PATRICK WHITE

Voss

Introduction by
THOMAS KENEALLY

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi–110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in the United States of America by The Viking Press 1957
First published in Great Britain by Eyre & Spottiswoode 1957
Published in Penguin Books (UK) 1960
Published in Penguin Books (USA) 1982
This edition with an introduction by Thomas Keneally published 2008

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
White, Patrick, 1912–1990.
Voss / Patrick White ; introduction by Thomas Keneally.
p. cm.—(Penguin classics)
ISBN 978-0-14-310568-8
I. Title.
PR9619.3.W5V63 2009
823'.912—dc22
2008043021

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Adobe Sabon

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For
Marie d'Estournelles
de Constant

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Introduction

In Patrick White's magnificent modernist novel *Voss,* set in colonial Australia, there is an exchange between Mr. Bonner, a characteristically well-off Sydney trader who was one of the sponsors of the German explorer Voss's impending exploration of the continent, and Voss himself. Mr. Bonner remarks that Voss might consider it imprudent of him to ask, but he wonders whether he has studied the map. At the time that the question was asked, a greater part of the middle of the immense continent of Australia was indeed utterly unexplored by Europeans and was, like Africa, under suspicion of being the sort of place that could devour explorers whole.

> "The map?" repeated the German. "I will first make it."

"At times," writes Patrick White in *Voss,* "his arrogance did resolve itself into simplicity and sincerity, though it was usually difficult, especially for strangers, to distinguish these occasions."

The prototype for Voss is Ludwig Leichhardt, the renowned if incompetent Prussian naturalist and penetrator of the Australian continent. A pacifist who did not believe in serving in the Prussian army, Leichhardt studied at a number of German universities but never received a degree. Later in his career, however, people would refer to him as Doctor Leichhardt, a tribute to his expansive knowledge of natural and physical science.

An English patron enabled Leichhardt to travel to Australia, where he hoped to be appointed head of either a natural history museum or the Botanic Gardens in Sydney. Like Voss's in White's novel, Leichhardt's goal was always knowledge itself. But Australian exploration was usually based on practicalities

such as the finding of grazing land, and those who discovered it, as an ambitious Scot, Major James Mitchell, had in the Australian region named Australia Felix, were cherished and rewarded. The fact that Leichhardt had desires greater than commercial payoff was no doubt one of the aspects of his character that attracted White. Leichhardt wished to be a *knower* of the country he penetrated.

Leichhardt spent his first two years in the colony exploring the bush around Sydney and the Blue Mountains. In 1844 he sought private subscriptions to put together a party that would leave Moreton Bay to cross the north of the continent as far as Port Essington, a long-since-abandoned attempt to create a new Singapore on the far tropic coast of Australia. On this journey a brilliant young ornithologist was killed by natives while sleeping in the open—a prototype of the attacks, especially of the killing of the naturalist Palfreyman, recounted in *Voss*. Leichhardt's party staggered into Port Essington just before Christmas 1845. When he returned to the Australian Southeast he was dubbed the Prince of Explorers, rewarded with grants, and invited to give lectures. He decided now, despite his limitations as a leader, to cross the continent from east to west. The first attempt to do so ended in debacle, and the second, in 1848, ended with his complete disappearance somewhere far beyond the outermost sheep and cattle stations.

Leichhardt's story increased the reputation of Australia as a netherworld that could consume any descending Orpheus. Indeed, there was an extent to which Patrick White himself was a European Orpheus trapped in this European version of Hades, which had after all originally been devised as a penal settlement, and which had thereafter become a great livestock walk of the British Empire.

The novel *Voss* appeared in 1957, when White was forty-five years old. Again, White was like Voss himself, a man whose sensibility was European but whose destiny could be fulfilled only in Australia, a place that, by its lack of European reference points in the landscape and by its colonial and postcolonial philistinism, challenged his prophetic temperament. White was born to a privileged family in Knightsbridge, London, on May 28, 1912, of two Australian parents. He returned to Australia with his parents, who

settled in Sydney because his mother did not want to live at Belltrees, the Upper Hunter Valley family estate, with her sisters-in-law. White's great-grandfather had founded the family wealth when he emigrated from England to New South Wales in 1826 as a flockmaster and received a grant of Crown land in the Upper Hunter Valley. From it he had built his fortune.

White's mother, Ruth Withycombe, was from a family of "less material success than the Whites," wrote White himself, "which perhaps accounted for my mother's sense of her own superiority in White circles." The Whites considered that all their menfolk would work on the land—Patrick was intended to, though he sensed it would not happen in his case. Despite his childhood asthma, at thirteen he was sent to school at Cheltenham, in England, because of his mother's conviction that it would polish him. "I spent four very miserable years as a colonial at an English high school," confessed White. An English master, noticing that he had a teenage liking for Ibsen and Strindberg, declared that he had a morbid streak that needed stamping out. "He then proceeded to stamp it deeper in," said White.

After Cheltenham he returned to Australia, working as a jackeroo, a barely paid gentleman-stockrider, first in the extreme, mountainous south of New South Wales and then in Queensland. "The life in itself was not uncongenial, but the talk was endlessly of wool and weather." In his free time, at his uncle's dining table, he started writing a novel. Two years later he traveled to England again, to attend King's College, Cambridge. "Even if a university should turn out to be another version of a school, I had decided I would lose myself afterwards as an anonymous particle of a London I already loved."

At Cambridge he discovered French and German literature, and after graduating settled in London, wanting to become a writer, for which purpose his uncomprehending but decent father gave him a small allowance. Early in 1939 he published a novel named *Happy Valley,* "received well enough by the critics to make me feel I had become a writer." It was published not only in Britain and Australia but in New York, too, by The Viking Press. This exhilarating personal situation was somewhat spoiled by the outbreak of World War II. White hovered between London and New York, writing a second novel, *The Living and*

the Dead. In 1940 he was commissioned as an intelligence officer for the Royal Australian Air Force "in spite of total ignorance of what I was supposed to do." His group of officers were landed on the Gold Coast, "to be flown by exotic stages to Cairo, in an aeroplane out of Jules Verne." Much of the war was spent advancing and retreating across deserts, "sitting, waiting in dust-ridden tents, or again in that other desert, a headquarters." Though he saw something of nearly every country in the Middle East, perhaps the most important moment of his war was "when, in the western desert of Egypt, I conceived the idea of one day writing a novel about a megalomaniac German, probably an explorer in nineteenth-century Australia." The other major moment was "when I met my Greek friend, Manoly Lascaris, who has remained the mainstay of my life and work."

After the war White and Lascaris did not go to London but returned to Australia, where they bought a small farm at Castle Hill outside Sydney. His family wealth would make him ultimately a rare though not unique creature in the Australian cultural landscape, a writer of some independent means. And to explain his return? "During the war I had thought with longing of the Australian landscape, this and the graveyard of post-war London, and the ignoble desire to fill my belly, drove me to burn my European bridges."

On the way back to Australia by ship he had written *The Aunt's Story.* It was a shock to him that most of his fellow Australians found the book unreadable. "I had never felt such a foreigner." But he consoled himself with the growing of fruit and vegetables and flowers, and the breeding of dogs and goats. He suffered savagely from asthma, but then during 1951 began to write again, a novel entitled *The Tree of Man.* This was acclaimed in Britain and the United States, but in a nation where social realism was the most popular genre, and where cultural and social begrudgery were national sports, it was "greeted with cries of scorn and incredulity . . . that somebody, at best, a dubious Australian, should flout the nationalist tradition, or worst, that a member of the grazier class should aspire to a calling which was the prerogative of schoolteachers!"

But it was now, with the authority of the brilliant *Tree of Man* behind him, that White wrote *Voss.* Together with his next work, *Riders in a Chariot,* they would make up the three classics of the Castle Hill era of his life. In 1964 he moved to the center of Sydney, to Centennial Park, an idyllic Australian landscape surrounded by a city. Of Centennial Park he wrote, at the time of his Nobel Prize, "Here I hope to continue living, and while I still have the strength, to people the Australian emptiness in the only way I am able." This peopling of the Australian emptiness was an imperative that both ruled his life and sent Voss into the desert, which even in this writer's childhood was dismissed as Australia's "dead heart."

Since the days of White, Australian consciousness has become somewhat transformed by a sense of the interior as not a European curse but a national inheritance. Popular anthropology as well as magnificent art from Central Australia and Arnhem Land have undermined the Voss vision of it as a place lacking in human maps. But Voss's and White's assumptions of Australia as an emptiness are valid in their context. White was certainly very conscious of the claims of aboriginal Australians to a landscape crammed with significance for them if not for early European visitors. But he sensed the apparent great emptiness of Australia in two ways: he saw himself as alienated from much of the egalitarian and the willfully ugly in Australia, and as a homosexual in an emphatically heterosexual male population he was confronted by the unmapped mysteries, the interior meaning not only of the continent but also of the Antipodean soul. Australia was to him a place that had not been visited by gods of his understanding. Love of, and aversion to, the place was the great tension of his life.

The idea of inevitable suffering was as central to White's life as to Voss's. "I have always found in my own case that something positive, either creative or moral, has come out of anything I have experienced in the way of affliction." Thus, what affliction taught those who were willing to know it was a central idea of White's writing. Behind Voss, the alien in a British colony, the alien in a landscape unpopulated by European mythology, lay the face of White, the asthmatic, homosexual, half-foreign artist in a society where art was not treasured.

"Some years ago," he told his American editor in a letter, "I got the idea for a book about a megalomaniac explorer. As Australia

is the only country I really know in my bones, it had to be set in Australia, and as there is practically nothing to explore, I had to go back to the middle of the last century . . . my ideas seemed to fit the character of Leichhardt." But he also read the desert journals of Edward John Eyre, whose fantastically harsh exploration of the region between Gulf Saint Vincent in South Australia and King Georges Sound in Western Australia seemed, in human terms and in material payoffs, as futile as Leichhardt's last journey.

White also wanted to create a female character, Laura Trevelyan, an edgy, percipient young woman, as Voss's counterpart and soul mate. "As the two characters are separated by events and distances, their stories have to be developed alternately, but they do also fuse in dreams, in memories and in delirium. . . . As for the look and sound of the thing, I have tried to marry Delacroix to Blake, and Liszt to Mahler."

"The music of Mahler meant most to him when he was writing *Voss,*" said his biographer David Marr in *Patrick White: A Life*. Liszt was not a composer White liked much, "only that his bravura and a certain formal side helped me in conveying some of the more worldly, superficial passages of *Voss.*" He finished the book in December 1956. After it was finished, Manoly Lascaris, his partner, returned to Greece, and the possibility that the relationship was at an end hung in the air and tormented White. However, Lascaris would return and stay with White for the rest of the novelist's life.

Voss was respectably reviewed in New York, ecstatically applauded in London, and deplored in Australia. In his *Flaws in the Glass,* a memoir published in 1981, White says that "bronchitis, Menuhin playing Bartók's Violin Concerto, and a virulent review of *The Tree of Man,* helped me resolve the death of Voss. I had not felt up to it before. Suddenly I was injected with adrenaline enough to hack off the head."

During his years at Centennial Park, White involved himself in such issues as Aboriginal rights and the environment. The Nobel Prize in Literature came to him in 1973, at a time when the government of Gough Whitlam seemed to be opening up Australia

to a broader world. White appeared both eager for the prize and terrified by it, and when it came down to actually receiving it, he sent his current friend Sidney Nolan, the remarkable artist who had painted the covers of many of his earlier books, to represent him in Stockholm.

White died in Sydney in 1990, soon after a production of his play *The Ham Funeral* by the Sydney Theatre Company. The confusion Australia showed about whether to acquire his house as a memorial and cultural center was characteristic. Though pursued by heritage bodies, the project never fully compelled politicians or the populace. White would have commented wryly, if not savagely, on advocates on both sides and would have been grimly confirmed in his worst suspicions to discover that we, his fellow countrymen, were ambivalent about having had such a prophet, such an exacting judge, such a noble but spiky presence, among us.

Patrick White was—temperamentally if not philosophically—a Gnostic, Gnosticism being a philosophy or so-called heresy of the first and second centuries of the Christian era, which considered the physical world, the world in which humans walked and traded and had their being, a divine mistake. Gnostics therefore had an affinity for deserts, where all seemed as yet unmade, undefined, and so untainted. The Gnostics extolled quite severe forms of self-sacrifice and set high standards for themselves and their friends, as did White. The name Gnostic is derived from *gnosis,* "knowledge," and though the issue has not been statistically proven, it is likely that *know, knowing, knowledge,* and all their synonyms are proportionately dominant in White's writing. White asserted through his fiction that there were human beings redeemed through knowledge itself, rather than through commerce or finding valuable pastoral land. *Voss* abounds with references to a special form of knowledge, and in his other novels it is again the special knowers who predominate: the humble farmers Stan and Amy Parker of *The Tree of Man,* and the Jewish immigrant Mordecai Himmelfarb of *Riders in the Chariot.* Other knowledge—common knowledge—is not worth having. In company at the Bonner house, Voss watches "the men aware of some joke that

only the established, the sleek, or the ordinary may enjoy." Voss and his sponsor Bonner do not speak the same language.

> "I am compelled into this country," continued the oblivious Voss.
> "That is all very well," said the merchant, easing his thighs forward, "that is enthusiasm, I suppose, and it is as well that you should have it."

Men like Bonner own land and can compel resources, but Voss knows that he is possessed of this country "by implicit right." "Unseeing people walked the sandy earth, eating bread, or sat at meat in their houses of frail stone foundations, while the lean man, beneath his twisted tree, became familiar with each blade of withered grass at which he stared, even the joints in the body of the ant."

After he makes his first contact with that other knower, Laura Trevelyan, she remarks in conversation with the young soldier Tom Radclyffe that Voss is not afraid.

> "Who is afraid?" asked Tom Radclyffe.
> "Everyone is still afraid, or most of us, of this country, and will not say it. We are not yet possessed of understanding."

She already understands that though the country is not hers, though she has lived in it, it is the German's "by right of vision."

To Laura, Voss is able to say that "It would be better that I should go barefoot, and alone I know. But it is useless to try to convey to others the extent of that knowledge."

And so the book proceeds with debates about knowing and the ways in which both existence and knowledge itself are known. Even the expeditionary member Frank Le Mesurier, one of Voss's disciples, declares, "I will cross the continent from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart." And much later, on the expedition, Voss himself writes, "If I have not described every tree, every bird, every native encountered, it is because all these details are in writing for those who will not see beyond the facts."

This tension between ways of knowing exists amongst the minor characters too.

> "I came here through idealism," said Topp, feverish with his own situation, "and a mistaken belief that I could bring nicety to barbarian minds. Here, even the gentry, or what passes for it, has eaten itself into a stupor of mutton."

But the youngest of the expeditionary party, the boy Harry Robarts, declares, "I see nothing wrong with this country . . . nor with havin' your belly full. Mine has been full since the day I landed, and I am glad."

As White had promised in his letter to The Viking Press, there was a strong painterly quality to his prose: "Then the world of light was taking possession, the breeze becoming wind, and making the dust skip. The whole shore was splintering into grit and mica, as down from the town several equipages drove, with flashing of paint and metal, and drew near, bringing patrons or sceptics, and their wives, in clothes to proclaim their wealth and, consequently, importance." White himself would probably consider such a vivid elaboration more Delacroix than Goya, but so be it.

At the country stations from which he departs into the interior, Voss encounters rough men, but also the Sandersons, a husband and wife who though more materially blessed than Stan and Amy in *The Tree of Man,* have all their virtues. "In another age," writes White admiringly, expressing something that was true of himself as well, "the landowner might have become a monk, and from there gone on to be a hermit. In the mid nineteenth century, an English gentleman and devoted husband did not behave in such a manner, so he renounced Belgravia for New South Wales, and learned to mortify himself in other ways. Because he was rich and among the first to arrive, he had acquired a goodish slice of land. After this victory of worldly pride, almost unavoidable perhaps in anyone of his class, humility had set in. He did live most simply, together with his modest wife. They were seldom idle, unless the reading of books, after the candles were lit, be considered idleness."

This Australian idyll was something Voss could not attempt, however. "It is not for me, unfortunately so, to build a solid house and live in it the kind of life that is lived in such houses."

From Brendan Boyle, the last settler he meets, Voss receives the warning. Though Boyle admits it is "the apparent poverty of

one's surroundings that proves in the end to be the attraction," he also tells him that if his wish is to overcome distance and to face irresistible disaster, "I can guarantee . . . that you will be given every opportunity of indulging yourself to the west of here. In stones and thorns. Why, anyone who is disposed can celebrate a high old Mass, I do promise, with the skull of a blackfeller and his own blood, in Central Australia."

By this stage of the book it is obvious that White intends Voss to become the Australian messiah, whose fate will endow the continent with a European meaning it had lacked to this point. Many lesser writers of the era attempted the Christ-figure leitmotif, to the extent that it became considered a literary cliché, but two of the most successful and authentic attempts in modern literature are the characters Voss and Himmelfarb, the latter in White's *Riders in the Chariot.*

White is explicit about the Christ parallels. The wakeful young gentleman ornithologist Palfreyman sees Voss rise in Boyle's squalid hut one night and identifies him as Christ by a trick of light that seems to separate head from body: "the bones of the naked Christ had been drawn through the foetid room, by sheets of moonlight, and out the doorway . . ."

Laura's relationship with Voss is therefore no conventional romance but akin to the official version of that of Christ and Mary Magdalene. The flesh is at a remove—it is Laura's convict servant who conceives. The desires of virtue and not the desires of the flesh characterize their correspondence. In the last letter Voss receives before he leaves Boyle's outlying station, Laura, in accepting Voss's proposal of marriage, writes, "Arrogance is surely the quality that caused us to recognize each other. Nobody within memory, I have realized since, dared so much as to *disturb* my pride, except in puppyish ways."

Indeed there is a Manichean self-loathing tone to their relationship: "I, personally," writes Laura, "to assume a most unseemly candour, would be prepared to wrestle with our mutual hatefulness, but mutually, let it be understood." Re-creating memories of her in the desert, "He did not encourage her to approach, for he was afraid that he might receive the impression of ungainliness, dressed as she was in her thick, travel-stained habit."

Yet later, in what might be called one of the novel's remarkable mesmeric sequences, she comes closer during the days and nights spent sheltering in a cave from a monsoonal flood. On the walls of this revelatory grotto have been painted native symbols and figures unknowable even to Voss. But Laura is his known: "The man in the cave should have felt wet, and aching, and cold, but the woman's smooth, instinctive soul caressed his stubborn, struggling spirit." And later: "Her hands were taking his weakness from him, into her own, supple, extraordinarily muscular ones."

Voss's exploration of Australia is designed to educate him in suffering rather than to give him the euphoria of discovery. "They were riding eternally over the humped and hateful earth, which the sun had seared until the spent and crumbly stuff had become highly treacherous." The natives seemed content or even joyous in its possession, making their way to a bunya nut ceremony, pursuing a known path. But even though they recognize and speak to one of Voss's expeditionary natives, Voss does not try to communicate with them about earth and water ahead. If it is to mean anything to him, he must discover it all for himself.

One of the triumphs of the book—though this was disputed by some critics—was White's skill in maintaining the relationship between Laura Trevelyan and Johann Ulrich Voss while they are at such a distance from each other. Laura herself becomes increasingly compelled by the pregnancy of her convict servant, Rose Portion, as if this child was somehow a product of the intensity of knowledge shared between herself and Voss.

Laura's taking over of Rose Portion's baby, Mercy, as her own—albeit with the mother's deathbed compliance—is a parallel gesture to Voss's expedition, in which he is surrounded and supported by decent fellows and yet utterly solitary.

While Le Mesurier lies in a fever, Voss invites him to ascend to his own level.

> Frank, I will tell you, said his mentor, you are filled with the hallucinations of intellectual power: I could assist you perhaps, who enjoy the knowledge that comes with sovereignty over every

> province of illusion, that is to say, spiritual power; indeed, as you may have suspected, I am I am I am. . . .

But no one is compatible with Voss, not even, and perhaps not especially, the gifted and pious believer Palfreyman. And Le Mesurier knew it was so, struggling along as the German "continued to eat distance, and to raise up the sun in the morning, and the moon was his slave by night. Fevers turned him from Man into God."

