

# THE BOY WITH BLUE TROUSERS

Carol Jones



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*For Vincent*



The handcart was almost too heavy to lift. It bumped and wobbled around mullock heaps, skirting gaping holes, threatening to spill its cargo onto the pockmarked earth. Steadying the cart, the youth braced for the descent into the gully. In the distance, campfires flickered like fireflies amongst the tents, whilst ahead the bush beckoned.

Dark. Silent. Secluded enough to hide a secret forever.

The gully's banks were ridged with erosion where an army of miners had been at work, shovelling and sluicing with water dragged up from the creek. Makeshift plank bridges spanned the depleted creek as it trickled through the diggings. The gully wasn't deep but its banks were steep. The handcart was heavy and its load uneven. One false step and the cart would escape, hurtling over uneven ground to fling its contents into the water.

The youth paused, searching the night sky. But the skies of this southern land had never offered any heavenly guidance. They were alien, just as the land was alien. Wild and brown, populated by outlandish creatures and unfathomable men. Dry and dusty, with grey-leaved trees that shed bark in long, curling ribbons. A land that resisted order and thrived on chaos.

Although his arms were hard from the backbreaking work of mining gold, he started down the slope uneasily, taking one stuttering step then another, his blue cotton trousers hemmed with dust. But the cart dragged him forward, intent on yanking him from his feet. Gathering speed, it rumbled over a ridge of earth before becoming briefly airborne so that its contents shifted, sliding sideways, threatening to topple cart and youth in an untidy heap. Straining every muscle, he twisted his forearms, battling the dead weight of cart and cargo. Then, in a semi-crouch, he used the power of his legs to halt the runaway cart.

Breathing hard, he rested halfway down the gully's bank, the cart stable for the moment. But its contents had moved so that one blue-clad leg dangled over the edge, the foot bare and covered with scratches. He grabbed the leg by the ankle to place it back where it belonged, finding the flesh still warm, its heat sending a jolt through his arm.

Cradling the leg, he felt a dense mass fill his throat, as if everything that had happened in the past year was rising up to choke him. His gaze lingered on the figure curled up in the cart – arms crossed haphazardly over chest, a single braid draped about the neck – and he felt hot tears well. How had it come to this? How had they found themselves so far from the ordered groves and rice paddies of the mighty Pearl River? Why had the gods of the Celestial Kingdom abandoned them? And how had they come to hate each other so?

They had been friends of a sort once.

## Pearl River Delta, China, 1856

Already that day Little Cat had picked three baskets of mulberry leaves and reeled three *taels* of silk. One weary arm cranked the reel, while the other managed the complex task of transforming simmering cocoons into a single continuous thread. Yet no matter how nimble her fingers, or how sharp her eyes, her hand still grew raw plucking spent cocoons from boiling water, while her eyes strained from teasing out the gossamer fibres. Silkworms were ugly, insatiable beasts. Their silk was a hefty burden for a girl of seventeen. And she had done more than enough for one day.

That decision made, she reeled the last silk from the cocoons, removed the pot from the stove and doused the coals. She set aside the basket of cocoon husks to feed the fish and stood stretching tired limbs. Outside in the small courtyard, sunlight leaked through clouds, turning

the air warm and sticky. She was lucky that the worn, gummed silk of her tunic did not cling to her body like damp cotton. It was said that river mud and persimmon juice made it waterproof. It also made for an arduous process of mashing, dyeing, smearing and drying so that the outer side of the fabric was glazed black to repel water while the inner side turned a matt, muddy brown. No wonder Ma hadn't made her a new set in so long.

Second Brother would be finished at the fishponds. Perhaps he was even now down by the riverbank, plunging his feet in the cooling waters as minnows darted about on the sandy bottom. She too was in urgent need of a wade in the river. Her feet were feeling particularly warm from proximity to the charcoal stove, and her forehead was dotted with sweat from the steam. She walked to the edge of the veranda, listening for signs of activity elsewhere in the house. But there was silence from the kitchen and only the low rumble of snores erupting from Grandfather's room. Her mother must have already set out to the mulberry grove for the evening harvest. Her father would be paddling back from market. Elder Brother would be tending the newly hatched worms in the worm house, chopping leaves and sorting the dead from the living. If she was quick, Little Cat could be down by the riverbank before anyone had a chance to forbid it.

She stepped out from the shelter of the veranda and faced the door to the alley. High brick walls surrounded her on all sides, crowned by a roof of curving clay tiles.

Behind her, three main rooms faced south, protected by the veranda from the summer sun. One room faced west, another east, while a wall the height of two men enclosed the small courtyard to the south. Sometimes, when she had been trapped too long inside, she imagined the baked earthen bricks crumbling to dust and blowing away, or melting to mud from summer's torrential rains. But then her entire family would be left with nowhere to sleep and only she would be safe in the girls' house with her friends. What kind of unfilial daughter was she to think such selfish thoughts?

