OUT OF THE SILENCE

Erle Cox

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Chapter 1

BRYCE brought his car to a stop in front of the deep verandah of the homestead, and, before getting out, let his eyes search the vivid green of the vines for the owner. The day was savagely hot, and the sun, striking down from the cloudless blue-white sky, seemed to have brought all life and motion to a standstill. There was no sign of Dundas amongst the green sea of foliage. Now and then a dust devil whirled up a handful of dried grass and leaves, but seemed too tired to do more.

Bryce strolled to the end of the verandah and peered through the leaves of the trellised vine that shaded it. Some 200 yards away, in a slight hollow, he noticed a large pile of dusty red clay that added a new note to the yellow colour scheme. Even as he watched he caught a momentary flash of steel above the clay, and at the same instant there was a fleeting glimpse of the crown of a Panama hat. "Great Scott!" he murmured. "Mad—mad as a hatter." He turned rapidly off the verandah, and approached the spot unheard and unseen, and watched for a few moments without a word. The man in the trench had his back turned to Bryce. He was stripped to singlet and blue dungaree trousers, which clung to the figure dripping with perspiration.

"Alan, old chap, what is it? Gentle exercise on an empty stomach, eh?" The pick came down with an extra thump, and the worker turned with a smile. "Bryce! By the powers!" Then with a laugh: "I'll own up to the empty stomach," and, holding out a strong brown hand, he said: "You'll stop to lunch, old man?" Bryce nodded. "Might take the cheek out of you if I say that was partly my reason for calling in." Dundas only grinned; he knew just how much of

the remark was in earnest. "I am very sorry, Hector, but I am 'batching' it again, so it's only a scratch feed."
"You unfortunate young beggar; what's become of the last housekeeper? Thought she was a fixture. Not eloped, I hope?" They had turned towards the house. "Wish to glory she had," was Alan's heartfelt comment. "Upon my word, Bryce, I'm sick of women. I mean the housekeeping ones. When they are cold enough to be suitable for young unattached bachelors, and have settled characters, those characters are devilish bad. The last beauty went on a gorgeous jamboree for four days. I don't even know now where she got the joy-producer."
"Well?" queried Bryce, with some interest, as Dundas paused.
"Oh, nothing much. I just waited until she was pretty sober. Loaded her and her outfit into the dogcart, and by Jove," with a reminiscent chuckle, "she was properly sober when I got to the township and consigned her to Melbourne. Billy B.B. was in topping good form, and tried to climb trees on the way in."
"But, Dun, this is all very well," said Bryce, laughing. "You can't go on 'baching.' You must get another."
"No, I'm hanged if I do. The old 'uns are rotters, and, save me, Hector, what meat for the cats in the district if I took a young one."
"I'm afraid it would take more than me to save you if you did," said Bryce, laughing at the idea.
They had reached the house. Dundas ushered his friend in. "You make yourself comfy here while I straighten myself, and look after the tucker."
Bryce stretched himself on the cane lounge, and glanced round the room. It was a room he knew well. The largest of four that had formed the homestead that had originally been built as an out-station, when the township of Glen Cairn had got its name from the original holding, long since cut up. It was essentially a man's room, without a single

feminine touch. Over the high wooden mantel were racked a fine double-barrelled breechloader and a light sporting rifle, and the care with which they were kept showed that they were not there as ornaments.

The walls held only three pictures. Over the cupboard that acted as a sideboard hung a fine photogravure of Delaroche's "Napoleon," meditating on his abdication, and the other two were landscapes that had come from Alan's old home. From the same source, too, had come the curious array of Oriental knives that filled the space between the door and the window. What, however, attracted most attention was the collection of books that filled the greater part of two sides of the room, their shelves reaching almost to the low ceiling.

The furniture was simplicity itself. Besides the sideboard, there were a table and three chairs, with an armchair on each side of the fireplace. The cane lounge on which Bryce was seated completed the inventory. Above the lounge on a special shelf by itself was a violin in its case. To a woman, the uncurtained windows and bare floor would have been intolerable, but the housekeeping man had discovered that bare essentials meant the least work.

Presently a voice came from the kitchen. "Hector, old man, there's a domestic calamity. Flies have established a protectorate over the mutton, so it's got to be bacon and eggs, and fried potatoes. How many eggs can you manage?"

"Make it two, Dun; I'm hungry," answered Bryce.

"Man, you don't know the meaning of the word if two will be enough." Five minutes later he appeared with a cloth over his shoulder and his arms full of crockery.

A thought of his wife's horror at such simplicity flashed through Bryce's mind. "You're a luxurious animal, Alan, using a table cloth. Why, I don't know any of the other fellows who indulge in such elegance. Or am I to feel specially honoured?"

"No, Bryce; the fact is that I know that a man is apt to become slack living bachelor fashion," returned Dundas seriously, "so I make it a rule always to use a table cloth, and, moreover," he went on, as if recounting the magnificent ceremonial of a regal menage, "I never sit down to a meal in my shirt sleeves. Oh, Lord! the potatoes!"

