

An Australian Childhood

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2003



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Source Text:

Prepared from the print edition published by Blackie and Son London;
Glasgow; Dublin [1892?] 96pp.

All quotation marks are retained as data.

First Published: 1892?

919.4/667 *Australian Etext Collections at women writers autobiographies 1890-1909*

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An Australian Childhood

Chapter I. My Home.

WHEN I was a little girl I lived in Australia.

It seems a great many years ago to me; and I daresay if the little boys and girls that read this could see the gray head that is now recalling for their amusement some of the incidents of her own young days, they would think it must be still longer ago than it really is.

The place where I was born and lived till I was nearly grown up was situated a long way inland from Sydney; such a long way, indeed, that until I was a big girl of twelve or thirteen — I forget which now — I had never seen the sea, nor the streets of a bigger town than the funny little bush township, upon which we children used to look with great respect, considering it with its one street quite a large and bustling place.

Our home was three miles away from this small township, and it used to be looked upon as a treat indeed when one or other of us was allowed to occupy the back seat of the buggy on the rather rare occasions when our mother drove to Carcoar. We used to listen respectfully to her friendly chat across the counter with the small shopkeeper as she made her inquiries after the health of his wife, who was a great invalid; and we watched with personal interest the purchases she would make, which generally had some reference to our own small selves. Henry Kendall was the shopkeeper's name, and for years I firmly believed that the poems which used to appear in our weekly paper from Sydney, signed by that name, were written in the little room behind the shop. It was a grievous surprise to me when I found out for certain that he and the gifted poet were different men.

Besides the shop there were a couple of blacksmiths' forges, a bank, a few small private houses, and two rather large hotels, which did a thriving business; for Carcoar lay on the direct road to some large goldfields, and three or four times a week great heavily-laden coaches would go rumbling down the street, and remain a night at one or other of these hotels. Sometimes they would be carrying gold, and then they were escorted by a troop of mounted police, who made a very brave show as they clattered through the town, with their accoutrements all shining — quite as grand and as brave as real soldiers, we thought.

Then there was a court-house, where my father, who was a magistrate, used to sit and dispense justice about once a week; a tiny post-office, which was also a saddler's shop, and has always left on my mind a

connection, difficult to get rid of, between the smell of new leather and letters; and I think that is about all that Carcoar consisted of in those days.

Oh! and I must not forget the doctor's house, which stood half-way down the street, nor the old man that lived in it. He plays a prominent part in one of my reminiscences, for he was a dear old man, and very kind to us children. Looking back now I don't think he could really have been so *very* old — perhaps not much over thirty when I first remembered him, but to our youthful eyes he always seemed venerable.

Our own home was such a pretty place. It lay in a valley. All round it were hills covered with trees, but the valley itself had been cleared, so that you could look right across it to the opposite ridges covered with blue-gum and wattle trees, and down for some miles over fields, or paddocks as we used to call them, of green grass.

Our house was at the head of this green valley, close under a great hill called the "Sugarloaf," where on summer nights we could hear the wild dogs, or dingoes as they were usually called, howling to each other.

Down the middle of the valley ran a creek, or brook as it would be called in England, bordered with willow-trees, which divided my father's property from that of his nearest neighbour. Great old trees they were, with large branches stretching out over the water, where the peewits used to build their round mud nests.

Many a ducking I have had in attempting to appropriate eggs or young birds, for it was so easy to overbalance when stretching from one yielding bough to another. The water was not very deep, and a fall, unlike the fate of naughty children in the story-books, never ended with repentance and an untimely grave, but with a wetting of frocks and stockings, and a firm determination to try again on the first convenient opportunity.

All those trees we firmly believed were cuttings from Napoleon's grave at St. Helena, and I used to wonder how much of the original tree could have been left.

Our house was only a cottage. Deep verandahs ran round it, covered with honey-suckle and bignonia, a beautiful creeper which bore huge scarlet trumpets, in whose hearts lurked great drops of honey, which we used vigorously to dispute with the bees that could walk right down the deep throats of the flowers.

We had a very large garden, the lower part of which was full of fruit-trees, and our cherries, plums, and apples were quite renowned in the district. The upper part was bordered with acacia and wattle trees, and in it great bushes of the common cabbage-rose grew luxuriantly; and many another sweet English flower flourished there in exile.

It was a sweet home, and had a sweet wild name, "Nieramboula," a name given to the valley by the black people who once inhabited it.

We girls were educated at home by our mother. Poor mother! it must have been a sore tax on her time and patience, so busy as she always was. She made all our clothes, too, and did many another thing that I don't suppose she ever dreamt of doing when she was a girl in England; but we took it all as a matter of course. And when the man who was our cook got tipsy or ran away to the diggings, a casualty which happened not infrequently, it seemed quite a natural thing to see mother in the kitchen, her slender hands mixing great pans of dough, or busy over the curries that my father loved.

In fact we used to be rather pleased when this happened, for it generally meant a holiday from lessons.

It was *fun* to peel a dish of potatoes for dinner, or bring in wood for the fire — very much nicer, we thought, than learning French verbs or practising on the piano. It was on one of these enforced holidays that I once got into a dreadful scrape — a scrape, the remembrance of which makes me shudder even now. But you will hear about all that in due time.

Chapter II. The Pedlar's Prize.

THOUGH we were well enough provided for in essentials, very little pocket-money ever came the way of my sisters and myself. I suppose our parents thought that as there was so little opportunity for spending, there was no use bestowing it; but every now and then a chance would occur, when a travelling pedlar would pass by, and spend a few hours displaying his wares.

These would be of a varied description, dress materials and ribbons for the women, boots and tobacco for the men, toys and lollipops for the children.

Sometimes some pedlar, more enterprising than the rest, would supplement his load of useful articles with brightly coloured pictures, or a small selection of books. These last were always what most attracted me. I was a great reader, and had while still quite young read everything that I was permitted to touch upon my father's shelves. Of all the authors I knew anything of, Dickens was my chief favourite. I had read and re-read many of his books, always with an increasing pleasure.

I could repeat pages of the *Old Curiosity Shop* by heart before I was eleven years old, and had laughed and cried over *David Copperfield* and *Paul Dombey*, at an even earlier age.

We had not, however, many of my favourite author's works, and one in especial I had heard about, but never read, *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

I wished very much for that book.

One morning the welcome white-tilted cart belonging to the pedlar was seen descending the hill, and before long its contents were spread out on the verandah.

With eager faces we children gathered round and watched the man display his wares. Among them was a small box of books, on which I immediately pounced.

There, in a neat dark-green binding with gilt lettering, lay a copy of the very book I so wished to possess. I took it up and fingered it longingly. I tried to peep into the contents, but the uncut pages baffled me.

Waiting with what patience I could muster till mother had finished various little purchases of cottons, tape, and needles, I pulled her by the dress.

"Do buy this, mother," I whispered.

"What is the price?" she asked the pedlar.

“Fifteen shillings, ma'am,” he answered, and my mother laid the book down again.

“I'm going to have a birthday soon, mother,” I insinuated.

“No, Nellie, I cannot afford it, it is much too expensive. By-and-by, perhaps, it may come out in a cheaper edition, and then I may be able to get it for you, but not now.”

With despair in my heart I laid the book down, and watched the pedlar pack it away in the recesses of his cart. It was very exasperating to see it, to touch it, and then to have to let it go again.