'Little Cat!'

Her breath caught in her throat as her mother's voice echoed faintly up the alley between rows of houses. She could tell that her mother wasn't happy. She considered answering, like a good daughter would, but then Ma would expect her to trudge out to the mulberry grove and spend the last hours of daylight picking leaves for ungrateful worms. If she were a paragon of filial piety like the sons and daughters in the *shan-shu* stories, she would defy robbers to pick mulberries for her mother. She would wrestle tigers to save her father. But she wasn't. Anyway, she would only be defying worms, not robbers or tigers, so it hardly counted as heroic. She might as well not bother. She thought of all the other things she could be doing – trading punches with her brother down by the river, listening to gossip in the girls' house, even daydreaming under the *nammu* trees – and she began searching for somewhere to hide. Ma had the nose of a

moon bear and could sniff out any hiding place in the house.

‘Little Cat! Where are you?’ Her mother’s voice rose higher as she scolded so that she sounded like a discordant erhu. ‘I told you to come pick leaves when you finished the last basket of cocoons.’

A few moments more and it would be too late; her mother would arrive in the courtyard with her sharp eyes and the trusty bamboo stick she used for scaring away snakes. Yet the house was so small that there was only one place where she could be sure to escape her mother’s notice, one place where Ma had never thought to look. One place no one would be stupid enough to hide.

She scooted over to the well and dangled her legs over the edge. The well wasn’t wide, scarcely one arm’s span in diameter. The last time she had hidden here she was ten years old and her father was chasing her with a rush broom for trying to pee standing up like her brothers.

‘Little Cat!’

Hesitating for only a moment, she leaned forward to grab the rope that was tethered to the ground and slithered inside, supporting her bodyweight with her arms. She had strong arms from picking and reeling and lifting stone training weights with her brother. Still, it was a tighter squeeze than she remembered and all that was keeping her from falling was an ageing length of rope. Perhaps this wasn’t such a clever idea, after all. She almost regretted her decision, for there was scarcely room to brace her toes against the slimy bricks and she could

hardly bend her knees. She inched further down, scraping her shoulders against the rough masonry until her head was an arm's length below the rim. Then wedging her back against one side and her feet in the cracks between bricks on the other, she held on for her life.

‘Where is that body itchy girl?’

Hearing her mother so near, she shimmied down a little further and held her breath. There was always the danger of a stray giggle to give her away, or a loud splash if she put a foot wrong. The well was shallow but she didn't want to find out just how shallow, for she might get a nasty surprise. She listened as her mother upturned baskets and searched under beds, disturbing Grandfather so that he woke with a snort. She clattered from room to room, muttering curses before finally giving up and stomping across the courtyard and back into the alley with a heartfelt, ‘That girl will be the death of me yet.’

Although her toes and legs were screaming at her to release them, Little Cat counted one hundred breaths, not daring to move, for her mother was as tricky as she was nosy. When she felt safe enough to look up, she discovered that the clouds had dispersed, opening a circle of sky above her head, a circle of perfect blue that was suddenly blocked by a dark silhouette. She braced her shoulders for a beating, at the very least a tongue-lashing.

‘One day you're going to fall in and then we won't find you till you stink up the well and spoil the water like a dead rat.’

‘Oh, it’s you, Goh Go. Help me out. My toes are falling off.’ She sighed in relief at the sound of Second Brother’s voice. She wasn’t bothered that he likened her to a dead rat, for he had called her worse many times.

‘How long have you been down there?’ he asked as he stretched out a hand to help her.

‘Long enough.’ She wormed her way upwards, bracing her back against the well wall and pulling herself up the rope. Then she adjusted her feet and repeated the process until she was close enough to grasp one of his hands. Between the two of them they hauled her up and over the lip of the well and onto the dusty ground.

‘It wasn’t so tight last time,’ she said, as she picked herself up from the dirt and dabbed at the dirty marks on her tunic.

‘*Fai mui*. You eat too much rice. Girls should bend like a willow branch.’

‘Maybe inside girls with golden lilies for feet and hands like magnolia petals.’ Not girls like her who laboured in rice paddies or mulberry groves. Their hands were scraped and brown from the sun. Their feet walked many *li* each day. Their toes hadn’t been broken and curled under like hooves so that they swayed when they walked. How she would hate to be one of those inside girls, forbidden to visit temples with her friends or enjoy the visiting opera troupes. Perhaps their golden lilies might fetch their parents a higher bride price but she would rather chop her feet off altogether. At least they would no longer hurt.

Her twin was staring at her tunic with a smug smile and a glint of laughter in his eyes. ‘Ma won’t be happy. You tore your tunic, little sister. Double punishment for you.’ These days it was always ‘double punishment’ never ‘double happiness’ for her. These days she was always in trouble for one thing or another while Goh Go was the dutiful son.