With two dishes nicely balanced, Dundas arrived back again, and after another journey for a mighty teapot, he called Bryce up to the table. To an epicure, bacon and eggs backed by fried potatoes, for a midday meal with the thermometer at 112 deg. in the shade, may sound a little startling, but then, epicures rarely work, and the matter is beyond their comprehension. Bryce stared at the large dish with upraised hands. "Man, what have you done? I asked for two."

"Dinna fash yersel', laddie," answered Dundas mildly. "I've been heaving the pick in that hole since 7 o'clock this morning, and it makes one peckish. The other six are for my noble self. Does it occur to you, Bryce, that had I not scrapped an unpromising career at the bar, I might also have regarded this meal as a carefully studied attempt at suicide?"

"Humph! perhaps—I believe you did the best thing though, and I own up that I thought you demented then."

"Lord! How the heathen did rage."

"True. But don't you ever regret or feel lonely?"

"Nary a regret, and as far as for the loneliness, I rather like it. That reminds me. I had George MacArthur out here for a week lately. He said he wanted the simple life, so I put him hoeing vines. More tea? No? Then, gentlemen, you may smoke." Dundas reached for a pipe from beneath the mantel, and then swung himself into an armchair, while Bryce returned to the comfort of the creaking lounge.

"By the way, Alan," said Bryce, pricking his cigar with scientific care, "you haven't told me the object of your

insane energy in that condemned clayhole." Dundas was eyeing the cigar with disfavour. "I can't understand a man smoking those things when he can get a good honest pipe. Oh, all right, I don't want to start a wrangle. About the condemned clayhole. Well, the fool who built this mansion of mine built it half a mile from the river, and that means that in summer I must either take the water to the horses or the horses to the water, and both operations are a dashed nuisance. Now observe. That condemned clayhole is to be ultimately an excellent waterhole that will save me a deuce of a lot of trouble. Therefore, as Miss Carilona Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs so elegantly puts it, you found me 'all a muck of sweat.'"

"Yes, but my dear chap, you can afford to get it done for you."

"In a way you are right, Hec, but then I can't afford to pay a man to do work that I can do myself."

"Don't blame you, Alan." Then, after a pause, and watching him keenly: "Why don't you get married?"

Dundas jerked himself straight in his chair, the lighted match still in his fingers. "Great Scott, Bryce! What's that got to do with waterholes?" The utter irrelevance of the question made Bryce laugh. "Nothing, old chap—nothing. Only it just came to my mind as I was lying here." Lying was a good word, had Dundas only known. "You know," he went on, "there are plenty of nice girls in the district."

"You are not suggesting polygamy, by any chance?" countered Alan serenely from his chair, having recovered from the shock of the unexpected question.

"Don't be an ass, Alan. I only suggested a good thing for yourself."

"Can't you see the force of your argument, Hector, that because there are plenty of nice girls in the district (I'll admit that) I should marry one of them."

"You might do a dashed sight worse."

"You mean I mightn't marry her?"

"You Rabelaisian young devil! I'll shy something at you in a minute if you don't talk sense."
"Well, look. If you want reasons I'll give you some. First, for the same reason that I cannot afford a pumping plant. Now do shut up and let me speak. I know the gag about what will keep one keeping two. It's all tosh. Secondly, I wouldn't ask any nice girl to live in this solitude, even if she were willing. Third—do you want any more? Well, if I got married I would have to extend and rebuild this place." Then he quietened down, and said seriously, "I know what you mean, Hector; but those," pointing to the books, "are all the wife I want just now."
Bryce smiled. "By jove, Alan, who's talking polygamy now? There are about six hundred of them."
"Oh!" answered Alan serenely. "I'm only really married to about six of them. All the rest are merely 'porcupines,' as the Sunday school kid said."
"Alan, my son, I'll really have to consult the Reverend John Harvey Pook about your morals, and get him to come and discourse with you."
"Lord forbid!" said Dundas piously. "That reminds me. I told you I had George MacArthur here for a week, living the simple life. Well, he was never out of his pyjamas from the day he arrived till the day he left. However, one afternoon while I was taking the horses to water, who should arrive but the Reverend John Harvey and Mamma and Bella Pook, hunting for a subscription for a tea-fight of some sort. Anyhow when I got back the noble George was giving them afternoon tea on the verandah. Just apologised for being found in evening dress in the day time."
"Humph!" commented Bryce, "did Pook get anything?"
"Well, I paid a guinea just to get rid of them. George was making the pace too hot," replied Dundas. "Pook nearly fell over himself when George came to light with a tenner."
Bryce smoked a few minutes, watching Alan through the cloud. "Why did you get MacArthur down here?" Dundas,

who had been gazing off through the window, spoke without turning his head. "Oh, various reasons. You know I like him immensely in spite of his idiosyncrasies. He's no end of a good sort. It's not his fault that he has more thousands a year than most men have fifties. He lived a godly, upright, and sober life the week he was here. Pity he doesn't take up a hobby of some sort— books or art collecting or something of the kind."

