

OUTCAST  
OF EDEN

An Australian  
Novel

By  
E. M. BAILY

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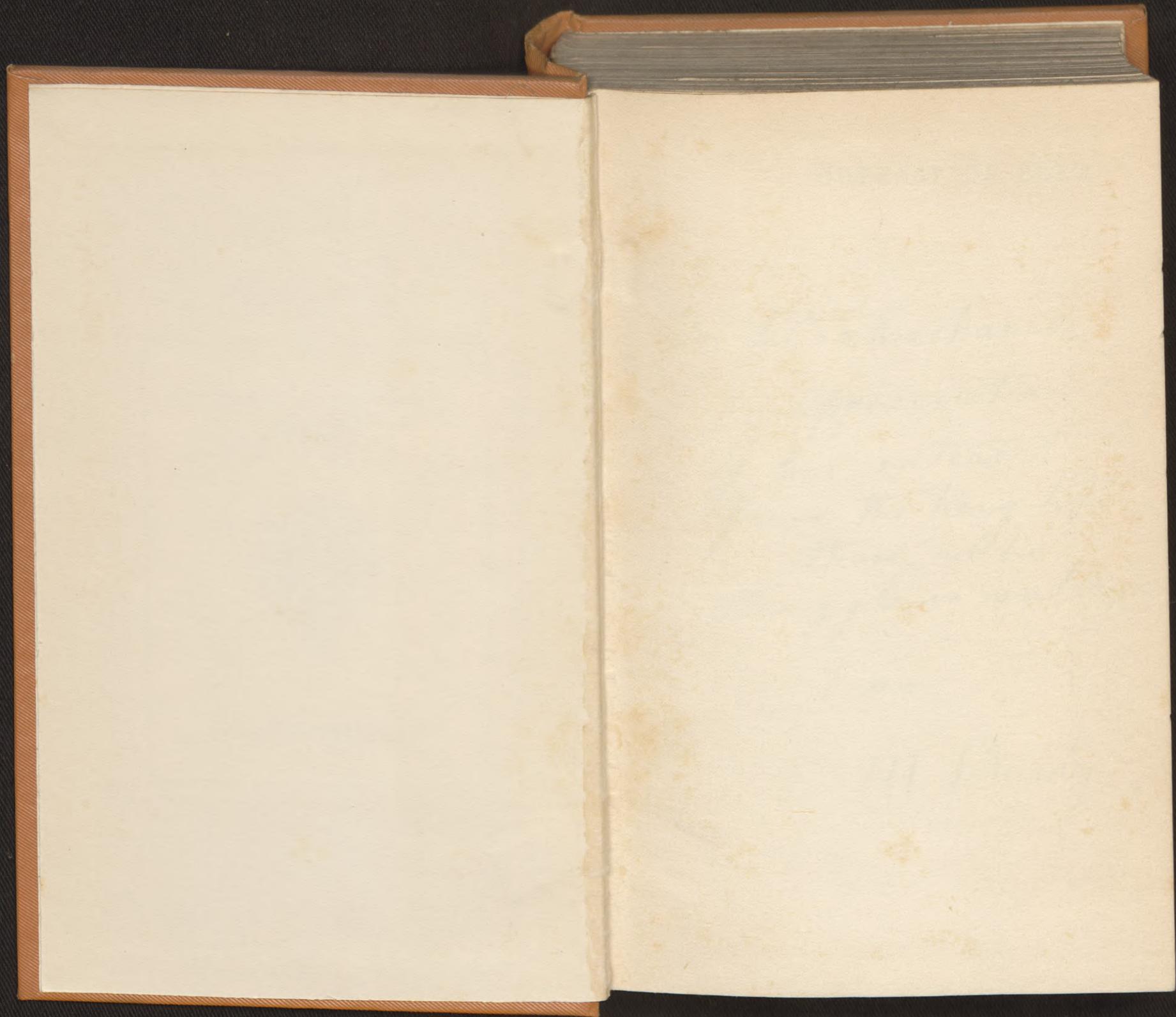
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OUTCAST OF EDEN

To D<sup>r</sup> Mackaness,

In appreciation  
of his interest  
from the heights  
in those who  
struggle in valleys

From.

E. M. Bairly

OUTCAST  
OF EDEN

BY  
E. M. BAILY



1933  
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## OUTCAST OF EDEN

“And He placed at the east  
of the garden . . . . .  
. . . . . A Fiery Sword . . . .  
to keep the way of the  
Tree of Life.”

# OUTCAST OF EDEN

## CHAPTER I.

"IT'S not as bad as it looks."

Tess Gordon looked at the calm figure at the wheel, and her grip on the side of the lorry relaxed. It was silly to feel scared, but, for a moment, she had really thought the lorry was getting out of control. Whirling down the side of the mountain with inky darkness all around, except where the yellow light from the lamps fell upon the road or showed yawning chasms directly in front was a bit trying on the nerves; and then, suddenly, to find the lorry rushing into what looked like a flooded river . . . . . It had caused her to catch her breath sharply. But the driver was taking it all calmly; he was as casual as if stepping into a tram.

"It certainly looks rather formidable," she ventured.

He steadied the heavy vehicle as it neared the water, and threw the engine into low gear.

"It's not so deep, but there's been a fresh, and it has washed big stones into the crossing; it's not too easy to get through just now."

They began to cross, and the jolts of the lorry confirmed his words; there were some very big stones.

Just as they seemed to be through the worst, the lorry gave an extra sharp jolt and stopped, the engine stalling.

Two hours later it crawled up the bank, a very weary and very wet driver at the wheel.

"I won't say anything about the next one," he remarked with a laugh.

"Oh, is there another one?"

"Two more."

"Oh well, you won't get much wetter," she consoled him.

She smiled as she thought of the situation. It was hours after dark, and she was alone with a total stranger in the wildest country she had ever seen, miles from anywhere. What would her friends in Sydney think of such a state of affairs. Yet she was making a joke of it. Her heart beat a little faster at the thought that two more river crossings lay ahead, and she couldn't conquer a feeling of horror whenever the huge lorry shot round a sharp curve where she could look down almost perpendicularly into the deep gorge below. Still, she was determined that these people among whom she was coming should never know how she felt. Admiration for this mail-carrier's courage and ability made her feel ashamed to show any sign of nervousness; and when the wheels again dipped into the river she was ready with a joke with him about getting his diving suit ready.

Safely over, the driver turned his attention to the road again, and Tess allowed her mind to wander back to her own affairs. Why was she so anxious to stifle her nervousness? Pride? Yes, but not merely a desire to appear well in the eyes of these people. The root of it lay further back than that. She could still see Mac's superior smile as he regarded her with amused indulgence. "Don't be alarmed, little girl; you'll soon get

over it. You'll be only about a hundred miles from civilisation, and when you're blue, you can gaze out on the glories of nature—better than a picture show any day."

"She's mad!" her mother had exclaimed irritably in support of Mac's satire.

"The first train'll land her back," Kit had sneered.

There had been something almost fierce in Kit's words afterwards, when they were alone.

"It strikes me you're stark dippy. Why don't you take the chance life is throwing at you? Be sensible and settle down. I wish I had half your chance. When you've come round, you'll see it all. Then, after those country bumpkins, Mac'll appear like a veritable prince. Fancy turning down a chance like this—a banking account unlimited—to go tearing off into the Never Never! Mad—simply mad! Don't forget that men are fickle; you never know. I won't promise not to vamp him myself as soon as you're out of the way."

Kit's calculating words were grinding out with the rattle of the lorry. Mac and his banking account. Was that one of the reasons why she had fled—to get away from Mac and from the duty expected of her; that of marrying him and getting her hands on that banking account? She had run away, yet even here he seemed to be still with her, dominating her. She seemed to see his steely penetrating eyes in the darkness. He was always so calm and self-sufficient. She had liked him; sometimes she had thought that she more than liked him. She still liked him, but why should everything be taken for granted? He had been too sure of her, and she had revolted. She felt resentful against him now, for even her sudden decision to go to the country

hadn't shaken his assurance. She had clearly seen his thought—that the lesson would be a good one. She could fancy him, on some future occasion, saying, with a self-satisfied smile, "Remember, Tess, your sudden rush of independence and how it ended."

But it hadn't ended yet, she reflected.

So deep were her reflections that she scarcely noticed the last crossing, and she was surprised when a dim light appeared ahead, and she felt the car slowing down.

"Here's the post office, Miss. I guess old Harry Brandon will be tired of waitin'."

As the lights of the lorry swung round from the main road, they revealed a collection of horses and vehicles, and a group of men about the door of the room that served as a post office.

"Lor' love us! Here 'e is at last!"

The big, rather untidy man, standing in the doorway, came forward as he spoke, and the mail-carrier hauled out a couple of big mail bags and handed them to him.

"Where have you been?" he demanded as he dragged the bags inside.

"Stuck down there in that bottom crossing. It beats me why some o' you fellows from up here can't get down there and take a few o' them boulders out . . . . And o' course it must happen just when I've got a young lady passenger on, too. She took it mighty well, especially comin' from Sydney."

Tess saw the postmaster pause in his work to look at her. The light of the lorry played upon his face, and she noticed that he was well advanced in years; his eyes were kindly and humorous.

"I'll tell your wife about this: always gettin' bogged in the river when there's a young lady passenger on."

"Where's Harry Brandon?" the other asked, ignoring the threat.

"Brandon?" The postmaster turned toward Tess. "Are you expectin' Brandon to meet you? Gosh! You've got a long way before you yet. He hasn't turned up yet. Must ha' got stuck in one o' the crossings, like Sam here."

He turned again to his mail bags, then he said:

"You better come in here and sit down; Lord knows how long Brandon will be. His old Lizzie might ha' tumbled to pieces on the road; you'd expect that to happen any old time. I don't know how it hangs together at all."

Tess surveyed the room as she came in. Somehow, the last words seemed very appropriate to the building as well as to the overdue "Lizzie." The postal business was scarcely screened from the rest of the room. It was typically a bachelor's establishment, rough to the point of ugliness. The whole place cried aloud from neglect; yet it was a relief to get inside and sit down. In the great open fireplace, the kettle was swinging over glowing coals, while the remains of a meal littered the rough table. It looked as though the postmaster, tired of waiting, had at last commenced his tea, only to be disturbed before he had finished.

She watched the men file in and take a hand with the sorting of the letters, making comments as they did so about the different people to whom they were addressed. It was all so strange and easy-going that she found herself fascinated.

"If Brandon doesn't come by the time I've finished dealing this mail out, I'll find you a cup o' tea," the postmaster called cheerily. "Here, Bill, are you takin' "

Grover's mail? It won't be anything flash, you know, but I guess you'll overlook that, especially after sittin' there in the river fer a couple of hours, with Sam down underneath fixin' the car—did yer get underneath, Sam?"

"Let me warn you, Miss," the mail-carrier retorted, "Joe, here, has tried his hand with every young lady round the district for the last twenty—thirty years. Never had no luck, but he's a good trier still. I thought I'd better put you wise."

The mail sorted, and most of it claimed, Joe turned his attention to the kettle.

"Now, we'll see what we can do."

Tess, meanwhile, had been debating with herself whether or not she would rather Brandon come before the promised tea could be made. The surroundings were not tempting, but she was tired and stiff, and the thirty miles from the railway had been long and rough. "Perhaps you'd like a bit of a wash?"

After a good deal of hunting, and a few jokes from Sam, who also came forward to share in the refreshments, Joe managed to unearth a clean towel. Tess supposed its cleanness, like character, should be judged by the law of relativity.

"I notice you don't offer me a wash," Sam complained.

"I thought you got wet enough in the river."

The delicious softness of the water had a wonderfully refreshing effect on Tess. She longed for a dab of powder, but her bag was still out in the lorry, and somehow—she glanced around the place—powder didn't seem to fit in with Joe's dwelling.

Never had she tasted tea like this. How, in the name of wonders, could Joe, with such rough and limited means, turn out such a divine beverage?

Some of the men still lingered outside talking. A new arrival, evidently from Brandon's direction, took Joe outside with mail.

"Seen anything o' Harry Brandon? Don't know what's become of him. There's a passenger here waitin' fer 'im. What's the road like up there?"

"Not too good," she heard the other reply. "Pretty slippery around the cutting. I took a lot of cattle along there yesterday. One of the calves ventured too near the edge and over he went. It's almost a straight drop on to the rocks at the bottom. I don't know how it escaped a broken neck. I had a job to get down to it. It looked dead enough too when I got there. I dragged it through the river to the other bank, and came back with the cart to take it home; thought it would do for pig feed; and when I got there, the silly thing was sittin' up lookin' at me. It's running about now as though it never knew what a crack on the head was. The river brought it round, I suppose—just slight concussion."

Tess hadn't seen the speaker's face; but she felt she could picture him by his voice; it was a voice to be remembered—a cultured voice, deep and strong, friendly and suggestive of humour.

"No, Harry hasn't gone over the cutting. I can hear his old bus now. A few miles off yet, but on the way." He turned, and, with a cheery "Good night," rode off.

A little while later, Sam walked out as the coughing, rattling car stopped.

"Gosh! You're a nice one, Harry. Here I bring a nice young lady along, make extra good pace and everything to give her a good impression of the place, and you let us down by sneakin' in three hours late."

"Don't worry," the other retorted. "What about the

river?"

"A mere detail—just a pause to admire its beauty; but here you've had Joe nearly in hysterics wondering what he was to do if you didn't turn up. I wouldn't be surprised if he gets quite ill from the strain."

"He'll get over it."

As Brandon approached the door, Tess looked up curiously. What sort of man would he be? She felt she could picture his wife from the letter.

She was conscious of a vague disappointment as she looked at him. He was very ordinary looking—rather rough, in fact. Most of the other men possessed splendid physique. Brandon was strong enough, but ordinary, phlegmatic. His large face was cast in serious lines; hard, Tess thought. He held out his hand.

"Sorry I'm late, Miss Gordon. Something went wrong with the jolly engine when I was starting out; then I ran out of juice, and had to walk back a couple of miles to get some. I'm glad Sam got stuck; takes some of the responsibility off me. Mrs. Brandon won't be able to blame me for it all."

His face lighted up with a smile; and there was a gentle quality in his voice that rather belied his rough appearance.

Tess surveyed the dilapidated car with some misgiving; and when at last it started off on the return journey, she found herself clinging to the side rather nervously. It seemed such a ramshackle old thing; it would surely suffer dissolution before the trip was over.

