to comfort him in his bitter disappointment. She must have understood, surely she understood. He turned the letter over and over in his hands; he read the post-mark carefully; he held it up to the light, but he could not make up his mind to break the seal. Suppose it should not be all he wanted, what then? Ah, what then? It would be all very well to say she was not worth caring for, but what else had he? The fierce hot sun crept in at the doorway across the hard bare floor, it seemed to emphasise his desolation. He looked round the hut, and it told him how little he had to offer. Little — it was less than nothing. What right had he to expect any girl to stick to him, and yet if she did not what would his life be worth? He thought of her bright fair face, of the loving letter, the worn, torn letter; and he took it out and read it once again, and called himself a brute for doubting and fearing, just because there was only one little letter, and it was old. A thousand things might have stopped her writing. If he were going to feel like this every time he got a letter, how would he live till he should be able to marry her and have her for his own. He was a fool, and he swept the letters and papers off the box on to the floor, sat down deliberately and tore open the envelope. Only one sheet — he could hear his own heart beating — only one sheet, but after all one can say a great deal in one sheet, and all he wanted to read was that Nancy was true to him and would wait for him, that would take him over another two weary long months. All he wanted might be said in a very few words. Slowly he drew the letter out and slowly opened it. No heading — Ah, but the very tenderest letters have been written without any heading, without any beginning at

"I don't know how to write," began the letter, and in truth there was no heading, no date, and no address. If it cost him to read, it had cost Nancy a great deal more to write. She had thought it over for days, she had begun it again and again, she had cried her heart out over it; but she had never for a moment swerved from her purpose. "I don't know how to write and tell you how sorry I am, but I think you will know that without my telling. I'm so sorry for you; it must be such hard lines, specially when you had counted on the gold; but I daresay you will find some more when the rain comes, and anyhow, a man stops young a good long time, and has plenty of time to make his fortune, so I hope you will be rich yet, by and by. It is never any good to despair. And about our engagement? At least it was not an engagement ever, was it? And I believe by your letter you want it to go on still, and it is very good of you; but that would be very foolish, and I am sure you will think so by the time you get this. What is the good of our going on being engaged and never seeing one another for years and years? And then when at last you did come I might be old and shrivelled, and you would think it an awful bore to have to marry me, and hate me ever after; and I wouldn't like you to do that, so I think we had better stop right here. I am so sorry, indeed, indeed, I don't believe you know how sorry I am, but what else is there to be done? It is always best to look things straight in the face, and you see I must like you a lot to write to you just exactly as I feel. So goodbye, and I do hope you will be happy in the future. I believe you will be happier than me.

"Last week I got engaged to Mr Josiah Sampson — you know him — and we are to be married in April. It was all arranged last week, and father and mother are so pleased. It looks funny to write that to you, but I want you to understand everything. Goodbye." And then she ended up abruptly, "ANNIE MARSDEN."

## CHAPTER XIII. NANCY DOES THE RIGHT THING

Falsar than the smiles of faithless April.  
A. COWLEY.

"You are a good girl, Nancy. Of course I am very pleased, and so is your father. It is naturally a great comfort to him to think one of you girls will be so comfortably provided for. You have never been any anxiety to me, though. I always felt you would be all right."

"And Mr Josiah Sampson?" asked Nancy, thoughtfully.

"Your father says he is such a good fellow. And such a large practice. Of all the men in Ballarat, I don't know a better match. You are very lucky, Nancy. You'll be able to keep two servants and a man, and a pony carriage, and send to Robertson and Moffat's for your dresses, and have no anxiety about money. Oh, Nancy, you are lucky; and such a nice man with it all."

"You used to say he was very wooden," remarked Nancy, demurely.

"Ah, that was before I knew him. His manner is a little stand-off and prim, perhaps; but that wears off when you get to know him. Those gay, fascinating sort of men all the girls fall in love with make just the worst sort of husbands. He will make you a good one, I'm sure he will, he looked at you so kindly, Nancy. My child, I'm sure you will be happy, and you will be spared all the little anxieties and worries that make a woman's life so hard. You haven't had time to realise yet what that means."

"Poor old mother," said Nancy, affectionately, "I knew you would be pleased. But think how much nicer it would be if I was head over ears in love with him."

"No, no, don't say that. It is much best as it is. One is bound to do the loving, and it had better be the man. You will love him well enough after you are married. Half the misery in the world comes from the woman loving too much; besides," Mrs Marsden put on a severely proper air, "I really don't think it is nice for a girl to talk about loving a man before she is married to him. I'm sure it isn't. I never called your father anything but Mr Marsden till we were married, and I certainly wouldn't have told him I loved him. Nice girls never do. It is the men that do that, and yet you see -- "

Mrs Marsden paused to let this brilliant example have full weight, and Nancy stooped over her, kissed her, and fled.

"She thinks her marriage is an immense success, evidently," said Nancy to her sister, when they were brushing their hair before going to bed. "Fancy that. I guess I will be happier than she has been, anyhow."

"Poor mother," sighed her eldest daughter.

"I haven't the least doubt," said Nancy, "that at this moment she is probably thinking to herself 'Poor Phoebe,' and wondering if by any possible chance I will be able to get you married. There, there, don't fly into a rage. You shall be an old maid if you want to; I promise you I won't stop you."

"As I've explained before," said Phoebe, brushing hard at her long, dark hair, and as her sister caught a glimpse of her glowing cheeks and bright dark eyes, she thought once more, as she had done several times lately, they must have all been making a mistake in setting down Phoebe as plain; "as I have explained before, I don't want to be an old maid, but I object to any one looking out for a husband for me and feeling obliged to marry me off."

## Kirkham's Find

"Yes, I know. Well, anyhow, you haven't got such a job before you as I have. You may be thankful for that."

"What is that?"

"I have got to --- I mean, I will have to write to Ned Kirkham --- and --- and --- "

"Nan! You don't mean to say you haven't done that yet. How mean of you!"

"It's all very well of you to say 'how mean of you,' but how would you like to have to do it yourself?"

Phoebe made no answer to this, only went on steadily brushing her hair.

"Oh, of course, I know," grumbled Nancy; "you are thinking such a thing would not ever happen to you. You would not have behaved so. But then you don't understand. The temptation doesn't come to you."

"Well," said Phoebe, ignoring the last remark, "I know this much, you ought to let Ned Kirkham know at once you are going to be married to some one else. You ought to do it this very night. You are engaged to two men at once."

"I haven't any paper or ink," said Nancy, weakly.

Phoebe shook back her long hair, opened the bedroom door, and peeped out into the dark passage. All was still, and every one was evidently in bed. Then, in nightgown and slippers, she made her way softly into the dining-room, to her mother's davenport, took therefrom paper, pen, ink, and blotting-book, and returned to her sister.

"There," she said, clearing a corner of the dressing-table, and drawing a chair up to it. "Now sit down and write before you go to bed."

"It is so late," objected Nancy.

"You won't have a moment's time tomorrow. Nan, if you don't write, I'll just tell mother."

That threat settled things. Nancy sat down, and Phoebe, getting into bed, put the pillow up against the wall to lean upon, and settling the bed clothes around her, prepared to see that Nancy did her duty.

"Don't look at me," objected Nancy.

"I won't the minute you begin to write."

"What am I to say?"

"Dear Mr Kirkham, --- Last week I got engaged to Mr Sampson and am going to be married in April. I think I ought to tell you, because I know you think I'm engaged to you."

"Oh, that will never do," sobbed Nancy, "I couldn't write such a horrid letter as that. Poor Ned, oh, poor Ned!"

"Put it your own way, then," said her sister. "It will be a horrid letter, anyhow, if he cares for you, and you know he does. Just write what you like, only the less you say the better. You have got to think of Mr Sampson now."

Nancy laid her head down on the table and sobbed heartbrokenly.



## Kirkham's Find

"I can't do it. I can't — I can't."

"You have got to write to one or the other," said Phoebe, coldly. "It would, perhaps, be better to write to Mr Sampson, but I'm sure you won't do that," and she leaned back against her pillows and closed her eyes.

Nancy swallowed down some sobs, mopped her eyes with a towel because she had not a handkerchief handy, and proceeded to begin her letter, and Phoebe, listening to the scratch, scratch of her pen, came to the conclusion that as soon as she had written a word she scratched it out again, and when she got to the end of the page she stood up and tore it into little bits.

"What did you do that for?" asked her sister. "It would have been written if you had left it."

"I can't write it — I don't know what to say — I don't know how to put it." And Nancy had another fit of passionate heartbroken sobbing.

Phoebe watched her in silence; not that she was not truly sorry for her sister, but how could she help her? She knew her well enough, she might cry all night, but she would keep her engagement with Mr Sampson all the same in the morning, therefore Phoebe was determined that Ned Kirkham should thoroughly understand there was no hope for him.

"Nancy," she said, as Nancy's sobs died down again, "write now, like a good girl. Don't you see, it can't matter in the very least what you say to Ned Kirkham, so long as he clearly understands you are going to marry Mr Sampson in April. Whether he is angry, or sad, or don't care twopence, you won't hear about it. Why, you will be married soon after he gets the letter. You will never know what he thinks."

This matter-of-fact way of looking at the matter evoked a fresh burst of tears from Nancy, but it had the desired effect, too. Presently she wiped her eyes again, and set to work in earnest. Phoebe watched her turn over the paper, and then she asked in muffled tones —

"Ought I to write it again, this is only a torn sheet of paper?"

"No, no, certainly not." Phoebe would be only too thankful to see that letter finished anyhow. "What can it matter? He will never notice."

"How shall I end it?"

"Just sign your name, of course."

"It looks so brutal and cold. Just 'Nancy?'"

"No, of course not. You must put 'Annie Marsden.'"

"I don't believe he knows my name is 'Annie,'" said Nancy, with another burst of tears.

"Oh, yes, he does," said Phoebe. "There, now that's done. No, Nancy, you are not to tear it up. It will do very well. Did you tell him you were going to be married in April? Yes. Very well, then, the rest doesn't matter. Now put it in an envelope and direct it, like a good girl, and come to bed. It is after twelve o'clock."

Nancy obeyed her tearfully, and with a sigh of relief Phoebe straightened down her own pillows and blew out the candle as her sister jumped into bed. In the dark she heard her sobbing to herself, but she said nothing, there was nothing to be said. If Nancy was determined to marry the man she did not love, Phoebe felt she would have to pay

## Kirkham's Find

the penalty. It was no good her worrying. Nevertheless, she did worry; it was no fault of hers, but she was keenly sensible that there was something wrong in her sister's life, and she could not but be sorry for it. Still, Nancy, sobbing muffled sobs into the pillows, would not have changed places with her; so she sighed once more for the crookedness of the world, thought thankfully that at any rate that letter was written, and finally went to sleep.

Next day Nancy had a headache, and was petted by her mother. "Poor child, no wonder, the excitement had been too much for her," and the day after she was her old cheerful self again.

"It is no good bothering," she told Phoebe, as she watched her put some fresh frames into her hives, "I am sure I have cried rivers; it is no good crying over spilt milk. I can't have Jamie, and auld Robin Gray is a gude mon to me," and she held out her hand, so that Phoebe might admire her diamond ring.

"Oh, Nancy, is that your engagement ring? How perfectly lovely!"

"I thought you would say so. And look here," and she pointed to a new gold bangle on her other arm. "What do you say to auld Robin Gray now?"

"Oh, Nancy, how can you talk of him like that! It is wicked when he is so good to you."

"My dear, as I have told you before, you have the absurdest notions as to the way men ought to be treated. As I have said more than once before, which of us two do men like best, which treatment do they approve of most? For all your goodness, no man gives you gold bangles and diamond rings, and no man goes breaking his heart for you just because he can't get you."

"Nancy, you ought to be ashamed of yourself to talk like that."

"Ought I? I would be thinking it if I didn't say it, and so are you. I wouldn't say it to an outsider, of course, but just to you Besides, it is good for you; it is teaching you the error of your ways before it is too late."

"It is too late already," said Phoebe, gravely, putting the mat over her frames and the cover on the hives. "I think it is wicked to do as you do. I'm sure it isn't that makes the men like you, and I'm going to do what I think right, even if I am a lonely old woman in the end. It is better to feel you are doing right."

"It depends on what you mean by doing right. Weren't you carefully explaining to me the other day that you thought we each of us made our own standard of right? Well, that is my standard of right, and I feel quite comfortable, thank you."

"I don't think you do," began Phoebe, then she stopped. Where was the good of reminding this sister of hers of the night she had spent in tears? If she had forgotten, so much the better; but Phoebe wondered how she could forget so soon. She was really cross, though, when more than a fortnight later Nancy, in taking a handkerchief from her drawer, drew along with it a letter, which fell on the floor. Nancy hastily put her foot on it, but not before her sister had read the address.

"Nan!" Her tone was shocked. She felt she never would understand this sister of hers, who was so tender and gentle and soft and kind, and yet was so utterly callous of the feelings of the man she loved. "Oh, Nan, you don't mean to say you haven't posted that letter yet! Nan, how could you be so cruel? I thought it had gone three weeks ago."

Nancy picked it up and turned it over in her fingers.

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"I hadn't a stamp," she said. "Besides, it is a cruel letter. I'm not going to send it. He deserves something better," and the ready tears overflowed, and Nancy looked the picture of misery.

But the diamond ring, with a sapphire one now above it, still gleamed on her finger. Mr Sampson, when Nancy was not staying at Ballarat with Mrs Moore, was always out at "Wenoona," and Phoebe knew she had not the least intention of breaking her engagement with him. She might sigh for her lost love, but she had no intention of giving up the fleshpots of Egypt for his sake.

"I quite agree with you," she said, taking the letter from her limp fingers; "but since you won't give him anything better, this is the least you can do for him. It must go."

"But it isn't stamped."

"I will stamp it, and I'm going up the township now -- I will post it."

"Phoebe -- "

But Phoebe put on her hat without another word, and Ned Kirkham got his long-looked-for letter.

## CHAPTER XIV. THE WORST OF IT

Oh, my sweet,  
Think, and be sorry you did this thing!  
Though earth were unworthy to feel your feet,  
There's a heaven above may deserve your love.  
Should you forfeit heaven for a snapt gold ring  
And a promise broke, were it just or meet?

BROWNING.

And he sat on the box and read it through. "Annie Marsden!" he repeated to himself. "But I wrote to Nancy." Oh, yes; it was Nancy then -- it had always been Nancy for him -- but now she was going to marry Mr Josiah Sampson it was Annie Marsden. She -- was -- going -- to -- be -- married -- in -- April, in -- April, in -- April. He said it over very slowly to himself. Annie Marsden -- Nancy, his Nancy -- was going to be married in April. He weighed every word deliberately. In April -- in April. It might be April now for all he knew; she might be married now for all he knew, and he had counted her his. He held the letter between his fingers; he did not lay it down. He did not open his other letters. He never thought of looking at a newspaper. He sat on there and stared at the opposite wall -- the hard, grey-blue corrugated iron with the maker's name stamped across it in black letters, and the setting sun coming in at the open doorway was creeping slowly up it, very slowly the sunlight went, but very steadily, up and up. There was nothing to break the monotony. The bare earthen floor, the iron wall, and the iron roof -- that was all the hard, cruel sunlight showed. When the sunlight reached the roof, would it go out? It had seen all there was to be seen, it had showed up in its garish golden light the desolate barrenness of this his only home, and then it would go away for a day, for another twelve hours, for another twenty-four -- was it twenty-four? He tried to reckon, but somehow his brain seemed dull. Yes, it must be twenty-four, and in twenty-four hours hence that sunlight would be on his wall in just the selfsame place, showing just the selfsame surroundings. And another twenty-four hours, and another, and another, and another. It would go on for ever, the same weary procession of days, unchanging, unalterable, until some day, perhaps, the rain would come, and then they could go back and work at their claim. And what was six months out of a man's life, if only he got what he desired in the end? Nothing, surely nothing. Who has not waited six months for success? And the gold was there, there for the taking. Allan was pretty sure of it, and Allan was a careful Scotchman; and once they had it -- well, he would be rich, no need to stay any longer in this God-forsaken hole. He could go where he pleased, have what he wanted, and Nancy -- Annie Marsden would be Mrs Josiah Sampson.

## Kirkham's Find

He let the letter slip through his fingers on to the floor, and the faintest little breath of wind — the very ghost of a breeze that was springing up with the evening — caught it and turned it over and over till it reached the corner, and held it there against the wall. Tap, tap! Then a pause. Tap, tap! It was the only sound that broke the stillness. It seemed quite loud and echoed in his ears. With his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, he stared at it and thought dully how he had longed and watched and counted the hours for that letter, and now he sat there calmly and allowed it to lie on the floor. Then the fancy came to him, and he took out the first letter — the long treasured letter — and he dropped it, too, on to the ground to see if the wind would treat it in the same way. But it was old and worn, the paper had lost its crispness, and it lay there at his feet like an old friend, pitifully, silently reproaching him with ingratitude. All that letter had been to him, and he let it lie there on the hard ground! Without a voice it cried out to him, till he put his head in his hands and rocked himself to and fro in speechless misery. That bit of frayed paper had been so much to him, and yet it had meant just nothing at all to Nancy, just nothing at all. "I love you, I love you, I love you," she had written, and yet she had meant so little by the words that seemed to him so sacred and so binding. She had understood him so little that two months later she could write, "I might be old and shrivelled, and you would think it an awful bore to have to marry me, and hate me ever after; and I wouldn't like you to do that, so I think we had better stop right here." And she hadn't even given him the chance of pleading his own cause. She had clinched the matter at once by getting engaged to another man; she had waited to write to him even till she had fixed her wedding-day. Oh, the cruelty of it — the selfish thoughtlessness! Thoughtfulness would be a better word, for she must have felt her engagement would settle matters. He picked up the letter at his feet and straightened out the crumpled paper, and laid his face against it like a child for a moment; then he stepped across the hut, picked up the other, and folded the two together, though it cost him an effort, for he felt as if he were doing the first dear letter a grave injustice. But it had lied to him, too, in a way, it had buoyed him up with false hopes, and so he folded them together and put them in his pocket. And as he did so the sunbeams stretched up to the roof, and went out suddenly and left him in the dark. He stared at the wall for a minute, and then came back and stood in the doorway, and watched the golden light die out in the west. Another day was done, another long, hot, weary day, and there was nothing for him but a succession of long weary days like this one — no change, no hope of change, nothing to look forward to, and the girl he loved and trusted had played him false.

"Oh, my God, my God!" he moaned. "I would rather have seen her die."

Allan had gauged her accurately, and Allan had loved her too. Ah! but he had not loved her as he had done. She did not even seem to understand the wrong she was doing him. She was of the world, worldly-wise, and every one in her world and his would say she had acted rightly. How could he complain? She was dainty and pretty and lovable. If he had been rich, if only he had had just enough to marry her, she would have been true to him. But she wanted to be married, she as good as told him so, and as she could not get him — well, she put up with somebody else. That is what her letter amounted to. She did care for him? In a way, yes, but not enough, or it was her mother's or the world's training.

"My God!" he muttered between his teeth; "it is damnable the way they bring women up."

Oh, she had cared for him, she had cared, but her training had been too much for her. She could not believe in a man's love, certainly not in his constancy, and therefore she would sacrifice nothing for him, would risk nothing for him. It was time she was settled in life, and he laughed bitterly to himself. That was the refrain of an old song, wasn't it? Yes, something about 'old Margery,' and he laughed again. The stupidity, the folly of it, the wickedness of it, a fresh young girl like his little sweetheart deliberately tying herself to a man she cared nothing for — he was very sure she cared nothing for him — an utterly unsuitable man, just because "it was time she was settled in life." Wasn't there anybody by to save her? No, there was no one — not one. "Father and mother are so pleased." And he went outside and walked straight ahead in fierce impotence. He could do nothing, just nothing. It seemed to him his own life was ended. The main spring was broken; there was nothing to live for now. The only thing to be done was to crush down this fierce unrest, this hopeless longing for what could never be his. She was to be married in April, married in April, and in all probability it was April now. So he walked on swiftly across the

## Kirkham's Find

level plain, and the crisp, dry, salt bush crunched beneath his feet, and the stars, brilliant with a tropical brightness, came out as by magic in the soft, dark, velvety sky. He hated that bright, spangled dark sky. He would have given a great deal for a sky of storm-laden clouds with the moon just breaking through, or no moon at all, but the rushing wind and the pouring rain. A great deal? But he was bankrupt; he had nothing to give -- nothing at all. The woman he believed in had played him false, and it would matter little to him henceforward what the skies above were like; he only wanted to get through his life quickly and have done with it, and it crawled away so intolerably slowly. It was an age since the morning. This night already was stretching into an eternity, and he quickened his pace as if by so doing he could make the minutes fly. And even so, when it was all over, what then? Always the salt bush crushing under his feet, and overhead and all round as far as the eye could see the brilliant, clear sky. But he walked on and on, till at last, for very weariness, he stumbled and lay where he fell because there was nothing in the world to get up for; he was tired, and he might just as well lie there as anywhere else. And then he dozed a little -- and when he wakened the plain was light, and the moon, a little out of shape and old, but fierce and red and hot, was just rising over the jagged peaks in the east. So he might as well go back, and he rose to his feet and stumbled back, watching the moon rise higher in the heavens. He walked slowly now. His walking fast did not get him through life any quicker; it only wearied him, and there was nothing to hurry for. Then he thought of his mother, his poor mother, who had written so regularly to her boy. In his heart he was sore against women, against all women, but he knew she would have given all she possessed to make her boy happy, and the thought comforted him not one jot. His poor mother! He only wished she would be happy without him, would not worry about him. Ah! it was a cruel world. Things didn't seem to be properly fixed up, somehow.

And when he reached his hut again he would not go inside. He was very weary, but how could he bear to go in and lie on his bed and think. The moonlight was coming in through the window, he knew that well enough, and he knew that from his bed he could just see where it fell on the doorpost, showing up so clearly the nicks he had cut to mark the time for the coming of the letter. And the letter had come, and there was nothing more to look forward to: he could not lie and look at the notches he had cut when he had hope.

Now there was nothing to hope for, nothing to be disappointed and heartsick about, that was a comfort. If no rain came for the next two years, for the next forty years, he would not mind. He was not fit for any exertion, for any sustained effort, and yet he plodded on steadily -- eastward this time -- looking up every now and then at the moon as she sailed higher into the sky. Yes, there was comfort in that. Fate had done her worst for him -- he need fear nothing more.

How the night passed he could hardly have told, only it did wear away somehow, and when the moonlight began to pale before the rosy light of morning, and the sun rose up behind the jagged peaks in the east, he found himself away out on the plain, watching, with eyes that saw not, the glorious gold and grey of the sunrise, while he himself was an object of interest to hundreds of crows, who sat on the ground in rings round him, and flew cawing over his head. He laughed aloud as the sunlight shone on their handsome blue-black plumage.

"Why, they think I'm mad or lost," he said aloud, and he waved his hands at them, and made some of them move lazily and leisurely into a back row. "Not yet, mates, not yet. Have a little patience, I dare say your turn will come by and by," and he turned round and went slowly back to his hut. And it angered him and worried him not a little that the crows came too.

Had they ever followed him before -- had they? He tried to think. They were always there, of course, always ready to pounce on a poor sick sheep, or tear out the eyes of an unprotected lamb, but they had never looked at him like that before, he was sure they never had. They knew -- oh, the crows were wise -- that he would never go away from here now, that he would die here, and then they would pick out his eyes. Yes, they knew it very well. That would be the end, only it would not be just yet, and he must get back to see to the well, for that was what he was here for. The sheep would die if they had no water.

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But when the windmill was fixed up, he ran hurriedly to his hut, looking furtively over his shoulder to see that the crows were not following him, and once inside he shut the door fast and pulled a box across it, and felt a sense of triumph in the fact that he had successfully outwitted them.

Then he lay down on his bed and drew his hand across his eyes. Surely he must be mad to fear the crows; he knew well enough they would not attack even a sheep as long as it was strong and well, let alone a man. He must be going mad to be afraid of them. Going mad? He must be mad indeed, and he crossed the hut and took a good draught of water — there was no tea made — and tried to eat some of the damper he had made before he went to see Morrison, but it was dry and he could not eat it; there was fresh flour now, he would make some more by and by. It did not matter much, there was no hurry — nothing mattered now. He lay down on the bed and tried to read his letters, but the lines of writing were all blurred and danced before his eyes, and when he opened the illustrated papers it was just the same, he could not read them, he could not even look at the pictures. He had not slept the night before, he told himself, that was what was the matter; but even now he could not rest, and he found himself perpetually walking round and round the hut, keeping his eyes carefully away from the notches he had cut in the doorpost, because it seemed to him it would pain him to look at them, and ever now and then walking softly, so that the crows would not hear him. He ought to be dead, they were waiting for him, but it wasn't time yet — not quite yet, Allan was coming down soon, and he would want his papers and things, and to hear the news, and the crows must wait, and he laughed aloud. And the sound of his own laughter brought him to his senses again.

What was this horrible thing that was coming over him? Was he going mad? Mad! He had heard of such things. Shepherds who had lost their senses from very loneliness, from sheer want of human companionship. But that had been after years of loneliness, and it was only yesterday he had seen Allan Morrison — only yesterday he had been full of hopes for the future. A girl's faithlessness could not make all this wide difference. Such things happened every day in his world, every day; it was ridiculous to think he would go mad for that. He would take up his life and make a good thing of it, in spite of all she had done; he would show her he would have been worth waiting for — he would begin this very moment. Ah, but there was nothing to do, nothing whatever, but to tend the windmill once in twenty-four hours, and to watch the weary hours go round; nothing whatever to do, but to count the hours and watch the crows.

And so it began again, the whole weary round. He was afraid of the crows — they terrified him, they made him shudder, and the horror of his lonely helplessness was strong upon him. Then he would shake that off; remember, he was a strong young man, not yet thirty, with all his life still to be lived; all his life with its great possibilities, and for one moment he was hopeful and happy; but only for a moment. The thought of Nancy — pretty, dainty, laughing, loving Nancy — came to him. He longed for the sound of her voice, for the touch of her hand, just to take her in his arms for one brief moment, to make her understand, as he was sure he could, that she belonged to him and to no other man. But it might not be, and he would chafe and fret and weary over it, till the thought of the crows came back to him in spite of himself, and he hid his face in his blankets to keep out the horrid sight, and then hastily raised it again, because he fancied there was a crow on the narrow window-sill watching him, and he could not bear to be taken unawares.

And so it went on the livelong day. He ate nothing, he did not want to eat, only his mouth was parched, and he drank a little water now and then; and when the darkness came he stole out into the cool, soft night, and walked up and down till at last for very weariness he dozed a little on the ground. Not for long, though. His thoughts crowded on him too quickly to allow him to rest. All the livelong night he seemed to be trying to arrange some scheme of life for himself, something that should rescue him from the horror of dreary loneliness; but it grew harder to concentrate his thoughts, and when the morning came and he saw the crows round him looking at him with their evil eyes, he ran back to his hut and barred the door again, and forgot even to attend to the windmill, which was his reason for being there at all.

Up and down his hut he walked, up and down, and then across, and he began to look furtively at the gun in the corner, only furtively as yet, because he was not quite mad and he knew what he was doing, and he knew that life

## Kirkham's Find

might hold many happy days for him yet, even though he could not see them; and why should he take his own life simply because a girl had proved unfaithful, when girls were doing that every day. There was his mother to be thought of, and his sisters, and yes, there were the crows, they were —

A loud knocking and pushing at his door brought him to a sudden standstill in his walk. Could it be possible they had grown so bold?

"Ned, old man, are you dead? What the devil — "

He took one step across the little room and drew away the box, and in stepped Allan Morrison, Lassie following close at his heels.

"Good Lord, Ned, what are you barred up in this way for? Didn't you hear me come up? I put my horse in the paddock there, and I must have been knocking a good ten minutes. I began to think you must be away. What do you have the door shut for?"

"The crows — " began Kirkham, and then hesitated. What had he been dreaming about? There was Morrison and his dog, if they had been angels from heaven they could not have been more welcome; but with them standing there and the bright sunlight flooding the little hut it was the height of foolishness to fear the crows or anything else.

"The crows?" repeated Morrison, in astonishment.

"I — I — was dreaming," hesitated Kirkham. "Come in, old man. I'm very glad to see you. I didn't think you would come so soon."

"Well, you see," hesitated Morrison in his turn, "I — I — I heard from Phoebe Marsden — she is a ripper is that girl — you had got some bad news," he turned his eyes away from Kirkham's worn and haggard face, "and I thought perhaps, seeing you were all alone, perhaps you wouldn't object to the company of a mate."

"Come in," repeated Kirkham, "do come in, and — and — sit down — and have something. I'm afraid," he added, "I've neglected things a bit lately."

Even a bushman's hut can look uncared for and untidy, and Morrison, as he stepped across the threshold and looked round, felt that things certainly had been neglected a bit lately. That the majority of his cousin's possessions should be on the floor did not surprise him. A bushman's things very often have to be on the floor for want of any other place to put them, but they seemed to have been kicked there, as indeed they had, for Kirkham had felt the need in his restlessness of having as much space at his disposal as possible, and had piled up his scanty belongings in order to provide that space. He looked down on them guiltily, feeling that Allan must needs read in that hopeless confusion something of his state during the last forty-eight hours, and he was ashamed now that he had come. How could he — how could any sane man, have gone on as he had done for the last two days? What would Allan think of him?

"Whew," whistled Morrison, cheerfully, as he disinterred the flour-bag, and proceeded to lug it across into its own corner again, "you have been making hay of things generally, old man. I suppose it was a relief to your feelings. One generally wants to do something of that sort, I notice. Paint the town red, or run amuck, as a sort of let out," and he raised the sugar bag and put it beside the flour.

Lassie was sitting in the doorway, making ineffectual snaps at the flies that buzzed around her, and Kirkham, with a sudden feeling of weariness, sat down on the box beside her, and leaned back against the wall.

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"I'm sorry I've no tucker ready, old man," he said, "but the truth is, I've been off my feed lately. There are no points about feeding alone."

"We'll soon mend that. You take a snooze, old chap, and I'll have something ready by the time you wake. No, now lie on the bed, man. Lie down and rest a bit, and I'll straighten things up. We've come over to stop for a day or two, perhaps a week."

Kirkham looked at him doubtfully. He had a horrible suspicion he had been making a fool of himself, and that his cousin knew it, but Morrison only tapped him on the shoulder kindly.

"Come, old man, you'd do as much for me if I were a bit out of sorts."

So he suffered himself to be led, and lay down obediently and watched Allan hunt out the materials for a billy of tea. Then he went outside to light the fire, but Kirkham lay still, for he saw that Lassie still wagged her tail softly in the doorway, and he felt safe, and what he did not see was the sign that Allan made to her to stay there. And presently Allan came back with a pannikinful of strong, sweet tea, such as bushmen drink, and Kirkham drank it gratefully. Nothing so refreshing, it seemed to him, had passed his lips for a long time, and he lay back and closed his eyes for a moment, and before he realised it was sound asleep.

It was many hours after when he awakened with a start and a remembrance that something strange had happened to him, and as he sat up, sleepily rubbing his eyes, he saw that Allan was sitting on the box in the middle of the hut smoking a pipe and looking over an illustrated paper by the dim light of a slush lamp. All the while he had been here Kirkham had never found it worth his while to make a slush lamp, and to his waking eyes, with the smell of the strong station tobacco in his nostrils, it seemed to him the little bare hut had never looked so cosy and homelike.

Allan heard him stirring, and looking up from his paper peered over into the darkness.

"Awake, old man? Feel better for your snooze. Another man! Come, that's all right. If you come outside and dip your head in a bucket of cold water you'll feel right as a trivet, and we'll feed by the light of the moon. I see her ladyship's getting up over the hills there."

Kirkham did as he was bid, and the two men made an evening meal outside off fried chops and damper and highly sweetened tea. Morrison had killed a sheep, and the carcass hung against the corner of the hut, and the guest raked up conversation on every conceivable subject, while his host ate in silence. Morrison looked at him anxiously at first, but seeing he did eat, he pulled Lassie's ears gratefully, and heaved a sigh of thankfulness as he filled his pipe.

Kirkham did the same, lighted it up, blew a wreath or two of smoke, and then laid it down.

"What in God's name made you come over here today, Allan?"

"For company, old man, and to see the papers. The diversions over at Merri are a bit limited."

"But we'd met only a day or two back."

"Well, if you don't want me," laughed his cousin, "Lassie and I'll — "

"No, no, my God! I never was so thankful to see any one, only if you only knew it seemed so opportune, so — "



## Kirkham's Find

"You see," said Morrison, interrupting him, "I may as well tell you the truth, old chap. After you were gone Lassie and I got talking about you — Lassie's mighty good company I can tell you — and we came to the conclusion that you weren't bearing the loneliness well, that your mother wouldn't be pleased with your looks at all, and we determined to come over under the week and see how you were getting along. Then the mail came, and, as I told you before, I had a letter from Phoebe Marsden — she's a ripping good girl, that I can tell you — and she told me some news I knew you wouldn't like, and said how she'd got Nancy to write to you, and — and — well, you see, old chap, I thought — I mean — it's a blow, of course, it must be, after you'd been counting on her, and we sorter thought after the first — the first — "

Morrison was getting hopelessly muddled in his endeavour to conceal his real anxiety and sympathy under the guise of a simple, friendly desire to cheer a friend up; but out of the weariness of the last two months, the horror of the last two days Kirkham understood and stretched out a hand and wrung his gratefully.

"I — somehow — I think I was regularly off my chump last night," he said, turning his face away from the flickering firelight. "I don't know what I mightn't have done if you hadn't turned up when you did."

"Oh, nonsense, old man, you were all right — a bit out of sorts, that's all — and then the disappointment and the loneliness. Loneliness always sort of aggravates things."

But he knew very well, and Kirkham, though he accepted his explanation knew very well, too, that it had very nearly been something more serious with him than a passing "out of sorts." He shuddered when he thought of the last two days.

It is a fact that men don't confide in one another as women do, but these two were alone in the wilderness. It was night in the open air, and their only light was the moonlight and the glow from the dying fire; their pipes were alight, and one was firmly convinced in his own mind that the other had saved him from taking his own life, and the other, though he said nothing, had more than a suspicion of the truth. The occasion seemed even to demand confidences. You cannot live at high pressure for long; human nature won't stand it; the reaction must come at length, and after the long weary months of waiting, the agony of bitter disappointment that had so crushed him for two miserable days, it had come at last to Kirkham, bringing with it a desire to speak freely to the man who had helped him in his need, to see in what light an impartial eye like his would view the conduct of the girl who had been so much to him. Clearly he was getting better; he almost realised it himself. There is no doubt about it, when we can talk of our sorrow, even to our most intimate friend, the first sting has gone out of it, and we are on the mend.

For a few minutes the two men sat puffing on their pipes in silence, then Kirkham took his out of his mouth and remarked —

"So Phoebe wrote to you. I wonder what the dickens made her do that?"

"It is possible, mind you I don't say it's probable, but it is just possible that she had a friendly feeling for a poor beggar out here in the wilds with no one to take any interest in him. All the girls may go for your good-looking phiz, old man, but maybe there are exceptions!" "Oh, decidedly there are exceptions, large exceptions," said Kirkham, ruefully. "The only girl I want — " "There are good fish in the sea, old chap, as ever came out of it. Nancy may be the more taking, but I've always maintained, even when I was head over heels in love with her, that there was more real grit in her sister's little finger." "Unfortunately we don't seem to want the real grit," said Kirkham, still more ruefully. "Unfortunately we don't. I don't know though. I wouldn't like to say how much these letters Phoebe Marsden writes to me are worth to me. It's good to think that somebody cares enough about you in a friendly way to write to you so regularly. Sometimes she sends me papers too, poor girl, and I know she's so hard up that even the postage must be a consideration. By Jove! that's the sort of woman, she'd stick to through thick and thin." "She'd run the risk of you're not wanting her when you did turn up because she was old and

## Kirkham's Find

shrivelled." "You might take your oath on it." "And suppose you didn't want her," mused Kirkham. "Well, it would be mighty rough on her, but she'd not hold you to your word. Oh, there's the makings of a grand woman in Phoebe Marsden."