"I'm afraid an old master is less in his line than a young mistress," said Bryce sourly.

Dundas looked around, wide-eyed. "Jove, Hector, that remark sounds almost feminine."

Bryce chuckled. "You must have a queer set of lady friends if that's the way they talk."

"Oh, you owl! I meant the spirit and not the letter. Anyhow, what's MacArthur been doing to get on your nerves? You are not usually nasty for nothing."

"You've not seen him since he left?"

"No, I've not been near Glen Cairn or the delights of the club. Been too busy. Anyhow, you don't usually take notice of the district scandal either."

Bryce stared thoughtfully at the ash of the cigar he turned in his fingers. "Well, if you will have it. Here are the facts, the alleged facts, club gossip, tennis-court gossip, also information collected by Doris. The night after he left you, George MacArthur filled himself with assorted liquors. Went down with a few friends to the Star and Garter (why the deuce he didn't stay at the club I don't know). He made a throne in one of the sitting-rooms, by placing a chair on the table. On the throne he seated a barmaid—I'm told it was the fat one (Perhaps you can recognise her from the description). Then he removed a leg from another chair and gave it to her as a sceptre. I believe, although statements differ, he made them hail her as the chaste goddess Diana. Rickardson tells me that, as a temporary revival of paganism, it was a huge success."

Alan's frown deepened as the recital went on. "Bryce, how much of the yarn is true? You know the value of the confounded gossip of the town."
"I've given you the accepted version," said Bryce slowly.
Alan, still staring through the window, said, a little bitterly, "I suppose the verdict is Guilty? No trial, as usual."
"The evidence is fairly conclusive in this case," answered Bryce. He was watching Dundas keenly. Then he went on, in a slow, even voice, "I saw Marian Seymour cut him dead yesterday." Then only he turned his eyes away as Alan swung round. For a moment he made as if to speak, but thought better of it.
Bryce heaved himself out of his lounge. "Well, Alan, we won't mend the morals of the community by talking about them. You'll come over to dinner on Sunday, of course?"
Alan stood up. "Jove, Hector, that will be something to look forward to. Tell Mistress Doris I'll bring along my best appetite."
Bryce laughed. "If I tell of your performance on the eggs to-day I'd better forget that part of the message. You had better break the news of the calamity yourself. Phew! What a devil of a day! Surely you won't go back to that infernal work?"
"You bet I do! I've taken twice my usual lunch time in your honour. Aren't you afraid some of the gilded youths on your staff will do a bunk with the bank's reserve cash if you are not there to sit on it?"
"Not one of 'em has as the bowels to do a bunk, as you so prettily put it, with a stale bun. You can thank your neighbour, Denis McCarthy, for this infliction. I had to pay him a visit."
"Humph! It's about the only thing I've ever had occasion to feel genuinely thankful to him for. You found him beastly sober, as usual?"
"Well," said Bryce grimly, "I found him beastly and I left him sober. Yes, very sober. Thank goodness that finishes the last

of my predecessor's errors in judgment." He stooped to crank up his car. "Goodbye, Alan; don't overdo it." He backed and turned in the narrow drive before the verandah, while Dundas stood and made caustic comments on the steering in particular and motor cars in general. The last he heard was a wild threat of "having the law agin' him" if he broke so much as a single vine-cane.

Chapter 2

IN a long white robe before the mirror of her dressing table Doris Bryce stood flashing a silver-backed brush through her long, thick hair. Her lord and alleged master had already reached the stage of peace and pyjamas, and was lying with his head already pillowed. There was rather more than the shadow of a frown on the comely face of Doris, which, Bryce, wise in his knowledge of his wife, affected not to see. There had been a few minute's silence, during which Doris had tried to decide for herself whether she had heard aright or not.

At last! "You really said that, Hec?"

"Yes. What difference does it make?"

"You mean to tell me you asked Alan why he didn't get married?"

"Well, I didn't ask any questions. I merely suggested that he ought to."

"Well!" said his wife, pulling a fresh handful of hair over her shoulders. "All I've got to say is that you are an absolute donkey."

"My dear girl!"

"Suppose you were fishing, and I came and threw stones beside your line?"

Said Hector soothingly: "I might say, dear, that your action was ill-advised." A slight shrug of her shoulders showed him that his correction was not being received in a spirit of wifely submission. "You must remember," he went on, "that I stand 'in loco parentis.'" "'In loco grandmother.'" Doris had put down her brush, and commenced to plait one side of her hair. "Well, if you like it better, 'in loco grand-parentis.' My Latin has got a bit rusty; anyhow, I can't see for the life of me what difference it makes."

Doris disdained to answer. "Perhaps," she asked coldly, "you can remember what he said to your beautiful suggestion?"