‘Where is Ma?’ She twisted her head over one shoulder in a futile effort to assess the damage to her tunic. Perhaps she could repair the tear before her mother noticed it was there. Then again, she wasn’t very handy with a needle. Her stitches straggled more untidily than pigeon footprints.

‘Probably out harvesting leaves by now. I passed her on the way here.’

It wasn’t fair. Why was she always the guilty one? Why didn’t her mother ask Goh Go to help, since she passed him on her way to the grove? Why did her twin get to rest when he finished shovelling shit to the fish, yet she had more chores to do? He was only thirty minutes her elder but it might as well have been thirty years.

‘You could have helped her,’ she said through gritted teeth. She felt like shouting but that was another thing she was chastised for regularly.

‘Picking mulberry leaves is for women and children,’ laughed her brother. ‘Hauling nets is men’s work.’

Ever since their father began training him to maintain the ponds and repair the dykes, Goh Go had adopted a superior attitude. Once, they had done everything together

– picked leaves, fed worms, planted the winter vegetables – but increasingly he took every opportunity to remind her of their differences. To show off his muscles and his place in the world. To separate himself from her. As if he couldn't wait for her to be sent away. To be sent to live in another village with a stranger. To become part of another family. To become someone else. To un-twin her.

'It doesn't take brains to haul a net. That's why it's called men's work,' she said, and punched him in the stomach before he could deflect her hand.

'Don't start something you can't finish,' he responded with a sidekick to her shin. She grunted with the impact, knowing she would find a bruise there tomorrow. She had grown so much this last year that her trousers barely reached her calves. Ma was sure to notice the bruise and interrogate her. Yet another thing to get her into trouble.

Goh Go removed his bamboo hat and flung it to the ground, baring his shaved scalp to the sun. Then he secured his queue around the top of his head and they faced off, feet hip-width apart and pointing slightly inward, as they had done so many times in the past. Her brother grinned and brought his hands into a fighting stance. He held his left arm close to the body, elbow bent, in the subduing hand position, the other rolling through a series of familiar motions. She joined him so that their arms appeared to twirl around one another as they searched for an opening in the other's defence.

'You've been practising without me,' he said, and she couldn't decide whether he said it with approval or

otherwise, for his narrowed eyes registered nothing but opportunism.

‘I have too much time on my hands and you are always too busy,’ she said with a laugh, and feigned an attack. But that laugh turned to a grunt as he deflected her attack with a winged arm and jabbed her chin hard with his other fist.

‘That hurt!’ she said, rubbing her chin reproachfully.

‘It was meant to. You wonder why I rarely spar with you any more? Someone needs to teach you to stop fighting or no one will marry you. How will our parents find a family willing to take a daughter-in-law who is always fighting and arguing?’

‘I don’t need anyone to marry me.’ Her words were scornful but her feelings were hurt. She wished hurt feelings were as easy to ignore as a scraped knee or a sore chin.

‘Sooner or later you have to grow up, Little Cat. You have to stop behaving like a boy. You have to stop fighting and become a woman.’

But it was her twin who had taught her to fight. It was he who practised on her the arts he learned with the other boys. It was he who bought the martial arts manuals and pored over them with her in the mat shed behind the worm house. It was he who mastered the techniques of kung fu by beating up his sister. And now he wanted her to stop? She didn’t want to stop.

She fought the urge to cry by renewing her attack. Claws out, teeth bared... like the fierce little cat of her nickname.

Most days Young Wu found reason to wander down the alley next to the Mo house. He told himself it happened to be situated along his route to the temple, or that it was the most convenient alley to reach the ferry poled by his cousin, Ferryman Wu. But the truth was that he liked to keep an eye on the Mo twins. This afternoon he was returning home from supervising the silk reeler at his clan's silk filature. As usual, his route followed the path along the river before making a turn through the village. Sandy Bottom Village was a three-surname village of some two hundred families. Situated on a bend in the river, its alleys wound between houses, skirted around banyan trees and traversed irrigation channels. Several of these alleys led to a paved road where the lineage temples and the Wu clan hall were sited. Others came to abrupt dead ends in a ruse designed to hinder any bandit or warlord who chose the village as prey.

It had taken centuries for Wu's ancestors to tame the river at Sandy Bottom Village. They had dug the

fishponds, formed the dykes and planted the raised earth, so that from a distance the floodplain twinkled with water, and the land was lushly green with rank after rank of truncated mulberry trees, all arranged in the four-water-six land system. The entire area was criss-crossed with paths that meandered through field and village, yet Young Wu's journey always took him past one particular house, little different to any other whitewashed, mud-brick, clay-tiled house in the district. Except for one thing, or things. The Mo twins. Mo Wing Yong and his sister Mo Lin Fa, better known as Little Cat.