Brandon was too much occupied with steering to talk much. It was amazing to Tess that he could sit there so unconcernedly as the car bumped round the sharp turns and wound up the narrow cuttings in the moun-

tain side. What had Sam said? "Brandon'd take that old rattletrap through Hell itself if he had to." Well, it looked like it. He was quite at home with the old car. Her nervousness departed, and, weary with the journey, she dozed off in spite of all the bumps and turns of the road.

It was with a start she heard the grind of the brakes, and found the car at a standstill before a gate.

"We're here at last, and you'll be thankful," Brandon said sympathetically.

A few minutes later, the car drew up in front of the house, and a woman's voice hailed them from the verandah.

"Good Heavens, Harry, you're late! Whatever happened you? Whatever must Miss Gordon feel like?"

The rickety car door was wrenched open, and a pair of strong arms almost lifted her to the ground.

"My dear, I am glad to see you. I do hope all this terrible experience won't make you dislike the place. Come on inside; I've some good hot supper waiting for you."

Tess followed her, noticing, with appreciation, the wide verandahs and the solid comfort of the rooms and furniture. She smiled as she looked at Mrs. Brandon; her mental picture had not been far out. Short, round figure, good-natured, laughing eyes, warmth, kindness. She felt at ease immediately.

"You'll need a wash. This is your room. I hope you'll like it. Nothing elaborate about the place; we're only plain folk, but we'll do what we can to make you comfortable and happy with us."

Tess studied the kindly face with gratitude; she suspected that a good deal of Mrs. Brandon's time was

spent in trying to make people happy and comfortable. The whole house seemed to breathe a welcome. To Tess's hungry heart, it felt like the home for which one has longed in exile.

Back in the dining room, Mrs. Brandon confronted her husband, her face flushed with excitement.

"Did you ever see such a lovely girl? The way her hair curls . . . and her eyes like violets! She's that pretty, and not a bit stuck up . . . so different from any of the others we've had. Oh dear, I do hope she stays! But . . . with a face like that, she'd be sure to have heaps of admirers in the city. It's too good to be true; she'll get sick of the loneliness."

"Maybe," he replied. "But there couldn't have been such great attractions in the city, or she wouldn't have left it. Maybe she'll like the country life. You never can tell; women are queer cattle."

"Some of them are, and some aren't; they're not a bit more queer than the men if it comes to that. Women had no monopoly in that direction. I could mention a few men around here who would be hard to beat if it came to queerness. But I hope you're right about her . . . .But with her looks. . . ."

The door on the far side opened a fraction, and a hoarse whisper thrust itself through.

"Has she come? Can I see her, Ma?"

Tess walked in from her room, and Mrs. Brandon waved her to a chair.

"Come on, Miss Gordon; now for some tea."

"Can I, Ma?" the whisper persisted.

"It's young Laddie," Mrs. Brandon explained. "He's anxious to see you, Miss Gordon. He's been in bed for hours, but he doesn't seem to have gone to sleep. You'll

find him your most interested pupil. It's on his account we have a teacher here. You see, he's crippled and can't ride to school, yet he loves school more than the other two put together."

Tess smiled sympathetically.

"Bring him in, Mrs. Brandon, and let us be introduced."

The eager boy waited for no more; the door opened and he limped forward. Tess looked in surprise. What a wonderful face! Blue eyes—the richest blue she had ever seen—shone with a wealth of eagerness and affection. Eyes radiant with hope and expectation; features alight with intelligence and vivacity. His leg dragged sadly.

He studied her gravely, appraisingly; then his smile, brilliant as Spring sunshine, lit up his face.

Tess held out her hand.

"I hope we'll have a good time together, Laddie."

Laddie took the hand enthusiastically.

"You'll do," he commented frankly. "Gosh, you're different from our last teacher!" He broke into boyish laughter.

Tess glanced at his mother, and caught in her eyes the light of pride and wistful appeal that went straight to the heart. "Our last teacher was no use at all," Mrs. Brandon explained. "She only stopped a few months, and we were all glad when she'd gone. None o' them wanted me to try any more, but I said one bad coin didn't prove there were no good ones; and I was right, too." Laddie, satisfied, crept off with a smile.

"Wait till you see the other fellow," Harry Brandon warned.

"Oh, poor Jack!" his wife exclaimed. "He's as different—you'd never believe they were brothers. He hasn't

got a scrap o' patience with school. You'll find him the biggest duffer out. You know what boys are at that age—think it's awful to be taught by a governess. He'd rather be out riding brumbies in, or shooting dingoes. He's a real good boy, though, when you get to know him and understand him. Don't be too disappointed if you find him a bit of a handful at first."

"We'll hope for the best," Tess smiled.

## CHAPTER II.

TESS opened her eyes with the bewilderment that follows weird dreams. The light of the dawn came dimly through the heavy curtains, investing the furnishings of the room with a strangeness that, for a few moments, created a wave of homesickness in her half-awakened senses. The conservative side of her nature was endeavouring to cling to the solid ground of familiar things—the buzz of the city, the lure of the shops, the sight of Mac's confident face.

A brighter glow at the window dispelled the feeling, and, rousing herself, she slipped across and drew back the curtains. She caught her breath sharply at the prospect, then, throwing the window wide open, leaned out to drink in the glory of the morning. Down the slope on the right, a little creek wound its way among trees and shrubs to the river about half a mile away. The tall gums and oaks growing on its banks marked the river's course far up the winding valley until it was lost among the blue-curtained hills. Away beyond and above, radiant with the purple glory of the sunrise, stood the great wooded ranges, their towering minarets challenging the sky.

As she stood gazing away into the distance, two merry kookaburras at the bottom of the garden burst into peals of laughter; the rasping screech of the white cockatoos away in the distance and the chirp and song of a thousand other birds in the trees and shrubs mingled with the soft murmur of the river, making a perfect harmony

and thrilling her soul with delight. For a moment, another picture flashed before her mind—hills covered with line on line of houses, noisy trams rushing madly along streets between ambitious shops and flats whose ugly roofs offended the artistic eye. She contrasted the rush, dust and turmoil with the serene glory of the peaceful hills.

A timid knock interrupted her meditations.

"Come in," she called, as she slipped back into bed.

A girl of about eleven entered, carrying a cup of tea.

"Mother thought you might like some tea."

"Oh, she is good; so I would."

She took the tea, and caught the child's hand at the same time.

"And are you Vida?"

The girl nodded, smiling shyly. Tess noticed the round limbs and full face. The girl's figure was slim, but the likeness to her mother was very marked. She would grow plump later on.

"Vi! Vi!" came a call from the kitchen, and she darted out.

"Only the incorrigible Jack to see now," Tess reflected. "Perhaps he won't prove such an outlaw."

Feeling refreshed and tingling with eagerness to discover just how she would react to all her new surroundings, she dressed quickly and came out to the dining room. Mrs. Brandon smiled warmly from the kitchen door.

"Did you sleep well? No need to ask; you look as fresh as a rose. Some folks can't sleep in a strange bed." She sniffed. "You don't look like one to mollycoddle yourself with such a pack of imagination."

"Oh, I sleep fairly soundly anywhere," Tess confessed

with a laugh. "But last night I could have slept on a cement floor."

"You must have been tired; but you'll have the whole day to look around and get over it. I'll have breakfast ready for you in a moment."

It was while the breakfast was proceeding that Tess heard an aggrieved voice floating in from the back door.

"Oh, Mum, can't you manage without Vi to-day? I want to go out to look at the cattle in the back paddock."

"None of your nonsense, Jack; you know it's baking day, and I must have Vi helping me. It won't hurt you to do it; you ought to be glad."

"Oh, Mum!"

"Now, no more or I'll tell your father; you'll do as you're told." Tess strongly suspected that Jack's objectionable task, whatever it was, somehow involved her. A few minutes later, a face expressive of martyrdom and resignation, appeared in the doorway. It belonged to a boy of about thirteen. "Mum says I gotta take you—" he broke off suddenly as he saw her clearly for the first time.

"Are you Jack?" she asked sweetly, taking advantage of the pause.

"Yes, Miss."

She rose and held out her hand.

"Now I've seen all three of you, and I'm sure we'll be good friends."

He was a little uneasy, but evidently the sight of her complexion recalled his thoughts to his task and inspired him with a new hope.

"Mum says I gotta take you round to look at things. It's goin' ter be hot as . . . as billy-o; and I bet you'll

get sunburned; it makes all the skin peel off yer face. Walkin' is real hard work on this hilly country in hot weather. Ridin' 's different; if you'd only been able ter ride—"

She looked at him in a puzzled manner for a moment, and then broke into a merry laugh.

"Well, Jack, I believe I could stick on a horse. Would you teach me to ride if I promised to try?"

"Garn, you come from the city; all the city people are scared if a horse switches his tail. I bet yer wouldn't be game ter go near enough to put your hand on 'is neck."

"Well, you try me, and see. Bring one round and we'll start to-day; I'm not very fond of walking."

He studied her with growing respect.

"Yer not kiddin' me?"

"No, you get the horse, and I'll do my part."

He turned and hurried off.

"She's gonter ride," he called excitedly as he strode through the kitchen. "I'm catchin' Dan."

"Oh, you be careful; it's not safe," his mother cautioned. "Remember, Miss Gordon isn't like the girls up here."

Tess's eyes softened as she caught the note of anxiety on her behalf. She rose and went to the kitchen.

"You must be careful, Miss Gordon. The roads are so tricky. Are you sure you'll be alright?"

Impulsively, Tess bent and kissed her.

"I'm quite sure I'll be alright with Jack; he'll teach me."

Jack didn't see the wink that told volumes to his anxious mother.

"Oh well, if you're going riding, you'll be glad to take

some lunch with you."

A few minutes later, Tess came out ready for her first lesson. "Never thought about riding; didn't bring a thing with me fit to ride in. I hope Jack won't get a shock if my dress shows a little more leg than it should."

"I don't think he'll be fussy," Mrs. Brandon laughed.

The horses arrived, and Jack stood back open-mouthed as he watched her carelessly throw the bridle rein over Dan's head and swing lightly into the saddle.

"Is that the way I should get on?" she asked, as a loud peal of laughter burst from the doorway.

Jack was too much astonished to answer.

"Golly! You—you can ride!" Wonder and admiration lent a touch of awe to his voice; a new friendliness crept into his attitude. A girl who could ride couldn't be so dusty. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad having her to teach a fellow.

"Like to go up the river?" he inquired.

"Splendid! I love the river."

"Oh, she's nothin' now. Y' oughta see her in flood time, or even when there's been a fair amount o' rain up the mountain. You can cross her anywhere now and hardly get your feet wet; but when she fills up—gee! You'd be washed away in a jiffy. There's a big waterfall right up there near the head o' the river; you'll get a shock when you see it in flood time."

Jack had lost himself in his enthusiasm. He rattled on and on as they rode along, while Tess marvelled more and more at the beauty of the river singing over its rocky bed, laughing at the willows which dipped their feathery branches in sparkling waters.

"This is the junction of the two rivers," Jack explained.

"Our boundary is only a bit further up. See the big

waterhole below the junction there? That's the place for fish. It's awful deep." Tess noticed the road running to the water's edge, and a narrow cutting round the cliff on the other side.

"Where does that road go, Jack?"

"That's Steve Drummond's land over there; he lives away further out on that river."

Jack looked at the sun. They had turned aside to look at so many interesting things that the morning had slipped away before they were aware.

"This oughta do fer lunch." He indicated the shade of a very large tree. "Then, we can go up to 'The Lookout.' There's another crossing there. In flood time, it's the only way Steve can come over; but it's gotta be pretty bad before he'll go round there; he can mostly cross here."

They sat in the shade, enjoying the lunch Mrs. Brandon had packed; then, remounting, they proceeded up the river. The valley became narrower, and the road veered away from the river, rising steeply. Along the narrow ledge of road, they wound their way up and up till the river appeared a silver ribbon far below, winding and twisting between two rocky walls. Again the road turned downward, and the valley opened to a wide basin in the mountains. Crossing this basin, the road began to climb again.

Reaching the top after another long climb, Jack stopped and wheeled his horse about.

"This is 'The Lookout.'"

Tess followed his example.

"Oh!"

She felt a quick thrill of surprise and wonder that almost made the senses reel as her eye swept the amazing

panorama. They seemed to be standing high above everything except the towering peaks directly to the East, while, to the North, South and West, the ground fell away in magnificent terraces of mountain. Glimpses of other valleys, similar to their own, came to them over the blue-misted tops to right and left, and away to the West the whole series of lesser ranges sank, steeply at first, then more gently, until they merged into the rolling plains, so far away that they assumed the appearance of the ocean.

Even Jack's unsentimental nature was awed by the vastness of this mighty view.

"Our valley is the biggest," he explained. "The ranges at the head of our river seem to bend away like a horseshoe toward the coast country, and more rain falls in that bend. There's terrible scrub up there."

They approached the edge of the cliff and looked down to the river almost directly below. Jack drew Tess's attention to an immense wild fig tree growing on the rocks near the edge, its great roots twining about the rocks and forming a peculiar hollow like a great arm-chair.

"This is 'The Lookout' tree; makes a lovely seat fer a couple of people. They call it the lovers' tree, sometimes; but that's only because a girl we had stayin' with us a couple o' years ago caught a fellow that used ter work fer Steve over there. They used ter come up here ter spoon. She took him away ter Brisbane in the end; didn't like the country. That's the worst o' girls—yer never know what fad they'll get. He was a real decent chap, too."

Tess laughed outright at his blunt words; then she gazed in silence on the overwhelming glory of the scene

below. The day was warm, and insects hummed dreamily around. Under the hypnotic influence of the vast scene, Tess closed her eyes. Her senses reeled with the delight of it all; and the old tree seemed to be twining its gnarled roots about her, making itself part of her life. It was destined, she felt sure, to play a part in her future. It had a strange, luring effect—a fascinating influence; and yet it imparted a vague uneasiness, half frightening her. She opened her eyes with a start.

"Thought you were goin' ter have a sleep. It wouldn't go bad, but I suppose we'll have ter be gettin' back now, or Mum'll be in a stew, imaginin' yer drowned or lost or bitten by a snake or something. Mum's terrible like that. You should just hear her sometimes when we're late home. Dad says women are all like that. Auntie May was worse 'n Mum. Must be rotten bein' a woman."