Bryce eyed her in silence for some moments, calculating how far he might risk a jest. From experience he knew the cost of miscalculation. "I must confess," he ventured, "that his answer came as a shock. Alan owned up that he was already married." His voice had a nicely-toned seriousness.

"Hector!" Her arms dropped. "You don't mean to say—" Words failed her.

"Yes, my dear. About six wives, he was not quite sure, and several hundred porcupines. A regular young Solomon."

There was a look in Doris's eyes as she turned away that made Bryce feel that he had rather overdone it. "I think I have told you before that I do not want to hear any of the club jokes. I suppose that is meant for one." Her voice was anything but reassuring. "Perhaps you will tell me what you mean."

"Well to tell the truth, Doris, he didn't seem to take kindly to the idea."

"Not likely when it was pelted at him like that," was his wife's comment. She stared at her reflection thoughtfully. "He will come in to dinner on Sunday, I hope?"

"Yes, of course," answered Bryce, pleased to be able to give one answer that might mollify a somewhat irritated wife.

"Ah, well, I have invited Marian Seymour to dinner on Sunday as well. I told her you would drive out and bring her in in the car."

"Good idea, Doris. It will be bright moonlight in the evening, and we can go for a spin after we take her home."

Doris, who had stooped to remove her shoe, straightened up, and looked at him helplessly. "Good heavens! What a man! To think I'm married to it!" She turned up her eyes as though imploring heavenly guidance in her affliction. "Hector, if I thought there was the remotest possibility of your suggesting driving her home, I should most certainly

jab your tyres full of holes. It's beyond my comprehension. They say you are the cleverest business man in the district, but in ordinary matters of domestic common sense you are just hopeless."
"Now, what in the name of all that's wonderful have I said?" asked the injured man, groping for light. "Must I put it into plain cold English?"
"Well, my good woman—"
"For goodness' sake, Hector, don't say 'good woman.' You know I hate it."
He did know, as a matter of fact, and that is why perhaps, he used the expression. "Well, Doris, may I ask you to be a little less complex?"
"A little less complex! Instruction for the young!" she said bitingly. "Alan Dundas will drive in to dinner on Sunday. Marian Seymour will be driven in by you to have dinner with us on Sunday. Do you follow that much?"
"I have already absorbed those two ideas," said Bryce mildly.
"Well, as you have already remarked, it will be bright moonlight when it is time for them to go home. Your car will have something wrong with it's engine—"
"But, my dear, it hasn't anything wrong."
"It had better have then."
Bryce hastily remarked something about sparking plugs.
"Then, as I said, your car will not be fit to take Marian home in, so it will be necessary for Alan Dundas to drive Marian Seymour home, a distance of five miles—in fact, nearly six—in the moonlight, and," she concluded, "I know the seat of Alan's dog-cart is not very spacious for two. Perhaps you see now?" and she tossed her head disdainfully.
Bryce spoke slowly. "And Alan called me a Machiavelli! Good Lord! Well, as you please. These manifestations are beyond me."

That afternoon Dundas watched the dust of Bryce's car until it died away along the track, and after setting his domestic affairs in order returned to his "condemned clayhole." For some time he stood on the edge of the excavation staring thoughtfully into it, but in spite of appearances, his thoughts were far from pick and shovel. Had Doris Bryce only known, she need not have condemned her long-suffering man on her own somewhat biassed and self-satisfied feminine judgment, for Hector's sledge-hammer diplomacy had undoubtedly given the owner of 'Cootamundra' an unexpected mental jolt that for the time being had left the smooth running of his thoughts somewhat out of gear.

For a long ten minutes Alan stood and stared, then pulling himself together abruptly he scrambled down, and drawing his pick from its cover began to make up for lost time. He worked himself mercilessly in spite of the breathless, sweltering heat.

The greater part of the afternoon had gone before he paused, after clearing up the bottom, to survey the result of his labour with pardonable satisfaction, and he estimated that a couple of weeks' clear work would see his property the better for a serviceable waterhole. Then, taking up his pick, he struck heavily at a spot on the face some two feet below the surface level. The result of the blow was both unexpected and disconcerting. Hard as the clay was, and braced as his muscles were for the stroke, the jar that followed made his nerves tingle to the shoulder. The pick brought up with a loud, clear ring, while two inches of its tempered point and a fragment of clay flew off at a tangent and struck his foot. Alan swore softly, but sincerely. He picked up the broken point and examined it critically. Then he stooped and inspected the spot where the blow had taken effect. Then he swore again wholeheartedly. "Rock, and I suppose the only rock on the whole dashed place, and I've found it." However, he was not the sort to waste his

time in growling, so set to work carefully and scientifically to discover the extent of the obstacle, and the longer he worked the more puzzled he became.

His usual stopping hour passed. The shadows of the trees and homestead grew to gigantic lengths and grotesque shapes, but the rim of the sun was touching the distant timber belt before he finally flung down his tools.