You little English children, with your shelves full of pretty story-books, can little realize what a new book used to be in those old days, to your Australian cousins in the far-away bush. Now things are different, new books are much more easily obtained, and the consequence is they are not nearly so much prized as they were in the long-ago days of which I am telling you.

As the pedlar turned to go I followed him.

“Will you soon be here again?” I asked.

“Not for six months, missie,” he answered. “I've got to go all the way down the Macquarie, and back again.”

“Do you think you will sell that book?”

“I don't know, I'm sure, missie; maybe I will, and maybe I won't, it depends upon whether anyone will give me the price I want. You see it's rather an expensive book, but it's the first edition that has come out, that's why it's so dear.”

“If you don't sell it before you come back, *I'll* buy it then,” I said boldly.

For I thought: — “Six months is a long *long* time, a perfect age; before it is over I shall surely obtain the money, somehow. I have a shilling of my own already, surely in six long immense months I shall be able to get the rest.”

There were several little things we used to do for mother, which she would occasionally reward by the gift of a sixpence, when we went to Carcoar. As a rule these sixpences melted away in bull's-eyes, or were absorbed in cheap toys; but now, with such an object in view, I could refrain from such trivial purchases, and every sixpence would help. I remembered too, with delight, that not long before, my father had offered a shilling to the first child who should repeat “John Gilpin” to him, from start to finish, without a mistake. With the prospect of buying *Martin Chuzzlewit* to spur me on, I should have no difficulty in earning that shilling.

All these things rushed through my brain as I said to the pedlar:

“If you don't sell it before you come back, *I'll* buy it then.”

“Very well, missie,” said the good-natured man, “and I'll take care it isn't sold either, I'll keep it for you till I come back, and not unpack it.”

“Oh, thank you!” I said fervently, and then sat down on the verandah, my elbows on my knees, my head on my hands, and watched the white tilt of the pedlar's cart go wobbling down the valley till it was out of sight, whilst I pondered over the undertaking to which I felt I had now committed myself.

It seemed, on second thoughts, a frightful responsibility, to raise in six months' time a larger sum of money than I had ever possessed before; I almost repented of my rashness. But then the remembrance of *Martin Chuzzlewit* came over me, and I felt no task would be too hard which had the possession of that book as its reward.

My sisters, perhaps they would help me! but I rejected this idea. No, Mary loves housekeeping, and little Dot only cares for dolls. No, I will do it all by myself, somehow; I will save every penny, and tell no one for what I am doing it. It shall be a real secret kept all to myself, and when I get the book I will give it to mother as a birthday present. How delighted she will be, and how surprised! In imagination I saw myself presenting the book with a neat little speech. I pictured my mother's look of pleasure, my sisters' half-envying wonder. “How ever did you do it, Nell?” they will ask; “where did you get the money?”

Ah, where?

That was the nut I had to crack before my plan could succeed.

The first thing I did was to turn the miscellaneous contents out of a little old workbox, long past active service, and by nailing the lid securely down, and cutting a slit in the top with one of mother's best dinner knives, I succeeded in converting it into a very respectable money-box. I also succeeded in cutting my finger severely. And in the cross-examination that followed touching my own injuries, and those sustained by the dinner knife, my secret had all it could do to remain a secret.

I kept it, however, and felt that I had shed my blood in a good cause.

“Good-bye, sweet coin,” I said, as my one shilling rattled down into the box; “when next I set eyes on your silver face you will have fourteen fair brothers.”

Ah! but it was all very well to talk and plan, but long before that happy day came I had many a time despaired of success.

I lost no time in tackling “John Gilpin,” and my sisters wondered at my preoccupied manner, and tried in vain to fathom the mystery.

John Gilpin went to bed with me that night, and I had got him to Ware and back again before breakfast next morning.

“Nell was talking in her sleep all last night,” announced Mary next morning at breakfast, “and this morning she was lying wide awake muttering to herself ever so long.”

“Give the child some medicine, my dear,” quoth father, who put great faith in mother's powers as a doctress, and in a certain horrible

compound called "Gregory," which was administered to us for all and sundry ailments. "She looks rather heavy about the eyes."

"I'm *quite* well, father," I said with natural eagerness; but the edict had gone forth, and had to be obeyed. I silently resolved to do my Gilpin in solitude for the future.

Chapter III. Live Bait.

SOME weeks passed before I was able to add anything to my hoard. I knew John Gilpin perfectly now, had shouted him aloud in the garden by day, and very much under my breath to myself in the dead of night, but my father had not yet called upon us for the fulfilment of our task, so the shilling was still unallotted. Mother never seemed to want anything done that would bear fruit in the shape of sixpences, and these rare coins seemed rarer than ever now that I wanted them so sorely. One month out of the six had passed, and I was none the richer, when light dawned upon me in my despair. Doctor Warren came to tea!

This was not at all an unusual occurrence, but on this occasion it bore great results. With my attention divided between our guest and bread and jam, I was assisting at that cheerful meal, when I heard the doctor say:

“You'd think there would be plenty of poor children about the township glad to earn a few shillings so easily, but I assure you those that I asked seemed to think they would be conferring a favour upon me if they did it. I said to them, I'll give you sixpence a dozen for as many live leeches as you like to bring me; but they are so independent and so lazy that I doubt if they will bring me any at all.”

“What do you want them for?” said my mother.

“To send home to a friend of mine,” answered the doctor, “a medical man who has heard of the Australian leech, and asks me to procure some for him.”

Here was my chance, and *what* a chance! *Martin Chuzzlewit* no longer dangled unattainably before my eyes. I felt as sure of him as if I already held him in my hand.

Leeches! of course I could catch them easily! Were not the creeks full of them? — a fact we had frequently verified when bathing. I would ask the doctor quietly, first binding him to secrecy, if I might catch him some.

“Of course you may, little lassie,” he said, when with much diffidence I preferred my request. “And I expect you'll get me more than all the Carcoar children put together if you give your mind to it.”

Bathing in the creek used to be a very favourite amusement of ours in the long hot afternoons, and we had a most delightful place for it, a deep shady hole underneath a small waterfall, where we could splash, swim, and dive to our heart's content.

The very next afternoon I took with me a large glass bottle for the leeches I intended to catch; but whether it was because I wanted them so badly, or because the noise we made frightened them, I don't know, but I had no luck that day, and returned with my bottle as empty as when it went.

Clearly, I must try some other plan, so the next day I begged a piece of meat from Bidy, who for a handsome consideration consented to embellish our kitchen, and cook our dinner in a sufficiently independent style.

Slipping quietly down through the garden I sat down on the bank of the creek, and tying my meat to a piece of string dropped it into the water and waited.

Not for long; tug, tug, came a sharp pull at the string. I pulled it up, and a large dark-green crayfish was hanging on to it. I tried again, and fished up a small fresh-water turtle, but no leeches came near my meat.

"It's no use," I thought; "the horrid things evidently prefer live bait. They won't look at dead meat. I don't like doing it, but catch some leeches I *must*, no matter how horrid it is."

Off came shoes and stockings, and slipping my feet very quietly into the water, I waited for what might befall.