Tess took a last lingering look, and reluctantly turned away to where the horses were tied up.

"How far is it to 'The Lookout' from home, Jack?"

"About twelve miles the way we came—along the river; but there's a shorter way across the hills—about seven. Not a bad track either, but most people like the river road because it's prettier."

Back at the homestead, Tess lay down on the couch in the dining room.

"I'm feeling stiff already, Mrs. Brandon. Twenty-four miles isn't bad for a first riding lesson, is it?"

"Oh, Jack can't get over it—a girl from the city who can ride! It's not natural."

Before my father died, we lived in the country a couple of years," Tess explained in a low voice. "I used to ride all over the place with Dad."

"It will be a great help to you here; maybe you won't

find the country so monotonous. It gets very lonely sometimes."

"I won't mind that a bit; in fact, that was one of the reasons I was anxious to get away from Sydney—I didn't have a moment to myself. I have a gay sister who glories in a houseful of gay company, and mother is fond of social life, too. I was rather the odd man out, except. . . . except with Dad."

The elder woman glanced at her sympathetically, understandingly, and, with true delicacy, forebore to comment.

At the tea table, Jack was mercilessly teased about the riding lesson. Tess responded to the free, happy atmosphere; they were delightful people. Harry Brandon, she noticed, took little part in the merry chatter. He didn't seem to fit in with the easy, happy style of the rest of the rest of the family, she thought. Was he always so silent and stern-looking? Or was he worried about something. She studied his face again. Yes, it was hard, she concluded—rather callous and cold. A few minutes later, his voice broke in for the first time during the meal. She felt at once that his voice was not hard.

"Vi, how long since you took any milk to them kittens?"

Vi looked down guiltily.

"I see 'em to-night down there; poor little things are nearly starved. You'll have to bring 'em back if you don't feed 'em."

He turned to Tess, and a smile lighted up his stern features.

"We get fair pestered out with cats here. Mrs. Brandon ordered me to drown this lot, but I couldn't manage it—

shirked it till it was too late; so the wife sent 'em down over the creek. We feed 'em till they're old enough to catch rabbits for themselves; but Vi forgets 'em."

"I'll see that they get some milk," Mrs. Brandon guaranteed. "Dad's that soft-hearted, he'd bring the pests back again. I'll drown the beasts myself if he does."

Tess was looking at the stern-faced man with a new light in her eyes. Worrying over a few stray kittens! Oh, these strange men of the bush—how easy to misjudge them!

"Hello, people!"

They all swung round with a start to see a tall figure in the doorway.

"Heavens! Where did you spring from, Steve? What did you do to the dogs? Never heard a whimper from them. Come on in."

Mrs. Brandon placed a chair for him as she spoke.

"You're just the man I want to see," Harry Brandon greeted him. "I was comin' across to see you as soon as I could dodge the work long enough."

"Come on," urged Mrs. Brandon. "Have some tea."

"Now, Mother, don't make any fuss over me. I've had tea, but I believe I can drink just one cup."

Tess, facing the doorway, studied the tall, sturdy figure framed there in the doorway. The man looked a typical bushman in his rough, careless clothes, yet there was something, some ease of manner or grace of movement, that differentiated him, and also there was a hint of culture in his speech and manner.

Mrs. Brandon, recollecting herself, introduced the newcomer to Tess.

"I wanted to meet you, Mr. Drummond," Tess told him. "Jack has been pointing out your land to me from

up at 'The Lookout.'"

"Oh, yes. It's not much to look at just now, though it always looks pretty decent from 'The Lookout'—distance lends, you know . . . You've been to 'The Lookout' already? Making the best of your time, eh? You've seen about the best there is to see, now."

"I'm sure I'll be quite satisfied with it, Mr. Drummond, and if the land doesn't look as well on close inspection, I'll always view it from The Lookout."

His eyes sparkled in appreciation. He turned away to listen to Brandon.

"Yes, it was about the shearing and the shed I wanted to see you," Brandon was saying. "You spoke about putting up a decent shed, and clubbing in to fix 'em all up here. I wasn't too keen about it at first, but on thinkin' it over, I reckon it might be a good idea. I been lookin' over the old shed; it wouldn't take much to put it in shape for machines."

Steve seemed pleased.

"I think you'll find it a great success; better than everyone fiddling with a little bunch of his own, with no proper equipment for pressing and everything. There'd be a tidy few sheep to do, too; you'd have mine and the Boorendabri lot; then there'd be Atholdene and Melville, and I suppose Benson, from up above me, would bring his little mob.

"Can Benson shear, do you know?"

"Couldn't say."

"A fellow'd want to get some work out of him; he'd never pay for the job. He's always hard up. I suppose with that mob o' kids you can't expect anything else, poor devil!"

"Well, whose fault is it?" Mrs. Brandon demanded

indignantly. "A man ought to be ashamed of himself; that poor little wife of his is the one to pity."

"You ought to get some of his youngsters to work," Steve suggested. "They'd soon cut out the price of the shearing. He has nearly as many youngsters as sheep, I think."

"Say, Steve," Jack suddenly exclaimed. "You should see Miss Gordon ride! She got on Dan as nippy as I ever see you get on a horse; and her kiddin' me she was only a learner."

"She put one over you, Jack? You never tried to teach Miss Armitage to ride, did you?"

"Aw, no,"—there was no mistaking the scorn in his tone—"but I wasn't frightened of her, anyway." He turned to Tess. "Steve was scared out of his wits of 'er, Miss Gordon; used ter shiver every time she looked at 'im; and, by Jove! she liked to look at 'im too. 'Mister Drummond,' she used ter say just as soft as—as a kitten purrin'."

Everybody laughed at Steve's embarrassment.

"Couldn't we change the subject?" he asked, laughing with the rest.

"I don't wonder at 'im bein' scared," Brandon commented. "A strong-minded female like 'er would be enough to scare even the devil himself, I reckon, let alone a poor helpless bachelor."

Tess looked at Drummond's strong, clean face. She felt quite at home with him; could meet him on his own ground, as it were. She caught the infectious merriment that seemed to lurk in the strong, calm eyes, and a roguish vein in her disposition came to the surface. His voice intrigued her; there was something familiar about it, yet where could she have heard it? Suddenly

it came to her. Harry Brandon had asked him about his cattle, and in a moment she remembered. An impish smile curled about her lips as she turned to him.

"And how is the injured calf?"

He stared in bewilderment.

"The calf?"

"Yes, the one suffering from concussion?"

His laugh nearly shook the house.

"What do you know about it?"

"I heard all about it. . . . . by wireless," she teased.

Mrs. Brandon looked at the pair of them with a light of great expectation in her eyes.

### CHAPTER III.

JACK entertained a deep-rooted prejudice, savoring of contempt, against all things educational. His ambitions rose high in the direction of land, sheep, cattle and spirited horses. These things entirely absorbed the spring of his interest; nothing remained for such secondary matters as ancient barons or the whereabouts of some foreign river.

Vi worked hard, but Tess soon concluded that no scholarship would be likely to come her way, nor would any ordinary examination be likely to yield her honours.

Jack possessed the mind of his father with something of the impetuous spirit of his mother. Vi had her mother's good nature and her father's perseverance.

Between Jack's chafing spirit and Vi's sluggishness, Tess, out of training in teaching methods, found her first day trying enough. But Laddie! Laddie was an inspiration. His eager brain, quickened by the fire of affection, absorbed knowledge as a sponge water. His delight in learning compensated for the lack in the other two. Tess found herself intrigued by the strange phenomenon of this unusual, exceptional child in this very ordinary family; the body thin and crippled, but the mind that of a giant, a genius. She looked with pity on the deformity that, some day, would lead him in dire agony through many a Gethsemene. Would the strength and wealth of the brain compensate for the weakness and poverty of the body? Would the sweetness of learn-

ing outweigh the bitterness of barred doors and forbidden fields?

She determined that, if it lay in her power to impart any riches to the mind or spirit, to exert any influence that in later years might shield him a little from the flames or soothe a wounded heart, she would spare herself nothing in her efforts to mitigate the bitterness which life must hold in store for him.

Evening came as a relief. She was delighted to find that Laddie could remember and expand practically everything she had told him; he was a marvel. Vi merely sighed when her mother asked her about the day's lessons, and Jack snorted in derision. It was bad enough having to go to school without being worried about it after. Mrs. Brandon was in the midst of a lecture to Jack on the benefits of education when Steve Drummond walked in.

"Thought I'd drop in and see if there was any mail," he explained.

"Mail!" Brandon echoed. "What made you think I'd be in town to-day? I'm going like a steam engine on this shearin' shed."

"Oh, I thought you might have needed something for the job."

Jack, whose eyes were fixed with some surprise on Steve, suddenly broke into a giggle.

"Yer must be gettin' flash, Steve. Never saw yer with yer collar on before—only on Sundays or when the Minister comes."

"Jack!" came the shocked exclamation from his mother.

Steve coloured, but covered his embarrassment with a laugh. "You see, Jack, my collar was lying there so long getting dusty, I thought if I didn't soon wear it,

I'd have to get it washed again without being worn at all. I suppose I must be a bit Scotch."

"Jack," cautioned his mother. "One of these days you'll go too far, and then you'll get what's comin' to you. You can just help Vi wash up now. Come on, Steve; Miss Gordon will give us some music. The piano hasn't been touched for months."

"It's to be hoped you do make some use o' the thing," her husband commented. "Remember, Steve, how she was always hankerin' after a pianer? And a lot o' use it's been—standin' there fer ornament. But, there it is; if a man wants to sleep peaceful in his bed, he's got to satisfy his womenfolk. Don't ever be rushin' into matrimony, Steve, fer that's when yer real worries begins."

"A mighty lot o' use you'd be without a wife, anyway," Mrs. Brandon reminded him.

"That's only because a man gets accustomed to his wife doin' a few things fer 'im. Come on into the other room, Steve, and hear this wonderful instrument. Cost me fifty quid, second-hand, so it ought to turn out something. Maybe, now Miss Gordon is here, it may be saved from gettin' rusty; maybe she'll turn Vi out a real expert."

Tess ran her fingers over the keys thoughtfully, trying the tone. What class of music would these people most appreciate? Nothing too classical, she concluded. She started off with a catchy popular tune, which set several toes beating time on the floor. Then, playing from memory, she drifted on to the old-time melodies, her skilful fingers touching the keys so softly that the tones were like a sweet and tender voice. The bag of mending on Mrs. Brandon's lap lay untouched; Brandon leaned forward, his chin resting on his hand, a remini-

scent smile playing over his face. Laddie's face was a picture, his eyes irradiated by some exalted rapture.

Steve sat close to the end of the piano, and Tess's eyes wandered to him as she played. He was gazing upon her hungrily, listening like one in a dream. What was the light that shone in his eyes? She felt the warm blood rising to her cheeks as the question came to her mind, then she smiled at her foolishness; evidently he was musical, and the old melodies were acting like a strong wine to his music-starved soul. She liked musical people; there always seemed an exceptional degree of affinity between them and herself. What did it matter to her, anyway, whether there was affinity between him and herself? She was smiling at her own thoughts as she began to sing "Annie Laurie."

She looked again at the strong, tanned face and the wavy hair. He was good to look at, she thought. She sang "Silver Threads Among the Gold." Brandon's smile beamed more brightly. "Gosh! That's good, Miss Gordon. I can remember my mother singing that; it seems only yesterday. There's something in them old songs that'll never grow old."

Tess started up "My Old Kentucky Home," and Brandon joined in, while his wife contributed to the chorus, but Steve continued to gaze at Tess, drinking in the sound of her voice as something too exalted to be desecrated by the intrusion of his feeble efforts. As she glanced in his direction, Tess could not help reflecting upon him. True, and solid as the mountains among which he had been reared, she thought. From him, her thoughts wandered naturally to her father, and before she knew it, she was playing "Love's Old Sweet Song." Such tenderness had crept into her voice, that Mrs. Bran-

don dropped her work again, her eyes growing misty.

"What a wonderful song! How sweetly you sing it!"

"It was my father's favourite," she said, speaking in a very low voice as she rose from the piano.

Tess went to her room that night with her spirit aflame. Life was rich, deep, radiant. Her soul was in an exalted mood. She had been travelling a narrow, twisted valley road which was suddenly opening out upon a wide and lofty tableland. The atmosphere was freer here, the outlook wider; and she could sense the approach of yet greater things ahead. How fortunate she had been to find herself in such a place!

In this exalted frame of mind, Tess passed her days at Allynburn. Life flowed tranquilly on, each day varying little from its yesterday. She managed to evolve some system in her teaching, but it was often broken into by unexpected circumstances, the most frequent being a summons for Jack from his father to some duty on the run. Jack never showed any signs of regret at these interruptions in his education. His father was always apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Miss Gordon," he would say, "but, you see, I'm a bit pushed with the shearing so close on me. Fixin' this shed is takin' a lot of my time, and Jack can help with other things. When the shearin's over, he'll be able to settle down to it better; but I don't think you'll ever make much out of him that way. He's like me: they tried all ways to drum learnin' into my wooden head, but they didn't get much in after all. Still, I been mighty glad fer what I did get, and I don't intend to let Jack lose a bit more'n can be helped."

Tess, herself, felt rather helpless with Jack; he was too much wrapped up in the outdoor life to apply him-

self, especially after so many periods, some of them stretching into a half year, when no teacher had been available.

Steve was often at the homestead, either after helping with the shed, or on a visit to see how it was progressing.

Always when he was there, Mrs. Brandon would insist on Tess singing and playing, until it became almost a fixed custom.

Mails came seldom. For one thing, Brandon was too busy to go for them, and they were mostly brought by Steve. The Brandons wrote but little, and received few letters in return, the newspaper being their chief interest as far as mail was concerned. Tess had written home, but the days lengthened into weeks before an answering letter came. She smiled as she thought about it. Were they using silence as a means of starving her into submission? She could fancy her irresponsible mother shaking her marcelled curls.

"If Tess doesn't get any news, she'll get homesick."

And Mac? She wondered. How was Mac feeling? She ought to write to Mac. They had parted good friends, even if his superior, patronising manner had almost driven her mad. Yes, she ought to write to Mac.

There were brief periods of homesickness—just a longing for the bustle and throb; but these had quite gone by the end of the first week. In fact—she flushed a little as she thought of it—there had been no attack at all since that first night she had played and sung when Steve was there.