The many layers of his cloth-soled shoes allowed him to tread softly along the dirt alley, stopping unnoticed at the entrance to the courtyard. Sometimes the only occupants were chickens. Sometimes Grandfather Mo could be seen, squatting on a low stool mending nets or weaving a raincoat from straw. If he was early, he might catch Little Cat and her mother reeling silk thread on the veranda and then he would continue upon his way. But if he happened upon the twins alone, he would enter.

'Young Wu!' shouted Mo Wing Yong, catching sight of him in the doorway. The Wu clan accounted for more than five hundred souls in Sandy Bottom Village, by far the most numerous and prosperous lineage. But despite their multitude, everyone knew Wu Hoi Sing as Young Wu, son of Big Wu, who was headman of the village, and the Wu clan elder.

Unfortunately, Ah Yong had momentarily taken his eyes from his sister's hands to greet him. He watched as

the girl exploited her brother's moment of inattention by pivoting on one leg and swinging the other in a high kick to the side of his head so that he reeled back from the blow. Yet his friend didn't seem unduly upset at the kick. He screwed up his face, before shaking his head to fling away the pain.

'Need some help teaching her a lesson, Ah Yong?' Young Wu laughed, folding his arms over his chest and leaning back against the wall, legs crossed at the ankles. He knew his comment was guaranteed to annoy Little Cat. Since she was so easily annoyed.

As expected, she threw him a withering glance before returning her attention to her brother. He felt a pang of something that may have been disappointment. He had expected more from her, a stinging riposte or, at the very least, an invitation to argue. The twins were his age mates and he had been keeping an eye on them for as long as he could remember. He supposed it had begun when they were ten and the twins stood up for him against Bully Yee – the biggest, meanest boy in the village – who had taken to calling him Maggot Wu. He didn't know why the boy taunted him in this way. Perhaps because it was the lowest thing he could think to call the headman's son. Or perhaps he really thought Young Wu was as loathsome as a maggot. In any case, he had found himself eating dirt with Bully Yee's big foot on his neck until the Mo twins threw themselves at his attacker. Ah Yong pummelled at the bully's back while Little Cat hung from his neck like a troublesome child.

They had all earned a beating that day, or to be precise, two beatings. One from Bully Yee, and another from their parents for fighting. Big Wu did not approve of pointless fighting, especially when his son lost. He did approve of purposeful fighting however, for bandits were a perennial problem in the region. Just last month he and the other elders had conceived a plan to build watchtowers in the village. His father believed the situation was only going to worsen, with the long-haired Taiping rebels warring with the Imperial Army, the foreigners creeping further and further up the Pearl River, and warlords taking advantage of the whole mess to grab for power.

Anyway, after the incident with Bully Yee, he had taken to trailing the Mo boy through the mulberry groves, sitting next to him in the clan hall at their lessons, or joining him under the banyan tree by the river when the monks came to teach them kung fu. He didn't mind admitting that he admired Yong's strength and agility. And there was something strange and exciting about the idea that his friend had shared a womb with his sister. With a girl. He couldn't imagine sharing a womb with one of his sisters. His two elder sisters would suck all the nourishment from the space and his younger sister would drive him away with her wriggling. He often wondered if some of Yong's maleness had rubbed off on Little Cat in the womb, for she didn't behave like other girls he knew. But if that were true, why hadn't some of her femaleness rubbed off on her brother? It was a mystery he was yet to solve.

Mo Wing Yong was his friend. Lin Fa, however, was generally an annoyance. Or so he complained to her brother. A loud, tall girl who popped up where she wasn't wanted, and spoke up when she wasn't invited. She wandered barefoot where she willed. She didn't seem to care that her pigtails were straggly or her trousers muddy, so unlike his own sisters. Not one of them would ever kick her brother in the head.

'It doesn't matter,' Ah Yong said now in response to his offer of help. He didn't glance up as he answered, focusing all his attention upon his sister, resetting his position, one elbow tucked loosely to his side. The girl was a hand shorter than her brother, and her limbs lacked his muscular bulk, but Wu knew from experience that she struck with the speed of a spitting cat.

'Why are you fighting a girl anyway? She should be wrestling laundry down at the riverbank, not fighting her betters.' He tried again to provoke a response.

'Tongue and teeth will fight each other sometimes,' Ah Yong muttered absently as he blocked his sister's next strike with a receiving hand.

'Tongue and teeth should work together,' Young Wu said, quite reasonably he thought. Even his Elder Sister, who was known for being bossy, would not think of upsetting family harmony like Little Cat.

'Tongue and teeth should learn to shut up!' she hissed, finally losing her temper.

'Little girls should learn to mind their manners.'

