'But Dunwich is only a depot. Don’t judge us by a depot. Wait, my dear Miss O’Beirne, wait till we get to the settlement. Which with this wind—’ Mrs Bulwer drew a hand from her muff and held it into the wind—‘will be some five hours more. It’s quite a pretty little place, I assure you. And healthy besides. None of us has gone to our graveyard. Not one. And only one soldier. Quite a contrast with the India stations. At least with Madras. I am sure the rumour that the fifty-seventh is to go to Madras is quite unfounded. Agra. It will be Agra. Agra is delightful. Very little fever at Agra. On the settlement we do have the fever, but not the India sort, not the sort to carry one off. And we have the ophthalmia and the dysentery, though neither is so prevalent with us. But of course we have nothing so dreadful as the cholera. The cholera! Do you know
how bad it was at home last year? Why, of course you do, you were there.’

Frances said, well, she had been in Ireland.

‘Well, Ireland. Ireland is as bad as England for the cholera. Did Letty write you that we have two surgeons on the settlement now? Both young,’ she said, on a note of persuasion, and with a sudden bold look at Frances, ‘and both such dear clever good men.’

Frances sank her chin in her collar and opened her eyes wide. ‘Mr Henry Cowper is good?’

‘Why, certainly he is.’ Mrs Bulwer’s note of persuasion deepened into bluster. ‘I can’t think with whom you associated in Sydney if they told you he is not.’

‘But I saw him myself, ma’am, on this very voyage—’

‘And so you may have. But you have not yet seen him conducting divine service.’

‘He conducts—’

‘He does. We were sent a chaplain, but he and the commandant— We all have our failings, and our good commandant is sometimes short of temper. Mr James Murray is the other surgeon, the new one. He is single—’ she flashed Frances another of her bold looks—‘and dines quite often with your sister and the commandant. Oh, you will not be dull, I assure you. And the commandant’s cottage is charming. Letty has such taste. Well, I will say no more. You will soon see it all for yourself, and meet your little niece and nephew
besides. So come, my dear, let us have a smile. Such a young creature, yet so-o dejected!'

‘It’s the architecture of my face,’ said Frances.
‘Arch-itecture?’
‘Yes. It makes me look dejected when I am only thoughtful.’
‘It does not do to be too thoughtful.’
‘But—does not do for what?’
‘Why, that’s a question I hardly know how to answer.’ Mrs Bulwer’s voice was slower. Without looking away from Frances’s face, she withdrew into preoccupation. ‘If you’re going to ask clever questions, you had better talk to Mrs Harbin.’

‘I’ve hardly seen Mrs Harbin since we left Sydney Heads. She was so sick.’

‘We were all sick. You don’t resemble Letty, do you? Or Cassandra? You are in quite a different style.’

‘Letty and Cass take after papa. I resemble mama. Or did, when she was alive.’

Mrs Bulwer responded only with a brief but most reflective murmur. ‘H’mmm.’ Frances, made uneasy by her continued scrutiny, put a hand to her left cheek, where smallpox had left an area of roughness, and raised herself slightly in her seat to look out over the water. They had disembarked at Dunwich from the Isabella, and were now on the deck of the Regent Bird, going up Moreton Bay. ‘What island is that?’ asked Frances.
But Mrs Bulwer didn’t even look. ‘Green Island. I understand there are two more of you.’

‘Yes. It’s not very green.’

‘Both girls?’

‘Yes. Hermione and Lydia.’

‘Your poor father,’ said Mrs Bulwer, with sudden frank gloom.

‘Well, ma’am, he is poor, you see.’

‘I meant, of course, unfortunate.’

‘I know. But it’s being poor that makes him unfortunate.’

‘You look much more like Cassandra when you laugh. Oh, we do miss Cassandra. Always so agreeable, so patient and tactful. But never mind, she will be as happy as a bird with her lieutenant, *even* in the Indies. And you will take her place. You will have Letty to help you now. And the commandant.’

Frances murmured an excuse and got up, gathering her shawl tightly around her, and went to the side. Mrs Bulwer’s warning voice followed her. ‘It does not do to be opinionated.’ She pretended not to hear. On the bay were amazing stretches of turquoise and violet, and the sky was empty of everything except a dandelion of sun, mildly blazing, and a meek white crescent of moon. From beneath the frill on the back of her bonnet a strand of dark hair dropped and was caught and extended by the wind. The sun, the boom of sails and the race of water, would have held her there at
the side, in a dream or trance, as had happened so often on the voyage out, had not Mrs Bulwer, small and black and compact in her side vision, waited. And with a sense of facing something lately evaded, Frances admitted that also waiting, the more insistent because only inwardly visible, was the commandant. Deliberately, she set herself to visualise him, in five hours or so, descending the river bank to meet the *Regent Bird*.