At last, a letter came from home—a gay letter, full of the news of theatres, latest town gossip, the social whirl, tit-bits about their acquaintance—an appealing picture of city life at its gayest and best. Tess smiled

as she read, wondering why they had never been able to understand that all these things left her cold.

By the same mail came a letter from Mac. It was a good newsy letter, yet breathing the all-sufficiency of the writer. A little aggrieved note had crept in, however. What had he done? Didn't she intend to write?

She leaned back in her chair and gazed away to the blue hills. What had he done? The question was just. He had done nothing. He was the same old Mac she had known for years; he had not changed. She was the one who had changed. Grown tired, that was it—tired of the obvious money worship which all the rest of the family accorded him. It was her father's spirit coming uppermost in her—his independence, his love of simplicity, of reality . . . . Poor old Mac! It wasn't fair to treat him like this. She must write . . . . But go back . . . ? Take up the old attitude . . . ? Face the prospect, so rosy and desirable in the eyes of her people; that of being an ornament in Mac's home, something to entertain his friends, present him with the inevitable heir to carry on the name and interest of the firm.

She smiled as she thought of Mac's cousin, a replica of Mac, himself, immaculate, superior, with a big city business under his control. His passion was for a son to follow his footsteps and take his place when he retired, as head of David Grey & Son. Unfortunately, the four Greys so far arriving had been Lucy, Jessie, Daphne and Jean. Tess well remembered Brenda Grey's aggrieved tones when Jean had arrived. "I think it might have been a boy this time. David will never be satisfied till he has a son. I suppose we've got to keep on hoping, but it's pretty hard on me."

Mac would look at life just as his cousin did; but somehow she didn't feel that it would worry her much, unless . . . unless she grew tired of this.

The sound of her name awakened her from her reverie, and she looked up to see Steve at the gate holding two horses.

"Miss Gordon, I've brought this nag over, do you think you could make some use of her? She's quite safe, but not so safe as to be deadly, you know. I can leave her here as long as you like to use her; I've no work for her at present, and she'll be getting too flash. I thought perhaps, as it's Saturday, you might like a ride out somewhere to-day!"

"Oh, Mr. Drummond, it's too good. Are you quite sure you can spare her?"

Steve's glance brought the colour to her face.

"I'm only too glad to be of any service to you. I know you like riding, and a good hack will make the place less lonesome. You see, I—we don't want to lose you."

She had come out, and stood by the mare, fondling her arching neck.

"Isn't she a beauty?" Her eyes were sparkling with delight. "Yes, I'll come; I won't be a minute getting ready."

Steve caught his breath sharply as he caught sight of Tess, a little later, arrayed in her new riding outfit. It suited her perfectly, adding subtle charm to her graceful figure. The ruby gold of her hair glistened in the sunlight, and her blue eyes were dancing with anticipation.

She experienced a little thrill of purely feminine pleasure as she glimpsed the light in Steve's eyes; she knew she looked well in her riding costume.

It was the first time they had been out together. She

thrilled with the delight of his companionship; she felt perfectly at ease in his company. It was good to have found such a pleasant companion. Surely it wasn't only a fortnight she had known him!

Cantering along the road in the soft sunshine, she studied him again. Self-reliance, independence, dependability, she saw; his personality breathed calmness and depth, and exerted a soothing influence. She contrasted her own rather highly strung, emotional and impulsive temperament, and thought it odd that she should find so much pleasure in the company of one so quiet and calm.

Throughout the ride, he talked intelligently on a hundred subjects on which men of his age were usually entirely ignorant; yet he spoke of them so naturally that it never sounded like a display of knowledge. She could not help contrasting him with the youths of the circle in which she had previously moved, so many of them empty-headed young fools, whose deepest thoughts centered around the week-end amusement and whose greatest concern was to have the proper crease in their trousers. True, Mac was not like that; but, when Mac talked, he always seemed to focus attention on himself.

How would Mac appear in these surroundings? She couldn't visualise him here at all. But what of Steve in Mac's surroundings? Yes, she fancied Steve would hold his own even there.

They cantered home in the mellow glow of the afternoon sun; and the brightness of their eyes was not all a reflection of the sunlit sky.

A lanky, raw-boned horse was tied up near the gate. "A visitor," Tess remarked.

Steve cast a critical glance at the gaunt animal.

"It's the parson's horse, I fancy. He doesn't get round this way very often, but that's old 'Bony' or I'm a clown." They watched Jack come along and take the horse toward the stable.

"If that's his name, he well deserves it; he's mostly bones and certainly doesn't look young."

"Young! He's seen four or five parsons out, and he'll probably see one or two more out yet. Don't imagine he's not well cared for; he is, but some horses won't fatten. He's one—a real raw-boned Scotchman."

Afternoon tea was in progress when they entered the house, and they were soon included in the party.

A certain hush pervaded the house as befitting the presence of a man of the cloth. Jack was awkward and ill at ease, anxious not to miss any of the glory of being present, yet half wishing he were far out on the run. Laddie was quite at home, the Reverend Mr. Richmond and he were evidently great friends, and Laddie talked and laughed happily with him.

Tess noticed with pleasure how easily and naturally Steve entered into discussion with Richmond. She smiled at Jack's subdued air. It was not the man, but his office, that filled his youthful mind with awe. No other, however well dressed or impressive, could ever have achieved such an influence.

Richmond appeared to her a man who would do justice to his high position and exercise the influence of his office for the best. He seemed genuinely good-natured, impelled by lofty motives, investing his work with an importance perhaps unjustified if one analysed the Church's influence and realised its smallness after all. Tess, however, was not in a position to judge the results of his work, and she was herself impressed, had she but

realised it, to some slight degree at least, the same as the others.

He talked with her in a soft, pleasant voice, and she enjoyed his conversation.

"You will stay to-night?" Mrs. Brandon urged.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Brandon. I'd love to stay; you are always so kind to me, but I must push on to-night: I'm going over to Boorendabri. I must go there this trip, and I have to get back early to-morrow."

Tess was surprised at the expression which crossed Mrs. Brandon's face. "Boorendabri!" There was reproach and surprise in her tone. "I should scarcely have thought that you would like to spend a night there!"

Richmond turned his eyes full upon her, a deep tenderness lighting up their depths.

"I only wish to God I could spend more time there." His voice was low and intense. Very softly, he continued:

"Would that your kind heart and kind hands could reach out in that direction, Mrs. Brandon. There is much that needs healing there; how much, only God can know. We can never judge."

#### CHAPTER IV.

CURIOSITY was not one of Tess's characteristics; in fact, she rather prided herself on her indifference to the affairs of others when they did not directly concern herself. Yet, somehow, in this neighbourhood, everything seemed to belong to one's own circle; and the minister's plea on behalf of Boorendabri roused more than a momentary interest. What was Boorendabri? And what needed healing there?

She sensed some mystery, and her quick imagination seized upon it as a subject for all kinds of speculation. What had it to do with her? She dismissed it, deliberately turning her mind to other matters: what did it matter, anyway? Yet, next evening, she found her brain again busy with the name 'Boorendabri.' It was slightly familiar . . . 'Boorendabri.' Oh, yes, she remembered now. Steve had mentioned it casually—a place over the river beyond his run. What mystery could be connected with such a peaceful spot? She would ask Mrs. Brandon. No, how could she? The conversation had not been directed to her, and did not concern her. Evidently Mrs. Brandon didn't approve of the people there. That, after all, was no great marvel: no one—not even big-hearted Mrs. Brandon—was free from prejudice. Perhaps Jack would tell her . . . She curbed her rising curiosity with a sudden effort, and smiled at her new inquisitiveness.

"Whatever has come over me?" she asked herself. "I'll soon be a thorough-going sticky-beak at this rate."

She turned over, and began to think about Steve. Boorendabri receded to the shadow of the subconscious, and, for the time being, was forgotten.

Jack was missing from school next morning. Mrs. Brandon was rather upset at his absence.

"The young scamp has slipped away with his father. I saw them down by the gate as they went out. I'll have to speak to Harry about it. He doesn't need him to-day: he's only gone out to the mountains to bring in a couple of horses he turned out there last year. He wants them for mustering. It's disheartening—really it is. I've had to battle, battle for years to get them educated; and then he throws his chances away like this."

Tears were not far from the troubled eyes. Tess fancied that a certain amount of the trouble was on her behalf—Mrs. Brandon wanted to make things as easy for her as possible—and the delinquent Jack was spoiling her efforts. It was difficult, Tess had to admit to herself, to make any progress with Jack when half the time he was away, and the other half dreaming of things that had little relation to the improvement of his education. Still, she was not going to be discouraged.

"I wouldn't be worried over him, Mrs. Brandon. He'll probably make a great success on the land and with the stock. His mind simply won't turn in the direction of education. I manage to get him a little interested by making all the work touch on problems he would meet in running a station; but I scarcely know enough about it myself to do a great deal in that way. Don't worry, I'll just do my best with him."

Mrs. Brandon looked her gratitude.

"I suppose it's no use worryin' if he's not cut out for school. It's no use goin' against what's natural in them.

I remember a family back where we came from. They wanted to make their boy a scholar. His mother used to think of Allan in an office wearing a clean collar and nice clothes. They sent him to high school and college and what not, spent no end o' money on him and all, but, goodness me! he didn't care if he never saw a clean collar, and he couldn't bear the idea of bein' cooped up in an office all day. After all they'd wasted on him, he went away outback working on a cattle station; happy as a sand boy, he was."

She heaved a sigh.

"I suppose it's the same with Jack. He'll be out there on the mountains ridin' for dear life, forgetting there ever was a book or a school in the world."

\* \* \*

Tess was enjoying a cup of tea after school when Jack returned. He burst into the house like an excited hound. Tess noted the shine of his freckled face and the eyes dancing with excitement, and thought of the conversation of the morning. Could all the learning in the world give him a glow of happiness such as shone in his eyes now?

"Golly, Mother," he burst out breathlessly, "you oughta see 'er! If she isn't a beaut!"

"What is it, Jack?" his mother asked calmly, evidently used to his wild enthusiasm.

"A black filly we found runnin' with our two. Gee! You talk about ride! And the job we 'ad gettin' 'er in the yard. Why if—" he glanced apologetically at Tess. "If I 'adn't been there, we wouldn't 've got 'er in. Oh, she's something out o' the box; an' Dad says she'll fetch a decent price when she's broke in. Golly! Won't it be fun? Wild! 'Er eyes are like two fires; she'd kick

yer to smithereens if yer got near 'er 'oofs—wild!" He drew his breath in sharply. "We met Steve; he's comin' over to ride 'er to-morrow afternoon. I—" he threw another glance at Tess, half defiant, half supplicating—"I'm goin' ter see it. I wouldn't miss it fer... fer a bloomin' gold mine."

He looked eagerly from Tess to his mother.

"Come on down an' 'ave a squiz at 'er. I bet you never set eyes on a better horse... even in Sydney."

They yielded, and made their way down to the yards.

"I don't like these wild brutes Harry brings back from the mountains—brumbies, or next to it. They turn out alright sometimes; but mostly they're too wild to do anything with, and it's dangerous work breaking them in. Steve's an expert at it; always seems to be riding some young horse. Thank goodness Harry isn't much at it, and knows it. That's more 'n some o' them do; most men think they can manage everything. One of our neighbours nearly got his neck broken trying to tame one o' these wild brutes. Spent a couple o' months in bed through it. Nice time his wife had of it. Harry's got more sense."

Jack was yards ahead, striding on in the grip of a great enthusiasm. Tess peered through the heavy rails at the beautiful creature that tossed her proud head and snorted at their approach. The wary, nervous motion, the splendid carriage, the curved neck, the glossy satin coat, made her a splendid picture. Tess thought she had never seen such a perfect specimen. She noticed the quick, nervous stamping of the feet, the quiver of the shoulders, the restless fiery eyes; and her imagination suddenly carried her away into the wild mountain gorges where this splendid animal had wandered, unconquered,

free; pictured that shining black skin flashing back the sunlight as the magnificent beast flew with the fleetness of the wind over hill and valley, or stood, knee-deep in the cool mountain streams . . . . And now—this; this awful cage... and the shadow of bondage. It reminded her of the city—the stifling, restricting, cramping sensation it always gave her. "Poor brute!" she exclaimed involuntarily, her soul leaping out in sympathy to the caged creature before her.

"Ain't she a pearl?" Jack's voice cut across the train of her musings.

"Wild-lookin' brute!" his mother commented. "Fancy Steve getting on that thing's back! Temptin' Providence, I call it."

"But isn't she a beaut, Ma?"

"Oh, I'm not sayin' anything against her looks, son; but I don't like her eyes; strikes me she'd put her teeth through you and trample you to death if she got half a chance."

"You wait till Steve's had a few days with 'er. Hope Dad keeps 'er; it's about time we had a decent horse on the place instead of a lot of old mokes that are nearly too slow fer a plough."

"Nonsense, Jack. We've got the car. I wouldn't have a moment's peace with any of you riding her, anyway."

"The car!" Jack's voice breathed unmitigated scorn. "That beastly old tin Lizzie. I bet she could race that old bus any day."

Something of Mrs. Brandon's fear of the wild thing crept into Tess's heart. Steve was going to match himself against this mad brute. Would there be any danger? She could not view the matter in the same impersonal

way Mrs. Brandon did. Her heart pounded a bit faster. Steve! Suppose Steve lost the battle? The thought brought a feeling of uneasiness; it was awful to think of his fine figure being torn or broken. She would be anxious for any friend under the circumstances. Then, the next instant, she was feeling a glow of pride as she thought of him mastering this mad creature. What magnificent courage! The picture of Mac floated before her. Why did she keep on thinking of Mac? She had not desired to measure him against Steve; yet his immaculate figure obtruded—his confident, superior smile. . . . He would look on, were he here; acclaim Steve a gallant horseman. But the whole thing would be an entertainment, far below his personal level.

Mac did not belong here, she argued; and it wasn't fair to make comparisons. Yet her heart warmed toward Steve as she made the comparison.

## CHAPTER V.

"You'll have to declare a school holiday this afternoon, Miss Gordon. We don't have a breakin'-in like this one every day; the kids'll all want to be there."

Harry Brandon was in a very jolly mood; Jack's excitement seemed to have penetrated even his imperturbable spirit.

"Maybe you'll enjoy seein' it yourself; it'll be an education for you."