‘Little boys should keep their opinions and their penises in their pants.’

Luckily, the last comment was too vulgar and disrespectful to be ignored. A curt reprimand was called for at the very least. Instead he found himself pushing off from the wall and kicking away his shoes, a tingling of anticipation twitching his arms.

‘Want to show me how?’ he offered, as he bent over to roll his trousers higher, and then coiled his queue around his neck. He knew that fighting a girl was unbecoming. He knew that she was goading him, but despite knowing these facts he felt a sense of urgency, as if he must teach her a lesson. Must subdue those long slender limbs, tangle those whirling arms, and flip her to the ground with a twisting leg. She was only a girl but he wanted to crush her. To make her—

‘Lin Fa, that is enough!’ Ah Yong shouted, capturing both his sister’s wrists and holding them so tightly that she could not wrench them from his grasp. ‘And you, Ah Sing, stop teasing my sister. She’s too stupid to know when to stop and you should know better. You’ve had plenty of practice with three sisters.’ He glanced angrily from Young Wu to his struggling twin.

‘If she doesn’t want to fight, she shouldn’t pull the tiger’s tail,’ he said with a shrug.

‘Who said I don’t want to fight?’

‘I did, little sister. You think you could win a real fight against either of us? I’m just toying with you.’

From where he stood, Young Wu saw how she struggled to free her wrists, twisting her arms so far that she was in danger of dislocating a shoulder to escape. She narrowed her eyes, flicking venom-filled glances from one youth to the other as her brother watched impassively.

‘Let me free, Goh Go, and I’ll show him not to mess with the tiger,’ she hissed.

‘Daaih Lou was right. I should never have let you train with me in the first place. But who listens to their older brother?’ Ah Yong said, shaking his head before suddenly releasing her and stepping back. ‘It has put all the wrong ideas in your head. Girls shouldn’t fight.’

She was breathing hard. Young Wu couldn’t help noticing how her chest rose and fell beneath her tunic, how she held her spine rigid with anger, and how red marks like manacles had formed about her wrists. He wanted to hold her close until her resistance melted away. He wanted to soothe her so that she purred rather than hissed. But he spoke none of this nonsense. Men did not speak of such things, not even to their wives.

‘Your mother should have bound her feet when she could and then she would not be able to fight,’ he said instead, with a conspiratorial glance at his friend. ‘Now it is too late. She is *chang gai po*.’ Like a chicken she would continue fighting long after she had lost her head.

‘It’s not true that girls shouldn’t fight,’ Little Cat shouted. ‘One way or another, girls always have to fight.’

‘Huh!’

‘Teacher Fang invented the White Crane style by observing cranes. Wing Chun learned kung fu so that she could escape a bandit who would force her to marry him. Sometimes girls have no choice. Sometimes fighting is the only way to be free.’

She spat the words but the fight had gone out of her for the moment. Her arms hung loosely at her sides and her breathing slowed. She looked down at the ground rather than challenging them further. Her pigtailed caressed the curve of her bowed neck like two ropes of silk. Young Wu knew he should be pleased that she ceased provoking him. This was as it should be, as the sage Confucius advised. Yet he was disappointed.

He strove to be a man of *yee*, a righteous man like his father, yet Little Cat brought out the brute in him. He was drawn to her and repelled at the same time. How could a man be gentle and good if a woman would not listen and obey?

‘No one is free,’ he said, pointing out the obvious. ‘We all have obligations.’

She stood so still that he felt regret form like a pebble in his gut. There was something compelling about the fizz of blood in his veins that her hostility incited. His desire to fight her warred with his desire for righteous action. He did not want to let it go.

‘Except perhaps a hermit,’ he forced himself to croak.

‘Of course a boy would say that,’ she muttered, not raising her eyes from her feet, bare and narrow with long toes that clawed into the dust of the courtyard.

‘One day you may find, little sister,’ pronounced her brother, ‘that the price of freedom is too high... even for you.’

Young Wu nodded, recognising this truth. He was the son of Big Wu. He had obligations to his father and the Wu ancestors going back fifty generations. He had to set an example. He had to relinquish vain desires.

### 3

Robetown, South Australia, 1856

That morning, the autumn sun had beckoned cheerfully, tempting Violet into a sprigged muslin day dress, which had cost the extortionate sum of two pounds six shillings the previous summer. Muslin may not have been the most prudent choice for a walk upon the beach, but how could she have predicted that a cold breeze would spring up from the bay, setting it to flapping, and turning all her labour with the curling iron to straw? The wind was playing havoc with her bonnet too, while twisted ropes of kelp twined about her boots and rimed the hem of her dress in salt. And all her vanity had been for naught, since the only people to see her were the children.