She saw a tall, straight-backed, cold-faced, gingery man, who walked with a kind of curbed stiffness, and who moved his head restlessly, or as if fretted by his high neck band. And as detail accrued—the scarlet and gold of his uniform, the gloss and weight of the braid—the background her imagination had provided, slope and river and blurred sky, faded away and left him as she had first seen him in reality. Walking like that, he had descended the unkempt incline before her father’s house in Sligo, while she, nine years old, had peeped from a window with Bridie and Meg. Later she had met him face to face, but it was only as a dim tallness that she could see him bending from the waist to catechise her on her lessons. Her own squirming shyness, and her simultaneous shame of it, had perhaps obliterated from those later meetings nearly everything but itself, whereas at the window, safe between the adult softnesses of Bridie and Meg, she had been free simply to gape.

‘Here comes Miss Letty’s captain.’
‘Look at him legging it!’

Bridie and Meg had managed to convey mockery, dislike, and admiration, all at the same time; but in Sydney the Hall girls had said, ‘Oh, Logan,’ and had refrained from looking at her, or at each other. Another strand of hair fell from her bonnet into the wind. She gathered it all together, wound it on two fingers, and poked it beneath her bonnet as she turned to face Mrs Bulwer.

‘How will—they—come up the bay?’

Feeling the occasion to be one for courage, she was sad to be betrayed by her shy voice. And now, forced to persist against Mrs Bulwer’s look of cool interrogation, she sounded shyer still.

‘I mean—the convicts?’

‘Oh, the pris-ones? Why, how else but in a boat? And be assured, they will be made as comfortable as is consistent with their condition. As indeed they were on the voyage from Sydney. There is more room between decks on the Isabella than one might think. If only she could cross the bar I am sure the journey would be less tedious for everyone. Or if there was a way by land. Of course there is a way. The runaways find it. But such a wild rough terrible way it must be, it doesn’t bear thinking of. Do sit down, my dear, you will blow away. Did Letty write you about the Laetitia Bingham? The commandant had her built on the settlement. I believe there’s nothing that man can not
do, if he puts his mind to it. He named her, of course, after Letty.’

Against such purposeful animation Frances could persist no further, but was left only with the trifling independence of continuing to stand, and of asserting that Letty’s second name was Anne, not Bingham. ‘So he must have named the boat after their little girl.’

‘Indeed? Oh, but I am certain.’

So was Frances certain, but her bonnet now blew off and saved her from insistence. As she twirled on a heel and threw up her hands to catch it, she let go her shawl, which slipped down her back and dropped to the deck. By the time she had retrieved it she saw that Captain Clunie, who had evidently just come up on deck, had picked up her bonnet and was offering it to her with a bow. He was about thirty-five, big and staid, and during a seven-day voyage on which neither had been sick, she had found him almost entirely silent. Frances was seventeen; she was not stupid, but was often absurd. His silences had had the unexpected effect of making her gush. Shamed by this, she had vowed each time never to do it again, yet at each meeting had done it again, and indeed, was doing it now.

‘Oh, thank you, Captain. You have saved my very life!’

He gave his little blink, his little bow. Mrs Bulwer fluttered up and set herself at Frances’s side. Her clothes had so many loose surfaces—shawls, veils, ribbons,
capes, fringes—that in the wind she seemed to ripple all over with sharp little black flames. She confronted Captain Clunie with her muff raised vertically on one hand. ‘Captain, do tell us your wife is soon to join you on the settlement?’

His wife, he replied, was visiting her parents in Oxfordshire. She would soon sail for the colony, but whether she came to the settlement or not would depend on the length of his stay. He excused himself with another bow, then turned away and set himself to pace the small deck.

Mrs Bulwer set her chin in the end of her muff. ‘H’mmm.’ But then she saw that Frances, to free both hands for attention to her loose hair, was gripping her bonnet and shawl between her bent knees. She sprang forward. ‘Give those to me!’

Frances saw in her outraged face the reflection of her own lack of grace and propriety; she unloosed her knees and let her take the bonnet and shawl.

‘Now, either go below, or tuck all your hair under your bonnet. It is better to look skinned than like a tinker woman.’

Louisa Harbin, very tall and thin, and clutching about her with long hands a furred and hooded mantle of dark blue, dragged her feet as she crossed the deck to her chair. She had just come up from below. Her big lips were compressed and her deeply lidded eyes all but
shut. She sat down in a resigned but gingerly way, shut her eyes completely, and folded her hands in her lap. The fur trim on her mantle, from her habit of clutching it, was worn to the hide on the breast and inside cuffs. Mrs Bulwer clucked with her tongue and hurried over to her.

‘Louisa, I am happy to see you so well.’

Louisa opened her eyes. ‘I am always a little better, Amelia, in the bay.’ Her voice was languid but precise. ‘But pray, don’t call me well.’

‘The great thing is not to give in to it. Look, here is Miss O’Beirne.’ Mrs Bulwer took Frances by an arm and drew her forward. ‘Here is Frances.’

‘So it is.’ The sick equine face in the dark hood quite pleasantly smiled. ‘Frances, do I look well?’ Frances hesitated.

‘Thank you, my dear.’

‘Well, I did not mean well, Louisa, but well enough. You can help us. Did the commandant name the Laetitia Bingham after Letty or the little girl?’