If Phoebe could only have heard him! And it was all because she had written to him and sympathised with him when he was lonely, and the world was going against him.

"And Nancy?" asked Kirkham, with some hesitation.

"Well Nancy, old man -- I've been very bad there, so I can speak with feeling -- is just one of those charming little girls whom a fellow can't help getting gone on. She's got a way with her there's no resisting; but you mustn't count on her, bless you, no. She has got a vein of selfishness along with it all that makes her think of herself first. She always preferred you to me, so I ought to bear no grudge against her, but the little flirt had a way of insinuating that it was my own fault I wasn't the favoured one. I knew it was all rot, of course, and she cared more for your little finger than all my body put together; but still she did it, and it kept me dangling on a string adoring her when I might have been far better employing my time finding out the good qualities of her sister. I expect that's why the little minx did it. Those sort of women can't bear to see any one preferred before them."

"Much she cared for me," said Kirkham. "Why, she didn't even wait to throw me over before she got engaged to another man. And after the way she wrote I thought -- I thought -- but she got engaged before breaking with me, and writes to tell me she's going to be married in April," he finished, bitterly.

"She couldn't make up her mind to hurt you, she wanted you to think well of her. It's the way of those sort of women. It's a charming way, too, often, but sometimes it don't work out right. Phoebe's evidently in an awful way about it, she's afraid you'll feel it so."

"She needn't trouble her head," said Kirkham, with an uncomfortable feeling that he was an object of pity.

"Oh, I'll write and tell her you're all right. She says she posted the letter -- Nancy's letter to you -- so I suspect you'd never have got it at all if it hadn't been for her. She's a dainty, lovable little girl, is Nancy Marsden, but I'm not so sure she'd be desirable as a wife, and for a long uncertain engagement, old man, you're well out of it, I congratulate you."

Which might be all very true, but Kirkham was hardly equal to looking at things in that light yet. It was all very well for Morrison to talk, he had not been cruelly jilted. Still, by the light of the slush lamp before he turned in that night, he read all his mother's letters, and Morrison noted that he had to open all the envelopes. On the whole, he thought as he closed his eyes, it was a good job he had come over to Lone Hand out-station without waiting to think things over.

## CHAPTER XV. A WORD OF PRAISE FOR PHOEBE

Doth the wild ass bray when he hath grass? Or loweth the ox over his fodder? JOB.

"Mr and Mrs Josiah Sampson request the pleasure of Mr and Mrs Hammond's company, ought I to say pleasure or honour, Phoebe?"

"Government House cards always have 'honour'."

"But that's for a ball. This is for a dinner. How do they ask you to dinner?"

## Kirkham's Find

"I don't know, I'm sure. I've never been asked, and I'm not likely to be. Put whichever you think best. It can't matter."

"Oh, but it does. Mrs Josiah Sampson -- oh -- doesn't it look horrid?"

"Oh, Nancy, how can you? And Joe is so good to you."

"So he ought to be. Didn't I become Mrs Josiah Sampson just to please him, when I'd much rather have been Mrs Somebody else?"

"Nancy! oh Nancy, what a dreadful thing to say! And you haven't been six months married!"

"It's more dreadful to feel it, after all. Yes, I know what you are going to say. Joe is very good to me, I suppose. Everybody is always telling me he is, any way. But, after all, it is a mistake to get married. You don't feel a bit different to what you were when you were a girl, and then there is all the bother of it and none of the fun."

"You have got such a good husband, and plenty of money," murmured Phoebe, laying down the book she was reading -- she had come in, as she often did, to spend a week with her sister in Ballarat -- "and pretty dresses -- and -- and --"

"In fact everything I was always longing for," laughed Nancy, a little bitterly, as she shook out her penful of ink all over her dainty monogrammed paper. "There, bother it, I've spoiled another sheet. Why should I trouble? I'll have the card engraved, that's the proper thing to do," and she flung herself down on the comfortably cushioned broad window seat opposite Phoebe, and looked out discontentedly over the green lawn where the young oaks and elms were just bursting into leaf, and the sparrows were twittering cheerfully in the bright spring sunshine.

Nancy Sampson had everything that the heart of woman could wish for. Her husband had spared no expense to make her comfortable, and whether Phoebe looked out over the garden and lawns that surrounded the dainty cottage, or whether she looked inside at the carpet floors, the rich hangings, the cosy cushions, the bright silver and sparkling glass, so totally different to anything that Nancy had been accustomed to in her own scrawly home, she could only see in it all a man's ardent desire to surround the woman he loved with every luxury, to make her happy if it was in man's power to make her so. It was pathetic, thought Phoebe, looking at her sister's discontented face, so much love wasted and gone wrong. For Nancy was sweet and lovable, and yet to her unlucky husband she always showed her worst side. It almost seemed sometimes as if she bore him a grudge.

"I tell you what it is, Phoebe," she said, surveying discontentedly her pretty shoes, there was no need for her to tuck her feet out of sight now. "I'll just tell you what it is, it is really a great mistake to get married. You just don't feel a bit different, only bothered sometimes; and if you have got a little fun to look forward to, it doesn't matter in the least what your carpet is like, you don't mind if it is linoleum all holes, and as for frocks --" and Nancy looked disdainfully down at her own smart silk.

"Oh, Nan! you know you always loved pretty frocks."

"I thought I did. You don't know these things till you are really married. Just think what jolly fun it used to be doing up my frocks in our old room, scraping up the ribbon from all corners, and so glad when one made a thing do, and some one came along and told one how nice one looked. It was fun. Now it don't matter if I do look nice: I ought to, when I never get a dress under ten or twelve guineas. If I had only ten guineas a year ago, what fun we would have had spending it. It was fun then to make Joe admire me," and Nancy heaved a heavy sigh.

"Oh, Nan, but he admires you now."

## Kirkham's Find

"My dear, you look remarkably nice!" That is just exactly what he says, and he always says the same thing, always, always, always, and he stands a good distance off, as if he were afraid of spoiling my clothes, and in fact, he is just as wooden as he ever can be."

"Oh, Nancy, Nancy," cried Phoebe, distressed. If this was the way a six months' wife talked what would be the end.

"Say something more original than 'Nancy, Nancy,'" pouted that young lady.

"Why don't you run at him and put your arms round his neck, and tell him you want him to admire you," suggested Phoebe, hesitatingly.

"Goodness me, you might just as well embrace the telegraph pole."

"Nan, dear, that is just nonsense. He is so good and kind and thoughtful for you that you ought to take that into consideration, it is a sign how fond he is of you, and I expect if you only cared to show him the way he would show his feelings a little more openly. Nan, it is mean of you to be so hard on him."

"Hard on him?" Nancy opened her blue eyes wide. "How am I hard on him? He wanted me and he has got me. And I never get out of temper, at least not much, and stop at home lots of times when I would rather go out, and I look after the house properly, and it is as dull as ditch water, and I'm bored to death. You don't know what it is like when you are not here. I think I must always have one of you here, you, or Lyd, or Nell; I would rather have you, of course. Phoebe, you must come and live with us, of course, why didn't I think of that before. Joe is really fond of you. I believe he is less woodeny when you are here. You provide him with something to talk about, and make me look at him in a better light."

"I can't live with you, Nan. You know very well I can't. I have got the bees to look after; I can come and stay with you sometimes if you'll have me; but I wouldn't live with you for anything. And Nanny," she got up and put her hand lovingly on her sister's shoulder, "do promise me one thing. I expect you are a little out of sorts just now or you wouldn't talk of your husband like this. It is quite safe with me, you know it is, but do promise me you won't talk like this to anybody else, not to Lyd, or Nell, or mother, or anybody. You might be sorry for it you know some day. You'll feel quite different when your baby comes."

"I shan't. I don't want a baby. I never did want one. Hateful little things."

"Well," said Phoebe, laughing. "I suppose you took that into consideration. Folks mostly do have babies when they get married, and if they don't they seem to want them."

"Oh, of course, Joe wants it, but I don't."

"Huxley says every woman is a potential mother."

"Bother Huxley! What did he know about it?"

"He seems to have known a good deal, I think," said her sister.

Nancy stretched over and picked up Phoebe's book and turned over to the title page.

"Lay sermons! Goodness gracious me, Phoebe, whatever makes you read that! It looks dreadfully dry," and she turned over the pages rapidly.

## Kirkham's Find

"Joe told you it was well worth reading last night at dinner, don't you remember, so I went into his study this morning and got it. Nan, dear, it is awfully interesting. Your husband would be so pleased."

"Sermons? Sermons are dreadful dry things, I never can listen to them. I always go to sleep."

"Pulpit sermons, oh, of course," with a certain amount of contempt in her voice; "I don't often listen to them myself. They are sleepy things if one may judge by their usual effect on the congregation; but these are something quite different. A man who had thought a lot and knew a lot wrote these."

"I can't read these sort of books," said Nancy, turning over the leaves, "they are much too dry. Joe reads them, and once or twice he has tried to tell me about them; but I soon showed him they weren't in my line. That's the worst of Joe. Just fancy waxing quite eloquent over a dry old thing like that, and when one really has something interesting to talk about, he is so mum, he is quite a wet blanket. You can't possibly talk to him."

"But, Nan, if you were only to try and be interested in the things he liked! Read this book and talk about it and see how pleased he would be."

"What book?"

"Why, mother!"

Both the girls started as Mrs Marsden walked into the room.

"Your carpets are so nice and thick, Nancy," she said. "The boys really wanted boots so badly I had to come in, though how they are to be paid for I'm sure I don't know. Your father hasn't made a five pound note this week."

"It is only Tuesday," suggested Nancy, cheerfully. "Things will look up if you give them time. I suppose Phoebe's allowance for this month has gone wrong as usual."

"Your father really hasn't got the money," said her mother, taking off her bonnet and smoothing down her glossy black hair before the glass. "You don't know, Nancy, how thankful I am to see you so comfortably married."

Nancy gave an impatient little shrug to her shoulders, and Mrs Marsden settled herself in an armchair with a sigh.

"What is the book Phoebe wants you to read, and who is going to be pleased? Joe?"

"It's Huxley," said Phoebe.

"Huxley, who is he? He wrote something learned, mathematics or something, didn't he?"

"I don't think he wrote mathematics," said Phoebe, doubtfully. "He might have, but I never heard of it. He is very learned and interesting, and seems to know a lot about human nature as far as I have gone. He is rather agnostic, I think," she added, wickedly, because she knew her mother would be shocked.

"Agnostic! Then, my dear child, don't let any one see you reading his book. It is most unbecoming and unladylike. Books like that are only fit for men. They are only meant for men."

"I was sure you would say that. That is the way Huxley says girls are brought up. He says what is fit for their brothers is not fit for them."

## Kirkham's Find

"He is quite right there, then," said Mrs Marsden, complacently, and Huxley stood a thought higher in her estimation.

"Oh, he didn't mean it that way," said Phoebe, anxious to show that she had at least a learned man on her side in her views on the bringing up of children, but Mrs Marsden cut her short.

"For goodness sake, Phoebe, put that book away. An agnostic book is a dreadful thing for a girl to read, and recommending it to Nancy too, though to be sure a married woman may read what a single girl had better not look at."

"I didn't recommend it to Nancy, Joe did. And as she wouldn't read it, I did. I was just saying he would be so pleased if she would read it and discuss it with him."

"What nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense, mother. I heard him tell her to read the book myself."

"He might do that, but he never meant her to read it. He might like her to take it up and say it was dry and uninteresting, and she thought he must be awfully clever to read it; depend on it that's what he wanted. There is nothing men hate so much as a learned woman."

"Oh, Phoebe is getting on that way," said Nancy, lazily good-natured, "and Joe doesn't hate her, he is very fond of her. I know he thinks a lot of Phoebe."

"Which of you two did he marry?" asked Mrs Marsden, solemnly. "That settles the question. Men talk a lot of what a woman ought to be, but they just don't know what they want themselves. They talk about the frivolity of women and how they would like them better educated and all the rest of it, but when they get a woman who ought to be after their own heart, you would think, they don't marry her, they pass her by and take some frivolous little girl with a pretty face, just the sort they have declared they don't want, and the other girl is left lamenting; and depend on it marriage is the test."

Nancy laughed a little bitterly, and her sister looked out of the window at the bright morning sunlight. It was galling to be told so often in effect that she was wanting in all that could make her attractive and charming, and that all her desires after culture must be crushed down and hidden away if she hoped — as what woman does not hope — to be some day in the future a wife and mother.

"Men are fools," she was thinking to herself, "they are — they are. It can't do a woman any harm to know a little," and then the comforting thought came to her that possibly her mother was wrong. Anyway there was comfort in the fact that hers was a hopeless case from the beginning, and therefore she might as well do as she pleased.

"I declare, mother," laughed Nancy, "you are hard on Phoebe. It really isn't fair to talk at her in that way."

"I'm not talking at Phoebe. I'm only just saying what I'm sure you must have seen dozens of times."

"Well, really," said Nancy, "I wonder what on earth we are all in such a hurry to get married for."

"I'm sure I'm very thankful you are so comfortably married. I wish the other girls were as much off my mind."

"Well, Phoebe is getting quite good-looking. Aren't you, Phoebe?"

"I?" said Phoebe, turning round startled. "I? Oh, no one was ever so kind as to call me good-looking."

## Kirkham's Find

"Well, you are. Come now, isn't she, mother?"

Mrs Marsden looked critically at her eldest daughter.

"Phoebe's complexion has certainly been looking much clearer lately," she said, "and I believe she is giving up that slouch, and keeps her hair tidier and does it more becomingly. Then that dress is becoming. You gave her that dress, you see."

Mrs Marsden often felt antagonistic towards her eldest daughter. She did not approve of her ideas, though she admitted she was a good girl at home, and the last year she had been showing so decidedly that she intended to go her own way that she felt aggrieved and hardly ready to acknowledge that that way seemed to agree with her personal appearance.

"Oh, Phoebe is quite good-looking, I declare," said Nancy, the fact seeming to dawn on her all once. "Go and look in the glass, Phoebe, and tell me if you don't think so yourself."

Nancy had always desired mirrors in which to admire her pretty little self, and now she had one in every room, even in this one which was the morning room.

"Don't blush, Phoebe -- yes, do, it improves your looks. Now go and look in the glass and see who is the beauty of the family."

Phoebe got up slowly and shyly. That any one should even hint she was passable looking! It seemed incredible. Then she stood in front of the mirror and saw reflected there a tall, fine-looking young woman clad in a well-fitting grey tweed dress with just a touch of scarlet at her throat. And her face! Could that really be her plain face? Those dark eyes, those bright cheeks, those white teeth and smiling red lips, that glossy dark hair that crowned her head -- why -- why -- it made up a handsome woman!

She turned to her sister, the flush of unexpected excitement and pleasure still on her face.

"Well, Phoebe, aren't you satisfied?"

Most women would have denied their satisfaction in their own looks, but Phoebe was too honestly delighted and surprised for that. She put back her shoulders so as to make herself a thought more upright, and swept back to her seat with an air that seemed to say the world lay at her feet and she would conquer.

"Nan," she said, suddenly, "and I'm close on twenty-five!"

"Well, you always said twenty-five shouldn't be old for a woman. Evidently you are going to prove it. If you go on like this you'll be a professional beauty by the time you are fifty. Won't she, mother? Did you ever see anybody improve so?"

"Phoebe certainly is greatly improved," said Mrs Marsden, hesitatingly. As she herself would have said, she never did like these large women, "and I don't know how it is," she went on "she never goes out anywhere. Just pokes about her bees all day long, and reads all sorts of dry books in her spare time. It is a dull enough life, goodness knows. I wonder she doesn't take the pleasures that come in her way," and Mrs Marsden sighed. She was greatly concerned about her eldest daughter.

"Because they wouldn't be pleasures to me, mother, and I don't neglect anything I ought to do, now, do I?"

"No, but -- "

## Kirkham's Find

"Nan," Phoebe turned to her sister with a glowing face. She had just discovered that her foot was on the first rung of the ladder that leads to success, and the way looked fair and easy before her. "Nan, it is the bees have done it. They are getting on so well. I've six hives — six frame hives — and before the end of summer I believe I'll have some more. And I have an extractor and I don't have any difficulty in selling my honey now. The next lot I'm going to send to Melbourne. I wrote to the Mutual Store about it last week, and I'm to let them know. I'll have a bee-farm soon."

"You haven't a rag to your back except what Nancy gives you," said her mother, severely.

"Never mind. The bees must come first. They'll buy me dresses by and by, I know. You don't understand, mother."

"I do not, indeed," said Mrs Marsden, still severely. "It wouldn't be much — still if you would spend your allowance upon yourself — £2 10s for an extractor when you haven't got a decent pair of boots!"

"Never mind, mother," said Phoebe, serenely. "It will all come right in the end, you see," and she gave a little satisfied sigh.

Nancy looked at her mother's face and laughed, perhaps a little bitterly. If Phoebe was sure she was right, she, Nancy, was beginning to think she might have made a mistake.

"Don't worry, mother," she said. "You have married one of your daughters very comfortably, haven't you? You can afford to let the other do as she likes. One sacrifice is enough."

"Sacrifice, Nancy? Why, Nancy what do you want?" and her mother looked round the comfortable room.

"Oh, nothing, mother. That is just a way of putting it. Only Phoebe is improving to such an extent under her own management you had better let her alone. And you are going to stop to luncheon, mother, aren't you? Ring the bell, Phoebe, dear, and tell Jessie to lay another place."

## CHAPTER XVI. PHOEBE'S HAND IS FORCED

"I saw a little girl," said the moon, 'who was weeping over the wickedness of the world. She had been presented with a most beautiful doll as a present. It certainly was a very pretty doll, so fair and delicate, and not made to bear the rough usage of this world. But the brothers of this little girl, those great, naughty boys, had set the doll high up in the branches of a tree, and had run away. The little girl could not reach up to the doll to help her down, and that is why she was crying.'" HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN.

"First blood, first blood!" yelled Tom Marsden, bending down from his bare-backed Shetland pony and poking hard at the old sow with the wrong end of his mother's best carpet-broom. And then, because the pony was bare-backed, and her only bridle was a halter, while her rider was simply attired in a very scanty pair of drawers, as the broom-handle slipped off the sow's fat back he slipped too, and struck earth with some force, while the hunt, amidst wild cries of 'first blood,' swept over him away down the home paddock. The hunt consisted only of the old sow and Jack now that Tom was out of it, but he arose proud and happy, and promptly gave chase to his fiery steed, assisted by Frank and Charlie, frantically waving their sacks — sacks were supposed to be the insignia of beaters or syces, both of which they were in turn — yelling at the tops of their voices. On the top of the orchard fence were perched Lydia and Nellie, sharing in the excitement in a somewhat shamefaced and doubtful manner. They were a little uncertain whether they ought to be there at all, and they were very sure that both their father and mother would be very angry if they knew that the moment their backs were turned, and they were supposed to be safe for the day, a mighty pig-hunt was inaugurated. Decidedly they had not the least idea what excellent training their pigs were in, and how extremely smartly they could double. It was awkward,



## Kirkham's Find

certainly, when the hunt went too close to the bush fence at the bottom of the paddock, for, once ensconced amongst logs and stumps, as every sportsman knows, a pig has the best of it, and it is difficult to dislodge him. There was a tradition in the family that the old black and white sow had spent the night there on one occasion when the shades of night had overtaken the hunters all too soon, and the tea-bell had rung, peremptorily demanding their presence at the house before they had succeeded in dislodging her. The Marsden family, including Phoebe, whom they had to confide in, went to bed that night with a weight as of a fearful crime on their minds, which was added to in the case of the boys by Pat, the man who fed the pigs, making his way to their room "at the dead of night" — ten o'clock probably — and threatening them with all manner of pains and penalties, not excepting a thrashing from "yer pap-pa" if that pig were not in her sty before he went the rounds in the morning. Jack got up at three o'clock in the morning — he said hunters often had to do that — and "pig-sticking" went out of favour for some time, and the "war-game" took its place.

But it was such a bright, sunny April day — a Saturday too — and, with the powers that were both away, it seemed a distinct throwing away of chances not to take advantage of their absence. There mightn't be a fine Saturday with father and mother both away for goodness knows when. It was always possible to play the "war-game" down in the far paddocks out of sight of the house. To be sure, if Mr or Mrs Marsden should happen to wander down that way they might be astonished and shocked at the sight of four of their sons in a state of nature careering round as Zulus; but it would just have added zest to the entertainment to stalk their parents, and Tom and Jack had the firmest faith in their own skill as savage chiefs, and were quite sure they could hide their impi from the enemy among the scrub and undergrowth in the paddocks. Anyhow, they had not yet been discovered, but "pig-sticking" was quite another thing. To begin with, it required the pigs, and must take place in the home paddock, which had been under cultivation, and was close to the house. So the decree had gone forth that in consequence of this conjunction of favourable circumstances there would be a right royal pig-hunt this sunny April afternoon. Phoebe knew of it, of course; she could hardly fail to do so with the howls and joyous shrieks of the hunters ringing in her ears, and, like her young sisters, she was doubtful what line of conduct she ought to adopt. Personally, the savage in her would have liked nothing better than to have sat on the orchard fence alongside Lydia and Nellie, and have bestowed on the hunters her unqualified approval; but then she, as the eldest, and so much the eldest, felt in a measure responsible not only for the safety of those pigs, but for the boys themselves, and again she was handicapped, for not one of the four would pay the least attention to her. They did not care a snap of the fingers whether she approved of the pig-sticking or not. They reckoned she would not be so "mean" as to tell of them, and, having satisfied themselves on that point, they cared not one jot about anything else. After all, she was not worrying very much today; not as much as she would have done a year ago, not near as much as she would have done two years ago, when she was wont to enter frantic and ineffectual protests, and get laughed at for her pains. The boys were beginning to think Phoebe wasn't half a bad old thing though she was an old maid. And today, after looking surreptitiously over the fence, and seeing Tom come a cropper along with the best broom into a nice soft mud-hole, she quietly went back to her work among the bees again. The dirt on that broom would have to be accounted for, and so might the dirt on Tom's drawers, but it was no business of hers; she had some honey to extract, a good deal too considering she had been working not for honey but for bees, and she had two Italian queens that had arrived by the post that morning all the way from H. L. Jones' apiary at Goodna, Queensland, and if they were to do well they ought to be introduced to their new homes this very night. Her bees were increasing; it was wonderful the way in which they were increasing. They certainly amply repaid her for the care and attention she bestowed on them. She made them her first object in life. Not a book on the subject that she could lay her hand on did she fail to read; she took in and studied carefully the quaint American bee journal from Medina, Ohio, *Gleanings in Bee Culture*, edited by A. I. Root, and had even gone the length of writing to Mr Root himself, asking his advice on various things that had puzzled her, and had received in due course a kind and thoughtful answer beginning, "Dear Friend Phoebe Marsden."

It had given her a great deal of encouragement, that letter. She seemed to be working in company upon well-worn tracks, not feebly and wearily breaking up a new road for herself which might possibly lead to nowhere. Mr Root seemed to think it so natural that she should work at the bees, that she should want a little help and advice, and had written as if there was no doubt in his mind that she would succeed. Here they all thought her eccentric and

## Kirkham's Find

laughed at her; even Nancy and Mrs Moore who helped her, and would help her all they knew; but she felt they did not take her seriously. If they had been asked they would probably have said it was a good thing that Phoebe had found something to interest her, and she might as well amuse herself with this fad till she got married, she might have a chance of marrying now she was grown better looking. Nothing, she was convinced, would make them understand that she wanted to be regarded in the same light as a man. No man worked away "until he married," he worked steadily always for his living, and his marriage might, often did, modify things, but it made no material difference to his work. No one ever thought of looking at things in that light. Why wouldn't they regard her as a man who ought to be helped to gain his own livelihood? But they wouldn't, so it was no good worrying about it; she must just work on, encouraged by Mr Root, the unknown friend in a far country, and her quiet, undemonstrative brother-in-law.

Yes, she was thinking to herself this afternoon as she began making the hives smaller and closer for the winter, what very good friends Josiah Sampson and she had become. To this silent, quiet man, she had explained her hopes and fears as she had never explained them to her mother or sister; she had read the same books with him and discussed them, and if his wife found his society dull his sister-in-law never did. They were the very best of friends. He was far more a brother to her, she thought, than her own brother Stanley, whom, she knew in her heart, despised her for an uninteresting old maid, and, with the best wish in the world to love your brother, the affection is apt to fade away if the brother tinges his with the faintest dash of contempt. Josiah Sampson was a real brother to her, thought Phoebe Marsden gratefully; that much good had come out of the marriage she had objected to so strongly, that she had tried so hard to stop. Luckily it never occurred to her to try and analyse Josiah Sampson's feelings for her, it never occurred to her, as it might have done to a more worldly woman, that there was danger in this friendship. He was her good, kind brother, and she hated to hear Nancy grumble, because she knew he was a kind, tender husband, immensely proud of his wife, and delighted with his month-old little boy. Perhaps, Phoebe thought -- she had thought so several times -- there were moments when he was just the least bit disappointed in his wife, when he thought that she need not have felt, or at least shown that she felt, that in bestowing herself on him she had done all that was necessary in a wife, but if he did feel this he never said so, and Phoebe was very content to have him as a kindly friend always interested in her affairs, and who did not seem to think it was her duty to get married out of hand. She wished he was coming out tonight, but he was not, only Nancy and baby, and they would not be the least interested in the important question whether it would be advisable to move her hives over into the home paddock, just the other side of the orchard fence, for the winter. She was rather inclined to think it would; they would get all or most of the sunlight, and by way of experiment she had lifted across a double-storied hive the night before. She did not suppose her father would object, if he did it would have to be moved back again, but if he said nothing she would move another across this very night.

She had got thus far in her reflections, almost unheeding of the shouting and yelling in the home paddock. It had gone on for over an hour, and she was just thinking she might fairly put in a word in the interest of the pigs and the ponies, when the hunt swept up against the orchard fence.

"Go it, Jack, go it," shouted the beaters, waving their sacks, and Jack leaned over and with the long-handled kitchen broom aimed a sweeping blow at the old black and white sow who was galloping ahead just under his pony's nose. But the old black and white sow had been there too often, and knew what to expect. In a flash she had hurriedly turned, and, with her fore-feet on the very alighting board of the beehive, doubled under the pony's belly, and in another moment would have been safe away down the paddock; but alas! for Jack, he, too, thoroughly understood the sow's tactics; he gave a smart pull to the rope halter which served him for a bridle, and if it had not been for that unlucky beehive, which was right in the way, the only person who would have suffered would have been the sow. As it was the pony, too, got his fore-feet on the alighting board, gave a lurch, tried to recover himself, and the next moment over came the hive, and the pony, Jack, the old sow, and innumerable bees, seemed to be mixed up in direst confusion. To Phoebe, working away quietly on the other side of the fence, it seemed as if pandemonium had suddenly broken loose, for all the Marsden family were howling in chorus, the old sow was squealing at the top of her voice as she careered away unnoticed down the paddock, and above all was the angry buzzing of a multitude of bees.

## Kirkham's Find

"Phoebe! Phoebe! Phoebe!" shrieked the whole hunt in chorus, and Phoebe, in her thick veil and gloves, scrambled over that fence in far less time than it takes to tell it. Jack was up on his legs now, running for dear life, frantically waving his arms and yelping at the top of his voice, while the pony and the sow were away down the paddock, each surrounded by a sort of halo of angry bees. But around Jack they were the worst. His back and shoulders, his arms and chest, were covered with them, and he was tearing up and down, howling at the top of his voice, mad with pain and terror.

"The horse trough, Jack," shouted Phoebe, rushing after him; "get into the horse-trough."

He did not heed her, perhaps he never heard her, but Lydia did, and, being a young woman of common sense, flew to the horse-trough, followed by Nellie, and they pumped with such vigour that by the time Phoebe had caught up to her brother, the trough was full and overflowing with icy cold water from the well. She brushed off all the bees she could, she tried to shield him with her dress, and then, catching hold of him, half-dragged, half-carried him to the trough, lifted him in, still howling at the top of his voice, and, because the water did not cover him altogether, put his head under the spout and pumped with all her might. The other two girls fled; they were afraid of stray bees, but they need not have been; in a minute there was not a bee to be seen save the floating corpses of the drowned ones in the water. Then she lifted Jack out, dripping, panting, and sobbing with pain, not a vestige left of the plucky hunter who was ready to dare anything two minutes before. There were no bees now about him, only an angry hum came from the neighbourhood of the hive, and the family drew near to offer their sympathy and advice.

"My golly!" said Frank, "he's all over stings."

He was indeed. He had only been clothed from the waist to the knee, so the bees had had a fair field, and they had made the most of it. His back was one mass of stings, thought Phoebe, miserably, as, taking off her gloves and veil, she began hastily to extract them. She knew what the pain of one was, what would this be like?

"Here's the blue bag," said Nellie, offering the well-known household remedy.

Jack groaned aloud.

"You'll have to send for the doctor, you'll just have to send. I'm sure I might die — o—o—oh," and he began blubbering aloud in spite of his thirteen years.

"We'll put him in a warm bath. Go and get one ready, Lyd, there's a good girl. Don't cry, Jack; oh, don't cry. I'll give you half-a-crown if you don't cry."

But Jack was beyond monetary consolation, though he was impecunious, and his blubbering soon rose to a howl again, and his sister, looking at the state of his back and chest, could hardly wonder.

"Crimini!" said Tom, "we are in for it now. The gov'll have to know. There's the old sow's back all lumps, and she's bit Pet's leg, and he's as lame as a crow, and the bees have stung him till his eye's all bunged up. At least," added Tom, "it will be by tonight, and so'll Jack's."

"Then for goodness sake," said Phoebe, "get the sow into the sty before he comes home, and perhaps he won't notice, and if Pet's not very bad — he can't be very bad, surely — put him down in the forty acre and perhaps he'll be better by Monday. Anyhow, Tom, do, like a good boy, tidy up things a bit, put away those sacks and the broomsticks, and get in the pig and clear up the pigsty. It's no good to make things out worse than they are."

"Well, you are a oner, Phoeb," said Tom, deceiving the old gov. "I don't know where you'll go to."

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, I don't care," said Phoebe, wild with anxiety about Jack. "Do whatever you please. I'm sure to get into a row anyway about the bees. You can explain it all to father if you like, just how it happened. That would be the honestest way, if you dare do it, only after all one is enough to get into trouble."

"You won't tell on us, Phoebe," asked Tom, doubtfully.

"No, no, goodness me, no. Jack knocked over my beehive; that is all I'll tell. Is that bath ready, Lyd? Tom, I do believe you had better get on Kitty, and ride in and tell them Jack has been badly stung, and ask what we had better do."

Tom whistled disdainfully.

"Don't you wish you may catch me," said he.

"Yes, but Tom, I really mean it. Jack is in a fever already," Jack howled a little louder, "and something must be done."

"Catch me doing it."

"You have only got to say Jack's been badly stung all over the back and chest and head. Stand still, Jack, there are only two more stings that I can see. I must get them, and ask them what we ought to do."

"Yes, and he'll want to know what he was doing without any clothes on. He'll think he was bathing in the horse-trough, and you know he said we weren't to."

"Well, it's Jack, not you."

"Get out, as if that makes any difference. Somebody's got to be blackguarded, and it won't be Jack, because he's hurt. It'll be me, you can bet."

"Well, Tom," said Phoebe in desperation, "you ought not to go pig-hunting, and you had better just take your scolding like a man. I won't tell anything about it."

"If the gov. were only like other fellows' gov.," sighed Tom, but nevertheless he began rubbing Kitty down with a wisp of straw, to hide as far as possible all traces of the violent exercise she had been constrained to take that afternoon, and by and by Phoebe, applying hot fomentations to Jack's back, looked through the bedroom window and saw a very reluctant young horseman set out through the front gate.

"Poor Tom," she thought, "there will be a row."

And there was.

## CHAPTER XVII. "KIRKHAM'S FIND"

For a blow of his pick,  
Sorter caved in the side,  
And he looked and turned sick,  
Then he trembled and cried,  
For you see the derned cuss had struck -- "water?" --  
Beg your pardon, young man, there you lied!

It was gold, -- in the quartz,

## Kirkham's Find

And it ran all alike;  
And I reckon five oughs  
Was the worth of that strike.

BRET HARTE.

"By the Lord, Harry! It must be gold!"

It seemed unlikely, certainly. All the anxious days he had spent seeking the precious metal, and never a sign of gold, and now, after eighteen months of existence in this desolate hole, here under his very eyes, was sticking up out of the ground what looked like a bar of cleanly-melted gold. He was twenty miles to the south-east of his hut this morning, simply having ridden out in this direction the night before, because he had nothing else to do, and he thought he might as well follow the trend of the range eastward, and see what the country was like.

For eighteen months Kirkham had lived alongside his windmill, and never thought to explore. He had taken Morrison's word for it that all the country was alike, just a shade removed from barren desert, and therefore he had spared his horses and gone nowhere except across to see his cousin when he began to feel the loneliness very much. There had been no rain, and he himself had given up all hope of going back to try his luck at the deserted claim further north. Allan might, he would not. He was waiting now, banking his £1 a week, till he should have enough capital to rent a very modest farm down in Victoria. But yesterday, for some unknown reason, he had broken through his routine and come exploring.

And truly he had been compelled to acknowledge Allan was right; a more dreary, desolate country it would be difficult to imagine. Behind him, it was true, there seemed to stretch for several miles a lovely lake dotted with islands, grassy green with banks and high cliffs, covered with trees and bushes, all reflected faithfully in the pellucid waters. There were little boats on it too, boats covered with white awnings, and others with white sails, shimmering and quivering in the blazing sunlight. He could even see the water rippling round these boats, though the rest of the lake lay calm and breathless, as if overpowered by the heat of the day. Such a lovely lake, so cool, so refreshing. Involuntarily he thought how delightful a header would be in its tempting waters. And then he laughed a little. He had just ridden right through it. He knew well enough that its joys were visionary and delusive, only a taunting mirage. The lake was only a large flat claypan, which, when there was any to catch, would catch the drainage from the surrounding country; the islands were rocks of green stone, and the boats with their awnings and sails were just pieces of dazzling white quartz jutting up out of the bed of the clay-pan. Where the trees and the water and the seductive look came from, Kirkham could not tell, they were all part and parcel of the mirage, he supposed. Anyhow this country was bare enough. Just this clay-pan, which would hold a little water after rain, and round it for all vegetation here and there patches of salt bush and cotton bush, and where that did not grow sand, sometimes yellow, sometimes red, often white. It was a desolate land.

Just now he had reined up his horse, because right across his path stretched an outcrop of quartz, which, just in front of him at least, was twenty feet high, a little to the right it fell to about six feet, but though apparently it was but a narrow band, it was certainly impassable for a horseman. To a man on foot it would be a scramble. It was not connected, he thought, with the ranges; they receded still farther to the left, but at least he would have to ride along it for a mile or so before he could get round to the other side. Was it worth the trouble? The country beyond, ten to one, would be exactly the same; he was getting accustomed to these outcrops of quartz now, and they were all alike. The sun was blazing hot, he would look for a little shade under some jutting rock, take there his midday meal, and then go back. Morrison was right, the country was the abomination of desolation. He rode slowly along and then pulled up his horse suddenly. What was that? A nugget? Impossible! Impossible! He had given up thinking of gold. Could this loneliness be turning his brain? Very quickly he dismounted, slung his horse's reins over his arm, and peered over his find. There it lay in the blazing sunshine, no doubt whatever about it, a square piece of metal, like the top end of a bar of gold sticking up out of the dust and debris that the winds had worn at the edge of the quartz outcrop. Mica? No, certainly not mica. Was it possible — was it possible? His heart began to beat wildly. Had he found what he came to this desolate land for at last? Then he took out his knife and began

## Kirkham's Find

to dig. Gold, certainly! most certainly. The earth was very loose, it came out easily enough, a little bar of gold about three inches long by an inch through, tapering a little at one end, but looking for all the world as if it had just come warm from the mould. Kirkham looked at it for a moment, then he flung up his hat into the air and shouted with all his might. Then he desisted, it was eerie shouting there all alone, and the echo of his own joyous shout came back to him weirdly. It made him feel uncanny. What good was this gold to him here alone in the wilderness? He must have some one to share his good luck. He wanted human companionship now more than ever. There must be more where that came from. Surely there must, and his fortune was made, and if that girl had only waited one little year -- one little year, how short a while it seemed to look back upon, just twelve months, and he was a rich man. Was he? He hoped he was, any how. And his first idea, after he had carefully stowed his precious find in his breeches pocket, was to dig round where he had found it to see if there was any more; his next was to go straight for Allan Morrison, not only to share his good fortune, but to get his advice as to their further proceedings.