Before the morning was over, Tess wished the whole day had been declared a holiday. Jack was hopeless, Vi was a little better, and even Laddie's educational aspirations were overwhelmed by the excitement pervading the atmosphere.

Several times, she caught herself visioning the splendid black animal yielding to Steve's masterful strength; and a little of the excitement crept into her own breast.

"What's all your impatience?" Mrs. Brandon demanded when, at last, midday came, and Jack was wandering restlessly about asking how long dinner would be. "You can't get a start till Steve comes; and goodness knows what time he'll come."

"Huh! Don't you worry about Steve; he'll be here early enough."

Jack was right; Steve presented himself before they had dinner ready.

"Thought I might as well enjoy a decent meal, Mrs. Brandon. You're a better cook than I am."

Jack grinned and glanced at Tess; Steve hadn't always

been so keen on good cooking.

"I should think you would feel like a good meal before tackling a mad thing like that down in the yard. I'd be thinking it might be the last."

Steve laughed.

"She does look a bit nifty. Going to watch the fun, Miss Gordon?"

Tess smiled at the touch of pride in his voice. How human he was! He was proud to be doing this great feat which he knew would look grand in her eyes.

"I'm tempted to go along," she replied. "Mr. Brandon thinks it would broaden my education."

She wondered if the proceedings would hold the same interest for her if some other man were the chief actor. Was it the breaking-in or the man?

They chatted over the dinner table until Steve noticed Jack's restless movements.

"We'll have to be moving, I guess, or Jack will go insane. Don't worry, Jack; she won't melt. It isn't good to ride buck-jumpers too soon after a good dinner."

"Huh! I thought you must be gettin' good weight ter keep 'er down a bit. You used to be a mighty quick eater, Steve; but you've lost yer speed the last few weeks."

Steve rose hurriedly, his face flushed.

"Well, come on, we'll have a look at her."

As they made their way to the yards, Tess watched, with a feeling of amusement, the suppressed excitement in Steve's eyes. This filly was not going to be an ordinary conquest. He sensed she would give him a lively run for it, and he was glad.

The thought of Mac again obtruded itself. Why would that thought persist when Steve was filling her mind

most? Was she giving this man the place that had been regarded so long as belonging to Mac? What would Mac think of Steve taking his place? He simply wouldn't believe it. As well suggest that a man from behind one of his numerous counters would take his place. The thought that a horse-breaker, a mere selector from outback, could occupy equal place with him in any girl's mind would be unthinkable to Mac. Oh well, no need to worry about it now; Mac was away in Sydney, and she didn't feel drawn toward either him or Sydney at present. Everybody had taken it for granted that Mac held first place; but this man admired her...and perhaps...well, who could tell?

They reached the yards. Everything was at hand in readiness for the great act. Mac, Sydney—everything—faded from her mind save two figures—one, a black, shining, defiant horse; the other, a strong, smiling, confident man.

They put in two hours' exhausting work before the filly could be bridled. That sufficed to take the glint of triumph from Steve's eyes. She was no longer merely a spirited animal to be gracefully tamed, nor even a mad brumby to be conquered with might, but a demon to be grappled with and overcome at the expense of every ounce of energy and every atom of wit—an extraordinary beast possessed of a ferocity seldom found in a horse. Had the rugged hills breathed into her wild nature this spirit of desperate defiance and disdain?

For half an hour after the other horses had been turned out of the yard, the filly had succeeded in keeping the yard clear. Divining their intention, she had rushed the men with stamping foot and open mouth, keeping them at a safe distance; and when Steve managed to

lasso her from the rails above, and made bold to approach again, a lightning attack with her forefeet drove him hurriedly into retreat again. Rearing and plunging in the entangling ropes, she became so exhausted that, at last, she cowered in the corner and allowed the almost exhausted men to entangle her still more and at last get the bridle on.

The advantage had been no sooner gained, however, than, suddenly rising out of her exhaustion, she reared and kicked and struck with such unexpected ferocity that even the imperturbable Steve got out of the way with more alacrity than dignity. He had never dealt with such violent and persistent resistance.

More exhausting work, and another lull in hostilities.

"My word! Brandon, she's a wonder; you'll have something to be proud of when she quietens down."

"She's got some spirit, all right," Brandon agreed.

The filly now suffered herself to be further laden with tackling; but, with uncanny perversity, chose one awkward moment for her next outbreak, and, with super-violence, smashed half the tackling to shreds, rushed everyone from the yard, then, with a superlative effort, charged the heavy rails with such force that several of the top ones gave beneath her weight. Another terrific plunge, and she was on top of them; a wild scramble and she was outside, racing like the spirit of the wind across the little paddock, broken tackle flying like symbols of victory from her foaming shoulders. The astounded watchers held their breath as she made straight for the gate, cleared it like a bird, and flew on toward the other horses with which she had been running on the mountains.

"She's the devil!" Steve exclaimed as he mopped his

brow and breathed heavily.

Tess retired to the house, content to watch from the verandah as, round and round the paddock, they chased and dodged the flashing black beauty.

Steve had been a bit disappointed, Tess sensed, at not being able to give a better demonstration of his talent; but never had she admired a man so much—his calm strength, his patience, his courage, his athletic movement. What a man he was! She tingled with a new pride in him. He had desired to impress her. She felt it an honour; any girl would feel it an honour to receive attention from such a man.

The sun sank and disappeared behind the hills, and still the black filly defied their efforts to yard her again. The great job had to be postponed till the next morning.

Jack's excitement had grown with each development, and at tea time he could scarcely keep still enough to eat.

"Wait till you get the saddle on 'er, Steve," he was saying.

"It seems to be a matter of wait," Steve commented. He was particularly quiet; his mind was busy with the problem of besting the black filly.

"Oh, you'll steady 'er up to-morrow."

"You'll have to throw her," Brandon suggested.

"Yes, choke 'er down with the rope," Jack added.

"I've never had to do it yet; its not good horse-breaking," Steve replied thoughtfully.

"You can't stick to rules when you get a demon like 'er," Jack counselled.

"We haven't got her in the yard yet," Steve reminded him.

The next day, no one thought of school, so completely had the great breaking-in overshadowed everything else.

By some strange equine psychology, the filly decided she would allow herself to be yarded; and when Tess came down in the middle of the morning, the struggle with ropes and straps was again in full progress. By the strategy of a blindfold, for which, in his heart, Steve loathed himself, the saddle had been fastened. He believed that to resort to such devices was not according to the highest code of horse-breaking, and savoured of taking a mean advantage.

The great moment was drawing near. Tess felt a tightening of the heart. She could see by Steve's set face that he knew what he was facing, but there was never a moment of hesitation.

For one fleeting second after he touched the saddle, while every watcher's breath was bated, the black filly remained motionless, rigid; tense muscles bulged; fury, desperate, demoniacal, blazed from the wide eyes. Then, swifter than any watcher's eye could follow, she was in the air. Tess, standing at one side of the yard, clearly saw the top rails on the far side beneath the filly's feet. Her movements were so swift, they defied following. With every plunge, she seemed to whirl in a half circle. Before they could realise what was happening, the figure of Steve could be seen leaving the saddle; and the next moment, he fell heavily, just inside from where Tess stood. The filly's hoofs shot out in a wicked kick as he fell, missing him by inches.

Tess was horrified. For a moment, the yard, the black monster and the watchers spun round and vanished; but alarm, and anxiety for the rider brought her back to her senses.

"Oh, Steve!" she gasped, involuntarily.

Brandon, who had always appeared so deliberate and slow, was the quickest to act. In one lightning movement, his hand shot under the rail, and the next instant the dazed Steve was drawn beneath to the outside, not

a moment too soon, for the vicious forefeet thundered down with fell intent to smash the rider's head. Steve was on his feet almost before Brandon's hand released him.

"Round one to you, old girl," he said quietly, though with hissing breath through set teeth. He grasped his whip and scrambled again through the rails.

As one in a trance, Tess watched him going again through all the preliminary actions of catching and mounting. It was incredible that he could face such a monster again after such a terrific experience. She looked across at the others. Vi had turned pale and was looking on with wide eyes. Even Jack's face had lost some of its excitement, and was set in anxious lines, while Brandon looked on with the stoic calm so characteristic of all his actions.

She wished she could feel calm. She felt a sob in her throat; she wanted to cry out, to call him back, to plead with him to keep away from the dangerous brute; but she gazed on, speechless. Again the amazing whirl and spring, the mad plunge, the terrific pound. Jack swore afterwards he plainly saw the black filly throw a somersault.

But this time the watchers saw the rider sticking in the saddle with set determination that made their hearts beat faster. The battle seemed almost over; Steve was winning. The filly, anticipating her defeat, made one sideward motion, and the next moment the whole weight of horse and rider was hurled sideways against the rails. Steve made a supreme effort, and, with wonderful dexterity, caught the top rail as she bounded from under him, leaving him clinging to the fence. He vaulted lightly down, but couldn't hide the limp. The leg of his trousers was ripped open and a large piece of skin was missing from his shin. The impact had also ripped a

knee pad from the saddle.

He was trembling with the intensity of his determination as again he spoke:

"Second round yours, too."

Before anyone could say a word, he was in the yard again.

Another saddle was procured, and again the giddy whirl. Would Steve win in spite of all? But with a tortuous twist, even while she was bucking, it seemed to the onlookers, she doubled her neck around and under and seized the rider's toe in her vicious teeth. The snap with which she tore him from the saddle landed him almost across the yard, and again only Brandon's lightning action in leaping into the yard with a stout stick saved him from sudden destruction. This time, Steve lay still; his head had come into contact with the rail. He was stunned.

Vi ran, white-faced and screaming, toward the house.

"He'll be killed! He'll be killed!" she screamed.

Tess was rooted to the spot, fascinated, spell-bound, her heart pounding in a way that almost suffocated her. The contest between man and beast was thrilling, awe-inspiring; it seemed to have aroused primitive emotions within her breast—emotions that surprised and frightened her.

By the time she had recovered herself sufficiently to realise he was not back in the yard attacking his enemy, it was too late to be alarmed. He was leaning against the rails with a hand on the side of his head. The battle was over; she read it in his eyes. In that moment, she could have thrown herself into his arms, and wept on his shoulder. She wanted to go to him, to comfort him, to take his injured head in her hands and caress the

brown hair with her lips. At least she could go and murmur her sympathy to him. But no, he was feeling his defeat too keenly at present; any words would drop like fire upon his wounded soul. She would wait—the time would come. He would come to her, and she would soothe the hurt from his soul.

A loud defiant snort from the yard drew all their eyes toward the black figure standing with rolling eyes and distended nostrils. Steve was looking at her, breathing a few fierce oaths under his breath.

"I'm done, Brandon, old man; I'm afraid she's too good for me."

Oh the bitterness with which those words were wrung from his soul! Tess understood, and the tears were no far away from her shining eyes.

"Got a bit o' something lively in there, Brandon!"

Everybody swung round with a start; none had heard the approach of the horseman behind. Tess's musical ear had caught some peculiar quality in the voice that spoke—a liquid melody softening the high key in which the voice was pitched.

"Henderson! By all the gods! You've said it; she's lively alright. You're just in time to have a go at her if you'd like to. She's done her best to kill Steve.... nearly did it, too. She'll stop at nothing. I've never seen anything so vicious."

The newcomer leaned against the rails, surveying the foaming filly. Tess, meanwhile, was observing him. She saw a lithe, graceful figure mounted with an aristocratic head, with short black hair. The features were dark and alert. She could not see his eyes. His age was problematic; might be anything between twenty-five and forty. Brandon was describing the filly's murderous

attacks, while Steve leaned silently on the rails. He was beginning to feel the full effects of the struggle in which he had played more than a man's part, albeit a losing one.

"She looks like something worth while," he commented when Brandon had finished. "Perhaps Steve has pretty well exhausted her tricks; a bit of an effort on my part may finish the job."

Tess felt a glow of gratitude to this stranger for his effort to cover Steve's failure. Big souls, these men of the bush, she thought.

"Don't you believe it," Steve burst out. "She's got plenty of guts in her yet; and, if you beat her, it won't be on account of what I've done."

Slipping into the yard, Henderson approached the filly with a few low, penetrating words, partly warning, partly coaxing. She cowered into a corner, shoulders trembling, flanks heaving. He removed the saddle, at the same time asking Brandon to bring the saddle from his horse. The exchange made, he again spoke to the trembling beast. Defiance seemed to give place to fear in the wild eyes. She made one frantic plunge, rearing almost upright and striking out madly, fiercely with both forefeet. Quick as she was, Henderson was quicker. He seemed to have stepped backward while the dread hoofs were in the air, and the lash of his whip cracked like a rifle shot on the filly's exposed chest. Like lightning, she wheeled and lashed out with the hind hoofs; but Henderson dropped low, almost imitating the action of a dog when biting a kicker's heel. Again the hissing lash stung home in a way that drove the filly, wild-eyed, to the far corner of the yard. Henderson followed boldly, and caught the loose bridle rein as she turned to face him.

Before they knew what had happened, he was in the saddle; and they were watching the terrific struggle, the desperate, agonising struggle for freedom on the part of the wild animal from the ranges, and for conquest on the part of the man astride her.

Finding he was not to be thrown, the filly resorted to the terrible trick of dragging the rider off with her teeth; but, as the bared teeth opened, the rider's doubled whip came down across the lips so quickly and with such force that the brute squealed with rage, and suddenly dropped to the ground with the deadly purpose of rolling on the clinging thing that would not be thrown off. One cat-like motion left her rolling while he stood on his feet, well out of harm's way; then, as she bounded up with amazing speed, he leapt with one swift movement back into the saddle again. As he plied the whip to the heaving sides, the fire faded from the eyes, the breath came in short gasps, and the poor black creature stood still, defeated and dejected.

Henderson slipped off, and his long, thin hands scooped the foam from her neck and shoulders. It was almost a caressing gesture.

"Put your price on her, Brandon. I'd be proud to own an animal such as this. I'm very much inclined to think she'll never be any good for ordinary work."

"I'll think about it," Brandon rejoined.

Henderson removed his saddle and came out of the yard.

"You're a horse charmer," Steve congratulated him as he came out. "I match my strength against hers; but you conquered her with your will."

"May be something in that," Henderson admitted.

"But you always seemed to see what the brute was

going to do, and were ready for it," Brandon suggested.