‘The little girl. He named something else after Letty. I think it was a plain. You are looking at me in great puzzlement, Frances. Why?’

‘Your face looks thinner, ma’am.’

‘But not because she has been sick. She had four teeth drawn in Sydney, and the swelling went down on the voyage.’

‘Yes, Frances, I had that lovely fat face when we
embarked. I expect you thought me quite bonny. Come and sit here, out of the wind. I am glad to see you brought warm garments. So many don’t.’

‘Letty told me to,’ said Frances, as she sat down.

‘The first people,’ said Amelia Bulwer, ‘brought no warm garments at all. Not for anybody. They say the whole settlement was a-shiver every night from June to September, but the commissariat in Sydney could not be persuaded of it. They said it was the tropics, and how could anyone be cold in the tropics.’

In spite of her vivacity, most of Amelia’s attention was for Captain Clunie as he passed and repassed. ‘But what a difference these days!’ she said distractedly.

‘Louisa, I have been telling Frances how comfortable we all are now.’

‘You’ve been telling her how good and sweet and amiable we all are. I know you, Amelia. No wonder she looks dejected. You make the place sound insipid.’

‘Then see if you can cheer her.’

Amelia fluttered away as she spoke and accosted Captain Clunie. His pause was of the briefest, his bow little more than a headthrust, like the first forward move of a pigeon; but she was not deterred from falling into step at his side, talking and leaning forward to trace the effect of her words in his face.

‘How her clothes blow about,’ said Louisa. ‘Though it suits her. It makes her look less like a porcupine. She is in mourning again. At this rate her Lancelot will
soon purchase his captaincy. These journeys are very tiresome. We shall hardly be there before dusk.’

‘Mrs Harbin, is it an insipid place?’

‘Not exactly. What do you think of our new captain?’

‘If I dislike him, it is only because he makes me dislike myself. I seem doomed to act foolishly in his presence. Some people know in advance how they will act, but I don’t. I am made up of hundreds of persons, and I never know which one will come out. I am at the mercy of my company. I think I divine what they believe me to be, then can’t help acting the part. Which means I respond differently to everybody, and falsely to all but a few. And when I meet one of those few, I am so grateful that I become excited, and talk too much, and put them off. Were you ever like that, Mrs Harbin?’

‘Yes,’ said Louisa in a startled voice. ‘Yours seems an extreme case. But it’s true I was slightly like that.’

‘I shall change, too. I have determined to change.’

‘It would certainly be more comfortable. You must acquire a manner, and refer your intelligence to it, and most of your instincts. That’s the way it’s done. Of course you must work at it. But you will have Letty to help you now.’

‘That’s what Mrs Bulwer told me,’ said Frances in disappointment.

‘Amelia is not always wrong. And I am sure she took the greatest trouble with you. Letty is first in
consequence among us, and you share her greater glory besides.’

‘Do you mean our cousin Lord Clanricarde? I have never met him.’

‘Gracious, don’t tell Amelia.’

‘But Letty has, two or three times.’

‘Better not tell her that, either.’

‘I see. Does Letty—’

‘Say no more, child. What we were speaking of before is of more interest. At the mercy of your company. It’s a striking phrase. How did your company in Sydney affect you?’ She turned fully to face Frances, setting back her hood a few inches to disclose a hair-piece of tight titian curls. ‘I speak of the Hall girls.’

Frances quickly put a hand to her smallpox scars, then as quickly folded it with the other in her lap. ‘I felt myself with them. Never more so with anyone. Except the servants at home, and my two little sisters. And one other, a gentleman. But no,’ she said, in her scrupulous way, ‘I am apt to deceive myself about gentlemen. I will only say this—that with the Hall girls I felt almost entirely myself.’

‘And so you talked too much, and put them off.’

‘No. It wasn’t like that with them. I think I let them talk too much. We walked all over the Surry Hills, talking and talking.’ Frances broke into laughter. ‘You should have seen us!’

Her transforming laughter made Louisa look at
her with a new kind of attention. ‘I did,’ she said. ‘Not on the Surry Hills, but in George Street. Six Hall girls, of all sizes, and two young men with open collars. The girls were pointed out to me as the daughters of the imprisoned editor. My informant didn’t know the young men, or you. But I recognised you when I saw you on the Isabella.’

‘You can’t be a dyed-in-the-wool tory, then. You were so nice to me.’

‘Dyed-in-the-wool? I don’t think I’m a dyed-in-the-wool anything. From time to time I am reached by these new ideas, but I’m too lazy to disturb myself with them. I confess they could be disturbing. I must tell you this, however—I am not the only one who saw you with the Hall girls.’

‘Mrs Darling? When I visited Government House, I fancied she looked at me strangely.’

‘I was not thinking of such elevated persons. Amelia Bulwer saw you.’

Amelia, now stationary at the side with Captain Clunie, was still talking. Frances pulled a quick wry childish face. ‘Well, I don’t care. They may say what they please. Elizabeth and Barbara Hall are heroines, and Mr Edward Smith Hall is a hero.’

‘I take it Elizabeth and Barbara are the two eldest, who care for all the others?’

‘There are emancipist servants.’