It soon befell. In a few seconds I felt a sharp stinging prick like a needle, first on one foot then on the other, and pulling them quickly out I found a dark-brown leech with yellow stripes clinging to each foot. Ugh! the horrible cold feeling of them! I set my teeth hard, and taking the leeches between my fingers, with a shudder at the chill slimy contact, I popped them into the bottle, which was half full of water. They swam lazily about, looking quite comfortable, and, freed from their contact, I could admire their rich colouring and graceful movements. Besides, they were worth a halfpenny apiece. Hurrah for *Martin Chuzzlewit!* and down went my legs into the water again.

This time I had rather longer to wait, and to improve the shining hour I began to repeat John Gilpin softly to myself to make sure I had not forgotten him.

"My sister and my sister's child,
Myself, and children three,"

I shouted; but the "three" ended in a little howl of pain, so sharp was the bite I had got.

"It saves trouble being one's own bait, but it *has* its drawbacks," I thought, as I detached with difficulty a large and vigorous specimen of the horse-leech species from the fleshy part of my ankle, and sent him to keep the others company in the bottle.

"I think I'll only put one leg in at a time, and nurse up the other," I said

to myself, and with an admiring remembrance of the Spartan boy in the history, who went to school and did his lessons with a fox gnawing at his vitals, I sat with an emulating endurance on that bank for about an hour, putting in first one leg and then the other with great impartiality.

Sport was good; the creatures seemed to tell each other about my bleeding feet, and by the time I felt I had had enough of it, I had caught about twenty fine lively leeches.

And now an unexpected difficulty assailed me. My feet and ankles began to feel very sore and stiff. Here and there, where a leech had bitten more deeply, the blood still flowed, and refused to be stanchd, so I had to tear my handkerchief in half, and tie a piece round each foot to try and stop it.

On reaching home I felt a little puzzled as to where to bestow my leeches, and after some cogitation ended by putting the bottle, which I had corked down with the greatest care, into a cupboard in the room I shared with my sisters. I took great care to keep my legs well out of mother's sight that night, for the bleeding from the leech bites was very troublesome, and I had to hunt all over the verandah for sufficient cobwebs to stop it.

Thus adorned I naturally shrunk from inspection, and sat so quietly at the table with my legs tucked well under my chair, that it attracted mother's notice. She looked at me with some anxiety.

"You are looking very pale to-night, child," she said; "are you feeling ill?"

"No, mother," I answered.

"Perhaps you were out too long in the hot sun to-day," she went on; "that might account for it."

I could have accounted for it easily enough, but I held my tongue, and the sun remained answerable for the leeches' work.

"You had better go to bed early, dear," added mother. "A good night's rest might set you all right again."

Chapter IV. A Plague of Leeches.

A GOOD night's rest, however, was what I did not get.

Little Dot was already asleep in her tiny crib when I went to our room, and shortly afterwards Mary came too. The three beds were tenanted as usual, and the candle blown out.

I could not sleep, however, for my numerous bites ached and stung. I had never known before what a painful thing a leech bite can be. I had gained my experience now, and as I turned and tossed I tried to think of some other plan to make up the required number. It would take 336 leeches at a halfpenny apiece to make fourteen shillings. I had spent a whole afternoon, and lost more blood than I well could spare, and had only got 20. In despair I thought again of John Gilpin; he was worth 24 leeches, I thought — and began repeating him over again to my pillow till the sleep-cloud began to gather round me.

“And when he next doth ride abroad,
May I be there to see,”

I murmured, with no sense of the meaning of the words, when a wail came from Dotty's bed.

“What's the matter, darling?” I called out.

“Someping's hurting me, Nellie, on my neck.”

“Nonsense, Dotty, go to sleep! You've been lying with your head crooked, and it's given you a stiff neck.”

“No, I hasn't; and it's *hurting* me,” she repeated with a still louder cry, which woke Mary, who jumped quickly out of bed, and began to fumble about for a match.

“Don't cry, darling,” she said; “Mary will see what is hurting you.”

“Make haste,” wailed Dotty; and Mary's bare feet pattered across the floor.

She struck a match, and simultaneously my mother, who had heard the cry, entered the room with a candle. They both gave a shriek.

Poor little Dotty was sitting up in bed, her face streaming with tears. Her little white gown was open at the neck, and on her soft, smooth skin was hanging — a leech!

In a moment mother had snatched the horrid thing from its hold, thrown it — alas! my leech — out of the window, and was soothing the frightened child, who clung to her in terror.

Mary, whose presence of mind never failed her in an emergency, brought a basin of water and a sponge to bathe the poor little neck, while I cowered down in my bed, and wondered if Cain ever felt worse than I did.

My poor little baby sister. I had given my own blood freely, but I had never intended to shed hers.

“How *could* it have got out of the bottle?” I thought, and then a horrible idea came into my mind. Suppose all the rest have got out too, and are wandering about the house in search of prey!

I longed to go to the cupboard, and ascertain the extent of my loss, and my relations' peril, but prudence kept me under the bed-clothes. I dared not expose my bandaged and cobwebbed ankles.

“Things must take their course,” I thought in desperation. “Let us hope their course will lead them into no more beds.”

Here Mary gave a sudden shriek, and jumped up on a chair, upsetting, as she did so, the basin of water she was holding all over Dotty and her bed. Mother dropped the candle, which went out and left us in darkness — not in silence, though, for now Mary's screams were added to Dotty's loud wail, and mother called loudly for help.

In came father with another light.

“What on earth is the matter?” he demanded half angrily.

“I've got a snake hanging to my foot,” sobbed Mary, and father made a spring across the room to her assistance.

“Snake! pooh, it's no snake,” he said in a relieved tone; “it's a leech. How on earth could a leech get into your bedroom?”

“It's bitten me too, Daddy,” cried Dotty, “on my neck.”

“Not the same one,” said mother; “I threw that one out of the window. See, there's another crawling under the bed; and look, there are two more near the fireplace. Have all the plagues of Egypt descended on the house?”

And she picked up Dotty and retreated, Mary limping after her.

“Here, bring a broom,” called my father; and Bridget, tucking her dress between her knees, and calling upon all the saints in Ireland to look down on her, came stepping carefully into the room, and handed my father the broom at arm's-length.

In spite of my misfortunes and my penitence, my sense of humour still came uppermost, as I watched my father wielding the unaccustomed article, and sweeping into a dusty wriggling heap about twelve of the creatures I had taken such trouble to catch.

“Bang goes saxpence!” I thought, as Bridget carried them gingerly away in the dust-pan, and I dared not say a word to save them.

My father, meantime, had been putting two and two together, and now turned to my bed.

“This is another of your doings, Nellie,” he said sternly. “Tell me at

once, did you bring those horrible brutes into the house?"

"Yes, father," I answered, in a very small voice, but not so small as I felt.

"What for, in the name of all that is disgusting?"

"I wanted them!"

"Now, look here, Nellie," he said. "There must be an end to this sort of thing. I've put up with 'possums in the verandah, tame kangaroo rats in the kitchen, and pet magpies and parrots all over the house; but I draw the line at *leeches*. You understand?"

"Yes, father," I muttered.

"How did you catch them?"

"In the creek."

"Of course, I know that; but how?"

"I put my legs into the water," said I in a very low voice.

"And let them bite you, you silly child? Put out your feet, and let me see."

There was no help for it. Very slowly I began to poke out the best-looking of my feet for inspection. My father's mouth began to twitch.

"Out with it!" he said; and I presented it for inspection. A huge cobweb was wrapped round and round the ankle, and a blood-stained rag above that. In spite of his concern, my father burst out laughing.