Henderson had turned, and was looking at Tess. His eyes met hers—black eyes, she saw, eyes that burned with a strange fire, that seemed to glow with hidden lights, compelling, fascinating eyes. His long, steady gaze seemed to penetrate to her very soul, and lay bare its secrets. Her own glance wavered; and then he was looking down as though he had suddenly caught himself in an indiscreet action.

"That's Miss Gordon—Mr. Henderson," Brandon introduced awkwardly. She must be highly strung to-day, she felt the excitement, probably. She was tingling with a strange sensation as she recalled that long piercing glance. Turning away, she faced Steve. He was still smarting under his defeat. He had gone forth to conquer and had been humiliated. She lingered beside him, feeling that her presence helped to soothe him, but she said nothing. The mad impulse that a while before had surged through her being had passed, and a reaction had set in; she wanted to get away. Was it the piercing of Henderson's burning eyes that made her feel so strangely? No, it must be the reaction after such emotional tension. The coming of this stranger had made her feel self-conscious; it was scarcely the place for her, watching the breaking of horses; but then, it was only right she should be with the children. There was no need to stay any longer.

Entering the house, she found Mrs. Brandon calmly attending to the dinner, as though nothing at all had happened. Tess felt it had been a terrific day—a day of tremendous happenings, how tremendous, she couldn't rightly judge. Things would be different, somehow, for the happenings of that day.

"So the breaking-in is over?" Mrs. Brandon asked.

"Yes, it's over."

"And Steve hasn't got a broken neck?"

Tess was on the point of telling her that Steve hadn't done the job after all, but the disappointment she felt at Steve being robbed of the triumph he had anticipated held her back, and she passed on to her room. She was tired; her nerves were jumpy.

Half an hour later, her nerves still at high tension, she made her way to the piano. As her hand strayed idly over the keys, and the soft, plaintive melodies came at her will, tranquillity stole again over her spirit and soothed her. Presently, she found herself playing the accompaniment of her father's favourite song, and, as she played, she suddenly became aware of a voice softly singing somewhere out by the orchard gate:—

"Just a song at twilight,  
When the lights are low,  
And the flickering shadows  
Softly come and go—"

It was just idly sung, following the notes of the piano; but her trained ear detected its clarity, its vibrant power, and a rich, elusive quality of flute-like, liquid softness. She thrilled strangely at the sound, and fell to wondering again on the stranger whose personality had appealed to her as being so extraordinary, and whose prowess with the wild filly had been so amazing.

Dinner had commenced when she entered the dining-room. She wondered Mrs. Brandon hadn't called her. Steve was not looking happy, but was putting the best face on the matter, and talking gaily. Brandon seemed unusually jubilant and was praising the two men unre-

servedly. She glanced at Mrs. Brandon; she was subdued, unusually silent.

As the meal progressed, Brandon grew more and more talkative. Whatever possessed the man? She had never heard him talk like this before. The children were absent. The fact suddenly burst with a weight of significance upon Tess's mind. Perhaps there hadn't been enough room. No, that wasn't it. She glanced again at Mrs. Brandon: her face was set and stern. Tess became aware of a tenseness in the atmosphere. What was wrong? Was Harry Brandon talking to ease the tension, and Steve doing his best to back him up?

Henderson carried himself with an easy grace through it all; yet somehow Tess could not help feeling he was aware of the tension. She studied him again; his bearing suggested culture and a natural courtesy. She was caught in the fascination of his quick, flashing eyes, and, when he directed his glance towards her as they rose from the table, she was conscious again of their penetrating power. What a strange light glowed within them! Almost they were the eyes of a fanatic, she thought.

He had gone. Strange how he seemed to have thrust himself so much into her mind and consciousness in that little contact! Perhaps it was just his coming when she was in the grip of an emotional storm, perhaps his wonderful performance.

She tried to explain it all, but her soul was disquieted, and the influence of this strange day was to linger with her for many a day to come.

## CHAPTER VI.

THE peaceful atmosphere of Allynburn was invaded by a hundred disturbing sounds. School was a difficulty: the infection of restlessness had spread from pupils to teacher; the result was not inspiring.

In spite of the dry weather, the hills still looked beautiful, and the charm of the Spring called appealingly. Tess gazed through the wide windows, watching the men working on the shed and the old building that was being transformed to serve as shearers' hut. Sunburned men, some with swags some riding horses, drifted in during the morning. A constant stream of vehicles came and went, and Brandon's old "Lizzie" rattled back and forth disturbing the peace of the place long before it arrived and long after it had departed again. The whole place, after months of tranquil repose, seemed suddenly to have burst into an orgy of activity.

It was Tess's first experience of the busy life of shearing time. Even for the Brandons, this year was a bit unusual; shearing had never assumed such proportions before. Mrs. Brandon was pleased with the new order.

"Thank goodness, I won't have to do the cooking for the mob this year; there's enough o' them to have their own cook."

"Have you had to do it other years?" Tess inquired.

"Yes, it's a terrible job. I never knew anything to eat like shearers do. It's generally warm weather, and it's heavy work; they drink and eat from morning till night. It's killing work, cooking for them. Before it was over,

I used to feel like a black gin . . . and didn't care either. No wonder the women outback get careless and let themselves go the way they do so often. Before I married Harry, I was as proud as the next of my complexion, but what with lookin' after kids and cows and things, I soon forgot I had a complexion."

"You'll have a busy time with the shearing all the same, won't you?"

"Busy! I should say so. There's always someone extra here for meals and they come in all times some days; everything's a muddle. I'm always glad when it's over. It's a worryin' time with the children too. I can't keep them away from the sheds. Even Laddie will go down among the men, and Jack simply lives there. Some o' the men are decent enough, but some are not. You never know what the boys'll learn down there. Sometimes they come out with the things they've hear—it fairly makes one's hair stand up."

Tess gathered, as she heard Brandon talking over certain arrangements with his wife, that shearing was to commence the next afternoon. She had gone to the fernery with a book to escape the sun which was hotter than usual. The conversation proceeding just through the wall of vines didn't interest her till the name of Henderson cut across her thoughts like a flash of light. Mrs. Brandon's voice was high-pitched, indignant.

"Henderson's! Is he bringing his sheep here?"

"Yes, it's easier for him than doing them himself; he hasn't got a proper shed an' all. That was part of my idea—have one central shed fixed up so they all could bring their sheep here. It won't pay me unless a good many come."

"Pay! Is that all you think about? I'm surprised at

you, Harry Brandon, having his sheep at your shed. It strikes me you're as bad as a worshipper of . . ." She paused, either to gain breath or recall a suitable expression. "Of the Golden Calf," she finished, recalling Reverend Mr. Richmond's last discourse, in which the said calf had occupied a prominent place. "All you think about is the money you'll get from the thing."

Tess was amused at the idea of Brandon being a worshipper of the Golden Calf. He was the last man on earth one could justly accuse of such idolatry. A dim liking on his part for that animal, Tess thought, would have been a decided advantage to the family in general.

He made some sort of apologetic reply. Peace and tranquillity constituted his ideal. One couldn't refuse to take one man's sheep when all the rest were coming he explained.

"Oh well, you'll have to fix him up for meals down with the shearers; I simply won't have him here for meals."

"I suppose I can fix it up for him to have his meals down there. Perhaps he would prefer it, if the truth was known; but I thought like, he bein' a settler, and a decent enough fellow after all—he keeps to himself and never interferes, doesn't push himself forward—I thought it would look better if we asked him . . ."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. I won't have him here. Oh well, that settles it."

Tess heard Brandon's steps as he retreated from the unequal contest. Her interest in her book was gone; her pulse was racing unreasonably. What did it all mean? She recalled the tense atmosphere and Mrs. Brandon's silence the day of the breaking-in. She saw again those burning eyes, the lithe figure, the sensitive, alert fea-

tures; heard again the soft, penetrating voice, the rich ravishing strains of the song . . . . Why did Mrs. Brandon object to him so strongly?

Anyhow, why was she so interested in the matter? It had nothing to do with her; she had only seen the man once, and, when shearing was over would probably never see him again. She would soon know what the trouble was, if any. Mrs. Brandon wasn't free from prejudice; it might be nothing more than a personal dislike.

She was awakened next morning by a medley of noises such as she had never heard before, and, pulling aside the blinds, discovered that a mob of sheep had arrived for shearing.

It was all so strange, so fascinating—the panting, barking dogs, the frightened, bleating sheep, the running, shouting men.

This mob would belong to Henderson. She was inclined to smile this morning at her curiosity concerning this man. There he was now, riding that big, splendid chestnut. Something in the very way he sat in the saddle distinguished him from all the others. Even there, riding round a mob of sheep, he rode in a way that would draw a second look. Steve was a good rider, but there was a difference. She couldn't define it, yet it was unmistakable. Born to the saddle—that was it.

The shed was in a bustle all the morning. They were testing the new engine and the machines, putting final touches on the yards and the wool press.

Jack was missing from school, and Tess mentally bade him farewell till shearing was over. Half an hour had to be granted the others to see the start in the afternoon; then things settled down to something near normal again.

Evening brought Steve with mail. Two letters came

for Tess—one from her mother, and one from Mac.

She read her mother's letter with a smile.

"Surely," it concluded, "you are not altogether mad! Can't you see the risk you are running? He is wonderfully patient to put up with such foolishness at all; suppose he grows tired of waiting . . . ? He is always round here asking for news of you. It isn't as if you didn't like him—and think of his position—so assured, so secure! You will wake up to the value of it all when you have lost your chance. I speak with a knowledge of the world, and I tell you, you're mad to go on as you're going.

"What do you find so attractive in such a terrible hole of a place? For heaven's sake, don't let your head be turned by romantic dreams. Remember, you haven't been reared to that kind of life. You can't get away from early training; you'd be sorry before you'd had many years of it. Now do be sensible and listen to reason . . ."

How like her mother, Tess thought. Was there anything in the advice? The last few days had been romantic enough. Was it just romance that sent her blood pulsing so riotously? She thought of Mac, and of settling down to the old round that made up his life. A sinking sensation of the heart made her shiver, and she dismissed the thought. "Early training." Yes, but even as a child, she had found the city irksome. She was like her father. That was her mother's explanation of many things in her temperament. Like her father . . . there had been little affinity between her father and the rest of his family, herself excepted. He had been odd, according to her mother's light; and to be odd in her mother's circle, when all were cut to one pattern, was an unrelieved tragedy.

"Let Mac speak for himself," she counselled as she took up his letter. She noticed a marked change in tone from his last letter. It had been amused, tolerant—a strong man's tolerance for the whim of an impulsive child. Evidently, he had ceased now to regard it as a whim. She smiled; she had expected his view to change in that direction and had expected his amusement to come to an end. She was succeeding more quickly than she had expected.

"I miss you, Tess," he wrote. "I really think, my dear girl, you have been away from us long enough. We have learned the value of your company, and know we cannot take liberties with you, lest you be cruel and leave us again . . . . If you don't soon put in an appearance, I shall be under the necessity of coming myself to bring you back . . . ."

Tess frowned. He was asserting his rights with a vengeance.

Perhaps . . . if the appeal had been made differently, she might have entertained the idea of going back to him, of yielding to the impulse to run from these strange emotions which had awakened within her, baffling her understanding, and frightening the conservative side of her nature. But this assertion of proprietorship, this hint of command, touched some chord which instantly vibrated defiance and roused the strength of opposition, the courage to face life alone. She would stay. She would hold out her hands to destiny, grasp eagerly all that life had in store for her, she would no longer be afraid.

With the making of this resolution, an amazing change came over her. She had cast her moorings . . . an adventurer sailing unknown seas with limitless possibilities

lying ahead.

"What cowards the easy conventions of life make of us!" she mused, folding her letters. "Here was I, with all my boasted independence, debating whether I would not run to Mac and safety at the first touch of some force I didn't understand. Life challenges: well, I accept the challenge."

She made her way to a secluded corner of the wide verandah, and watched the million stars that jewelled the clear sky. Away down the valley, the river sang as it coursed over its stony bed—a low, faint song these days, but sweet to Tess's ear nevertheless. It seemed to have sung its way into her heart and become part of her life. Giant gums stood sentinel in the valley and the night wind murmured through the oaks.

She loved the night. As a small child, she had found some sense of sweet mystery in the quiet of the night that soothed her spirit and brought tranquillity to nerves in any hour of restlessness or disturbance. Here in the heart of these beloved hills, night was doubly restful and refreshing. No discordant noise of man's restless energy, no clang of jarring industry broke upon the sacred stillness, and the night wind murmured the softest of love songs, the hills breathed poetic messages of all that was truest and best in life.

To-night, she was not entirely tranquil; strange sensations disturbed, and the challenge she had taken up stirred with a thrilling disquiet. The peace of night was there, but even the very peace seemed to throb with a force that, though pleasant, was disturbing.

Around the big fire outside the cook's hut, she could discern a group of men. They were chatting and laughing together before turning into their bunks. She could hear

their voices breaking in on the stillness of the night. In vain she tried to convince herself that it was this unusual sound made the evening different from other evenings she had watched the stars and listened to the voices of the night. Her deepest instincts told her some new force had touched her; her drifting barque had made contact with some deep, strong current in the sea of life.

Clear upon the night air, someone's voice was raised in song. Others joined in, and presently all the men were singing together—jazz, rag-time, and then the old popular sentimental songs. She strained her ears for the sound she had come to know. Was he there? Then she heard it; he was singing alone—"Annie Laurie."

She thrilled as the notes fell upon her ears. Madness seemed to take possession of her; her emotions ran riot. Fire entered her blood. She listened entranced—a marvellous voice, trained cultured. She was sitting tense and still. The other singers had dropped out. A burst of clapping followed, and then again the voice came. The hot blood surged to her face. . . .

Though our hearts be weary,  
Sad the day and long,  
Still to us at twilight  
Comes Love's old song—

The song finished and the applause of the group died away. A hush seemed to have fallen on the men; they quietly drifted off to their blankets.

Tess awakened from her entrancement to find herself gripping the railing. What was the meaning of it all? Reason seemed to leave her at the sound of those flute-like notes. Was there some hypnotic power in his voice? How else could she explain it? She did not even know Henderson; he was practically a stranger. She couldn't

say whether or not she even liked him. The thought of Steve came to her mind; she knew she liked Steve. Her heart warmed toward him now as she mused; he was so splendid in every way. She remembered being thrilled by Steve when they were together. Was this new force which so utterly swept her away the same, differing only in degree? What was the force, anyway? She recalled her resolution made earlier in the evening, and smiled. She would know what it was ere long. She would explore it, analyse it, get to understand it; yet, how could one analyse a force that gripped one and swept one away in its powerful current, as this force did?