‘You don’t think it irresponsible of Mr Smith Hall
to get himself jailed, and leave his daughters with former convicts?’

Frances had seen a portrait of the editor. She recalled a thin face, an intense but smiling gaze, a loose cravat. She raised her chin. ‘He is in jail in the cause of truth and justice.’

‘Gracious, which of your many selves is this?’

Frances was herself conscious of having put it badly, of having been both banal and freakish, the one in the words chosen, the other in the exalted tone. But though tempted by Louisa’s invitation to laugh and forget it, she felt obliged to persist.

‘I hope it’s the best of my selves, ma’am. Mr Smith Hall asks for trial by jury for everyone. He would have no trial by military officers, nor a selected council instead of an elected assembly. And he sets himself against all sentences that exceed the law, and in that respect he spares no one, not Governor Darling himself. You must have heard, ma’am, of Governor Darling’s sentence on those two soldiers.’

Louisa had shut her eyes. ‘I suppose you are proving your theory,’ she murmured. ‘After seeing you with those girls I did expect you to be like this.’

But still Frances would not stop. ‘And you must know that one of them died, and that Mr Smith Hall wrote very strongly about it in the Monitor. And that’s why the governor hates him, and induces the persons he criticises to bring libel actions. No, not induces. Instructs.’
‘Do you know which persons are bringing these current libel actions, Frances?’

Frances looked slightly aghast at this sterner tone, but continued with the same childish exaltation as before. ‘There are a number. I have heard names. I have forgotten. All I know is that Governor Darling is determined to bring Mr Smith Hall down. And he refuses to be brought down. So he is kept in jail.’

‘From where he continues to edit his journal.’

‘He is so brave.’

‘Any reply I make will sound ridiculous. You have fallen into a nest of radicals.’

‘He proclaims himself a liberal tory.’

‘What is that? No, pray don’t tell me. I expect it is something like a heathen christian. There are plenty of those, though they seldom proclaim themselves.’ Louisa was looking at Frances with curiosity and amusement. ‘However did you become acquainted with the wretched girls?’

‘Through a young gentleman. A passenger with me in the Hooghly.’

‘One of the young men with open collars?’

‘Yes. The dark one. Mr Edmund Joyce.’

‘Was he the “one other” you spoke of?’

‘He was. He had a letter to Mr Smith Hall.’

‘He looked as if he would have a letter to Mr Smith Hall.’

‘From Mr Joseph Hume.’
‘Indeed!’ Louisa reflected for a moment. ‘Ah, but there will never be a whig government,’ she then said with confidence.

‘We believe there will be.’

‘Very well. But even so, how radical are they?’

‘I know nothing of radicals. I speak of reformers. There are reformers among them.’

‘Yes, and how they embarrass the rest! And in any case, child, what would be the use? Even if they took the Commons, the Lords would head them off. Here is our bread and gruel.’

But Frances, ignoring the woman who was serving them, said with indignation, ‘Is that what you hope for, ma’am?’

‘I’m sure I don’t care. But facts must be faced.’

‘And injustice must rule?’

‘You must surely be hungry. Thank you, Madge.’

Frances also murmured her thanks, and looked up into the woman’s face. One of the commandant’s household servants, sent to serve her on the voyage, she was short and thick, with swarthy skin lined in a random and peculiar manner, and small black eyes that reminded Frances of struggling beetles. Her dress was of coarse grey cotton, but she displayed no number, and round her neck she wore a clean muslin kerchief. Before she bobbed and turned away, Frances detected in her expression something of the tolerance towards herself displayed by Louisa, but while Louisa’s was
open and ironic, this woman’s seemed contemptuous and sly. The gruel was greasy but scented with herbs. Louisa ate and drank with thoughtful slow placidity, but Frances, who felt she had talked herself into a trap she could not define, and who was dismayed because the convict Madge Noakes aroused revulsion in her instead of pity, drank with her head bent and encircled the cup with her hands.

Captain Clunie and Mrs Bulwer were taking their gruel standing at the side.

‘Mind,’ said Captain Clunie, ‘some of Smith Hall’s proposals are already in practice at home, but that is not to say they’re practicable in a colony partly populated by former convicts.’

‘Exactly! It is not to say so.’

‘Besides, I dislike the ranting of fellows like that.’

‘The ranting. Exactly! Here is Madge Noakes to take our cups. Madge, I hope Mr Cowper was able to take some gruel.’

‘He could not be woke, ma’am.’

‘Is Mr Cowper often in this state?’ asked Clunie when the woman had gone. Clunie had not been long in the colony.

‘H’mmm. I think I shall only say that in this instance his weakness may be compounded by sea-sickness. Oh—but—such a son for such a father! When I called on the Reverend Cowper in Sydney, I asked when the
gospel was to be carried to our poor native blacks. His
dear face grew grave. “We don’t want a repetition of
the Reverend Vincent incident,” he said. Not a word
of blame for the commandant. He is a saint.’