Perhaps an hour of arithmetic would have been advisable after all, despite the children's hankering for adventure, for they had been plodding along the beach for a good half-hour and still the sand stretched ahead

for miles. Violet didn't fancy the walk back to town with sand whipping her face, yet neither did a climb over the dunes appeal, with the sword-like grass and prickly heath that dragged at her skirt and scratched her ankles. Not to mention all the nasty, biting things. But at least the walk would be shorter. It occurred to her that every decision in this disagreeable country became a choice between two evils.

Beside her, Alice picked her way through the seaweed, stooping every now and then to examine the chalky backbone of a cuttlefish or toss a flat stone out to sea, whilst James played chicken with the creeping waves. Violet bent to pick up one of the cuttlebones, dusting the sand from her glove with the other hand. 'Did you know, children, that this shell is the backbone of a creature with ten arms called a cuttlefish?'

'Mrs Smith feeds it to her parakeet,' said Alice, snapping the cuttlebone in two. 'It isn't very strong for a bone.'

'I believe its lightness helps the creature stay afloat. And the cuttlefish has the remarkable ability to change colour too.'

'I should like to see that,' said James, distracted from his game momentarily.

'Have you seen one change colour, Miss Hartley?' asked Alice.

'No, but I have read about it in Mr Darwin's book. My previous employers were fortunate to possess an extensive library.' But she did not want to think about her previous employer or his walls of books. She had travelled to the

ends of the earth to escape those memories. 'Well, I think we have had enough Nature for one day,' she announced.

'Just a little longer,' Alice pleaded.

'Your nose is pink already, Alice. Your poor mama will have conniptions when she sees you.' The girl was unlikely to risk upsetting her mother since they were all familiar with Mrs Wallace's conniptions. Her brother, however, was made of sterner stuff and would not be dissuaded from his expedition by the threat of a ruined complexion or a tearful mama.

'Cook has promised seed cake,' said Violet, sidestepping the carcass of a large crab.

Food was her customary bribe with eight-year-old boys, but this morning seed cake appeared to have lost its attraction too, for James remained deaf to her pleas. Rather, he poked industriously at the dead crab with a stick of driftwood so that its insides oozed forth in yellowish slime, while Alice looked on in scientific fascination. Violet was considering resorting to sterner measures when he shouted suddenly, 'Look, a steamer!' abandoning the crab and pointing out to sea.

Indeed, a ship was steaming into the bay from the north, coming from the port of Adelaide, no doubt. Sailing low and dark in the water, with twin masts and a single funnel belching smoke, it seemed vaguely familiar.

'It's the *Burra Burra*,' he declared, 'on its way to Melbourne.'

'The *Burra Burra*,' Violet repeated with a shiver. Had it been a mere three months since she found herself

ensconced below its decks with six girls bound for service in the South Australian bush, a pianoforte, numerous bolts of cloth, several crates of tea, a barrel of pitch and assorted plumbing fixtures? Already it seemed like an age since she had stepped onto the rickety jetty in Robetown, to be met by Mr Wallace. Following upon the interminable voyage from Gravesend, she had never been happier to find herself with solid earth beneath her feet. Since the voyage from England, she had discovered a new respect for sailors, something she hadn't appreciated when her father was alive. As a child she was more interested in his tales of strange lands and the even stranger creatures he met than the dangers and privations of his journeying. But on her voyage out she experienced the rigours of a sailor's life for the first time. The sun had burned so hot that it melted the pitch upon the deck. She had it from the mate that the beef had been three years in the barrel. The water was so tainted she could not drink it without a splash of vinegar and the butter had turned to a rancid oil. Perhaps she was lucky she had been too seasick to eat anything other than stale biscuits, so hard she had to break them with a hammer. Her single consolation for these privations had been the inches she shed from her waist. To think that this had been her father's lot for his twenty years at sea.

Violet closed her eyes on further thoughts of her father or her journey. She wasn't one to dwell upon unhappy circumstances. Unhappiness was too debilitating for a young woman of uncertain means and indeterminate

family. It was liable to show upon her face in a less than attractive manner and lend an unappealing quality to her voice, a consequence she could ill afford under present circumstances. No, she was determined to make the best of her situation, such as it was, as a poorly paid governess in this rural backwater at the veritable ends of the earth. Well, at least until she could arrange a more congenial situation, one more suited to her talents. For an inventive young woman, that should not prove too difficult.

‘If we return now we may be in time to see the *Burra Burra* dock,’ she said, pleased at this sudden inspiration. James considered her suggestion for a moment, but the beach still offered too many attractions to lure him away quite so easily.

‘And perhaps we might find some gull eggs in the dunes,’ she offered. Gull eggs were sure to be alluring to an energetic boy.

‘Can I take my stick?’

‘Why not.’ The dunes were riddled with the burrows of mutton-birds, but Violet was confident she could contrive not to find any of the poor innocent creatures or their eggs.