The night had turned cool. Reluctantly, she turned toward her room.

As she went indoors, she thought of Mac. The thought brought a smile; how far away he seemed! Fancy placing him in the same category as these other two! She couldn't remember ever being in the least thrilled by Mac's company. She had liked him; but his kisses had always left her utterly cold.

## CHAPTER VII.

MORNING has a way of stripping off the robes of illusion and romance with which the witchery of night camouflages reality.

Tess laughed at herself and her fancies as she thought of the night before; called herself the essence of a fool. The affair seemed altogether too ridiculous. Had the moon been shining, she could have excused herself under the old plea of moon madness; but she hadn't even that to mitigate her foolishness.

At breakfast, Jack broached the subject of taking her through the shearing shed.

"Oh, that would be splendid, Jack; I want to see how it's all done."

But, even as she spoke, she remembered Henderson; he would most likely be there. She wanted to act the explorer, certainly, but somehow the morning had convinced her so completely of the foolishness of the previous night's emotions that she wanted a little time to recover herself before she came into contact with this mysterious personality again. She must have a chance to analyse more calmly.

So when Jack came for her after school, she pleaded a bad head, and put the visit off.

"A woman's excuse," she thought, feeling a little contempt for herself. "When there's anything troublesome or disturbing to be avoided, a headache does the trick."

She went out riding instead, smiling at herself as she

rode along. "I might as well have gone," she mused. "I'll have to go."

His sheep would be done in a few days, she reflected. She would defer her visit to the shed till he had departed.

Next morning, however, when Brandon suggested she should take the opportunity that afternoon, she demurred no longer. In fact, some subtle pleasure arose in her heart that opportunity had opened the door and she couldn't well refuse.

Jack came for her early in the afternoon, and school was closed forthwith.

It was all quite novel to her—the thousands of bleating sheep, the whirr of a dozen machines, the cough of the engine, the sweating shearers driving the combs so swiftly back and forth over the writhing sheep, the hurry and clatter of the penners replenishing the catching pens from the yards outside, the pickers-up snatching the fleece almost before the frightened sheep had kicked its way through the exit door, the pungent smell of tar with which the bleeding wounds were dabbed.

Jack conducted her along the sweating row till he met with his father, who abandoned his immediate occupation to join Jack in explaining things to her.

At the top end stood the wool-press from which the bales of pressed wool tumbled out so neatly and so quickly.

Suddenly she found herself face to face with Henderson. She looked directly into his eyes, and he held out his hand. Brandon stopped too. He had not anticipated this; but, well, it couldn't be helped.

"Miss Gordon's seeing the inside of a shearing shed for the first time," he explained.

Tess grasped his hand. How firm his grip! She

glanced down; how brown the hand was! She noted the long, tapering fingers—soft, sensitive fingers, they seemed to be. What a hand for a surgeon! In spite of all her resolves the soft, musical drawl of his voice seemed to touch unfathomed chords, setting the fire running through her veins again. It was uncomfortable, disturbing yet pleasant, exhilarating.

"A shearing shed is interesting for all but the poor sheep," he smiled, showing even white teeth. "I can never get over being sympathetic with the sheep."

"Wasted sympathy," Brandon opined. "The poor beggars must feel a darned sight more comfortable with the stuff off this weather."

"Perhaps so. . . . like a lot of things supposed to be good for us in the end, it's not very nice while the job's going on."

"Your lot'll be through the ordeal to-morrow, don't you think, Barrie?"

"Yes we've made good progress to-day. You've struck some speedy chaps in this bunch. They've put through over a thousand to-day."

"Oh, they've hardly warmed up yet, and your sheep ain't favourites with 'em, either."

"No, my sheep never will be much good to shearers. I have some of the best sheep country in the State, and it's up to me to see that my sheep are well up to the standard. They're doing fairly well this year with an average of ten pounds each."

He turned to Tess.

"How does our part of the world impress you, Miss Gordon?"

"I'm enraptured with it, Mr. Henderson. To me, it seems a unique district. Of course, I haven't seen much

of a lot of the country."

"I've seen most of Australia," he replied, "and I share your view. People from the city seldom appreciate it."

"Specially the ladies," Brandon interposed. "We've had some experience, and they've all been scared to death of snakes and dingoes, or else they're bored stiff with the loneliness or the terrible people. Miss Gordon is quite a curiosity."

Tess was conscious of a searching scrutiny, and then his voice, soft and vibrant.

"Miss Gordon is evidently Australian enough to appreciate Australian country life; but—" he turned to her again, "there's always a danger of monotony in the country. Maybe, it will get you in the end. The city has so many changes, so much stir and life, so many possible diversions. At times there comes the longing for the lights and the roar and whirl."

He paused reflectively, and then:

"Yes, the city has its pull."

His summing up surprised her.

"You know the city, then?"

"Yes, I could say 'cities,' for I've seen the inside life of quite a few; but the country has the strongest pull with me: it is so immense, at times so generous, and its problems grip one." He paused again.

"Yet, I'm no stranger to fits of the blue devils; and then the roar of Sydney Central Station would be like running water to a man dying of thirst. Sometimes, with all the beauty and peace of the country, it holds no panacea for that curse of the human soul. The artificial brings forgetfulness. It's only in the rush and glitter of the city with its hollow laughter and its teeming life that the demons of restlessness and discontent

can be sidetracked and lost for a time. . . . that is if one's pockets are well lined; the city isn't kind to the poor."

"The best thing I know for the blue devils, as you call 'em, is a good day's work; it doesn't give 'em time to get a leg in, and makes you too tired to worry about 'em after," Brandon testified. "Miss Gordon seems to enjoy life too much to be on speakin' terms with devils, blue or red; she's a sensible, healthy sort."

Henderson turned his piercing eyes on Tess; and as plainly as if he had said it aloud, she read his thought: "I wonder I wonder."

He turned lightly to Brandon.

"Yes, your medicine is rather good, but you see we haven't all the same capacity for work as you have, Harry: you're a bit of a glutton in that direction, you know."

Brandon smiled, pleased with the compliment.

"Trouble is," Henderson continued, "some of us feel that your medicine kills too many things other than the devils. Not in your case, because I believe work is your hobby. I've tried it, and I can take my share of work with the rest. I hold that work is one of the best all-round tonics for body and soul ever invented. But some of us suffer from such misfortune either of temperament or circumstance that only drastic overdoses would take effect, and it would be so deadening that we would lose much that makes for life's enrichment. Then it becomes a special case; the frivolity of the city is one mode of treatment." He looked at Tess and read understanding in her eyes.

"Another way is to grin and bear it," he concluded, smiling. "I believe, Harry, in spite of your powerful cure, even you have had your periodic attacks it could

not shift: you've just had to go on and let them run their course, till the devils found you weren't much fun, and transferred to some less fortunate individual who was more easy prey, or who had less work on hand."

"Maybe, you're not far wrong, Barrie," Brandon agreed, smiling. His glance turned uneasily toward the door at the far end of the shed. His wife had promised to follow on after Miss Gordon; what if she walked in now, and found the two of them standing there talking about blue devils as though they were old friends discussing a common experience? He must do something.

"Did you notice that chap second to the end, Miss Gordon?" he pointed down the perspiring row. "He's the crack shearer of the district; does over two hundred a day when he gets going well. Come and have a look how the wool seems to roll off by magic."

Henderson shot a swift glance at him—must have read his purpose, Brandon thought, embarrassed.

"Henderson's a wonderful talker," he remarked as they reached the end of the shed. "He's just the same on everything he talks about. He seems a decent chap to talk to; seems so strange he should be mixed up—"

Mrs. Brandon's ample figure appeared in the doorway; and her husband broke off as her cheery voice reached them.

"Here I am at last. Well, Miss Gordon, what do you think of it?"

"Wonderful!" Tess answered, as she watched the swift hand of the expert ply back and forth with its amazing speed and skill. Why had Mrs. Brandon entered at that moment? What had Brandon been on the point of telling her? For the first time since meeting her, Tess wished the good lady miles away. Would such oppor-

tunity offer again? She doubted it. Some conspiracy seemed afoot to prevent the solution of the mystery surrounding Henderson.

Mrs. Brandon glanced quickly round the shed. Henderson was a good distance off, occupied with the wool-classers. This fact afforded satisfaction, in which her husband heartily shared. He was congratulating himself on his timely intervention.

Unfortunately for Brandon, his wariness did not last long enough. After tea, the subject of the shearers' progress came up.

"I wonder if Steve's got his sheep ready? Henderson's lot'll be cut out to-morrow."

"And a mighty good job, too; I'll be glad to see him go."

"Well, he hasn't bothered us much with his presence."

"No, but I don't like having anything to do with him."

"But he keeps to himself, never interferes in other people's business. He's never anything else but a gentleman; and he can talk, too: it's wonderful. Why, the way he was talkin' there to-day just before you came in—"

"Do you mean he was talking with Miss Gordon?" she cut in.

"Oh Lord!" he groaned inwardly. "Now I've done it." Aloud he said:

"Yes, she had to meet him looking over the shed; it was only natural they should speak."

"It's like his cheek to go talking to her; the fellow should be kept in his place."

"But, hang it all, he has to be treated with ordinary decency. Are all the other station owners such angels that we can pick him out as bein' so much worse than

everybody else? Besides, Miss Gordon is no fool; she's knocked around a city. I guess she can be trusted to look after herself."

"Oh, I don't know; this Henderson is dangerous—just the sort girls go crazy over. Something romantic about him."

"Oh, she's too sensible."

"Sense is no safeguard against that sort of thing; it sweeps sense aside. He's just the kind of man to have that effect on the opposite sex. Hear him singing the other night? It's in his voice; something that fascinates. He's not safe. Even apart from the other business; he's dangerous. Them queer eyes of his, and his hands so restless.... never keeps 'em still. I never care about men with hands that can't keep still. Steve, now, is a different type altogether."

Brandon sighed.

"He won't have much chance to charm Miss Gordon; his sheep will be finished to-morrow."

"I'll be mighty glad to see his sheep go. It would be a terrible thing if he should attract her. And you know she's a lovely girl; any man would lose his head over eyes like hers—I never saw such beautiful blue eyes. If it was Steve, now, it would be a different matter. I reckon they'd make a splendid match. I never thought I'd be anxious to see Steve marry a girl from the city after what we've seen o' them here, but she's so different I can't help being fond of her. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see it come off either: they went for a walk down to the river this evening; and I couldn't help thinkin' as I saw them go, 'What a bonny couple they are! Steve's a fine built chap.'"

"You're like all the old women—can't help match-

making," her husband teased. "How do you know she hasn't got a chap back in the city? Guess Steve and her are pally; but I wouldn't put too much on it. Still, you never know. I'm not sayin' it wouldn't be a good thing."

## CHAPTER VIII.

SHEARING passed. Spring lengthened out its days, and an impatient Summer was hovering near, anxious to get an early start with its own operations.

Tess smiled her thanks as she took the letter from Steve. It was quite a while since Mac had written.

A frown of resentment gathered in her eyes as she read. What right had he to tell her what she should do or not do? What right had he to write peremptorily, telling her to be ready: he was coming to bring her home?

Mac coming to Allynburn! It would do him good to let him come. She tried to picture him at Allynburn with his cool self-assurance and superiority; tried to picture him alongside Brandon and Steve, especially Steve. She thought of him out riding with Steve after cattle in the ranges. The picture almost brought a laugh. So he was coming to take her home—the heavy husband stunt! It wouldn't work. Anyway, she wasn't going to let him come. She must write and put him off. No, that wouldn't be enough. The time had come for more drastic action. It must be a complete severance, a burning of her boats. Mac must be under no misunderstanding; she must make it definite that she was going out of his life forever, turning her back on the life he represented. She carried his letter to her room and sat thinking. Did she wish to sever herself irrevocably from the old life? Suppose she should weary of this and want to go back?

"The fleshpots of Egypt," she mused. "Why do we turn to them? Because most of us are cowards; we are afraid—afraid of life. We want ease and safety. Life, real honest life, battling on our own, fighting our way—it scares us. Mac represents security, plenty, ease, position; and he banks on my fear of life, fancies I will not dare to lose what he offers; fancies I will surrender all this new-found freedom, that I would surrender even love..." She whispered the word softly and broke off. Did Mac understand love? Could his soul ever rise to that mighty thing which he had visioned in these days—love, vivid, intense, fearful? Love was no thing of ease and safety; it was a clarion call to hardship and sacrifice, the youth's "Excelsior" which knew no turning back; it was fire that scorched and burned, but it was life. She was glimpsing life these days, and Mac was out of the picture.

How was it that Mac, once the central figure, had so suddenly receded to the background—gone out of the picture, in fact? Why had the sun been extinguished like a candle caught in the draught? She tried to answer the question. Was it because a man's eyes had gazed deep into her soul? Was it that hands held her fascinated by their strength and grace? Did the call of a voice in the silence of the night make all this difference? Could it be some subtle bond, some attunement of soul had drawn her?

Was it the absence of this subtle attunement that caused so many failures in married life? Only a few marriages within her knowledge had been really successful. In most cases, the victims just blundered along, most of them putting up with it, some graciously, others ungraciously. In either case, it was a pitiable falling

short of the great thing marriage should mean.

She might have mistaken her liking for Mac for the great thing before she came to Allynburn; but these few months away in the quiet of the mountains had brought deep discernment to her heart. Day after day and night after night of the eloquent silences of the bush had taught her soul that greater things existed than she had known before; and, having sensed the greater, she could never be content with the lesser emotion.

What was it the bush was teaching her? Could it be love? Would she be afraid if it were? Would she turn away from the path of its sacrifices?

No—a thousand times no! After all, life only gave its riches to those who knew love and were prepared to make sacrifice. Mac had no place in this new vision: Mac, and all he stood for, must be left behind. There must be no dallying with fate now. She would be no weakling, holding the door of security half open behind her, afraid to let go, while she ventured a little into the dark.

And so the words went forth, words which told Mac in no uncertain strain his proposed visit would be wasted and unwelcome, and that her affairs were progressing quite satisfactorily in her own hands, that his place in her life was by no means a prominent one.

"It will be a severe blow to his self-sufficiency and pride," she mused. Would it go any deeper than that?