But at the mention of the commandant Clunie
had coolly turned his head. Across the deck, Madge
Noakes was taking the cups from Louisa and Frances.
‘Why was that girl allowed to roam about like that?’ he
asked in an offended voice. ‘Why wasn’t she put with
some decent woman?’

‘But you were staying with Mrs Pollard,’ said Louisa.
‘Such a starchy old thing. Yet she let you go about like
that. Does she tipple?’

‘No!’ Frances was forced to laugh at last. ‘She was
sick. She let me go about with her daughter.’

‘Oh. Who had a friend she wished to visit. Don’t
reply. I am not asking you to betray anyone. I find it all
very interesting. I am not much in the way of meeting
radicals. I expect there is a kind of excitement in the
lives of such people. They certainly look excited. All
the same, you will change these opinions in two or
three weeks.’

‘Neither two nor three,’ said Frances. ‘Never!’

‘You contradict yourself.’

‘How?’

‘You said you were at the mercy of your
company.’
Frances put a hand to her cheek, frowning and staring ahead of her. Lieutenant Edwards of the fifty-seventh, who had been sent from the settlement to discharge the *Isabella*, had come up on deck and was talking to Captain Clunie, while Amelia Bulwer, with swinging skirts, now paced the deck silently and alone except for her gliding shadow. ‘Then I shall have to learn to resist it,’ said Frances in an undecided voice.

‘Learn to adapt to it. Adapt. These ideas will impede you. But never mind, so quickly picked up, they will be quickly dropped.’

‘But were they quickly picked up? I think—they began a long time ago. After mama died, Letty and Cass lived most of the year with our Dublin or Bristol aunts, and papa was—hard to talk to, and Lydia and Hermione were only babies, so I was mostly with the servants, and they were a link with the people about. And there was famine, and in Sligo, some rioting. Which is indeed why Captain Logan was sent there.’

But when she looked to Louisa for a reply, she saw an averted head, deeply hooded again. Rebuffed by what she took for boredom, she got up and went to the side. But almost immediately she ran back. ‘Mrs Harbin, we have entered the river.’

The reply seemed to come from cold distances. ‘I know. I recognised that clump of pines.’

To Frances’s eyes, half-shut against the sun, the thin branches of the pines melted away and left the dark
tufts of foliage as if exploding in air. ‘They are very curious,’ she said timidly.

Louisa’s hooded head did not move. ‘Quite distinctive.’

‘We must be nearly there.’

‘Hours yet.’

But Frances, at the side again, saw in the thick brown swirls just below the surface of the water, a first greeting from their destination. Since nobody else seemed in the least excited, she crossed her arms on her breast, over her shawl, and hugged herself. But almost at once, this flush of excitement receded, leaving her face pale and frightened. She stared for a moment at the swirls of mud, then turned and went back slowly to Louisa. Refusing now to be unnerved by that motionless hooded figure, she sat down and spoke softly and earnestly.

‘I didn’t know it was a penal station.’

Louisa drew back her head. For the first time, she looked angry. ‘Impossible!’

‘Oh, I knew—’

‘Certainly you did.’

‘I have put it badly.’

‘Then put it well.’

‘I knew it was a penal station. And I knew it was for those convicted twice, once at home and again in the colony. But I didn’t know it was only a penal station. I thought of it as a mixture of convict and free.
Like Sydney, only smaller. Letty simply didn’t think to explain the difference. I didn’t know the waters were proscribed for fifty miles around. And the land too. I didn’t know that the commandant is coroner and sole magistrate and censor. I didn’t dream that every single article that enters is under his scrutiny—all mail, every single thing.’

‘And who informed you?’

‘Mr Edmund Joyce. We mean to correspond.’

‘My dear girl, you are right about the proscription of the land and water, but about the mail, someone has exaggerated. Those are the regulations, certainly, partly because where there are ships there is smuggling. But the commandant will not examine mail sent or received by his own household, or the officers’ households either. That’s what I dislike about your radicals—their childish suspicions and crude assumptions. It is always the same. Directly one begins to sympathise with them a little, something of this sort occurs, and puts one off. Oh but come now, don’t cry because your friends were mistaken.’

Frances wiped her eyes and cheeks. ‘I am not. I am crying because I’m afraid.’

‘Lord, child! What of?’

‘I suppose—of arriving. You don’t like it yourself, ma’am, it seems to me.’

‘A mood. It comes when we enter the river, and goes as fast as it comes.’ Louisa set back her hood. ‘See
me now, looking forward to my books and my sketching pads, and to tea from a china cup. And as for you, my dear, you are going to your own sister.’

‘A stranger. I haven’t seen her for eight years. And Captain Logan,’ said Frances, passionate through fresh tears, ‘is a perfect stranger.’

Louisa set a long knobbly hand on one of hers. She said no more, but looked around the great sky as if finding there a confirmation that it was indeed a confounding world into which such young and lonely creatures were venturing every day. And no matter in what bold ignorance they set out, they must observe this detail, and that detail, until it must occur to them, one day, to be frightened. Frances had stopped crying; Louisa patted her hand. Her own two daughters, aged ten and twelve, were with relatives in England. She found it hard to recall their features, a fact she pressed home to her husband by pretending to forget their names. Captain Clunie and Lieutenant Edwards had gone below, and Amelia Bulwer was crossing the deck towards them.