In the fading light of the evening, Dundas strolled back to the hole again. He had hurried over a meal that he usually took at his leisure. He had brought with him a cold chisel and a heavy hammer, and after throwing off his coat he jumped into the excavation. There was just enough light for his work, and he selected a spot for an attack. Holding the chisel carefully against the uncovered rock, he brought the hammer down on it again and again with smashing force, bringing a flash of sparks with every blow, until at last a corner of the tool's edge snapped with a ring, and whirred into the dusk like a bullet. Alan examined the dulled and broken edge with a frown, and then peered at the spot on which he had been striking. The stone showed neither chip nor mark. Not the faintest scratch appeared on the hard glass-smooth face after a battering that would have scored and dented a steel plate. Just as wise as when he started his investigation, he returned the ruined chisel and hammer to the tool shed, and went back to the house.

The book Dundas selected lay on his lap unopened for half an hour. The pipe he lit hung between his lips, cold after a few pulls, and he stared into the dark through the open window. Finally he pulled himself together and sat up.

At last he stopped, at peace with himself and the world. Close beside him and just where the light fell from the open window, a vine shoot from the verandah had sent down a tendril, and along the tendril, doubtless attracted by the light, appeared, cautiously feeling its way, a fat black vine caterpillar. The insect arrived at the end of the tendril and reared up as if seeking assistance to continue its journey.

Dundas watched it idly. With absurd persistence it reached from side to side into space. Then, speaking half aloud, (habit formed of his solitary life), he addressed his visitor.

"My friend, can you tell me this? I have to-day broken up ground that I am absolutely sure has never been broken before, and yet below the surface I have come on rock that is not rock. It is a rock that I am prepared to stake my life on came out of a human workshops and not nature's. Perhaps you can tell me how that human handiwork comes to be embedded in virgin soil that has never been stirred since time began. No, Mr. Caterpillar, the smoothness of that rock, which is not a rock, does not come from the action of water. I thought so myself at first. No, and again, no. It is human work, and how did it get there? Give it up? Well, so do I—for the present. I'm off to bed, old chap, and I'm very much obliged for your intelligent attention."

Ten minutes later darkness and silence held the homestead.

Chapter 3

NEXT morning Alan Dundas returned to his work with an interest he had never known before.

When he had stopped the night before, he had uncovered about two square yards of the obstacle that had broken first his pick and then his cold chisel. In colour it was a dull red, not unlike red granite, but without a trace of "grain." The surface was as smooth as glass, but it was the indication of a symmetrical shape that puzzled Dundas most. Where he had cut away the clay low down in the hole the rock sprang perpendicularly from the ground for about two feet, then from a clean, perfectly defined line it came away to form a dome. Of that he could make no mistake. Running his eye over the uncovered space, he estimated roughly that, supposing the lines continued as they appeared, he had unearthed the edge of a cylindrical construction, terminated by an almost flat dome, of some twenty-five to thirty feet in diameter. How far down the foundations might go he could not even hazard a guess.

So, filled with curiosity, he set to work, and as the hours passed the original idea of tank-sinking fled, and he worked solely to solve the mystery he had unearthed. The course he had to follow took his trench across the boundary he had first marked out, but as he worked surmise became fact. The boast he had made the day before was forgotten, and he ate his midday meal standing in his kitchen, and washed it down with a drink from his water-bag. By evening he surveyed the results of his day's work, the most perplexed man in Christendom. To follow the course of what, for want of a better name, he called the rock, he had cut around the segment of a circle of about the size of his original estimate for about twenty feet. He had made his cut about three feet

wide and shoulder deep, and all round he had found the clean cut line of the spring of the flat dome as clearly defined as if it had been moulded, and every inch he had uncovered strengthened his first idea that the work was from human hands. So far as he had examined it he was absolutely at a loss to account for its purpose. It was like nothing he had ever seen or heard of, and moreover again and again came back the certainty that the surface of the soil had been hitherto unbroken.

For a while he considered whether he should catch Billy Blue Blazes and drive into Glen Cairn to talk the matter over with Bryce, but the mystery had eaten into his soul, and in the end he determined at all costs to solve it for himself. When he had arrived at this resolution he felt a keen satisfaction in the thought that his place was so far removed from the beaten track.

It was not until late in the afternoon of the following day when the strain of the past few days was beginning to tell on his energy, that he came on the first break in the wall, and it so far revived his spirits that he redoubled his efforts until he had assured himself that the break he had come upon was the top of an arched doorway. There could be no possible doubt of that, and when he had satisfied himself on the point he set to work, tired and aching as he was, to fill in enough earth all round his trench to hide as far as possible all indications of the construction. He felt certain that the solution of the problem would come from within, and he left only enough uncovered to enable him to have easy access to the newly discovered doorway.