And to communicate with Allan Morrison was a long job for an impatient man. It was twenty miles to Lone Hand, and twenty-five miles further on to Morrison's, and he had not too much horseflesh to waste. He took his resolution at once. Hastily gathering together all the the loose stones within reach, he made a pile over the place where he had taken out his nugget that must attract his attention when he returned, then, taking the bearings of the spot, he mounted his horse and made straight for home, feeling with satisfaction the heavy bit of gold that weighed down his breeches pocket. And it was the next night before he burst in on Morrison, who was smoking a pipe and reading a bit of an old Argus by the light of a slush lamp.

"Allan, I've found gold!"

Kirkham had ridden the last mile at a gallop, so anxious was he to share his good luck, and now he stood panting and breathless before his cousin.

"Ned, you old idiot! I -- "

But Kirkham saw the dawning incredulity on his face, drew the nugget out of his pocket and flung it down on the box that served as a table, just in the rays of the slush lamp. Then he looked at his cousin anxiously. Was this only the elfin gold old fables told about, that faded to dull earth when it was shown to any one by its finder? Somehow now he could hardly believe in the reality of his own find. Then the look on Morrison's face reassured him.

"By all that's holy," he cried, springing to his feet, "it is gold."

"I said so," said Kirkham, and sat down with a sigh of relief. And then he told the story of the find, entering into the minutest details, and reiterating the same statements over and over again, in order that Morrison might thoroughly understand exactly how matters stood.

There was no sleep for them that night. So much gold for so little exertion -- what possibilities might not lie in the next week? It seemed too good to be true, and yet such things had happened in the story of the goldfields of the eastern colonies. Men had risen up in the morning poor as church mice, and gone to be at night almost millionaires. Why should not the same good luck happen to them? It might -- well, it might. And they sat there discussing what might happen till the lamp went out and left them in darkness.

Not much preparation for bed is needed in the back blocks. Morrison tumbled on to his stretcher in one corner, and his guest did likewise in the other; but they could not stop talking and speculating.

"I say, old man," said Morrison from his dark corner, "she ought to have waited, it would only have been a year, and now she's safely tied up to the other chap."

## Kirkham's Find

Kirkham laughed a little bitterly; but the world was before him, and his bitter sorrow and disappointment lay a year behind.

"She did it herself," he said. "I'd have stuck to her through thick and thin. Well, there is Phoebe left, anyhow, and you always said she was the best of the two. I wonder if she would look at me if I made myself very sweet?"

"Go to sleep, man," said Morrison, sharply. "It's well on to morning now, and we'll find out as soon as possible that the whole thing isn't only a castle in the air."

And Kirkham turned over and grinned privately at the wall. The change in Morrison's tone was so marked, he couldn't help it. Old Allan, actually old Allan! He didn't like him talking as if he'd appropriate Phoebe. Was there anything between them? No, certainly not. She wrote to Allan at least once a month; but there was nothing loverlike in the letters; he had read them himself often, nice, kind, friendly letters, such as a kind, good woman might write to a lonely man without compromising herself in any way. But Allan didn't like the idea of his appropriating her, didn't he?

"Why, I say, old man," he said, turning over, "we may have made our fortunes, but it'll take us some time to realise, and meanwhile some other chap may be poaching on your manor. Why, she may be married by this time. You have been dinning into me her perfections at intervals for the last eighteen months. I'll bet some other chap will have eyes to see as well as you, and he'll be handy."

"You be hanged," grunted his cousin; whereby Ned Kirkham concluded that the prospect was not a pleasing one.

And two days later they were standing in the blazing sunshine over the little cairn Kirkham had made.

"Here it is, I tell you, right here," and he began pushing aside the stones.

"Man," said his cousin, "it's a buck reef, I tell you. No one in his senses ever expected to get gold out of a buck reef."

"Well, I got that bit right here, and seeing's believing."

Morrison sat down on a stone, pushed his slouch hat back, and wiped his damp forehead on his shirt sleeve, as he thoughtfully watched the hobbled horses as they cropped at the scanty herbage. The last water was twenty miles behind, at Kirkham's hut, and all their small store was in their water-bags.

"I don't know what to say about it, I'm sure," he said. "As you say, seeing's believing, but there mayn't be any more, I never heard of looking for gold in a buck reef before. And even if we found it, there's not a drop of water within twenty miles."

Kirkham was scrambling up the outcrop to try and get a glimpse of the country beyond, and suddenly, instead of answering his mate, he gave vent to a shout of triumph.

"Water, there's boggings of it."

But the older and more experienced man barely turned his head.

"I've been there before," he said, "and so've you if you only think a moment. Apparently there's boggings of water in front of me, but for all that if I found gold I'd have to dry blow," and he began thoughtfully cutting up some tobacco to fill his pipe.

## Kirkham's Find

Kirkham, from his point of vantage, looked behind him, and when he saw the lovely lake lying there in the blazing sunlight, his voice came back a little dubious and doubtful.

There was such a strong family resemblance between those two lakes, there was the same still, clear water, the same islands, the same green trees and bushes, even the self-same boats with their white sails and awnings were there.

"The shape is different," he said, "quite different. This looks like a long, narrow lake. It might be water."

"It might just as likely be milk and honey."

"Well, I shall go over and look. The rocks this side are quite different — sort of mossy, I think."

"Good Lord! where would they get the moss from?" said Morrison, and he rose up leisurely, for he was still trying to puzzle out in his own mind the anomaly of a nugget in a buck reef. "The moss is all my eye like the water."

Then he too climbed to the top of the outcrop, looked at the deceitful mirage, and watched his cousin pick his way carefully down the other side. But he was hardly careful enough. Before he reached the bottom his foot slipped, some of the crumbly rock broke off, and he and the crumbling fragments came down to the solid earth together. He sat up rubbing himself ruefully.

"Are you hurt, old man," asked Morrison, anxiously. It wouldn't do to get hurt out here in the wilds.

"No, not much. The rock is just like so much rotten wood, you can scoop it out with your fingers. See here," and he rubbed his hand along the edge of the scar where he had fallen.

Then Allan, standing there on top of the outcrop, heard a change in his voice that brought him down to his side more quickly than he could have thought possible.

"Old man, is this a mirage, too?"

"Good God, Ned, it's a mountain of gold!"

Morrison took out his knife and ran it under a cleft in the rock, and as the loosened stone fell to the ground there showed behind it specks of virgin gold; he chipped off more pieces of the rock, and there throughout the rotten yellow stone the gold showed freely. There was no mistaking it. A novice must have known it. The two men sat down each on a rock and faced each other. Was it true? Was it — could it possibly be true? There must be at least a hundred pounds' of gold showing now; if the rest of the outcrop was like this — . Kirkham drew a long sigh.

"Our fortune's made, I think," said Morrison, in a low voice. And Kirkham, as he had done when first he found the nugget, threw his hat up in the air, and jumped and shouted like a lunatic for very joy. The echo brought his voice back to him, but it did not sound so weird and awful now his cousin was looking on smiling approval.

"Come and see what the water is like," he suggested, when he began to find this form of exercise a trifle violent under such a brazen sky. "Why, what are you covering it up for, old man?"

"You don't want any one else to find it, I suppose, before you get a chance to work it."

"Any one else. Why, who's likely to come to this God-forsaken place?"



## Kirkham's Find

"You never can tell. It's not far off the track to Lone Hand from the head station. You found it, and some one's been here before you."

"Impossible!"

"Look there."

It looked like a heap of dust and small white stones till Kirkham stepped up and examined it more closely.

"A man?" His voice sounded doubtful and horrorstruck. It had not happened to him to find a man dead of hunger and thirst yet.

"Poor beggar! You can bet he found the reef. He must have been here a long while, judging by his bones. Two or three years at least. What's that? An axe?"

Kirkham lifted it up. It was lying there among the bones, and a little lizard, just the colour of the soil, ran out startled, rattling the bones faintly as it moved among them.

The axe was weather worn and rusty. Morrison took it and looked carefully at the wooden handle.

"He might have written his name here," he said.

But he hadn't. Deeply there was cut into the wood just one sentence.

"Soak, S. by E.," and then followed partially obliterated letters, which they made out to be "J.S."

"John Smith," translated Morrison.

"How do you know?"

"I don't know, but it may as well be that as anything else. I don't suppose any one'll ever know now. I wonder if his girl down south waited long for him."

"Forgot all about him long before he turned up his toes," opined Kirkham, speaking out of the depth of his own bitter experience. "Let's bury him."

"Let him lie. He's lain there quiet enough for the last three or four years, and if we don't want to join him we'd better look for the soak he mentions. Don't be afraid, we will bury you, old boy," he said, touching the light skull carelessly with his foot, "if it's only out of gratitude for recording the fact of there being such a thing as water anywhere within coo-ey of this place."

"South by east," said Kirkham, thoughtfully.

"Right across your blessed lake. Here, old man, catch the horses and let's start. After all perhaps it's no good. Why didn't he make for it himself if it was any good?"

"Perhaps he left it too long?"

"Perhaps. More likely it was dried up, or he was hurt, or had blight or something. It's a foolish thing to go prospecting by yourself. You never know what may happen. South by east -- that's very vague -- Lord knows how many miles off that may be. We'll do ten, and if we don't come across it by then we'll have to turn back."

## Kirkham's Find

"It's following the trend of the range."

"Well, it's as likely a place as not."

"It looks as if it hadn't seen water since the beginning of the world."

"What about your lake?"

Kirkham laughed a little.

They were riding right through where apparently it had been, and the dust which was half salt rose in clouds from beneath their horses' feet. Here and there the white quartz jutted out, gleaming like the dead man's bones and here and there was the green stone, but the water had vanished. Only now and again it seemed to be lying clear and cool in the shadow that lay at the foot of the ridge. More than once Kirkham turned towards it, but Morrison always stopped him with a laugh.

"Mirage, man, mirage. The country's one big fraud."

They had hardly ridden between three and four miles when the increasing desolation of the country made Morrison think of turning back. If they took the horses much farther it would be a serious question how they would get them back again.

"I think — " he began, when his cousin interrupted him.

"It looks as if there might have been a water-course down there at sometime or other, about the creation of the world."

"By the powers that be our dead friend spoke the truth, and there is a soak!"

"Did you think — "

"Well, the sentence on the axe might have referred to any place in Western Australia, but he meant this place evidently, poor beggar."

The steep side of the hill was cleft by a rugged gorge, where water might have run down in remote ages, and at the foot was a large patch of sand with just a suspicion of moisture about it; there were actually two or three patches of thorny spinifex, and the clumps of salt bush had just a shade more green about them, and looked more like ordinary vegetation and less like remnants of a prehistoric age.

"It's the soak, sure enough," said Morrison, dismounting and beginning with his spade to dig in the sand. He threw out a few spadefuls, and then the water began to soak in, and they sat down and watched it until there was enough to give a good drink to both man and beast.

"We can manage now," said Morrison, with a sigh, puffing away at his pipe. "It's a jolly good soak, and we'll chuck the station just as soon as ever we can. Get two months' tucker and plant ourselves down here, and just see how much gold we can take out before anybody gets to know of it."

"Oughtn't we to take out a lease, or something or other like that?" asked Kirkham.

"Well, we ought; and there's the bounty — a thousand pounds I think it is — for finding gold. That's yours."

## Kirkham's Find

"Share and share alike," said Kirkham.

"I guess we'll keep the find to ourselves just as long as we can, and just prospect about the place. Folks'll be coming along quick enough. It's astonishing how soon they get wind of a gold find. The very birds of the air must carry it."

"There aren't any," said Kirkham, looking up into the hard blue sky overhead.

"The crows, my lad, the crows — plenty of them round your place."

"Well, they're wicked enough for anything," said Kirkham; thinking of two certain dreary days he had spent when the crows took a hand; but the subject was not pleasant and he went on quickly, "Allan, old man, I want to get to work at once. What's the use of fooling away time here?"

"Fair and softly, man; we don't want a big goldfield here yet awhile. There's only enough water here for you and me and the nags, and as there isn't any feed at all, we'll have to do without those same nags when we come here for good. If we get to work two months hence, it'll be time enough. We must get clear away from the station first."

"I want to make certain of it," said the younger man, restlessly.

"Well, so do I," said his cousin, springing to his feet. "Hang it all, man, suppose we set to work and see what we can make before sundown. We can stow the gold away somewhere if we can't take it home with us."

Kirkham was just feeling that he could stand another moment's inaction no longer, with so much wealth apparently within his grasp, therefore he acquiesced gladly, and after refilling their water-bags and giving their horses another drink, they went back a good deal quicker than was good for those horses. But they had been well-watered and lay down contentedly enough in a patch of shade, whilst their human companions, with one shovel they had brought along with them, proceeded to tear down the side of the outcrop.

It was soft, rotten stone that came away in great chunks in which here and there they could see small nuggets dotted like currants in a plum pudding — not so numerous perhaps, and yet thick enough to make them work with eager haste to get down more of the outcrop. It was easy enough to do that, but the gold itself was not so get-at-able, for though they could break up the rotten stone that was half earth easily enough, the gold itself was imbedded in quartz hard as iron, on which neither spade, stirrup-irons, nor knives made any impression. But the gold was there — there in plenty, mostly, imbedded in the hard brown quartz, but occasionally in tiny minute particles that Morrison laid carefully in his neckerchief, and in little nuggets of fantastic shape varying in size from a pennyweight or so to half an ounce or more, and twice they found small lumps that might have been half valueless stone but appeared to them to be almost solid gold and to weigh one about three and the other certainly five ounces.

They were grimed with red earth, it was in their beards and hair, it made their eyes smart and their mouths gritty, the westering sun poured his beams right in their faces, and the sweat and the red earth mingled on their foreheads, but what did they care? They had found gold. After long toil and long and weary waiting they had found what they had come out to seek. Already after little more than two hours' work there must be near a hundred pounds worth of the precious metal lying in the neckerchief; and what were a little dirt and a little discomfort and a little weariness now?

The plain, the sand, the hot sun, the rugged ridge, the mocking mirage, all, all were unchanged. Only the men themselves were different. They looked in each other's faces triumphantly. They had succeeded. What did the desolation of this land matter to them? Here at their feet lay the key that would open the door of freedom to them, or make the desert blossom as the rose. Hurray, then, for the bright yellow gold! And the skeleton of the dead man

## Kirkham's Find

who had found it long before, and rejoiced perhaps as they were doing, lay unheeded and unburied close beside them; and the sun sank lower and lower in the cloudless sky, and the only other living thing there, the little lizard that had made his home among the old prospector's bones, crawled out and surveyed them from the top of the whitened skull thoughtfully. They had forgotten all about him, and he was not afraid. And then the sun went down below the edge of the plain, and the sudden darkness came upon them. Morrison hastily lighted a match and peered among the last fragment of stuff he had broken up till the dying match burnt his fingers, then he dropped it with a sigh of contentment. Already the bright stars were coming out overhead, and he rose to his feet and stretched up his arms luxuriously.

"We're rich, Ned, old man, no manner of doubt about it. All that in so little time. What could we get with proper appliances? Come on, old man, we'd best go back. The sooner we make all arrangements for the working of 'Kirkham's Find' the better."

## CHAPTER XVIII. THE BEES MUST GO

What is that which I should turn to, lighting upon days like these? TENNYSON.

Poor Phoebe! Her very worst fears were confirmed and more than confirmed. There was a row — not a row that died away and was forgotten in due course, but one that bore lasting fruit. Jack was very bad, indeed for a couple of days he was in a high fever, the doctor had to be called in, and finally the fiat went forth that the bees must go. The bees had the entire blame, and Phoebe was powerless to defend her property. Certainly all inquiries had wrung a very garbled account of the accident from Tom and the younger boys; they were very careful to leave out all account of the part the pigs and the ponies had played in the accident, and as for Jack, when he was questioned, he became suddenly worse and could only shut his eyes and groan. Something had to be scapegoat, and it was Phoebe's bees.

"I told you so — I told you so," said her father, almost, grumbled Lydia, as if he were glad to have something to be angry about — "I told you so. I always said those bees would be a source of danger. But, as usual, no one paid any attention to me. Now I suppose you'll allow I was right. Phoebe, those bees must go."

It was useless to protest, useless to declare that if they were let alone the bees were quite harmless. Jack was tossing on his bed in a fever, and as for Phoebe's hopes and fears, her anxieties, and her hard work, they went for nothing with her father. A daughter ought to be contented and happy in his way, she had no right to strike out for herself. He did not say it in so many words, but he always acted as if those were his views.

The bees must go, and that at once.

"Don't you think he might change his mind tomorrow?" asked Phoebe, anxiously, of her mother. The bees were her little all. How could she part with them? "He's never taken any notice of them before?"

But Mrs Marsden shook her head. She was very sorry for her daughter. She understood in a measure what the bees were to her, and she was very sorry to see her hopes crushed just as it seemed to her she was about to succeed, but it was no good buoying her up with false hopes.

"It's no good, Phoebe," she said; "I'm so sorry, dear, because I know what a lot you have given up to those bees, but it's not the least good in the world. Your father has never liked them, he has always been wanting to get rid of them. Whenever there is a bee wanting to sting it always seems to find out your father, and he is afraid to go into that corner of the orchard, and they are just where the jargonelle pears are he is so fond of."

"I'd get him the pears," said Phoebe, feebly.

## Kirkham's Find

"But he likes to get them for himself, you know, dear."

"Yes," put in Lydia, who was always Phoebe's companion, "he pretends he never eats any at all then. That's what's the matter. Greedy old pig!"

"Hush, Lydia, hush — that's not a nice way to talk of your father. He has the best right to all the pears."

"Of course he has," said Lydia, "nobody said he hadn't. What I object to is his going on as if he never had anything at all, but gave up everything to his family."

"He does, you know, but — "

"Poor Phoebe's bees?"

"I could move them down to the forty acre," suggested Phoebe. She was at her wit's end, and her trouble was out of all proportion, because it seemed to her that if she might not keep bees there was nothing left in the world for her to do. She had made this interest for herself with such hard work and industrious care, and now it was to be taken from her with no more thought than her father would throw away a pair of old shoes. It was cruel.

"It's no good, Phoebe, he won't have them, I know he won't. He doesn't like the bees about. And — well — I daresay he doesn't like his daughter to go peddling honey to all the small shopkeepers. I daresay that has something to do with it. He said something to that effect the other day."

Phoebe stamped her foot angrily on the ground, and Jack — they were in the boy's bedroom — groaned heavily, because he feared in Phoebe's trouble his own pains were being overlooked. His mother bent over him anxiously — she knew nothing about the pigs and the ponies, and she hadn't discovered her damaged brooms — yet, therefore, she looked upon her poor little boy as a suffering martyr; and Phoebe marched out of the room, put a shawl round her head, and went away down the orchard and leaning up against the fence, rested her head on her arms began to sob bitterly.

It might be a little thing to the rest of them, but to her it was everything. The bees must go, and then there would be nothing in the world to hope for; she would sink into a dreary, dull, stupid, penniless old maid, with nothing to interest her or to look forward to, and all the family would scorn her. They wouldn't do it in so many words, perhaps, but she knew very well they would in their hearts. Those very boys who had brought on the catastrophe would grow into men with positions and some sort of place in the world, and would look down in half-scornful pity on their poor old maiden sister, and never think they had helped to make her what she was. But this mournful picture of her desolate future was too much for Phoebe; if she had cried before the sobs that rose thick and fast threatened to choke her now. It was such a bright night, with the moon at full, and just a suggestion of frost in the keen air, but Phoebe never thought of that, she was too much occupied with the downfall of her hopes to notice anything.

So it happened that she never noticed the footsteps crossing the orchard towards her, and started up ashamed when a kind hand was laid on her shoulder, and a voice said in her ear —

"Phoebe! My dear girl! Don't cry like that. What is the matter?" Phoebe raised her head hastily. No one but her brother-in-law would have spoken to her so gently. She did not relish being caught in tears, but perhaps she minded him less than anybody else in the world.

"Joe! You! I thought you were in Ballarat."

## Kirkham's Find

"So I was. But I got done sooner than I expected, and it was very dull at home," he said, with a little sigh, that did not escape his sister-in-law, "so I thought I might as well come on here."

"Yes," said Phoebe, surreptitiously wiping her eyes and trying to swallow down another sob.

"I found the family in a ferment," he went on, settling his hands in his pockets and his back against the fence so that the moonlight fell full upon his kind, honest, if somewhat hard face, and the same moon rather unkindly showed up the thin hair on the top of his head. Not that Phoebe was looking — she had turned her back on the moon and was trying to restore her face to something of its normal condition — but even if she had noticed, she belonged to the order of woman who never sees anything amiss with the folks she cares for, and she did like her brother-in-law very much. There was no one she would rather have seen at this contingency, and it was always a mystery to her that his plain face and thin hair was such a trouble to his wife. She supposed women felt different towards their husbands.

"There was a row," sighed Phoebe.

"And you are the scapegoat."

"The bees are, anyway. Father says they have got to go. Mother says he has been wanting them gone for a long time. He — he — She says he doesn't like me peddling honey to the small shopkeepers, and I — I — know, of course, the boys don't like it. They don't think their sister — "

"What rot!" interrupted Mr Sampson. "The airs those youths give themselves! They ought to be well spanked."

"Stanley," began Phoebe, feebly. She felt impelled to take her brothers' part, but still it was infinitely comforting to listen to some one who actually seemed to think she had right on her side and was being ill-used. Her mother, though she was unfeignedly sorry for her, was quite certain in her own mind that an unmarried woman had no rights, and should put up with anything pleasantly, while here was Josiah Sampson — she could have put her arms round his neck and given him a good hug, still she faintly brought up Stanley, because by his opinion the rest of the household was guided, and she knew he strongly resented any sister of his selling honey by the pound. But her new champion soon disposed of Stanley.

"Stanley? When that young gentleman's a little older let's hope he'll be a little wiser. Meanwhile, he isn't through his course yet, and I'm surprised your father and mother don't treat his opinions for what they are worth. He wants a good dressing down, does that young man. Never mind what he says. Any man with a little ordinary common sense would think you were a brave girl, and ought to be encouraged."

"Thank you," said Phoebe, putting her hand on his arm gratefully. "You don't think I'm outside the pale, then, and that every man thinks me a strong-minded female too awful to — to — "

"My dear," said her brother-in-law, looking up at the moon with unwinking eyes, "I'm not going to tell you how attractive I think you, and how attractive many another man would think you if he only got the chance to know you as I do. Don't let your people dose you with such old-fashioned notions. Don't believe them if they do. No man worth calling a man will look down on a woman because, instead of drifting along with folded hands, she sets out against many odds to make a place for herself in the world. A man never thinks what a woman does so long as she's pleasant and entertaining and — "

"Mostly, I think," said Phoebe, with a faint laugh, "she's got to be good-looking."

"Oh, has she," he said, dryly. Then he turned her face round so that the moonlight fell full upon it, and showed up her swollen eyes and tear-stained cheeks. "Well, you have been doing your best to spoil your good looks, young

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woman, but, as a rule, I should say if that's all that's needed you're all right."

Phoebe pushed his hands away and wiped her eyes again.

"Thank you," she said. "I can just fancy I hear Stanley's comments on your remarks."

"What would he say?"

"That your admiration didn't amount to much. You never looked at me while Nancy was by."

For one moment it occurred to Mr Sampson to say that if only the chance were to come again he wouldn't make such a blasted idiot of himself, but luckily reflection and loyalty prevailed, and he laughed a little and answered

—

"Well, the next man will think I was an idiot for my pains. But your people are foolish. They just set up one standard of beauty, and if you don't happen to conform to it you're utterly damned. Nancy is a sweet, pretty little lovable thing, with a knowledge of her own beauty that gives her confidence and adds to her charm. You are cast in quite a different mould. Whatever do your people want you to be like Nancy for? You'll be a grand, strong woman, Phoebe, when poor little Nancy — Don't envy Nancy."

"I don't; indeed, such a thing never entered my head. Oh! but you'll be good to her, won't you, Joe? You are so good. I wouldn't like Nan not to be quite happy."

"Is she quite happy, do you think?" he asked, wearily, as a man who does not want an answer. "Sometimes I'm afraid, Phoebe, she isn't very happy, and yet, God knows, I've done all I can for her. What else can I do? Phoebe, what can I do?"

"Joe, you are goodness itself to her. No one could be a better husband than you are."

"And yet I don't make her happy," he said sadly. "I see it all now," he went on — "now it's too late. She never cared about me, Phoebe. I don't believe she liked me half as well as you did. I'm sure she didn't understand me as well. She married me, poor little girl, because I wanted her to, and because — because — well, because, according to the creed of your family, every woman has to get married. Poor little girl!"

He spoke very sadly, not looking at, hardly seeming to notice his companion, and as for Phoebe, for a moment she forgot her own troubles in contemplating his. So he knew, he understood all about it, and had evidently understood for a long time. If she had only been a tactful, clever woman, she thought, she would know what to say in this contingency, might perhaps be able to straighten out this tangled skein. But as it was she was so sensible of the truth of what he said, she could only stare stupidly at him in the moonlight, wondering to herself what next, what next?

"Phoebe" — he turned to her so suddenly she started and blushed crimson — "whatever you do, don't make marriage a way out of your difficulties. For God's sake don't get married unless you're fond of the man. He won't ask you unless he's fond of you. And then — well, think of the cruel disappointment alone."

"It's a way out that hasn't presented itself," said Phoebe, thankful to find the conversation one more in fairly safe waters, "and I don't suppose it is likely to. But, you know, lots of men, I've heard, don't care for a woman who shows she is too fond of them. I haven't had any experience myself, as you know."

"It's a fallacy. A wrong argument altogether. There isn't a man in this world who wouldn't be thankful — I can find no words to say how thankful — to know he had the heart of the woman he loved. He wouldn't be worth

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calling a man if he wouldn't. I understand what they mean. Probably he wouldn't like a woman to smother him with kisses in public, or to make him ridiculous in any way. But to tell me a man doesn't value a good woman's love; my dear girl, they're foolish who tell you to the contrary."

"Once," murmured Phoebe, who, interesting as she found the discussion, couldn't help thinking they had strayed a long way from the bees, "I heard a man say the pleasure was in the hunting."

"He ought to have been licked," said her brother-in-law promptly, "and I sincerely hope he'll get a wife who'll take it out of him."

"He's got a wife."

"Probably that accounts for it, then. She didn't come up to expectations. Poor beggar! Married him because she wanted to marry some one, I suppose. Never gave a thought to his feelings in the matter, or that he couldn't be expected to keep up the high pressure of courtship all his life. Look here, Phoebe, married folks ought to be chums. There should be no question between them of which loves the most. If they are necessary to each other that's all that's needed. Don't get married, Phoebe, unless you marry your best friend."

"I'm not likely to marry at all, as you know very well. I'm sure your ideas are best. I'm glad to hear that's a man's opinion. But I don't see how one's to help these unlucky sort of marriages. There's always a risk."

"Of course there is always a risk. But it needn't be quite such a big one. If the woman was only sure she was fond of the man, and he was sure he was fond of her, surely then they would bear and forbear, and make allowances for each other, and would get along splendidly."

"Yes, of course, one would think that would be the way. But my people always laugh at me when I say such things, and say I don't know anything about it, which is true enough. And then a woman is better married."

"So is a man. But they will neither of them take any harm by waiting a little till they are sure they have met the right person."

"And what is to become of the woman if she don't marry?" asked Phoebe, putting the question that was filling all her thoughts just now.

"Oh -- ah -- marriage isn't the end of everything. She can do without, I suppose?"

"She can't," said Phoebe, boldly. "In the majority of cases she can't. She has neither position, nor place, nor money, nor anything else unless she marries; and even if she marries a poor man she is mistress of his house, and not under authority as she otherwise would be. Oh, I think if marriage offered the same temptations to a man as it does to a woman they would marry in just the same way."

"You haven't."

"Nobody asked me. The temptation was never brought very strongly before me; but I don't know what on earth is to become of me. How would a man feel if he was close on twenty-six and had no prospects whatever?"

"He would be an ass if he hadn't some project for the future; but, of course, a woman is different."

"There you are," said Phoebe, and she stamped her foot, "just as bad as the rest. A woman must sit down and look cheerfully forward to a dreary, objectless, penniless life, I suppose. I can't do it. But what am I to do? I thought the bees -- "



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"Still those unlucky bees," said a laughing voice, and Nancy, wrapped in a fur-lined coat with a dainty pink arrangement on her head, emerged out of the shadow. "I guessed I should find you two out here. I suppose you have neither of you noticed that though the moonlight is very lovely, the grass is very wet and the air is very keen."

"Your thin shoes," began her husband. "I hope — "

"Yes," she said, sharply. "I have got goloshes on, of course. You must think I'm a fool, Joe. What have you been talking about all this time? Bees, I suppose."

"And love, and marriage, and the position of women, and all sorts of things."

Nancy laughed.

"I might have known you would. You always do that, Phoebe, and yet you never get any forrarder. And what did you finally decide?"

"We didn't come to any conclusion," said Mr Sampson, a little sadly.

"Of course not," said his wife, triumphantly. "Phoebe never does. She is always trying to reform the world, but she never gets there."

"Circumstances are too strong for me."

"Have you decided about the bees? Father wanted to pour hot water on the lot and finish them off tonight, but I just took your part, Phoebe, represented they were worth a considerable amount of money, and you might as well have it. You can speak out a lot more when you're married. It's a great advantage. Well, I've decided now what you are to do, Phoebe. It will be dreadfully dull living at home without any interest, and you are not really wanted now Nell and Lyd are growing up so fast, so you can just sell off the bees next week and come and live with us. It will be delightful for me to have you, won't it, Joe? I'll never be dull then. There, that's settled."

Phoebe looked down at her pretty sister standing there before her, the bright moonlight showed up her dainty, delicate beauty, her face lighted up with the certainty that she had settled a knotty point to the advantage of all parties.

"You shall never be hard up for money again, Phoebe; shall she, Joe? And then when you get married — "

Phoebe glanced at her brother-in-law and saw a look on his face that told her plainly he too would welcome her. Indeed she herself could not fail to know how excellently they got on together. Then she ruthlessly interrupted her sister.

"I couldn't possibly do such a thing, Nancy, I couldn't. I wouldn't for worlds."

Nancy's face fell, and her lip began to quiver.

"But you seemed to think it was only the bees kept you at home. You laid often as soon as you had money enough you were going to start a little place of your own. It's not father and mother you mind leaving."

"But I couldn't live with you; I couldn't possibly, could I, Joe?"

"Couldn't she, Joe?"

## Kirkham's Find

"I should be very glad to have her," he answered, cautiously.

"You are both of you very good," said Phoebe, "but I want to be independent. I can't be dependent on anybody. I thought in a couple of years I would have enough to start a little bee-farm of my own, but now father — "

"How much would you want?" asked Mr Sampson, practically.

"I was thinking," said Phoebe, "that as soon as I had saved up £ 50 I might begin. Of course, I have always known there would come a time when father wouldn't stand any more, but I didn't think it would come so soon."

"£50 is very little," said the business man, thoughtfully.

"It would do to begin with," said Phoebe, sadly, because now £ 50 seemed as far away to her as heaven itself, and quite as unattainable. "One woman could live on so little. A little cottage in the country with an acre, or even half an acre of land round it, I could get it for five shillings a week, surely. Two rooms, or one even would do me. My keep would cost a very little. I believe I could do it for another five shillings."

"Phoebe, you must be mad!" said her sister, but Phoebe paid no attention.

"Then, of course, I would have to buy a little furniture, but I wouldn't want much. A table, and a chair, and a little crockery, and a fryingpan would do me until I could afford something better."

"Phoebe!"

"Then, of course, there would be the moving there and getting the place, that would cost something, and then I would have to have a little for carrying on the business, for jars, and packing, and carriage, and for clothes, but they wouldn't cost much. Yes, it would take quite £50, because it wouldn't do to run the risk of being left penniless."

"But you couldn't possibly live all alone!"

"Why not, Nan? By and by if I got on I could take Lydia into partnership, and I might afford a little servant. A girl wouldn't cost much in the country. But what is the good of talking?" and Phoebe turned away, and could have put her head down on her arms and sobbed again.

"Were you thinking of settling about here?" asked her brother-in-law, thoughtfully.

"I'd like to, of course, to be near them all, but it is so cold in the winter for bees here. They hardly do any work when there is so much wet weather. No, I thought — but what is the good of talking now? I might just as well want the moon," and the tears came into her eyes and blurred out the moon's round face.

"But tell me your ideas. I might hit on some way of helping you."

"It's all nonsense," said Nancy. "Fancy preferring a two-roomed cottage and starvation on five shillings a week to the comfortable home I would give you. Well, you would come to me before three months were out, anyhow."

"I'm not so sure of that, Nan," said her husband, kindly, and her sister looked at him gratefully. Here was a man who understood her. "Go on, Phoebe."

"You know last spring, when Nan and I went down to Warrnambool. That struck me as being just the place. Not near so cold as here, and everything was very cheap. I saw a cottage one day that would just have suited me. You

## Kirkham's Find

remember, Nan, I pointed it out to you the day we went to Nirranda."

"That hole! Oh, Phoebe, what nonsense you do talk! Just a common labouring man's cottage!"

"It would just have suited me," sighed Phoeb. "I would have made it very different looking if I had got on at all."

"It's silly to talk like that," said Nancy, impatiently. She wanted her sister to see the advantage of living with her, and here she was regretting a wretched little cottage she had once seen miles away down in the Western District.

"Are you sure now, Phoebe," asked her brother-in-law, gravely, "that that is what you do want? You wouldn't change your mind and be lonely and miserable and unhappy if you had it? Women," he added, speaking out of his own experience, "are so apt to think a thing would be 'just lovely' till they've got it, and then they find out it isn't what they wanted at all."

"Oh, but, Joe," said Phoebe, eagerly, "surely you know me better than that. I'm not a bit like that. Of course, every one's apt to make mistakes, but I generally know what I want, and appreciate it when I get it. I'm sure you know that. I always wanted something to do in life, and the bees gave it to me, and — and I've just been a different woman since, and — now — just when I was beginning to hope I was getting on a little — "

"Suppose we take that cottage, Phoebe, and I'll lend you the £ 50 to set up in business."

"Joe!" cried his wife and sister-in-law in a breath, and then Phoebe added, "Oh, but I couldn't take it. How could I?"

"We'll make it a business matter," said Mr Sampson, kindly. "You shall pay me interest if you like, and then you won't feel it a burden."

"Oh! but Joe, Joe, it's too good to be true;" Phoebe's hopefulness was reasserting itself. She felt she would only be too thankful if she could be persuaded to take the kind offer. "Suppose I failed. I believe I could manage. I might be over sanguine, all sorts of things might happen that I have never thought of, and then where would I be? I could never hope to pay off so much money."

"I take such risks every day," said Mr Sampson, smiling as he saw that his offer would be gratefully accepted in spite of protestations, "with men I don't know much about, why shouldn't I trust a woman I've learned to believe in?"

"I wonder at you encouraging her in such mad notions," said his wife, petulantly.

"The bees have done a lot for Phoebe, so I hear my sister say," said Mr Sampson, paying for once no attention to his wife; "and I heard your mother say exactly the same thing this evening, though I don't think she approved of them very much. She seemed to think Phoebe might give her time up to something better."

