

Henley must have had many opportunities of being married; but the right man has, I fear, not yet presented himself. Once more her eloquent eyes consulted Mountjoy, and once more nothing came of it. Two women are easily discouraged. Inexplicable Mrs. Vinpenny was one of the other women; she had not done with Mountjoy yet—she invited him to dinner on the next day.

'Our early hour is three o'clock,' she said modestly. 'Pray join us. I hope to have the pleasure of introducing my husband.'

Mountjoy had his reasons for wishing to see the husband. As he accepted the invitation, Miss Henley returned to accompany him to the inn.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

THE GIRL IN GREY.

A TASMANIAN STORY.

By E. T. MILLER.



HE township was asleep as usual. The storekeeper, with a confidence born of long experience, had left his stock of leather boots, dusty stationery, and tins of potted salmon unprotected, except by a drowsy mastiff that lay coiled on the door-sill, and gone across to smoke his afternoon pipe with the landlord of the Wellington.

Neither of the men were likely to be called by a customer until the arrival of the train, which daily roused Stony Creek from its apathy at a quarter after five o'clock. It seemed probable that in the days when trains were not the inhabitants of the hill-girt valleys had lain quiescent as the sleeping beauty of fairy lore awaiting the touch of some vigorous adventurer to rekindle their dormant energies. From the single straggling street of the township the land sloped down to the rushing stream that gave its name to the place; on the other side it rose again in a steep incline for some hundred yards, then swept backwards over a three-mile level plain, pasture land merging into bush, to the foot of the dark rounded hills that closed in Stony Creek on all sides. All the ground on that bank belonged to John Brady, whose substantial farm-house, with its white walls and green verandah, formed a pleasant spot for the eye to rest on, standing out from its background of dull foliage. On the road that ran direct from Brady's Station to the township there presently appeared a procession of three. First came a man with a wheelbarrow, advancing at an irregular jog-trot, which menaced with a speedy fall the band-box, trunk, and parcels that were piled up on this novel truck. The man was old, bent, cross-eyed, and of a villainous expression. To judge by his remarks his temper was not at the moment heavenly.

'Best if I'll carry 'em farder fur'er, 'n old man like me, brute of a gal she is too. Never give my no decent meals of a mornin', an' me up five hours, an' a orderin' of me round like a queen. I'll pay'er out. I'll trundle'er old bandboxes down to the bridge an' not a step farder, not for all the misuses in Tasmania!' And with this, the amiable creature having reached the bridge, upset his luggage, dragged the empty barrow to one side, sat down upon it, and began to smoke a short dirty pipe.

Figure two was that of a red-faced, stout woman, with frowsy hair and dress, and a bright blue bonnet, who came panting along the road with the anxiety common to country folk as to 'catching the train,' as though it were an erratic monster whose time of arrival and departure were uncertain, but likely to fall foul of ordinary arrangements. As this female approached the bridge her anxiety became anguish of soul.

'Hurry up, Larry, I don't want to miss the train.'

'Hurry up yourself,' growled the man. 'I ain't agoin' no farder a carryin' traps for varmint like you.'

'Varmint yourself,' shrieked the woman, furiously. 'Ye'd better take that there barrow along pretty quick. The master's comin' down behind, and he'll make you stir your lazy stumps.'

Larry smoked on stolidly.

'I'll call the boss, that I will!' continued blue-bonnet. 'I'll tell him o' that brandy as was took from the house, an' them shirts as you an' me knows where they went to off the lines, that I will!'

'Boss be blown!' was the only answer.

At that moment a distant whistle announced the approach of the train. The woman looked desperate.

'Come, Larry, let's part friends. You wouldn't leave me to stop in the bush all night, an' I ain't got money to go to the hotel. I'm lassy, and I ain't allers meant wot I said. I'm real sorry I didn't clean them dairy pans for you. Look, now, I'll give ye a shillin' to get lassy if ye'll just take them things up in time. - It's but a step or two now.'