Eight hours of dreamless sleep banished every ache. The morning was yet very young when Alan swung his dogcart into the main street of Glen Cairn, and Billy stopped, with his forefeet in the air, before the principal store in the town. There Dundas gave orders for timber and galvanised iron. Would it be out that day? And swag-bellied Gaynor,

the storekeeper, swore that Mr. Dundas's order would take precedence over all other in the matter of delivery.
Then it struck him that by driving a few miles off his homeward track he might see someone more interesting—that is, by accident.
Man proposes. Alan drove home by the long way. He irritated Billy by pulling him into as slow a pace as that bundle of nerves and springs ever assented to, but neither down the long hedged lane, nor in the curving oak-arched drive, nor yet about the white house half buried in the trees, was there any flutter of skirt or sign of her whom he sought. He was not good at fibbing, and, trying his best, he could not invent a reasonably passable excuse for a call.
And so home, all the time turning things over in his mind, till Marian Seymour first receded to the background of his thoughts and then disappeared altogether, and It took her place. "It." After days of racking toil he could find no other name for his discovery than "It." At times there flashed across his mind that there might be some simple and rational explanation for "It," and with the thought came a sense of disappointment and depression. The feeling soon vanished, however, under analysis. Every sense of his being told him that he stood on the verge of the unknown.
When he reached 'Cootamundra' he attended to Billy's requirements, and then sought means to pass the time until the arrival of his material from Glen Cairn.
Unconsciously his feet carried him back to the excavation, and he smiled grimly at its appearance. Its original symmetrical shape had vanished. Its apparently objectless outlines and the patent fact that it had been partially refilled made it look as an effort at tank sinking about as mad as some of his theories.
Although he was itching to recommence his explorations, he had to possess his soul in patience, and it was long after noon before Gaynor's team arrived bearing the material he had ordered. Alan had the cart unloaded well away from

the scene of his labours. He was taking no risks, although he felt sure that the driver's one idea would be to make his delivery and get away.

It was no light task that he had set himself. To make up for his enforced idleness of the morning he worked until the fading light made it impossible for him to continue. He had to admit to himself that as architecture the framework he had erected was beneath contempt, while a carpenter's apprentice would have snorted at his workmanship; but if it lacked all else it had strength, and would serve its purpose. Next morning saw him working with beaver-like persistence.

But, in spite of damaged and blistered hands and raw-edged temper, the work advanced. When evening came his persistence was rewarded by an almost completed enclosure ten feet high, surrounding the spot where he had been excavating. Raw it looked, and a blot on the not too beautiful landscape, but he felt that it would serve his purpose. Another day would see it roofed and completed, and then not even the most curious visitor, known or unknown, would have sufficient curiosity to investigate what was to all appearances, nothing but a shed for storing implements or fodder.

Alan felt at the day's end that Sunday's rest, if nothing else, was a justification for Christianity. When he finally put away his tools and tramped wearily to the empty house, he told himself that until Monday morning he would empty his head of every thought of work.

Chapter 4

DUNDAS woke late and care-free. It was ten o'clock before he had finished his leisurely breakfast, and captured and groomed Billy. Then he turned his attention to his toilet. To a man with a regard for the decencies of life, there was a deep sense of satisfaction in discarding his serviceable but unpleasantly rough working garb for more conventional clothing.

Truly clothes maketh the man. Few would have recognised in the the smart figure, clothed in spotless white from head to foot, the dungaree and flannel clad man of yesterday. As he stepped into his dogcart that morning, nineteen women out of twenty would have found Alan Dundas a man to look at more than once, although they might pretend they had never noticed him, as is their way.

Billy Blue Blazes made his own pace on the road to Glen Cairn, a privilege he was rarely granted, and made the most of it. Two miles out of the township Alan met Bryce in his car on his way to bring in the other visitor. The two exchanged hasty greetings as Billy clawed the air, and expressed his opinion on mechanical traction in unmistakable fashion. So, after stabling at the club, it was Doris alone who greeted Alan at the bank. And Doris, when she looked at him, said in her heart that her work would be good.

From her deck chair on the verandah she chaffed him for a hermit. "I suppose, Mistress Doris, that wretched man of yours has been telling tales of my menage. You know he had lunch with me last week."

"Of course, Alan, he told me that you were starving yourself, poor boy. I do hope that you have recovered your appetite."

"The traitor! He said he would do nothing to warn you of the impending catastrophe. Well, if he has to go without on my account, serve him right."
There came the hoot of a motor-horn from the street. "There's Hector now; he went out to bring us in another guest, Alan—guess?"
"I'm too lazy and contented for a mental effort." Then, after a pause, "MacArthur?"
Doris made a sound that approached a dainty sniff. "I'm not playing speaks with Mr. MacArthur," she said, a little stiffly.
"You might do worse, Mistress Doris. Give him a chance."
There came a sound of voices from the garden, and they both stood up. "Come on, Maid Marian. We'll find them on the verandah." Then the others turned the corner. Bryce greeted Alan heartily, and then turned to the girl beside him. "I've brought you a judge, jury, and executioner, Dundas. I hear you have been guilty of treason, desertion, and a few other trifling offences. It's currently reported that you were squared by the Ronga Club not to play yesterday."
Alan took the warm firm hand held out to him. "I've been executed already by Mistress Doris, Miss Seymour, you can't punish me twice for the same offence." The girl smiled as she took the chair he drew up for her. "Luckily we pulled through without you. What excuse have you?"
"Only Eve's legacy—work," he answered.
"Doris dear," said Marian, "is not the excuse as bad as the offence? A nasty slur on our sex by inference and a claim to the right to work when we want him to play."
Then, standing up: "Guilty on all counts, and remanded for sentence— until I can think of something sufficiently unpleasant to fit the crime."
"Then I can only throw myself on the mercy of the court. Make it a free pardon, Miss Seymour," said Dundas, laughing.