"I know," said Phoebe, "none of them will understand, not even Nancy here," and she put her arm round her sister, "that it isn't the bees exactly, it is having something to do that promises — that — I don't know exactly how to put it — that promises to earn me a living and give me a home of my own all by my own exertions. You don't know how delightful the feeling that you are getting on is. Oh Joe! would it be wrong of me to take that £50? It would mean so much to me."

"My dear girl, I'm delighted to help you."

## Kirkham's Find

"I'd have to start at once," said Phoebe, with the natural hesitation of a woman going into the world alone. But there was nothing else for it; unless she went, she felt the future would be a dreary blank. If only her father and mother would let her go cheerfully and take a good-humoured interest in all her arrangements. That was more than she could hope for, however.

"Father will give it to you properly," remarked Nancy, a little viciously. "He'll never let you go."

"If Joe will lend me £50 I'll go whether he lets me or not," said Phoebe, determinedly. "He has never in all his life told me he approves of me or of anything I do, and he has very often let me know he doesn't, so I may just as well please myself. I can but fail, and I feel as if I had been a failure always. Shall I go in and tell him now?"

Phoebe hardly felt as brave as her words implied. She had feared her father's cruel tongue all her life, and she dreaded it as much as ever still. But this thing must be done, and the sooner she broke it to her people the better; besides, she was angry at her father's injustice, and she would have her brother-in-law to back her up.

"The sooner the better," said Mr Sampson, quietly.

"I'm nearly frozen," said Nancy, crossly. "Oh, my goodness! Phoebe, you are in for it. Change your mind and come and live with us."

"I can't, Nan, indeed I can't. Come along in quickly, like a good girl. I'm sorry we kept you out so long."

## CHAPTER XIX. A DANGEROUS EXPERIMENT

Now if we could win to the Eden Tree where the four great rivers flow,  
And the wreath of Eve is red on the turf as she left it long ago,  
And if we could come when the sentry slept, and softly scurry through,  
By the favour of God we might know as much as our father Adam knew.

RUDYARD KIPLING.

Looking back now, Phoebe can never quite understand how it was she mustered sufficient courage to start out in life on her own account. It was not exactly the going, it was the marching in that cold autumn evening and announcing to her father that she intended to leave his roof for good and all. That was the step that cost so much. He sat there over the fire in the schoolroom with his back to the rest of the room, and as she came in, followed by her sister and her husband, she took her courage in both hands and addressed that disapproving back; in fact, if it had not belonged to a gentleman of mature years and the father of a family, one might have called it a sulky back.

"Father," she said, and her own voice sounded strange in her ears, and she said afterwards if Nancy and Mr Sampson had not been there she would have given up there and then — "father, I hear you want to get rid of the bees."

No answer. As far as the onlookers could judge the remark had fallen on deaf ears.

"Father," said Phoebe again, a little imperiously. She felt she was being badly treated, and she knew that Mr Sampson at least was sympathising with her thoroughly, and now that she was getting warmed to her work she did not mind much what she said. She had stood this tyranny long enough. "Father, do you hear me?"

"You know," he said, without turning his head, "I never approved of the bees. But, of course, no one ever takes any notice of what I wish."

## Kirkham's Find

"I beg your pardon," said Phoebe, thoroughly angry, and repressing a feminine longing to catch her parent by those very sulky shoulders and give him a good shaking, "I take a great deal of notice. I have come in to tell you that if you will let the bees stay here another week I will take them right away."

Her father relapsed into a stony silence, and for all sign he gave might not have heard a word she said, but Phoebe knew him better. By and by he would say he knew nothing of her movements; he had never been consulted; as if it were easy to consult a man like that; but at any rate, said Phoebe to herself, he shall not say he has not been told. Therefore, as briefly as possible, because it is not easy to confide your plans to a man's back, Phoebe launched out and told her father just exactly what she intended to do, adding, what had not occurred to her before, that she was going to Warrnambool by the very next steamer, would choose her new home, and then come back for the bees. She grew angrier as she went on, and by the time she had finished her little speech was feeling that anything — anything that took her out of the power of this father of hers she would welcome thankfully, no matter how hard the work or how lowly the position. Just as she was finished, Mr Marsden, who had never given the least sign that he had heard her, pushed back his chair and rising up slowly left the room; and Phoebe, flushed and hot from the unwonted excitement, faced round to the other two.

"There now, I've done it," she said. "He is a brute, he is, and now he will go on to mother that nobody pays the least attention to him, nobody cares about him in the least. As if it were possible."

"Well, you have done it, anyhow," said Nancy, settling down into the comfortable old armchair her father had vacated; "you won't be able to come back here any more, that's very certain. You'll have to come to us when you fail."

"I'm not going to fail," said Phoebe, drawing herself up. "If you will lend me the money, Joe, I will just start tomorrow."

"Very well," said Mr Sampson, simply. "Pack your bag tonight and you can drive in with me tomorrow morning."

So it was done, and Phoebe, still hot and angry, packed her bag, and went and found her mother and told her her plans.

As might have been expected, Mrs Marsden protested. Unfortunately all the arguments she could bring to bear against Phoebe's scheme were only those that made her doubly determined to carry it through. Mrs Marsden opined that it was very improper of a girl to think of living alone, and Phoebe at once began to feel she had had enough of the proprieties, and would be glad and thankful to get away from them. Mrs Marsden was certain if she did such a thing no one would ever marry her, and Phoebe began to feel that she must get away from people, even her nearest and dearest, who were for ever expecting her to get married, and being disappointed that she did not. Mrs Marsden was sure all her brothers would be shocked, and Phoebe felt that their opinion was less than nothing to her; she must just prove that she was of some use in the world, and if she only had money of her own and was well dressed, she was very sure her brothers would change their opinion. The argument that her father would be vexed counted for less than nothing, at that moment Phoebe wished for nothing more than to be beyond her father's reach for the rest of her life. Her mother was sure he was very fond of her, but the memory of the scene in the schoolroom was still so fresh in her mind that she angrily felt the sooner she was beyond his reach and thoroughly independent the better. And finally Mrs Marsden, seeing all her talking was having not the least effect, and being, poor woman, sorely troubled in her mind as to what was to become of this obstinate girl who was so very unlike her ideal woman, burst into helpless tears and reproached her daughter with want of love for her who had always done the best she could for her.

"I know your father is unkind at times," sobbed Mrs Marsden, "but you ought to know by this time it is only his way. He doesn't mean it. He thinks nobody cares for him. If you were ill or in trouble see how good he would be."

## Kirkham's Find

"But I'm not ill," said Phoebe, naturally enough, "and I'm not in much trouble except that I want to do something useful with my life for myself. Why can't he be pleasant and kind over that instead of waiting till I'm in trouble?"

"Naturally," said Mrs Marsden, "he thinks you are very selfish, always wanting to do something for yourself. Why can't you be content to be like other girls?"

"Considering he is always rubbing it into us what a frightful drag we all are upon him, I can't think," said Phoebe, a little contemptuously, "he ought to complain if I do want to do something for myself and relieve him of the burden of my keep."

"If you were only like other girls," said her mother with another great sob, "you would get married, and — and — there'd be no question of — of — "

But Phoebe turned away angrily, and her last qualm of conscience was swept away. The sooner she was settled in her life on her own account the better.

And the next morning she started. Her father had had his breakfast and gone off to a sale out Creswick way, very early in the morning, so she was spared the difficulty of saying good-bye to him, and had only to face her mother's tears. But Josiah Sampson backed her up manfully, and the younger girls were both interested and excited at such an unwonted departure on their eldest sister's part. The idea of her going out into the world alone did not shock them as it did their mother. The ten years that stretched between her and Lydia made her seem old enough to do anything she liked in the eyes of the younger girls.

And when she bid her mother good-bye, Phoebe had qualms again. She was leaving her to such a hard life.

"I'm so sorry, mother," she said. "It does seem such a shame to leave you with so much work to do, but really in the end I believe it will be better. When I'm independent you won't have me on your mind in addition to your other cares."

"Oh, Phoebe," sobbed Mrs Marsden, "if I could only get you to look at things in a proper light. Your conduct is undutiful, as your father says."

"I don't think it is," said Phoebe, kissing her mother again regretfully, and climbing up into the buggy beside Mr Sampson — Nancy was going to stay a day or two longer with her mother — "I don't think it is. Nobody thinks it is undutiful of Stanley to go to the University and get plucked for every second exam he goes for, instead of stopping at home and ploughing, and chopping wood, and feeding the pigs. Why should it be undutiful of me, who am older than he is, to try and set up for myself, instead of doing one eternal round of housework?"

"Girls are different from boys," repeated Mrs Marsden for about the twentieth time this morning, and Josiah cut short further reproaches by driving off, and Phoebe thought sorrowfully of the mother she was leaving for good and all the way into Ballarat. But there was no turning back now.

She went by train to Melbourne second class, because she had to economise in everything, and thence on board the Julia Percy, which would land her at Warrnambool early next morning. Last time she had gone by train, but then she had been with Nancy, to whom expense was no object; now she must consider every penny, and it would not do to consider the unpleasantness of being seasick.

All her compunctions came back with renewed force that dreary night at sea, the waves as they washed against the vessel's side, the wind as it howled through the rigging, all seemed to her to bear the same refrain. She was selfish, she was unkind, she was leaving her poor mother to bear her heavy burdens unaided, and that she should feel desperately lonely was only her due.

## Kirkham's Find

But when next morning she came on deck and found the little steamer was just coming to anchor against the new breakwater, and the bright sun was shining cheerily on the blue water, and showing up the spires and towers and the houses of the pretty little town of Warrnambool nestling among its low green hills, a new feeling of delightful hope and buoyancy came over her. The very day was a good omen. If she had felt depressed the night before, it was only natural, she was not accustomed to act on her own responsibility, or to be by herself; she must learn not to mind these fits of despondency, she must look always to the goal ahead and be very sure, as she was at this present moment, that in helping herself she was indirectly helping her mother far better than she could do by staying at home. Oh, but the morning was bright and sunny, it was a pleasure to be alive, and she stepped ashore and made arrangements with a cabman to leave her small bag at the Coffee Palace, and inquired of him the most likely place to hear of a small cottage in the country to let, the rent to be not more than five shillings a week. Cabby thought Mr Smith, of Hayes and Son, Kepler Street, would be the most likely, and so Phoebe set off to walk the mile and a half that separates the breakwater from the town. All along the path she went by swampy Lake Pertobe, and the frogs and the crickets, hidden in the tall green flowering rushes that grow up in the brackish water, croaked and called loudly and cheerfully to her that she was starting out on the right road; the seagulls, wheeling round overhead, with snow-white breasts, called the same thing in their plaintive language; the flocks of brown backed plovers harshly echoed it, and the wild duck and teal, and black swan out in the middle of the still, calm lake, tame because safe from the destroying hand of man, seemed to promise her, too, peace and happiness; while the bold blue water-hens, with their bright red legs and little white tails went further, and impressed on her with every movement of those same tails that she was to go in and win, and never mind what anybody thought of her. On every blade of the green grass there was a dewdrop, and every dewdrop sparkled like a diamond in the bright sunlight, and the salt breath of the sea just fanned her cheek, and played gently with the coils of her dark hair. Truly a lovely morning, a God-given morning to encourage and cheer her.

But Mr Smith, of Hayes and Son, though he knew of many small cottages to let, did not seem to have one that exactly answered her requirements, and did not know of that small cottage exactly opposite Benger's Flat State School, which had been to let last spring, and which exactly answered her requirements.

For a bee farm? Well, he had dabbled a bit in bees himself, when he wasn't quite so busy; he believed there was money in them, and he quite thought a cottage out Mepunga way, which was where Benger's Flat was, would suit admirably.

"You see, you get the heath in bloom on the sand hills in the winter time," he said, "and heather honey is always good; then there is a certain amount of pasture land, old Mapleson owned a lot of land there and laid it down in clover — clover honey is good; and about Benger's Flat there are a good many cottages with fruit trees surrounding them; no, for bees I really don't think you could have a better locality. Unfortunately, I don't do business for the Benger's Flat people, most of them go to Mr Wilson, over the way. I daresay he could oblige you, I'll put on my hat and take you over."

And he did. And Phoebe found the cottage she wanted was still unlet, and agreed to go out and look at it that very morning, and was shaken hands with and wished all success by Mr Smith, of whom she ever after spoke with the warmest gratitude as having been so encouraging and kind; and it certainly never occurred to her that her dark eyes were bright and eager, that her teeth were marvellously regular and white, and that the brisk walk and the excitement had brought a bright colour into her cheeks; that her close fitting tweed dress, if it was very plain, set off her figure to advantage, and that Mr Smith thought this young woman, who was so keen about a bee-farm, was a very charming young person indeed, such as did not often break the monotony of the morning for hard-working land and estate agents in small seaport towns.

And Phoebe hired a buggy and went out and looked at the cottage at Benger's Flat, and felt her ardour a little damped after she had done so. It was exactly opposite State School No. 002; in fact it belonged to the head teacher, which Phoebe thought was a good thing. When she came to think of the long nights she would have to spend by herself, she felt glad to think her landlord, a schoolmaster and a house owner, should be only across the

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road. For she decided to take it, she had not hesitated a moment, the country round was just the sort of country she wanted, and the rent was 4s 9d a week. It was certainly very dilapidated and out of repair, and to start with was only a weather-board cottage, built in the usual style of Australian ugliness, with four rooms opening into one another — two of decent size, but the two behind merely skillions — with windows reaching to the top of the wall, and being met by the ugly corrugated iron roof which projected hardly an inch beyond the wall, and gave the place an idiotic look, as of a face that had no forehead, but no eyebrows either.

It was ugly, but it would do, for not only was it very cheap, but there was an acre of land, fenced with a post and rail fence, that went along with it. Yes, it was the very place, and Phoebe went back to Wilson and Knight and took the house for six months, there and then.

Then she went and had some dinner at the Coffee Palace, and considered what should be her next move.

She would go back by the Julia Percy, next day, and — well — she must not stop a day longer than was absolutely necessary at home. As she was defying her father she felt uncomfortable in his presence, she felt she was not doing quite right in making use of his house. No, she would come down here next week, just as soon as ever she could get her small belongings packed. Then she took out her purse and counted her money, noting with dismay how very rapidly the £10 Josiah Sampson had advanced her was diminishing. Only yesterday she had got it, and already she had spent £3, and her heart sank with dismay. If she spent £3 in one day, how on earth was she going to set up in business on £50 and twenty beehives?

Then she was a little comforted by the reflection that the greater part of her expenses had been in travelling. Once settled, she would not need to spend money that way. She must just make up her mind to the monotony of one place and no friends. Beggars and borrowers cannot be choosers.

Then she began to put down on a card how much, or rather how little, she would want to furnish the house, and thinking over its dilapidated condition a bucket and scrubbing brush came very first on the list. Other things followed, just the absolute necessities of life — a stretcher bedstead, a table and two chairs, a couple of cups and saucers and a teapot. How the things mounted up to be sure. Five pounds she decided she would lay out on furniture. Her house would certainly be furnished in the barest, humblest style for that, but she could not afford more, and she put on her hat again and went out to interview the storekeeper at the next corner. He was evidently accustomed to furnishing on this scale, and soon Phoebe found herself the possessor of a stretcher with bedding to match, a couple of kitchen chairs, a very good second-hand kitchen table, and the minor trifles that no woman, however lowly her position in life, can do without. Naturally there was not a penny for curtains or carpet, not a drawer or cupboard of any description did it allow of, but at least Phoebe found herself possessed of the absolute necessities at a less cost than she had expected. She must do without the other things. If she succeeded, well and good, it would be time enough to buy them then, and if she failed — but she did not like to think of possible failure, and she turned to the storekeeper and asked him how she could get these stores out to Benger's Flat next week along with herself, her beehives and all the rest of her belongings.

That was soon settled. For the sum of ten shillings down — he ran a cash store — he himself would take her, and Phoebe left his shop feeling that she had done all she could and was really starting in life on her own account.

## CHAPTER XX. BEGINNING LIFE

Employment is nature's physician and is essential to human happiness. GALEN.

It was hard work to face them at home again, without Mr Sampson to back her. Her mother persisted in treating her as a forgiven sinner, and her father simply ignored her presence. Phoebe could not make up her mind which she disliked most. On the whole she was glad that she had fixed the date of her departure so close that all her time was filled up with mending her clothes and packing up her small possessions.



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They were so few, so very few. She looked at the little pile the night before she left, and sighed and thought how bare and dismal-looking the little house at Bengers Flat would be for many a long day to come. Lydia, who was sitting on her bed superintending the packing, put her thoughts into words.

"My word, Phoebe! How empty your house will be."

"Lydia," — the door opened and in came Mrs Marsden — "How can you be so vulgar. No lady ever says 'My word.'"

"Oh, bother, mother," said Lydia, tossing her head, "you wouldn't believe the nuisance it is being ladylike. I wish the thing had never been invented. I wish I was going away with Phoebe tomorrow."

"Into the bare little house?" asked Phoebe, smiling. "Well, perhaps you will come and stay with me when I'm a little settled."

"That I will," said Lydia, with energy, and her mother sighed.

"Phoebe, it's so wrong of you to go contaminating the younger girls."

"Contaminating? Well, mother," said Phoebe, pointing with some surprise at her meagre possessions, "if they envy me they really must have very little pleasure in life."

"It's not that. It is that girls nowadays are never contented at home. They are always craving for something new. Your father was only saying so last night."

"If I come to grief," said Phoebe, smiling at her younger sister, "and see what a good object lesson I'll be for these younger girls, and if I succeed — well you couldn't do better than let them do likewise."

"Oh, you'll succeed, never fear," said Lydia, cheerfully. "We all know now you never say you can do a thing till you are sure you can. I must say it's pretty hard lines though to start out with so little."

"I don't like it at all," said her mother, tearfully. "It doesn't seem to me you have the bare necessities of life, and I really haven't anything to give you, Phoebe. I would, though you are so headstrong, but what would your father say. I might give you sheets and blankets, but then your father doesn't approve and he mightn't —"

"It's all right, mother, it's all right. Don't give me anything. I don't want to make father cross. I've got plenty. Nancy made me a magnificent present of two pairs of sheets and a pair of blankets, to say nothing of two tablecloths and some kitchen cloths. Oh, I'm well set up, for I never expected such magnificent presents, and I bought some things which are waiting for me down in Warrnambool."

"And when will you come back?" asked Mrs Marsden.

"I can't very well come and see you for some time, I'm afraid," said Phoebe. "Who will look after my house and things?" and she felt quite a glow of pride in speaking of "my house," although it was such a small one.

"I don't mean that," said Mrs Marsden, "I mean for good and all."

"Well," laughed Phoebe, "I'm hoping I have relieved you of all the burden of my keep for good and all."

"Phoebe, don't talk like that. It is unladylike as well as ungrateful. All ladies," and Mrs Marsden put an emphasis on "ladies," "live in their father's house till they are married. And when have I ever said you were a burden?"

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"Never, mother, never," said Phoebe, putting her hand on her mother's shoulder kindly. "Poor little mother, but I'm not a fool, and I can't help seeing for myself how hard it is for you to get me my allowance, and if I seem to want anything beyond twenty pounds a year, it is a terrible weight on your mind. I can't bear to ask for even that, so I just must try and do something for myself."

"And your father says," said Mrs Marsden, "that at the end of the month you will be very glad to come back to your comfortable home. Remember," she added tearfully, "we will always be very glad to have you, and I think the lesson will do you good. You will be more contented after you have found out how hard it is to do for yourself."

"And if you get on, Phoebe," put in Lydia, "mind you ask me down to stay. I'd just love it, and so would Nell. We won't mind if it is a bit like a picnic."

"Next summer, perhaps," said Phoebe. "It ought to be a nice place in the summer."

And the day Phoebe got to Warrnambool with her twenty beehives and all her small belongings it was raining in torrents. The roads were ankle deep in mud, the rain was washing down the ruts in streams, and all the trees and grass were sodden with wet. And this was only the end of April, what would the country be like before the longed-for summer came again? But it was no good repining. The best thing was to get settled in her new home as soon as possible. And the little cottage did look so uninviting -- so cold, and bare, and dirty, and uninhabitable generally. Phoebe's spirit sank to zero when the waggon which had brought her and her belongings stopped at the gate.

"We'd better go right up to the door, I think," she suggested to the driver, "we can get to the back door. And, oh, would you mind going over to the school-house for the key?"

"There you are, miss," said the driver, when five minutes later he had opened the back door and brought the dray up to it. "Now what shall I do with them hives?"

"Put them in here, I think," said Phoebe, peering into the dirty little skillion, which looked as if it had never been scrubbed since it had been built. "It's so wet and cold, I'll keep them here for tonight, and I can see about them tomorrow. And the rest of the things I'll have in the front room, please."

"Right you are," said the man, who, with a good-natured desire to help, had all the friendly familiarity of his class, but he worked with a will and Phoebe was not going to grumble at his familiarity. After all, she thought, was she any way better than he.

It did not take long to empty the dray, and then the carter stood in the middle of the room and, rubbing his hands together, surveyed the establishment with a friendly eye.

"Now if I can put things to rights a bit for you," he said.

"You are very kind," said Phoebe, "but really it's so dirty, I must try and clean it up first. The only thing I seem to have forgotten is wood. I wonder where I could get some to light a fire."

"There's a good back log in the yard, I see," said the carter, "I'll just bring it in. It'll last you for two or three days that. And I saw a lot of wood about half a mile up the road. I'll go up and bring you a little back in the dray if you like. I don't suppose it'd cost much. They'll be glad enough to sell."

"How kind you are," said Phoebe, taking out her purse. "I'd be most grateful."

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So he brought in the log which though wet enough outside was probably dry at the core, and then she heard him whistling cheerfully as he went down the road, and in order not to think she set about ransacking the house for rubbish that would do to start a fire. There were plenty of odds and ends, broken boxes and rags, and by the time her new friend returned with enough wood to last her a week, which he proceeded to stack in one of the skillions, there was a bright fire on the hearth, or rather on the top of the colonial oven, which filled the sitting-room fireplace, the kettle was beginning to sing, and Phoebe herself had got into her working dress and had set out one end of the table with the tea things and the bread and butter she had brought with her.

"Well, that's hearty," said the man, "that looks like business. You'll do, I bet."

"I am much obliged to you for your kindness," she said. "I thought perhaps you might like a cup of tea. It is so wet."

"Well, as you are so kind," he said, and he sat down and partook of tea and bread and butter, while Phoebe apologised for the absence of milk, which she had forgotten.

"It's very good, thank you," he said, gratefully, "and just the thing on a day like this. If every one treated me like you do I'd do well. See here now, miss, the boss he does a lot of business along this road, and if ever you want any help and I'm along the road, just you sing out and Ned Wilson's your man."

"Indeed, I am very grateful," said Phoebe once again, and when she gave him the money for his "boss," added thereto a half-crown for himself, which he returned promptly.

"No, no, I'm not that sort. I'm glad enough to help you and the tea's thanks enough. Now just you remember Ned Wilson, and whenever I'm along this way, I'll just give a look in and see if I can help you a bit."

And he cut short her thanks by taking his departure there and then, and Phoebe felt she was fairly launched in her new life.

She inaugurated it with a big scrubbing match. It was not a romantic way of celebrating her start in housekeeping, but it was very necessary, for the little house was very dirty. However, she was a strong, active young woman, not afraid of work, and with a good fire, lots of hot water and plenty of soap, things soon began to assume a different aspect. Both of those two front rooms she cleaned out thoroughly, as very likely they had never been cleaned since they had been built, and then she piled up the fire to dry them — wood was cheap enough at any rate — and once dry she began to arrange her scanty possessions, and when, about four o'clock in the afternoon, a gleam of sunlight broke through the heavy clouds and the rain cleared off, she went outside and proceeded to clean her windows. She was rubbing away with a will when suddenly the little gate, which was but fifty feet from the front door, opened, and a woman with a shawl over her head and a baby in her arms stood beside her.

"How do you do, Miss Marsden," she said. "I'm Mrs Johnston, the school teacher's wife, and I thought I'd just come over and say we're glad to see you here. I'm afraid you found the house pretty dirty, and Mr Johnston was saying I ought to send the girl over to clean up a bit, but really what with four children, all babies as you may say, and the schoolroom to be kept clean — and the children do bring such lots of mud this weather, and not one of them ever thinks to wipe their boots — she really didn't get time to spare."

"Oh, that's all right," said Phoebe, cheerfully. "The front rooms are quite clean now, and tomorrow I'll see about the back."

"That's just what I told Mr Johnston," said Mr Johnston's wife a little fretfully. "I said you'd have a girl, and as there was only the two of you it wouldn't take much to clean up, and you with no children to be running off to every minute."

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"But I don't keep a servant," said Phoebe, bravely; "I'm just doing everything myself."

"Are you, now?" Mrs Johnston shifted the baby from one arm to the other. "Well, as I said, there's no children to go messing about as soon as you've cleaned up," but Phoebe plainly saw, to her amusement, that she had fallen in Mrs Johnston's estimation by doing all the work herself.

She gave a final polish to the last of the two windows, and then debated whether she should ask her landlord's wife inside or not. The furniture was so meagre, and the floor was so clean, while Mrs Johnston, besides being critical, had very muddy boots; however, hospitality gained the day, and Phoebe, laying down a sack at the front door, for her guest to wipe her feet on, invited her inside. She saw her glance round at the empty room, in which the only homely thing was the cheerful fire, and then she said —

"You see, I'm beginning very humbly, Mrs Johnston. It's no good getting too many things till I see how I get on. Will you have some tea? I'm sorry I have no milk, but I haven't found out where to get any yet."

But Mrs Johnston, greatly to Phoebe's relief, for she felt she could not afford to entertain two guests in the same day, declined the tea, and after a little humming and hawing managed to suggest that she should buy milk from them. They had a cow, and would be very glad to let her have, say, a quart a day. The only drawback was Mrs Johnston was evidently troubled with genteel notions, and hardly liked to suggest that she should have it at a price. Phoebe, luckily, had no feeling of that sort; she explained at once that she was poor, but would be very glad to buy milk, to come and fetch it herself, and to pay her 1 1/2d a pint. Her guest was manifestly relieved when that little matter was settled, and then proceeded to tell her how she might get meat from Mr Mackenzie, the farmer, who lived hardly a quarter of a mile away, and killed at least once a week, and how the store where she could buy bread and groceries was not ten minutes' walk from the school-house, and the school-house itself was the post-office. Then she opined Phoebe would be lonely, things being so different to what she was accustomed to, and Phoebe smiled. She hadn't had time to be lonely today, at all events, and was heartily wishing her guest would go home so that she might get straightened up for the night. Unluckily, another rain squall came up, darkening the whole sky, and Mrs Johnston drew a little closer to the fire, made herself quite at home by unloosening her dress and giving the baby, who was fretful, his tea there and then, and discoursed meanwhile on the people round about and their many shortcomings.

Mr Johnston, it seemed, was a blighted man. He was a first-class teacher but the Minister of Education had a 'down' on him; was envious of his attainments, Mrs Johnston darkly hinted, and kept him hidden away here teacher of a third-class school, and of course they both felt it for themselves and for their children, for the society was not what they had been used to. Then, having in a manner explained that they were superior people, and not to be judged in the same category as the rest, she settled down comfortably to gossip about her neighbours, and told Phoebe the news of the district. The chief item of importance seemed to be the establishment of a creamery a mile down the cross-road, and they did say all the farmers were going in for dairy cows, and every one who had a little bit of ground would just be for going in for a cow. There was Mrs Simpson, Mrs Mackenzie's sister, her husband never seemed to do no good, and was always away looking for work and never finding it; she'd started a cow, and they said it was all she and the children had to live on. And then she proceeded to dilate on the charms of "young Jack Fletcher," who, it seemed, was the beau of the neighbourhood, and had a place of his own five miles further up, but spent a good deal of his time with his sister, Mrs Mackenzie, and all the girls about were setting their caps at him, and none knew which was the favoured one; and the Benger's Flat Debating Society was to meet in the schoolroom tonight, the subject was to be, "Should Women be Allowed a Vote," and, if Miss Marsden liked, she — Mrs Johnston — would take her.

But Phoebe declined with thanks, even though Jack Fletcher was to be there, and would be sure to be so funny. He made you die with laughing. Well, next night they were going to hold a Social; it wasn't very expensive, only a shilling a head, but if a gentleman brought you, or you took something towards the supper — something worth, say sixpence — you got in free. She didn't go herself because of baby, but —

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But Phoebe declined that too. She never went out at night, and then, much to her relief, the baby finished his supper, the clouds cleared off, and Mrs Johnson began to pull the shawl around her and declare the time had slipped away so she really never did, and she must go home and see that the children got their tea, her girl was that careless there was no trusting her. And then at the door she turned back again.

"If you'd like some milk tonight, Miss Marsden, will you come over for it. I don't know if the cow's milked, the girl's that careless."

So Phoebe crossed the road with her jug in her hand, and smiled to herself as she thought how very shocked her mother would have been.

But the cow was not milked, though she was standing close against the kitchen door waiting for the milkmaid, and when Phoebe saw the unwashed can that was waiting, she repented her of her offer to buy milk.

"Suppose," she hesitated, "as I'm rather busy, you let me milk a little into my jug here, I see your can isn't ready."

"I couldn't milk to save my life," said the schoolmaster's wife, "but you can if you like."

And again Phoebe felt she was going down in her neighbour's estimation, but she got her milk fresh and pure, which was the main thing, and when she got home she put the finishing touches to her household arrangements, changed her dress, and did her hair again neatly, laid her table, and grilled herself a chop for tea, and, when everything was cleared away, sat down before her bright fire to review the events of the day and to think out her mode of life for the future.

The rain had come up again and beat furiously against the window-pane, the wind was howling dismally down the chimney, and every now and again an extra wild gust scattered the floor with hot ashes; a wild and wintry night for a girl to spend alone in a strange place, but somehow Phoebe did not feel depressed. She had been prepared for it; she had quite expected to be miserable and unhappy on this her first night away from home, but, much to her astonishment, the depression had not come. She was tired, it was true, but to look round at the clean floor and well-scrubbed table gave her a feeling of elation. The poverty of the little house did not strike her, she only saw it as it was when she entered and as it was now. If she alone, without any help, could make so great a change in such a very short time, why should she not succeed in other things. Then it gave her pleasure to look in her purse. She had reckoned that coming down here and setting up housekeeping would cost her, along with her first journey, nearly £15, and behold, here she was, settled in her house, with provisions enough to last her at least a week, and all she had spent was £ 10 3s 9d. To be sure the house was bare, and Mrs Johnston's taste in wall-papers — she supposed it was Mrs Johnston's taste — was enough to make the hair of even the common-place Philistine stand on end, but what matter? The thing that troubled her most was Mrs Johnston herself. Suppose, oh, suppose she should grow like Mrs Johnston! She might, why not? Mrs Johnston evidently considered herself superior to the rest of the folks surrounding her, and people, women especially, grew to be like their surroundings. Perhaps she might be thankful if she were no worse than Mrs Johnston. Phoebe shivered and drew a long breath. She was poor, and must live by the work of her hands, but might it not be possible to keep still some small modicum of refinement. Like one's surroundings? Yes, it was a law of nature, but it was no good repining. Things would not have been so very much better even if she had stayed at home. And she would, perhaps, in the days to come, if she succeeded, have a chance to improve her mind by travel and mixing with the world; but now it was not good fretting for what she could not get. She would make the best of it. And there and then, sitting with her hands folded, looking into the glowing coals, Phoebe made two wise resolutions, and kept them faithfully for many a long day. One was that she would never neglect her personal appearance. There was no one to see, but it would be the first step down. She would always do her hair neatly, she would always have a tidy dress, and always she would change her dress and make herself smart for the evening, though there should be no one to see but the kitten Mrs Johnston would give her as soon as it could leave its mother. The other was that, however busy she was, she would try and improve her mind by a little reading every day. Her books were very

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few and valueless, just old school prizes, but among them was a Shakespeare in small print and a tawdry blue and gold binding, and she resolved solemnly, as Phoebe was always resolving, to read carefully and thoughtfully at least one act of a play every night before she went to bed. What good it would do her she hardly understood, but at least it would separate her in some undefined manner from Mrs Johnston and women of that stamp. It was good policy always to made the best of things, thought Phoebe, taking down the Shakespeare from his new home on the mantelshelf and turning to "The Tempest" as the most suitable for such a night.

And when she had read for half an hour she went to bed. It was only half-past seven, but she dreaded sitting up longer lest she should begin to feel lonely. She had done a good day's work, she was tired but hopeful, and as soon as her head touched the pillow she was sound asleep.

## CHAPTER XXI. GETTING ON

One line — a line fraught with instruction — he was prudent, he was patient, and he persevered.  
TOWNSEND.

Put it what way you will it is dull work for any one to live alone, and in after days Phoebe always looked back on that first winter spent in the little cottage at Benger's Flat as the dreariest time she had ever spent in her life. On the whole the first week or so was not so hard to bear as she had expected. There was so much to do cleaning up, putting out the bees in the little paddock, arranging her mode of life and settling down generally. It was afterwards, when she had done everything she could do, and had to sit down in the short winter days and wait, that she found life hard, and gave way sometimes to fits of despair. If she had only had one of her sisters, or even one of the little brothers with her, it would have been all right, but she could not afford to ask them to come and stay with her even if her father would have allowed it, which was improbable, and so she just had to sit still and watch her money slowly dwindle away while she waited until the bees had made enough honey for her to sell some. They worked, those bees, that was her great comfort. Down near the coast, and she could always see the sea through the hollows of the sand hummocks, the climate is always mild, so that whenever the sun was out, and he was out very often indeed that winter, she had the satisfaction of seeing her hives very busy. It almost seemed as if they realised that their very existence depended on their activity. In June, too, the heath, pink and white, covered all the bush round with glory, and the bees worked hard at making the best of all honey. Truly the bees could not be carrying out their part of the contract better. And in June, too, she found a new interest — such a small thing is of importance when our lives are narrow. It was only that in the latter end of May she discovered that a big white hen came regularly and laid her eggs in the long grass just beside her front door.

She was tidying the place up a little, and had begun to dig over the garden with a view to growing a few vegetables for her own use, but now she decided she would not disturb that little piece of grass. The hen should have it to herself. She concluded that it belonged to Mrs Johnston, but that lady was above knowing her poultry by sight; she rather insinuated that it was beneath the dignity of one in her social position so to do, even if she had the time, so Phoebe concluded she was harming nobody by feeding that hen and encouraging her to regard the little garden as her home. By and by when 'Mrs Grey' had, in gratitude for all the household scraps, given her hostess no less than eighteen eggs for breakfast, she wanted to sit, and Phoebe negotiated with her well-to-do neighbour, Mrs Mackenzie, for a sitting of duck eggs, and in the beginning of July she had added to her possessions eleven golden balls of ducklings.

"My!" said Mrs Johnston, as she leaned over the fence one fine morning when the wintry sunshine was so warm it made one think gladly of the coming spring, "my! but those are fine ducklings of yours. How do you manage it? Jack set a hen in the stable and she only brought out six, and now there are only three left, and they aren't half the size yours are, though they're a week older."

Phoebe laughed.

## Kirkham's Find

"I've got nothing to do but look after them, you see. I expect that makes all the difference. I've got such a lot of vegetables now, I think I must raise some more chickens. I wonder if it pays to sell them."

"Oh, you can sell them right enough," said Mr's Johnston, "but paying is quite another thing. It doesn't pay to rear poultry. Everybody'll tell you that. I don't suppose you'd get more than two shillings a pair for fat chickens even if you sent them in direct to the Western Hotel. They're always wanting fowls there."

"That would pay me," said Phoebe, with a sigh of relief, as she saw a new source of income opening to her. "Why, these eleven little ducks have only cost me a shilling as yet. Ninepence for the sitting of eggs and threepence for the cabbage seed, and I haven't nearly used up all my cabbages yet."

"Well, I never," said the schoolmaster's wife in surprise, "is that the way you count? I wasn't meaning that way. I was just meaning it wasn't worth while to sell good fat ducks for so little. All the time they take up too."

"I haven't got anything more profitable to do," said Phoebe, smiling. Mrs Johnston was so limp and superior, she always made Phoebe feel intensely energetic and commonplace. "I came here to work."

