

It is happening now. As it has been happening ever since Edith Horton ran stumbling and screaming towards the plain. As it will go on happening until the end of time. The scene is never varied by so much as the falling of a leaf or the flight of a bird. To the four people on the Rock it is always acted out in the tepid twilight of a present without a past. Their joys and agonies are forever new.

Miranda is a little ahead of Irma and Marion as they push on through the dogwoods, her straight yellow hair swinging loose as cornsilk about her thrusting shoulders. Like a swimmer, cleaving wave after wave of dusty green. An eagle hovering in the zenith sees an unaccustomed stirring of lighter patches amongst the scrub below, and takes off for higher, purer airs. At last the bushes are thinning out before the face of a little cliff that holds the last light of the sun. So on a million summer evenings the pattern forms and re-forms upon the crags and pinnacles of the Hanging Rock.

The plateau on which they presently emerged from the scrub had much the same conformation as the one lower down – boulders, loose stones, an occasional stunted tree. Clumps of rubbery ferns stirred faintly in the pale light. The plain below was infinitely vague and distant. Peering down between the ringing boulders, they could just make out tiny figures coming and going, through drifts of rosy smoke. A dark shape that might have been a vehicle beside the glint of water.

‘Whatever can those people be doing down there, scuttling about like a lot of busy little ants?’ Marion came and looked over Irma’s shoulder. ‘A surprising number of human beings are without purpose.’ Irma giggled. ‘I dare say they think themselves quite important.’

The ants and their fires were dismissed without further comment. Although Irma was aware, for a little while, of a rather curious sound coming up from the plain, like the beating of far-off drums.

Miranda had been the first to see the monolith – a single outcrop of stone something like a monstrous egg, rising smoothly out of the rocks ahead above a precipitous drop to the plain. Irma, a few feet behind the other two, saw them suddenly halt, swaying a little, with heads bent and hands pressed to their breasts as if to steady themselves against a gale.

‘What is it, Marion? Is anything the matter?’

Marion’s eyes were fixed and brilliant, her nostrils dilated, and Irma thought vaguely how like a greyhound she was.

‘Irma! Don’t you feel it?’

‘Feel what, Marion?’ Not a twig was stirring on the little dried-up trees.

‘The monolith. Pulling, like a tide. It’s just about pulling me inside out, if you want to know.’ As Marion Quade seldom joked, Irma was afraid to smile. Especially as Miranda was calling back over her shoulder, ‘What side do you feel it strongest, Marion?’

‘I can’t make it out. We seem to be spiralling on the surface of a cone – all directions at once.’ Mathematics again! When Marion Quade was particularly silly it was usually something to do with sums. Irma said lightly, ‘Sounds to me more like a circus! Come on, girls – we don’t want to stand staring at that great thing forever.’

As soon as the monolith was passed and out of sight, all three were overcome by an overpowering drowsiness. Lying down in a row on the smooth floor of a little plateau, they fell into a

sleep so deep that a lizard darted out from under a rock and lay without fear in the hollow of Marion's outflung arm, while several beetles in bronze armour made a leisurely tour of Miranda's yellow head.

Miranda awoke first, to a colourless twilight in which every detail was intensified, every object clearly defined and separate. A forsaken nest wedged in the fork of a long-dead tree, with every straw and feather intricately laced and woven; Marion's torn muslin skirts fluted like a shell; Irma's dark ringlets standing away from her face in exquisite wiry confusion, the eyelashes drawn in bold sweeps on the cheek-bones. Everything, if you could only see it clearly enough, like this, is beautiful and complete. Everything has its own perfection.

A little brown snake dragging its scaly body across the gravel made a sound like wind passing over the ground. The whole air was clamorous with microscopic life.

Irma and Marion were still asleep.

Miranda could hear the separate beating of their two hearts, like two little drums, each at a different tempo. And in the undergrowth beyond the clearing a crackling and snapping of twigs where a living creature moved unseen towards them through the scrub. It drew nearer, the crunchings and cracklings split the silence as the bushes were pushed violently apart and a heavy object was propelled from the undergrowth almost on to Miranda's lap.

It was a woman with a gaunt, raddled face trimmed with bushy black eyebrows – a clown-like figure dressed in a torn calico camisole and long calico drawers frilled below the knees of two stick-like legs, feebly kicking out in black lace-up boots.

'Through!' gasped the wide-open mouth, and again, 'Through!' The tousled head fell sideways, the hooded eyes closed. 'Poor thing! She looks ill,' Irma said. 'Where does she come from?'

'Put your arm under her head,' Miranda said, 'while I unlace her stays.'

Freed from the confining husks, with her head pillowed on a folded petticoat, the stranger's breath became regular, the strained expression left her face and presently she rolled over on the rock and slept.

'Why don't we all get out of these absurd garments?' Marion asked. 'After all, we have plenty of ribs to keep us vertical.'

No sooner were the four pairs of corsets discarded on the stones and a delightful coolness and freedom set in, than Marion's sense of order was affronted. 'Everything in the universe has its appointed place, beginning with the plants. Yes, Irma, I meant it. You needn't giggle. Even our corsets on the Hanging Rock.'

'Well, you won't find a wardrobe,' Irma said, 'however hard you look. Where can we put them?' Miranda suggested throwing them over the precipice. 'Give them to me.'

'Which way did they fall?' Marion wanted to know. 'I was standing right beside you but I couldn't tell.'