She regarded him with laughing eyes, and then turned to Doris. "I doubt if severity will have any lasting effect in this case. Perhaps if we extend the clemency of the court—" Then to Dundas: "Case dismissed. I hope you will not appear here again. Isn't that what father says on the bench?"

Bryce chuckled. "A disgraceful miscarriage of justice. That's what it amounts to. Coming in, Doris, nothing but his bleeding scalp would satisfy her. Now he is pardoned. It's too thick."

"Out of your own mouth, Bryce," said Alan, "a free pardon was the right course. The quality of mercy is not strained. Why? Because it's too thick."

Doris stood up. "Come and take off your hat, Marian. A constant diet of eggs has affected his mind. He's absolutely unworthy of notice."

Left to themselves Bryce and Alan settled down to a yarn that drifted from politics to town and district news, and thence to the absorbing topic of vines and crops. "How grows the waterhole?" asked Bryce after a while. Dundas was waiting for the question, and with elaborate carelessness answered briefly that he had struck rock and abandoned it. "I am building a fodder-house on the site as a monument to my displaced energy," he went on. "I was so busy with the building that I missed coming in to town yesterday."

Bryce shook his head. "You'll overdo it, Dun."

"Hector and Alan." It was Doris's voice. "If you want any dinner you had better come now."

It was afterwards when they were at peace with the world, the one with a pipe and the other with a cigar, that Alan put the question that he had been quietly manoeuvring for.

"Can you tell me, Hec, if at any time there has been any big building work done at 'Cootamundra', or even started?"

Bryce reflected for a few moments. "I've known 'Cootamundra' now for nearly forty years, and I'm certain

that, beyond the present buildings, nothing of the kind has ever been done there. Why ask?"
"Oh, nothing much," answered Dundas, fibbing carefully. "Now and again I thought I noticed traces of foundations about the place near the house."
And so the talk drifted lazily off into other channels until they were rejoined by Doris and Marian.
It was the strange behaviour of his wife that occupied Bryce's attention for the rest of the day, to the exclusion of all else. As an onlooker he thought he should have seen most of the game, and knowing the rules, or thinking he did, it was, he found, a game that he did not understand. When Marian came on the scene he prepared cheerfully to give Dundas a clear field, but to his surprise he found that every attempt was neatly foiled by his erratic spouse.
Thereafter he watched her manoeuvres with amused astonishment. It was apparent to the densest understanding that both Alan and Marian would have welcomed each other's society undiluted, and Bryce enjoyed to the utmost Alan's diplomatic but persistent efforts to "shoo" off his too attentive hostess, and her apparently unconscious disregard for his efforts.
In the end it came as a relief to be able to announce a wholly fictitious trouble with the engine of his car that threw on Alan the responsibility of delivering Marian safely at her home. It was nearly ten o'clock when Dundas brought the snorting Billy B.B. to the door of Bryce's quarters at the bank, and Marian made her hasty farewells, for Billy was never in a mood on a homeward journey to stand on four legs for two consecutive seconds.
The two watched the receding lights of the dogcart for a few minutes, and then returned to the house. Doris began to straighten some music that was lying about, while Bryce, leaning back in an easy chair, watched her thoughtfully. Presently she appeared to be aware of his scrutiny. "What's on your mind, Hec?" she asked.

"It's not what's on my mind, best beloved; it's what's in yours that is making me thoughtful," answered her husband.
Doris returned the music to its place, and sank into a chair, while Bryce, after placing a cushion for her head, took his stand in front of her, feet apart, hands in pockets. "Now, my lady, I want explanations; lots of 'em."
Doris looked up at him with a slow reminiscent smile that ended in a little gurgle. "Aren't they lovely, Hec? The dears! I'm sure Alan would have liked to shake me. Don't you think so?"
"By Jove, Doris, I wonder at his self-control! Now, listen." Here he shook an admonitory finger. "If you don't immediately explain your scandalous conduct, I'll act as Alan's deputy, and shake you till you do."
"Violence is quite unnecessary, Hec," she laughed softly. "You know it struck me this morning, that if I left them together Alan would just take things easily, and let them drift. You know I'm not altogether sure of Alan." Here she paused thoughtfully.
"And so?" persisted Bryce.
"And so," she went on, "I just teased them by not giving them a chance, because, well, suppose you dangle something a child wants just out of its reach, and then suddenly rest for a moment, the probabilities are that the child will grab when it gets the chance." Another pause.
"And you mean?" asked Hector with dawning comprehension.
"Well, there is a tantalised nice man, and a specially nice girl, and a narrow-seated dogcart, and a wonderful moon, and if the man doesn't grab—well, I don't know anything. Oh, you monster!"
Bryce's arms had swept outwards and gathered her in with one heave of his shoulders. "Oh, Hec, do let me down." He backed to his armchair, still holding her firmly until her