"You seem to have pretty well punished yourself," he said presently; "so we will say nothing more about it this time."

And he retreated, still laughing, to mother's room, next door; where, as he closed the door, I distinctly heard him say:

"That is the most extraordinary child. I wonder what she will make a pet of next."

As soon as the coast was clear, I hastened to ascertain the fate of the remainder of my leeches. One or two I found crawling about the floor of the cupboard. Why! oh, why had I not closed the door properly! I had left it ajar; and through the chink the twelve ill-fated leeches had escaped. The remainder, as far as I could judge, were safe in the bottle.

I found out how the others had escaped. It was an old cork, with a hole made by a corkscrew in it. I thought it pretty clever of them to get through that; but so they had. I now tied the mouth of the bottle down securely with a piece of calico, and had barely finished and closed the cupboard when Mary returned. She bestowed a very reproachful glance on me, as she once more climbed into her bed after satisfying herself that there were no more leeches in it.

Next morning I questioned Bridget as to what she had done with the twelve.

"Kitchen fire!" was all she would say.

I felt that all my relations looked askance on me at breakfast, as if wondering whether any more leeches were concealed about my person;

and I am bound to confess that I met with more than sympathy from my mother, as she examined into the number and nature of my wounds.

“You must never do such a thing again, Nellie,” she said, in the tone we knew meant obedience. “You might do yourself serious harm. What could you possibly want such horrid things for?”

Ah! but that was my secret — mine and Dr. Warren's, at least.

This interdict upon my industry gave a severe check to my hopes. I wandered disconsolately about the garden that afternoon, wondering what possible plan I could hit on next. Here I came across a boy, the son of one of the working-men on the place. His name was Humphrey Davy, and he had been an idiot from his birth. Seeing him, a happy thought struck me. I approached the subject carefully.

“Humphrey,” I said, “do you like apples?” The boy's vacant face almost looked intelligent, as he grinned in assent. Evidently he understood *that*, at any rate.

“Wait here a minute,” I said, and I ran back to the house, got my bottle of leeches, and another empty bottle; also a couple of rosy-cheeked apples, which looked and smelt as sweet as they tasted.

I held these up before Humphrey's longing eyes. His jaws fell apart as he gazed as though they would never close again until the coveted delicacy was between them.

Then I held the two bottles up before him, and with the careful slowness with which one speaks to very old people, or very young children, I said, pointing to the creek:

“Humphrey, catch more!”

The idiot nodded, but as he always nodded, whether he understood or not, that did not make me sure as to whether he had caught my meaning. I tried again. Putting the empty bottle into one of his unresisting hands, and one of the apples into the other, I said:

“Humphrey, go now?”

“Yeth,” said Humphrey, and immediately sat down and began to eat his apple. I fairly stamped at his stupidity, but waited with what patience I could muster until he had swallowed the last piece, and turned eagerly to look for the other, like a dog who watches his master's hand.

Then Humphrey's face fell, for I put the second apple into my pocket, and again showed him the two bottles, and pointed to the creek.

A sudden gleam of intelligence came over his face for a moment, and he turned and went down the garden path which led to the creek. I stood and watched what he would do. He passed through the little gate at the foot of the garden, but instead of going straight on, he turned aside and went up to where a very old blind cart-horse was standing sleepily in a corner of the small field.

“Does he think I want him to catch leeches on horseback?” I thought, as I saw him lead the quiet old beast down to the water, and I followed to

see what he would do.

Idiot, or no idiot, Humphrey Davy was the wiser of us two then. With admiration and amusement combined, I saw him place the docile old horse in the water, and stretch himself along the bank.

Stamp went one of old Beppo's feet, and Humphrey's hand went out quickly. Stamp went another foot, and again the action was repeated.

I sat down on the bank and laughed with delight. My riddle was solved now. Humphrey and Beppo would do it for me. I rather wondered that I had not thought of such a simple plan myself, remembering, as I now did, how often, when riding across the creek, and pausing midway to let my horse drink, I had leaned from my saddle to wonder at the number of leeches swimming to the horse's feet as soon as they entered the water.

By and by Beppo got tired of standing still in the water, and walked out; and Humphrey brought me the bottle with about a dozen more leeches in it; and received his reward, the second apple.

The connection in his mind was established from that day onwards. I had but to show him a bottle and an apple, and off he would start to the creek, and bring me home more or less, as his luck might be good or bad, of the slimy reptiles upon which I set such store.

Each time Doctor Warren came to see us I had some ready for him, and each visit he paid increased the contents of my money-box.

Shall I ever forget the huge satisfaction I felt on the day when my tale of shillings was complete, and opening my money-box, I poured out my wealth and counted it; there it was, fifteen nice bright shillings. With great impatience I waited for the return of the pedlar. He came at last, just as autumn was verging into winter, and *Martin Chuzzlewit* was mine! I had to keep my secret for yet another week until mother's birthday came, and my vision was realized. All except the neat speech I had conned over so often. I forgot it all at the critical moment, and could only say as I held out the book:

“Here, mother, it's for you.”

How many a winter's evening did *Martin Chuzzlewit* wile away for us! my father reading it aloud, while we young ones worked or were idle as our inclinations prompted us, but it was more often the latter than the former, I am afraid. And mother brought out the big basket of mending which never got any emptier. How we laughed over Mark Tapley in America, and writhed in execration of Jonas! I never take up that book without the picture of that fireside in Australia rising before my eyes. Nor do I ever look on the well-known binding without a vivid remembrance of poor Humphrey Davy — dead long ago — old Beppo, and a bottle of leeches.

Chapter V. I Buy Two 'Possums.

AMONG the greatest of our childhood's pleasures a visit to Boree, the station home of a large family of cousins, always stood first and foremost. The attractions of Boree were many and varied, and one of the greatest was a native blackfellows' camp just across the creek on which the station homestead stood. There were not many natives about our own home. Occasionally a wandering tribe would pass by, and camp for a few nights on the opposite ridges; but these Boree blacks belonged to the place, or rather, as they put it, the place belonged to them, and the people who lived on it.

They looked upon my uncle as a sort of head of their family, the funny little black picaninnies called him "Daddy," having heard his own children use that endearing appellation, and the grown-up members of the tribe followed their example. They were cunning hunters these dark-skinned sons and daughters of the bush. And knowing this, an ambition to profit by their cleverness seized me, and I watched my opportunity. I was very anxious to possess a pair of young 'possums, so meeting with one of the blackfellows one day I spoke as follows: —

"Jackie, dear, do you think you could get me a pair of young *little* 'possums? I want a couple to take home with me, and I expect I'll be going next week; you will, won't you, Jackie?"

"If Jackie climb a gum-tree for Missie, Missie get Jackie some baccy; eh?" with a long-drawn intonation, and a gleam of white teeth. "Baccy welly budgerie for Jackie."

"Yes, I will, Jackie, you get me the 'possums, and I'll get you the baccy. I'll ask Mr. McRae for a stick out of the store, and I know he'll give it me."

"Baal gammon, Missie?"

"Baal gammon, Jackie!"

And so the bargain was struck, and eager to perform my share of it without loss of time, off I ran to where the good-natured Scotch manager was smoking his after-dinner pipe, and with some diffidence made my request.