In a further letter to Laura before he vanishes, Voss utters the fairly conventional sentiment, "That we should love each other, LAURA, does at last appear inevitable and fitting, as I sit here alone in this immense country." But though he admires his convict foreman Judd as a good man, and Palfreyman as a saint, ultimately they cannot give him companionship of the highest order. "I am reserved for further struggles, to wrestle with rocks, to bleed if necessary, to ascend. Yes, I do not intend to stop short of the Throne for the pleasure of grovelling on lacerated knees in company with Judd and Palfreyman. As for yourself, take care! At the risk of incurring your serious disapproval, I will raise you up to the far more rational position at my side."

In the end only Laura understands that Voss's own knowing of the country is the point. All expeditionary papers, stylishly written for ultimate publication and enlightenment of Europeans, and sent back to Boyle's in the hands of the aboriginal Dugald, are lost when Dugald meets with natives. He is forced to explain that the sealed envelopes contain thoughts of which white men wished to be rid, and thus represent sinister white purgings. The natives respond reasonably enough by destroying them.

But even as he pursues his own godhood in the desert, Voss aspires to be cut down. Like his disciple Le Mesurier he wants to be a desert hermit in the shade of the ribbed native tree known in Australia as the brigalow. As Le Mesurier writes: "Humility is my brigalow, that must I remember: here I shall find a thin shade in which to sit. As I grow weaker, so I shall become strong. As I shrivel, I shall recall with amazement the visions of love, of trampling horses, of drowning candles, of hungry emeralds. Only goodness is fed."

Back in Sydney, the Bonners and Laura are visited by the officers of British naval vessels that have come to port. There is an air of scornful irony to White's depiction of such a banal social event. "As evening approached, the gas was lit, and activity flared up in the retiring- and refreshment-rooms, where respectable women in black were setting out such emergency aids to the comfort of ladies as eau de Cologne, lozenges, safety pins, and needles and thread, and for the entertainment of both sexes every variety of meat that the Colony could provide, in profusion without vulgarity, as well as vegetables cut into cunning shapes, and trifles and jellies shuddering under their drifts of cream."

But Laura Trevelyan, though given to the occasional lozenge herself, is soon saved from such fatuity by a bout of scarlet fever during which, delirious and with shaven head, she is at one with Voss's desert suffering.

There is so much else that could be said without for a moment exhausting the richness of White's narrative. The pious and noble naturalist Palfreyman will be immolated in a way that makes the reader suspect for a time that, just as the baby Mercy Portion is to be Voss's child by proxy, Palfreyman is to be Voss's blood sacrifice by proxy. Then, before the end and after Palfreyman's death, the German will receive his last rites from an aboriginal elder.

> Once, in the presence of a congregation, the old blackfellow, the guardian, or familiar, put into the white man's mouth a whole wichetty grub.
>
> The solemnity of his act was immense. . . .
>
> He mumbled it on his tongue for a while before attempting to swallow it, and at once the soft thing became the struggling wafer of his boyhood, that absorbed the unworthiness in his hot mouth, and would not go down.

Following her illness, restored to the world and her certainties, Laura Trevelyan will tell us what we have already been told, and had proved to us, by the narrative. "Voss did not die. . . . He

is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it."

Reviewing *Voss* for the *Sydney Morning Herald,* the accomplished Australian novelist Kylie Tennant, a woman who had defended *The Tree of Man,* wrote, "The pace of the book, the strength and power of the prose, the tension and dramatic force, were all there, but when the book strikes off into the deserts of mysticism, I am one of those people who would sooner slink home."

That, however, White made a coherent Voss universe, a cosmology in which "the deserts of mysticism" were a convincing landscape, seems obvious to me. It was the Australian reaction to *Voss* that caused White to write pessimistically about the novel to the filmmaker Joseph Losey, who wished to adapt it to the screen, an extraordinary challenge given the subtlety of White's dialogue and the textures of the prose. "As it is," said White to Losey, "I'm a dated novelist, whom hardly anybody reads, or if they do, most of them don't understand what I am on about. Certainly I wish I had never written *Voss,* which is going to be everybody's albatross."

Here then is White's albatross, a bird that retains its own prodigious life and sheds light from its wings.

THOMAS KENEALLY
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, 2008

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Voss

on her bed for some time, behind the shutters, in the green afternoon, until the woman came, and asked:

'Are you not coming down, miss? There are some calls. It has been the wife of Justice Smart, and now it is Mrs Pringle, with Miss Una, in a pale pink bonnet.'

Then the girl, who in the past had barely suffered her maid to touch her, on account of a physical aversion such contact invariably caused, suddenly reached out and put her arms round the waist of the swelling woman, and buried her face in the apron, in the sleeping child, to express what emotion it was difficult to tell.

'Ah, miss!' hissed Rose Portion, more in horror over the unorthodoxy of it, than for the stab she experienced in her belly.

Later they would both be glad, but now the girl, realizing she had just done something awkward and strange, jumped up from the bed and began to change into a better dress.

It was Una Pringle, who, seated in the drawing-room on a little, tight-buttoned, slippery chair, first caught sight of Laura through the doorway as she was descending the hall stairs. Down, down, down. Through that, and every subsequent afternoon, of which, it was obvious, she would be the mistress. Una Pringle stopped breathing. She had always hated Laura Trevelyan, and would now hate her more than ever.

8

By now the tall grass was almost dry, so that there issued from it a sharper sighing when the wind blew. The wind bent the grass into tawny waves, on the crests of which floated the last survivors of flowers, and shrivelled and were sucked under by the swell. All day the horses and the cattle swam through this grass sea. Their barrels rolled and gurgled. All night the beasts were glutting themselves on dew and grass, but in the dreams of men the waves of grass and the waves of sleep were soon one. Dogs curled in pockets of the grass, shivered and bristled as they floated on their own dreams.

It was the dogs that first confirmed the German's opinion that they must be in the vicinity of Jildra. On a certain evening, as the

expedition continued to advance, the dogs had begun to whine, and gulp, and lift their legs repeatedly. Their muzzles had grown leaner, the eyes were bulging from their skulls, when, with very little further warning, suddenly foreign tails, then the bodies of foreign dogs were emerging from the grass. Thus having come together, the two parties of animals were stalking round and round, in stiff, shocked silence, awaiting some sign.

The members of the expedition had shaded their eyes with their hands, as an extension to the already broad brims of their hats, and eventually one of them, Mr Judd it was, remarked that he could see a man approaching on horseback above the waving grass. Other eyes were soon focused on this figure, who came on through the red light, firmly clamped by the thighs to the body of his strong, chestnut horse. As he advanced, erect, moving in the saddle just enough to emphasize the arrogance of ownership, it was disclosed that the man himself was of a reddish, chestnut colour, intensified by the evening sun.

There he was, at last, reining in. The suspicious horse snorted.

'Boyle is my name,' announced the man, on thick lips, holding out a hand that did not waver.

'Of Jildra,' added Voss.

'That is correct.'

No further civilities were expended on the meeting, but Mr Boyle turned his horse and proceeded to escort the party along the track he had made by his coming. The band of sweating horses, straight mules, lowing, heavy-headed cattle, and parched, tingling men went on towards Jildra. By the time the homestead was reached, the western sky was of a blood red. The foreground had almost foundered, through which ran the figures of a number of individuals, if they were not animated, black sticks, to receive the reins from the hands of the new arrivals. Smoke was ascending, and dust fom the broad road the animals had trampled, together with the vapours of night. All was confused, nor did the approaching unity of darkness promise great consolation.

Mr Brendan Boyle was of that order of males who will destroy any distinction with which they have been born, because it accuses them, they feel, and they cannot bear the shame of it. In consequence, the station-owner had torn the boards off Homer

to chock the leg of the table, and such other books as he had inherited, or even bought in idealistic youth, now provided material for spills, or could hope at best to be ignored, except by insects, dust, and mould. In his house, or shack of undaubed slab, that admitted day- and starlight in their turn, several pieces of smooth Irish silver stood cheek by jowl with pocked iron, the former dented somewhat savagely, in reprisal it seemed, for elegance. The dirt floor was littered with crumbs and crusts of bread. Birds and mice could always be relied upon to carry off a certain amount of this rubbish, but some lay there until it became petrified by time, or was ground to dust under the hard feet of those black women who satisfied the crude requirements of Brendan Boyle.

'This is my mansion,' indicated the latter, waving a lantern so that the room rocked, and the dimples which came when he spoke flickered on either side of his mouth. 'I suggest that you, Mr Voss, and one or two others, peg your claims here on the floor, and allow me the pleasures of conversation, while the rest of the party enjoy the luxury of their own tents. There are plenty of blacks here, bustin' themselves with meat and damper, who will lend a hand. Here, Jem, where the deuce,' he grumbled, and shouted, and went outside, causing the whole neighbourhood of grass and trees frantically to rock in that same disturbed lantern-light.

Voss and Palfreyman, who were left standing in the skeleton shack, in the smell of old, hard bread and that morning's ash, did not regret that this was the last hospitality civilization would offer them.

Later, when these two had shared with their host a lump of salt beef and some cold potatoes, which a pair of shrieking black women, naked as the night, had set on the table's edge, he proceeded to make the conversation he craved, or rather, to disgorge out of his still handsome throat chunks of words, and opinions he was not used to confess to other men in all that vastness.

'It is ten years now since I came to this something country,' said Brendan Boyle, swilling the rum, to which he seemed addicted, from an ugly, iron pannikin. 'I have done nicely,' he said, fascinated by the eddies in his pot of rum, 'as nicely as most people, and will do better; yet it is the apparent poverty of one's sur-

roundings that proves in the end to be the attraction. This is something that many refuse to understand. Nor will they accept that, to explore the depths of one's own repulsive nature is more than irresistible—it is necessary.'

He had opened the shirt on the hair of his chest, and had sat forward, and was holding his head in his hands, and was twitching with his mouth to release the words, or some personal daemon.

'To peel down to the last layer,' he yawned. 'There is always another, and yet another, of more exquisite subtlety. Of course, every man has his own obsession. Yours would be, it seems, to overcome distance, but in much the same way, of deeper layers, of irresistible disaster. I can guarantee,' he said, stabbing the table with two taut fingers, 'that you will be given every opportunity of indulging yourself to the west of here. In stones and thorns. Why, anyone who is disposed can celebrate a high old Mass, I do promise, with the skull of a blackfeller and his own blood, in Central Australia.

'High Harry!' he laughed, more for himself, and added, in a sigh: 'Ah, dear!'

Palfreyman, who had been shifting about, thought that he would turn in, and Voss, who was growing increasingly glum, agreed that this could be a solution.

'If that is the extent of your ambition,' said Brendan Boyle, and spat upon the floor.

His two guests got between their blankets, where they were, while himself was gone out on last errands.

The anatomy of the house was such that, by night, it resembled a warped skeleton, so that, for a long time, Voss lay looking at the stars on the other side of that cage of bones.

Meanwhile, Mr Boyle had returned to the room which he was pleased to refer to as the Bedchamber, beyond the chimneypiece, and which was the only other room of the house. He was blundering about a good deal, and making animal noises, and exploring the darkness for its distinctive grain. His bed, it seemed, was full of giggles.

Palfreyman was already asleep, but Voss continued to stare at the restless stars until he was no longer able to identify himself.

Next morning, when host and guest of honour were standing together upon the veranda, it was possible to compare the two

men—at least their outward appearances, since their souls were temporarily gathered in. Now Brendan Boyle was reminiscent of the big, rude, red potatoes, the shapely ones, but hard, with the fine red dust coating them, which is akin to the patina the man had encouraged to coat those persistent traces of aristocracy. Where these lingered formally, as in the head and throat, of course he could not destroy them. There they were; it was both sickening and sad for him. But his hands, as he spoke, or on any occasion, waited, were stroking the accretion of red dust on the bare skin of his forearms. It could have afforded him some pleasure, but his eyes, which were of a cold, unchanging green, would not convey his feelings by daylight.

At his host's side, on the rudimentary veranda, which was all splinters, just as it had been split, stood the German, also in disguise. Blackened and yellowed by the sun, dried in the wind, he now resembled some root, of dark and esoteric purpose. Whereas the first man was composed of sensual forms, intended to be touched, flesh to be rubbed against flesh, it would not be presumed to use the second except in a moment of absolute necessity, and then with extreme caution. He stood there moistening his lips, and would have repudiated kinship with other men if it had been offered. In the presence of almost everyone of his companions, and particularly in the company of Brendan Boyle, he was drawn closer to the landscape, the seldom motionless sea of grass, the twisted trees in grey and black, the sky ever increasing in its rage of blue; and of that landscape, always, he would become the centre.

The two men were evidently expecting something or someone to appear. The host was balancing on the veranda's edge and, from annoyance at being made to wait, could very easily have toppled off. The delicate wobbling of his barely controlled body made him look ridiculous.

'I cannot recommend these blacks as infallible guides and reliable companions,' Mr Boyle was saying. 'Like all aboriginals they will blow with the wind, or turn into lizards when they are bored with their existing shapes. But these two fellers do know the tribes and the country for a considerable distance to the west. Or so they tell a man. Standards of truth, of course, vary.' Then, realizing, he added: 'But you do not know their lingo. Dugald—that is the elder feller—has a little English. But you will not be able to make much of an exchange.'

'In general,' Voss replied, 'it is necessary to communicate without knowledge of the language.'

Then the two men were looking and laughing at each other insolently, their faces screwed up, their eyes splintering. Each would consider he had gained the point.

Before they had recovered themselves, two blacks came round the corner of the house. Their bare feet made upon the earth only a slight, but very particular sound, which, to the German's ears, at once established their ownership.

'Well, now, since they have condescended,' said Mr Boyle, who was not really of bad temper; if he raised his voice to a bellow, it was only because he was addressing blacks, and it made his meaning clear. 'You, Dugald, you, Jackie,' he said, 'I tell you this Mr Voss go far places,' waving his arm towards the west, 'find new country, do good all of us, black and white feller. You stick to Mr Voss do you hear, even if you drop, you old beggar.'

Then he laughed, and spoke to the men in a few phrases of their own tongue, in a very English accent, to which they listened with that same politeness with which they received intelligence in any shape or form.

The elder native was most serious and formal. He was wearing what appeared to be a very old and floury swallowtail coat, but deficient in one tail. His black skin, which had been gathered by age into a net of finest grey wrinkles, was not tramelled further, except by a piece of bark-cloth, the colour of nature, in an appropriate place. A similar piece of cloth did cover his colleague a little; otherwise, the latter was naked, of a youthful, oily skin, and flattened features. This one, Jackie, was really quite young. He stood about with the delicacy of a young girl, looking away while absorbing all details, listening with his skin, and quivering his reactions. It was not possible to address him directly, nor would he answer, but through his mouthpiece, Dugald.

In other circumstances, Voss would have liked to talk to these creatures. Alone, he and the blacks would have communicated with one another by skin and silence, just as dust is not impenetrable and the message of sticks can be interpreted after hours of intimacy. But in the presence of Brendan Boyle, the German was

the victim of his European, or even his human inheritance. So he got down from the shaky step, and advanced on the old black with his rather stiff, habitual gait and said:

'This is for Dugald.'

It was a brass button that he happened to have in his pocket, and which had come off a tunic, of military, though otherwise forgotten origin.

The old man was very still, holding the token with the tips of his fingers, as if dimly aware in himself of an answer to the white man's mysticism. He could have been a thinking stick, on which the ash had cooled after purification by fire, so wooden was his old, scarified, cauterized body, with its cap of grey, brittle ash. Inside the eyes moved some memory of myth or smoke.

The youth, on the other hand, had been brought to animal life. Lights shone in his skin, and his throat was rippling with language. He was giggling and gulping. He could have eaten the brass button.

On an afterthought, Voss again put his hand in his pocket and offered Jackie a clasp-knife that he was carrying.

'*Na, Junge,*' he said, with a friendliness that could not avoid solemnity.

Jackie, however, would not receive, except by the hand of his mentor, and then was shivering with awful joy as he stood staring at the knife on his own palm.

Voss, too, was translated. The numerous creases in his black trousers appeared to have been sculptured for eternity.

As all of this scene was a bit unexpected, not to say peculiar, to Brendan Boyle, the latter was itching to cut it short.

He jabbed with a finger in the old man's shoulder-blade, and said:

'Plenty valuable button. You take good care.'

After which, he spat, and was easing his clothes.

Boyle then proposed to Voss that they should spend the morning inspecting the sheep and goats he had selected for use of the expedition, and which would probably be found somewhere in the vicinity of a string of waterholes a mile or two north of the homestead. Voss agreed. It soon became clear that he and his host were continually humouring each other. In this way each hoped to hide the indifference he felt towards his companion,

though each remained humorously aware that the other was conscious of his attitude. The agreeable part was that neither harboured actual dislike. No one could have disliked Brendan Boyle in spite of his peculiarities, and he was quite incapable of disliking for long anyone but himself.

So they set out from the slatternly settlement of Jildra, to which Voss had grown reconciled, just as he had come to accept certain qualities of his host. The smoky setting of the early morning was not unpleasing, even touching. Columns of blue smoke were ascending, a long cloud was lying flat above them, and the wisps of smoky grass, suggested an evanescence of the solid earth, of shack and tents, iron and hessian, flesh and bone, even of the rather substantial Brendan Boyle. They rode out of the jumble of grey sheds, past several gunyas, at which black women were standing, and little, red-haired boys with toy spears. Over the skins of the natives, the smoke played, and through. A yellowish woman, of spreading breasts, sat giving suck to a puppy.

'Dirty beggars,' coughed Mr Boyle—it was the smoke, 'but a man could not do without them.'

Voss did not reply to what appeared, in his host's case, obvious.

The two men rode on, in hats and beards, which strangely enough had not been adopted as disguises. In that flat country of secret colours, their figures were small, even when viewed in the foreground. Their great horses had become as children's ponies. It was the light that prevailed, and distance, which, after all, was a massing of light, and the mobs of cockatoos, which exploded, and broke into flashes of clattering, shrieking, white and sulphur light. Trees, too, were but illusory substance, for they would quickly turn to shadow, which is another shape of the ever-protean light.

Later in the morning, when the air was beginning to solidify, the two riders were roused from themselves by sight of the promised waterholes. These might have been described more accurately as mud-pans, or lilyfields, from which several grave pelicans rose at once, and were making off on wings of creaking basket-work.

'There are the sheep now,' said the station-owner, pointing.

These dirty maggots were at first scarcely visible in the yellow

grass, but did eventually move enough, and mill round, and stamp.

'They are a rough lot,' said Boyle, 'but so is your undertaking. I am glad it is you,' he had to add, sniggering, because in very many ways he was a schoolboy.

'It is almost always impossible to convince other men of one's own necessities,' Voss said. 'Do you believe you were convincing to us last night when you attempted to explain yours?'

'I? What?' exclaimed Boyle, and wondered whether his obscurer self had been caught in some indecent confession, or even act; he suspected it, but could not remember. 'What a man lets out at night, you know, is a different thing from what he would say by day.'

He was protesting, and redder, as he searched his mind.

'I cannot think what you are referring to,' he concluded.

On such a mild and bountiful morning, Voss would not reveal what it was.

All this time the sheep, in their yellow wool and wrinkles, went on milling round and round, trying to find, or to escape from one another. Two black shepherds, at a distance, gave no indication of wanting to come any closer.

'There, I think, are the goats,' indicated Voss.

'What? Oh, yes, the goats,' Boyle replied.

About a hundred of these animals had gathered on the farther bank of a second waterhole, where they were climbing and slithering on the hulks of fallen trees, stretching their necks to pull at the fronds of live leaves, scratching at remote pockets of their bodies with the tips of their horns, skull-bashing, or ruminating dreamily. As the horsemen approached, the goat-mind was undecided whether to stay or run. Several did remain, and were staring up, their lips smiling, looking right into the faces of the men, even into their souls beyond, but with expressions of politeness.

'Descendants of the original goat,' Boyle commented rather crossly.

'Probably,' answered Voss, who liked them.

One aged doe had searched his mind with such thoroughness as to discover in it part of his secret, that he was, in fact, only in appearance man.

He held out his hand towards her subtle beard, but she was gone, and all of them, with hilarious noises, and a rain of black dung.

'Come on,' said Boyle.