‘You have not done much to cheer her,’ she remarked. But without a second glance at Frances, she sat on Louisa’s other side and spoke close to her ear.

‘He has come to relieve Lieutenant Bainbrigge.’

‘We all know that.’

‘But it is all we know. And what is more curious, it seems to be all he knows. But to send a captain—’ she
broke off and directed a glance across Louisa at Frances. ‘Well, it is of no consequence,’ she said lightly.

Frances excused herself and got up and went to the side. ‘But to send a captain,’ said Amelia, ‘to relieve a lieutenant? to become subordinate to another captain? It is not natural.’

‘You make too much of it.’

‘All the same, all the same, I wonder if he has come to take the command.’

‘Very likely, if Captain Logan’s regiment is for India.’

‘If the fifty-seventh is for India, it will not be until next year. This is only August.’

‘Or if the commandant is needed in Sydney.’

‘To press his libel action? Well, to be sure. But an absence of a few weeks hardly warrants a captain as relief. Indeed, if Captain Clunie is not to take the command, it is a perfect riddle.’

‘There will be an answer to it in the mailbag, Amelia. Nobody is sent without a covering letter from Mr Macleay.’

Alexander Macleay, colonial secretary in Sydney, was Governor Darling’s closest colleague. ‘I am sure I hope so,’ said Amelia. ‘But there has been talk, and one does wonder. Does she, by the by—’ she pointed with her muff at Frances’s back—’know what the father of her boon companions wrote about her sister’s husband?’
‘I have not told her.’
‘She ought to be told.’
‘Leave her to Letty.’

The muff was still pointing at Frances, though Amelia’s eyes were watching Louisa’s face. ‘A delightful young lady. But does she think a little too well of herself?’

‘No. Only a little too much. How boring these journeys are. I wish we were there.’
‘Dear Victor will be enchanted to see you.’
‘I shall be a change from overseers’ wives, to be sure.’

Amelia put her muff to her mouth and giggled into it. ‘You are bold beyond anything.’
‘Glum rather than bold. I shan’t be enchanted to see dear Victor.’
‘Louisa, at heart he is the best of men. In my Lance-lot’s opinion he is second to none.’
‘I know that, Amelia.’
‘Damon and Pythias. How pleasant it is to see them at night, with their pipes. I think, Louisa, the peace of our little community during the next few months will depend on how congenial our good commandant finds our new captain. But I am confident they will get on. Both are Scots, both much of an age, both of a foot regiment . . . Indeed, I should not care for the task of establishing seniority. Oh, Louisa, look at that girl. I am not a critical woman, but just look.’
Frances was standing with her elbows on the rail, her chin in her hands, and her bottom stuck out.

‘But her ignorance is not her fault,’ said Amelia. ‘It is the old old sad story, Louisa. Brought up by servants!’

I shall live on that island, said Frances to herself, I shall live there for ever with my beloved husband.

Her continuous search for a sanctuary, which was one aspect of her fear of the gaping world, had been directed by her reading into romantic expression. She had hardly admitted to herself her fear of the world, but that she knew her search to be only a fantasy was apparent in her choice of places, for she never chose any real or practicable place, but was attracted only by glimpses and suggestions and cities in clouds. In this case, the island rising out of the muddy river, though made more pleasant by contrast with flat and undistinguished shores, was only a mound of yellow sand on which grew a small grove of slender trees with thin foliage blowing all one way. In contour as plain as a pebble, it was a token or toy island, and since it was too small and unprovided to live on, it did not combat, by raising questions of ways and means, its ideal occupation by Frances and her husband. Nor did the figure of the husband demand gross definition, but was simply required to exist there, in the featureless blaze of romance. She fell into one of her elated trances. Her
eyes, unfocused by staring at the island, could now see only a blurred image of the trees, like tall candles with green flames blown sideways, and presently they too disappeared, and so did the husband, and the dream of retreat itself, leaving her elation in its pure form, a matter of the affinity of her youth with air and water. She reasoned that if she were conscious of being asleep with her eyes open, she could not really be asleep, and yet she did maintain a kind of sleep, holding herself most beautifully at the very margin of the unconscious. And in this state time became so distorted that she could have believed this shortest stage of her journey to be the longest—longer than from Cork to Sydney, longer than from Sydney to Dunwich. But the progress of a new fantasy (that they would sail on like this for ever and ever) was impeded by an anxiety, only faintly jarring at first, but presently formulating itself into two words.

‘My hair.’

They would soon arrive. All her hair, as commanded by Amelia, was thrust beneath her bonnet: she must go below and dress it.

‘How old are you?’ asked Henry Cowper.

‘Are you speaking to me?’

‘My face is three inches from yours. Who else might I be speaking to?’

Frances repressed nervous giggles. ‘I am nearly eighteen.’
‘Good Lord. You look as old as your sister.’
‘It’s my hair.’
‘Hair? I don’t see any hair.’
‘That’s what I mean. It was too wobbly underfoot to dress it. I had to poke it all under my bonnet again.’