"Well, to be sure," sighed Mrs Johnston, "it's what a woman always has to do, but not your way. I was just saying to Mr Johnston only last night how strange it was you coming to live here all by yourself. He gave you a month, but it's near three now, and, my word, I couldn't have believed a girl could have improved the place so. It looks quite a different place."

"I hope it'll look better by and by when the spring comes," said Phoebe, smiling, for even Mrs Johnston's witness to any improvement in the cottage she had found so desolate was welcome.

"Yes," went on her neighbour, opening the gate and swinging it slowly backwards and forwards as if she were considering the propriety of coming in, "you're just a plague to me, you are. Mr Johnston's for ever throwing it in my teeth how nice this place is kept and how you're getting on. And look at our place."

The Johnston establishment stood in the midst of a quagmire, as Phoebe knew well enough, but she hardly liked to say so to its mistress, so she prevaricated, and murmured, "You have all the children to mind, you see," which was true enough, only the children didn't get minded, but that never struck their mother.

"That's just what I tell Mr Johnston," said his wife, eagerly; "I'm sure he has just as much time after school hours as I have."

"A great deal more," murmured Phoebe, who did not love Mr Johnston.

"There, I'll tell him you said so," said his wife; "he thinks a lot of your opinion. He thinks you're just the right sort of woman."

"Does he really?" and Phoebe smiled. It was strange the first word of commendation should come from a man she so thoroughly disliked as she did the schoolmaster. Then, on the strength of opening up a new industry in the sale of ducks, she became suddenly hospitable, and asked the schoolmaster's wife in to tea, an invitation that was eagerly accepted, for by now that good lady realised — though she failed to understand the reason why — that Miss Marsden's scones and home-made bread were excellent, and Miss Marsden's butter, although it was made from Mrs Johnston's own milk, was always fresh and sweet as the day it was made.

"I've given over making butter," she sighed. "It's cheap enough to buy, and it's an awful bother to make, and then like enough it's not eatable."

## Kirkham's Find

"I make this from your milk," said Phoebe, demurely.

"Oh, I know. But as I tell Mr Johnston, you've got no one to distract you and can just have a regular time for everything. Besides, I was never brought up to this sort of work, and if Mr Johnston only had his due -- "

And again Phoebe had to listen to a tirade against the sins of the Minister of Education which lasted till it was time for her guest to go home.

Indeed, Mrs Johnston had spoken truly. The improvement three months' hard work had effected in that miserable little cottage was something to be wondered at. Its mistress had never spared herself, and the more despairing and hopeless and lonely she felt, the harder she worked, partly to achieve her end and partly to kill time and give herself no time to think. The rich black soil was easy enough to work, luckily, and she dug up all her garden with her own hands, and sowed vegetables, cabbages and potatoes, and suchlike useful things. She mended all the tumble-down fence that surrounded her acre of land. Nancy sent her flowers and seed, and she planted them all, carefully tended them, and already the little flower garden looked flourishing, and ivy geranium was beginning to grow over the ugly nakedness of the house. She invested in a pot of paint and painted the door, and then turning her attention to the interior spent the rest of her paint on the woodwork there, and when it was all gone, having no more money for such luxuries, laid in a stock of whitewash and thoroughly whitened the two skillions at the back. The house might be poor, and the furniture decidedly scanty, but at least it was spotlessly clean, and that seemed to lend an air of refinement that is wanting in many a better furnished house.

Still there was always the loneliness to combat. The long, dark nights, when the rain beat against the windows, and the wind howled down the chimney, when the clouds scurried across the sky, and the 'boom boom' of the wedge-shaped flock of wild geese came borne like the call of the ghostly huntsman on the cold wind. There were the wet days when the ground outside was like a quagmire, the trees round were sodden, and the sky one even grey, and she knew that from morning till night she would not have a soul to speak to, no one to cheer her, nothing to break the monotony. It was a hard life for a young woman, a very hard life indeed, and probably the only thing that kept Phoebe to it that long winter was the feeling that she could not go back and own herself a failure. Had either her father or mother been but a little more sympathetic, she would have thrown it up, gone back home and declared it was utterly impossible for a woman to live alone; but as it was, she felt she must succeed, there was nothing else for it. She could not afford to fail.

Every evening before she went to bed she read her Shakespeare carefully, but she sometimes wondered if it did not make her discontented. Where was the good of reading of the joys and sorrows of other women's lives, when her small joys consisted in the successful hatching out of a new brood of chicks, her worst sorrow was when a hawk swooped down and carried off her most promising ducklings. There was nothing noble or great in such a life as that, she thought; even the small pleasures were marred by the want of some one to share them with, and she must just make the best of it. Then she would get up and walk about and try to throw off the despondency that would come over her, to reason it away. Every man's life looked at closely is one dull routine of small duties. It depends upon the man himself to be happy, at any rate, thought Phoebe with a sigh; all she could do was to make the best of it, and write such cheerful letters home as made the younger girls wild with envy of her independence. But to herself she never minced matters. It was dull, deadly dull, and she seemed far away from everything that goes to make up a happy life for a woman. A woman ought to marry and have children -- yes, that was what she was created for, that is her use in life, and Phoebe felt sad, sometimes as she sat over her lonely fire, that such happiness could never come to her. She thought of no man in particular; long ago she had forgotten her fancy for Allan Morrison, it had died out as utterly as does a fire for want of fuel, and in her hurry to get settled down she had entirely dropped her correspondence with him. It was a pleasure certainly to get letters, but she could not find the time to write to a man who as the days went on got more and more of a shadow. She might never see him again; where was the good of writing now he had dropped out of her life, she felt friendly enough towards him, she even smiled sometimes to herself as she thought what an interest she had taken in him, but all that was passed and behind her, and only sometimes of an evening she sat over her cheery fire and read of the loves of dead and



## Kirkham's Find

gone men and women, she sighed to think that such happiness or such sorrow could never come into her life. Well, it was possible, of course, but it was not very likely. She was getting on for thirty, and no man had loved her, and now she never even saw a man. It is an undeniable fact that you cannot be loved without being seen, and though our mothers used to say that if a woman was to be married she would be, for the man would come down the chimney to do it, still Phoebe in her own mind thought there was a good deal in propinquity, and she certainly didn't expect a man to come down the chimney to marry her. After all, wasn't she happier than if she had married as Nancy had done? She was — she thought — a thousand times happier, and yet Nancy had the baby to comfort her, and there was no doubt Nancy was fond of her baby, fonder than she — Phoebe — was of any human being. She gave it up; where was the good of bothering, she must just make the best of things, and generally after a bad fit of the blues over night, she would wake up cheerful and hopeful enough next morning.

And in August, greatly to her surprise, Nancy came to see her — drove out one bright sunny day when she was watching the bees hard at work on the heather which lay between Benger's Flat and the sand hummocks, and announced that she was going to stop a week at least.

"I can leave baby at night now, and nurse is most trustworthy, so I'll leave them at the Western, and I'll come out and stop with you, and we'll play at being girls again."

"Oh, Nan," said Phoebe, the prospect was so delightful, "but — "

"But you haven't got a bed. I guessed you hadn't, so I brought me bed along with me, like they did in Scripture."

"But Joe — "

"Now, Joe's all right. You'd mollycoddle a husband, Phoebe, if you had him. Don't you know a good wife always leaves her husband every three months for a week at least, so he can miss her and so learn to appreciate her properly."

"But, Nan — "

"Now, which knows more about husbands, you or me? And here's Master Baby come to see his auntie. Isn't he a beautiful boy, Phoebe, isn't he? And doesn't he sit up strong and straight? Wouldn't you be proud of him if you were me? And not six months old yet," and the proud young mother took him out of his nurse's arms and set him down on Phoebe's table and took off his bonnet and cloak so that his aunt might see at a glance all his good points. And his aunt admired him fully as much as even the most exacting mother could expect, and for a quarter of an hour those two young women indulged in baby worship of the most approved order. It was delightful to Phoebe to have her sister with her again, it was delightful to have the baby, and to hold the soft warm morsel in her arms, and to know in a measure it belonged to her, and she had a right to admire him as much as she pleased. Then Nancy with a sigh sent her boy back to Warrnambool, and set to work to criticise Phoebe's belongings.

"There's room for my bed in your bedroom, isn't there?" she asked, peeping in. "Yes, just. It'll be here before six o'clock. I'm going to make you a present of it, and then you can ask the girls down to stop with you. It'll be good for you and good for them."

"Nan, dear, how good you are!"

"Phoebe, dear, how bare your house is," mimicked her sister.

"It's not manners to criticise when you come to stay with a person. And I am sure," she added, laughing, "you never saw a cleaner house."

## Kirkham's Find

"I never did, that's true," said Nancy. "My servants don't keep things half as spotless. Did you do it all yourself? Let's look at your hands."

Phoebe held them out, laughing. Of old Nancy was wont to say Phoebe never took proper care of her hands, and they were like a cook's.

"H'm, not so bad, after all. You must have been wearing those gloves of Joe's you took away with you, after all. I never thought you would."

"Well, it was rather a struggle," admitted Phoebe, "but I kept it up because I don't want to sink more than I can possibly help and I think a woman looking after the housework, and working in the garden, and planting her own potatoes, and all that sort of thing, is so apt to sink so easily without knowing it, so I thought I'd just take care where I did know. But the gloves were a trial I must admit."

"Good girl," said her sister, standing a little off and surveying her.

"But you know, Phoebe, you don't look half bad, far, far better than you used to do at home. There's a perky look about you as if you knew the place belonged to you."

Phoebe laughed.

"It belongs to Joe, I think. I never could have managed if it hadn't been for him."

"And as it is, do you think you can manage? Really and truly now, Phoebe?"

"Really and truly I believe I can. The bees are doing splendidly. I never saw so much honey in their hives at this season before. I believe I'll have plenty to extract before Christmas, and then, well, I shall have some poultry to sell before then. It all brings grist to the mill."

"It's so little," said Nancy. "It hardly seems worth while to toil for so little."

"It costs me a mere nothing to live, you must remember, so it's all such profit that if I could do it on a grand scale I should make my fortune. If eleven little ducks cost me exactly four and sixpence to rear up to four months old, and I can sell them then at one shilling a piece, that's a good enough profit, isn't it?"

"Is it?" said Nancy, dubiously. "I don't understand these things."

"It's more than one hundred per cent in four months. Oh, I think it must be good enough. I expect on a large scale it wouldn't work out, but it's all right on a small one."

Nancy sighed.

"Why didn't you think of this before? What fun it would have been to set up farming with you. Wouldn't it have been jolly, Phoebe?" and she drew her chair up to the fire and stretched out her hands to the glowing coals, for the evening was closing in and it was growing chilly. "We'd have got on capitally together. What an awful pity I'm married."

Phoebe thought so too, very often, but she knew, too, that Nancy was not made of the stuff that would have gone hopefully through the winter she had gone through, so perhaps things were better ordered as they were.

"You've got baby," she suggested.

## Kirkham's Find

"Yes, thank goodness. I didn't want him, but I don't know what I'd do without him now. Joe's awfully good, you know, but somehow I don't suppose any husband could ever be like your own child."

Her sister said nothing. She disagreed so thoroughly with her sister that she felt the best thing she could do was to hold her tongue. And after all, what did she know about it?

"Do you ever hear from Allan Morrison or Ned Kirkham now?" asked Nancy, after a pause. And Phoebe knew that she, too, had been wondering if her feelings towards a husband would be the same if she had married the man who had won her girlish heart.

"No, never," said Phoebe. "I let it drop for a little, and then, somehow, I never wrote again, though I intended to, and now I don't even intend to, though I'd like to know how they're getting on."

"I used to think you were smitten with Allan Morrison."

"I believe I was," owned Phoebe, with a blush and a heart-whole laugh. "But if I was I've forgotten all about it long ago."

"And if Allan Morrison met you now," mused her sister, "he'd be the one to fall in love, I expect. How is it, Phoebe, that you've grown so much better looking, under such unfavourable circumstances, too?"

"Better looking, am I? I'm sure I'm glad to hear it. Perhaps it's because nobody hints I'm so plain and unattractive generally. It suits some people to be a good lot criticised, but I don't believe it suits me. And then, you know even if it's dull it's comforting to think one's getting on so well."

"It seems to be," said her sister, and relapsed into thought again.

After a while she burst out again.

"I do believe you're right, Phoebe, you never had a fair chance before. We all decided you were the ugly duckling, and shoved you into the position. What's going to become of the other girls? Are they going to marry, like me, or strike out for themselves, like you?"

"Perhaps they'd better marry," said the elder girl, thoughtfully, "if they get a chance. It's pretty lonely living by yourself, and you never know how it may turn out."

"There's a greater uncertainty in matrimony, my dear," said the married woman a thought bitterly, "and if it wasn't for the children — Well, I shall just tell them at home they had better send Lydia and Nellie to you before they let them settle down."

"That's a triumph for me," said Phoebe. "You remember you said — "

"Never mind what I said. It's your looks I go on now. You look as if the world belonged to you, and I know that all your worldly possessions consist of an old hen, a few young ducks, and a lot of horrid old bees."

"It's a good deal for an unmarried woman," laughed Phoebe. "I shouldn't have had that if I'd been a dutiful daughter."

"Well, Phoebe, I'm going to fit you out a little. I shall give you some cretonne to decorate these bare walls with, and a sofa and a couple of easy chairs, and — wouldn't you like some more fowls? Honestly, now."

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, but, Nan — "

"You would, Phoebe, you know you would. You would get all Mrs Johnston's waste milk, and that and a little pollard would fatten them splendidly."

"If I could get a couple of broody hens I'd raise plenty," owned Phoebe.

"Well, we'll get the hens tomorrow."

Nancy spent her week with her sister, and it would be difficult to say which of the two young women enjoyed it most, and before she left she was as good as her word, and provided her sister with the sitting hens she had promised her; not only that, but after she had gone home a bulky parcel arrived for Phoebe, which turned out to be Nancy's sewing machine.

"I want a treadle machine," she wrote, "now I have baby to work for, so you may as well have the old one, and mind you let me see you with decent curtains next time I come down. I'm coming back in November."

And after that life was never again so hard for Phoebe. She was lonely, certainly, but she couldn't feel quite so lonely when she sat in her easy-chair over the fire and looked round the little room which now, although it still needed a carpet, looked cosy and comfortable in the firelight, and which, she reflected, was her very own. The very poultry took away half the sense of loneliness; it was good to think of those hens sitting so steadily on their eggs, of the chickens already hatched and growing fat and ready for the market, and there was always the thought that Nancy would come back in November and be as interested and a great deal more surprised than she herself would be at her progress.

It was a long while to wait, but success would come; of that she was certain now, and that was so great a step gained it coloured all the world rose-colour for Phoebe, and wonderful were the castles she built in the air for the next three months. The summer was coming, the bees were busy, and her poultry-yard was flourishing, and the garden which had been a wilderness was growing as things only do grow in the rich soil round Warrnambool. She had no time to be dull in this busy present when the future was promising her all manner of good things, and the success would be the sweeter that she had won it with her own hands.

## CHAPTER XXII. THE BEGINNING OF A GOLDFIELD

An oath from Salem Hardieker,  
A shriek upon the stairs,  
A dance of shadows on the wall,  
A knife — thrust unawares —  
And Hans came down, as cattle drop,  
Across the broken chairs.

RUDYARD KIPLING.

"Murder will out," they say, but the difficulty of hiding a murder is as nothing to the difficulty of keeping to yourself a rich gold find. The murdered, maybe, has few friends, but is there a single soul in all the broad continent of Australia that is not interested, and keenly interested at that, in a new gold find?

Kirkham and Morrison bore away some of their richest specimens to the former's hut, and there, improvising a pot, they dollied out the little pieces of quartz they had brought along with them, till at the end of a long morning they stood up with aching arms, and with smiling faces surveyed the goodly little pile of gold that lay on an old Argus in the middle of the table. They had no means of calculating its value, but roughly the merest novice could have told that, if all the quartz was as rich as that, a fortune lay there ready to their hand.

## Kirkham's Find

Then they discussed ways and means, and before a month was out were free of the station, settled alongside the outcrop which Morrison still contemptuously referred to as a "buckreef," and were working for their own hand.

But the birds of the air, as Morrison had prophesied, carried the news, and one hot morning as Kirkham sat wearily on a boulder letting his steel shod rod drop regularly into the dollypot between his knees, while Morrison was away refilling their water-bags at the soak, there was a faint whirring in the air, a shadow fell across him, and, looking up in surprise, for shadows come seldom or never in that land, he beheld a vision that made him rub his eyes in bewilderment, for there close beside him was a young fellow covered from head to heel in red dust just dismounting from a bicycle also smothered in the same red dust.

"By all that's holy!" he gasped, for, little as he expected to see a man in such a God-forsaken place, still less did he expect to see such a product of civilisation as a bicycle.

"Well, matey," said the stranger, calmly, "how goes it? A pretty good average, eh?"

But Kirkham was too dumbfounded for the moment to do more than stammer out —

"How the devil did you get here?"

"On the bike, to be sure. You can bet your sweet life the bike's going to be the coming beast of burden on these goldfields. You can get along on him, and he don't want feed or water."

"But — but — what brought you?" asked Kirkham, lamely, thinking of Morrison's desire that they should keep this to themselves.

"You, mate — and your chum. You don't suppose a man can go about Geraldton mysteriously buying up stores and provisions and then cutting away back and not saying nothing to nobody these times without attracting attention. Most of them have made towards Cue's Find at Lake Austin, but I reckoned they'd be rather thick on the ground, and I remembered you and just followed up your tracks on the bike, and a mighty rough track I've had of it," and he sat down and passed his grimy hand over his still grimier face.

"But what have they gone to Lake Austin for?" asked Kirkham, still in the dark.

"Gold, man — same old job. You don't suppose you're the only person in the colony has found gold, do you? Why, Tom Cue — do you know Tom Cue? — great strapping Irishman — he found gold on Lake Austin, and he's got the bounty. I heard it just the day after I lost sight of you, and so when there was talk of a rush I thought I must just as well make it my business to see what you were after, and here I am."

Here he was, and here he meant to stay, evidently. After all, the land was free to all, and this was what Morrison had warned him would happen sooner or later. They had to make the best of it. But Allan himself was not pleased when he saw the stranger; however, there was no help for it; they must just peg out their claim and let him pick one for himself. Well enough they knew that he too would keep the secret just as long as he could, for, supposing the first claims turned out to be duffers, how could these first-comers pick another if the place was overrun with eager, anxious diggers?

But it came to that. Long before Morrison and Kirkham had realised anything on their claim diggers came trooping in and settled themselves down at irregular intervals between Kirkham's Find and the soak, and roamed the country round, trying every likely looking rock with their napping hammers. The soak showed signs of giving out, and an enterprising gentleman from Geraldton settled down with a condenser by a shallow salt lake about two miles to the eastward and dispensed fresh water to the camp at the rate of a shilling a gallon, finding it more lucrative than any gold mine. A hotel calling itself the "Kirkham Grand Hotel" arose right in the middle of the

## Kirkham's Find

clay-pan, where in the hot sunshine the false gondolas used to be seen floating calmly on the waters of the make-believe lake; and, if the only bedroom had for a roof the clear sky and for a floor the bare earth, still the whisky was fiery and the brandy had a bite in it that was much approved of, and the proprietor, too, was in a fair way to make his fortune. Grimy men smothered in red dust, who had not washed for a fortnight, walked the roughly marked out streets, and day by day round every corrugated iron hut and ragged tent grew the untidy, unsightly heaps that go to make the refuse of a mining camp. Empty preserved meat tins perhaps predominated, but there was a very fair sprinkling of kerosene tins that had seen better days and been worn out as buckets, and a goodly array of old boots, while as for the bones — scanty as was the meat supply — Kirkham, who was new to the beginnings of a diggings township, wondered daily at those increasing heaps of bones.

But it was a rich find, not a poor man's diggings by any means, for provisions were ruinous in prices, and the gold was all imbedded in quartz so hard as to require powerful machinery to crush it and separate it.

All around the first-comer's ground was being pegged out, and the owners thereof found plenty to encourage them to go on, or rich enough specimens to warrant their trying to float their mine in the eastern or the English markets.

That was what Morrison and Kirkham decided they must do with their mine. It was rich, no doubt; they had got right on the reef, and it was very rich; every time they came on it the gold showed thickly, but it was so hard as to be unworkable without more machinery than they could afford. They had been lucky in the nuggets they picked out at first, but to go any further without more money seemed impossible. And more money they had not got, but with so much gold in sight it ought to be easy enough to raise it.

They sat there at the table in their rude little hut, and the bright full moon outside in the clear sky softened down the crude ugliness of the camp; from the Grand Hotel a little way off came the sound of singing, and a little nearer at hand the sound of voices talking softly in a foreign tongue, and now and then a discontented grunt from the camels camped alongside their Afghan drivers just at the back of the hut. They were well enough accustomed by now to the sight of a camel train with its old-world guardians; they suited this desert land. No horse could live here without being fed, and who but a millionaire could afford to feed horses with chaff at a shilling a pound?

"It's a beastly hole," said Kirkham, with a sigh. "I wish I'd never left Victoria."

"The gold, man, the gold! Look at the yellow boys," and Morrison turned over the specimens on the table before him.

"Gold, yes, but what's the good of it to us when it keeps us sweating here in the midst of filth and stench and heat and every other abomination?"

"A little patience, Ned — a little more patience, and you'll see. All the same, we can't do any more without machinery."

"And machinery we haven't got, and not a red cent to buy it with all our rich gold find," said Kirkham, bitterly.

"A mine like this is as good as money any day, though," said Morrison, with confidence. "Jenkins over at the pub there was talking to me only this morning. The people in the eastern colonies are mad about the mines here, and he'd have no difficulty in putting a good mine like ours on the Melbourne market. That would soon raise money enough for all the machinery we want."

"And where do we come in?" asked Kirkham.

## Kirkham's Find

"We'll keep a fourth or a sixth share for ourselves, of course. And if this reef is only as rich as it promises to be, that'll more than make millionaires of us both. What do you say, old man? There's nothing else for it, I'm thinking."

Kirkham got up and moved uneasily towards the door. It was phantom gold they had found after all. There was the rich reef mocking them with its promise of fabulous wealth, and yet day by day with aching arms and weary backs they only managed to dolly out sufficient gold from the hard quartz to buy their daily tucker, the flour and tea and sugar and hard tough mutton or unsavoury tinned meat that went to make up the fare of the average digger at "Sunset," as the township had come to be called.

There were some bloated millionaires in camp who could afford such luxuries such as sardines and salmon at seven shillings a tin, but they had struck it rich on a patch of alluvial half a mile to the eastward of Kirkham's Find, and the only patch of alluvial on the diggings. As a rule it seemed the great majority were in the same predicament as the first finders. There was plenty of gold apparently, but provisions were so high and the quartz so hard that they were only able to get sufficient to carry on day by day till some syndicate from the eastern colonies or from Europe should provide the money wherewith to work the claims.

"It's the hardest earned money I ever got," said Kirkham, thoughtfully, looking up at the velvety sky spangled with golden stars. "If I could only raise enough to buy a camel I'd go out prospecting for more alluvial. That's the stuff to pay."

"Go on a bike, man," suggested Allan Morrison, who was busy cleaning out the wheel socket that did duty for a dollypot; "go on a bike. But then you wouldn't know good alluvial when you saw it."

"And I couldn't manage a bike," sighed Kirkham. "It's all very well on the beaten tracks, but it must be pretty well impossible once you get into rough country. These fellows only ride them where they know the country's pretty easy going. I've a good mind to chuck the whole thing and go back to Victoria and go in for the dairying business. I see creameries and butter factories are the latest things over there. Makes one's mouth water to think of it, doesn't it?"

"It's your turn for bread and milk tomorrow, old man," laughed his cousin. "I see you're hankering after the flesh pots."

"Condensed milk and the heels of the dampers," grumbled Kirkham. "I've got to loathe this place. Hark to the row they're kicking up at the pub over there."

"Jenkins has imported a fourth-hand billiard table," said Morrison, "that's the attraction. Oh yes, and they're raffling a camel too."

"I heard," said Kirkham, "that Disney was going to raffle 'Larl.' She's a rare good camel, only a pound a member; I'd go in for her myself if I hadn't always such beastly bad luck, that if I did win her she'd probably die on my hands."

Morrison laughed.

"You are down on your luck, old man. There's many a man would be glad to stand in your shoes, with half a rich gold mine at his disposal. Come on, old chap, suppose we take a ticket or two. We aren't so stony yet that we can't afford a little recreation."

"I don't feel up to that stinking, reeking bar tonight," objected Kirkham.

## Kirkham's Find

"Come on, old man," said Morrison, "any distraction will be good for you. We can't afford to have the senior partner getting morbid in this way. Let's look at the funds," and he drew a chamois leather bag out of his breeches pocket, and peered in it at the gold-dust it contained.

"Yes, it'll run it," he said; "good solid gold dust, worth £3 15s an ounce if it's worth a penny. The Union Bank opens a branch tomorrow, and then I expect we'll get a fairer price for our gold."

He put the bag into his pocket, and then putting his hand on his cousin's shoulder, fairly forced him along in the direction of the Kirkham Grand Hotel.

Half the Kirkham Grand was of canvas, and being fairly well lighted with kerosene lamps, the shadows on the walls from outside showed a surging, tossing mass of heads distorted into all imaginable shapes, with here and there an arm above the mass frantically waving, as if to call attention to its owner's wants, while just at the edge of the tent, a shadow much higher than the rest showed that some one was raised up on a box or table high above the others.

"That's that little beast, Herman," said Kirkham. "I know the curly brim of his hat."

"He's running the raffle, I expect? Then we're sure of two things. One is that Isaac Herman will not lose by the transaction, and the other is that there'll be an almighty big row before it's all over."

They were in the crowd at the door now elbowing their way in, through a motley crew made up of specimens, it seemed, from every nation under the sun, wedged tightly together, one reeking mass of odoriferous humanity. The kerosene lamps were fixed for safety against the corrugated iron wall that separated the bar from the rest of the house and threw a yellow smoky light over the scene, and between them hung a large placard, fly-stained and dirty, bearing this legend in big black letters: —

"To Trust is to Bust, To Bust is Hell. No Trust, no Bust, No Bust, No Hell. Our only Trust is in God, Everybody else MUST PAY CASH."

This was Jenkins' creed and he abided by it, and was popularly supposed to be making his pile in consequence. Tonight the bar counter had been pushed into one corner to give plenty of space, and as it was hardly high enough, two brandy cases were placed on one end of it, and on them, high above the swaying crowd, was perched the little Jew whom Allan Morrison had objected to. In one hand he held a long strip of paper which he waved round his head while he emphasised his remarks by dabbing in the air with a long pencil, and his tongue never ceased for a single moment.

"Now, gentlemen, gentlemen," he kept saying, with a decided Hebraic twang in his voice, "make room there, gentlemen. Fair play's a jewel, and there's gentlemen at the back wanting to come in. Make room, make room. Them as has recorded their names might pass out. Careful record will be kept. The drawing will come off just as soon as ever the hundred members are filled in, and the winner will be notified at once. There's no necessity, gentlemen, for you to crowd here. Drinks will be handed through the kitchen window to all who pay first. And we want room here for those who can't get in. Will you move, gentlemen? I have your names here," and he mopped his moist forehead with the list; "on my honour, I have."

Somehow this didn't seem quite to reassure the company as it ought to have done. There were one or two laughs that were the reverse of complimentary. The men good-humouredly crowded themselves a little closer together, but though many tried to get in, no one made the least effort to get out, and the heat and the reek grew more unbearable. It was a hot night outside; inside, as Allan Morrison remarked to his cousin, the usual sheet of brown paper that separated the Kirkham Grand from the infernal regions had been removed for the evening. There was nothing picturesque about the crowd, as a rule there is nothing picturesque about the ordinary digger, and these all



## Kirkham's Find

were clad alike, in grimy flannel shirts and still grimier moleskin breeches, the only difference being that the dust which coated every man impartially was sometimes red, sometimes white, and sometimes yellow, just according to the nature of the ground in which he was working; if he was not working at all he was likely to be red, for that colour decidedly predominated in the unmade streets of Sunset, and no man there was such a millionaire as to be able to indulge in a good square wash more than once a fortnight.

"It's lucky," murmured Morrison, as they moved slowly through the crowd towards the bar counter and the little Jew, "that mirrors are scarce in this part of the world. Some of us, I reckon, would receive a shock if we could see ourselves."

"To say nothing of the girl we left behind us," laughed the man next him, whom popular opinion regarded as the son of an earl, but who was known on the camp as Long-legged Larry. "Look at the Afghans over there. 'Pon my word, they look so eminently respectable it makes me feel a blackguard to be in the same room with them."

"Look at the Chinamen over there then," suggested Morrison, "that'll restore your self-respect. They're ten times dirtier and more dilapidated than we are."

"But the carrying trade's the thing," grumbled the scion of the noble house. "Look at those Afghan chaps, neat and clean, not to say picturesque-looking, they put all us fellows to shame. They make a pot of money out of the carrying trade."

"Are you thinking of going in for it?" asked Morrison. "Now's your chance. Larl's a very good camel, and the only thing bad about her is her owner. A pound's worth of gold-dust will give you a chance."

"My dear chap, why don't you ask me for a chunk of ice from the top of the South Pole, or some little trifle of that sort? Gold? Bless you, I'm stony. I owe two weeks' tucker at the store, and next week, as far as I can see, my necessities will compel me to part with my only spare pair of breeches to keep going."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," cried the little Jew again, "make room there, make room there — only five tickets now left. Will any gentleman take the lot and so get a twentieth chance in this magnificent camel, the very best between here and Coolgardie. Ask my friend, Faiz Mahommed, there, if what I say is not true. He hasn't one like it among his lot. Have you, now?"

The Afghan, whom Larry had cited as being so superior to the rest of the company, smiled faintly, and the Jew went on: "Only five more tickets, gentlemen; only five more and the camel will be drawn for. Such a chance was never before offered to the gentlemen on this camp. The best camel in Western Australia for one pound. Only five more tickets. Come, gentlemen, let's get the drawing over before midnight."

"The old cheat," whispered Larry, "I've counted one hundred and twenty names, if I've counted one."

"I'll have a go in," said Morrison. "Shall we go shares, Ned, old man, as usual?"

Kirkham nodded, and Allan Morrison elbowed his way up to the counter, and the Jew carefully weighed out a pound's worth of gold dust and wrote his name on the long list.

"And that's about all the satisfaction we'll get out of it," suggested Kirkham, as he made his way back to his side, while the Jew went on shouting, exhorting people to come forward and take the four last tickets.

At last he announced his list full, and added: "The drawing will now take place. Gentlemen, you may now order drinks; they will be handed you through the kitchen window, while I tear up the paper."

## Kirkham's Find

"Read us out the names first," suggested Long-legged Larry, leaning back against the corrugated iron partition and pushing his hands deeply into the pockets of his last pair of breeches. "It doesn't matter to me the wink of an eye," he said to Kirkham; "but this thing is beastly dull, and that's bound to make things lively."

"Yes, read 'em out; read 'em out," came from several parts of the room, and as the Jew did not at once comply, the tones became more threatening.

"Will you read them out?"

"It'll end in a free fight if there's anything wrong," suggested Kirkham.

"All right," said the Irishman, "anything to break the monotony. I'm just spoiling for a fight."

"Gentlemen," said the man on the brandy boxes, "you see these two pannikins?" Jenkins, the proprietor of the hotel, jumped on the counter and waved two tin pannikins over his head. "I will now fold up ninety-nine strips of blank paper into little squares, and one piece of paper on which is written, 'Prize,' and put them into one pannikin, and into the other I will put your names, all folded up, and two of you gentlemen will be appointed to draw them out -- first out of the pannikin with the prize, and then out of the one with the names. Could anything be fairer than that?"

"Read us out the names," growled a man struggling to get inside the doorway.

"Very well, gentlemen, very well; anything to oblige." For the growling of the crowd began to be threatening, and he began to read slowly: "Ludlow Manners, Snapping Pete -- "

"That may be on his list now," interrupted Long-legged Larry, "but it wasn't when last I looked at it. It was headed Lawrence Herman and James Jenkins. I don't think either Herman or Jenkins ought to be in it."

"You're not in it yourself," said the Jew, angrily. "What right have you to interrupt? The other gentlemen are satisfied."

"Oh, are they?" said a strapping young fellow, springing on to the counter. "Just you hand over that list, Moses, and we'll manage this little affair ourselves."

But the Jew, very unwisely, if all was right, jumped to his feet and put the paper list behind him, calling wildly on the people around to protect him from violence.

Most of the men present laughed, and his assailant good-humouredly took him by the collar of his shirt and shook him much as a friendly big dog shakes the yapping toy terrier that has been snapping at his heels, just to warn him that he had better mend his ways.

But the Jew did not look at it in that light. He protested vehemently, his voice rising to a scream; he gesticulated and clawed with his long, lean hands at his captor's arms, he implored wildly, incoherently the onlookers to see fair play. But the onlookers were only amused, and one suggested cheerfully --

"Hand along the list, now, sonny," and reaching up a brawny fist would have taken it from its owner.

But Herman was too quick for him. Whether there really was anything wrong with the list, or whether he was only angry at being interfered with and determined to be revenged, it was impossible to say; but with one determined effort he wrenched himself from his assailant's grasp, and before any one thoroughly understood what he was going to do, he was holding the light paper over the chimney of the kerosene lamp. It caught in a moment,

## Kirkham's Find

and, regardless of consequences, the little man waved it like a blazing banner over his head.

His triumph was momentary though. With one howl of rage the crowd as one man realised that the only record of the money, or money's equivalent, a hundred or more of them had paid over to Herman was gone. Some one behind cried out that it was a put up job, and the next minute the counter was rushed by those nearest. Down came the brandy boxes that had served as a rostrum, and the Jew was the centre of a swaying crowd, each man of which was bent upon applying his fist to the unlucky man's nose.

Jenkins, the gentleman who owned the establishment, put his head through the opening that had been referred to as the kitchen window whence drinks would be handed, and called out —

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, it'll be all right. Gentlemen, take things coolly," and then, as the swaying mass on the counter came close against the wall, a new danger struck him, and he cried earnestly. "Take care of the lamps."

He might as well have spoken to the wind. The men on the outside pushed hard in an endeavour to get at the object of their wrath; those inside pushed out because it was getting a little too hot to be pleasant, and the next sway of the mass brought them right up against the corrugated iron wall, and down came the two lamps on top of them. Then was confusion worse confounded. There was not, luckily, much oil in the lamps, but what there was was in flames and was distributed impartially over the people round. The crowd lost its head, if it had ever possessed one, and with one accord made for the door. Wedged together as they were, they soon put out their burning clothes. But it was dark now and the men were no longer good-humoured. They were a little afraid they might not be safe from fire; many were smarting from burns, and every one now being bruised and trampled by his neighbour. Some shouted to go this way, some that, and all swore loud and deep.

"I say, old man," said Allan Morrison, "the sooner we're out of this the better."

But it was all very well to wish to get out; to do it was quite another thing, with a mass of surging humanity pressing round on every side, kicking, fighting, swearing, every man for himself, knowing little, caring less, how he hurt his neighbour. There was a sharp scream as some Chinaman went down underfoot, and then a howl of terror and rage.

"Look out, boys; the Chinks are using knives!"

The oaths that went up from the crowd now had a ring of fear in them, for no man likes to be stabbed in the dark. Morrison and Kirkham stood together, and the Irishman kept close to them, though there was not a very jubilant ring in his voice as he suggested —

"Let's make for the side of the tent, boys, and cut our way out. It's our only chance. The man who's down'll be trampled to death."

It was easier said than done. The crowd could not make up its mind for more than a second at a time which way it wanted to move; first it pushed one way and then another, and curses rose loud and deep in the air. However, Kirkham and Morrison kept together, the Irishman backed them up on one side, and some one else whose voice Morrison recognized as that of Faiz Mohammed, the Afghan, appeared on the other, and the four managed to stand their ground and gradually approached the side of the tent. They felt the canvas bulge out with their weight before any one of them could get space enough to use his knife. Some one was down, struggling for dear life behind them, and Kirkham cried out that he was stabbed as he felt a sharp pain in his leg. Then above the oaths of the crowd they heard the sound of tramping feet outside, and the sound of the inspector's voice demanding entrance in the Queen's name.