Larry considered. Baccy, as having been a forbidden luxury in his prison days (for he had been sent out fifty years previous at his country's expense on a life sentence), was the great enjoyment of life to him now, and he usually got through his weekly ration in four-and-twenty hours. He got up.

'Say sixpence more to drink your 'ealth and I'll do it,' he muttered.

There was no time to be lost. Blue-bonnet produced the money, the boxes were piled up once more, and by dint of much exertion the party gained the railway siding just as the train came shrieking in.

Stony Creek was awake now. One by one its inhabitants

stroled along to points of vantage, whence could be seen the tiny station with its arrivals and departures. To-day there was little to excite interest. Two minutes' down on their track, followed the ex-cook from Brady's into the second-class carriage, from which had stepped the only passenger for Stony Creek—a girl in grey. Five minutes were spent in doing nothing, then with much noise of whistle and puff of steam the fussy locomotive went on its way; the landlord and the storekeeper returned to their gossip over the bar; a boy carried off the mail-bag to the apology for a Post Office that stood behind the store; the station-master locked up and went home to tea; Larry left his barrow to go in quest of 'baccy,' and the girl in grey remained alone on the platform looking about as if in search for someone. At this moment, the third member of the procession from Brady's, the boss himself, made his tardy appearance at the bridge, and was soon across it, and scanning narrowly the new arrival.

'So that's the girl, is it?' was his mental comment. 'A neat, respectable young woman, but not cut out for country work.' Then aloud:

'You have come from the Registry Office, I suppose, in answer to a telegram? You are for Mrs Brady's?'

'Yes—sir,' was the answer, after a strange pause.

'Very well. I'll take you up to my house at once. Lend a hand to hoist that box on to the barrow, please, and it will follow us presently.'

Again there was a pause before the girl stooped to raise her end of the box that comprised her luggage, and Mr Brady caught on her face a flush and contraction of the lips that might denote pride or independence, but which were not to his liking. He scrutinised his new domestic narrowly as she walked at his side with head erect and eyes darkly observant of all around them. Her face was pale, and wore a strained, sad look for one so young. Brady took her for little over twenty, and the lips, instead of a full curve, displayed a tight, straight line, as though compressed to hold back some welling secret grief or burden.

'A woman with a history,' thought her new master; 'one who is fighting a hard battle with something or other, but who has strength and wit to win through with it in the end.'

'By the way, what's your name?' he queried, as they approached the house.

And again came the pause before she replied slowly: 'I am Lydia Brown.'

On the verandah stood John Brady's mother, looking out with anxiety for the appearance of her new domestic. 'A succession of fools and knaves,' as her son termed them, had reigned in house and kitchen during the year that Mrs Brady had superintended the young widower's establishment. They had broken most of the chimneys and crockery, burnt holes in kettles and saucepans, stolen fruit from the orchard, cream from the dairy, and eggs from the fowl-yard till the poor lady's orderly soul was grieved to death; and when the last variety, a woman who claimed a weekly reward of 15s for a service of incapacity and impudence, had announced that 'she would be missus in her own kitchen, and Mrs Brady had better keep her fine airs for her own dromin-room,' John had packed her off at a day's notice, and telegraphed to town for 'an honest, hard-working girl to do cooking and general work for a small family,' in answer to which had come Lydia Brown.

When Mrs Brady had inducted the new arrival into office and left her busy frying potatoes for an early tea—meals had been somewhat sketchy of late—she returned to her son with an air of comical dismay.

'My dear John, whoever is this young woman? Not a servant up to this date, I am very sure. She says she is just out from Home, which is, perhaps, true, but in England her position must have been very different. Did you notice her language and refined air?'

'There is something out of the common about her,' admitted John; 'but it's none of our business, mother. Don't overwork the girl, and for goodness' sake let her settle in without question if she can get on here, for the wretches we've had lately have worn you grey.'