struggles ceased. "Will you be good?" he asked. "Good as gold," she answered, with her head on his shoulder.
"It's my opinion, Doris, that you are a scandalous little schemer. Great Scott! What chance has a man against that sort of thing?"
"Do you think it will work, Hec?" passing her hand round his neck.
"Maybe—it won't be your fault if it doesn't, you imp! The only thing against it is that you forgot Billy. He is a straightforward little animal, whatever may be said against him, and I doubt if he will permit his owner to become a victim of your conspiracy."
"Hum—dear boy—it would take wilder horses than Billy to stop a man if he really meant business."
"Look here, Doris, I want to know, are we all treated like this? Are you and your kind really the destiny that shapes our matrimonial ends? You know it makes one nervous. I never dreamed of such depths of duplicity. What about me, for instance?"
She looked at him with shining eyes, and smiled softly. "Oh—you— well, Hec, special cases require special treatment. I've read somewhere that natives when they want to get certain very shy birds, just do something that will attract their attention and their curiosity. Then, when the bird comes to see what it is, they just put out their hands and take it. That is, if the bird is worth taking."
"So—I see—I see—I don't seem to recollect any tactics of that kind in our case, Doris, and I'm sure I would have remembered, because I have read somewhere, too, that the method adopted by the natives is to lie on their backs and twiddle their toes in the air. Now, if you had done that—"
There was a brief struggle and a soft hand closed over his mouth, and the rest is of no interest to outsiders.

Chapter 5

MEANWHILE, way down the long white road between well-ordered vineyards and scattered homesteads nestling in orchards, sped Marian and Alan behind the fretting Billy, and with them a silence that neither seemed inclined to break. There were not many women even in that district of horse-women who would have sat calmly and care-free beside Dundas, knowing Billy's reputation. Where a city-bred girl would have clung with white knuckles to the side-rail, Marian sat with loosely folded hands, letting her body sway with the swing of the dogcart. Billy's breaking-in had been peculiar. His forebears had been remarkable more for speed than for good temper. George MacArthur had acquired him as a yearling, and under that gentleman's able tuition he had developed more than one characteristic that made sitting behind him more exhilarating than safe.

MacArthur, grown tired of buying new dogcarts, sent Billy to the saleyards, and insisted that the auctioneer should read a guarantee that described Billy as perfectly sound, and an ideal horse for a lunatic or anyone contemplating suicide, and it was under this guarantee that Alan purchased for a couple of sovereigns what had originally cost MacArthur fifty guineas.

Alan used to say, when asked why he retained Billy, that to get rid of him would deprive him of the joy of a royal progress. "You have no idea how polite people are to me when B.B.B. gets moving. I've seen a dozen vehicles pull off the road the moment I came in sight, and stand still till I passed them."

Tonight Alan was driving with special care, for his freight was very precious. He felt, too, a pride in the fact that Marian had trusted herself to his care without hesitation. It

was only when the first struggle was over, and Billy had settled himself into his real gait, that he turned to the girl beside him. "Now, he is not so bad as he is painted, is he?"
Marian laughed. "No horse could be as bad as Billy is painted, not even Billy himself, but he is splendid!" Then, after a pause, "but I think it is almost criminal to have spoiled such a horse in the first place."
"Don't believe it," answered Alan. "I've studied Billy carefully for three years now, and I'm quite convinced that his habits are a gift. MacArthur only cultivated them, just as a fine voice is cultivated." Marian looked straight ahead, and said, "I'll admit that in this instance he could not have had a more able tutor."
Alan looked round at the calm, disapproving face, and smiled. "Et tu, Brute," he said, quietly.
She turned quickly. "Do you stand by Mr. MacArthur?"
"Inasmuch as he is my friend, yes; more so now than usual, perhaps."
She turned his answer over in her mind a moment. "Yes, I suppose you would," she said.
"What does that mean—approval or otherwise?" he asked.
"I only meant that I thought that you would be very loyal to your friends, right or wrong. But, at the same time, in this instance I don't agree with you."
"God made him for a man—let him pass. Steady, Billy! That's only a cow."
There was a full and lively thirty seconds until the horse had recovered from his attack of nerves. Then Marian took up the tale.
"That's all very well, but is it fair, I ask you? Suppose, now, that I carried on a flirtation with the groom at the Star and Garter, which God forbid, for methinks he is passing fond of beer. Would your charity stand the strain?"
Dundas made a mental comparison, and chuckled. "I'd take the strongest exception to your taste, apart from conventions."