If he could have attacked or accused his guest in some way, he would have, but the German had assumed a protective cloak of benevolence. As they rode homeward, the many questions that the latter asked, all dealing with the flora and fauna of the place, were unexceptionable, expressed with that air of simple benevolence. His face wore a flat smile, and there were little lines of kindness at the outer corners of his eyes.

Yet there was something, Boyle knew. He rode, answering the German's questions, but absently flicking at his horse's shoulder with the skein of reins.

During the remainder of their sojourn at Jildra, Boyle tried to read the faces of the German's men for some clue to their leader's nature and intentions. But they, if they knew, would not be read, or else were spell-ridden in the hot, brown landscape. As they went about the tasks that had been allotted to them, such business as arises during an interval of preparation and rest, the men appeared to have little existence of their own, unless it was a deeply buried one. There was Palfreyman, in a cabbage-tree hat that made him look smaller, with a clean, white handkerchief to protect his neck and throat, but which exposed, rather, his own innocence and delicacy. There he was, riding out, an old woman of a man, with the boy Robarts perhaps, and one or two natives, to secure the ornithological specimens which he would then clean and prepare by candlelight. Nothing more simplified than Palfreyman. So, too, the others were tranquilly occupied. Judd had become an immense rump as he busied himself at shoeing horses. Others were oiling firearms, greasing leather, sharpening axes, or sewing on buttons.

Except once or twice, nothing untoward occurred. On one occasion, to give the exceptions, Boyle had gone into the men's tent, admittedly to satisfy his curiosity, and there was Frank Le Mesurier, sprawled out upon his red blanket, writing in a notebook. As Boyle was a big man, he was forced to stoop to enter the rather low-slung, oiled calico tent, then to stand hunched. He was so obvious that he made no attempt to behave casually.

The blood was too thick in his fingers. Le Mesurier stopped writing, and rolled over on his book, which he could not hide effectively, because it had been seen.

'Where is Mr Voss?' asked Boyle.

Although he had not been looking for Voss, it was true the German was always somewhere in his mind.

'I do not know,' answered the young man, darkly returning the intruder's stare. 'He has gone out somewhere,' he added in a hollow voice, which suggested that the speaker had but recently woken.

Then Boyle squatted down, as an opportunity seemed to be offering itself.

'Have you known him long?' he asked.

'Yes,' Le Mesurier answered at once, and at once began to hesitate. 'Well, no,' he corrected, prodding at a seam of the tent with his stump of lead pencil. 'Let me see now. I knew Mr Voss at Sydney.'

Then he blushed and was confused.

'It was much longer than that,' he said. 'It was on board the ship. Which does make it a very long time.'

Boyle's suspicion increased. What was this young man trying to hide? Had he, perhaps, participated, or was he still participating in the German's crime?

Le Mesurier lay there blushing dark, and resenting the intrusion more than ever. Now, as on that evening under the scrubby trees of the Domain, he felt that he did share something of his leader's nature, which he must conceal, as, in fact, he was hiding the notebook that contained the most secret part of himself.

Boyle suspected this, but could no more snatch away the book than tear out by bleeding roots those other secrets of personality.

'I was thinking of taking the gun down to the river, to look for a few duck that I saw making that way. Will you come, Frank?' he now asked.

He wanted to kill something.

The young man agreed to come, rolled over, and grabbed for his hat. In the folds of the blanket there was no sign of the notebook that both knew to be there.

So they went down to the river, which had almost dried since

the last rain. A brown heat was descending like a flat lid. Jildra, with its squalid pleasures of black flesh and acres of concealed wealth, was reduced to a panful of dust and stinking mud, in which Brendan Boyle himself had chosen to stick.

Once during those days, the latter approached Voss and almost asked to take part in the expedition, as if death in unpredictable circumstances were suddenly preferable to slow rotting.

Instead, they discussed water-bags.

This man has a favour to ask, the German knew, and in consequence grew wily. All, sooner or later, sensed his divinity and became dependent upon him. There was young Ralph Angus, Sanderson's grazier-neighbour, blushing like a girl to ask an opinion. The armour of youth and his physical strength had not protected him against discovery of his own ignorance during the journey north. Turner was abject, of course, and Harry Robarts an imbecile. But Angus might prove a worthy sacrifice. The young bull of pagan rites, he would bellow and cast up his brown, stupid eyes before submitting.

Of all the company, Judd remained least changed. Voss was encouraging, but amused. The day he found the convict tarring a horse's swollen pastern, the German's upper lip was as long in amused appreciation as a hornet is in legs. He looked at the stooping man, and said:

'Is it a solution you are putting, Mr Judd?'

'It is,' replied the latter, chasing some insect away from his face with his tar-free arm.

'You have not omitted the oil?' asked Voss.

'No,' said Judd.

Voss was whistling a little tune of insect music.

'That is excellent,' he said.

He continued to whistle until, Judd could feel, he was drifting on. Then the convict's empirical nature was glad of the stench of tar, and the heat which was for ever descending and ironing the dust still flatter.

Heavy moons hung above Jildra at that season. There was a golden moon, of placid, swollen belly. There were the ugly, bronze, male moons, threateningly lopsided. One night of wind and dust, there was a pale moonstone, or, as rags of cloud polished its face,

delicate glass instrument, on which the needle barely fluttered, indicating the direction that some starry destiny must take. The dreams of men were influenced by the various moons, with the result that they were burying their faces in the pregnant moon-women, or shaking their bronze fists at any threat to their virility. Their dreams eluded them, however, under the indicator of that magnetic moon. The white dust poured out from between their fingers, as they turned and turned on hairy blankets that provoked their nakedness. On the other hand, there were some who lay and listened to their own eyelids grate endlessly.

Such was the predicament of Palfreyman on one particularly white night. Unable to sleep, he had passed the time reviewing houses in which he had lived, minor indignities he had suffered, and one tremendous joy, a white eagle fluttering for a moment on the branch of a dead tree and almost blotting out the sky with the span of its wings.

The sound of the strong feathers, heard again above the squeak of mice and groans of sleep in Boyle's squalid shack, had almost freed the wakeful Palfreyman, when Voss rose. There he was, striped by moonlight and darkness, the stale air moving round him, very softly. Voss himself did not move. Rather was he moved by a dream, Palfreyman sensed. Through some trick of moonlight or uncertainty of behaviour, the head became detached for a second and appeared to have been fixed upon a beam of the wooden wall. The mouth and the eyes were visible. Palfreyman shivered. Ah, Christ is an evil dream, he feared, and all my life I have been deceived. After the bones of the naked Christ had been drawn through the foetid room, by sheets of moonlight, and out the doorway, the fully conscious witness continued to lie on his blanket, face to face with his own shortcomings and his greatest error.

But there was an end to this unhappiness, he was surprised to find. The moonlight returned Voss to the room. As he was moved back, his bones were creaking, and his skin had erupted in a greenish verdigris.

Palfreyman nearly put out his hand, to recall them both to their normal relationship, but was restrained by an access of cold.

Next morning he remarked:

'Mr Voss, do you know you were sleep-walking last night?'

The German was engaged in putting on his socks, his backbone exposed to his accuser.

'I have never been known to, before. Never,' he replied, but most irritably, as if refusing a crime with which he had been unjustly charged.

Boyle, who had just then come through the partition, scratching an armpit, felt compelled to say:

'We welcome you, Voss, through the gate of human weaknesses.'

And was glad at last. He remembered how the yellow woman had flattened her belly against him the other side of sleep.

But Voss was grumbling. He had grown livid. All that day he remained bones rather than flesh.

All his days were wasting away in precise acts. His feet were heavy with dust as he tramped between shed, tent, and stockyard. Now his distaste for men returned, especially for those with whom he had surrounded himself, or, to be more accurate, with whom an ignorant jackass had surrounded him against his will. Blank faces, like so many paper kites, themselves earthbound, or at most twitching in the warm shallows of atmosphere, dangling a vertebral tail, could prevent him soaring towards the apotheosis for which he was reserved. To what extent others had entangled him in the string of human limitation, he had grown desperate in wondering.

So he was chewing his pen over that journal of acts and facts, which he did keep meticulously, he was holding a narrow oblong of clean, folded paper to protect the page from other eyes and dust, at the moment when Boyle came into the room, crunching over stale bread, smelling of sweat, and said:

'Now, Voss, I do not want to meddle in anybody's affairs, but I would suggest you are missing the best of a good season by delaying.'

'Yes. Yes,' said Voss, flicking at the page with the paper shield that he held between his long, clean bones of fingers. And frowning. 'In two, three days we shall be prepared to leave. I have a report to write,' he added.

'I do not want to suggest you are in any way *de trop,*' said his

host, and could have become sentimental, for anyone at all, even for this scraggy guest whom he did not understand, suspected, and at times had even disliked.

Boyle was not resentful. Of loving flesh, he could not have wished for better than a close companion on the same dung-heap, to sit beside, and touch.

'Understand that, old man,' he said, patting the German on the knee.

Voss frowned at the dust which had spurted through the open doorway and dirtied his clean paper. It was about sundown, and the blaze of light was blinding him.

'I do not intend to inconvenience you above a day or two,' he repeated.

With these words, spoken thus, for a second time, he realized that he was staking all. Thus, he could blame no one else for his own human weakness. He had delivered up his throat to the long, cold, glistening braids of her hair, and was truly strangling in them.

'That is very reasonable,' commented Boyle. 'And Thorndike should be here by then. A black from Cubanong has just come in. Thorndike has arrived there. If they have sent up anything for you, as an afterthought, Thorndike will have it.'

'Who is this Thorndike?' the German asked, although he was not interested in knowing more.

'That is difficult to answer. Thorndike is just a man. Comes and goes. Does a job here and there. He is of no importance, but useful. Brings things, you know. Mail.'

The simplicity of the clay-coloured landscape was very moving to the German. For a moment everything was distinct. In the foreground some dead trees, restored to life by the absence of hate, were glowing with flesh of rosy light. All life was dependent on the thin lips of light, compressed, yet breathing at the rim of the world.

'That will be convenient then, and I shall leave at once on the arrival of Thorndike.'

Never had an issue of greater importance been decided so conclusively by an apparently insignificant event.

'Take it easy, though,' laughed Boyle, who began to suspect that other spurs had been applied to his particular friend.

'Oh, it is natural to regret the waste of time,' Voss shrugged and fenced. 'And to wish to make amends for it.'

So he explained, but did not tell, absorbed as he was in his discovery: that each visible object has been created for purposes of love, that the stones, even, are smoother for the dust.

As darkness fell upon a world emptied for its complete reception, the German began to tremble in a cold sweat, with the consequence that, when the black woman brought the inevitable leg of charred mutton, he announced to his astonished host:

'I do not think I will eat tonight. I am suffering from some derangement of the intestines.'

And avoided further explanation under cover of the difficulties of language.

For an hour or more he proceeded to pace up and down by himself, only interrupting his walk to stoop and pat the station dogs. These animals were quick to sense a desire to express tenderness, and, indeed, he was shaking with it.

To what extent would he be weakened? He could not help but wonder, fear, and finally resent.

As they waited for Thorndike, the strange moons continued to hang above Jildra, and even by day there would appear to be a closed eye, which signified the presence of a moon. Voss was for ever biting his whiskers and cracked lips. How thirsty the days were already, the ground opening in cracked mouths, in spite of that good rain, which people will always tell you has fallen. The German would go to the water-bag, and drink down pannikins full of the tepid canvassy water, which flushed his stomach. He already felt physically sick. Somewhere behind his knee-cap a time was beating, as he waited for the man Thorndike to arrive.

Early on a certain morning, the leader was suddenly moved to issue orders.

'I will have all cattle, goats, and sheep that we are taking with us, mustered and driven into the vicinity of the homestead,' he announced to Boyle. 'Dugald and Jackie must go with Turner and the boy. Ralph'—he addressed the young grazier—'I will put in charge of these operations. Tomorrow we will make a start.'

'You are not waiting, then, for this feller Thorndike?' Boyle asked.

'Yes,' said Voss. 'It is certain. He will come before evening.'

Boyle was rather diverted by this intelligence.

'The smoke messages have got going?' he inquired lazily.

'Mr Judd,' Voss called, going out into the languid morning of young, silky air, 'I wish you to make a careful count of all fire-arms, tools, instruments, *und so weiter,* that nothing is overlooked. You, and Frank, will see that horses and mules are brought in and securely hobbled tonight.'

Soon dogs were barking, children laughing, threads of dust weaving in and out of one another as a pattern began to form upon the bare earth at Jildra. Harry Robarts was by now brave enough to jab spurs into his horse's sides, so that it would leap into action and execute proud and important figures. Harry himself had become leaner, for the distance had thinned him out. Yet, paradoxically, his once empty face was filled with those distances. They possessed, but they eluded him; he was still, and perhaps would remain always, lost.

Now, however, Harry and those with him were riding forth. Their purposes were set in motion.

Mr Judd went immediately, with his quartermaster stride, and began to account for such tackle as was in his charge. Frank Le Mesurier had already spotted the mules and horses, and their attachment of tails, occupied in the shade some little distance off. He would ride over later, as they moved to open pastures with the cool, and turn them with his whip, and they would drum the depths out of the earth as they raced up the flat towards the homestead, and pull up sharp at the yards, on their knees almost. The sky would be peacock-coloured then.

In the heat, after the men had left to muster, Mr Judd was proceeding methodically. He had a scrap of crumpled paper, on which he would make his own signs. There was a stub of lead pencil in his mouth. One of his thumbs had been badly crushed by a sledge-hammer long ago, and had grown, in place of a nail, a hard, yellow horn. Now as he worked, he experienced a sense of true pride, out of respect for what he was handling, for those objects, in iron, wood, or glass did greatly influence the course of earthly life. He could love a good axe or knife, and would oil and sharpen it with tender care. As for the instruments of navigation, the mysticism of figures from which they were inseparable made

him yet more worshipful. Pointing to somewhere always just beyond his reach, the lovely quivering of rapt needles was more delicate than that of ferns. All that was essential, most secret, was contained for Judd, like his own spring-water, in a nest of ferns.

Sometimes he would breathe upon the glass of those instruments, and rub it with the cushiony part of his hand, of which the hard whorls of skin and fate were, by comparison, indelicate.

But now he complained:

'Frank, I cannot find that big prismatic compass in the wooden frame.'

'It cannot have got far, a big thing like that,' answered Le Mesurier, who was not greatly interested.

'These blacks would thieve any mortal thing, I would not be surprised,' the convict said.

He was sweating, as big men will, in sheets, but his upper lip was marked by little stationary points of exasperation, anxiety, even cold despair.

He was looking everywhere for that compass.

'Frank,' he said, 'it has got me bested. It will not be found.'

Then he went down to the gunyas, and cursed the black gins that were squatted there, looking in one another's hair, laughing with, and tumbling the small, red-haired children. The black gins did not understand. Their breasts became sullen.

To Judd, the peculiar problem of the lost instrument was as intricate as the labyrinth of heat, through which he trudged back.

Mr Voss was furious, of course, because he had been expecting something, if not necessarily this.

Judd went away.

In the late afternoon when the other men rode in, and were watering their horses and coiling their whips, they were closely questioned, but there was not a single one could honestly feel the compass concerned him personally. At best amused, at worst they were irritated at having to turn out their packs.

Voss, who had come down to the tents, a prophetic figure in his dark clothes, said that the instrument must be found.

Boyle, too, had come across. He had questioned the blacks at the camp, and was pretty certain no native was withholding the prismatic compass.

'Then there is no explanation,' Judd cried, and flung his own saddle-bags from side to side, so that some of the onlookers were put in mind of the flapping, of a pair of great, desperate wings.

'It is as if I was dreaming,' the convict protested.

For almost all, the situation had begun to assume the terrible relevant irrelevance of some dreams. They stood rooted in the urgent need to find the compass.

Which Judd, it now appeared, was drawing out of his own saddle-bag.

'But I never put it there,' said his shocked voice. 'There was no reason.'

His strong face was weak.

'No reason,' he added, 'that I can think of.'

But he would continue to fossick in desperation through his memories of all evil dreams.

Voss had turned and walked away. The incident was closed, if not to his positive advantage, to the detriment of some human being. Yet, there were times when he did long to love that which he desired to humiliate. He recalled, for instance, the convict's wife, whose simplicity was subtle enough to survive his proving of her lie. He remembered, with some feeling, the telescope that Judd himself had rigged up, and found unequal to its purpose of exploring the stars. Associated with such thoughts, of human failure and deceit, the German's shoulders narrowed as he flumped across the dusty yard. Judd's humiliation over the discovered compass forced him up the side-tracks of pity, until, suddenly, he jibbed. Delusion beckoned. His throne glittered achingly.

Down at the tents, Judd said:

'Mr Palfreyman, I did not put that compass there.'

'I believe you,' answered Palfreyman.

'There was no reason.'

There is always a reason, Palfreyman corrected silently, and would continue to search for this one.

Their stay at Jildra had become for the ornithologist a season of sleep-walking, dominated by his dream—it could have been—of tortured moonlight and rustling shadow, that retrospect had cast in lead. This brooding statue stumped horribly for him under the glass moon, but although Palfreyman watched—in fact, he continued to do so long after they had moved on—Voss the man did not walk again.

And now, at Jildra, something else was about to happen. Blacks scented it first upon the evening air, and dogs were half inclined to snarl, half to fool with one another. Then some of the white men, who had washed their necks and faces of dust, and who were smelling of dried water and soap, and an aggressive, crude cleanliness, came up formally from the tents to announce that a team was approaching. Distantly already the barking of strange dogs was going off like pop-guns, and the dogs of Jildra had begun to whine and to bite at one another's shoulders, to express their joy and solidarity.

'It is Thorndike, then,' said Voss, running out without a hat, which left the white of his forehead exposed: he could have been emerging from a mask.

'Damn me, if you were not right,' contributed Boyle.

The latter was now permanently good-tempered, indifferent, acceptant, and, above all, amused.

In time the team was straining into Jildra, with that gallantry of animals reaching a goal. The bullocks groaned to a stop, and were turning up their eyes, dilating their nostrils, and, to the last, resisting the heavy yokes with their necks.

Thorndike, a scrawny, bloodshot individual, did not make any great show of pleasure, so insignificant and regular were his habits. Nor did he pay much attention to the German, about whom people had been talking; he merely handed over, as he had undertaken. For Thorndike brought, in addition to the expected provisions for Jildra, an axe that had been left behind at the station of a Mr McKenzie with whom the expedition had camped some miles farther back, as well as a bundle of mail, tied with a bow of string, for the German cove.

Voss took the mail, and was striking his leg with it as he asked Thorndike questions, flat ones about his journey and the weather, at which the other rasped back in some amusement. Thorndike had never seen a German, but was determined not to look at this one. So he spat, and worked his adam's apple, and went about freeing his bullocks.

Presently, Voss went inside and untied his letters.

There were instructions and digressions, naturally, by Mr Bonner. There was a friendly line from Sanderson; newspapers; and a lady had contributed a fly-veil, made by her own hands, out of knotted, green silk.

There was also the letter, it would appear, from Miss Trevelyan.

When he had read or examined all else, throwing pieces of intelligence to his host, who had by this time pushed back his plate, and was picking his teeth and mastering his wind, Voss did break the seal of Miss Trevelyan's letter, and was hunching himself, and spreading and smoothing the paper, as if it had been so crumpled, he must induce it physically to deliver up its text.

Finally he read:

Potts Point,
—Nov., 1845

Dear Mr Voss,

I must hasten to thank you for your letter, which arrived at its destination several days ago, by Newcastle packet. If the length of time needed for mine to reach you should make you suspect an utter unwillingness on my part to reply, you must take into account great and exonerating distances, as well as the fact that I have been compelled by the substance of what you have written to give it the deepest possible consideration. Even after such thought, I confess it is not clear what answer one in my position would be expected to return, and, since it is one of my most stubborn *weaknesses* to try to reach conclusions without the benefit of advice, I must, I fear, remain at least temporarily confused.

Your letter was unexpected, to say the least of it: that anybody possessed of your contempt for human frailty should make so unequivocal a proposition to one so well endowed with that same frailty! For, on at least one memorable occasion, you did not attempt to conceal your opinion that I was a person quite pitiably weak in character. Having formed a similar estimate of myself, I could not very well reject your judgement, even though the truth one has perceived is, if anything, more distasteful when confirmed by the mind of another, a mind, moreover, that one has held in some esteem. That you made me suffer, I cannot deny, but the outcome or purpose of that suffering still remains to be understood.