'I only hope,' said the old lady, solemnly, 'that there's not a young man in the case.'

Whereat her son laughed, and went off whistling to his sheep.

As time went on Lydia Brown developed many virtues and a few peculiarities. She swept and cleaned to perfection, never grumbled, rose early, and after the first difficulties were surmounted carried out her work with order and skill. But the men about the place, accustomed to the ready tongue and familiar airs of former Abigail, disliked this quiet, distant woman, who never smiled, never appeared even to hear their rough jokes, and would not have them sitting in the kitchen smoking for a minute, but dismissed them to the yard as soon as meals were over. True, their food had never been so well cooked, nor served in such comfort before; still there was a quiet reserve about the 'new woman' that exasperated them exceedingly, and not one would have hesitated 'to pay her out' should occasion serve.

'John,' said Mrs Brady, about a week after Lydia's coming, 'that girl puzzles me. She is concealing something. I hope she's not cranky. She keeps a candle burning in her room till all hours, and every evening she goes marching off into the bush by herself. I told her to-day it wasn't safe, and I really don't think she ought to go.'

'Oh, she wants fresh air, I suppose; leave the girl alone, mother. She's a gentlewoman in trouble, if I'm not much mistaken, but her face is good and honest. She is a woman to be trusted, take my word for it.'

Trusted! Well, it might be so, but why then did this mysterious young person put on such airs of secrecy? The old lady had her full share of Eve's curiosity, and one evening, after watching the girl off the premises carrying, as she always did, a black leather bag ('What can she want with that bag in the bush?' thought her mistress), Mrs Brady made a tour of inspection in the servant's apartment. The room was in shoddy order. A few handsonely-bound books lay on the chest of drawers; a few had the name 'Lydia Brown' inscribed in various handwritings. (Her name was not assumed, then.) Opening the cupboard, however, nothing but simple order met the view, and the good lady was leaving the room, half ashamed of her suspicions, when her eye caught sight of a crumpled paper that had fallen behind a chair. She took it up, smoothed it out on the palm of her hand, and to her consternation read as follows:—

£500 REWARD offered for information that will lead to the capture of Alfred Miles, late agent for Messrs Dykes, Lee and Co., wool-growers, Melbourne, who absconded on the 23rd October last. Tall and slight in build; eyes brown, with a drooping of left lid; white scar over one temple, etc., etc.

Mrs Brady read this over twice; then suddenly turning to the pile of books she opened one, a volume of poetry, and re-read on its title-page the words, 'Lydia Brown, with affectionate regards from her sincere friend and well-wisher, Alfred Miles.'

So this was the clue to Lydia's peculiarities. Poor girl! There was some dark trouble no doubt connected with this fellow. Perhaps, thought the shrewd old lady, he had sent for her to come out to him, and then disgraced himself and abandoned her. If so, was she a married woman living under her maiden name? Or had the fellow absconded before Lydia's arrival, and thus left her friendless in a strange land to find for herself? Time would show perhaps; it was of no use to force confidence; but from that day Lydia, without suspecting the cause, foster herself treated with a watchful consideration by both master and mistress that touched, while yet it seemed to humble and shame, the salicyed, pale girl.

John Brady kept an eye on the Melbourne news, but beyond ascertaining that vigilant search was being prosecuted for the missing man, who had robbed his employers of £2,000, his inquiries were without result. And weeks went by, and shearing time came on, and in the consequent press and hurry indoors and out John Brady had almost forgotten to be curious about Lydia Brown's eccentricities, when his attention was again drawn to them in a very unpleasant manner.

'John,' said his mother, one evening early in December, 'do you think the new men are honest? In the last month I've missed more things than I can account for in any other way than that there are thieves about the place.'

'What sort of things?' demanded her son.

'Eggs to begin with, and candles, tea, butter, and so forth. I said nothing at first, thinking Lydia's appetite was improving with country air; but yesterday something else went that only men could have taken—your top-cot, John, and the gun from the rack in the hall, and also the opossum-rug that belongs to the buggy.'