"Want a stick of baccy for that dirty black Jackie? Nonsense, Miss Nell! I can't do it, it encourages the whole thieving tribe to hang about the place. I wish your uncle would give me my own way about them, I would pull all their rubbishy gunyahs down and send them about their

business. I can't bear to see the lazy black creatures loafing about in their tattered blankets; it's neither decent nor Christian. No, I am not going to give you tobacco for them, and that's all about it, Miss Nell."

For answer I went closer up to his broad shoulder and slipped my hand round his neck. He softened at once.

"What for do you want 'possums, little lassie?" he said; "they're not nice pets at all, sleeping all day and awake all night. Wait some day till I've time and I'll see if I can't catch a nice little kangaroo-rat for you; you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes indeed, I would, but I want the 'possums too; I want to take them home with me, and I think I'll be going soon; do give me just one little stick, do, dear Mr. McRae, and I won't ever bother you again."

"Not until next time, I suppose," he answered smiling, but in his smile I read compliance. The coveted stick of tobacco was soon in my possession.

I did not know exactly what to do with it; it smelt so strongly, that I dared not keep it in my pocket, nor for the same good reason could I introduce it into the bed-room, which I occupied conjointly with one of my cousins, and a governess, stern of aspect, and vinegary of temper, with a nose trained to detect unlawful odours. Many a luscious apple or surreptitious stick of liquorice had that keen organ scented out, with the certain result of speedy confiscation, and I dared not trust my precious stick of tobacco in the same room with it.

After some deliberation I decided to bury it, and stealing away to a quiet corner of the garden I dug a hole a few inches deep, and carefully wrapping my precious possession in a piece of paper, I covered it up, and placed a stick to mark the spot.

Just as my labours were concluded, and with a mind at ease I was about to leave the place, a hoarse and unearthly chuckle made me start and turn round, and I became aware of the bright black eye of a villainous-looking old magpie following my proceedings with the greatest interest. That eye said so plainly, "I'll soon see what is in *that* hole," that I hastily dug up my treasure. This annoyed the magpie, which made a vicious dig at my ankles with its sharp beak as I darted past it and repaired to the barn.

Here I deposited the parcel in a corner under the thatch, this time without any witness of my proceedings. In the barn was a native bear belonging to one of my cousins, which was coiled up on one of the rafters, and according to the nature of such animals, was sound asleep. I gave a contemptuous poke at his black hairy body as I passed him, a mark of attention to which the creature paid no attention whatever, and returned to the outer world satisfied.

Several days passed. I paid surreptitious visits to the blackfellows' camp across the creek, and to the barn.

We were forbidden to haunt the former place, the society of lubras and

picaninnies not being considered edifying by the authorities; but who could consider orders when a pair of young 'possums was in the question, and what were gum-trees for, if not to dodge behind, or fleet legs, unless to elude "grown-ups." And so each day I slipped across to the forbidden ground, only to see Jackie's lazy length stretched by his camp-fire, or curled up in his leafy gunyah.

I began to despair, but at length patience meets with its wonted reward.

"Jackie gone a-hunting to-day," was the answer I got on inquiring for him; and that very same evening I saw Jackie enter the kitchen yard with something small rolled up in a corner of his blanket, and an air of having come on business.

"You have got them, Jackie? Do show them to me! Oh!" with a long-drawn cry of wonder as Jackie holds out in his sooty paws, two tiny objects smaller than the smallest kitten, with not a vestige of fur on their pinky-white bodies.

"Oh, the funny little things! Oh, Jackie, they're much too young! they'll die the very first night! Oh, can't you give them back to their mother, and get me an older pair?"

"Jackie bring along a mudder too," answered the blackfellow with a grin which showed all his white teeth, and he held up to my sight a 'possum skin with its rich soft fur. "Missie makee bag; hang um at the fire; keepee little chaps warm."

"Oh, you cruel Jackie! is that the poor mother? Why did you kill her?"

"Jackie want some dinner" — a laconic but sufficient explanation, which was accompanied by another grin.

"And Jackie wants tobacco too, doesn't he?" I answered as we repaired to the barn, where Jackie received the coveted reward.

Chapter VI. Jock and Jin.

WHAT were you talking to that Jackie about, Nell?" asked my uncle, meeting me a short time after. "Don't you know that I don't allow any of you children to talk to the blackfellows?"

If there was one person in the world of whom I stood in awe at that period of my existence, it was my big, burly, passionate uncle; and was it not hard luck that he should have been the one to witness my interview with Jackie? I looked down guiltily, and mumbled out something, of which "possums" was the only coherent word.

"Possums!" echoed my uncle; "what on earth do you want with 'possums? I never came across such a child in my life, never. You make the place into a perfect menagerie. Can't you be content with the native bear and the magpie?"

"The magpie always bites my legs, uncle," I said, plucking up courage, "and the bear is such a stupid, sleepy thing. These 'possums are my own; I want to take them home with me when I go."

"H'm!" grunted my uncle, turning away; "I wish your father and mother joy of them. I'd as soon have a skunk about the house myself. Keep them out of my sight, that's all."

They were a good deal of trouble. I really think I lost more rest over them the first few nights than did ever a young mother over her first-born baby. I coaxed the cook into allowing me to hang them in their mother's skin close to the kitchen fire, and her kind heart also prompted her to supply me with minute quantities of warm milk, which I administered through a quill. My labours were rewarded. Soon a pale-brown tinge came over the little pink bodies; their tails and eyes did not look so preposterously out of proportion. My pets were in a fair way to be successfully reared.

By and by they began to get playful, and to exhibit decided individuality. We christened them "Jock" and "Jin." Jock was the bigger and braver, with very large dark eyes; Jin was of a more retiring disposition, and owned the longest nose. I loved them both dearly, and many a game of romps did my cousins and I have with them in the school-room at nights when, the governess having joined the drawing-room circle, we were supposed to be learning our lessons.

It was so pretty to see them run out on an extended arm, and then, leaping to the nearest object, hang on with claws and tail, or chase one

another wildly up and down the curtains and along the poles.

I grew bold with the boldness born of undetected crime, and one never-to-be-forgotten evening I brought my 'possumskin bag to the drawing-room while the elders were at dinner, and hung it near the fire, meaning to bear it safely away long before they returned; but the charms of a fairy story so engrossed me that, horrible to relate, I forgot all about everything but my book, and was sitting absorbed in it when the elders re-entered the room.

My uncle seated himself in his accustomed chair, spread a silk handkerchief over his bald head, and went off into his after-dinner doze. He was a tall, stout, old man, with a kindly, handsome face, and just a fringe of white hair round his head. He was my favourite uncle in spite of the awe which he inspired, and which others shared with me, for his temper was quick and violent, and once to see it roused was not to desire to see it again. We had all been taught to respect his evening slumbers. No noise or movement among the children was allowed in that well-regulated drawing-room, and I must remain in my seat till bed-time came, when perhaps I might be able unperceived to abstract my precious bag when I went up to my uncle for my good-night kiss.

I felt cold all over with dread as I watched him sleep, and thought what would happen did he chance to open his eyes and cast them on the little furry thing hanging so quietly from the nail, from which a small ornamental hearth-broom was wont to depend.

The evening passed quietly on. My uncle's deep and regular breathings testified to the soundness of his slumbers. I made up my mind that Jock and Jin thought the bright light of the lamp on the table was the sun, and would not venture on their usual evening gambols, so, lulled into false security, I returned to my book.

After a time, casting my eyes in their direction as I turned over a page, I sat transfixed with horror and dread, and literally unable to speak or move to avert the calamity I saw impending.