In the meantime, if nothing else, my lamentable frailty does accuse my arrogance.

Arrogance is surely the quality that caused us to recognize each other. Nobody within memory, I have realized since, dared so much as to *disturb* my pride, except in puppyish ways. Men, I am inclined to think, are frightened if their self-importance does not impress. You, at least, were not frightened, but ignored me so coldly that I was the one to become alarmed—of my insignificance and isolation.

So, Mr Voss, we have reached a stage where I am called upon to consider my destroyer as my saviour! I must take on trust those tender feelings you profess, and which I cannot trace clearly through the labyrinth of our relationship. Can you wonder that I am confused? All the more since I have remained almost morbidly *sensitive to the welfare* of one whose virtues do not outweigh the many *faults I have continued to despise.*

Now the question is: can two such faulty beings endure to face each other, almost as in a looking-glass? Have you foreseen the possible outcome? And have you not, perhaps, mistaken a critical monster for a compliant mouse?

I, personally, to assume a most unseemly candour, would be prepared to wrestle with our mutual hatefulness, but mutually, let it be understood. For I do respect some odd streak of humanity that *will* appear in you in spite of all your efforts (after reading poetry, for instance, or listening to music, while your eyes are still closed), just as I regret most humbly my own wretched failures to conquer my unworthiness.

Only on this level, let it be understood, that we may *pray together* for salvation, shall you ask my Uncle to accept your intentions, that is, if you still intend.

In any event, Mr Voss, I do thank you once again for your kind letter, and shall intercede as ever for your safety and your happiness.

Your sincere,
LAURA TREVELYAN

Then Boyle, who had been dozing in a pleasant apathy of tobacco and half-digested meat, opened his eyes, and asked:

'Nothing bad, I hope, Voss?'

'Why should it be bad? No,' said the German, who was get-

ting up, and mislaying and dropping other papers. 'On the contrary, I have received nothing but favourable news.'

And he tied the string tightly and methodically on his papers.

'I am glad of that,' answered Boyle. 'Nothing can upset a man's digestion like doubtful news. For that reason, I am glad I no longer receive letters, except those in black and white.'

'None of my acquaintances is in the habit of corresponding with coloured inks,' said Voss. 'I think I will turn in soon, Boyle, so as to make this early start that we have anticipated.'

Now he went out into the darkness, ostensibly to issue last orders to his men, though in fact to hide himself, and failed in his real purpose, as he embraced the past tremblingly beneath a vast audience of stars.

On his return he began to notice Palfreyman, who had been there all the time, seated within the candlelight, sketching for his own pleasure a big, dreamy lily propped in a tin mug.

'What is this?' asked Voss, with unduly warm interest.

'It is a lily,' said Palfreyman, with grave concentration on his silvery sketch, 'which I found in the red soil along the second of the waterholes.'

Voss made a lazy guess at the variety.

'With these seeds?' asked Palfreyman.

Voss squinted. They were of a distinct shape, like testes, attached to the rather virginal flower.

When the German had undressed and was lying in his blanket, he and Palfreyman began to recall other botanical specimens they had found, of unorthodox seed formation. Boyle had retired by now, and it was a pleasant, drowsy conversation that drifted between the two men, containing friendship, because it made no effort to.

Perhaps it is I who am frequently to blame, Palfreyman decided, and would not move for fear of breaking the spell.

'Will you not go to bed, Palfreyman?' Voss yawned at last. 'We start tomorrow early.'

'It is the lily,' Palfreyman said, and sighed. 'We may never see it again in all its freshness.'

Voss yawned.

'It may be very common.'

'It may,' Palfreyman agreed.

Their voices were somehow complementary to each other. Like lovers.

Then Voss began to float, and those words last received. But *together.* Written words take some time to thaw, but the words of lilies were now flowing in full summer water, whether it was the water or the leaves of water, and dark hairs of roots plastered on the mouth as water blew across. Now they were swimming so close they were joined together at the waist, and were the same flesh of lilies, their mouths, together, were drowning in the same love-stream. I do not wish this yet, or *nie nie nie, niemals. Nein.* You will, she said, if you will cut and examine the word. *Together* is filled with little cells. And cuts open with a knife. It is a see seed. But I do not. All human obligations are painful, Mr Johann Ulrich, until they are learnt, variety by variety. But gold is painful, crushing, and cold on the forehead, while wholly desirable, because immaculate. Only resist the Christ-thorn. Tear out the black thing by the roots before it has taken hold. She was humbly grateful for it, however. In her kneeling position, she continued to bathe her hair in all flesh, whether of imperial lilies, or the black, putrefying, human kind.

After one of those pauses, in which the sleeper dries up, in which his tongue is a little pebble, and the blanket is grafted on his side, he said:

I do accept the terms. It was the sweat that prevented me from seeing them.

You are in no position to accept. It is the woman who unmakes men, to make saints.

Mutual. It is all mutual.

It was his tongue that would not come unstuck.

You have gained that point, the mouth was laughing.

Two *zusammen* should gain by numbers, but lose in fact. Numbers weaken.

The weaker is stronger, O Vooоos.

So that the sleeper sat up, the better to look into the mouth of the lily. Instead, he found darkness and the smell of a wick, for Palfreyman was finished, and had gone to bed.

Then Voss lay down again, and pretended his sleep had not

been interrupted, for he did not wish to be told that he had spoken during his dream. He was dubiously happy. He remembered whole lines of Laura Trevelyan's letter. And her voice speaking. He would have liked to be told, in that voice, what to do next, since consummation is not an end in itself.

Next morning, in a tunnel of red light and bowed grass, Voss took his leave of Boyle, who, as the cavalcade moved forward with a surge of sacrificial animals and dedicated men, stood for a long time looking sorrowfully like something that had been abandoned on the edge of life. An old boot, in fact.

With very little warning the day opened like a square-cut, blazing jewel on the expedition, holding it almost stationary in the prison of that blue brilliance. Its progress and humble dust did begin to seem rather pitiable. The goats were obviously bewildered by the extreme imprudence of man. The sheep, on the other hand, could have possessed some understanding of foolishness, as they pushed on scraggily, staggily, through the tussocks, leaving bits of wool on the bushes, their pulsating throats already resigned. Round and about moved the magnificent men, correcting any blunders on the part of the cattle, in whose horns the long whips were frequently entwined. The men were impressing themselves, although towards noon their sense of purpose was less definite, and what had been a compact mob of moiling beasts had worn into a thin trickle.

So that after the midday halt, which was spent in the shade of some brigalow scrub, Voss called his men and divided his strength into several parts, of sheep together with goats, of cattle, and of pack animals. Thenceforth they followed at their several speeds the river-bed which Boyle had identified for Voss as the C—. Voss himself rode forward with the two blacks, Dugald and Jackie, and in that way was freed momentarily from further responsibility, and strengthened by his vision of uninterrupted space.

He was happiest with his loyal subjects.

'You were foolish to bring along that fine coat,' he said to the old native. 'Now, if you lose your life, you will lose your coat too.'

Then he laughed.

The old native followed suit, bouncing lightly on his grey horse. No one had ever spoken to him like this. There was a certain absence of the expected in the white man's words which made him shy, however.

The white man was singing:

'Eine blosse Seele ritt hinaus
Dem Blau' ent-ge-gen. . . .'

He would pause, and think, and continue to sing.

'Sein Rock flog frei.
Sein Schimmel mit den Wol-ken
Um die Ehre rrrann. . . .'

He was very pleased with his song. He was singing it at the sky.

'Nur der edle Rock zu Schaden kam,
Die Fetzen fie-len,
Den Hi-im-mel ent-lang.'

All the time the young native was keeping up a chatter to his mentor, Dugald, who was lost between several worlds.

The white man was laughing.

'Ach, Dugald, Wörter haben keine Bedeutung. Sinnlos!

'Nonsense,' he added, and asked: 'Do you understand *nonsense?*'

Dugald smiled. He was shy. But they were happy together.

By now the light had softened and was beginning to reveal more. Voss thought how he would talk eventually with Laura Trevelyan, how they had never spoken together using the truly humble words that convey the innermost reality: bread, for instance, or water. Obsessed by the struggle between their two souls, they had threatened each other with the flashing weapons of abstract reasoning, while overlooking the common need for sustenance. But now we shall understand each other, he said, glancing about. At that hour fulfilment did appear to prevail, in the dry river, with its recurring pot-holes of greenish-brown water, in the drifts of white flood grass tinkling on bushes, in the ugly, thumping lizards and modest birds. Through the marriage

of light and shadow, in the infinite distances of that dun country of which he was taking possession, all, finally, would be resolved.

His almost voluptuously hopeful vision was broken by the younger native, who had slithered from his horse into a saucer of bare earth, and was there belabouring something with a stick. The lights in his skin were flickering frenziedly.

'Jackie kill lizard,' Dugald explained.

It was, in fact, one of the short, knobbly-tailed lizards. Surrendering up its life quickly and decently to the grinning Jackie, it lay with its paler belly exposed. A very little of its dark blood had trickled out of the battered mouth.

The three men rode on. The two blacks were chattering to each other. The naked Jackie dangled the stiff lizard by its tail.

'What will he do with the lizard?' Voss asked of Dugald.

The old man popped a bony finger into his mouth. All his grey stubble laughed.

'It is really good to eat?' asked the German.

Dugald restricted that possibility by waving the same, long, black stick of a finger.

'Blackfeller.' He laughed.

And Jackie joined in.

The two blacks jogged along, a little to one side of Voss, as if the subjects of his new kingdom preferred to keep their distance. They could even have been rejecting him. Their voices were for each other, and twining with the dust.

Other figures were beginning to appear, their shadows first, followed by a suggestion of skin wedded to the trunk of a tree. Then, at a bend in the river's bed, the dusty bodies of men undoubtedly emerged. Dugald and Jackie averted their faces. Their cheeks were sulking as they rode. Once the old man did exchange words with some of those who had come, but tentative language, of a great formality and coldness. The strange natives looked at the white man, through the flies, and the whisks of grey leaves, with which they brushed them away. The explorer would have liked to talk to these individuals, to have shown them suitable kindness, and to have received their homage. But they disappeared. Once or twice he called to his escorts, who had decided, apparently, not to hear. They were riding faster now. The increased pace robbed the white man's voice of its

roundness: it flickered flimsily with the motion of his horse. If he turned in the saddle, and attempted to communicate directly with the strange blacks, he found himself beckoning to those same shadows which had accompanied their approach.

This was, of course, a temporary state of affairs. New hope convinced him that he would interpret the needs of all men, the souls of rocks, even. In that more tender light the bare flesh of rocks was promisingly gentle.

As evening was approaching, he resolved to camp there in the elbow of the river, and sent the natives back to convey his intention to the other members of the party. In consequence the leader was left alone for some little time, and then the immensity of his presumption did accuse him. The dome of silence was devoid of all furniture, even of a throne. So he began pulling logs together, smashing sticks, crumbling scrub, and was building their first fire. Sympathy, brilliance, warmth did not, however, immediately leap forth, only a rather disappointing flame. It was a very human fire. Walking up and down, its maker was overcome by the distance between aspiration and human nature. The latter, it appeared, was almost inescapable, like those men whose dust he could already see. Fidgeting in a similar dust, his spurs accused him of his own failures.

Of which we must make the most, Laura Trevelyan implied.

From where he was standing, he could watch the secret place at the nape of her neck, of infinite creaminess, and the swathe of greeny-white veil round the hard, dark crown of her hat. He had never yet dared to touch, except through those formal gestures society expects, or else, the formless, self-explanatory liberties of sleep. Human relationships are vast as deserts: they demand all daring, she seemed to suggest. And here was the little fire that he had made. How it flickered on the smile of this girl, or woman, as she was becoming. Her throat and shoulders were both convincing and convinced. He could not see the eyes, however. Because, she said, you cannot remember. It was true. He remembered her chiefly by the words and ideas they had offered each other, and by a certain poignance of her Italian hand. So that her form remained indistinct. While suggestive of hopefulness. As she turned her rather pointed face with the unremembered eyes. He did not encourage her to approach, for he was afraid that he might re-

ceive the impression of ungainliness, dressed as she was in her thick, travel-stained habit.

Then the cries of men and animals began to break in.

Ralph Angus had cantered up, and was at once correctly informative.

'Mr Voss, sir,' he said, and his brick-coloured skin was very respectful, 'the sheep are quite done up. They are a mile back, still.'

'Good, Ralph,' replied the German. 'You will take Dugald or Jackie and camp near them tonight. It is late now. We shall see in the morning.'

Judd the convict was more reproachful, who came up then behind the spent cattle.

'We did ought to camp earlier, sir,' said Judd, but still respectful.

'Yes, yes,' Voss agreed. 'We have come far. It is a mistake not to camp earlier. You are correct, Judd. If you are offering me advice I shall take it for the next occasion.'

Judd had not expected to be thus mollified by reasonableness and smiles.

With the exception of Turner, who was grumbling because his thighs were chafed, everybody was contented at the sight of fire. Cattle lumbered to a standstill, holding their masks close to the ground. Horses rubbed their faces on their wet legs. A mule dragged at the branches of a tree. And the men, though white about the mouth from thirst, jumped down, and at once assumed ownership of that corner of the dusk.

After Mr Judd had mixed flour and water, and hidden it in the ashes, and taken from that unpromising bed a huge, rude loaf, and they had cut themselves chunks of salt beef, an offering from Boyle of Jildra, and were burning their mouths on the red tea, there was little else to be desired.

'Except that tea without milk,' Turner grumbled, 'is not much above medicine.'

'If you will walk back a mile in the dark,' suggested Voss, 'to where the goats are camped with Mr Angus, you may have your milk, Turner, if you care to pull it.'

Some people considered this a joke of the leader's, and laughed accordingly, but Turner spat out the bitter tea-leaves, which tasted of metal, besides.

'Poor old Turner,' laughed Harry Robarts. 'You are out of luck. Better turn in.'

The boy could not stop, but continued to laugh beneath the stars. The apparent simplicity of space had deceived his rather simple mind. He was free, of past, and future. His hilarious body had forgotten its constricting clothes.

'Turn in, Turner! Eh?'

He was so pleased, this large boy, of laughing throat.

But Turner had turned sour. He was harbouring a grievance, against no one in particular.

'I will turn in, all right,' he answered. 'What else would I do?'

For a long time that night Harry Robarts continued to enjoy the joke that he had heard and the joke that he had made. Lying with his head in the crook of his arm, he discovered, moreover, that he could draw a line through certain stars, and create figures of constellations. He was dazzled in the end, if not delirious with stars. Their official names, which Mr Voss had taught him on board, he had long since chosen to forget, for the stars themselves are more personal than their names. Then he who had been dazzled became puzzled. It seemed that he had not spoken with Mr Voss for several days. So that someone else fell asleep with a grievance, and in his sleep licked the hand, licked with the tongue of a dog, down to the last grain of consoling salt, but was fretful rather than comforted.

The country round them reduced most personal hopes and fears until these were of little account. An eternity of days was opening for the men, who would wake, and scramble up with a kind of sheepish respect for their surroundings. Dew was clogging the landscape. Spiders had sewn the bushes together. And then there were those last, intolerably melancholy stars, that cling to a white sky, and will not be put out except by force.

After breakfast, which was similar to other meals, of salt meat, or of meat lately killed, with the tea they made from scum of waterholes, or from the same stuff brought on in canvas, Voss, attended by Judd, would take readings from their instruments, and attempt to assess their current position. Judd would bring out from their cloths those trembling devices in glass and steel and quicksilver. Judd was the keeper of instruments, Voss indulging his subordinate's passion with the kindness of a supe-

rior being. He himself would sit with the large notebook upon his knees, recording in exquisite characters and figures, in black ink, the legend. Sometimes similarly black, similarly exquisite spiders replete from their dew-feast, would trample in his hair, and have to be brushed off. These small insects could affront him most severely. By this time the air was no longer smelling of dew; it had begun again to smell of dust. Men were buckling girths, and swearing oaths through thinner lips. As the sun mounted, the skin was tightening on their skulls. Some of them winced, and averted their eyes from those flashing instruments with which Voss and Judd professed to be plotting, in opposition to Providence. The sceptics would ride on, however, because they were committed to it, and because by now their minds and limbs had accepted a certain ritual of inspired motion.

So they advanced into the country which now possessed them, looking back in amazement at their actual lives, in which they had got drunk, lain with women under placid trees, thought to offer their souls to God, or driven the knife into His image, some other man.

Then, suddenly, Voss looked in his journal and saw that the following day would be Christmas. By some instinct for self-preservation, he would not have spoken of it, and most of his men, dependent on him for every judgement or calculation, would have ridden quietly by.

Palfreyman realized, but as he was not a man to act, an observer, rather, or sufferer of life, he was waiting to see.

If, in the case of Voss, it was the instinct for self-preservation that warned him to avoid Christmas, in Judd's case it was the instinct for self-assertion that caused him to remember. Since his death by whips and iron, he had aspired longingly at times to be reborn, and when more hopefully than at that season, at which, he sensed now, they had arrived. If he had not succeeded all those years, in the loving bosom of his family, it was perhaps because he was shy of eyes that had witnessed something of his sufferings. But to these mates, and even to the knowing German, he was a stone man. Then it would be easier, given the opportunity, to crack open and disclose all manner of unexpected ores, even a whole human being.

So the emancipist was expectant. He was always urging his horse forward, and hesitating, and reining it back. He must only choose the moment, but would speak soon, he knew. His shirt was shining and transparent with sweat, over the old wounds, and clumsy labouring of great ribs, as he tidied the edges of his mob of cattle, and watched the point at which the German was riding with Mr Palfreyman. The backs of the two gentlemen ahead remained quite flat and unconscious, while the figure of Judd, labouring always with his cattle and his thoughts, loomed like sculpture.

They had entered, as it happened, a valley sculptured in red rock and quartz, in which a river ran, rather shallow and emotional, but a river of live water such as they could remember, through the valley of wet grass. Heat appeared to intensify the green of a variety of splendid trees, some sprouting with hair or swords, others slowly succumbing to a fleshy jasmine, of which the arms were wound round and round their limbs. These deadly garlands were quite festive in immediate effect, as they glimmered against the bodies of their hosts. The breath of jasmine cajoled the air. Platters of leaves presented gifts of moisture. And there were the birds. Their revels were filling the air with cries and feathers, rackety screams of utter abandon, flashes of saffron, bursts of crimson, although there were also other more sombre birds that would fly silently into the thoughts of men like dreadful arrows.

When it was almost noon, and the valley had narrowed to a neck, the convict left his cattle, which were tired and unwilling, and rode forward.

He said:

'Mr Voss, I reckon it is near Christmas. If it is not tomorrow, it is soon after.'

Then they listened to the silence.

If he had been given to irony, Palfreyman would have indulged in it at this point, but as he was not, he looked at the grass, and waited.

'Yes, you are correct, Judd,' said Voss.

The birds were screaming and ascending in red riot.

'It is tomorrow,' said the German precisely.

All round this group hung the heat in sheets of damp silence.

'It did not occur to me to mention it,' said Voss. 'You know, in such circumstances.'

He let his hand fall limply, as if his own body were as much to blame.

'But if this festival will mean anything to you, Judd, personally, or to any of the other men, then certainly must we celebrate it.'

'I would like to celebrate Christmas, sir,' said Judd.

Once he would have looked to Palfreyman, even last week he might have, but did not now. This rather massive man, sitting astride his caked horse, was not in need of support for the present.

Instead, it was Palfreyman who felt the need to follow. He hastened to add:

'I, too, would like to celebrate Christmas.'

It was perfectly natural that any Christian should wish to join the emancipated convict at this season of complete emancipation, yet Voss, who feared union, most of all one in which he himself might become involved, suspected snares.

'Good,' he said, wetting his lips, and smiling painfully. 'Then, what would you suggest, Judd?'

He waited to hear something he would hate.

'I would suggest, sir, that we call a halt just where we are. It is a pleasant spot,' the convict said, and indeed, it was reflected in his face, a place of large leaves and consoling water. 'If you agree, I will kill a sheep, that we will eat tomorrow. I will make a pudding or two, not the real thing, like, but to deceive ourselves. I am not going to suggest, sir, how we should spend Christmas Day. Every man will have his own ideas.'