‘Why didn’t you get Madge Noakes to help you?’
She was sobered by the memory of Madge Noakes’s face gliding into the dark mirror behind her shoulder.
‘She offered her help, but I like to do my own hair.’

‘Then you ought to get a hairpiece like Mrs Harbin’s.’ He raised his voice for the benefit of Louisa, who stood nearby with her back turned. ‘Mrs Harbin has a hairpiece,’ he said, ‘like six red dead snails.’ Louisa looked at him over her shoulder and pursed her lips thoughtfully. Frances had discarded her shawl, cinched her waist with a wide belt, and was holding a reticule. Lieutenant Edwards sauntered by with his hands at his back, Amelia Bulwer and Captain Clunie stood in tired silence, and Madge Noakes and the Bulwers’ servant Maria, holding shawls and cloaks and muffes, talked apart in low voices. There was a slight whistling in the sails, a hurried whispering sound in the wash. Louisa Harbin, still looking over her shoulder at Henry, raised her eyebrows and drawled, ‘Lord, Henry, how you smell of rum.’

‘I always smell of rum.’
Frances giggled again. Louisa looked at her hands
fiddling with the reticule, then stepped back and stood at her side. On the banks of an olive green creek vines like ropes were twisted round gigantic trees with buttressed roots. Frances’s eyes searched the dark alleys between the trees, her imagination engaged by their unseen extensions; but she was tired and nervous, and rather cold (for she had discarded her shawl out of vanity), and could not for the moment proceed with fantasy. Then a sudden bend in the river disclosed another kind of country: on one bank pleasant wooded hills, and on the other low fields swarming with men in yellow hoeing between rows of very young wheat. They were so close that Frances could hear the unrhymic sounds of their shifting irons and the collapsing links of chain. Overseers, carrying heavy sticks, lumbered over the unsettled soil among them, and on the perimeter of the field moved red-coated soldiers, crosses of white webbing stark against their breasts, and bayonets shining and precise against field and sky. All the passengers on the cutter were watching them. Captain Clunie exclaimed at the area under cultivation, and Amelia Bulwer told him in a fast pleased voice of other fields, other crops. In the streets of Sydney Frances had seen iron gangs coming and going from barracks, but she had never before seen so many at once, and nor had she seen them at work. It was their great number, perhaps, or the clumsiness of their fettered movements that made them appear sub-human, like animals adapted to mens’
work or goblins from under the hill. She hated herself for her aversion from them, for the recoil of her spirit and the agitation of her heart. She was still standing between Louisa and Henry Cowper. ‘Dear God,’ she whispered, ‘why must they look like that?’

Both turned to look at her. She felt in their attitudes a kind of caution. ‘Like what?’ asked Henry Cowper.

To spare them, or herself, she temporised. ‘They are so—small.’

Henry Cowper shrugged, thrust his hands in his pockets, and with a swing of his shoulders moved away. He stood at a short distance, hands still in pockets, chin sunk in cravat, and his curved legs thrusting his calves against his trousers. Frances wondered how such a weary face could look so childish. ‘Mrs Bulwer told me he is good,’ she said to Louisa.

‘Amelia will never speak ill of anyone, though she sometimes pulls faces.’

‘Then he is not good?’

‘I am no judge of goodness. I believe he sometimes tries to be.’

The wheatfield was spread across a long point of land. The cutter had passed the head of this point, and had reached the other side, when cries broke out from the field. One man had grasped his hoe near the blade and was bringing it down upon his neighbour’s head and shoulders. The attacked man fell, his attacker fell with him, and the rest of the gang drew inwards about
them. The soldiers, their feet avoiding the young wheat, began to converge on this congestion of yellow, but before they could arrive it was broken into by two overseers. These, parting the gang, disclosed the two on the ground, one felled, the other propped on an arm like a man at a picnic. The soldiers drew back and watched, while on the cutter, the two convict women, and all the passengers except Frances, were watching in the same manner, impassive yet attentive. But the two overseers bent over the men on the ground and obscured them from view. The rest of the overseers brandished their sticks and shouted something like, ‘Hup! Hup!’ The prisoners began to work again, and the passengers to turn away.

Henry Cowper came back to Louisa and Frances. ‘The fellow picked his time.’

‘Do you mean—’ began Frances. The shock of the incident had made her voice hoarse; she cleared her throat. ‘Do you mean he wanted us to see?’

‘No doubt of it.’ His voice still held a shade of the sulkiness, or resentment, with which he had met her first emotional response to the prisoners. ‘It’s a thing they often do,’ he said.

The knowledge did not eliminate Frances’s pity, but tempered it with an unwelcome reserve. ‘It simply shows,’ she said, reaching back for that first pity, ‘their great desperation.’

‘And their great cunning, alas,’ said Louisa.
‘It is said they kill because they wish to hang,’ said Frances.

Henry nodded towards the receding wheatfield.
‘There’s no evidence that the fellow was killed.’
‘No. But I have heard it of others. And read of it, too.’