Jock, naughty Jock, always the bolder and more enterprising of the two, had crept out upon the edge of the bag, and sat there for half a second, poisoning himself, his flexible tail waving, and his claws outstretched in the act of springing on the nearest object.

And that object was my uncle's unconscious head, from which the bandana handkerchief had slipped, and which rested quietly on a cushion, well within springing distance.

It was all over before I could catch my breath and collect my faculties enough to rush to the rescue. A tiny dark body was launched through the air and descended plump on that smooth and shining surface. A roar of anguish from the victim broke the stillness of the hour, and a large man in a larger passion was stamping furiously round, not yet fully alive to what had occurred, but only conscious of the fact that the blood was

trickling fast down his face from his scarified bald crown. At least four deep long scratches testified to the sharpness of Jock's infant claws.

With one spring I tore down the bag from its nail, caught up the guilty 'possum from the chair, and fled for dear life, nor halted until I had ensconced myself, my pet in my arms, under my own bed in the darkest corner of our bed-room. There I lay quaking till long past our usual hour for retiring.

I heard my cousins come in, and listened with a beating heart to their comments on the night's catastrophe.

"Poor old governor!" said one, "I don't think I ever saw him in such a rage before; not even when he burnt his fingers trying to fry fish the day we were camping out on the Macquarie and he upset the pan, and we had nothing for dinner."

"This was enough to make him angry," rejoined her sister. "My goodness, I'd not be in Nell's shoes to-morrow morning for twopence; would you? It took all the sticking-plaster in mother's work-box to cover the scratches. I wonder where the child has got to!"

"Run away home, I shouldn't wonder," said the other with a laugh.

I waited till the light was out and silence had fallen upon the room, and then, creeping quietly out from under my bed, endeavoured noiselessly to bestow my trembling body in its usual place of rest; but my bed was old and shabby, and creaked beneath my weight.

"Is that you, Nell?" said a voice. "You've put your foot into it nicely, haven't you? If I were you I should go out for a walk to-morrow morning early, and forget to come back for breakfast; just you keep out of the governor's sight for a few hours till he has had time to cool down a bit."

I made no reply, but in my heart determined to follow my cousin's advice.

Chapter VII. In the Hollow Gum-Tree.

THE first dim light of early dawn accordingly beheld my retreating figure slip quietly out of the house, and without breakfast I betook me to a hiding-place I knew of. It was a large old hollow tree that stood on the bank of the creek almost within hearing distance of the house.

They will never look for me here, I thought, as, with my 'possums tightly hugged in my arms, I climbed up into its dark and damp interior. And here we stayed hour after hour, my 'possums and I, till, as the day waxed and waned, I became so ravenous with hunger that I could have almost found it in my heart to eat Jock and Jin themselves.

I heard my name called at intervals. I also heard the bells for the different meals very loudly and invitingly, and could almost imagine that I smelt the savoury kitchen odours, till at last the limits of my endurance were reached. Human nature could stand out no longer. I succumbed, and leaving Jock and Jin to keep one another company in the hollow tree, I plucked up my courage, and putting on as good a face as I could I went back to the house to meet my fate.

My fate in the shape of Uncle Bob himself met me as I turned the first corner, and at sight of him all strength deserted my limbs. My heart went down, lower and lower, till it must have reached my boots, and I stood trembling with terror, before the justly irate authority.

He did not speak, but stood and regarded me steadily. From head to foot he looked me up and down, and my very fingers tingled as he surveyed me. If he would only say something, I thought desperately, it would not be so bad, or if I could only pluck up courage to rush past him.

All my hunger was gone, and I thought with longing of the safe hiding-place I had left. The situation was growing desperate when at last my uncle spoke.

“Where have you been all day, Nell?”

His voice was grimmer than grim, and sounded ominous to my affrighted ears. Mine was hard to find, and came forth at last so small and weak that I hardly recognized it for my own.

“Up in a gum-tree, uncle,” I murmured.

“What have you done with those abominable brutes?”

“Left them up a gum-tree, uncle,” in a humbler squeak than ever.

“H'm!”

He paused, and again looked at me; and as his eyes travelled over my

person I became aware of the exceeding blackness of my dress and pinafore. My hollow tree had been hollowed out by fire, and I looked as if I had been passed through an exceedingly smutty chimney.

He spoke again:

“And now, tell me what you have to say for yourself.”

“I'm so sorry, uncle, — ” but here tears, shame, and terror combined to choke my utterance. I could say no more, but stood there, black and sobbing, a sufficiently pitiable object to stir the compassion of the hardest heart.

And my uncle's heart was not hard; it was a very kind one, though his temper was hasty and violent. He never bore malice, and the injury was a day old already.

“There, run away and wash yourself, and get something to eat,” he said, with a sound suspiciously like laughter, and I needed no second bidding.

Like an arrow from a bow I sped past him, and gained my room, where I plunged my hot face into a basin of water.

“It's about time you washed it,” remarked my eldest cousin, who, with novel in hand, was reclining in an arm-chair, and whom I had not seen.

“Where you've been all day, Nell, you know best yourself, but you look more like Jackie's sister than anything else.”

To this unfeeling speech I made no reply, but proceeded as well as I could to rid myself of the marks of my sojourn in the gum-tree. But as I changed my dress and smoothed my hair, I pondered over my shame till I grew hotter and hotter, and felt as if I never should be able to face the assembled family again, or endure the jokes of the boys.

But childhood is elastic, and a good meal from the friendly hands of the cook went far to restore my courage.

Following her advice, urgently tendered, for the good soul hated to see the “children in trouble,” I repaired afterwards to my uncle's room, though my knees knocked together as I tapped gently at the door, and his gruff “Come in” nearly made me fly in the opposite direction.

However I went in and received his forgiveness, with which I was able to run the gauntlet of “chaff” with which my appearance at tea was greeted. Before the evening was over I could look without a shudder on Jock's handiwork as it stood out in deep red seams on my uncle's head.

My spirits rose again, and that very night I went to the old tree, and bringing out my disgraced and hungry pets, solaced them with an extra good supper before hiding them in an empty box which stood in the corner of a disused outhouse.

Here they lived in deep retirement, till, my visit being ended, I returned home and took them with me.

That was only the first of many a scrape which my 'possums led me into, for to enjoy their society it had to be at prohibited hours. In the

daytime they were as stupid as native bears, but at night there could not be merrier playmates, and many a warm moonlight night has seen me climbing about the acacia and wattle trees that surrounded my home, playing hide-and-seek with Jock and Jin, when my too confiding parents thought me safe in bed.

But time passed on. My 'possums attained their full size, and I, also striving after womanhood, was despatched to school in Sydney for the benefit of my mind and manners.

Sadly, and with many a foreboding, did I bid good-bye to my pets, and the first question I asked on my return home after an absence of some months was:

“Where are Jock and Jin?”

“Can't you find them?” was my brother's answer, while a sardonic grin overspread his features. “Well, now I come to think of it, I haven't seen them myself lately. — Not since the day Jin was found coiled up in mother's largest jar that she had filled with peach jam last season. It was beautifully clean too, licked all over. I don't think I have seen Jin since.”

“And Jock?” I cried breathlessly.

“Well, Jock got into the store too, and he must have been trying to sample the beef, for he was found at the bottom of the pickle barrel. I expect he found the brine too strong.”