'You didn't see them fall because they *didn't* fall.' The precise croaking voice came at them like a trumpet from the mouth of the clown-woman on the rock, now sitting up and looking perfectly comfortable. 'I think, girl, that if you turn your head to the right and look about level with your waist . . .' They all turned their heads to the right and there, sure enough, were the corsets, becalmed on the windless air like a fleet of little ships. Miranda had picked up a dead branch, long enough to reach them, and was lashing out at the stupid things seemingly glued to the background of grey air.

'Let me try!' Marion said. Whack! Whack! 'They must be stuck fast in something I can't see.'

'If you want my opinion,' croaked the stranger, 'they are stuck fast in *time*. You with the curls – what are you staring at?'

'I didn't mean to stare. Only when you said that about *time* I had such a funny feeling I had met you somewhere. A long time ago.'

'Anything is possible, unless it is proved impossible. And

sometimes even then.' The scratchy voice had a convincing ring of authority. 'And now, since we seem to be thrown together on a plane of common experience – I have no idea why – may I have your names? I have apparently left my own particular label somewhere over there.' She waved towards the blank wall of scrub. 'No matter. I perceive that I have discarded a good deal of clothing. However, here I am. The pressure on my physical body must have been very severe.' She passed a hand over her eyes and Marion asked with a strange humility, 'Do you suggest we should go on before the light fades?'

'For a person of your intelligence – I can see your brain quite distinctly – you are not very observant. Since there are no shadows here, the light too is unchanging.'

Irma was looking worried. 'I don't understand. Please, does that mean that if there are caves, they are filled with light or darkness? I am terrified of bats.'

Miranda was radiant. 'Irma, darling – don't you see? It means we arrive in the light!'

'Arrive? But Miranda . . . where are we going?'

'The girl Miranda is correct. I can see her heart, and it is full of understanding. Every living creature is due to arrive somewhere. If I know nothing else, at least I know that.' She had risen to her feet, and for a moment they thought she looked almost beautiful. 'Actually, I think we *are* arriving. Now.' A sudden giddiness set her whole being spinning like a top. It passed, and she saw the hole ahead.

It wasn't a hole in the rocks, nor a hole in the ground. It was a hole in space. About the size of a fully rounded summer moon, coming and going. She saw it as painters and sculptors saw a hole, as a thing in itself, giving shape and significance to other shapes. As a presence, not an absence – a concrete affirmation of truth. She felt that she could go on looking at it forever in wonder and delight, from above, from below, from the other side. It was as solid as the globe, as transparent as an air-bubble. An opening, easily passed through, and yet not concave at all.

She had passed a lifetime asking questions and now they were answered, simply by looking at the hole. It faded out, and at last she was at peace.

The little brown snake had appeared again and was lying beside a crack that ran off somewhere underneath the lower of two enormous boulders balancing one on top of the other. When Miranda bent down and touched its exquisitely patterned scales it slithered away into a tangle of giant vines. Marion knelt down beside her and together they began tearing away the loose gravel and the tangled cables of the vine.

'It went down there. Look, Miranda – down that opening.' A hole – perhaps the lip of a cave or tunnel, rimmed with bruised, heart-shaped leaves.

'You'll agree it's my privilege to enter first?'

'To enter?' they said, looking from the narrow lip of the cave to the wide, angular hips.

'Quite simple. You are thinking in terms of linear measurements, girl Marion. When I give you the signal – probably a tap on the rock – you may follow me, and the girl Miranda can follow you. Is that clearly understood?' The raddled face was radiant.

Before anyone could answer, the longboned torso was flattening itself out on the ground beside the hole, deliberately forming itself to the needs of a creature created to creep and burrow under the earth. The thin arms, crossed behind the head with its bright staring eyes, became the pincers of a giant crab that inhabits mud-caked billabongs. Slowly the body dragged itself inch by inch through the hole. First the head vanished; then the shoulder-blades humped together; the frilled pantaloons, the long black sticks of the legs welded together like a tail ending in two black boots.

'I can hardly wait for the signal,' Marion said. When presently a few firm raps were heard from under the rock she went in quite easily, head first, smoothing down her chemise without a backward glance. 'My turn next,' Miranda said. Irma looked at

Miranda kneeling beside the hole, her bare feet embedded in vine leaves – so calm, so beautiful, so unafraid. ‘Oh, Miranda, darling Miranda, don’t go down there – I’m frightened. Let’s go home!’

‘Home? I don’t understand, my little love. Why are you crying? Listen! Is that Marion tapping? I must go.’ Her eyes shone like stars. The tapping came again. Miranda pulled her long, lovely legs after her and was gone.

Irma sat down on a rock to wait. A procession of tiny insects was winding through a wilderness of dry moss. Where had they come from? Where were they going? Where was anyone going? Why, oh why, had Miranda thrust her bright head into a dark hole in the ground? She looked up at the colourless grey sky, at the drab, rubbery ferns, and sobbed aloud.

How long had she been staring at the lip of the cave, staring and listening for Miranda to tap on the rock? Listening and staring, staring and listening. Two or three runnels of loose sand came pattering down the lower of the two great boulders on to the flat upturned leaves of the vine as it tilted slowly forward and sank with a sickening precision directly over the hole.

Irma had flung herself down on the rocks and was tearing and beating at the gritty face of the boulder with her bare hands. She had always been clever at embroidery. They were pretty little hands, soft and white.