'We could read the service,' he did add, as a careful afterthought.

'Let us, at least, call the halt,' said Voss, and, riding into the shadow of a tree, flung his hat down, then himself.

Judd took command. His face was glad, Palfreyman saw. Calling to his mates as they approached, throwing out his thick, hairy arm, signalling to them to dispose of beasts and baggage in a final halt, the convict had become a man of stature. Little signs of hopefulness were playing round his mouth amongst the lively

points of perspiration. The strength of innocence can but increase, Palfreyman realized, and was himself glad.

Then, as he was exhausted by the luxuriance of unwonted green, by the habitual heat, as well as by the challenge of souls that he had just witnessed, the ornithologist went and joined the German in the shadow of his tree.

'It is not splendid?' asked Voss, admiring the prospect of sculptural red rocks and tapestries of musical green which the valley contained.

Palfreyman agreed.

'Ennobling and eternal,' persisted the German. 'This I can apprehend.'

Because it is mine, by illusion, it was implied, and so the ornithologist sensed. By now, moreover, the latter had learnt to read the eyes.

'Yet, to drag in the miserable fetish that this man has insisted on! Of Jesus Christ!'

The vision that rose before the German's eyes was, indeed, most horrible. The racked flesh had begun to suppurate, the soul had emerged, and gone flapping down the ages with slow, suffocating beat of wings.

As the great hawk flew down the valley, Turner did take a shot at it, but missed. It was the glare he blamed.

During the afternoon Voss continued in his journal the copious and satisfying record of their journey through his country, and succeeded in bringing the narrative up to date. As he sat writing upon his knees, the scrub was smouldering with his shirt of crimson flannel, the parting present of his friend and patron, Edmund Bonner. If there were times when the German's eyes suggested that their fire might eventually break out and consume his wiry frame, as true fire will lick up a patch of tortured scrub, in a puff of smoke and a pistol shot, on this occasion he was ever looking up and out, with, on the whole, an expression of benevolent amusement for that scene in which his men were preparing a feast.

'Do you appreciate with me the spectacle of such pagan survivals?' he called once to Palfreyman, and laughed.

For Judd had seized the lamb, or stained wether, and plunged

the knife into its throat, and the blood had spurted out. Several of his laughing audience were splashed.

Judd himself was painted liberally with the blood of the kicking sheep. Afterwards he hung its still carcass on a tree, and fetched its innards out, while the others lay in the grass, and felt the sweat stiffen on them, and talked together peacefully, or thought, or chewed the stems of the fat grass. Although they appeared to ignore the butcher, they were implicitly but the circumference of that grassy circle. Judd was the centre, as he plunged his arms into the blue cavern of the sheep.

Watching from his distance, Voss remembered the picnic by the sea, at which he had spoken with Laura Trevelyan, and they had made a circle of their own. As he saw it now, perfection is always circular, enclosed. So that Judd's circle was enviable. Too late, Laura said, or it was the shiny, indigenous leaves in which a little breeze had started up. All the immediate world was soon swimming in the same liquid green. She was clothed in it. Green shadows almost disguised her face, where she walked amongst the men, to whom, it appeared, she was known, as others were always known to one another, from childhood, or by instinct. Only he was the passing acquaintance, at whom she did glance once, since it was unavoidable. Then he noticed how her greenish flesh was spotted with blood from that same sheep, and that she would laugh at, and understand the jokes shared with others, while he continued to express himself in foreign words, in whichever language he used, his own included.

Laura Trevelyan understood perfectly all the preliminaries of Judd's feast. It would be quite simple, humble, as she saw it; they would eat the meat with their hands, all of them, together, and in that way, it would become an act of praise.

As the day grew to an end, and preparations for the feast were completed, Voss grew angry and depressed.

The same night, after the fires had been lit, and the carcass of the sheep that would be eaten for Christmas was a sliver of white on the dark tree, Judd took fat, and tossed the liver in a pan, and when it was done, brought it to his leader.

'Here is a fine piece of liver, sir, done as nice as you would see it.'

But Voss said:

'Thank you, Judd. I cannot. It is the heat. I will not eat tonight.'

He could not. The liver stank.

When Judd went away, which he did as respectfully as ever, he had a glittery look in his eye, and pitched the liver to the dogs.

Left alone, Voss groaned. He would not, could not learn, nor accept humility, even though this was amongst the conditions she had made in the letter that was now living in him. For some time, he sat with his head in his hands. He did truly suffer.

Except for the dogs scratching and sighing, the night had grown silent, the fires had fallen into embers, when grass began to rustle, feet approached the leader, and there was Turner's face upon the darkness.

Why did I bring the man? Voss wondered.

'Look at this, sir,' Turner invited.

'What is it?' asked Voss.

Then he saw it was the handle of the frying-pan.

'Well?' he asked. 'How does this concern me? Is it of any interest?'

'It was him,' laughed Turner.

'Who?'

'The cook, or Jack-of-all-trades. Lord God Almighty!'

'I am not interested. You are foolish, Turner. Go to bed.'

'I am not all that foolish.' Turner laughed in going.

He should have been drunk, but his stomach would sometimes turn sour without all that assistance.

As he prepared for sleep, Voss continued to feel incensed against the miserable fellow. Though it was Judd who had roused his anger. It is Turner, he said, but he knew that it was Judd.

And Turner knew, in the tent that was shared by several.

Some were already snoring as Judd lay fidgeting against the pillow of his saddle.

'Listen, Albert,' Turner said. 'You are awake, I can hear that.'

He rolled over, so that his long thin body was close against the thicker one. His long face was very close.

'Remember that there compass, that was lost at Jildra, or not lost, it was in your bag?'

Judd did not have to remember, for he had not forgotten.

'It was put there, see, on a moonlight night, by a certain Prussian gentleman, who was innocent on account of he was *sleep*-walkin'.'

'I do not believe it,' Judd said.

'No more do I,' Turner continued. 'He was as naked as moonlight, and bony as the Lord. But his eyes did not convince this one.'

'You did not tell,' said Judd. 'Not till now.'

'I have been caught before,' Turner replied. 'And this was valuable.'

'I do not believe it,' said Judd. 'Go to sleep.'

Turner laughed, and rolled over.

Judd lay in that position until his bones had set, but did also sleep at last.

Then everyone was sleeping, or waking, to remember that it would soon be Christmas, and fall into a deeper sleep.

About midnight, however, wild dogs had begun to howl, which woke the dogs of the expedition, and these were soon moaning back in answer. The night was grown rather black, but with a flickering of yellow from a distant storm. A thin wind ran along the crest of things, together with the high yelping of the increasingly uneasy camp dogs.

Himself disturbed, Voss got up at last, and stumbled in search of their two native guides, tracing them by the embers of their fire, against which they were rolled like animals. Their eyes were open, he could see, upon some great activity of their minds. If only he could have penetrated to that distance, he would have felt more satisfied.

Dugald, the old man, immediately turned away his face, and said, before other words could be spoken:

'I sick, sick.'

And was rubbing his belly under the remnants of his ridiculous swallowtail coat.

'Have you heard something, Dugald, perhaps? Could it be wild dogs?'

'No dogs,' said Dugald.

These sounds were made, he explained, by blackfellows who intended mischief.

Just then there fell a few big drops of flat rain, and there was a sudden thumping of the earth, and protesting of grass.

'That is cattle,' said Voss.

It could have been the sound of cattle in motion, of frightened cattle, a little farther up the valley where the herd had been left to graze.

'Blackfeller no good this place,' Dugald moaned.

Voss now returned to his tent, and fetched a gun. He called to the two natives.

'You come, Dugald, Jackie. We go look cattle.'

But the two men were fascinated by the fire. They turned their faces from the darkness, and stared closer into the coals, rubbing their cheeks against the dust. Darkness is a place of evil, so, wisely, they avoided it.

Voss continued up the valley for what seemed like some considerable distance, encountering only a vast, dark humidity. Once a cow and calf propped, and snorted at him, and lumbered away. There was no further sign of cattle.

'Nutzlos,' he said, coldly furious, and discharged his weapon once or twice in the direction the herd must have taken.

When he returned, Le Mesurier and Palfreyman had come out, awakened by the shots and a hysteria of dogs.

'It is probable that blacks have driven off the cattle,' Voss announced. 'There is nothing we can do for the present.'

Beside their fire Dugald and Jackie were listening to these words. The voice of the white man could have been issuing from the earth.

So Christmas began.

In the morning, it was learnt that more than half the cattle had been driven off. Dugald, who had resumed possession of his ancient grace and a kind of sad resourcefulness, said that Jackie would take his horse and search—Jackie had eyes for stolen cattle—and Voss accepted this suggestion as a temporary measure, if not a way out of their dilemma.

The others were secretly glad that, for the moment at least, they need not exert themselves on such a radiant, pigeon-coloured morning. After breakfast—a subdued, though contenting meal—Harry Robarts fetched out a flag they had brou ght with them, and fastened it to a sapling-staff, from which it hung rather dank. At once somebody began to mumble, then almost all joined in, and they were singing *'God Save the Queen'*.

The German in his crimson shirt observed them with amusement, but quite kindly, holding himself erect by instinct, if not from approval.

Afterwards, Mr Palfreyman produced his prayer-book, and declared his intention of reading the Church of England service.

Then Voss said:

'It may not be the wish of everyone, Palfreyman, to be forced to worship in this way. It is preferable if each man does his own part, and reads in his own book. There,' he concluded, looking at them.

It was not altogether unreasonable, and Palfreyman made himself condemn certain of his own thoughts.

Soon, one or two who possessed prayer-books had taken them out, and were attempting to follow the words, in that place where the wild jasmine was sweetly stifling a sense of duty, and the most dogged devotions were shot through with a glint of parrots. Turner, frankly, whittled wood, and recalled how the rum was far more efficacious than prayer as a means of refreshment. Judd went away.

'The old beggar,' Turner was quick to call. 'What will yer ma say? Church is not out.'

'I have things to do,' Judd mumbled. 'There is the mutton.'

'Then, I will come and lend a hand,' Turner proposed.

But he was not encouraged by the convict, who went from there, shambling and mumbling.

'There is no need,' he said, surlily. 'I have my own methods, and will be ready by noon.'

So that Ralph Angus looked up from his dry book, and his mouth was full and moist in anticipation.

Judd was soon hidden by the blessed scrub. He who could squeeze the meaning out of a line by pressing on it with his finger-nail, always hastened to remove himself from the presence of true initiates when they were at their books. All the scraps of knowledge with which he was filled, all those raw hunks of life that, for choice, or by force, he had swallowed down, were reduced by the great mystery of words to the most shameful matter. Words were not the servants of life, but life, rather, was the slave of words. So the black print of other people's books became a swarm of victorious ants that carried off a man's self-

respect. So he wandered through the bush on that morning, and was only soothed at last by leaves and silence.

Then he was glad again. He would have expressed that gladness, but could not, except by letting the smooth leaves lie upon his stubbly face, except by being of the stillness. In this way he offered his praise. For a short space the soul returned to his body, from which it had been driven out by whips, and he stood there looking through inspired eyes into the undergrowth.

When Harry Robarts discovered Judd, the latter was already at work upon the sheep's carcass. He was cursing the flies.

'Urchhh!' cried the disgusted boy.

'Why, Harry,' said Judd, 'those are only maggots.'

'And what about our dinner?'

'Why, it will be on your plates, as promised.'

'Maggots and all?'

'Maggots knock off very easy,' Judd replied.

He was, even now, engaged in knocking them off.

'Filthy stuff!' cried the boy.

Certainly the meat was already of rather a green appearance as the result of such a damp heat.

'You wait and see,' coaxed the convict. 'You will be surprised. If you do not eat your mutton, then I will eat my hat.'

But the boy was not consoled.

'My stomach is turned up,' he complained.

'Not everyone is queasy by nature,' answered Judd. 'Still, Harry, I will ask you not to mention this to anyone else.'

Other incidents prevented the boy from breaking his promise.

During the morning a party of blacks appeared, first as shreds of shy bark glimpsed between the trunks of the trees, but always drifting, until, finally, they halted in human form upon the outskirts of the camp.

'Did you ever see such a filthy race?' asked Ralph Angus, whose strength and looks prevented him from recognizing anything except in his own admirable image.

'We do not understand them yet,' said Le Mesurier.

The latter's doubts and discoveries could have been leading him towards the age of wisdom.

'You are morbid, I believe, Frank,' Angus said, and laughed.

He was all for driving out the wretched mob of cattle thieves.

The blacks were watching. Some of the men even grew noble in the stillness of their concentration and posture of their attenuated limbs. Their faces betrayed a kind of longing. Others, though, and particularly the old, could have been wallowing beforehand in the dust; they had the dusty, grey-black skins of lizards. Several of the women present had had the hair burnt from their heads. The women were altogether hairless, for those other parts which should have been covered, had been exposed by plucking. By some perversity of innocence, however, it did seem to emphasize the modesty of those who had been plucked. They had nothing left to hide.

Turner, naturally, was provoked to immoderate laughter, and was shouting:

'What will you bid for the molls, Mr Le Mesurier?'

And when Le Mesurier was silent:

'Or are they not to your taste?'

Finally, he took the handle of the iron frying-pan, which he still had about him from the previous night, and presented it to one of the more impressive blacks.

'You sell wife,' he demanded. 'I buy. But the pretty one. The one that has not been singed right off.'

Everyone was by this time repelled by Turner, and by the blacks that had so inspired him.

The blacks themselves were disgusted by those of his gestures which conveyed a meaning. Several of the males made hissing noises, and the pan-handle was flung down.

Hearing the scuffling and flumping that followed, and curses from Turner, and gibberish of natives, the German had come out of his tent, and entered into the situation.

'Turner,' he said, 'your behaviour will always live down to what I would expect. You will please me by not molesting these people who are my guests.'

Someone who had begun to snigger did not continue. It was often thus in the presence of Voss. His laborious attitudes would fill the foreground and become the right ones.

Now he approached the black whose instincts had rejected Turner's offer, and, holding out his hand, said stiffly:

'Here is my hand in friendship.'

At first the blackfellow was reluctant, but then took the hand as if it had been some inanimate object of barter, and was turning it over, examining its grain, the pattern of veins, and, on its palm, the lines of fate. It was obvious he could not estimate its value.

Each of the white men was transfixed by the strangeness of this ceremony. It would seem that all human relationships hung in the balance, subject to fresh evaluation by Voss and the black.

Then the native dropped the hand. There was too much here for him to accept. Although something of this nature had been expected by his companions, Voss appeared somewhat saddened by the reception his gesture had received.

'They are at that stage when they can only appreciate material things,' he said in some surprise.

It was he who was in the wrong, to expect of his people—for as such he persisted in considering them—more than they were capable of giving, and, acknowledging his mistake, he promptly instructed the boy to fetch a bag of flour.

'At least, sir,' said Ralph Angus, 'let us question them on the subject of the stolen cattle.'

Dugald did exchange with the natives a few, unhappy, private words. Then all was mystery, in a concert of black silence.

'No know,' said Dugald, in that sick voice he would adopt for any of his failures.

By this time the boy had lugged the flour into their presence, and Dugald was ordered to explain its virtues. This he did briefly, as people will confess unwillingly to the lunacy of some relative.

The blacks were chattering, and plunging their hands into the flour, and giving floury smiles. Then they swooped upon the bag, and departed through the valley, laughing. While yet in sight, some altercation of a semi-humorous nature arose, and many hands were tugging at the bag. One old woman was seizing handfuls of the flour and pouring it upon her head. She stood there, for a moment, in veils of flour, an ancient bride, and screamed because it tickled. They were all laughing then, and running through a rain of flour, after which they trailed the empty bag, until it was dropped, finally, in ignoble rags.

Such an abuse could have been felt most keenly by Voss, the

benefactor, if at that moment the smells of roasting mutton had not arisen.

'It is the dinner,' cried Harry Robarts, quite forgetting the earlier stages of its preparation.

Judd had fixed the carcass above the coals of a fire, in a kind of shallow trench, and now the golden sheep was rustling with juices and spitting fat. Slabs of hot meat were presently hacked off for the whole company, who for once omitted to gnaw the bones before throwing them to the dogs. All were soon bursting, but still contrived to stuff down some of the hard puddings that Judd had improvised out of flour and currants, and boiled in water; even these were good on that day. Afterwards the men lay in the grass, and embroidered on their past lives, stories such as nobody believed, but to which they listened contentedly.

Even Voss descended from his eminence, and was reviewing the past through benevolent gauze.

'I can remember in the house of my parents a green stove. It was composed of green tiles, you understand, of which the decoration was rampant lions, though they more resembled thin cats, it occurred to me as a boy.'

Everybody listened to the German. Exhausted by food, mellow with Christmas, they no longer demanded narrative, but preferred the lantern slides of recollection. Into these still, detached pictures entered the simplest members of the party as into their own states of mind.

'Round that green stove we would sit on Christmas Evening: the relatives, some acquaintances, old women living off friendship, one or two boys apprenticed by my father. We would sing the Christmas songs. There was always a tree, a *Tannenbaum,* smelling as such trees will when they bleed from fresh wounds. Between all this festivity, and sweet things that were passing round, and the hot wine, I would hear the streets. It was the snow, filling and filling the empty streets, until we were lost, it seemed, in Christmas.'

The German paused.

'So,' he said. 'It was not altogether different. Except for the snow, *selbstverständlich*. There was the snow.'

'And except that we are not lost,' Judd felt compelled to add.

Some of them laughed, and said they were not so sure. At that moment they would not have cared.

'What did you use to eat, sir?' asked Harry Robarts.

'At Christmas, a goose. But on the Christmas Evening, always a fine carp.'

'What is a carp, sir?'

But how could the German answer, who was so far distant?

In the cool of the evening, when those who had been feasting rose from their stupor of meat and dreams, Voss asked Judd to come with him, and they took horses, and rode out in the direction in which Jackie had gone to look for the lost cattle. It was not long before they had left behind all trace of that pleasant valley where they were camped, entering a dead country, in which the horses were continually stumbling, for they would plunge their feet into burrows or hidden pot-holes, and sink up to the pasterns in the crumbly earth.

Once in the course of this hard going, the horse which Voss was riding shied at a snake. The fact that it was a live one was surprising, for all else in the landscape appeared to be dead. The horse was immediately protesting, with his breath and his forelock, and the whites of his eyes. In that sudden leap, the German's left temple and part of his forehead were scored by the branch of a dead tree, nothing serious, indeed, he would not have thought anything more of the matter, if the blood had not begun to trickle down into his eyes.

'You should attend to it, sir,' said Judd, on noticing that his leader was brushing away the blood.

'It is nothing,' Voss replied.

And frowned. With the result that the blood was again gushing, and tumbling down into his eyes.

'Wait,' said Judd.

Astonishingly, Voss did. They were both reining in. They were jumping down upon the ground. The convict took a handkerchief that he had but lately washed in the river at the place where they were encamped, and with which he was now preparing to bind the German's head.

Should I let him? wondered the latter.

But he was already submitting. He was bowing his head. He

could smell the smell of the crumpled, but spotless handkerchief, which had been dried on spikes of grass, at leisure, in the sun. He could hear the convict's breathing, very close.

'Is that too tight, sir?' Judd was asking.

Although expert in being of service to others, frequently on such occasions he would experience a weakness so delicious that his skilful hands would bungle.

'That is right. As it is,' said Voss.

To surrender itself into other hands is one of the temptations of mortal flesh, the German knew, and shivered for an instant.

'Do you say that somebody is passing over your grave?' he laughed.

'There is some such saying,' replied the convict, whose eyes were examining his work with a detached affection.

When they had remounted and were riding on, Voss wondered how much of himself he had given into her hands. For he had become aware that the mouth of the young woman was smiling. It was unusually full and compassionate. Approbation must have gone to his head, for he continued unashamedly to contemplate her pleasure, and to extract from it pleasure of his own. They were basking in the same radiance, which had begun to emanate from the hitherto lustreless earth.

'We will find it pretty rough going from now on, I expect, sir,' interrupted Judd, who was ploughing forward somewhat in advance.

'I have every confidence in our company,' said the German.

They rode on, and it could have been the gentle silence of evening that made them both grateful.