“And you did not try to save them for me, you cruel boy,” I cried, tearfully, “when you knew how I loved them, and how they loved me.”

“They loved jam and pickled-beef better,” was the callous answer; and he added sententiously, “retribution always overtakes thieves, you know. I did bury them for you, but I'm afraid you won't be able to weep over their graves, for I've forgotten the place.”

I never had any more 'possums.

Chapter VIII. Rarefying the Pony.

I THINK you will not have read so far as this, without discovering for yourselves what I am about to acknowledge. In my home circle and among my nearest relations I enjoyed an unenviable and very-hard-to-be-got-rid-of notoriety. I was the family pickle, the universal scapegrace. No matter what went wrong, Nellie was sure to be at the bottom of it. I think I must have been born under an unlucky star, for with the best possible intentions everything I undertook went askew in some curious manner, and though I was most frequently my own victim yet every now and then others would suffer from my mistakes, and always found it hard to forgive me.

My brother was some years younger than myself, and naturally greatly under my control in all our amusements. Wherever I led, Ted trotted obediently after, and did my behests as far as he could, no matter at what risk.

Ted went to school in Sydney, but always came home for the long summer vacation. He was a capital rider at a very early age; and indeed, for that matter so was I. Many a scamper he and I used to have over the hills that bounded the valley where our home lay.

Now it happened one day that a man came round lecturing upon horse-taming by a process he called "Rarefying;" and having watched him successfully experiment upon a young unbroken colt belonging to my father, Ted and I burned with ambition to go and do likewise ourselves.

Not long before, a friend had sent us a gift of a new pony, but father had decreed that, being only two years old, it should not be broken in for our use until it was a little older.

The day following suited us admirably, for father had ridden into Carcoar on business, and mother was going to cook the dinner, the cook having had a temporary lapse, in connection with whisky.

The coast therefore seemed clear, and to work we went. Looking back now I recall with astonishment all that we two children contrived to do to that pony.

First, we inveigled it into the stockyard — an inclosure with a high fence all round it, and procuring a long rope we tied one end securely round a post. Then we wound up and entangled that unfortunate pony with the other end, until, after many futile struggles, which only drew its bonds the closer, it succumbed to circumstances, and the rope round its

legs, and fell down.

Then, closely imitating the horse-tamer as far as we remembered, we blindfolded the unfortunate little animal, and proceeded to tame the pony as we had seen the man do. We breathed into its nostrils and gently rubbed its ears, and then going farther we rubbed and stroked its back and legs, whispered to it, sat upon its prostrate body, and finally succeeded in slipping a halter on its head.

The creature lay as still as a dead thing, its distended nostrils and heaving flank being the only signs of life. We considered the deed accomplished, and wondered, while we rejoiced, at our success.

“You see, Ted,” I said condescendingly, “a horse is an inferior animal, consequently its will is weaker than ours, and now it knows this, and will always obey us.”

“Ye-es,” said Ted, doubtfully.

“You see,” I went on, “we will let it get up now, and it will let us put on a saddle, and we will take turns of riding it; you see how quiet it is,” seating myself, as I spoke, upon its hind quarters, and smoothing and stroking the shining flank.

“Good little horse, now we will loosen your legs.”

We did so, and after a little pulling at its head, the pony rose and stood with drooping head, while we carefully adjusted the small pad that served us both as a saddle.

“Me first,” said Ted, and I helped him on the pony's back. The animal still stood perfectly quiet, and in triumph I led it out of the stock-yard, and down towards the house, that others might see and wonder at our prowess.

“He is quite quiet, Nell,” said my brother, digging his little heels into the pony's side. “Take the bandage off his eyes now. I want a canter.”

Off came the bandage.

The pony stood still for half a second, looking stupidly about it.

“Gee up!” said Ted, with another kick.

What came next, happened more quickly than words can describe. There was a sudden mad rush, a vision of heels, a little figure flying through the air, while the Rarefied pony had regained its dormant will, and was careering down the paddock kicking wildly at the pad on its back.

I rushed to my brother, who lay motionless, and screamed loudly for help.

A man came running and lifted him up. He had fallen among some tall nettles, which may have broken his fall, but made amends for it by stinging him plentifully. He was not insensible and soon revived, but his mouth bled dreadfully, and we found that his teeth had gone nearly through his tongue, his cheek also was cut severely, and he was very much bruised about the body.

We put him to bed, poor frightened mother being too much alarmed for any questioning, but I heard my father's voice shortly after, and the tread of his horse's feet at the hall door. I then deemed it wisest to retire for a while, but I heard his question to the man who took his horse, "What is the matter?"

"Miss Nell has been Rarefying the new pony, sir, and put Master Ted on its back, and he went to market in the nettle bed, and it's nearly killed him."

I only heard one more remark from my father that night, and it did not take long in saying.

"Bread and water in your own room for a week," was its sum and substance, and being faithfully carried out, I had much leisure for reflecting upon the perversity of ponies in general, and the reason why our pony had refused to be Rarefied.

Chapter IX. A Faithful Little Blackfellow.

WE were sitting busily at work one morning, my mother, Mary, and I, when the door opened, and my father appeared on the threshold holding by the hand a tiny black boy.

He was about three years old, and small for his age.

Such a poor little mite he looked, as he stood shivering just inside the door, for, although the sun was shining brightly, there had been a slight frost that morning, and it had left a coldness in the air.

A misshapen little creature he appeared on this his first introduction to us, with his large woolly head, thin body, and shrunken shanks. His sole covering was a small, very small, rug of 'possum skins.

"There you are," said my father.

"What on earth is that, and why have you brought it here?" demanded my mother.

"It is a small investment I have just made," was the answer, "small in every sense of the word, for he only cost one and ninepence and a nobbler. I passed a tribe of Murrumbidgee blacks out on the Iron Bark Range this morning, and this little fellow took my fancy, so I bought him."

"*Bought him!*" echoed my mother, with a horrified intonation, "from his mother?"

"No, I think the aged crone who parted with him for the small consideration I mentioned, dates more than one generation before his grandmother, perhaps, but I asked no questions."

"And what are we to do with him, now you have got him?"

"In the words of the immortal Mr. Dick, I should say, 'Wash him.'"

"It is all very well for you to laugh, John," said my mother, with some irritation, in her usually placid manner, "but what am I to do with a child like that? He will be more trouble and responsibility than any Christian baby, and I shall have all the worry of him."

"We will make a Christian child of him," answered father, a little gravely. "Indeed, Mary, if you had seen him this morning, as I did, toiling along behind the other blackfellows, on those poor thin little legs — just look at them — I am sure you would have pitied him. Why, the creature has never in his life known what it is to have enough to eat."

"There, say no more," interrupted mother, her kind heart touched. "We will do our best for the child, and the first thing to do is to give him

something to eat, then we must try and clothe him decently.”

Mary and I looked at each other eagerly, each reading in the other's eyes the wish her own expressed. We had not yet passed the age for dolls; here was a new, live doll, going a begging.

“Mother, let us take care of him; let us make his clothes, and feed, and wash him;” “and teach him when he is old enough,” added Mary, looking forward into futurity.

“Very well, girls; you may try. Only, remember, you must treat him with more consideration than you usually give to your pets. It mustn't be a feast one day, and a famine the next; if you undertake him you must do it properly.”

We promised, and straightway carried off our new toy to the kitchen, and regaled him with bread and butter — which he gnawed like a starved dog — and a large cup of milk.