'That's getting serious,' responded Brady. 'I'll see to it, mother.' He knitted his brows moodily over his evening pipe as he paced the verandah from end to end long after Mrs Brady had retired. For this was the second warning that had reached him in one day of something going wrong, and to others, if not to himself, the new domestic was the suspected person.

It was no less an authority than the ex-convict Larry, who professed to have detected Lydia Brown in the act of robbing her employers, and to judge from the old saw, 'Set a thief to catch a thief,' his discovery ought to be valid. According to Larry the girl was in the habit of stealing down from her room at midnight and going off in the direction of the bush, carrying a basket and the stable lantern. On two occasions, the man affirmed, she had admitted a man to the kitchen early in the morning, before the household was astir, and sent him away loaded with provisions. On those occasions the business of preparing supper for the shearers had prevented her usual evening walk on the previous day.

John had silenced Larry's revelations, but the tale suddenly gained ground in the light of his mother's information, and he resolved to put Lydia's good faith to the test that very night.

It was the 15th of December, ten days to Christmas, and a deal of shearing yet to do. The men were at work by half-past 5 o'clock in the morning now, and with a view to the early breakfast, it was the custom of the Brady household to retire soon after eight at night. Thus, long before midnight, Sonnus reigned supreme at Stony Creek, or seemed to do so. In the office, alert, but in silence and darkness, the master of the house kept watch. Not a sound save the occasional scuffling of rats in the old walls broke the stillness. Overhead, in the apartment occupied by Lydia, there had been no noise or movement for the past three hours. John Brady looked at his watch by the light of the moon, which shone suddenly out from behind a cloud and sent a bright beam across his little sanctum. It wanted only twelve minutes to midnight. Stretching himself, he rose, yawned, and resolved to go to bed. He was keeping a fool's guard, after all, he thought.

At that instant a peculiar low whistle sounded through the quiet air, and immediately afterwards the door above creaked on its hinges and a stealthy tread began to descend the flight of steps from the servant's room. Two minutes later the cloaked figure of Lydia Brown moved swiftly across the courtyard, softly opened the outer door that led into the bullock-yard, and disappeared in the shadow of the barn. As swiftly and as silently John Brady followed in her track.

It was a strange scene. Overhead the deep blue sky, clear in the unique splendour of a Tasmanian summer night, the Southern Cross, like a sacred beacon, lighting the way to eternal purity and peace; below, on the shadowed earth, a conflict of evil passions and base desires, with weak but steadfast clings to the right.

John Brady was a generous man, but stern to punish willful error, and here, where he had trusted much, his wrath at having been deceived was rising to a pitch of fierce intensity.

Standing concealed by a cart lifted against the end of the long barn, he witnessed (himself unperceived) a meeting between the 'girl in grey' and a rough, haggard-looking man, who was dressed in the missing overcoat, and who carried in his hand—carefully, too, as if it were loaded—Mrs Brady's own gun. The man was speaking vehemently as Brady came within earshot.

'You won't say no, Lyddy, now that it's come to the last! Why, girl, for your own sake you must go through with it now. You've done too much for your own safety and too little for me to dare to stop short of this final step.'

Lydia's voice, in reply, trembled at first as with suppressed anger, but grew firm and louder as she went on:

'Alfred, I have already done for you all that a girl can do without dishonour for one she loves. I have kept your secret, I have run many risks and undergone many hardships to supply you with food and drink, not because I love you (here her tone became very scornful)—that feeling died with my respect when you sank the gentleman into the runaway thief; but for the sake of the old days, and your good mother's kindness to me. I have gone almost without food that you might live on what was honestly earned. Now that you have broken your promise not to wrong these people who are my only friends out here, now that you dare insult me by asking me to join in your wickedness and to follow up base ingratitude with a life of deceit on your ill-gotten gains, and under a false name—now, Alfred Miles,