‘In the Monitor, no doubt,’ said Louisa. ‘Miss O’Beirne,’ she said to Henry, ‘is an admirer of Mr Smith Hall.’

Frances had not imagined he could look shocked. He opened his little blue eyes as wide as possible. ‘Oh, I say! I say!’

‘Is Mr Smith Hall such a monster?’ cried Frances; but Louisa put a hand on her arm and said peremptorily, ‘Not so loud!’ And Frances, looking about her, caught the cold eyes of Amelia Bulwer, and noted Lieutenant Edwards’s blank astonishment and Captain Clunie’s quelling little blink. She lowered her voice, but still spoke with passion. ‘Mr Smith Hall would not have them worked in chains. And when Mrs Shelley was in Pisa—’

‘Mrs Shelley?’ echoed Henry with bewilderment. ‘The widow of the poet,’ interposed Louisa. ‘When Mrs Shelley was in Pisa, and saw chained prisoners sweeping the streets, she refused to stay.’

‘How did that profit them?’ asked Henry. ‘Had she money of her own?’ enquired Louisa. ‘It may have profited them,’ said Frances to Henry,
‘by drawing attention to their condition.’ And to Louisa she replied, rather more thoughtfully, ‘I don’t know about the money.’

Frances herself had eighteen pounds a year, from her mother.

Amelia Bulwer crossed over to them. After glancing unsmilingly from Louisa to Henry, she put both hands on Frances’s, over her reticule, and looked her full in the eyes. ‘Round the next bend you will see our botanical gardens. And round the one after that—’ she brought up her hands and softly clapped them—‘the settlement!’

On the land a loud bell began to ring. Frances, who knew the botanical gardens to be cultivated by prisoners, and was prepared to find them hateful, was surprised by their peacefulness, their boskiness and glow. It was the first stage of dusk, when shadows deepen but the light grows for a while more intense. The banana trees, the citrus and figs, the grapevines and cane, all in separate plantations, covered the whole of the sloping bank. The mustered prisoners, half-hidden by foliage, were visible only as an undulating ridge of yellow, a colour that glowed as innocently, against the violet shadows and vivid greens, as the shaddocks and lemons nearer the shore. The glimpses of red—soldiers’ coats—could have been the flowers of Rio, and when she saw, on the crest of the hill, a small octagonal cottage with a pointed roof, she gave a cry
of pleasure, and Amelia Bulwer, watching her across the deck, nodded in vindication. The bell had stopped ringing.

Again they were rounding a long point defined by the windings of the river. The gardens lay on its eastern side, and when they left them behind, and came within sight of the western bank, Frances, like Amelia herself, brought up her hands and clapped them. The row of houses set in gardens, the smoking chimneys, the tall flagstaff and spirited fluttering flag, the barge crossing the river, the windmill on the hill, the cluster of people on the wharf, all this seemed to her the essence of homeliness and familiarity. A long line of yellow, flanked by spots of red, was moving in low billows of dust down the hill from the windmill, and more yellow, this time an irregular block, could be seen on the opposite side of the river, which the barge had now almost reached. But did not labourers all over the world walk home at dusk, and wait for ferries on river banks? To fortify Frances’s impression that the place was much better than she had lately supposed came memories of Sligo, came her knowledge that free men and women, and their children too, could die of hunger while these men ate. For the man lying in the wheatfield the peasant in the Sligo ditch offered himself as counterpoise.

Now that the cutter was drawing nearer, the figures on the stone wharf, near the neat and solid warehouse, could be defined as a wharfinger and his helpers, two
army officers, two women, and two children. One child, a small fair girl, was held in the arms of an old woman in a grey dress and white apron; the other, an auburn-haired boy, stood close by the side of a slender young woman, nuzzling her waist. Frances had no trouble in recognising her sister, for Letty’s curls were still cropped close to her head, and she still wore the kind of soft and high-waisted dress that Frances remembered. Quite unexpected, however, was her slender unencumbered figure. Frances turned to Louisa to remark that Letty must have miscarried, but was forestalled by Louisa making the same remark to Henry Cowper.

The two officers, both lieutenants of the seventeenth regiment, were soon identified by Louisa (again in a low remark to Henry) as ‘my poor Victor and Amelia’s ridiculous Lancelot’. It was nearly dark now. Lights were appearing in the houses, the wharfinger was lighting his lanterns, and the cutter was drawing close to the wharf, when three men came over the crest of the bank: a young soldier, a man in rough clothes holding aloft a torch, and Patrick Logan. Frances had remembered him accurately. With one glance she confirmed his height, his straightness, and the restless carriage of his head, but she now wondered if the curbed fastidious step, which had become in her mind almost his emblem, was not caused by the gradient and roughness of the ground, for it was nearly duplicated by the soldier at his side. For the rest, the torchlight
showed him to be heavier, stronger, older, harder. He jumped down to the wharf and walked alone out of the torchlight to stand behind Letty. Frances looked from his face to her sister’s, and once again felt the weakening flush of fear. She was too much at the mercy of her company, and was about to discover which of her unpredictable selves would advance to meet these two strangers.