He was then introduced to a large washing-tub filled with warm water. This he objected to strongly, but we persisted, and gave him a thorough scrubbing. The poor little creature turned more gray and shivery under the process, cleanliness was evidently cold comfort to him.

“I think he would wash white if we kept on long enough,” said Mary; but mother came to the rescue, attracted by the howls of the victim.

“*Trop de zèle*, my children,” she remarked, noticing the chattering teeth of the martyr to our love of cleanliness. “Remember he has probably never been washed before in his life. Now, dress him; here are some old clothes of Ted's, which won't be much too large.”

That was more easily said than done. No skin-clad Celt of the middle ages ever displayed more horror and aversion at the sight of a pair of breeches, than did this small blackfellow, and force had to be used before we could array him in an old pair of my brother's.

He was too little for boy's clothes, we agreed, and certainly he presented a most hideous appearance, for the breeches seemed to absorb him altogether, there was no room to put anything else on.

“We will make him some little frocks.”

Then we christened him. We named him Tommy, which seemed to suit; and then we cast about where to put him to sleep. No one wanted him, that was patent; but I did think it hard when our Irish cook, who, I am sure, need not have been fastidious about the poor baby, objected on the score of cleanliness to having “a black thing like that in my bedroom.”

Mary and I would have taken him, but here mother's prejudices stepped in.

Matters were compromised at last and a small bed was made up in a room adjoining the kitchen; but Tommy settled it for himself, for on going the last thing at night to see our new pet, the carefully-arranged little bed was vacant, and from underneath the table gleamed a pair of

bright black eyes. He had crawled into a small box kept by the cook for chips and bits of firewood; and here he had coiled himself up as round as a ball, with his little rug of 'possum skin wrapped round him. There he always slept (until he outgrew the box) in company with a small terrier dog, whose bones he would share with the utmost friendliness.

There was no denying it — Tommy, as a small boy, was undeniably naughty. He seemed to have no moral sense at all. Quick he was, and intelligent to a degree, but all his intelligence seemed to be useful only to evade justice. Nothing was safe from Tommy, whose black eyes and quick fingers were everywhere.

Mary and I exerted all our ingenuity in the fashioning of small garments, the bright colours of which would please Tommy at first, and he would allow himself to be dressed up. But for clothes *as* clothes, he had a rooted aversion, so that in half an hour afterwards the clothes would be hidden, and Tommy would be capering about the yard or garden with his bit of 'possum skin tied round him again. His body soon grew round and shiny, and he really was a very handsome little picaninny.

Once he disappeared for nearly a week. We searched in vain, but could not find him, though the daily disappearance of food from the kitchen pantry was conclusive evidence that he had not run away. At last, one morning early he was caught stealing out of the back-door with a loaf of bread.

“Where have you been, Tommy?” he was asked.

“All along a pig-ty!” he lisped.

And so he had. A motherly old sow had made him welcome, perhaps not noticing any great difference between him and her own offspring. And in the dark recesses of a covered pig-sty Tommy had been comfortably hidden away, whilst Mary and I had searched every likely and unlikely place for a mile round.

Time passed on, and Tommy grew a big boy. Tommy Tellalie was his name in full — a name given him first by reason of his frequent lapses from the truth, but which lost its special meaning after, and became as respectable a surname as many another of equally doubtful origin.

When my brother Ted came home from school, Tommy straightway fell down and worshipped him. Together they caught and harnessed the goats; together on moonlight nights they stalked the 'possums, or set snares for the native cats; and together they rode day after day through the bush after cattle, kangaroo, and what not.

Mary and I in vain lamented for our pupil, who was just beginning to learn to read. His allegiance was wholly given to Ted; and we, his first benefactresses, who had washed him against his will, and made gay little frocks of ticking and scarlet braid to set off his black baby charms, were quite forgotten.

His love for Ted was pretty to see; his tears and despair when, the holidays over, my brother returned to school, were only equalled by the rapturous, dog-like joy with which he would greet his return.

He was about twelve years old, and Ted fifteen, when one day the latter returned home unexpectedly — sent home, in fact, in the middle of the term. Measles had broken out in the Sydney Academy, and the boys had been dispersed.

My brother, however, brought the seeds of the disease home with him, and in a few days was lying in bed delirious.

His attack was a very bad one; “suppressed measles” the doctor called it; and we children were all forbidden to go near him.

Tommy hung all day about the window of his room, lifting a pathetic face of entreaty whenever mother appeared at it.

“Go away, Tommy,” she would say; “Master Ted too sick to play now.”

“Tommy *want* to go along of Massa Ted,” he would answer.

More than once, coming out of the sick room late at night, mother stumbled over the coiled-up body of poor Tommy, who had lain down at the door to listen wakefully to the sounds within.

Ted got better, but he was still kept apart in his room, for now, said the doctor, the infection was worse than when the illness was at its height.

“Master Ted thinks the wild raspberries must be ripe on the ‘Sugarloaf,’ ” said mother one morning to Tommy, “and he has a great fancy for some. Go and see if you can find any, there's a good boy.”

Tommy needed no second telling, he was off like an arrow shot from a bow.

Poor mother, weary with nursing and anxiety, fell asleep in her chair that afternoon, beside Ted's bed. Mary and I were busy in the dining-room, so no one saw Tommy's return. No one heard the light foot along the passage, or saw the door of Ted's room open and close gently, but by and by the sound of low voices woke mother from her nap.

There was Tommy, sitting on the edge of Ted's bed, feeding the sick boy with the purple berries, whose sweet, yet acid flavour, was peculiarly grateful to the fevered palate.

“How *could* you let him come in, Ted?” said mother reproachfully; “he is sure to catch it.”

“I don't know when he came in, mother,” said Ted; “I was asleep, and just opened my eyes, and there he was, sitting by me, and then I thought the mischief was done, and he might as well stop.”

Mother shook her head apprehensively, and with but too good cause.

Two days later, the poor little black boy was raving in a worse delirium than Ted's had ever been.

“These natives take English diseases so badly, that not one in fifty gets over them,” was the doctor's verdict.

At the end of a week little Tommy was dead, and Mary and I lamented sorely for our pupil and pet.

He lies under a shady willow in the corner of the old garden at home, and as long as we remained there we kept the small grave bright with flowers.

I wonder if any one tends it now?

Every childhood is lived in a family context (whatever form that family takes) and our family was struggling to survive for most of my early years. As well as writing a story of my childhood, I was also charting the beginning and the end of my parents' marriage. The end came as I turned 15 and walked out the gate of the local school for the last time. Once the divorce was finalised, Mum did not speak Dad's name again. For her, that past remained hurtful and harsh and she rarely talked about it except in negative terms. Australian Childhood Foundation, Richmond, Victoria, Australia. 17,753 likes · 307 talking about this. An independent non-profit organisation committed... We thought that a six day program with 25 international speakers, inspiring masterclasses, delicious food and beverages, as well as networking drinks wasn't enough...so we've decided to go one more! If you register for the International Childhood Trauma Conference 2020 before Friday 6 December 2019, you will go into the draw to WIN one of 3 x DOUBLE PASSES. At the Australian Childhood Foundation, children are at the heart of everything we do. We acknowledge the importance of children's rights and freedoms and their right to speak and be heard. All children have the right to be loved, cared for and feel safe. Your kindness and your investment in these children is an investment in our community's future.