Not long after this, on the banks of a dry creek, they came upon Jackie with seven head of cattle, or what remained of the lost herd.

'You look all over?' exploded the infuriated Voss.

'All over,' said Jackie, reasoning that this was what the white man wished to hear.

'We could fan out in the morning, the whole lot of us,' suggested Judd, 'and perhaps snap up a few more.'

As it was growing late, nothing else could be done for the present, but fall in behind the exasperating rumps of the recovered few, and return to camp.

In the morning the convict's plan was adopted by all but Palfreyman, who was occupied with the ornithological specimens he had taken while in the valley. He sat at work beneath a tree, brushing the flies off his neatly folded birds with a switch of leaves. So that the German was irritated to see him.

'Perhaps it is as well you should remain, Palfreyman,' he did say, contemplatively, 'to guard against possible marauders.'

But he continued to be furious with all, especially with Gyp, the big, half-Newfoundland bitch, that got beneath his horse's feet, and then shrieked.

Except that they discovered the hacked carcasses of two steers, the search for the missing cattle proved fruitless, and after several days it was decided to strike camp and push on without them. Only Palfreyman, it now appeared, had profited by their stay in that pleasant place, for the interlude of Christmas had faded, Turner was suffering from a fever, and two of the others from insect bites. Palfreyman had to try hard to conceal his personal contentment, but did not succeed in hiding it from Voss.

'What shall we do,' grumbled the latter, 'when the back of the last mule is broken under the corpses of birds?'

Palfreyman accepted this as a joke.

And they pushed on.

They were riding eternally over the humped and hateful earth, which the sun had seared until the spent and crumbly stuff had become highly treacherous. It was, indeed, the bare crust of the earth. Several of the sheep determined to lie down upon it and die. Their carcasses did not have much to offer, though the blacks would frizzle the innards and skin, and stuff these delicacies down their throats. The white men, whose appetites were deadened by dust, would swallow a few leathery strips of leg, or gnaw from habit at the wizened chops. Their own stomachs were shrivelling up. In the white light of dawn, horses and cattle would be nosing the ground for any suggestion of leaf, any blade of grass, or little pocket of rock from which to suck the dew. The ghosts of things haunted here, and in that early light the men and animals which had arrived were but adding to the ghost-life of the place.

But it is what we expected, the German assured himself.

His features had grown thinner, his eyes, of that pale, pure blue, were the clearer for this confirmation of vision by fact.

Once they came across a party of blacks, trooping gaily over the grey earth. The blacks approached, laughing, and showing their white teeth. Unlike their fellows farther back, they proceeded to hail Dugald and Jackie. An exchange of cheerful civilities was taking place; then the thin line straggled on into the vastness. The women were carrying nets and children, but the men were free.

It was afterwards learnt from Dugald that the party was on its way to eat the fruit of the bunya bunya.

'Where?' asked Le Mesurier, to whom those dark trees promised paradise.

'Very far. Blackfeller walk,' answered Dugald, growing sad. 'Many sleeps,' he added.

So the white men continued westward through what could have been their own perpetual sleep, and the fruit of the mystic bunya bunya contracted in their mouths.

Several days from there they came to a ridge, of hills even, at which a brigalow scrub whipped their flesh back to waking. Mules began to buck. The udders of those goats which had kidded were slashed and torn by twigs, and the glassy eyes of the most rational of all animals were seeing far too clearly as they advanced into chaos. On the farther side of the ridge, however, there was the suggestion of a creek, that is to say, a string of pools, filled with brown water or scum, for which the expedition made with all the speed it could muster, and but for curses, and skill in horsemanship, would have been trapped in it.

As it was, two of the more obstinate mules succeeded in becoming bogged, and were only dragged out by concerted strength at the end of their leading ropes, and blows on the rump from the torn-off branch of a tree.

One of these animals, it was seen, had staked itself. Dark blood was mingling on its fetlock with the slime of mud. It limped ostentatiously.

Voss approached the animal with that directness which comes from controlled distaste, a thin figure possessed by will, and was immediately lying on his back, his face even thinner.

Most of his party appeared as if drugged by circumstance, but Palfreyman was quick to dismount and run to their leader.

'What is it, Mr Voss?'

'It has got me in the stomach. The devil of a thing!' the German did manage to convey, as he lay twisting his lips.

At this point Judd arrived at his side, and the tortured man was carried back up the slope, and laid in the shade of some scrub, over which the convict rigged a sheet of canvas as additional shelter.

As the German continued to bite his lips, and seemed incapable of uttering any but his own language, Judd took it upon himself to call a halt, and they camped there several days, treating the sick, for the fever-ridden Turner had contracted the diarrhoea, from the milk of a goat, he insisted, and there was, besides, the staked mule.

Judd had soon organized the camp. He sent the supple Jackie out along a log to scoop the scum-water with a pannikin. Dugald unearthed the roots of trees, from which he shook a quantity of crystal water. Soon all were meagrely refreshed. Only the beasts were dissatisfied with their portion of scum; they would stand and murmur, with their heads held low, nosing for celestial dew.

One evening when the pain had begun to leave him, and the skin of his face was less yellow, Voss sent for Judd and thanked him formally.

'For your personal attention, Mr Judd, and kindness,' said the stiff German, who was still stretched upon the ground like a breathing corpse, looking from beneath his eyelids.

'A man does what he can,' said Judd, and would have accepted the cat rather than the scourge of recognition.

'But with no water,' he blurted.

A most shameful tenderness was taking the shape out of his mouth.

He had, indeed, been forced to boil in a pot of scum the rags he had used to foment the German's belly. Tinged by the mule's hoof with saffron and purple, this part of his anatomy must originally have been ivory in colour, very thin, moreover, and private, so that, as he worked, the convict had been forced continually to turn his head, and turn his head, to look out into the haze, and thus avoid violating further the privacy, that almost sacrosanctity of which he was aware.

Voss, who had felt more exposed on some less physical occa-

sions, despised all sickness; he despised physical strength; he despised, though secretly, even the compassion he had sensed in the ministrations of Judd. His own strength, he felt, could not decrease with physical debility. But, was Judd's power increased by compassion?

He was continually observing the convict as the latter applied the miserable hot rags, and now, from beneath his eyelids, as he thanked the man for his services.

'And particularly for seeing fit to assume command.'

Judd stood there.

'I did not take command, not intentional like.'

'But it is for this that I commend you,' answered Voss, looking ever deeper into Judd.

'I did round up a few mules,' the convict confessed. 'And tell the men to see as the canvas was pegged down. And kill a beast. And send the blacks to look for water. Because I am a practical man.'

'And mules must be rounded up. And men, men must be driven, although they blind themselves to the truth.'

Then the convict protested with great vehemence:

'Not men. It is not so with men.'

This man was shaking, as if the wounds were opening in him.

'Good, Judd,' laughed Voss. 'I will exonerate you from any such designs.'

But when the fellow had gone away, he continued to suspect him of exercising great power, though within human limits. For compassion, a feminine virtue, or even grace, of some sensual origin, was undoubtedly human, and did limit will.

So the German was despising what he most desired: to peel the whale-bone off the lily stem and bruise the mouth of flesh.

Ah, he cried, rubbing his face against the leather of the saddle-bag.

Then he lay more tranquilly upon the barren hillside. He thought about the woman whose consent was making her his wife. All twisted lusts had gone out of his body and the stunted trees. The sky was flowering at that hour, and the distant fields of vision. He lay breathing gently in this union of earth with light. He lay thinking of the wife from whose hands he would accept salvation, if he were intended to renounce the crown of fire

for the ring of gentle gold. That was the perpetual question which grappled him as coldly as iron.

In a few days Voss was up. His will walked erect, if not yet his emaciated body. As the others were cured of their ills, Turner of all but the grumbles, and the offending mule of its lameness, the German called Judd and Palfreyman and informed them of his decision to make a start on the following morning.

It was a relief to put an end to inactivity on that scrubby slope. Life starts afresh with each fresh journey, even into the dust. So the forenoon and evening were filled with lively preparation.

Only Dugald was squatting inactive on the ashy fringe of a small fire. The old native was more than ever a man of ash and charred wood; his brittle hams might have crumbled at a touch.

'What is it, Dugald?' asked the German. 'Are you not pleased?'

'Blackfeller old,' said the old man, in a voice that was his oldest. 'This feller too old.'

How the notes of lamentation twangled on his bone harp.

'This feller sick. Sick old. Wanta go back Jildra. This no place old feller die.'

'I will not let you die, Dugald,' Voss consoled lightly.

'You let Mr Voss die. You no stop Dugald,' answered the old black, looking gravely at the white man.

'How *let myself die*?'

'Not now. No ready. You no stop when ready.'

This melancholy conversation that was taking place at the fire's edge had its gaiety for Voss.

'You old devil,' he laughed, 'you will see us all put in the ground.'

Then the old man himself began to laugh.

'No here,' he laughed ashily. 'Jildra. Jildra good place. Please,' he said, quickly, quietly. 'I go away Jildra.'

But the German dismissed that possibility with his hand, and walked on.

The old man continued to nurse what was, indeed, a sickness of foreboding and fear. He was holding his old ashen head as he squatted by the fire. The hostile spirits of unfamiliar places were tormenting him.

Later, in the camp which had begun already to dissolve in anticipation of the morning's move, Voss caught something of the

old native's melancholy, and began to look about at their blackened pots, at the leather tackle which sweat had hardened, and those presumptuous notebooks in which he was scribbling the factual details of their journey. Then the palms of his hands knew a great helplessness. The white sky, for it was again evening, was filled with empty cocoons of cloud, fragile and ephemeral to all appearance, but into which he would have climbed, if he had been able. As he could not, he continued to walk about the camp, and his men looked up from whatever work they were engaged upon, searching his face with the eyes of children who have not yet learnt to reject appearances.

So Voss, who was exhausted, besides, by the illness from which he had not fully recovered, went and sat by his own fire.

'Dugald!' he called, when he had decided, and taken paper.

The breeze was lifting the stiff paper, and rattling it slightly against his knee, as if it had been bark or twig, but, without his protection, would have scrabbled and tormented it, for such white constancy is anathema to the mouths of dust.

The old native came.

'Dugald,' said Voss, who was by this time somewhat feverish, or irritated, '*hör' wohl zu.* Tomorrow morning you will leave for Jildra. *Verstanden?* You will take the horse from Mr Turner. He old, poor horse, better to stay Jildra.'

'Yes,' laughed Dugald. 'Old man same belong Jildra.'

'That is exact,' the German said. '*Warte nur.* Give Dugald's horse to Mr Turner.'

'Yes,' murmured the old black, who was now preparing to suffer all else with patience.

'I write paper, give Dugald letter,' Voss explained.

How the unborn letter rattled against his knees.

'Dugald take same letter Mr Boyle.'

His words were lead bullets.

'Now do you understand?'

'Yes,' said the old man.

Darkness sighed.

When he was alone again, the German spread the sheet of paper, on which the whole darkness converged, spread it on the boards of a notebook, and was prepared to write. His knees were trembling, but, of course, he had been ill. And firelight

flickers. Dugald had been gone a long time, but Voss still hovered over the heading of his letter. Had he been in fullest possession of himself, he would have consulted his neat journal and copied down their latest estimated position. He was not, however, at that moment, self-possessed. He was sitting in the middle of nowhere. Which, naturally, was of too fantastical a nature, too expressive of his nothingness. Yet, out of nothing, he did finally begin, smiling painfully at the prospect of certain words, of which the sentiments remained unfamiliar.

Voss wrote:

My dear Laura, . . .

Addressing her thus intimately, as if he knew her, again the man hesitated. He knew that part of himself, the weakest, of which was born the necessity for this woman. With the latter he was acquainted from several cold conversations and one heated argument. They had met, besides, by flashes of intuition and in dreams. Whether or not such knowledge, haunting and personal though it was from some aspects, sufficiently justified his attitude, he touched the L gently with his pen, and so continued:

. . . *Your letter* has brought me great happiness. I will not say my only happiness, since I am underway to accomplish my also great, and long-conceived ambition. All these prizes falling to me at last make me at times confused, so that you will see you have inspired some degree of that humility which you so admire and in me have wished for! If I cannot admire this quality in other men, or consider it except as weakness in myself, I am yet accepting it for your sake.

There are many points of criticism in your letter that I could answer, but do not here in the circumstances in which I am placed, for those arguments appear to me rather as subjects for the tea-table, and here I have no such furniture from behind which I might make a stand. Indeed, we are reduced almost to infinity. In consequence, I will pass instead to those of your sentiments which, you profess, underlie your arguments, and which have been the cause of so much cordial happiness, while accompanying me these many weeks. That we should love each other, LAURA, does at last appear

inevitable and fitting, as I sit here alone in this immense country. No ordinary *House* could have contained my feelings, but this great one in which greater longings are ever free to grow.

Do I take too much for granted, my dearest wife? I have forgotten, perhaps, some of the pretences, living and dreaming as I do, but life and dreams of such far-reaching splendour you will surely share them, even in your quiet room. So we are riding together across the plains, we sit together in this black night, I reach over and touch your cheek (not for the first time). You see that separation has brought us far, far closer. Could we perhaps converse with each other at last, expressing inexpressible ideas with simple words?

I will send this shameful letter tomorrow by an old native, to Jildra, to Mr Boyle, together with all necessary information on the progress of the expedition for your Uncle, and the formal request of his niece's hand. I would postpone this, Laura, to enjoy our privacy a little longer. Such a precious secret will be stolen only too soon. Am I mad? It is the gold that I have found in these rocks, in these desert places. Or I am delirious still, having been kicked in the stomach by a mule before several days, and suffered considerable pain.

You need not fear that I have not received every attention in my sickness, my chief Angel (a rather hairy one) being Mr Judd, an emancipist convict and neighbour of Mr Sanderson's, of whom I recollect it was also spoken at your Uncle's. Judd is what people call a *good man.* He is not a professional saint, as is Mr Palfreyman. He is a tentative one, ever trying his dubious strength, if not in one way, then, in another. It is tempting to love such a man, but I cannot kill myself quite off, even though you would wish it, my dearest Laura. I am reserved for further struggles, to wrestle with rocks, to bleed if necessary, to ascend. Yes, I do not intend to stop short of the Throne for the pleasure of grovelling on lacerated knees in company with Judd and Palfreyman. As for yourself, take care! At the risk of incurring your serious disapproval, I will raise you up to the far more rational position at my side.

So, we have our visions. Frank Le Mesurier has experienced something of importance that he is keeping hidden from me. On the other hand, Harry Robarts must tell all, while growing simpler, I sometimes feel, with distance. His simplicity is such, he could well arrive at that plane where great mysteries are revealed. Or else become an imbecile.

If I have not described every tree, every bird, every native encountered, it is because all these details are in writing for those who will not see beyond the facts. For you, our other journey, that you are now condemned to share, to its most glorious, or bitterest end.

I send you my wishes, and venture by now also to include my love, since distance has united us thus closely. This is the true marriage, I know. We have wrestled with the gristle and the bones before daring to assume the flesh.

Your

JOHANN ULRICH VOSS

In the morning, when the now shrunken cavalcade pushed westward, Dugald took the old horse which had been assigned to him, and which was gone in the feet, with girth galls, and saddle sores besides. The native was still standing at the stirrup looking shy when the last of the surviving sheep and a heavy, palpitating cow had shambled past. The men had finished calling, some correctly, others affectionately, one obscenely, to the old black. Now, all were gone, except the dust, and Voss.

'Good-bye, Dugald,' said the German from his horse, bending down, and offering a hand.

Then the old man, who was unskilled in similar gestures, took the hand with both his, but dropped it, overwhelmed by the difference in skin, while laughing for happiness. His face was filled with little moons of greyish wrinkles.

'You will go direct to Jildra,' said the German, but making it a generous command.

'Orright, Jildra,' laughed the old man.

'You will not loiter, and waste time.'

But the old man could only laugh, because time did not exist.

The arches of the German's feet were exasperated in the stirrup-irons.

'You will give those letters to Mr Boyle. You understand?'

'Orright,' Dugald laughed.

'Letters safe?' asked the man in bursting veins.

'Safe. Safe,' echoed the scarecrow.

He put them in a pocket of his swallowtail coat. They were looking very white there.

'Well,' cried the writer of them, *'was stehst du noch da? Los!'*

The black mounted. Kicking his bare heels into the sides of the skinny horse, he persuaded it to stumble away.

Then Voss turned and rode in the direction of the others. Always at that hour he was a thin man juggling impotently with hopes. Those great, empty mornings were terrible until the ball of the sun was tossed skyward.

Dugald continued to ride. Several days he spent jogging on the back of the old horse, which sighed frequently, and no longer swished its tail at flies.

The old man, who was contented at last, sang to himself as he rode along:

'Water is good,
Water is good. . . .'

The truth of this filtered fitfully through the blazing land.

Sometimes the old man would jump down at the butt of certain trees, and dig until he reached the roots, and break them open, and suck out the water. Sometimes he would cut sections of these precious pipes, and shake the moisture into the cup of his hand, for the old horse to sup. The hairs of the drawn muzzle tickled his withered skin most agreeably.

The old man killed and ate goannas. He ate a small, dun-coloured rat. As he had reached an age when it was permissible for him to eat almost all foods, it was a pity so little offered itself.

He experienced great longings, and often trembled at night, and thrust his skin against the protecting fire.

When the horse lay down and died, one afternoon in the bed of a dry creek, the black was not unduly concerned. If anything, his responsibilities were less. Before abandoning the dead horse, he cut out the tongue and ate it. Then he tore a stirrup-leather off the saddle, and went forward swinging it, so that the iron at the end described great, lovely arcs against the sky.

The veins of the old, rusty man were gradually filling with marvellous life, as his numbness of recent weeks relented; and in time he arrived at good country of grass and water. He came to a lake in which black women were diving for lily roots. In the

dreamlike state he had entered, it seemed natural that these women should be members of his own tribe, and that they should be laughing and chattering with him as he squatted by the water's edge, watching their hair tangle with the stalks of lilies, and black breasts jostle the white cups. Nor was it unnatural that the strong young huntsmen of the tribe, when they burst through the wiry trees, clattering with spears and nullas, should show contempt, until they realized this was a man full of the wisdom and dignity that is derived from long and important journeys. Then they listened to him.

Only his swallowtail coat, by now a thing of several strips, was no longer dignified enough, with the result that the tallest huntsman solemnly tore off one of the strips, followed by a pocket.

Remembering the white man's letters, Dugald retrieved the pocket, and took them out. The shreds of his coat fell, and he was standing in his wrinkles and his bark-cloth. If the coat was no longer essential, then how much less was the conscience he had worn in the days of the whites? One young woman, of flashing teeth, had come very close, and was tasting a fragment of sealing-wax. She shrieked, and spat it out.

With great dignity and some sadness, Dugald broke the remaining seals, and shook out the papers until the black writing was exposed. There were some who were disappointed to see but the pictures of fern roots. A warrior hit the paper with his spear. People were growing impatient and annoyed, as they waited for the old man to tell.

These papers contained the thoughts of which the whites wished to be rid, explained the traveller, by inspiration: the sad thoughts, the bad, the thoughts that were too heavy, or in any way hurtful. These came out through the white man's writing-stick, down upon paper, and were sent away.

Away, away, the crowd began to menace and call.

The old man folded the papers. With the solemnity of one who has interpreted a mystery, he tore them into little pieces.

How they fluttered.

The women were screaming, and escaping from the white man's bad thoughts.

Some of the men were laughing.

Only Dugald was sad and still, as the pieces of paper fluttered round him and settled on the grass, like a mob of cockatoos.

Then the men took their weapons, and the women their nets, and their dillybags, and children, and they all trooped away to the north, where at that season of the year there was much wild life and a plentiful supply of yams. The old man went with them, of course, because they were his people, and they were going in that direction. They went walking through the good grass, and the present absorbed them utterly.

9

Mrs Bonner had come out in a rash, due to the particularly humid summer, or to the shortage of green vegetables at Sydney (neither would she be robbed), or sometimes she would attribute her physical distress—privately, in case any of her family should laugh—attribute it to the impossible situation in which she had been placed by the pregnancy of her servant, Rose Portion. For Rose was still with them, very heavy, very shameful. Mrs Bonner would refer to her maid's condition as *Rose's illness.* It was intolerable, as was her own helplessness.