The Irishman, who was leaning against the wall, did that inspector's eyes cheerfully.

## Kirkham's Find

"It's out we're fighting to get ourselves!" he shouted. "There isn't room for so much as a half-grown flea more in here. Can't you cut the canvas, you fool, and be d -- d to you?"

His not very polite hint was taken. A long slit was promptly cut in the wall of Mr Jenkins's Grand Hotel. Larry was the first man who tumbled through it, right into the arms of the police, who promptly arrested him for creating a disturbance in a public place, and then the rest of the crowd came tumbling through so fast that to arrest one would have entailed arresting of the lot. They were quiet enough as the fresh air struck their faces, and the main object of every one was to get away as quietly as possible. There had been a row certainly, but each man was sure he was more sinned against than sinning. The real culprits were Jenkins and the little Jew. Morrison and Kirkham fell out somehow, and it seemed to Kirkham that the majority of the crowd fell over him. Then at last his cousin dragged him on one side, and the two sat down ruefully to inspect damages.

"I've lost a lot of blood," said Kirkham, faintly; "my trousers are soaked and my boot's full."

"Well, you are an unlucky beggar," said Morrison. "Hold on, and I'll get the little doctor to look at you."

"I'll go back to Victoria just as soon as ever I'm equal to it," sighed Kirkham, and tumbled off the stone insensible, just as an Irish policeman came along and arrested the pair "for being concerned in the disturbance at the Grand Hotel."

## CHAPTER XXIII. FIVE YEARS AFTER

A land of hops and poppy-mingled corn,  
Little about it stirring save a brook!  
A sleepy land --

TENNYSON.

"Phoebe!"

"Well?"

"I want to speak to you."

"Well, then, Lydia, you must come in here. You know well enough I'm busy. I must introduce those three new Queensland queens tonight, and I want to set those two clucking hens. Mrs Allan has sent me some pure-bred Pekin duck eggs."

"Phoebe, you're always fussing over something or other."

"Oh, Lyd, dear, could I have got on if I hadn't? When I came here four years ago you wouldn't believe what a desolate, miserable sort of place this little house was, and now look at it."

It was a moonlight night in August, soft and warm for the season of the year, which is generally blustery down on the south coast, but tonight the moon was at the full, and just the softest of warm north winds stirred the air. The two young women stood in the garden looking up at the creeper-covered little cottage, and the scent of violets and wallflowers and jonquils and daffodils came wafted to their nostrils. The cheerful firelight flickered on the curtained windows, and through the open doorway showed the cosy little room which now was more sitting-room than kitchen. It looked like a home, and a comfortable home too.

Phoebe looked at it quietly and proudly. The ivy geranium that covered all the walls was just coming into bloom

## Kirkham's Find

— in November it would be one glory of pink and red blossom — and the banksia rose that climbed over the arched porch at the door was putting out a bud here and there. This was her home, and she had made it herself. She was a proud and happy woman, and the younger sister, with a rush-woven basket of eggs on her arm, seemed to divine her thoughts.

"Phoebe, you're very proud of your home."

"Well, now, Lydia, wouldn't you be if you were me? If you only knew what a place this was when first I came here, and you know what it was like when first you saw it, and it had greatly improved in a year's time."

"Nan used to come out and see us and say it was an awful hole, and she didn't know how you managed to put up with it, and then at other times she used to wish she wasn't married so she could join you."

"Poor Nan!" sighed Phoebe; "I never could have done it if it hadn't been for her and Joe. They were good to me."

"It's 'Poor Joe!' I think," laughed the younger girl. "Nan's so sweet and good-tempered and charming, and yet she always manages to lead her poor husband such an awful life. They're not a bit suited to each other, you know. I don't believe they've got an idea in common."

"They're both awfully fond of the children," said Phoebe, with a sigh. After five years Nancy's unsatisfactory marriage still continued to trouble her.

"Joe ought to have married you," said Lydia, thoughtfully. "We used to say so when we were children, and I think so still."

"Oh, no," said Phoebe; "I'm very fond of Joe, and I do appreciate his good qualities. Really I don't believe I've ever been such great friends with any man, but I wouldn't have liked to marry him. You ought to be in love with a man to marry him. But Joe's been very good to me. I don't know what I would have done without him."

"He says it's because you're a clever woman you've succeeded."

"He lent me £50. Clever or not, I couldn't have done anything without that."

"How did you do it, Phoebe?"

"Not by wasting my time as we are doing now. Come along and set this hen. I put a box in the cow byre for her this morning."

"When did you first begin to succeed, Phoebe?" asked her sister, as they put the hen on her eggs in a box and covered her over with a sack. "Didn't you ever feel as if it was hopeless?"

"Oh, often. The first three months I was so lonely and wretched and poor I'd have given up any day if anything else had offered, but there was nothing else, you know, unless I'd gone home, and I couldn't do that."

"You'd have been the family drudge," said Lydia. "I always think we were a bit hard on you."

"Poor mother," sighed Phoebe. "It seemed such a shame to leave her."

"It was the right thing," said her younger sister, emphatically. "Look at you now. How many fowls do you sell a week?"

## Kirkham's Find

"Ten pairs," said Phoebe. "You see, I sell regularly to all the principal hotels in the town. I remember the first pair of ducks I sold to the Western Hotel. I thought my fortune was made, and then I had a fit of the worst sort of blues when I thought I'd never, never be able to keep up a regular supply. But I found it wasn't so hard, after all. The great thing is to look after your fowls yourself. And the creamery coming so close was a godsend to me. Skim milk at twopence for ten gallons, and what could you have better than milk and potatoes to fatten fowls on? And I only pay sixpence a week to the man for fetching it here. It's all in his way, you see."

"And the bees?" said Lydia.

"Oh, the bees are my mainstay, of course. It was my first great success when I discovered, after I had struggled on for seven weary months, that I had thirty-two hives to start next season with, and yet the season was so good I took 810 lbs of honey. I sold it at 4d a pound then, I remember, and made £11 clear out of it. That did cheer me up; I knew I should get on then. I couldn't get that for it now."

"But then you have so many more hives?"

Phoebe laughed happily.

"I've got about ninety now, and if I only get twopence a pound for my honey that means about £25. Really, Lydia, I was adding up my accounts the other day, and what with bees and poultry and milk and eggs, I make about £80 a year. I'm going to pay off the last instalment of my debt to Joe next month, and then I shall be quite clear."

"And you only had an acre of land to start with?"

"That didn't last long. As soon as the creamery started I rented the ten-acre paddock from Mr Mackenzie and went in for a cow, and many anxious nights I spent wondering if I'd ever be able to make the rent. I'm sure there ought to be grey hairs and wrinkles on my face."

"There aren't, then. You look remarkably well and good-looking. But, Phoebe, you are a good-looking woman, you know; no one would ever take you for thirty. Do you always intend to live like a nun, or do you ever intend to get married?"

Phoebe blushed in the moonlight. The hens were set now, and Lydia was holding the smoker while her sister introduced the new queens.

"Marry? I'm not in the least likely to marry. I must be a regular country bumpkin by now, and I'm thirty."

"Well," said Lydia, wonderingly, as Nancy had done four years ago,

"I don't know how it is, but you really are good-looking, and I used to think you were ugly when I was a little girl. Wouldn't you like to be married?"

"There, now that's done we can spend the rest of our evening with quiet minds over your new frock. Lydia, dear, when I started out on my own account I decided I'd try and not think of the nice things that were entirely out of my reach, only work for those I could get, and be as glad as possible when I got them. It's a little hard at first, but on the whole it has answered."

"It's made you good-looking," said the younger girl, thoughtfully.

"Thank you. Come along in now, like a good girl. What was it you wanted to tell me when you came out?"

## Kirkham's Find

"Only," hesitated Lydia, and Phoebe noticed with surprise a hot blush creep up her sister's face, "only — that poor Mrs Simpson is ill again, and I promised, if you didn't mind, to drive her milk to the factory for her tomorrow."

"Why can't her little boy do it for her?" asked Phoebe.

"Poor little chap, you know he's hurt his knee and the doctor won't let him get up, and the only person to look after both of them is little Polly, who isn't ten years old yet."

"You seem to know a good deal about the Simpsons," said Phoebe, suspiciously. "I've been here over four years, and I know less about them than you do in as many weeks."

"Well, of course," hesitated Lydia, "you've always been so busy about your own affairs you haven't had time to think about your neighbours'."

"Neither will you if you want to get on. Lydia, dear, I'm sorry, but if you join me it means hard work. You see, we must always keep ahead of our expenditure and have something to put by, because we don't want to be as poor as this all our lives."

"There's plenty of time."

"Yes, for you, and I do hope you'll have good times yet; but it won't do, Lydia, to mix ourselves up and be too intimate with the people about."

"Phoebe" — Lydia was on the verge of tears, her sister saw with surprise — "you're as bad as mother. I was sure you'd think all that sort of thing rot. I'm sure you've said often enough that it is all foolishness, and that you didn't want to be any better than other women who sold honey and fowls. You used to say you just hated the word 'lady.'"

Phoebe's chickens were coming home to roost, and she didn't half like it. It was all very well for her to preach democratic doctrines; she didn't quite like to see her young sister putting them into practice. She was sure of herself, but would a young girl like Lydia know where to draw the line?

"I wouldn't like you to get too intimate with the women round," she said, anxiously. "I know all their good qualities, but, Lydia, you must see for yourself there's a lack of refinement — of — of — . If you want to be a lady" — Phoebe was as severe as her mother "you must not be too intimate with the people about."

"It couldn't do any harm to drive poor Mrs Simpson's milk to the factory," said Lydia, a trifle sullenly. "Besides, I promised."

"Promised!" echoed her sister in surprise. "When did you promise? Who on earth did you promise?"

Lydia looked down in confusion and fingered the corner of her apron irresolutely.

"I promised Jack Fletcher," she blurted out at last defiantly.

"Jack Fletcher!" Oh, this was dreadful!

"Come inside, Lydia," said Phoebe quietly, "and we can talk it over."

Lydia laid down her basket on the table, and, drawing a chair up to the table, opened her workbox and began to sew furiously.

## Kirkham's Find

"Really, Phoebe," she said, as she watched her sister pick up the basket she had thrown down and hang it up against the wall, "it's a great fuss all about nothing. I met Mr Fletcher at the store this afternoon, and he was speaking about his sister, saying how unlucky it was she was so badly off and so delicate, and he didn't know how she would get her milk to the factory tomorrow, so of course I said it wouldn't be a bit of trouble for me to drive it there. I knew you'd done it several times, so I didn't think you'd mind me doing it. Where is the difference?"

"Why can't Mr Fletcher drive his own sister's milk to the factory?" asked Phoebe, not unnaturally.

"Oh, Phoebe," said Lydia, eagerly, "so he would. He was coming over himself to do it, but it's dreadfully out of his way, and they're all so busy ploughing on the farm."

"You seem to know a great deal about Mr Fletcher. I didn't even know you knew him."

"I have seen him at the store," said Lydia, uneasily. Phoebe made a mental note that she would order her own stores for the future. "And I told you how kind he was the day I met the mob of wild cattle and was frightened to death."

"And so you promised to look after his sister for him?"

"Yes," said Lydia, defiantly.

And that evening Lydia's dress was finished in silence.

Next morning the day broke bright and sunny, but Lydia did not take Mrs Simpson's milk to the factory. Phoebe hurried through her work, and telling her sister she would do it herself, as she felt responsible to their mother for her good behaviour, and she was quite sure that mother would not be pleased if she heard of her driving milk cans to the factory, she went down to the sick woman's, harnessed up her tumbledown cart, and set off.

It was a bright, warm morning, and the glowing sunshine was rich in its promise of summer. The luscious grass was knee-deep in the paddocks, the little nameless birds of the bush were twittering in every shrub, the jackasses were making merry in the trees, and the bold black and white magpies were undisturbedly hunting for worms in the moist earth close by the road as she passed. But she did not see the glories of the spring this morning. She could not help thinking of the disappointment on Lydia's face when she told her to make the butter and feed the sitting hens, and that she -- Phoebe -- would see about Mrs Simpson's milk. The disappointment was so out of all proportion. It couldn't be any pleasure to drive this tumble-down old cart, even though the morning was perfect. What could it be? And then Lydia's face and voice as she said "Jack Fletcher" came up uneasily before her mind's eye. Why should Lydia blush and stammer when she mentioned one of the farmers of the district, and why, oh why, should she call him by his Christian name in a way that seemed to intimate a great degree of familiarity between them -- between Lydia and a working farmer, a man whom she had always put upon the same level as her first friend, Wilson, who had carted out all her scanty belongings four years ago, and had been her friend ever since, faithfully fetching and carrying for her and taking her fowls regularly into town once a week in his empty cart. But she never spoke of him as "Ned Wilson" in the tone that Lydia had used. This Fletcher, this farmer man, ought to be to Lydia just as the man she bought stores from -- to be intimate with him, to call him Jack Fletcher when she spoke of him, what could she be thinking of? She had thought this sister so very different from Nancy, she had thought she would not hanker after men and men's society, but would be content with the dull, monotonous round that made up her own life, brightened by the thought that some day they would have a little money and be quite independent. She had thought Lydia more like herself; she would never have dared ask her to share her life if she had not. Nancy had been bad enough, but there had always been a man of some sort dangling after her, but they had been men of her own rank in life, even if they had been most ineligible; never a man like this farmer, the brother of the woman who lived down the road, a dirty slattern, with a house like a pigsty. She did not know this Fletcher man very well herself, but his slatternly relations were enough to stamp him.



## Kirkham's Find

"I would not," thought Phoebe indignantly to herself, "have that Mrs Simpson into my house even as a charwoman."

And it was this woman's brother that Lydia had blushed and bridled about, as if she had found him very charming. Lydia, plain Lydia, whom she had thought so like herself there was no chance of her marrying, and so she had brought her here to save her from a dreary life that led to nothing, and here she was "carrying on" with one of the farmers round. And what was she to say to her mother if anything came of it? This was not a satisfactory question, and seeking for an answer only made her feel helpless and angry, and she whipped up the old grey horse into a trot and turned the corner sharply towards the factory, and then saw that another cart full of milk cans was being driven in her direction by a young man somewhat more smartly got up than the generality of those who came to the factory at this hour of the morning. She saw a black slouch hat waved evidently to her, and then caught a glimpse of a large sky-blue necktie and an early red carnation in the button-hole of his tweed coat, before she realised that this was the man who was troubling her, this was Jack Fletcher.

And when he came up and saw her face under the sun bonnet instead of the one he had evidently expected, it was most certain that he was disappointed.

"It's very good of you, Miss Marsden," he said, clumsily, and Phoebe said to herself crossly "State School twang," "to bring my poor sister's milk. I drove up to see if I can help you."

"No, thank you," said Phoebe, coldly. "I'll just get my cans emptied and drive home; I'm busy this morning."

"Get into line, then," he said. "They're very slow this morning. There's a new manager, and he's short handed."

There was a goodly array round the factory of carts, buggies, and all manner of vehicles that could by any possibility be made to hold a shining milk can, and such a motley crew of drivers — men, mostly old men past other work, women and children — all chattering good-naturedly together as they waited their turn. Butter was up a penny a pound, there had been plenty of rain, the season promised well, and the bright sunshine added to this put every one, even the tiny children, that their mothers had brought because they were too small to be left behind, in good spirits. Here all the news of the district was retailed, here all the gossip, and here, too, all the courting was done. At least the gossips considered the courtship had advanced a great stage when the young man brought his milk and met the young woman who brought hers early in the morning. As a rule men had other and more important duties than driving the milk to the factory, and Phoebe's heart sank as she noted the significance of the sign.

She waited in silence amidst all the cheerful bustle and chatter, trying to work out what would be the end of it all, and then an old Irishwoman in a little cart beside her lent over and caught hold of the skirt of her sunbonnet.

"Ah, begorra, but it's a spoil sport ye are, Miss Marsden! And him coming away from his ploughing at this time in the mornin', all for the sake of a glimpse of her purty face."

That did not make Phoebe feel any more sweet tempered, and it is to be feared she would not have answered quite amiably had she been called upon to answer at all, but luckily a small girl child, who had evidently been sent to the factory with the family milk, drawn in a small go-cart by a weed of a pony, seeing the Irish lady occupied in conversation, took the opportunity to make a sudden dash and get ahead of her in the line. But however much Mrs O'Grady might like a gossip, she was not going to be done out of her just turn.

"An' me wid all the childer waitin' for me at home," said she. "Out 'av the way, ye little snipe," and she bent down from her place of vantage in her own cart and lifted the small girl out of hers by the back of her dress, setting her down, screaming at the top of her voice, on the other side of the line from her own vehicle; then she proceeded to edge that cart out, and triumphantly took her own place again, while the ousted girl, sniffing and vowing

## Kirkham's Find

vengeance between her sobs, had to go back to the end of the line.

Mrs O'Grady was so triumphant she forgot to renew the conversation, and Phoebe was left in peace, till ten minutes later she found herself slowly driving the old white horse underneath the platform, whence hung a chain and hook to hitch her cans on to. She was still troubled and anxious about Lydia, and she bungled somewhat with the chain. Then the voice above startled her. It was a familiar voice with a note of refinement in it she had not heard for some time, an English voice that told of public school and college training, but it spoke very impatiently for all that.

"Now then, now then," it said, "my girl, what are you thinking of? I can't possibly haul them up hitched on that way; it'll never hold. Make haste, now, we're late as it is this morning."

She didn't make haste. In her surprise she dropped the hook and stood upright in her cart, her face turned up towards the hole in the floor, whence came that familiar voice. Surely she had heard it often enough in the old days at home. She looked up, and a pair of familiar dark eyes, and a very unfamiliar beard, met her gaze. Who could it be?

"Now then, do look alive. Do you think I can stop here all day," went on the man above impatiently, and then suddenly his tone changed, "Why, good Lord, surely it can't be."

"Ned Kirkham!" cried Phoebe. "Impossible!"

## CHAPTER XXIV. A NEW PHOEBE

At length I saw a lady within call  
Still than chisell'd marble, standing there;  
A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,  
And most divinely fair.

TENNYSON.

Ned looked down from his vantage point and saw a face, a handsome face he called it, framed in a pink sunbonnet, dark eyes set rather deeply in the head, dark hair growing low down on the forehead, cheeks glowing with health, and a large mouth, parted in a welcoming smile, and showing a row of perfect milk-white teeth. Phoebe Marsden? Could this handsome woman possibly be Phoebe Marsden, whom he remembered to have thought plain and kind, but somewhat uninteresting, a sort of amiable elder sister, who made a nice setting for his dainty little lady-love. And then he thought of Nancy again for the first time for many a long month, and then looked down at the smiling face below, and knew in a flash that no man was ever so thoroughly cured as he.

"Miss Marsden," he said in a moment, when he had recovered from his astonishment, "who'd ever have thought of meeting you here? I — "

"I'm very glad to see you indeed," she said cordially. "But, oh, there are such a lot of milk cans waiting behind me."

"Yes, of course, I mustn't talk now. Hitch yours on; that's right. What did you say? Mrs Simpson?" and there came into his tones just a faint trace of disappointment, for he had admired the face that had looked up to him from the shabby cart, and even though a man does not want to marry a good-looking woman himself, a third party, in the shape of a husband, is sometimes apt to complicate friendly relations with her.

"Oh, I'm not Mrs Simpson," said Phoebe, smiling as she saw his mistake; "it's Mrs Simpson's milk. That's all. When will you be done? I'd wait a little, and we could have a chat."

## Kirkham's Find

"I'll not be done till after twelve," he said, ruefully, looking at the long line of carts that were still coming. "At least I haven't been since I've been here."

"Well, come down to my house this evening, when your work is done, will you?" asked Phoebe. "Lydia's with me, she's grown up now, and we'll be so delighted to see you. It's just opposite the Benger's Flat school-house. Any one'll show you where that is. Come to tea; we'll put it off till seven to suit you."

"Thank you," he said, gratefully. It was a long time since any lady had asked him to tea, and he laughed when Phoebe said smilingly she had joined the working classes, and had forgotten what it felt like to have dinner at night.

"You'll remember," she added, "opposite Benger's Flat State School."

"Miss Marsden?" he asked, with a little emphasis that quite escaped Phoebe.

"Why yes, of course," said she. "Who else should it be?" and she gathered up her reins and drove off, while he was surprised to find that he was quite pleased to know that this good-looking, strong-minded young woman in a pink sunbonnet was still unmarried.

It never occurred to Phoebe that Ned Kirkham might be married, not for one moment. In fact she drove back in the bright sunlight cheerfully happy. All her anxiety had vanished, and she even smiled to herself as she saw that Jack Fletcher was hanging round apparently trying to screw up his courage to address her. He didn't bring it up to the sticking point evidently, and she drove on without taking any notice of him. She didn't mind now if he did admire Lydia, and even if Lydia had been a little taken with him. What matter? Ned Kirkham was coming to tea, and once Lydia talked on friendly terms with an educated Englishman, she would never give a second thought to a common farmer like Jack Fletcher. And then Phoebe, being a woman, went a little further, and began matchmaking in her own mind. Why not? Lydia was not exactly what you would call pretty, it was true, but she had a good honest, healthy, happy looking face any man might be pleased to own for his wife's, and for the rest she was tall and upright and her figure was good. More unlikely things had happened, and Ned Kirkham had been very fond of Nancy. Why shouldn't he grow to like Lydia? Well, there was no harm in building castles, and one thing was certain she would have no rivals about here. Poor? Well, they were all poor. Ned Kirkham would never have taken the position of manager of a butter factory if he hadn't been poor, but after all there were worse things in the world than being poor. And by the time she reached home Phoebe was quite jubilant at the thought that she would have them living so close, and had quite decided on the material and colour of her sister's wedding dress.

She felt so cheerful herself, and had so thoroughly put the ineligible Jack Fletcher in the background, that she was quite surprised to find that Lydia was very grumpy; and Lydia herself was a little astonished to find her elder sister in such spirits that they were not even damped by the intelligence that the hen which had been sitting so well for over three weeks, had deserted her nest within two days of the hatching out of a brood of young ducks.

"Oh, well, it can't be helped," said she, cheerfully. "Better luck next time. I'll buy an incubator just as soon as ever I can afford it. I'm sure it would be cheaper in the end. Who do you think I saw, Lydia? You'll never guess. Ned Kirkham. Just fancy, he's the new manager at the factory, and he's coming to tea."

Lydia did not express herself overjoyed at the news.

"He was one of Nancy's young men, years ago, wasn't he?" she said, indifferently, wondering very much in her own mind whether her sister had seen Jack Fletcher, and if so whether he had spoken to her and what he had said, but Phoebe never mentioned the farmer. She wouldn't if she had thought of him, but she never thought of him.

## Kirkham's Find

"I must just go round all the hives," she said, "all the fruit trees in the cottages are coming into blossom; a day or two of warm weather and they'll all be out. Things are very early this year, and I must see that the bees are all right. I think they are, but I'd better be sure. And Lydia, we must have a nice tea for Mr Kirkham. Do you think we can spare a little cream? We might have nice poached eggs, what can be nicer than fresh eggs nicely poached, and grilled chops — there are some chops still, aren't there?"

"Only three," said Lydia, ungraciously; she did not want to entertain Mr Kirkham.

"Oh, three will be enough. We don't want any meat for lunch, do we? And, oh, Lydia, you must make some nice scones. I want to have a nice tea. Now, where's my veil? I must really go to those bees."

Phoebe's tea was a success. In all her life perhaps before she never remembered to have enjoyed herself more. It was not only that she was pleased to entertain Ned Kirkham, but he was so pleased to be entertained, so overjoyed at seeing her again, and so nice and attentive to both the young women that even Lydia's sulky disappointment gave way before his geniality. But to Phoebe most of his conversation was directed. They had so much to say to each other, old times to talk over, old reminiscences to discuss. They had not been great friends in the old days — but yet those old days were a great bond. Kirkham was lost in admiration for this happy looking, independent young woman who received him in her kitchen as if it had been a palace, and yet contrived to make that same little kitchen so cosy and comfortable; he forgot she and her sister must have cooked and spread that dainty meal, and when it came to clearing away, he turned to and helped them as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"You don't know how delightful all this is to a lonely man like me," he said as, the last cup put away in the cupboard, they drew their chairs up round the fire. "You should just see the way we lived in Western Australia. Really the game isn't worth the candle."

"But you haven't been in Western Australia for a year," said Phoebe. "At least I thought you said so."

"Been tied by the leg in the hospital at Perth for the last thirteen months. That stab I got in my leg was too much for me. I got it poisoned somehow and it wouldn't heal."

"Poor thing," said Phoebe, sympathetically. "And what ever made you think of coming here?"

"Well, when I did get well, the doctor said I'd better not think of going back to the fields till the hot weather was over, and though it's a mighty fine thing to own a gold mine worth thousands of pounds, somehow until that gold is got out I'm very short of cash, so I had to look out for something to do. I tried for something in my own profession, and got the management of this butter factory just because I was a civil engineer. It sounds a small thing, doesn't it?"

Phoebe smiled, and Ned Kirkham thought she looked splendid when she smiled.

"It's not a bad place to live in at all," she said. "I've grown very fond of it, and I've lived here four years now. Every one around is so nice and kind, and then the country is splendid. You don't know how delightful it is to live in rich country like this. You scratch the soil and things grow beautifully. Of course we're all poor — but no, we're not poor. How can people be poor when there's food in abundance, rich and good and cheap, like it is here. Now don't laugh at me. I know Lydia thinks I'm a little mad on the charms of the Warrnambool district, but I've got to know it well and to love it, and now I've got Lydia to keep me company it's delightful living here."

"Don't you want to see the world?" asked Kirkham, smiling at her enthusiasm. "You remember you used to be great on the necessity of seeing the world long ago."

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, don't I? But that'll come in time. You see I'm getting on. I started with renting an acre of land, and now I rent eleven. I've been at it four years, and each year my profits are greater. Oh, I daresay a millionaire with a gold mine at his back will laugh at my profits; but it takes very little to keep a woman, less in proportion to keep two women, and already, you see, I've had to take a partner."

"Is Miss Lydia your partner?" asked Kirkham. "How nice for her."

"Nice for me, you mean. I really never was made to live alone. I used to feel so lonely at night. It's all very well when you're busy in the daytime, but at night, however much you read, you want some one to talk things over with. When Lydia gets married I shall have to take Nellie, and when she gets married I'm sure I don't know what I'll do. I'll hope Nancy's little girl will be grown up by then. Lydia, you mustn't get married for a long time."

Lydia blushed in the most unaccountable manner, and Kirkham said --

"Apparently you don't contemplate matrimony on your own account."

"Well, no," said Phoebe, laughing, "that's hardly likely. There's bound to be an old maid in every family, and I was regularly cut out for the position. I don't mind now, though, that I can earn my own living, and have a home of my own. It was dreadful when I thought I'd have to be a governess or companion."

"You are a brave woman, Miss Marsden."

"Why? Because I've set the priorities so dear to the soul of my little world at defiance, and come to be a small farmer all by myself. I don't think it's done me any harm, do you? and I'm ever so much happier than I was at home. Last summer Nancy and Lydia kept house for me for a week, and I went home and saw my father and mother for the first time for three years. Mother was getting over her shocked feelings, and I think felt rather thankful than otherwise that I had gone my own way, and father was absolutely civil to me. That comes of being independent."

"I say again you are a brave woman. I must write to old Allan and tell him I've met you. He thinks such a lot of you. There's no one like Phoebe Marsden."

Phoebe smiled a little. It was curious to think that Allan Morrison thought a lot of her now -- now that he had faded away into a vague dream, and Lydia spoke out her thoughts.

"It's all very well to talk like that now," said she, laughing, "but we children used to say you were both of you gone on Nancy and Phoebe was nowhere."

Kirkham flushed and moved uneasily in his chair, and Phoebe said,

"Oh, Lydia!" in tones that might have belonged to her own mother.

"We were both of us fools in those days," said their guest, recovering himself, a little surprised to find that he had not only completely got over his love for Phoebe's sister, but that he was devoutly thankful to think she had not married him; and he thought too with a feeling bordering on the shame of those dreary days out in the lonely north of Western Australia, when a letter from Nancy Marsden was his heart's desire. And now he was glad, he was thankful she had treated him as she had. Would he ever dare trust his own feelings again?

Then he stole a glance at Phoebe sitting knitting beside the fire. He could hardly believe it possible that any woman could have improved so. She was well-dressed too. In these days of blouses it is easy for a woman who has clever fingers to look well-dressed at small cost, and Phoebe at last fulfilled her aunt's prophesy and was a

## Kirkham's Find

good-looking woman.

Her skirt was an old, a very old black one that she had had a long time, but by the lamp light it looked all right; and her blouse was made of rich orange brocade that had once been a ball dress of Nancy's. It never had suited Nancy, who was wont to revel in much variety of garment now that she could afford it, and when someone spilled a glass of wine down the front, she packed it off to Phoebe, who made herself a blouse out of it with many inward misgivings that it was too gorgeous for everyday evening wear. This was a great occasion, and so she had put it on, and surveying herself in her looking-glass, was very well pleased with the result. The bright orange suited her dark hair and eyes, and her rich dark glowing complexion. The full sleeves showed off her shapely hands, and could she but have known how very much her guest was admiring her appearance, it would have been a delightful sensation to the woman who had been an ugly duckling all her life.

But she did not know. She only felt that they were spending a delightful evening, that Ned Kirkham's stories of his experiences and life in Western Australia were most entertaining, and when she went to bed that night it was with the calm conviction that Lydia must certainly have entirely forgotten all about the undesirable Jack Fletcher, after spending an evening with so charming a companion as Ned Kirkham.

So convinced was she of this, the next morning when the question arose as to who should take Mrs Simpson's milk to the factory, she unhesitatingly allowed Lydia to do it. There was so much to be seen to about her little farm, the hens never behaved so well as when she attended to them herself, and it would be nice for Lydia to meet Ned Kirkham again in so legitimate a manner. She would have enjoyed having a chat with him again herself; but, of course, it was more important for Lydia to meet him. She was more set on the match than ever now she had so thoroughly renewed her acquaintance with her old friend. And as for her own people, she knew very well they did not expect much from Lydia. They would be pleased if she married any one at all decent; if Kirkham's gold mine turned out to be a success it would be a brilliant match, and Phoebe, as she fed the sitting hens and the young ducks, and chose the young cockerels that were to go into Warrnambool next day, was contentedly happy in the prospect that lay before her younger sister. Life would be fairly smooth for these younger ones, none of the difficulties that had lain in her way would lie in theirs. Lydia would marry Ned Kirkham and be supremely happy, and Nellie would come and live with her till some one came and married her — and Nellie was so pretty, just like Nancy, she need have no anxiety about her future. Every day she — Phoebe — was doing a little better, every day made her own future a little more assured, her own and consequently her sisters', for it was not likely she would allow them to suffer as she had suffered when she could help it. It rained a little this morning — it was not as bright and warm as the morning before — but she went about her work cheerfully, and when Lydia came home she was cheerful too.

"I saw Mr Kirkham," she announced, "and he was so delighted to see me, and said he didn't believe he'd ever spent such a delightful evening as he did last night. He must have had some dreadful dull times if that pleased him. And they knock off about twelve on Sunday, so I just asked him to come to dinner and stay all the afternoon. You don't mind, do you? He's a handy sort of man, and I daresay can help us with anything we have to do. Do you think he'll be horrified at seeing me milk?"

"I think he'll think you're a nice sensible girl to work so hard," said her sister. "But you needn't milk, Lydia, I'll do that."

"Perhaps Mr Kirkham will do it for us. Now Phoebe, be sure and give the young man something decent to eat. It's rather taking him into the family, isn't it? because if he comes to dinner, he'll certainly stay tea, and if he stays tea it would be sheer waste of time to go home and not spend the evening."

Phoebe laughed.

## Kirkham's Find

"I'm sure he's very welcome to stay if he likes. It must be dull work keeping bachelor house by himself up at the butter factory. And I'm sure that Thompson girl must be a very makeshift sort of a housekeeper."

"Well, we'll ask him here as often as he likes to come, won't we, Phoebe? Oh, I wonder what Nancy would think of her old lover now. I wonder would she like him better than she does Joe."

"Lydia, you shouldn't say such things even in joke."

"Joke, my dear sister" -- Lydia was in the wildest spirits -- "I'm not joking. Nancy used to be very fond of Mr Kirkham, very fond indeed. Oh yes, we younger girls weren't so innocent but that we could see that. And then I suppose he was poor and a long way off, and so she took Joe just to get married. Nell and I used to bet about it; but we always knew she'd marry the richest man. Nancy can't bear to be uncomfortable. I shall write and tell her all about Mr Kirkham."

"Don't, Lydia, don't. That's all past and gone ages ago. Don't rake it up again. I'm sure Mr Kirkham has quite forgotten her, and she him, of course."

"I'm not so sure about that last," said Lydia. "Anyhow, she wouldn't like to think he had forgotten her, and now preferred you, or even me. How could she, how could she?" went on the girl, getting excited. "I'd stick to the man I loved through thick and thin, no matter what the rest of the world might say."

"Quite right, Lydia," said Phoebe, applauding a noble sentiment under the mistaken idea that Lydia was putting Ned Kirkham into the hero's place, and imagining her mother and father objecting to her marrying the humble manager of a butter factory, whereas it was a very different person that was in Lydia's mind. It was all very well to make Kirkham a hero -- Phoebe was doing that herself unconsciously -- but she would have thought it a very different matter to put Jack Fletcher in the place.

## CHAPTER XXV. GHOSTS

Ghosts! O breathing Beauty  
Give my frank word pardon!  
What if I -- somehow, somewhere --  
Pledged my soul to endless duty  
Many a time and oft? Be hard on  
Love -- laid there?

Nay, blame grief that's fickle,  
Time that proves a traitor,  
Chance, change, all that purpose warps, --  
Death who spares to thrust the sickle  
Laid Love low, through flowers which later  
Shroud the corpse!

BROWNING.

And next Sunday Ned Kirkham came to dinner and stayed the rest of the day, as Lydia had prophesied he would; and he came again in the course of the week, and again on the following Sunday, till before October came with his sunshine and his roses, Kirkham was the established friend of the little household. It made such a difference to have a man about the place, as Lydia said to her sister one day. He seemed to know so much about the ways of the world; he made so many suggestions -- such helpful suggestions; he broadened the women's lives altogether, as a man is bound to do who takes an intelligent interest in the women he meets and does not regard them as created merely for his amusement.

## Kirkham's Find

Phoebe wondered how she had ever got on before, and looked back with something of pity for herself to the dull days when she had neither Kirkham nor Lydia to keep her company.