‘And if we meet some bushrangers I shall protect you,’ he said, beating at the air with his stick.

‘There are no bushrangers in South Australia,’ said Alice, who had a sharp way with facts. She had not learned to dissemble in the face of male certainty as yet, something Violet had been forced to learn at quite a young age.

‘Then perhaps we shall drum some up, just for James,’ Violet said with a wink.

Whether for the sake of seed cake or expediency, Alice acquiesced and they set off across the dunes, the boy kicking up sand while his sister berated him. Violet left her to it. Chastising children was exhausting and to be avoided wherever possible.

The road into Robetown lay on the other side of the dunes. More of a track than a road, most of its traffic comprised the bullock drays that brought wool and wheat from the pastoral runs to the port, drovers herding cattle, and local residents on horseback. On summer nights, thousands of large, brown mutton-birds descended upon the dunes in noisy flocks, heading back to their burrows after a day of fishing far out to sea. At dusk, other small, furry creatures emerged from the dunes to scurry about; dark-visaged wallabies bounding for the marshy ground further inland, and plump grey wombats waddling through the heath searching for roots and leaves. Even for a habitu  of drawing rooms, it was difficult to avoid nature in these parts.

From the top of the dune, she gazed out across an expanse of flat country to a string of shallow lakes in the south. It was all so flat and dreary that come winter, the entire area would become a swamp. While to the north, the land stretched away in a series of scrub and grass-covered hummocks, with a small peak rising in the distance. However, even before she looked northwards, the rumble of hooves and wheels alerted her to the approach

of a bullock dray from that direction, as it followed the track through the sand hills. Its driver walked beside a team of twelve bullocks. A black and white dog dodged in and out of the animals' legs, nipping at their heels, while a riderless horse plodded along behind.

Bullock drays were a common sight in the port of Robe as they queued to load their cargo onto the steamers and cutters that plied the coastal route, so she did not pay it much heed. But the children were distracted from their search for gull eggs. They watched the approach of the dray, the driver cracking his whip above his head once when the animals appeared to stall.

'It's Mr Thomas,' said Alice.

'Who is Mr Thomas?'

'He plies the bullock route from Victoria.'

'That is a long way indeed,' said Violet, who had begged some maps of the local territory from the children's father for their geography lessons.

'Mama says he has a sheep station near the Grampians, but he'll be lucky to keep it if he doesn't make some improvements soon. She says he is quite genteel for a dirty, rough bullocky.'

Violet suspected that Mrs Wallace had said no such thing in her daughter's hearing. The children's mother was nothing if not a paragon of propriety. 'It isn't ladylike to listen in on another person's conversation,' she reprimanded dutifully, although privately she had found that listening at doors was the only way to discover anything useful.

‘I like him. He tells funny stories,’ shouted James, above the racket. The bullock dray was almost upon them now, the combined noise of hooves, wheels, whip and wind drowning out their voices. She could just make out the details of its driver who was almost dwarfed by his bullocks: lean and average height, with a tanned face and thick moustache. A cabbage tree hat rested on the back of his head and he wore a brown twill shirt and moleskin trousers.

‘Does Mr Thomas have a Mrs Thomas?’ she asked, glancing speculatively at the approaching dray.

‘I do not think so,’ said Alice. ‘He has probably never met a lady as pretty as you, Miss Hartley.’

Mr Thomas did not appear to have noticed their presence as yet. All his concentration was reserved for the uneven track and the great beasts hauling the dray. But Violet had her ways of attracting notice when she deemed it opportune, and now seemed the perfect moment to become acquainted with the almost genteel bullocky with some means and no wife. Through no fault of her own she was marooned in Robetown for the foreseeable future so any promising introduction was worth pursuing. Alice thought her pretty, but Violet was pragmatic enough to realise that any prettiness she possessed would fade soon enough. Already she was at risk of that dreaded epithet bestowed upon every woman above five and twenty years, and unlike her peers she did not have a mama to arrange matters for her, nor a papa to provide even the most modest of incomes. She must

depend upon her native wit to secure her future. Love, she had recently discovered, would not procure even a new pair of gloves.

‘Quick, children, run!’ she shouted above the sound of gusting wind. ‘There’s a snake in the grass!’

With a squeal, Alice set off at a run through the heath down the dune, but James hesitated, stick in hand, as if he might investigate. Grabbing his hand, she did not give him a chance, propelling him down the slope, her hooped petticoat bouncing about her legs as she ran. She gave him a little push and flung her body forward to land delicately in the dunes.

‘Woo there, Bruiser! Woo there, Taffy!’ shouted a voice not very far away.