'I understood,' said Mrs Bonner to her friend, Mrs Pringle, 'that there was this institution of Mrs Lauderdale's for fallen women, but I find, on making inquiries, it is not for those who exhibit, shall we say, material proof of having fallen.'

Mrs Bonner dabbed her lip.

'I really do not know what to suggest,' sighed Mrs Pringle, who was herself legitimately pregnant, and who could take no serious interest in a convict woman's fall.

'In a normal family,' complained Mrs Bonner, 'responsibility for such matters would not be left entirely on one's hands.'

'Oh, but Mrs Bonner, no family is *normal,*' Mrs Pringle cried. 'Is it not?'

This did not comfort as it should have.

'Children are little animals that begin to think by thinking of themselves. A spaniel is more satisfactory.'

Mrs Bonner looked shocked.

'I will not deny that children are dear little things,' conceded Mrs Pringle, who had a lot of them.

'Nobody would expect a tender child to offer mature advice,' Mrs Bonner pursued, 'but a husband should and does think.'

'A husband does think,' Mrs Pringle agreed, 'but that, again, is a different kind of thinking. I believe, between ourselves, Mrs Bonner, that these machines of which all the talk is at Home would never have been invented, if men were not *in sympathy,* so to speak, to a *great extent.* I believe that many men, even respectable ones, are *themselves machines.*'

'Really, Mrs Pringle?' Mrs Bonner exclaimed. 'I would not suspect Mr Bonner of this, though he does not think my way; nor will he offer suggestions.'

Mrs Bonner was again unhappy.

'It is I who must bear the burden of Rose.'

Ah, Rose, Rose, always Rose, sighed Mrs Pringle. Mrs Bonner had become quite tedious.

'We must think of something for the wretched soul,' said the kind friend, and hoped with that to close the subject.

Mrs Bonner, who was a tidy woman, would have turned her maid into the street and learnt to think no more about it, if her family might not have reminded her. In the circumstances, she did not dare, and the question of Rose's future continued nagging at her martyred mind.

One afternoon of deepest summer, when a brickfielder was blowing, and the hideous native trees were fiendish, and the air had turned brown, Mrs Bonner developed a migraine, and became positively hysterical. She flung herself too hard upon that upright sofa in the drawing-room, on which it was her habit to arrange people to listen to music, and was sobbing between gusts of eau de Cologne.

'But what is it, Aunt Emmy?' asked her niece, who had swirled in.

They were alone on that afternoon, except for the heavy Rose, since Belle had been driven to the Lending Library, and Mr Bonner was not yet returned from the establishment in George Street, and Cassie and Edith had started, unwisely, on a picnic with acquaintances while the gale was still threatening.

his own monument, and when he had got down, into the shadow of the rock, making himself as acceptable as he could, then he ventured:

'If it is your will, Lord, let me die now.'

Two horses still stood drooping in the sun as the man lay beneath his eyelids, but horses, he remembered, could take a long time, then go off with very little fuss.

All night long the hoofs of horses were stumbling back and forth.

In the early hours, while a moon still lay upon the muddy surface of the waterhole, Colonel Hebden awoke, breaking a particularly horrible dream, of which he could not remember the details. Since he had decided to abandon his mission, it was only natural that he should await somewhat anxiously the approach of daylight, and with it the opportunity to inform his companions of his intention. The morning finally came, and it was with obvious relief and delight that the members of the expedition found they were of one mind. To none had it occurred that others might have been harbouring the same secret thoughts. So that animal spirits were let loose, and there was much laughter and joking as these hitherto solitary individuals emerged from their isolation, to make plans for a hopeful future, while consuming their normal breakfast of muddy tea, dusty damper, and splintery strips of dried beef.

When the two aboriginals had brought in the hobbled horses, which had struggled back as always in the direction from which they had come, it did not take long to prepare for departure. Only Colonel Hebden himself gave one last look to westward, and at those inhospitable rocks in the near distance. Perhaps the fact that they were the only feature in the landscape made them most terrible.

So the expedition turned back.

That he had failed, was, of course, obvious to the Colonel, but he did not altogether blame himself. He blamed the boy Jackie, who had become, because of his elusiveness, the key to all secrets. Trailing back with his party in the direction of Jildra, Colonel Hebden's private resolve was eventually to find Jackie, or to 'apprehend', as he noted that night in his journal.

He remained unsatisfied, however. If he had but known—there was a great deal that Colonel Hebden did not know; it was almost as if there had been a conspiracy against him—if he had but known, Death had just apprehended Jackie, crossing a swamp, during a thunderstorm, at dusk. The boy had not attempted to resist. He lay down, and was persuaded to melt at last into the accommodating earth, all but his smile, which his tight, white, excellent teeth showed every sign of perpetuating.

16

In the absence of its present owners, the Parburys, on a pleasure voyage to Europe, the Radclyffes had taken the old house for at least six months, so that the children might benefit by the sea air and their mother enjoy such distractions as Sydney had to offer. So the whole household was transplanted—maids, nurses, governesses, a selection of grooms, the canaries, which otherwise would have been neglected, and Mrs Radclyffe's favourite pug. Mr Radclyffe, who was grown rather red and fleshy, although still most personable, did not allow the management of his property at Merivale to prevent him paying occasional visits to his family. He derived great satisfaction from their sojourn in the house at Potts Point, and would entertain the children with humorous, not to say satirical reminiscences of the life lived there when it had belonged to their grandparents, twenty years before. But Mrs Radclyffe was divided in her feelings.

Belle, of course, had always been rather sentimental. Now she cherished the past, and would decorate some aspects of it with an extravagance that she was forced to hide. If she had not been at the same time, a practical woman, loving wife, and devoted mother, she might have made a religion of it, but a pretty, gentle, saffron-coloured one, like Buddhism perhaps. Belle Radclyffe was never for the swords and saints of religious faith, nor would she blow her way to Heaven with assistance of the leather bellows. To accept, to respect, to let live: these were enough. Her own beauty and goodness were a pledge that she found confirmed repeatedly in what she saw around her. On returning to the old

house she had picked flowers in such reckless quantities, her husband had complained that she was cluttering the rooms, and that the pollen made him sneeze; he even sneezed to prove it. So she had been forced to curb herself, in that, as in many other ways, and to set store by recollection. She would remember flowers, branches she had picked on this or that occasion, even down to wild things: she would remember the scents that had accompanied certain incidents; she would remember pet animals she had kept, and the eyes of children at whom she had smiled in the street.

'Belle is still perfect,' said old Mrs Pringle, emerging at one point from her bronchitis and bezique.

'I am glad to say she is not,' replied Mr Radclyffe, as if he meant it.

Indeed, had he stopped to think he could have written out a long list of his wife's shortcomings, and without having recourse to pen and paper the fact that she rarely attended to what he said, that she encouraged children in noisy games, that she had but a superficial knowledge of most subjects, and that she slept with her eyes open, were unfortunate defects that easily came to mind. Thanks to her indulgence, he himself had become quite intolerable, but of this, perhaps her greatest sin, he remained in blissful ignorance.

Belle, however, who might have been less happy if she had had time to consider, was at her happiest that year, in what had been her parents' house.

During the spring a cabbage tree had flowered in the wilderness at the bottom of the garden, providing an object for expeditions so little adventurous that nobody else wished to share them. This was their virtue in Mrs Radclyffe's eyes. She would often visit the tree alone, but best in the morning, after she had given her orders, and before her husband, engrossed in the news, had begun to issue his. She would quickly lose herself in the garden. She would hum the songs she had sung, and forgotten, and now remembered in that clinging, reminiscent air. She would even whistle, very loud, although this was a gift that had never met with her mother's approval. And she would stoop to free or coax a plant, but mockingly, because what could one do for the plants of other people? All of the garden was hers and not. So

she would hurry on, to establish herself by reaching her goal. Her rash skirts rushed, down the steps, of which time had reduced the scale, past an attempt at a grotto, in which the moss had died, past the corner where her father himself had tended the barrel of liquid manure, down, down, through the evergreen tunnels of memory, until, there at the end, in a circle of light, was the cabbage tree. According to the day, the miraculous spire did not stir from its trance of stillest, whitest wax, or shuddered stiffly on the verge of breaking free, or rejoiced simply in its jewels of innocent and tinkling crystal. As she watched, so it was reflected in the face of the woman, who would return at last through the doorway of her own girlhood, convinced that she had been refreshed by the vision of the tree.

Only the supreme torturer would have tweaked the curtain of illusion, yet, very occasionally, it could have been after a sleepless night, or if the morning was a sultry one, her glance would waver, as if it had encountered the danger of distinguishing what has been given from what has been withheld. Then she would turn aside crumpling up her handkerchief in a way she had when her children were ill, and go back through the suffocating, rented garden, holding up her skirts as she climbed the steep and clammy steps, and, above all, on approaching the snails that it pained her so very much to destroy.

So she resumed her orderly and happy life. She was most fortunate, she assured herself, in everything, not least that their visit to Sydney had enabled her again to enjoy the company of her cousin, who would walk over on Sundays for midday dinner, and on rare occasions allow herself to be brought by carriage of an evening for tea and music.

Although their dissimilar lives had even further increased the difference in their natures, the two women were still quite greedy for each other's love. Belle was noted for an opulent and complaisant kindness. She would fall in with the most unpleasant suggestions, if she thought no positive harm could ensue and that, by doing so, she might be better liked. Not a little of her private thought was taken up with wondering how she stood in the opinion of others, nor could she bear to think that it might be ill. Laura, on the other hand, was stern. She rather liked to be disliked. It was the life she had led, in school, you know, Mrs

Radclyffe would apologize to friends; a headmistress must adopt a certain attitude. For, on the death of both Miss Linsleys, Laura Trevelyan had inherited the Academy for Young Ladies on the edge of the Surry Hills.

A great many people died, Belle Radclyffe realized upon an uneasy morning in her father's oppressive camellia grove. Rarely did she allow herself to think of death, but was receiving morning calls, or planning evening receptions, or kissing children, or carrying herself carefully on account of an expected baby. Now, for a moment in the shrubbery, her mind was choking with neglected thoughts, as the garden was with drifts of leaves. So she was forced to remember her mother's crumpled face, and fragments of advice, though her mother was buried these many years, and her advice proved fallible. After they sold the house, Mr Bonner had gone to live in lodgings in Bent Street, where a decent woman attended to his wants. A cheerful dotard, he would run out and claw at almost anyone to discuss the weather, and look most offended when acquaintance or stranger did not appreciate his prophecies. The weather was his sole remaining interest. Belle Radclyffe, while loving her father in theory, had to admit that she found him terribly tedious in fact.

Aghast that she should harbour unkind thoughts, Mrs Radclyffe was relieved the following moment to receive an onslaught of younger children, who came flinging down the path, released from Latin, or French, or scales, to bury in her soft amplitude their hard inky little bodies.

How she loved that which had been torn out of her. Such was her appetite for her children, she frequently had to remind herself that her husband was their father, and entitled to his share.

Now several of those children were kicking and shouting.

'We tasted the sillabub,' they cried.

'May I stay up tonight, Mamma?'

'I will stay up.'

'Who said?'

'I did.'

'If you do not stop kicking me, Tom!'

'That is enough,' said Mrs Radclyffe.

Only Laura, the eldest, who had accompanied the children, not as a sister, but as a condescending deity, preserved a godlike silence. Beneath her coils of grown-up hair she made a mystery out of almost everything.

'Everyone will stay up,' Mrs Radclyffe announced, in the accents of a just and rational mother. 'Not the babies, of course, and some longer than others, according to ages. You must agree that that would only be right.'

Whether they shared her opinion or not, all were agreed that their mother did conceive the most lovely ideas, and this could be one of them.

Mrs Radclyffe had determined to give a party to which she would invite only those people she wished to have. So constituted that she was always persuaded to see the best in human nature, it promised to be a gathering of fairly ill-assorted guests, rich with poor, which is daring enough, past with present, which can be more distasteful, age with youth, in which soil can germinate rare seeds of bitterness and cruelty. Yet, Mrs Radclyffe was resolved to dare. Nor had she devised any set plan of entertainment, but, owing again to her soft and trustful character, would leave it to the guests to amuse themselves, to illuminate by conversation, or to console with music, to answer questions on slips of paper, to eat and drink without shame, to flirt, or to wander solitary in the cool of the garden, which is, for some individuals, the only solution of a party.

Of the whole pantomime, Mrs Radclyffe had always loved best the transformation scene, and here she was, staging one of her own. As night fell and the moon rose behind the net of trees the woman's hands would have turned hot and childish but fo the clattering of cold rings.

'Belle!' her husband was calling. 'Belle!' Through the expe tant house. 'Your dog has relieved himself on my boot.'

'Oh, Tom! It could be any one of a variety of liquids. Or di you see him with your own eyes?'

'It can only be Pug,' Mr Radclyffe had decided. 'I am convinced of that.'

He always was.

'Oh, dear!' said his wife, but was concerned about other matters.

'I will not be answerable for the disaster you insist upon courting,' said Tom Radclyffe, as they were standing together, in anticipation, under the globes of blue gas.

'You will not be required to,' Belle replied, raising her chin slightly.

Not that she had any great confidence in her own powers, but did believe in allowing a situation to arrange itself.

Mr Radclyffe could not but smile, both for his superior knowledge and for her dazzling face. He was very pleased with his wife, though even more with his own perspicacity in choosing her.

She, who all her life had reflected the sun, was the colour of moonlight on this occasion. Thanks to various devices of an ingenious dressmaker, including the judicious use of mother o' pearl, she was shimmering like blue water. The moon itself could have rained upon her hair, in a brief shower of recognition, and as she floated through the altered room, a big, conquered, white rose dropped its tribute of petals at her feet.

Night had indeed, taken possession. The solid scents of jasmine and pittosporum that were pressing through the open window had drugged the youngest children to the extent that they were clutching drowsily at their mother's hoops to stay their inevitable fall.

'You must leave us now,' she said softly, loosening the tight grip of their hands.

Then she kissed them, in order, before they were carried out. Very small children, she had decided, would only have lain about in heaps and run the risk of being trodden on.

Soon after this, the guests began to arrive.

There was no lack of rank and fashion, it appeared, and all were vociferous in their admiration of Mrs Radclyffe's candid beauty, while hastening to detect its blemishes. For instance, her throat, of which other mothers had always predicted the worst, had thickened undeniably. If the world of fashion overlooked the generosity of her glance, it was because such virtues embarrassed it, even destroyed the illusion of its power. Belle, in her simplicity, secretly admired those who were light and meretricious, imagining they had found the key to some freedom she had never yet experienced, nor would, because she did not dare. This diffidence, far from diminishing her beauty, enhanced it in the eyes of the elegant by restoring the strength they had been in danger of losing. They would declare:

'My dear, there is none lovelier than Belle Radclyffe, although she is not what she was as a bride. Do you remember?'

Here would follow noises suggestive of severe colic.

'Yet, one might say she is improved, in a certain sense. Such *spirituality*!'

More noises, less physical, but more mysterious.

'Many a hard outline would be softened if its owner possessed but *half* of Belle's charm.'

Here someone was demolished.

'But would you describe Mrs Radclyffe as an entertaining companion?'

'Entertaining? It rather depends upon what you wish the word to imply. I do know others who might be described as *more entertaining than Mrs Radclyffe*. But no woman, of course, is endowed with *all* the qualities. And Belle is so sweet.'

'And dresses so beautifully. If not after the highest fashion.'

'More of an individual style.'

'I must say it does require considerable courage to appear with such an ornament in the hair.'

'The moonstones.'

'The moonstones? Effie! The Moon!'

'Sshhh!'

'Effie, do you not realize that Belle Radclyffe has come as the Moon?'

A thin laughter continued to uncoil.

Guests were circling and wondering which others they should avoid. Only their iridescence mingled. The men, in black, were clinging together for protection.

'Mrs de Courcy, it was so kind of you to come,' Mrs Radclyffe said, advancing.

Learning phrases from the more accomplished, she did not learn them well enough and spoke them with a hesitation, which did charm momentarily even the crueller women.

'You know that I would die for you, Belle. I would die for you alone,' said old Effie de Courcy, who was doing something to her chignon and looking round.

It was doubtful to which of the gentlemen that lady would offer the cold remains of her looks, but to one she must, out of habit.

Now the insignificant figures of several poor or grotesque individuals, known to most of the company, began unaccountably to make their appearance. There was a Dr Bass. Nobody would have guessed that the worthy physician had any other function beyond the prescription of pills. There was Topp, the music-master, who had been coming to everybody's house for years, to the exasperation of everybody's girls, and naturally Topp had always been allowed a slice of madeira cake and a glass of port, but in isolation, of course. There was that old Miss Hollier, a fright in pink net, who could recite pedigrees by the yard, and from whom one escaped only by buying a lotion for removing freckles. The presence of such persons provided the first unmistakable evidence that something was amiss. A Member of the Legislative Assembly was frowning, and several ladies were looking at their long kid gloves and giving them a tweak. Then it was noticed that children also were present, both of the house, and other young people, lumpy girls, and youths at the age of down and pimples. Strangest of all, Willie Pringle had arrived. Certainly Willie had grown up, which nobody had ever expected. That he had remained ridiculous, nobody was surprised. On returning from France, where he had lived for some years in a state of obscure morality, he had painted, and was still painting, a collection of what no one could describe as pictures; it was a relief to be able to admire the gold frames.

Immediately on entering the Radclyffes' drawing-room, Willie Pringle kissed his hostess because he loved her. This drew a gasp of horror from the guests.

'What kind of entertainment can Mrs Radclyffe be preparing for us?' the Member wondered to his immediate circle.

Mr Radclyffe would have remonstrated with Pringle if he had not held him in the highest contempt. He was also uneasy at the prospect of his own approaching nakedness, which would coincide with the arrival of his wife's cousin. He still hated Laura Trevelyan.

Belle Radclyffe moved amongst her guests, and now, surprisingly, said to some, who were most resentful of it:

'I have asked you all tonight because I value each of you for some particular quality. Is it not possible for each to discover, and appreciate, that same quality in his fellow-guests, so that we may be happy together in this lovely house?'

It was most singular.

The doors and windows were standing open, and the blue night was pouring in. Two little boys, with scrubbed, party faces, had fallen asleep upon an upright sofa, but their dreams were obviously filled with an especial bliss.

Several kinder guests were murmuring how entertaining, how sweet, following upon the speech by their hostess, but most took refuge immediately in their own chatter and the destruction of their friends.

Amongst the gentlemen, the talk was principally of the discovery of the wild white man, said to be a survivor from the expedition led by that mad German twenty years before. The man, who professed to have been living all those years with a tribe of aboriginals, had been brought to Sydney since his rescue, and had attended the unveiling of a memorial to his leader that same day in the Domain.

Now everyone was pushing in their attempt to approach old Mr Sanderson of Rhine Towers, and Colonel Hebden, both of whom had been present at the ceremony.

'Is it a fraud?' voices were heard to ask.

'It is something trumped up to discredit the Government for its slowness in developing the country,' others maintained.

Mr Sanderson would only smile, however, and repeat that the man was a genuine survivor from the expedition, known to him personally. The assurance of the old grazier, who was rather confused by his own goodness and the size of the gathering, were a source of irritation to the guests. Colonel Hebden could have been a statue, in stone or metal, he was so detached, hence impregnable, but the people might have vented their spite on old Sanderson if something had not happened.

Just then, rather late, for she had been detained at her school by a problem of administration, Miss Trevelyan, the headmistress, arrived. Her black dress, of a kind worn by some women merely as a covering, in no way detracted from the expression of her face, which at once caused the guests to differ sharply in opinion. As she advanced into the room, some of the ladies, glittering and

rustling with precious stones, abandoned their gauzy conversations and greeted her with an exaggerated sweetness or girlishness. Then, resentful of all the solecisms of which they had ever been guilty, and it appeared their memories were full of them, they seized upon the looks of this woman after she had passed, asking one another for confirmation of their own disgust:

'Is she not plain? Is not poor Laura positively ugly? And such a freakish thing to do. As if it were not enough to have become a schoolmistress, to arrive late at Belle's party in that truly hideous dress!'