She never did anything now without consulting both Ned Kirkham and her sister; and if she always leaned towards the former's opinion, no one but her sister noticed it. They were pleasant days in that early summer time, when the days were long and bright, and everything went so smoothly and so happily for Phoebe, and she went so content to bed that often for the first time for four years she forgot her solemn resolution for the improvement of her mind, and did not read those chapters from the classics that had become a habit with her. How could she, when life was pleasant and she so happy. There was so much to think of in her everyday life, she found she paid no attention to the page before her. Suppose she crossed her fowls with Indian game, as Kirkham had suggested, suppose she went in for growing big table poultry, and bred for export, as he was urging her to do; if she were to take in that other twenty acres from Mrs Mackenzie, would she ever be able to make it pay? Ned Kirkham said she would. He seemed to think she was a wonderful manager, and wanted to lend her the money to stock it, but of course she wouldn't take that; the sale of her honey would give her quite enough to buy pure-bred eggs, and that was all she would need. No, she wouldn't have his money, not even when he was her brother-in-law. She had taken Joe's without a qualm when she had far less chance of paying it back; but she wouldn't take Ned Kirkham's. That he would be her brother-in-law she never for a moment doubted. He came to the house just as often as he could; there must be some attraction, there couldn't be any fun in making all the coops and doing all the carpentry about the place during his spare Sunday afternoons, and discussing her future in so interested a manner unless he cared for Lydia. Of course he came to see Lydia, and Lydia in her eldest sister's opinion was just the luckiest girl in the world. She had liked Kirkham, and sympathised with him when he was engaged to Nancy; but now she told herself she had learnt to appreciate him at his real worth — she thought a great deal more of him now than she did then. He was so kind, so considerate, so thoughtful, no man had ever taken such an interest in her affairs before, and if he would do that for his sweetheart's elder sister, what would he not do for his wife? Sometimes when she wakened in the night and listened to Lydia's regular breathing in the bed opposite, she could find it in her heart to be jealous of her younger sister. She envied her this great happiness that was coming to her just on the threshold of her life. There would never be a care for Lydia, she was sure of that, once she was Ned Kirkham's wife. Why — why — why had not such happiness come in her way? Why had not some man, some man like Ned Kirkham, met her and loved her and let her, too, drink of the wine of life? And then she sat up in bed and sternly told herself that she was very ungrateful, life had held a great deal more for her than ever she had expected it would, why should she grumble if she did not have everything? She was succeeding, succeeding beyond her wildest dreams. She might now look forward to being mistress of a big farm; she would certainly be independent, she might even travel, and she had good, kind friends. Joe Sampson was her friend, Ned Kirkham was her friend, there was Nancy and Nancy's children, there was Lydia, her staunch ally, there was Nellie, who would so gladly take Lydia's place when Lydia got married; why should she fret when she had so much more than ever she had hoped for? And she was independent — above all things, she was independent; it comforted her greatly, that, and she worked harder than ever, and was happy, in spite of the fact that the one crowning happiness of a woman's life was denied her.

But it would come to Lydia, and Lydia was just wildly happy these summer days; and her sister, looking at Ned Kirkham, thought it was no wonder. Any woman might be proud of such a sweetheart. She was on such friendly terms with him too, she never seemed to mind what she said to him; and Phoebe, coming in from her fowl yard one Sunday afternoon, certain that she would see Kirkham in her little room, was surprised to hear that Lydia was chaffing him about his old affection for her sister Nancy.

How could she — how could she? Phoebe would not have mentioned her name for worlds; but Lydia had no such scruples.

"I'd like to see the meeting between you two," she said. "Nell and I used to be dreadfully interested long ago, when you used to come over. You can't think what an interest we took in you."



## Kirkham's Find

"That was very kind of you," he murmured, uncomfortably, looking uneasily at Phoebe, who felt very angry that her sister should have the bad taste to mention such a subject.

"Oh, I don't know, it was all experience for us youngsters. You see Phoebe never had any lovers. She is built that way, I don't believe she'd know if she did have one. Some one else would have to explain it to her if he didn't do it himself; but Nan was quite different. Some one was always dangling after her pretty face, and she expected it of them."

"Did I dangle?" asked Kirkham. "What a fool you must have thought me."

"Did you dangle? Of course you did. Oh, no! Nellie and I didn't think you a fool. We admired you immensely, and were very much in love with you ourselves. I wonder what you'd think of Nan now as a matron. She's coming down next week, she and the children."

"She isn't," said Phoebe, unbelieving, for Nancy had got in the habit of spending the month of February in Warrnambool, and had never been known to come at this season, when she considered the strong winds that blow in the early summer ruination to her complexion.

"Oh, yes she is! I understood by her last letter she was coming, though you didn't. And here's a postcard Cox" — Cox was the schoolmaster and postmaster who had succeeded Mr Johnston only the year before — "has just brought over. He said it escaped him somehow last night, and it says, 'I have taken rooms at the "Ozone." Doctor says little Phoebe wants a thorough change. Coming down on Wednesday.' There now. I believe — "

But Phoebe was afraid of what Lydia believed, and hastily changed the conversation with some entirely irrelevant remark that deceived neither of her listeners.

"I'll be glad to see Mrs Sampson again," said Kirkham, looking Phoebe straight in the face, "though your sister does chaff me unmercifully about my old weakness in that quarter."

For once in her life Phoebe could not honestly say she was glad to see her sister. They were such a happy little party, and she wondered what influence Nancy would have on them. Of course she would want all Kirkham's attention, and Nancy was an attractive woman, a woman who had seen a great deal more of the world than either Phoebe or Lydia. Phoebe had stood no chance beside her in the old days: what chance would poor Lydia have now? And Nancy would have no scruples. Phoebe felt that. She would not mean to be unkind, but she could not bear to be cut out, and she would lay herself out to charm her old love, to show him how much he had lost in losing her, how infinitely superior she was to both her sisters. It troubled Phoebe greatly. She was surprised herself when she discovered how much it troubled her, and the brightness went out of that sunny October afternoon for her.

And before the next Sunday had arrived Nancy had joined them, that is to say she left her three children in Warrnambool under the care of their nurse and spent the greater part of the day with her two sisters.

It was all very well when the weather was fine, then Nancy liked wandering about with Phoebe, watching her attend to the hens and look after the bees, but if it rained at all or was very windy, she was not quite so content, and was always inclined to quarrel with her sister because she could not sit over the fire with her.

"My goodness!" said Nancy, poking up the fire viciously just a day or two after her arrival, "that yard is just a quagmire. Look at my nice clean boots."

"Do be careful, Nan," remonstrated Lydia, "you're spoiling the fire and I have got the dinner to cook. What can you expect the yard to be like after a pouring wet night like last night. You shouldn't go in to it."

## Kirkham's Find

"What on earth does Phoebe go pottering about in it for, then?" asked Nancy, querulously. "Why can't she come and sit down like a Christian?"

"She's got her living to make," said Lydia, "and mine too. The chicks have to be attended to all the more because the morning is wet and cold."

"She might wait till it's drier."

"The chicks can't wait," said Lydia, soberly. "It's just attending regularly to little things like that and never sparing herself that has got Phoebe on."

Nancy surveyed her muddy boots discontentedly.

"It's a beastly life. I can't think how you put up with it."

"It's a lovely life," said Lydia, with fervour. She was elbow deep in a basin of flour and was making scones in honour of Nancy, but she stopped short and put her floury fingers up to her face because she felt herself blushing. Nancy tilted back her chair and looked at her steadily.

"My conscience, young lady," she said, "who is he?"

"Nan! what nonsense you talk!"

"It isn't nonsense," said Nancy, gravely. "I lived in the country myself when I was your age so I know all about it, and I never saw anything lovely about it."

"Ah, but it wasn't like this," said Lydia, fervently, "you see this is all for our very selves. It all belongs to ourselves, and you don't feel that you are slaving away as a servant and being looked down on and despised by all the boys just to save twopence in some indefinite manner, and perhaps never saving it at all."

"Phoebe has infected you with all her absurd notions."

"The notions have turned out very well in Phoebe's case, you must admit."

"She'd have done better to come to me."

"She wouldn't, indeed she wouldn't. You don't understand how happy we are here."

"Who is he? Ned Kirkham? He used to be a susceptible youth in the old days, but that must be nearly six years ago. Perhaps he's changed."

"You're sure to see him to judge for yourself on Sunday if not before. I thought he would have been here last night, but I expect you frightened him away."

"I — Phoebe tells me he's your admirer, and has implored me not to interfere."

Lydia laughed merrily and showed a row of even white teeth that quite redeemed her face from plainness.

"Phoebe is an old goose," she said, "a blind old bat. Ned Kirkham does not come here to see me. And it really doesn't matter one bit I'm sure how you behave to him."

## Kirkham's Find

"He won't look at me, I suppose you think." And Lydia put her lips together and nodded her head.

Nevertheless Kirkham had thought a good deal about Nancy, and it was her presence that had kept him away. She had dealt cruelly with him, and he did not care one cent about her, but still he felt the awkwardness of meeting her. Once it was over he supposed it would be all right, but the difficulty was to get it over. And he wanted to go down to Benger's Flat badly, he wanted to sit down in the lamplight opposite Phoebe in her orange brocade blouse, and watch her busy fingers knitting stockings, he wanted to make her raise her dark eyes and lay her knitting down in her lap and look him straight in the face as she always did when she was particularly interested in anything he said. Those comfortable, cosy, happy evenings, he missed them terribly; he wondered if Phoebe missed him, he rather thought not, she was interested in so many things, and she often left him alone with Lydia, still perhaps she would miss him a little even though she had both Lydia and Nancy to keep her company. On Sunday, then, he would go. Seven days since he had had a chat with Phoebe, he would go Nancy or no Nancy, besides — perhaps Phoebe would think he was staying away on Nancy's account, would think he cared for her still, was afraid to meet her. And when he had fully grasped this very unpleasant idea, he promptly saddled his horse, and, though it was only Saturday evening, rode straight down to Benger's Flat.

And when he found himself opposite the cottage, though the lights in the window were beckoning him with a friendly hand, he could not make up his mind to go in. A sudden shyness seized him, not of Nancy, he didn't care about her, but of meeting her before her eldest sister. He wanted so much that Phoebe should think well of him, he wanted to be very sure that she should entirely forget that miserable episode in his life when he had loved so passionately another woman. No, he could not go in and face them all tonight, and he turned his horse's head and rode straight back, though he swore at himself for a fool as he did so.

And next day was Sunday, and by half-past twelve he was opposite the little cottage half hesitating once more. It was a little early perhaps, he would ride up the road and come back again, so he rode on very slowly, not on the crown of the road but at the side, and his horse's hoofs made no sound on the thick grass. There were trees on either side of the road which intercepted his view and hid him from any one in front, but through the intervening leaves he caught a glimpse of something pink and diagnosed at once a pink sunbonnet. Phoebe Marsden's pink sunbonnet, perhaps, though what she should be doing down the road he failed to guess, but it did surprise him to find that his heart was beating unpleasantly fast at the thought of meeting her here. Why, he had not been as foolish as this for many a long day: he had thought never to be so foolish again. He did not quicken his pace, but he rode straight on instead of turning when he came to the corner, and then to his surprise, and for a moment his consternation also, he saw coming down the road a young woman in a pink sunbonnet with her head uncommonly close to a young man's shoulder, and it certainly looked as if the young man's arm was around her waist. That was what it looked like, but Kirkham had not time to make sure, for before almost he had time to think what he should do next, that young woman drew herself hastily away, and beneath the sunbonnet he saw Lydia Marsden's blushing face. It was an assignation evidently, there was Jack Fletcher's horse hitched to the rail of the fence close at hand, and there was Jack Fletcher himself, standing sheepishly by looking as if he didn't know what to do with his hands.

And he, Kirkham, had been fool enough to think it was Phoebe! In his relief and delight he laughed aloud.

"Well, Miss Marsden," he said, dismounting. "How are you, Fletcher?" Neither of them spoke for a moment, Lydia looked as if she were going to cry, and then Fletcher spoke out.

"Look here," he said, "we must have an end of this. I'm not going fooling round lanes keeping company with you any longer. I'll just go straight up and tell your sister we're going to be married."

"Oh, dear," said Lydia, half pleased, half frightened. "What do you think she'll say, Mr Kirkham?"

"How do I know, my dear girl?" Kirkham felt quite fatherly. "Give you her blessing probably."

## Kirkham's Find

"She might be angry at me not telling before," mused Lydia, "but — but — " she blushed crimson again, "there wasn't anything to tell."

"There's plenty now, then," said Fletcher, "and I'll go up and tell it."

"Oh, no, no, please," said Lydia. "I must tell her first, I must really. It wouldn't be kind of me not to. I'll tell her tonight, and you can come and see her tomorrow morning. That'll be best, won't it, Mr Kirkham?"

Kirkham assented, seeing they both looked at him, and Fletcher, muttering something about its being hard to be done out of a Sunday, finally allowed himself to be persuaded by Lydia, and stooping gave her a sounding kiss on the cheek before mounting his horse and riding away.

"Now mind, my girl," he said cheerfully over his shoulder as he rode away, "I'm coming straight up from the factory to see your sister and tell her all about it. Not a minute longer will I wait."

Lydia watched him down the road, and then as the trees hid him from sight, turned shyly to Kirkham, who was watching her with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"So that's what you do when you go down to comfort the sick and afflicted. I suppose it's Mrs Simpson is the excuse as usual."

"It is Mrs Simpson. I don't know why you should hint that it isn't. She's got a tiny baby there, and I go down to wash it and dress it for her. She isn't fit to manage by herself."

"And does Fletcher go down to wash and dress the baby too?"

"How can you be so horrid?" Lydia stamped her foot angrily. "Of course he goes to see his sister. It's only natural. And if he — if I — if — "

"I quite understand. Am I to tell Miss Marsden how I caught you this morning?"

"If you do — " they were walking down the road towards home now, and Kirkham had his horse's reins over his arm — "if you do I'll — I'll — I'll find a way to pay you out. Be nice now, Mr Kirkham, leave me to tell Phoebe in my own way. She — she will look down on Jack Fletcher, just because he's only a farmer, and his manners aren't polished. I don't think that matters a bit, do you, as long as I love him and he loves me? That's the main thing, isn't it? And Phoebe — Phoebe — you'd have thought Phoebe would have been different — but she will look down on Jack Fletcher, just because he's a common farmer, as if we were any better ourselves. We're not half as good. We peddle eggs and honey and fowls and milk, and it is hard Phoebe should look down on my Jack, when I — when I l-o-o-ve him so," and Lydia put her handkerchief up to her face and began to cry.

"Don't — don't — don't. There's a good girl," said Kirkham, alarmed. "Don't cry. Phoebe'll be as nice as possible once she understands your heart's set on it."

"I'm sure she ought," said Lydia, suddenly wiping her eyes and looking at her companion mischievously, "she's just been preaching nothing but the beauty of love matches for the last three months. She's been dinning into my ears for the last month that there's nothing so good in this world as to marry the man you really love, and it doesn't matter much really according to her whether you are rich or poor so long as you are companions and friends."

"So she is really responsible for this?"

## Kirkham's Find

"Of course she is," and Lydia, who at bottom was wildly happy in spite of a little natural anxiety lest her people should not properly appreciate her Jack, began to laugh. "Oh, dear, Phoebe is a blind old bat."

"Why?" asked her companion. He was prepared to take up the cudgels against all comers on Phoebe's behalf.

"Why? Because — because — what do you think? She's actually got it into her silly old head that you come here to see me. There now; what do you think of that?"

Kirkham looked at her gravely. The idea was very unpleasant to him; more unpleasant than he cared to own. He turned it over in his mind for a few moments, and then, looking Lydia gravely in the face, said solemnly —

"No, I did not come to see you."

"I knew you didn't," said Lydia; "I never thought such a thing for a moment. Don't look so glum. Phoebe's one of those very modest sort of people who never think any one could possibly care to talk to her, so she set my charms down as the attraction that brought you here. I knew better. It might be you came just because it was dull, but it certainly wasn't to see me."

"I didn't come because I was dull."

"It doesn't matter much what you came for, it wasn't to see me in the present, or for the hope of seeing Nancy in the future, only make Phoebe see my engagement in the right light, and — "

"And what?"

"Oh, you'll have your reward, whatever you want most. I suppose you've come to dinner as usual?"

"If I may stay," said Kirkham, meekly, and they walked on together in silence.

Ned Kirkham was troubled, much troubled. It grew upon him as he walked down the road by Lydia's side in silence. He began to think what this meant for him. No, he had certainly not come down to the cottage to see Lydia, certainly not. Lydia was a nice girl, and he liked her; he doubted not for a moment but that Jack Fletcher had won a treasure, that he was doing wisely for himself in taking to wife Phoebe Marsden's sister, but he, Ned Kirkham, had never thought of her in that light before. To him she was — well, she was Phoebe Marsden's sister, that was all. And Phoebe Marsden, what was she? He asked himself the question over and over again as they neared the cottage. She was — well, he hardly dared think what she was. He had always thought highly of her, and that, after all, is the very best foundation for love, though many a woman does not think it. And now he loved her, oh yes, he loved her! As he had loved his sister, aye, a thousand times more so he loved Phoebe Marsden. He had been wild and mad about Nancy, he would never be that about Phoebe, never; somehow he knew that Phoebe was a better woman than Nancy had ever been, and so his love was a higher and better thing, an older man's love, but none the less better worth having because of that. Was there a woman in all the world to compare with Phoebe? he asked himself. And then what did this pearl among women think of him? She actually thought — he said the words over very slowly to himself — she — actually thought — he — came — courting — her — sister — Lydia, — Lydia, — who — was — a — good — girl, — but — not — worthy — to — tie — her — elder sister's shoe. So she liked him, just liked him, while his whole soul was crying out for the love he knew she could give to some man. Was it Allan Morrison; had it been Allan Morrison all these years? Should he ask Lydia? He looked at her, but no, she was puzzling out her own affairs. She evidently was not much interested in her sister, and only so much in him as to be able to laugh at the absurd idea that he should have come down to the little cottage for her sake. And she had only thought of him as a lover for her sister, that was all. The bitterness of the thought grew upon him as he walked, till by the time they had reached the wicket-gate he had more than half made up his mind to turn back. He did not say so to Lydia, though. He swung the gate open for her, and as it

## Kirkham's Find

creaked on its hinges the door of the house opened, and Phoebe herself stood on the step welcoming him. Phoebe, tall and handsome and gracious, in a plainly made cream serge dress that hung in straight folds to her feet. It was her first indulgence to herself, that cream serge dress. She had always, ever since she had begun to take an interest in her personal appearance, felt sure that a cream serge would suit her, a cream serge with an orange sash and an orange ribbon at her throat and in her hair, and now that prosperity had fairly dawned upon her she had treated herself to one, and had put it on this first fine warm Sunday of October. She did not think that Kirkham would notice her, but still she would like to look nice in his eyes she said to herself, and she put a little bow of orange ribbon among the dark glossy coils of her hair, because her glass told her it was so becoming, and now she stood in the doorway, a handsome picture framed in nodding yellow banksia roses and red ivy geranium, and she looked so unlike the Phoebe of olden days, that even Lydia exclaimed —

"My goodness, Phoebe, you are a swell! You've got 'em all on, as Stanley says."

Phoebe coloured up to her eyes; she wondered was she too fine, and wished she had not put that ribbon in her hair, but the man before her only thought she was a perfect woman, and realised more bitterly that she was not for him. Of course not, of course not, this handsome woman with the true, honest dark eyes, who carried her head as if she had been a princess of the blood royal, of course she was not for him; he had wasted days and weeks and months courting her sister, he had nearly died of her faithlessness, and he had passed her by; even now for the last three months he had come regularly to the house, and had so comported himself that she had judged he had come to see her other sister. Naturally she did not think he was good enough for her, and oh, she was right enough; where was a man good enough for her?

"Aren't you coming in, Mr Kirkham?" she said, and her eyes softened as she looked at him, though he did not see it. "We've been expecting you. Nancy wants to renew her old acquaintance, and you see I've been tempted to put on my best bib and tucker in your honour, and I'm afraid — I'm afraid Lyd thinks I've made myself look ridiculous. One forgets how to dress out here in the country."

"You look lovely," burst out Kirkham, and the colour deepened on Phoebe's face, for she saw something in his face that told her he meant it. She — she, Phoebe Marsden, who had never had a compliment from a man in her life, to be told in this outspoken way that she looked lovely — she, a woman over thirty! Oh, he must be very much in love with Lydia indeed! And there came a jealous pang welling up in her heart. Why, oh why could such happiness not have come to her. Then she crushed it down. What a mean woman she must be who could grudge her sister her happiness.

"Now, you mustn't be turning Phoebe's head," said another voice with a trace of nervousness in it, a laughing voice he had loved right well in days gone by. "We're all of us growing too old for that sort of thing, Mr Kirkham."

And then Phoebe was brushed aside, just as in the old days she used to be pushed aside, and Nancy took her place. The same Nancy, and yet not the same. Nancy, with the freshness of her youth gone, Nancy, with the golden gleam gone from her hair, with the rounded cheeks a little hollow, with the bright blue eyes a little faded, with the pretty mouth a trifle fretful, and yet the same Nancy, but the years had not dealt kindly by her. She was so young a woman, not yet thirty; she had no right to look faded, and yet she did. Where was the pretty, dainty girl this man had loved so passionately? Here she stood before him, the ghost of her old welcoming smile on her lips, and behold all her daintiness and prettiness were gone, and the smile was but a ghost, the veriest ghost, and he had loved her, loved her with all his heart. And this was Nancy, this woman. He could not smile back at her as the thoughts came rushing through his brain, he only stood still slowly swinging the gate backwards and forwards, responding to her greeting neither by look nor word.

"Well, Mr Kirkham," said Nancy, pettishly, "you are a nice one. Is this the way you greet an old friend?"

## Kirkham's Find

"Don't be a goose," whispered Lydia at his elbow reassuringly. "Never mind if you were in love with her and have got over it. What does it matter? She's been married for the last five years, and it won't do you any harm to answer her civilly, even if she did jilt you. You ought to be thankful."

He was, that was just it, and he was ashamed of the feeling; but when Phoebe looked over her sister's shoulder and said, smiling, "Aren't you coming in, Mr Kirkham?" he let the gate go with a bang that was bad for its hinges, and walked up to the house, and entering, took his seat among the women and talked to them like a man in a dream.

## CHAPTER XXVI. LYDIA HAS A LOVE AFFAIR OF HER OWN

Why did she love him? Curious fool! be still.  
Is human love the growth of human will?

BYRON.

It was an uncomfortable dinner that midday Sunday's dinner, for not one among the whole four was at ease. Phoebe was anxious and troubled, she hardly knew why. It had never troubled her before that she had to serve the dinner in the room it was cooked in, never troubled her that either she or Lydia had to see to everything, and Kirkham had come to meals with them scores of times in the last three months. It could not be his presence, and Nancy — Nancy came to Warrnambool for a month at least every year, and spent the greater part of her time with her sister, so it could not be her; why should the two together make an uncomfortable party. And Lydia would not talk; she was silently puzzling out her own affairs, but Phoebe did not know that, and Nancy would talk, would talk in the way that had been so fascinating six years ago, and Phoebe wondered how she could be so silly. Nancy's conversation had never sounded so frivolous in her ears before, and it made her ashamed, too, to see how she laid herself out to attract their guest, and how he seemed not to be attracted. She would have joined the conversation if she could, but something tied her tongue. She had one or two feeble remarks about the chickens or the bees, and to her fancy it seemed Kirkham eagerly responded, but Nancy waived the topic aside, and made her feel that to talk about bees or chickens was foolish to a man who must be interested in weightier matters, though Nancy's doings certainly did not seem to interest him much, neither her travels, nor her pleasures, nor her babies, each of which she tried in turn. He answered stupidly, "yes," "no," and "indeed," as the case demanded, and relapsed into a troubled silence. Then Phoebe tried to lead the conversation round to Western Australia, and the unsatisfactory mine at Sunset, and asked whether there was any news, whether they had succeeded in floating the company yet?

He turned to her cheerful and alert.

"I got a letter from old Allan on Thursday," he said. "I really believe the most of it's taken up with messages to you. I intended to bring it over. Did I? No, what a fool I am. I'll bring it tomorrow or next day; you really ought to see it. Allan had just got my letter telling him I'd met you, and he wants to change billets with me. I believe he's quite wild that I've the good luck to be here."

Phoebe blushed in the most school-girl manner, remembering uncomfortably how pleased she would once have been to hear that, and wondering if Nancy was remembering too.

But Nancy only saw that Kirkham preferred her elder sister to her, and felt this must be remedied as soon as possible.

"And what about the company?" she asked, in a tone that demanded attention.

"The company," he repeated. "Oh, yes, I suppose it's getting along all right but I don't understand these things, and I'm beginning to lose interest, and disbelieve. For years I've been hunting a phantom, and even when I've got the

## Kirkham's Find

gold I seem to be no nearer wealth."

"But you found hundreds and thousands of pounds' worth of gold, didn't you?" asked Nancy, curiously.

"I found gold, certainly. They were the richest specimens ever I saw, but -- oh, gold-mining is a most unsatisfactory thing. I'm far better off now with a couple of pounds a week manager of a butter factory."

"But I thought you had a very rich claim," persisted Nancy.

"Well, I'm part owner of one. They say it's rich, but old Allan and I just slaved like niggers for our bare tucker. I assure you we got very little besides."

"How was that?"

"Well, food's very dear there, to begin with. When water's a shilling a bucket you can imagine the price other things run to."

"You didn't often wash, I suppose?"

"Couldn't afford it, though we did own a gold mine. No, I'm inclined to think a mine's a mistake."

"But what's happening now?" persisted Nancy. "I thought you'd have been a rich man before this. It seems a long while since I heard you'd found gold."

"It is a long while," said Kirkham. "You see, first we thought to work it ourselves, and nearly broke our backs dollying out the quartz. We paid our way, certainly, but I can't say much more for it. Then we tried to float the concern in England, and no one would have anything to say to us; then some blackguard took it up in Melbourne and bolted with the shareholders' money; and when at last we got hold of a decent man, or a decent man got hold of us, it took us a long while, and cost us a small fortune to get the machinery to such an out-of-the-way place, and now it's there -- "

"Yes, now it's there?" asked Nancy, eagerly.

"We haven't got enough gold to pay for it yet. I'm terribly afraid, and so is Allan, evidently, that the reef is going to pinch out altogether. We've never come across such rich specimens as we took out the day we discovered the mine. It gets regularly less the harder we work at it, though at first we counted it far and away the best mine on the field. Plenty of other men have made their fortunes there."

"Why did you come away?"

"Because of my leg. You see, I'm a little lame still. I was stabbed. They're a rough lot there, Mrs Sampson, and it didn't heal properly. For about a year I do believe I was trying to get well and couldn't. Then it took a bad turn, and I had to come away. There was nothing else for it."

"Where did you go to?" asked Nancy, but Kirkham noticed the pitiful look in Phoebe's eyes, though she had made him tell the tale of his troubles a dozen times over, and must have known it by heart.

"To the hospital at Perth. By Jove! it was a weary time; thirteen solid months of it, and I had a narrow squeak of losing my leg. However, it's all right now, thank heaven!"

"And I suppose you'll go back when the cool season comes again?"



## Kirkham's Find

For a moment Phoebe started. The thought that he might go away again had never occurred to her, and now that it did she listened with an eagerness that was lost on neither of her sisters for his answer. But to him the question seemed natural enough.

"I don't think so," he said. "Gold-mining never had much charm for me, and a closer acquaintance with it has not entranced me. There's not a bit of the gambler about me; that's been completely knocked out of me. I only want a peaceful, quiet life like this," and involuntarily he glanced at Phoebe.

"You were full of making your fortune when you went away," said Nancy. "Farming was too slow for you."

"Ah, I'm a wiser man nowadays," and Nancy winced. "We're getting older, Mrs Sampson, and — "

"And seeing the hollowness of the world."

"Learning how good a place the world may be."

"Oh, don't be a prig. That sounded dreadful."

"Did it? Perhaps it did. But it's true, nevertheless. I never thought I could have spent such a pleasant time, and be so thoroughly happy as I've been these last three months, and yet see how lowly my position is, and how little prospect I have of bettering it."

"You've learned contentment from Phoebe," said Lydia suddenly rousing herself from her dreams and taking part in the conversation.

"Miss Marsden, I have a great deal to thank you for."

"You needn't thank me," said Phoebe, earnestly. "I'm very happy now, but you'd never guess how miserable I used to be at first. I thought I never could hold out. Oh, dear, it just seems like a bad dream."

"And you are happy now?" asked Kirkham.

"I am very happy now," and she wondered why he did not look quite pleased. And he thought sadly to himself that she was quite content with her life, and that he counted for nothing in it unless she would be a little pleased if he would marry her sister. Would she say she was happy when she heard that Lydia intended to marry Jack Fletcher? Would she let him come and see her once Lydia was gone? would she take any interest in him whatsoever? did he want her to take any interest in him unless she gave him everything? And that she would not do. She was perfectly content to lead a single life, perfectly content with her independence, and he sighed heavily and swore inwardly at the new style of woman, which only showed that he, like the ordinary man in love, was quite incapable of seeing what was very patent to the other two women.

Lydia smiled at it with sympathy in her heart; besides this should make Phoebe more friendly towards her Jack, and Nancy was angry. There are some women so built that they cannot give up their old loves. Once a man has loved them he must not turn his eyes in another direction, and the more Kirkham sought to talk to Phoebe, the angrier her married sister grew. True, she had been married for the last five years; she had three babies over in Warrnambool, a husband in Ballarat, but that did not prevent her looking upon Ned Kirkham as her private property. He had been hers six years ago, he should be hers still. She had loved him as much as she was capable of loving any man, and if the years had worn that love away, still she could not bear to see her place taken by the sister whom she had always regarded as singularly unattractive. She did not love Kirkham now, but most certainly her husband did not fill the place that should have been his in her heart, and therefore she had room for the admiration of other men, and a flirtation, to which the tender memories that hang round dead years would have

## Kirkham's Find

added a keen zest, was just to her mind. She had been so sure of Kirkham's admiration, so sure that she had only to beckon and he would be on his knees again, that to find him with eyes and ears for no one but Phoebe, to find that even when she insisted on his talking to her he still watched her elder sister, was a bitter pill indeed.

So it was an uncomfortable afternoon for all of them, Lydia included, for she could not help going over in her own mind that uncomfortable interview with Phoebe which must come some time before next morning. And at last, when five o'clock came, Phoebe rose up rather thankfully, and said she must go and milk the cow. Nancy looked a little shocked that she should mention the fact that she milked her own cow before Kirkham, but he jumped up with alacrity, and said reproachfully --

"But I thought it was a bargain that I should always do that for you?"

"Oh, not tonight. We've a visitor to entertain," she said, smiling; "you mustn't neglect her."

Nancy pouted, and looked as if she felt aggrieved at her charms being disregarded in this way, but Kirkham fairly turned his back on her, and would have gone with Phoebe but that Lydia stopped him.

"Now, Mr Kirkham," she said, and there was a ring of appeal in her voice he could not ignore, "you must let me milk the cow this evening -- you really must. No, Phoebe isn't going to run off in her Sunday go-to-meeting gown in that way; she can't milk cows in a cream serge, but she can come down and talk to me while I do it. I particularly want her; I've got something important to say to her," and there was an anxious quiver in Lydia's voice that made her sisters look at her wonderingly.

It is rather a trying thing for a girl to tell her own people she is going to be married even when she is quite sure they will all approve highly. And Lydia was not at all sure of Phoebe's approval, but the result of her afternoon's cogitations had been the decision to get it over as soon as possible; and if possible, if Phoebe said anything about it openly, to get Ned Kirkham to speak for her; but the effort to speak naturally, to tell them she had something to say before them all, sent the blood to her face, and made her tremble all over. Nancy saw her emotion, and wonderingly chaffed her about it; while Kirkham, who was in the secret, felt such a thrill of gratitude that she was going to set him right with Phoebe, that he turned quite cheerfully to Nancy, and said they could really take care of each other for half an hour if these independent young women insisted upon doing their own work without masculine assistance. He couldn't quite have said how the proclamation of Lydia's engagement would further his own courtship, but he felt sure it would. And Phoebe, seeing the pleased look on his face, thought with a sigh, "Oh, yes, of course, it was only natural, he was yielding to the old fascination."

It did not take Lydia long to put on the clean print she always milked in, and then, with her stool and her bucket under her arm, she called on Phoebe to join her. The cow-byre was clean and dry, and Phoebe leaned up against one of the posts and looked over the green grass where the shadows were lengthening in the evening sunlight. So fair and rich the land lay before her, so bright the evening, there was such a consciousness of all things done well in her heart, that she could hardly find it in her to be anxious because Kirkham and Nancy were left alone together, and as for being jealous of Lydia -- of all the good that was coming to her -- well -- well, how glorious would this evening have been had she but stood in her younger sister's shoes. But it was mean to be jealous of Lydia -- mean, worse than mean -- she would conquer this feeling and be glad, as glad as she ought to be. Then she looked down at Lydia slowly and thoughtfully squirting the milk into the bucket, watched her thoughtful, troubled face, with the unwonted flush upon it, and asked suddenly --

"What did you bring me out here for, Lydia? What did you want to say so particularly?"

Lydia stopped and looked stupidly into the bucket full of foaming milk, while the red cow tried to free her tail from the rope that gently held it against the post.

## Kirkham's Find

"Well, Lydia, what is it?"

"Phoebe, oh, Phoebe!" — the quiver in her voice was almost a sob —

"Phoebe, don't be angry, but — but — I'm going to be married."

So it had come — it had come, and the shadows seemed to envelope all the landscape. All this joy for Lydia, and she, Phoebe, was alone in the cold as usual. A breath of wind came up and gently fanned her cheek and blew the ribbon at her neck across her face. Alone — in all her life Phoebe Marsden had never felt so utterly lonely as she did at this moment when her sister was telling her that what she had planned the day she found out who the new manager at the butter factory was, was accomplished. It was mean spirited, cruel of her, but she could not help it, and just for one moment such a wave of passionate jealousy swept across her she could have cried aloud for the pain of it. Then she crushed it down bravely, stepped forward, and, laying her hand on her sister's shoulder, stooped and laid her cheek against hers.

"I'm so pleased, dear, so glad," she murmured. "I hope you will be happy; I know you will be happy, the happiest woman in the world."

Lydia had not expected her news to be received in such fashion, and that and the relief at having got the telling over brought a sob in her throat. Then the absurd mistake her sister was making flashed across her mind, and strangled that sob with a burst of laughter, and the result was such an extraordinary sound that the red cow gently lifted her hind leg as a reminder that she wanted attending to, and kicked over the bucket of milk. Lydia pushed away her stool and rose to her feet, and Phoebe looked at her wonderingly, neither of them noticing that the precious milk was trickling away among the sand and stones that made the floor of the cow-byre.

"Lydia, Lydia," remonstrated Phoebe, "don't do that. What's the matter?"

"You — you haven't," gasped Lydia, between laughter and tears, "asked me who the man is."

"Who should he be," said Phoebe. "Why, of course, dear, I don't need to ask. I've seen it coming this long while. It's Ned Kirkham, who else could it be? Why, you never even see another man."

"Phoebe, I believe you were born blind, you must have been," and the laughter conquered, though the tears were still in Lydia's eyes. "Ned Kirkham, indeed! He doesn't care that for me," and she snapped her fingers contemptuously.

Phoebe looked at her dumbfounded. And then suddenly the sun came out once more, the grass looked green and bright, in the garden the birds twittered cheerfully their evening hymn, the quacking of the ducks the other side of the hedge sounded cheerful and contented, and the crowing of her Indian game cock though a well-mannered rooster has no right to be crowing at five o'clock in the evening — had a joyous ring of triumph in it that she had never noticed before.

What a lovely evening it was! what a perfect evening! What more could any woman desire than to stand and gaze at the lengthening shadows and the bright sunshine on the rich land, to drink in the breath of the roses and the woodbine, and that other heavier, sweeter perfume that came from the golden blossoms of the kangaroo acacia hedge close at hand. It was so good to be alive. Never before had she realised the joy of it, and in all the broad colony of Victoria for one brief moment there was not a more contented woman than Phoebe Marsden. She turned away her face, there was something there she would not like her sister to read. And then came the reaction. What was this she was rejoicing over? Lydia was not going to marry Ned Kirkham. Then — then —

"Lydia," she cried, sharply. "Who are you going to marry?"

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Lydia hung her head, and then she raised it boldly. Why should she be ashamed of her lover?

"Jack Fletcher, of course. You must have known. Who else would I be likely to marry?"

"Mr. John Fletcher! A common farmer!"

For once Phoebe was her mother's own daughter, and her tones showed the dismay she felt.

"Of course he's a common farmer, that's what makes it such a rise in the world for me."

"Lydia!"

"Well, it is a rise in the world for me, isn't it? He's a rich farmer and I'm only a farm servant."

"Oh, Lydia!" said Phoebe, hurt; "I did the very best I could for you. It wasn't much, I know, but I thought it would be better than staying at home."

"So it is," said Lydia, gratefully, "a thousand times better. I'm very grateful, Phoebe, and, you see, I have met Jack Fletcher."