She lay where she landed, waiting until the racket of bullock and dray dulled to a snorting shuffle before raising herself upon one elbow and letting her wide pagoda sleeve float back to expose the delicate bones of her wrist. With a toss of her head, she shook her bonnet so that it fell to her shoulders, revealing disordered blonde locks framing a heart-shaped face, and adding honey-toned highlights to her creamy skin. She opened her eyes to their widest – she had once been told that her eyes were the exact hue of aquamarines – and bit her lips to rosy plumpness. Lying on her side, with her waist curved to its tiniest, her view through the low vegetation showed that the bullocks were taking the opportunity to rest, sinking to the ground with their legs folded beneath them. Of the driver there was no sign.

‘Are you all right, Miss Hartley?’ Alice called from the safety of the track.

‘I believe so. Don’t move, children. Take care for the snake.’

She heard a rustle and looked up to find a pair of solid legs planted in the sand beside her. The bullocky was certainly fast on his feet, sprinting to her side so quickly that she did not see him coming. She looked up to find him gazing at her in concern. He seemed taller from this angle, his trousers slung low on his hips and held up by a belt of plaited leather. He bent towards her, extending a hand sprinkled with dark hair, his eyes disturbingly black.

‘Thank you.’ She clasped the hand in her free one and allowed him to pull her to her feet.

‘Can you walk?’ he asked with a slight Welsh lilt, examining her boots rather than her face, a unique occurrence in Violet’s experience. Usually a man was drawn to her ‘swanlike neck’ or ‘fine eyes’.

‘I’m not sure.’ She took a tentative step and winced. ‘I may have twisted my ankle. I was in too much haste getting the children away from the snake.’

‘What kind of snake was it, Miss Hartley?’ called James, who was fascinated by anything clawed or fanged.

‘A brown one,’ she said. Surely snakes came in brown.

‘Good thing you ran then. The brown’s a bad-tempered blighter.’ The bullocky grimaced, revealing a surprisingly good set of teeth. ‘Deadly too.’

She was about to extend the conversation into a discussion on the nature of the Australian snake,

which she felt certain must be of interest to a man of his profession, but she realised that he was no longer looking at her boots or her face. Indeed, he had taken to stomping about in a very peculiar fashion.

‘What on earth are you doing Mr...?’

‘Thomas. Lewis Thomas,’ he muttered, eyes to the ground. Strangely, he did not appear to have noticed her honey-blond tresses either. ‘I’m ensuring the damned snake does not show its face again.’

‘Violet Hartley. The Wallace children’s governess.’

He ceased his pacing to take her hand. ‘I’d heard Mrs Wallace was advertising in the London papers. The colonies not good enough for her?’

‘I expect it was a matter of quantity rather than quality.’

For the first time he looked her in the eye with a curious glance. ‘Robetown is something of a backwater for a Londoner.’

‘Well, a lady must eat. And there are other necessities.’ She replaced her bonnet upon her head, tying the long silk ribbons with a flourish.

‘Of course, what lady can survive without her bonnets?’ he laughed. ‘But this is a harsh land for a woman alone.’

‘Every land is harsh for a woman alone. But one does one’s best.’

‘Miss Hartley is teaching us French,’ announced Alice. ‘*Parlez-vous Français, Monsieur Thomas?*’

‘Very nicely done, *chérie*. Your vowels were quite French,’ Violet complimented her pupil.

‘I’m hungry,’ James called from the track, suddenly remembering his stomach, now that their expedition had been interrupted.

‘We might have to put you up on the dray then. Since Miss Hartley cannot walk far on that ankle. If you don’t mind riding along with the wool,’ Thomas said to the boy.

‘I don’t mind.’

Alice looked as if she might be about to say that she did indeed mind riding with a load of smelly wool, but Violet forestalled her. ‘Thank you, Mr Thomas. Alice is such a kind girl, I’m sure she won’t mind.’

Thomas supported her as she limped towards the dray where the bullocks waited patiently. He gave a leg-up to James, who clambered happily onto the single row of bales at the front of the dray. Behind him, the load tottered three bales high. Then he placed his hands at Alice’s waist and lifted her, light as a kitten next to the boy. Once the children were settled, he looked at Violet with a lift of one thick dark brow. ‘Miss Hartley?’

‘My ankle,’ she shrugged, with an apologetic smile.

‘Those petticoats aren’t made for climbing either, I’ll wager.’ The solid feel of his hands upon her waist was all too brief as he swung her onto the bales. ‘All settled?’

When the children answered in the affirmative he took up his whip once more, waving it in a signal to the bullocks. ‘Get up there, Bruiser! Get up there, Taffy!’ he shouted to the lead pair. Once all twelve bullocks had risen to their feet he commanded them to walk forward.

The dog took this as its cue to resume the job of harrying the rear animals.

‘I didn’t see any snake,’ Alice informed Violet as the team set off at a lumbering pace towards Robetown.

‘That’s the thing about a snake in the grass, Alice. It’s usually too late once you see it coming.’