In the meantime Miss Trevelyan was receving the greetings of those she recognized. Her face was rather white. Holding her head on one side, she murmured, with a slight, tremulous smile, that could have disguised a migraine, or strength:

'Una, Chattie, Lizzie. Quite recovered, Elinor, I hope.'

'Who is this person to whom all the ladies are curtseying?' asked Mr Ludlow, an English visitor, recommended to the Radclyffes by a friend.

'That is Miss Trevelyan. I must attempt to explain her,' volunteered the Englishman's neighbour.

The latter immediately turned away, for the object of their interest was passing them. It happened that the speaker was Dr Kilwinning. Even more richly caparisoned than in the past, the physician had continued to resent Miss Trevelyan as one of the few stumbling blocks he had had the misfortune to encounter in his eminently successful career.

'I will tell you more presently,' he said, or whispered loudly into the wall. 'Something to do with the German explorer, of whom they have just been speaking.'

'What a bore!' guffawed Mr Ludlow, to whom every aspect of the colonial existence was incredible. 'And the young girl?'

'The girl is the daughter,' whispered Dr Kilwinning, still to the wall.

'Capital,' laughed the Englishman, who had already visited the supper room. 'A green girl. A strapping, sonsy girl. But the mother!'

People who recognized Miss Trevelyan, on account of her connexions and the material glories of the past, did not feel obliged to accept Mercy. They received her with flat smiles, but ignored her with their eyes. Accustomed to this, she advanced with her chin gravely lowered, and an expression of some tolerance. Her glance was fixed on that point in her mother's vertebrae at which enemies might aim the blow.

Then Laura met Belle, and they were sisters. At once they erected an umbrella in the middle of the desert.

'Dearest Laura, I would have been here to receive you, but had gone up to Archie, who is starting a cold.'

'I could not allow you to *receive* me in our own house.'

'Do you really like the gas? I loved the lamps.'

'To sit reading beside the lamps!'

'After the tea had been brought in. You are tired, Laura.'

'I am rather tired,' the schoolmistress admitted.

It was the result of her experience of that afternoon, for Mr Sanderson had been so kind as to send Miss Trevelyan a card for the unveiling of the memorial.

'You should have come, too, Belle.'

'I could not,' Belle replied, and blushed.

Small lies are the most difficult to tell.

The cousins had arrived at a stiff and ugly chair. It was one of those pieces of furniture that become cast up out of an even life upon the unknown, and probably perilous shores of a party, there to stay, marooned for ever, it would seem.

'I shall sit here,' said Laura.

No one else would have dared, so evident was it that the stern chair belonged to its absent owners.

'Now you can see,' people were saying.

'Is she not a cow?'

'A scarecrow, rather!'

'Do not bring me anyone,' Laura Trevelyan enjoined. 'I would not care to be an inconvenience. And I have never succeeded in learning the language. I shall sit and watch them wearing their dresses.'

This woman, of the mysterious, the middle age, in her black clothes, was now commanding the room that she had practically repudiated. One young girl in a dream of white tarlatan, who was passing close enough to look, did so, right into the woman's eyes and, although never afterwards was she able to remember exactly what she saw, had been so affected at the time that she had al-

tered her course immediately and gone out into the garden. There she was swept into a conspiracy of movement, between leaf and star, wind and shadow, even her own dress. Of all this, her body was the struggling core. She would have danced, but her heels were still rooted, her arms had but reached the point of twitching. In her frustration the young person attempted, but failed, to remember the message of the strange woman's eyes, so that it appeared as though she were intended to remain, at least a little longer, the victim of her own inadequacy.

Laura Trevelyan continued to sit in the company of Mercy, who did not care to leave her mother. Bronze or marble could not have taken more inevitable and lasting shapes than the stuff of their relationship. The affection she received from one being, together with her detachment from all others, had implanted in the daughter a respectful love for the forms of all simple objects, the secrets of which she was trying perpetually to understand. Eventually, she must attempt to express her great preoccupation, but in what manner, it was not yet clear. That its expression would be true was obvious, only from looking at her neat brown hair, her strong hands, and completely pleasing, square face.

In the meantime, seated upon a little stool at the feet of her mother, she was discussing with the latter the war between Roman Catholic and Protestant maids that was disturbing the otherwise tranquil tenor of life at their school.

'I did not tell you,' Mercy informed, 'Bridget has blackened Gertrude's eye, and told her it will match the colour of her soul.'

'To decide the colour of truth! If I but had Bridget's conviction!'

The two women were grateful for this humble version of the everlasting attempt. Laura was smiling at Mercy. It was as though they were seated in their own room, or at the side of a road, part of which they had made theirs.

Strangers came and went, of course. Young people, moved by curiosity. An Englishman, a little drunk, who wished to look closely at the schoolmistress and her bastard daughter. A young man with a slight talent for exhibiting himself had sat down at the piano and was reeling off dreamy waltzes, whereupon Mrs de Courcy persuaded the Member of the Legislative Assembly to take a turn, and several youths were daring to drift with several breathless girls.

At one stage, the headmistress began to knead the bridge of her nose. She had, indeed, been made very tired by the episode in the Domain.

The platform had groaned with officials and their wives, to say nothing of other substantial citizens—old Mr Sanderson, who was largely responsible for the public enthusiasm that had subscribed to the fine memorial statue, Colonel Hebden, the schoolmistress who had been a friend of the lost explorer, and, of course, the man they had lately found. All of these had sat listening to the speeches, in the pleasant, thick shade.

Johann Ulrich Voss was by now quite safe, it appeared. He was hung with garlands of rarest newspaper prose. They would write about him in the history books. The wrinkles of his solid, bronze trousers could afford to ignore the passage of time. Even Miss Trevelyan confessed: it is agreeable to be safely dead. The way the seats had been fixed to the platform, tilted back ever so slightly, made everybody look more official; hands folded themselves upon the stomach, and chins sank in, as if intended for repose. The schoolmistress was glad of some assistance towards the illusion of complacency. Thus, she had never thirsted, never, nor felt her flesh shrivel in crossing the deserts of conscience. No official personage has experienced the inferno of love.

So that she, too, had accepted the myth by the time the Premier, still shaky from the oratory prescribed for an historic occasion, pulled the cord, and revealed the bronze figure. Then the woman on the platform did lower her eyes. Whether she had seen or not, she would always remain uncertain, but applause informed her that here was a work of irreproachable civic art.

Soon after this everyone regained solid ground. Clothes were eased, civilities exchanged, and Miss Trevelyan, smiling and receptive, observed the approach of Colonel Hebden.

'You are satisfied, then?' he asked, as they were walking a little apart from the others.

'Oh, yes,' she sighed. 'I am satisfied.' She had to arrange the pair of little silken acorns that hung from the handle of her parasol. 'Though I do wish you had not asked it.'

'Our relationship is ruined by interrogation,' laughed the Colonel, rather pleased with his command of words.

Each recalled the afternoon in Mrs de Courcy's summer-house.

'Years ago I was impressed by your respect for truthfulness,' he could not resist saying, although he made of it a very tentative suggestion.

'If I am less truthful now, it is owing to my age and position,' she cried with surprising cynicism, almost baring her teeth at him.

'No.' She recovered herself. 'I am not dishonest, I hope, except that I am a human being.'

Had he made her tremble?

To disguise the possibility, she had begun speaking quickly, in an even, kind voice, referring not so much to the immediate case as to the universal one:

'Let none of us pass final judgement.'

'Unless the fellow who has returned from the grave is qualified to judge. Have you not spoken to him?'

As her appearance suggested that she might not have heard, the Colonel added:

'He appears to share the opinion you offered me at our first meeting: that Voss was, indeed, the Devil.'

Now, Miss Trevelyan had not met the survivor, although old Sanderson, all vague benevolence since time had cast a kinder light upon the whole unhappy affair, had gone so far as to promise him to her. Seated on the platform, listening to the official speeches, she had even been aware of the nape of a neck, somewhere in the foreground, but, deliberately, she had omitted to claim her right.

'I do not wish to meet the man,' she said, and was settling her shawl against a cold wind that was springing up.

'But you must!' cried Hebden, taking her firmly by the elbow. Of dreadful metal, he towered above her, with his rather matted, grizzled hair, and burning desire for truth. Her mouth was dry. Was he, then, the avenging angel? So it appeared, as they struggled together.

If anybody had noticed, they would have made an ugly group, and he, of course, the stronger.

'Leave me,' she strained, out of her white mouth, 'I beg of you, Colonel Hebden!'

At that moment, however, old Sanderson, whom no one of any compassion would willingly have hurt, emerged from the group still gathered round the statue, bringing with him a man.

'Miss Trevelyan,' said the grazier, smiling with genuine pleasure, 'I do believe that, after all, I have failed to bring the two of you together, and you the most important.'

So it was come to pass.

Mr Sanderson smiled, and continued:

'I would like you to meet my friend Judd.'

The leaves of the trees were clapping.

She was faced with an elderly, or old-looking man, of once powerful frame, in the clothes they had provided for him, good clothes, fashionable even, to which he had not accustomed himself. His large hands, in the absence of their former strength, moved in almost perpetual search for some reassuring object or position, just as the expressions were shifting on his face, like water over sand, and his mouth would close with a smile, attempt briefly to hold it, and fail.

'So this is Judd, the convict,' said Miss Trevelyan, less harshly than stating a fact, since she must stand on trial with him.

Judd nodded.

'I earned my ticket-of-leave two years, no, it would be four years before the expedition left.'

All the old wounds had healed. He could talk about them now. He could talk about anything.

His lips parted, Colonel Hebden watched quite greedily. Old Sanderson was bathed in a golden glow of age. Such warmth he had not experienced since the lifetime of his dear wife.

'Yes, yes,' he contributed. 'Judd was a neighbour of mine in the Forties. He joined the expedition when it passed through. In fact, I was responsible for that.'

Miss Trevelyan, whose attention had been engaged by the ferrule of her parasol, realized that she was expected to speak. Judd waited, with his hands hanging and moving. Since his return, he had become accustomed to interrogation by ladies.

'And were you able to resume your property?' Miss Trevelyan asked, through her constricted throat.

There was something that she would avoid. She would avoid it to the end. So she looked gravely at the ferrule of the parasol, and continued to interrogate a man who had suffered.

'Resume?' asked Judd, managing his tongue, which was round like that of a parrot. 'No. It was gone. I was considered dead, you know.'

'And your family?' the kind woman asked.

'All dead. My wife, she went first. It was the heart, I think they told me. My eldest boy died of a snakebite. The youngest got some sickness, I forget what.' He shook his head, which was bald and humble above the fringe of white hair. 'Anyways, he is passed on.'

The survivor's companions expressed appropriate sympathy.

But Judd had lived beyond grief. He was impressed, rather, by the great simplicity with which everything had happened.

Then Colonel Hebden took a hand. He could still have been holding the lady by an elbow. He said:

'You know, Judd, Miss Trevelyan was a friend of Mr Voss.'

'Ah,' smiled the aged, gummy man. 'Voss.'

He looked at the ground, but presently spoke again.

'Voss left his mark on the country,' he said.

'How?' asked Miss Trevelyan, cautiously.

'Well, the trees, of course. He was cutting his initials in the trees. He was a queer beggar, Voss. The blacks talk about him to this day. He is still there—that is the honest opinion of many of them—he is there in the country, and always will be.'

'How?' repeated Miss Trevelyan. Her voice was that of a man. She dared anyone.

Judd was feeling his way with his hands.

'Well, you see, if you live and suffer long enough in a place, you do not leave it altogether. Your spirit is still there.'

'Like a god, in fact,' said Colonel Hebden, but laughed to show his scepticism.

Judd looked up, out of the distance.

'Voss? No. He was never God, though he liked to think that he was. Sometimes, when he forgot, he was a man.'

He hesitated, and fumbled.

'He was more than a man,' Judd continued, with the gratified air of one who had found that for which he had been looking. 'He was a Christian, such as I understand it.'

Miss Trevelyan was holding a handkerchief to her lips, as though her life-blood might gush out.

'Not according to my interpretation of the word,' the Colonel interrupted, remorselessly, 'not by what I have heard.'

'Poor fellow,' sighed old Sanderson, again unhappy. 'He was somewhat twisted. But is dead and gone.'

Now that he was launched, Judd was determined to pursue his wavering way.

'He would wash the sores of the men. He would sit all night with them when they were sick, and clean up their filth with his own hands. I cried, I tell you, after he was dead. There was none of us could believe it when we saw the spear, hanging from his side, and shaking.'

'The spear?'

Colonel Hebden behaved almost as though he himself were mortally wounded.

'But this is an addition to the story,' protested old Mr Sanderson, who also was greatly perturbed. 'You did not mention the spear, Judd. You never suggested you were present at the death of Voss, simply that you mutinied, and moved off with those who chose to follow you. If we understood you rightly.'

'It was me who closed his eyes,' said Judd.

In the same instant that the Colonel and Mr Sanderson looked across at each other, Miss Trevelyan succeeded in drawing a shroud about herself.

Finally, the old grazier put an arm round the convict's shoulders, and said:

'I think you are tired and confused, eh, Judd? Let me take you back to your lodgings.'

'I am tired,' echoed Judd.

Mr Sanderson was glad to get him away, and into a hired brougham that was waiting.

Colonel Hebden became aware that the woman was still standing at his side, and that he must recognize the fact. So he turned to her awkwardly at last, and said:

'Your saint is canonized.'

'I am content.'

'Oh the evidence of a poor madman?'

'I am content.'

'Do not tell me any longer that you respect the truth.'

She was digging at the tough roots of grass with the ferrule of her parasol.

'All truths are particoloured. Except the greatest truth of all.'

'Your Voss was particoloured. I grant you that. A perfect magpie!'

Looking at the monstrous ants at the roots of the grass, Miss Trevelyan replied:

'Whether Judd is an impostor, or a madman, or simply a poor creature who has suffered too much, I am convinced that Voss had in him a little of Christ, like other men. If he was composed of evil along with the good, he struggled with that evil. And failed.'

Then she was going away, heavily, a middle-aged woman, over the grass.

Now, as they sat in the crowded room, full of the deceptive drifts of music and brutal explosions of conversation, Mercy Trevelyan alone realized the extent to which her mother had been tried by some experience of the afternoon. If the daughter did not inquire into the origin of the mother's distress, it was because she had learnt that rational answers seldom do explain. She was herself, moreover, of unexplained origin.

In the circumstances, she leaned towards her mother from where she sat upon her stool, the whole of her strong young throat swelling with the love she wished to convey, and whispered:

'Shall we not go into another room? Or let us, even, go away. It is simple. No one will miss us.'

Then Laura Trevelyan released the bridge of her nose, which her fingers had pinched quite white.

'No,' she said, and smiled. 'I will not go. I am here. I will stay.'

Thus she made her covenant.

Other individuals, of great longing but little daring, suspecting that the knowledge and strength of the headmistress might be accessible to them, began to approach by degrees. Even her beauty was translated for them into terms they could understand. As the night poured in through the windows and the open doors, her eyes were overflowing with a love that might have appeared supernatural, if it had not been for the evidence of her earthly body: the slightly chapped skin of her neck, and the small hole in the finger of one glove, which, in her distraction and haste, she had forgotten to mend.

Amongst the first to join Miss Trevelyan was the invertebrate Willie Pringle, who, it transpired, had become a genius. Then there was Topp, the music-master. Out of his hatred for the sour colonial soil upon which he had been deposited many years before had developed a perverse love, that he had never yet succeeded in expressing and which, for that reason, nobody had suspected. He was a grumpy little man, a failure, who would continue to pulse, none the less, though the body politic ignore his purpose. To these two were added several diffident persons who had burst from the labyrinth of youth on that night, and were tremblingly eager to learn how best to employ their freedom.

The young person in the gown of white tarlatan, for instance, came close to the group and spread her skirts upon the edge of a chair. She balanced her chin upon her hand and blushed. Although nobody knew her, nobody asked her name, since it was her intention that mattered.

Conversation was the wooden raft by which their party hoped eventually to reach the promised shore.

'I am uncomfortably aware of the very little I have seen and experienced of things in general, and of our country in particular,' Miss Trevelyan had just confessed, 'but the little I have seen is less, I like to feel, than what I know. Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind.'

She laughed somewhat painfully.

'*You* will understand that. Some of you, at least, are the discoverers,' she said, and looked at them.

That some of them did understand was the more marvellous for their realization of it.

'Some of you,' she continued, 'will express what we others have experienced by living. Some will learn to interpret the ideas embodied in the less communicative forms of matter, such as rock, wood, metal, and water. I must include water, because, of all matter it is the most musical.'

Yes, yes. Topp, the bristling, unpleasant little thing, was sitting forward. In the headmistress's wooden words, he could hear the stubborn music that was waiting for release. Of rock and scrub. Of winds curled invisibly in wombs of air. Of thin rivers strug-

gling towards seas of eternity. All flowing and uniting. Over a bed of upturned faces.

The little Topp was distracted by the possibility of many such harmonies. He began to fidget and snatch at his trouser leg. He said:

'If we do not come to grief on our mediocrity as a people. If we are not locked for ever in our own bodies. Then, too, there is the possibility that our hates and our carnivorous habits will unite in a logical conclusion: we may destroy one another.'

Topp himself was sweating. His face was broken up into little pinpoints of grey light under the globes of blue gas.

It fascinated Willie Pringle.

'The grey of mediocrity, the blue of frustration,' he suggested, less to inform an audience than to commit it to his memory. He added at once, louder and brisker than before: 'Topp has dared to raise a subject that has often occupied my mind: our inherent mediocrity as a people. I am confident that the mediocrity of which he speaks is not a final and irrevocable state; rather is it a creative source of endless variety and subtlety. The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them.'

So they talked, while through the doorway, in the garden, the fine seed of moonlight continued to fall and the moist soil to suck it up.

Attracted by needs of their own, several other gentlemen had joined the gathering at the farther end of the large room. Old Sanderson, arrived at the very finish of his simple life, was still in search of tangible goodness. Colonel Hebden, who had not dared approach the headmistress since the episode at the unveiling, did now stalk up, still hungry for the truth, and assert:

'I will not rest, you know.'

'I would not expect it,' said Miss Trevelyan, giving him her hand, since they were agreed that the diamonds with which they cut were equal both in aim and worth.

'How your cousin is holding court,' remarked Mrs de Courcy, consoling herself with a strawberry ice.

'Court? A class, rather!' said and laughed Belle Radclyffe.

Knowing that she was not, and never would be of her cousin's class, she claimed the rights of love to resent a little.

At one stage, under pressure, Mrs Radclyffe forgot her promise and brought the headmistress Mr Ludlow. Though fairly drunk with brandy punch, the latter had remained an Englishman and, it was whispered by several ladies in imported poult-de-soie, the younger brother of a baronet.

Mr Ludlow said:

'I must apologize for imposing on you, madam, but having heard so much in your favour, I expressed a wish to make your acquaintance and form an opinion of my own.'

The visitor laughed for his own wit, but Miss Trevelyan looked sad.

'I have been travelling through your country, forming opinions of all and sundry,' confessed Mr Ludlow to his audience, 'and am distressed to find the sundry does prevail.'

'We, the sundry, are only too aware of it,' Miss Trevelyan answered, 'but will humbly attempt to rise in your opinion if you will stay long enough.'

'How long? I cannot stay long,' protested Mr Ludlow.

'For those who anticipate perfection—and I would not suspect you of wishing for less—eternity is not too long.'

'Ohhhh dear!' tittered Mr Ludlow. 'I would be choked by pumpkin. Do you know that in one humpy I was even faced with a stewed crow!'

'Did you not also sample baked Irish?'

'The Irish, too? Ohhh dear!'

'So, you see, we are in every way provided for, by God and nature, and consequently, must survive.'

'Oh, yes, a country with a future. But when does the future become present? That is what always puzzles me.'

'Now.'

'How—*now*?' asked Mr Ludlow.

'Every moment that we live and breathe, and love, and suffer, and die.'

'That reminds me, I had intended asking you about this—what shall we call him?—this familiar spirit, whose name is upon everybody's lips, the German fellow who died.'

'Voss did not die,' Miss Trevelyan replied. 'He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it.'

'Come, come. If we are not certain of the facts, how is it possible to give the answers?'

'The air will tell us,' Miss Trevelyan said.

By which time she had grown hoarse, and fell to wondering aloud whether she had brought her lozenges.