"But, Lydia, you can't marry him. He isn't in the same rank of life as you. His father was — was —" Phoebe hesitated because she didn't know what the paternal Fletcher's calling had been, but Lydia had no hesitation.

"His father was a most respectable pork butcher," she said. "I'm not going to marry his father."

"And your father was a University man!"

"And a very disagreeable one too," snapped Lydia. "What's the good of talking, Phoebe? I'm going to marry Jack Fletcher. I don't care what his people are. I'm sure mine aren't up to much. Look at Stanley — not a full-blown doctor yet, and I don't believe he ever will be. I shall be better off than ever I was in my life, and then there's Jack — He — he — Phoebe, you don't know how I love him, or you wouldn't be angry." And Lydia laid a pleading hand on her sister's arm.

"But Lydia, you don't know him. It's all fancy. You don't know what life will be like with a man of that class."

"Don't talk in that contemptuous way. Know him? Of course I know him. I never knew any man so well before."

"But where — when —"

"When did I meet him? Oh, everywhere. When didn't I meet him? First I met him at the post office, and then next day at the store when I went to order the flour — do you remember? — and he walked home with me, and then wherever I went I met him. And then I got to expect to meet him, and Mrs Simpson was ill, and I used to take her milk to the factory for about a month, and always he brought his own milk instead of sending a boy, just for the pleasure of meeting me." And Lydia bridled and blushed with happiness, just as if there were no such things in this world as social differences to be considered.

"I remember," sighed Phoebe, "I remember. I was afraid at first, and then I forgot. I thought you could never — I thought it would be quite safe."

"It's been a delightful time," sighed Lydia.

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"What?" asked her sister, sharply. "You haven't been meeting this man in the lanes and the stores? Lydia, it's just like a servant. Oh, Lydia! And I thought — I thought, even if we were independent and earned our own living, we could behave like ladies and not let men despise us." And there were tears in Phoebe's voice, she was so ashamed and shocked.

"They don't despise us," said Lydia, beginning to laugh. "They love us. They want to marry us."

"Don't," said Phoebe, pleadingly. "Mr Fletcher! Oh, what shall I do? Whatever shall I say to mother?"

"Well, you needn't be so scornful of my poor Jack," said Lydia. "You don't know what a good fellow he is. A man who is as good to his sister as he has been to poor Mrs Simpson must make a good husband. And what about Ned Kirkham?"

"Lydia, how can you? Oh, it would have been all right if you'd only married Ned Kirkham. What are you going to do about Ned Kirkham?"

"What's Ned Kirkham got to do with me?" asked Lydia, laughing outright.

"What does he come here for if he doesn't come to see you?"

"He doesn't come to see me, certainly."

"Nonsense, Lydia! You are throwing away your happiness. You can't look at the other when he is by."

Phoebe looked so distressed and anxious that Lydia walked up to her, put both her hands on her shoulders, and pushed her down on to the milking-stool.

"My dear old sister, you've been very good to me, so I'll forgive you making rude remarks about my young man. You'll like him well enough when you get to know him. Now, really, you are the blindest old bat that ever was seen. Do you — do you — honestly now — think that Ned Kirkham comes here for the sake of my sweet society?"

"Oh course," said Phoebe, looking up in her face. "What else on earth should he come for? Who else is there?"

"What about you?"

"Me!" Phoebe blushed to the roots of her hair. "I'm — I'm so old — I've known him so many years — that's ridiculous."

"He's three or four years older than you, I think, and if he comes to see me, why on earth does he spend so much time talking to you?"

"I'm your sister," murmured Phoebe, confused and blushing, hardly sure whether too be pleased or vexed at the turn things were taking.

"Fudge and fiddlesticks! No girl worth her salt would be wooed through her sister, and no man worth his salt would do it. Phoebe, did you ever have a lover?"

"No," said Phoebe, growing hot all over.

"Then you've got one now, only you don't know it, and for goodness gracious' sake don't go and try and palm him off on somebody else. And now you have got one you'll understand he's not to be given up for any one or what any one says. Oh, gracious! just look at the milk. I'll finish milking, and you can go in and give that unlucky young man a rest from Nancy's frivole."

## CHAPTER XXVII. NANCY DOES NOT QUITE RELISH THE SITUATION

"Ah me! for aught that ever I could read,  
Could ever hear of tale or history,  
The course of true love never did run smooth."

SHAKESPEARE.

Phoebe went back to the cottage feeling absurdly happy, but as she thought she ought to be vexed, there was such a troubled look on her face Nancy noticed it, and asked at once --

"Well, what was this desperate secret?"

"Lydia says she's going to be married."

"Bless my soul! Did the man come down the chimney?"

"No, he didn't," said Phoebe, feeling it would be a relief to tell and find out what these two thought of it. "It's -- oh, dear! I don't know whatever mother will say -- it's a Mr Jack Fletcher here, a farmer who lives out Saidlow way, just the other side of the factory."

"Jack Fletcher!" burst out Nancy, and she began to laugh. "Why, that's the man your valuable friend Mrs Johnston used to be so keen on, isn't it? Don't I remember hearing her hold forth on his charms? Jack Fletcher! Oh, my goodness, Well, Phoebe, a pretty pass your precious independence has brought us to. How will you like having Mrs Simpson for a sister-in-law?"

"Nancy," said Phoebe in protest, and she looked appealingly at Ned Kirkham.

"Fletcher is a very decent, honest man, I believe, Mrs Sampson. Every one here has a good word for him."

"Oh, yes, decent and honest. I know the sort. Just the character you give to a servant. Not the sort of man one thinks of marrying."

"She will marry him," said Phoebe. She knew Lydia well enough to be sure of that. "She says she's no better than he is."

"Well, I suppose she isn't, if you look at it in that light. But whose fault is that? Yours, Phoebe. If it hadn't been for your wild nonsense about being independent she never would have met him. Why on earth couldn't you stay at home like an ordinary girl?"

"She's been very happy," protested the culprit, humbly, because she really didn't know what to think about Lydia, "and I've been very happy too, and it's been a help to them at home to get rid of us, and -- "

"I would have taken you," said Nancy, "so that's no excuse. There's something wrong about this way you are living. I've always thought so, and now I'm sure of it. You two young women live alone here without a chaperon, without a servant even, and you go scraping acquaintance with young men -- 'walking' with them, as servants say

## Kirkham's Find

— just like servants. Fancy meeting a young man about the lanes and fields and doing your courting that way, just like the common people!" And Nancy looked severely virtuous, and Kirkham wondered if she remembered those many stolen interviews with him in the lanes about Bandara.

Phoebe had apparently forgotten this weak point in Nancy's reasoning, for she looked genuinely distressed and as ashamed as if she herself had committed this grave offence against the rules of good society.

"I never thought of such a thing happening when I asked Lydia down here," she said perplexedly. "I have lived here so long and — no — nothing — I mean —"

"You mean nobody's made love to you," said her sister, "You know well enough nobody ever did, so that doesn't count for much."

It was an unkind speech to make, especially before a man, but Phoebe forgave Nancy on the score of her natural irritation at Lydia's engagement; only by the hot flush on her face Kirkham saw the taunt had gone home.

"I was so sure," she said, "that Lydia was just like me."

"She is like you, very," interposed Kirkham, hastily, "and the consequence is the first decent man who comes across her topples head over ears in love with her, and apparently goes to a great deal of trouble to get the chance to tell her so."

The flush on Phoebe's face deepened at the implied compliment, but Nancy said scornfully —

"Such a man! I'm ashamed of the whole thing. Phoebe never could be got to see, Mr Kirkham, that there are certain rules of good society which must be complied with, and that any woman who steps outside them is sure to be looked down upon and held in contempt by any decent men, let alone the women."

"Lydia doesn't seem to have found it so any way," said Kirkham, wondering if he ever had been in love with this woman, or if it was all a dream.

"No decent man would marry her — no man in our own class," said Nancy, in her anger entirely forgetting poor Phoebe's feelings.

"Phoebe, I must go back. There's the buggy outside been waiting for me ever so long. Come in while I put on my hat. I want to speak to you."

Lydia came in at that moment, smiling and happy, but Nancy swept past her without speaking, and Lydia only made a grimace at Kirkham and suggested he should come outside and help feed the chickens, and inside Nancy gave Phoebe what she called a severe talking to.

"Phoebe, you'll have to give up this sort of life."

"I won't," said Phoebe, flatly.

"Well, I told you before — and so did mother and father too, for that matter — no decent man will ever look at you."

"No man ever did," said Phoebe; "we agreed on that subject long ago. So what's the good of me giving up my life for the good opinion of a very doubtful man?"

## Kirkham's Find

"Look at the scrape you've got Lydia into."

"I'm sorry," said Phoebe, sitting down on her little white bed and resting her chin in her hand. "I'm very sorry indeed. I never would have been on friendly terms with a man of that sort, and so it never occurred to me that Lydia would; and then when I began to think she would --- "

"Yes, well?"

"Ned Kirkham made his appearance, and then I felt quite safe and forgot all about Jack Fletcher, because I felt sure Lydia would not look at him when the other man was by."

"You made pretty sure of the other man," said Nancy, with a slight contemptuous emphasis on her words.

"He was always here," said Phoebe. "What else could I think?"

"Exactly," said Nancy, who was hot and angry, not exactly about Lydia's ill-starred engagement, but at the way the world in general had treated her this afternoon, and was bound to visit her displeasure on somebody, "any man would come and make free in a house run on such free and easy principles as this; but marriage, marriage is quite a different thing. He has never thought of marriage. Did he look a bit cut up or disappointed when you told him Lydia was going to be married? Not he. He never thought of either of you in that sort of way. It is not to be expected. It's all very well to spend his spare time here, but marriage is a very different thing. And let me tell you, Phoebe" --- Nancy looked grave and severe indeed --- "when a man will come and make free in a woman's house, be on such intimate terms as Ned Kirkham is with you and yet never think of marrying, it's a bad lookout for the woman. He thinks very lightly of her indeed. You don't know what he thinks," and Nancy paused and looked solemnly at her sister. "You must give up such a life."

Nancy's words were not without weight, for Phoebe was ready to acknowledge to herself that she knew little enough about the ways of men, and still less about the usages of good society. The latter troubled her little, but she could not help feeling that she cared a very great deal about the good opinion of at least one man. That he should think lightly of her was intolerable. However, the day had gone by when she would have taken Nancy's opinion without question. There might be a modicum of truth in what she said, and the thought was gall and wormwood to her, but she was not going to acknowledge that to her sister.

"You see what I mean, Phoebe," and Nancy carefully skewered her big hat on with a long bonnet pin, and arranged her veil daintily in Phoebe's glass, flattering herself in her own mind that the six years that had passed over her head had left no trace, and she was as fresh and fair as ever.

"I see," said Phoebe, calmly, "but I don't agree with you in the least. You're quite wrong. Mr Kirkham thinks very highly of both Lydia and me, and it has never occurred to either him or anybody else that we are making too free with him. I dare say he doesn't want to marry Lydia, I expect I made a mistake there; but that doesn't say he doesn't like her very much indeed."

"Respects you both, like Joe does my housemaid!"

Nancy was very angry indeed, she thought it was at Phoebe's independent mode of life, and would have been truly astonished had any one told her that the intimacy between her sister and her discarded lover was displeasing to her.

"Joe thinks very highly of Ellen," said Phoebe, coolly. "No woman need be ashamed if a man thinks of her like that."



## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, well, if you like to put yourself on a par with the servants," said Nancy, "I wash my hands of the whole business."

"I think you'd better. Come, Nan, dear," she added, "don't let us quarrel after all these years. If Mr Kirkham thinks of me as a servant, I can't help it. If I went back home, I should be a servant in reality in all but name."

But Nancy refused to be won over, and for the first time in her life Phoebe was glad to see her gone. She came back to her bedroom — Kirkham and Lydia had not reappeared — and indulged in a few feminine tears. Suppose this thing that Nancy said was true, suppose Kirkham thought of her and Lydia as he would of a decent housemaid? To be sure there was no shame in it, nothing to be ashamed of whatever; but — but — well, somehow the thought brought the tears into her eyes — it might not be the case, of course. Nancy was not invariably right, but he had seemed to think that Jack Fletcher was not a bad match for Lydia, and his good word for him, which she had found so comforting when Nancy was present, returned to her now in the most disquieting manner. Perhaps Nancy was right, and he did look upon such a match as most suitable, and the very thought brought fresh tears to her eyes. It could not matter to her, she told herself, in the very least what Ned Kirkham should think of the engagement; and then she cried on, and told herself she was a fool and ought to be ashamed of herself crying like a baby for nothing. The little farm was doing very well, she was prospering beyond her highest hopes, and if Lydia had engaged herself to the wrong man, at any rate she loved him dearly; and had not she herself always preached that love must come before all else, was the very first requisite for a happy marriage. What was she crying for? She sat up, wiped the hair out of her eyes, washed her face, and gave her mind to discovering what was making her so miserable. Because Lydia was going to marry Jack Fletcher? Certainly not. It was not human nature to cry one's eyes out because one's sister will marry the man she loves, and the man she loves is a most respectable farmer, whose father was a highly respected pork butcher. No; there was certainly nothing to cry about there, though she might rather dread her mother on the marriage; but, practically, her mother's opinions made no difference to either her or Lydia. She must actually be crying because — because — Lydia had suggested as the most natural thing in the world that Ned Kirkham came to see her, to do more than see her, to woo her, and just as she was beginning to realise the full delight of the suggestion, Nancy had dashed it aside, and had made her feel as if this man must needs look down upon her, must look upon her as Joe himself regarded his housemaid. The hot colour mounted into her cheeks as she thought of Kirkham, as the full significance of her thoughts came over her. She was not shocked at Lydia's engagement, she was glad, thankful — she poured some water into the basin and sponged her face — she had fancied she wanted to marry Ned Kirkham; she had schooled herself to hope she would, and what did it all come to? She had been thankful to hear from her own lips that she loved another man, and then Lydia's words about Ned Kirkham had filled her, for one brief moment, with such a vision of entrancing delight as took her breath away.

And Nancy with one word had swept this vision aside. It was too much. She hastily gulped down another sob, as she thought of it. And after all Nancy was not quite fair. He could not despise them. He wouldn't, in any case, she was sure of that, but at present he had no right. If she was only a farmer in a very small way, he, in spite of that gold mine, was only manager of a butter factory, and socially there was not a pin to choose between them. Besides, why was she bothering her head about social distinctions? She had given up such things when she started for herself. Why should they trouble her now? It was because — she came to the glass now and smoothed back her hair, and she flushed rosy red as she caught sight of her own reflection — it was because — she could not hide it from herself any longer, she wondered how she had hidden it so long — there was but one man in the world for her. It was for his footstep she listened, for his praise she worked; it was the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand, that set her heart dancing — and — and Lydia had said he cared, and Nancy had said he scorned.

She heard his footstep in the next room, she heard his laughing voice chaffing Lydia about her engagement, and she could not muster courage to face them. She was afraid lest the secret she had but now discovered must be written on her face. Perhaps, possibly — she grew hot at the thought — she had betrayed herself long ago, and it was a secret to neither of them. The horrid thought stayed her hand on the door handle, and she heard Lydia say

## Kirkham's Find

—

"Wherever can that sister of mine be? Phoebe, don't you propose to have any supper to-night?" and she pushed open the door and revealed her standing hesitating there.

"Why, Phoebe, whatever is the matter? You haven't been crying, have you? Has Nan been pitching into you? Poor old Nan," and Phoebe wondered why Lydia should pity her sister.

"Come along in, Phoebe. Now that our rich sister has gone we may be allowed to pursue our humble course in peace. I've just been pointing out to Mr Kirkham, Phoebe, what highly respectable farmers we are, in case he didn't know it before."

Lydia was in wild spirits. The relief at having got the announcement over was very apparent, and Kirkham, too, seemed to share her happiness. Nancy's departure was evidently a relief to him too, and he stole occasional glances at Phoebe, as if wondering why she did not respond to her sister's sallies. It was comfortable without Nancy, so homelike; so easy to talk that insensibly she recovered herself and began to think, as she always did think, that it really didn't matter what the outside world thought as long as they were happy together. There was that disquieting discovery she had made, though she hardly dared look Kirkham in the face lest he should read it in her eyes, and suppose he did not care, as Nancy said he did not; or suppose he did, as Lydia hinted.

It made her flush to think either, and as Kirkham sat and watched her, he could not but see that something was troubling her. He set it down rightly enough to Nancy's meddling, and was quite surprised to find how vigorously in his own mind he condemned the narrow views and vapid conversation of the woman he had only a few years back counted the only woman in the world for him. He had never given a thought to Phoebe then, and now he watched her all the evening and wondered vaguely what on earth he could do to help her, and asked himself, with a little anxious sinking at his heart, whether she would ever care enough for him to look to him for help.

And Lydia chatted on cheerfully and watched them both, and laughed when she thought thankfully that they were in the same deep waters that she and her Jack had emerged from only this morning. They seemed so old to her, she remembered them grown up when she was a child, she could not help a slight contempt for them. Why were they going on like this, making each other miserable, allowing Nancy to make them both so uncomfortable, when the way lay straight before them? She had given Phoebe a hint. Why could not the old stupid take it? She would make another effort on their behalf, anyhow, since they seemed so incapable of helping themselves.

"Phoebe," she said, "what about those duck eggs? I put them in a nice comfortable nest in a barrel, down in the corner under the lilac bush. Will you set the hen tonight?"

Phoebe glanced down at her pretty dress, dubiously. As a rule she did not shirk her duties, but tonight she felt very like letting that hen go till a more convenient season. Love had never come to her before, not like this; and even if it came unrequited, it was an era in her life, and she could not regard it lightly. She didn't feel a bit like sitting a hen.

"It won't do your dress any harm," went on Lydia, practically. "The nest's as clean as possible, and so's the Plymouth Rock hen. You've only got to catch her by the wings and carry her down. Mr Kirkham'll do it for you. Won't you, Mr Kirkham?"

"Of course I will," said Kirkham, cheerfully, rising to his feet, quite oblivious of the fact that up to quite lately he had cordially detested the business hen.

"Oh, no, I won't trouble you," hesitated Phoebe. "I can do it myself. Men hate hens."

"Well, let me come and look on then," suggested Kirkham, and they left the room together, while Lydia performed a wild war dance all by herself in the little kitchen, by way of working off her over-wrought feelings.

## CHAPTER XXVIII. THE BEST THING IN THE WORLD

There is no life on earth but being in love!  
There are no studies, no delights, no business,  
No intercourse or trade of sense or soul  
But what is love! I was the laziest creature,  
The most unprofitable sign of nothing,  
The veriest drone, and slept away my life  
Beyond the dormouse, till I was in love.  
And now I can outwake the nightingale,  
Outwatch an usurer, and outwalk him too;  
Stalk like a ghost that haunted 'bout a treasure,  
And all that fancied treasure — it is love!

BEN JONSON.

It was a lovely night, soft and warm, and the brilliant moonlight turned the common-place surroundings of the little farm into something romantic and not of this world. The lilac was all gone long ago, but the air was heavy with the scent of the roses that climbed over the garden fence, and beneath their feet as they walked they crushed the tall grass, and it gave off a scent like new-mown hay. It was very common-place to catch a hen, but Phoebe did not find it so when Kirkham caught it for her and carried it down to the barrel and stood and watched while she covered over the barrel with a sack, in case that hen should not be quite pleased with her new quarters.

Then she rose up and stood beside him, and forgot to thank him for his help. She leaned back a moment against the rose-covered fence, and looked up at the full moon sailing out in the clear, dark sky.

"What a glorious night!"

She was a perfect woman, thought the man before her, as he looked at her up-turned face — those dark eyes were beautiful, that firm mouth and chin; those white even teeth told of strength of will and force of character, and yet the little tender smile on her lips showed she was a very woman still, a woman to be wooed and won, a woman well worth the winning. A tender, loving woman. What fairer jewel could any man desire to place in his household? But was she for him? And he thought of the years he had wasted over her younger sister, and cursed himself for a fool.

"It is a perfect night," he said. "It's a shame to go in."

"But Lydia?" And the colour deepened on her cheeks, because he had in a manner asked her to stay outside with him. "And Lydia said — and Nancy said — "

Kirkham laughed.

"Oh, Lydia's all right. She can only think on one subject. Lydia! And I remember her a long-legged girl, who was the plague of your life because she wouldn't do her hair. Do you remember? And now she's going to be married?"

"Oh, dear," sighed Phoebe. "Whatever am I to do?"

"They haven't left much for you to do except say, 'Bless you, my children.'"

## Kirkham's Find

"Oh, Mr Kirkham," said Phoebe, anxiously looking him straight in the face and forgetting her own particular trouble, "do tell me what you think of it all. They will be so angry at home, and — and — yet what am I to do? He is a good fellow, I'm sure of that, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is a good, honest fellow who will make any woman a good husband. She will be quite safe with him, and if he isn't very polished — "

Phoebe groaned.

"He sucks up his gravy with his knife," she said.

Kirkham laughed at her lugubrious face.

"His principles are sound. What's the good of bothering about his manners?"

"And Lydia is very fond of him, and I've always held it's the best thing in the world to marry for love."

"It is indeed," said her companion, fervently.

"But," went on Phoebe, judiciously trying to weigh every word, "would she be in love with him if she had had a chance of seeing any one better? Would she be in love with him if she waited five years?"

"Probably not," said Kirkham, out of the depth of his own experience.

"Then — then — isn't it wicked to let her marry this man when she knows so little about him? Put it what way you will there are social distinctions in the world. They think at home I'm very broad in my views, but I wouldn't like to marry him. If I succeed in stopping Lydia now, won't she thank me with all her heart five years hence?"

"Oh, Miss Marsden, don't you want to know too much?"

"Would you like to marry the person you were madly in love with in the days of your youth?" asked Phoebe in desperation, forgetting for the moment to whom she was speaking, and how very apposite was her question. Then she remembered, and he saw her face go crimson in the moonlight.

"No, I would not," he said gravely, though his colour too mounted to his forehead. "You must know well enough," and he laid his hand on her arm and found to his surprise that she was trembling, "that I am more thankful than words can say that I could not marry the woman I was wild to have five years ago."

"That is to say," and she held up her head and drew her arm away, "there is no such thing as love in the world."

"That is to say," and Kirkham's voice sank low, almost to a whisper, so earnest was he, "that a man is sometimes made to realise very bitterly what a blasted idiot he has made of himself."

"You — you — I don't understand."

"Don't you?" Kirkham gripped her arm hard now and drew her towards him. "Oh, Phoebe, don't you understand. Are you going to punish me because I — because I loved your sister five years ago?"

"You did love her," whispered Phoebe, but there was a glow of happiness at her heart she could hardly have explained to herself. What did it all mean? What did it mean? Her heart was beating so wildly it almost suffocated her, and she was afraid lest he should find it out.

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He took his hand off her arm for a moment and held out both his own. Involuntarily she turned towards him, it was the slightest movement but it told him all he wanted to know, and the next he had her close in his arms.

"My dear, my dear, my darling, I cared for her in a way it is true enough, but not like this, not as I love you. She would have none of me, thank God. I am older and wiser now, and I've learned — I've learned — Oh, Phoebe, Phoebe, won't you love me a little?"

But Phoebe's head was on his shoulder, he whispered the words in her ear, his lips were on hers, and there was no need of an answer.

And the moon climbed up and up in the clear dark sky, and the evening crept slowly on while those two leaned up against the garden fence and gave no heed to anything but the love that had come to both of them after so many years. A flight of wild swans flew overhead crying mournfully on their way south, an owl across the road hooted at intervals in a most ill-omened manner, and the Plymouth Rock hen scuffled round until she got first her head and then her whole body outside the sack that covered the barrel, gave vent to her feelings in a frightened cackle which should have brought a well-regulated hen mistress to her side, and, as it failed to rouse Phoebe, took matters into her own hands and scuttled off down the garden where she found a resting place, after the manner of ill-conducted hens, on some addled hen eggs which Lydia would have buried that morning had not her love affairs interfered.

What matter, what matter? Such joy comes but once in a lifetime to a woman. Just for one brief hour let these two forget all else but their two selves. It had come to them at last, the greatest joy on earth, the joy of loving and being loved. Would it stand the test of years? Ah, well! They were very sure of that.

"Do you love me?" asked Kirkham, for the twentieth time turning her blushing face up so that he could look into her dark eyes.

"You know, oh, you know."

"Will you love me always?"

"Always, always."

Then she looked up at him smiling a little though there were tears in her eyes.

"It is I who ought to ask that question," she said. "I never was in love with your cousin."

"And I never loved any one like this, never, never. You'll believe me, won't you, darling?"

Oh, yes, she would believe him; when love comes to a woman like Phoebe Marsden, there is no question in it, no doubt, no reservations. It was all pure delight to her to stand here in the moonlight, her lover's arms round her, her head on his shoulder. There was no need of words between them, though it seemed to her that all her life would hardly be long enough to say to him all she had to say.

And it was getting so late.

"I ought to go in," said Phoebe, raising her head. "Whatever would Nancy say?"

"A little longer," pleaded Kirkham, "what does it matter what anybody thinks now?"

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"And we haven't settled anything about Lydia," sighed Phoebe, contentedly nestling her head a little closer to his, "I came out specially to consult you about Lydia."

"What can we say when we're doing exactly the same thing ourselves?" and he kissed her hair gently.

Phoebe laughed and sighed.

"Oh dear, oh dear, if she feel, just half what I do I wouldn't dare help the smallest bit to separate them."

And he kissed her hair again.

"You're not helping me at all," she said.

"Darling, you'll have to say, 'Bless you, my children'; I told you so before."

"Oh, if she should change, if she should change and some day see him with my eyes."

"If she marries him," said Kirkham, "she'll never do that. If she doesn't mind these little things that jar on you now, she won't in her married life."

"And he's a good honest fellow?"

"He's a good honest fellow."

"They will be so shocked at home."

"Especially about the pork butcher. What will they say about us?"

"I don't think they could think much worse of me," Phoebe laughed a little contented laugh. "They'll be quite delighted to think I'm doing anything so reasonable as -- as -- "

"Marrying a poor devil like me."

"What about the gold mine?" She lifted her up her hand and touched his cheek gently.

"Oh, the gold mine? I'm afraid we mustn't count on the gold mine. Darling, you're going to marry the manager of a butter factory."

"It's a rise in the world for me," said Phoebe, demurely, "I'm the woman that supplies the Western Hotel with poultry."

"Clearly we can't interfere with Lydia."

Then they both laughed happily, and Lydia's fate was decided as far as the Western District was concerned.

Lydia was very sure no one had any concern in it except herself, and she was so happy and so wild with excitement she hardly knew how to pass the evening. If only she had known, she thought, that those two silly old things were going to spend the whole of the evening over setting a hen, Jack should certainly have spent the evening with his sweetheart. But at any rate she promised herself good times for the future, and when the clock hand began to creep up higher she thoughtfully put out some cake and began to make some cocoa. There was a mischievous smile on her face when at last the other two made their appearance, looking -- well, as folks

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generally do look who have been kissing in the garden.

"Well, you two -- I hope you've been long enough," said she. "Now, did your hen sit?"

"The hen?" It seemed to Phoebe she had gone out into another world to set that hen, so long ago was it. "Oh, yes, of course. She's sitting all right. Those Plymouth Rocks always do."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," said Lydia, "for it really looked to me as if you did not know much about it. Might one be permitted to ask what you've been doing ever since. Three mortal hours by this clock."

Phoebe's happy face grew rosy red, and she looked down and twisted her dress between her fingers.

"What," asked Kirkham, coming to the rescue, "were you doing this morning when I met you in Byer's Lane?"

It was Lydia's turn to blush, but she was equal to the occasion. She caught her sister round the waist and kissed her.

"Phoebe! I'm so glad."

That night, after Kirkham had taken his departure, and the two girls were undressing, Lydia laid down her hair brush with a sigh and said, "Oh, dear, this has been an exciting day, hasn't it? Phoebe, dear, if any one had told you years ago that you would marry Ned Kirkham! Why, he was Nancy's lover, wasn't he? Nell and I used to think you ought to marry Allan Morrison."

"Oh, Lydia!" and Phoebe blushed because she remembered that long ago leaning towards Allan Morrison when he had given no thought to her. "He was always Nancy's."

"Was he? He'd have suited you. Ned Kirkham's very nice, but you know, Phoebe, dear, you really are marrying the wrong man."

"Am I? People always do, you know. Plenty of people will tell you you are, Lyd." Then she put her head down on the pillow and hid her face. "And I'm so happy, so happy, I didn't think there was such happiness possible in this world. The wrong man indeed! Oh, I hope, I only hope I'll make him as happy as he deserves."

And Lydia laughed because that side of the question only occurs to an older woman.

## CHAPTER XXIX. TOO LATE

We might have been -- but these are common words,  
And yet they make the sum of life's bewailing,  
They are the echoes of those finer chords,  
Whose music we deplore when unavailing.  
    We might have been!

L. E. LANDON.

The mail was due at Sunset. Allan Morrison could hardly have said why he was so anxious for that mail. There was no one down south cared much about him; only his cousin, Ned Kirkham, wrote to him regularly because he understood the loneliness of life on a mining camp, and would do all in his power to help his old mate. His letters were cool and refreshing, there was no drought there, no want of water, only talk of green fields knee-deep in spring grass, of milk and cream and butter, of evenings and Sundays spent with two happy, busy women -- such tales of home and comfort as made the lonely man's heart long with a great longing for the time when these things

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should be his. And it would not be long now. He and Sam McAlister, who had joined him when Kirkham went east, were eagerly looking forward to the first crushing. If it anything like came up to their expectations he would leave the mine to Sam, be off to the coast by the very next coach, and to the eastern colonies by the very next steamer. And it would be right this time, he had very little doubt of it. They had got the reef and it promised splendidly; such a show of gold he had not seen since that first day, when he and Ned Kirkham had ridden over and Ned had pointed out to him where he had found a nugget in a "buck-reef," and they had gone mad over that first promise of untold wealth. Well, it had been a long time coming, a long time; there had been more disappointments than he had thought possible, and he was not a man in the first flush of his youth, who expected to find everything to his hand. But now, now it was all right, the reef was there, the machinery was there, he could hear from his seat at his hut door the sound of the heavy stampers as they rose and fell steadily. Soon the first crushing, the first legitimate crushing at 'Kirkham's Golden Hole' would be over and he would be free to go away for the long-looked-for rest. Where would he go to? Oh, he had little doubt about that. Of course he would go and see old Ned running his butter factory, where else should he go? He would lie on the long grass, and let the cool wind play on his sunburned face, he would watch the cows feed knee-deep in it, the dairy folk coming up with their carts and buggies and their shining milk cans, the bonny, bright-faced, rosy children, the light-hearted girls, the happy women with their babies in their arms. How he yearned for it all after the desolation, and the heat and the dust and the flies, and the disappointment that had been his portion for so many weary months. But it was almost at an end now. Not another week of it. He looked out across the plain and saw a small red cloud of dust, which he knew was the incoming mail coach. Should he go down and get his mail first or should he go and see the result of the crushing? Overhead was the brassy sky, and the wind from the north was like a breath from a furnace, for it was the month of November, and all the miners were getting exemptions, and would be free to go eastwards to visit wife and children, or sweetheart, without fear of their claim being jumped. How he hated it all, red plain and brassy sky, those wretched tents and makeshift houses, the untidy, desolate, mining camp; the heaps of mullock and the heaps of stone; the poppet heads that were rising all over the place, the unwashed men in dirty shirts and ragged moleskins; the picturesque Afghans, the camels that looked as if they had stepped out of Bible history — how he hated it all. He would go east to the cool little town on the south coast of Victoria, nestling there among the soft green hills, where drought and want and greed of gold were unknown, and see if he too could not find there the peace that had come to Ned Kirkham. It read like a pretty idyll, the tale of his meeting and his intimacy with the two Marsden girls. What more could the heart of man desire, thought this lonely man, than to be a trusted friend in such a dainty, happy little household as Kirkham described in his letters? What more? Well, likely a great deal more, but all in good time, there was no hurry. He thought of the days when Nancy would have none of him, and smiled to himself. How much he had loved her! How he had schooled himself to see his cousin win her. It had been such hard work, and yet what a fool he had been, for behold her elder sister was worth a dozen of her. Kirkham had discovered that for himself now. He evidently thought a great deal of Phoebe, and of Lydia too. And Allan Morrison leaned against his rather rickety doorpost, and watched the red cloud of dust come closer and closer, and wondered idly would Kirkham marry Lydia? Could he love her when he had loved Nancy so madly? But that was five years ago, or was it six? Yes, there was nothing I like propinquity. Kirkham would probably marry Lydia, and they would have plenty of money, if that counted for anything. And Phoebe? Fancy Phoebe remaining unmarried all these years, and developing into a fine, handsome, tender-hearted woman. He thought a great deal about Phoebe, he had always respected her, placed her in a place apart from other women; in his heart believed in her, hoped great things from her, and behold here was Ned Kirkham writing to say that Phoebe Marsden had more than fulfilled his old time hopes of her. He thought of that Sunday afternoon they had walked back from church together, and he had longed to be with Nancy, and yet could not help seeing how superior was the girl who acknowledged that she always ironed her sister's dresses for her. She was a good girl, Phoebe Marsden, and she had grown into a splendid woman. Ned Kirkham seemed to speak of her as something infinitely superior to ordinary womankind, something to be looked up to and admired. Would this pearl among women look at him?

And there at this hot and blazing noon-day, with the north wind covering everything in his rough hut with red dust, Allan Morrison puffed away at his pipe, and in the curling smoke saw visions of the future that should be his. He saw it all clearly now. She was worth all a man's love, the best he had to give, and she should have it. He



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would go back and woo her as never surely was woman wooed before. He would make amends for his former blindness. His past had been so dreary, so devoid of home life, of all tenderness and love. But the future should be — that future, that future — He could sit here no longer and wait with idle hands, he would go down to the battery, they must know the result of the crushing now.

And as he stepped out into the hot and dusty roadway, Sam McAlister, rushing along as if the thermometer had been at freezing, almost carried him off his feet.

"Good Lord, boss, carry me out and bury me! It's ten ounces to the ton if it's a ha'penny! Whoop! Hurroo!" and Sam McAlister performed a wild war dance round the hut that brought the frying-pan and all the tin pannikins clattering about his heels. Then, streaming with perspiration, he flung himself upon the stretcher and contemplated with a satisfied sigh his own dust-covered butcher boots.

"Oh, Lord!" he said, as he drew a grimy hand over a still grimmer forehead, "we're millionaires after all. I suppose you're off east, boss?"

"Yes," said Morrison, rising to his feet and stretching his arms above his head with the air of a man who has borne much, and now that success has come, looks back, wondering at his own strength. He could not do it again. He has succeeded, but he could never go through those weary days again. Oh, to lay his wealth at Phoebe Marsden's feet, to feel the touch of her cool hand, to see the love light in her eyes. He might have won her years ago, a woman worth winning, a woman worth waiting for, and working for, but he had let the time pass him by. But now he was free to woo again, he was an older, wiser man, the foolish days of his youth were gone by, but not, thank God, his capacity for loving. Such a tender, loving husband she shall have if she will only take him. And why not? Why not?

"You'll be off, boss, pretty soon, I suppose?" said Sam McAlister.

"Tonight, man, tonight," said Morrison, impatiently.

The man on the bed opened his eyes and felt in the pocket of his breeches.

"Here's a letter for you," he said, throwing it at him, "I called for the mails as I passed. Catch."

Morrison caught the thin foreign envelope and saw the address was in Kirkham's hand. What did he say of Phoebe? And with eager fingers he tore it open.

"Congratulate me, old man," it began. "I'm engaged to the best woman in the world. You always said so, and I've been finding out all these months how right you were, only you see I know more about it than you do by now, for I'm going to marry Phoebe Marsden before Christmas."

"Lucky beggar you are," grumbled Sam McAlister, "I suppose I'll have to stick in this beastly hot hole and look after things till you get back?"

"You can go if you like, Sam," said Morrison, quietly. "There's no particular hurry about me."