The ocean of life was bearing her on. Mac had dropped below the horizon and was gone, and with him the last link with the old life.

Yet she was to find that these links could not be torn off without a scar. Despite the fact she had told herself that with the going of the letter her interest in

Mac ended, she found he was occupying a larger place in her mind than he had done for months past. Old scenes rose before her; old ashes smouldered. She had liked Mac; and this thrusting of his personality out of her life was not so simple and left a sense of loss. In spite of all she had come to dislike in him, he was strong. There were qualities to admire in Mac. Yet she had never come very near to him. She realised now that even in their intimate friendship, their souls had been miles apart: nothing could ever bring them nearer.

He would have been amused at her thought, she reflected; perhaps a trifle scornful. Souls, she fancied, had no place in Mac's system of thought. His was a hard, matter-of-fact world which inspired a belief in the survival of the strong. The strong ruled, and the measure of a man's strength, in Mac's world, was the size of his bank balance. Certainly, there were those who, by cunning wit, could outdo the financial man, but Mac would not confound cunning with strength; he was upright. Cunning and trickery were only a form of weakness, and he held all weakness in contempt. He was just, but was he merciful? He had been largely moulded by the thinking of his class. That was the trouble with all in the old circle to which she once belonged—cramped by the mould of their associations; unable to rise above it, or even to see above it. Money, social position, bank accounts were the only things worth while, the only door, in fact, by which the select inner circle might be reached.

Only the very exceptional people refused to be moulded by the thinking of their particular class, Tess reflected. Yet, here among these people of a simpler life, a greater freedom was to be found; minds were more independent. No higher society ruled here among these free mountain

glens. Here, men and women were thrown upon their own resources. They were removed from the influence of the mass mind, and had to carve out independent paths of thought for themselves, and to create their own class. Here a man wasn't valued only for what he possessed, but for what he was. Their life made them strong, these men capable of leaning on their own merit, of thinking for themselves.

Tess's mind centered upon Henderson. What was it set this man apart from his fellows? It wasn't that he couldn't show himself a man. She saw again the lithe figure astride the mad, untamable horse—the desperate struggle, the violent whirl, the vicious ferocity.....the drooping head, the dejected eyes...the man's victory. The very walk, the set of the shoulders, the flash of the eyes, proclaimed him a man, yet.....?

It was puzzling, alarming. These people were above class prejudice, class values; yet even Brandon recognised something that set Henderson apart. It must be something in himself, in his own life.

The more her mind grappled with the puzzle, the more difficult of solution it seemed. She was too self-conscious over the matter to ask the question that might set her mind at rest, or perhaps cause her to adopt the attitude of the others. Did the fear of this haunt her more than she realised? Did she hesitate to lift the curtain lest the truth should cause her pain?

An intolerable restlessness seized her; the house stifled her; the open hills called. It was Sunday; she would ride to The Lookout. That great view always breathed peace, and poured a balm upon her soul. There, she could still her soul in the great quiet; the solitude would help her fight her battle and overcome her restlessness.

She packed some lunch and set out. What a blessing Steve's mare had been! Her heart warmed as she thought of Steve's many kindnesses. He had become so much a part of her existence she could scarcely picture life without him; he was always in the background somewhere, strong, watchful, helpful, never obtrusive, always understanding—and yet . . . it was not his voice that sent the warm blood tingling through her veins. He had stepped so easily and naturally into her life she seemed to have known him always. He was as one of her own, something like she imagined an affectionate brother would be. Not having a brother, her ideas in that direction were rather hazy and ideal.

Sometimes she saw the hunger in Steve's eyes, and then she wondered just how he did feel towards her. What would she do if he should suddenly disappear, drop out of her life? The sense of loss accompanying the thought was disquieting, painful; he had become a necessity, almost, and yet . . .

She cantered along the winding river through patches of delightful brush untouched by the hand of man, where, mingling with the fronds of feathery ferns, the long antlers of the "staghorn" hung gracefully from the tree-tops; bright-leaved vines shaded fairy bowers of delicate flowering shrubs and the shady river rippled by, its song keeping tune with the clear, liquid notes of the bell bird.

Already, her fretful soul was feeling the healing balm of nature. Up and up she wound her way until the wide, panoramic scene of "The Lookout" opened to her gaze.

Seated in the chair of the old knarled roots, she gazed far down where the river crooned its song. Away behind her, the great range lifted its blue peaks like silent sen-

tinels to the sky. Peace! The hills always breathed peace. They were so majestic, suggestive of eternity . . . of God. Eternity! Love seemed to be about the only eternal thing. No, not a thing, a force baffling definition, mysterious and infinite as life itself. It came unbidden, departing never. It was not physical: its roots were hidden in the spiritual. It called for sacrifice, inflicted pain, yet life without it was barren and empty. What did it ask? Trust, understanding, compassion if need be . . . and perhaps more than all, forgiveness. Was it love—this great, new ocean of feeling that had begun to sway her barque, whose waves lured her on into the unknown? Would she sail undaunted on, bring what it might?

Suddenly, she sat up with a laugh. What had come over her? If her people only knew what was passing through her mind now, there'd be talk of a brain specialist. No doubt, there would be some such talk as that in any case if Mac had communicated to them the contents of her letter. Perhaps their opinion wouldn't be far wrong: there were moments when she almost doubted her own sanity. Perhaps she was allowing the romance of the bush to carry her away, to rob her of proper balance. Her thoughts had been absolutely absurd, couldn't stand the light of calm reason. Still, one couldn't prevent the mind running into all kinds of channels. Thoughts steal unbidden into the mind and set us day-dreaming. Life would be a very dull affair if sometimes our thoughts didn't trick us, and lift us out of ourselves in our unwary moments, clothing sane and monotonous reality with the robes of fancy and dream.

In spite of her temporary return to sober thought, she soon relapsed into speculative reflection. What was this love she thought so much about? Or rather, what was its

place in the scheme of life? With so many, it appeared to be a fleeting ecstasy that soon burned out, leaving only unromantic ashes. The great consummation of love was when the lovers came together in marriage. Why was it that eighty per cent. of the marriages settled down into such dull, commonplace, prosaic affairs? It should not be: some insidious power must operate to extinguish the holy fire. Was it that the flame spurred the languid flesh to heights too lofty to be maintained? Or did familiarity rob love of the gems of romance that adorned the first rapturous associations.

Surely love was stronger than to be choked out by any commonplace drudgery of life!

Was it that the vast majority was deceived, mistaking the first thrill of sex attraction for the all-absorbing, all-conquering rapture of love? She thought of her early associations with Mac . . . of the deeper, more abiding emotion stirred by her friendship with Steve. Maybe the brook seemed refreshing when the river was unknown. Afterwards, when the brook dried up, life was left a barren and unromantic spot. She must make no mistakes.

Her gaze wandered far down the winding valley, noticing the dozens of little creeks on either side. These all were now almost dry—like so many of the marriages she knew—but there was the river, still flowing, still singing even though the rains delayed to fall and the surrounding country was afflicted with drought. How symbolic of true, abiding love it was! Its springs were in the great heights!

"Dare I disturb the romantic dreams of youth?"

With a start, she turned her head. For a moment, she thought it was all part of her day-dreaming. But, no, there he sat upon his horse, his lips smiling, his eyes

wide, inquiring, flashing with that strange, quick fire that seemed to burn within his soul.

With a light movement he was on the ground.

"May I intrude upon your Paradise?" he asked, fastening the bridle to a branch, and preparing to climb down into the enfolding roots.

Tess found her heart beating painfully as the hot blood rushed to her cheeks.

"Yes, there's plenty of room," she invited.

He seated himself beside her

She felt a tinge of satisfaction in meeting him dressed in her riding costume: she was aware that she looked well in it.

"You have an eye for the glories of nature, Miss Gordon. You have not been long discovering this wonderful view."

"Oh, I found this my first day at Allynburn. It has been my favourite spot ever since."

"Yet I was here for years before I discovered it; and I never did discover this wonderful chair nature has provided. I know the old tree well enough. What years it must have been growing to its present size! I suppose it stood sentinel over Boorendabri for a hundred years before I came on the scene."

"Boorendabri?" Her startled eyes turned on him questioningly.

"Yes, that's the name of my place: all that land on the other side of the river there." He had noticed her start, and wondered.

So Henderson lived at Boorendabri! She recalled the young Minister's words: "There is much that needs healing there; how much, only God can know."

The whole scene whirled before her eyes; it was such

a stunning discovery. Silence fell between them: she was too confused to speak. The silence became painful: she could feel his bright, piercing eyes.

"Does the view inspire you?" he asked, breaking the awkward silence.

"It's the most wonderful view I've ever seen."

A smile hovered on his dark features.

"Perhaps you find it a good tonic for the blues?"

She smiled back at him.

"I do. These silent hills, and the immensity of nature seem to breathe a spirit of peace and contentment."

"Yes, and yet the same nature, which here breathes such contentment, fills the human heart with such discontent. We stretch out our hands vainly for the things that are unattainable—the joys that lie beyond the barriers she herself has hedged around us."

"Perhaps she has placed the barriers there to be overcome," Tess suggested.

"Maybe, but some barriers are prison walls behind which she has locked us and smashed the key. Or her richest treasures are placed so high as to baffle all our efforts, like Ogilvie's rose:—

"I stormed her tower on the southward wall,  
To drop fatigued from the bastions tall.  
Thorns made sport of me, red as the rose  
A hundred wounds ran blood at their blows,  
... Till I learned at last what they strove to teach:  
That great red rose was out of my reach."

"True," Tess replied thoughtfully. "But isn't it the unattainable that holds us on the upward climb, charms us, lures us on. But for that discontent, man might stagnate."

He laughed, a little bitterly, she thought.

"I fancy she has done the job rather well: there is little danger of stagnation. Most of us are born with the blessing of discontent. Wouldn't we be happier if we could desire less—could settle more easily into the common round . . . be more satisfied with the common roses? Isn't there something of a mockery in this eternal yearning for the stars when nature has bound us with unbreakable chains to the muddy earth?"

"Oh, I don't agree with you, Mr. Henderson," she cried earnestly. "We all have power to climb above the mud.

I believe there are no chains strong enough to hold us in the mud if we're really determined to break them. The trouble is most of us haven't enough determination; then we turn round and blame God."

"God!" His laugh rang out so cynically that Tess shrank from him. The bitterness and anguish compressed into that one word cut deep into her soul, startled her—alarmed her.

"What sort of a God do you believe in?" he demanded. "An all-powerful, angelic Being, sitting on His throne in the heavens, showering blessings upon His children, providing they sing His praise sufficiently and give him enough homage—are grateful enough for this gift of mockery called life?"

He turned his gaze upon her searchingly, and the fire seemed to leap up in anger in his eyes. She stared at him, fascinated by the fierce flashing eyes and the bitter curve of his handsome lips.

"Imagine a life," his impassioned voice continued, "cursed from its birth, shut out forever from the joy and light that makes life worth living, a life blasted, damned, sport for the Gods themselves, to laugh at, condemned to

know and feel the highest yearnings without the possibility of realising them: would such a life have cause, do you think, to praise and thank this beneficent Creator for the gracious gift of such life?"

She wanted to cry out that no life could be so condemned; that no matter how black the surroundings, there was a way to the light and a Hand to guide; that no matter how bitter the defeat, there was always the possibility of victory still; that the glory of life lay in turning defeat into victory, in climbing from the darkest dungeon up into the light. But his very intensity and bitterness had smitten her dumb: her tender soul sensed something of the bitter agony of his gethsemane. She could not think logically. He was wounded: she wanted to comfort him.

In that moment, she knew love; it had come to her in a blinding flood of light, and her senses reeled. It had come, not as the gentle light of dawn, but as the lightning, fierce, terrific, laden with pain. Yet she welcomed it, whatever sorrow and suffering might accompany it. Oh, if she could only make him understand the great thoughts which fought for expression in her mind! Oh, if she might stand beside this stricken, wounded soul and help it from the valley of gloom and despair up the shining heights of love and triumph! Whatever the past held, it couldn't stand against the redeeming power of love. She glimpsed the scars and longed to lay healing fingers upon them, to smother them with her lips, and rob them of their ugliness and pain by her love.

"Life!"—his voice was low-pitched and charged with sorrowful finality—"Life has given me a heap of ashes."

She looked up into his face, but a moment ago so full of intensity. Melancholy had fallen upon the fine, sen-

sitive features: the fire seemed suddenly to have died in the sad eyes.

"And to you it has given a wonderful garden, full of roses."

Tess was overwhelmed with her emotion, and could not hold back the tears.

Gently, he stretched out his hand till his finger touched her cheek.

"You weep for the sorrows of one who has but touched you in passing, one who is practically a stranger." He turned away. "God! To be denied the joy of such a friendship!"

He turned to her again.

"I would give my immortal soul if I might take your hand in mine and claim you as a friend, but it cannot be. This comedian, Nature, makes sport of me: she gives me one brief glimpse of Paradise, mocking me; opens the door, daring me to enter."

Tess, unaccustomed to such wild statements, turned white as again she caught the bitterness in his voice: it shot through her heart like fiery darts.

"You are wrong," she whispered passionately. "You are wrong to cry out against life as you do. In spite of all you say, we make our own lives—mould them to our will. Whatever our mistakes, we still have power to retrieve what is lost. Life can never beat us unless we give in, and," her voice sank, "only cowards give in when life beats them."

His eyes swept her face.

"How do you know?" he cried out. "What do you know of life? You have never felt its blasts—its bitterness; never known the fires of hell burning in your heart; never peered into the beauty of love's garden

knowing the door to be barred against you—a pariah. God! What can you know of life?"

She put her hand to her throat to ease the pain that was choking her.

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I know that light will still shine in the darkness. God once said: 'Let there be light,' and nothing has ever been able to put that light out. The darkness must give way in the end if we keep our faces toward the light. I don't understand how I know these things: I don't know anything of life; yet I know, I know."

He rose, and grasping a branch over their heads, looked intently down into her face.

"You know!" he repeated. "Life—all we desire—is ours for the taking, if only we dare! Cowards . . . !" his voice thrilled with a new intensity. "Only cowards are beaten! Cowards! It's the coward who lays hold upon the thing he desires. It takes strength and courage to turn away from the things life holds out to us. Life shows us light and beauty, mocking while she dares us to grasp them. The hero is the one who can stand against her; turn away from the garden which he knows will turn to a desert if he enter. God!" his voice rose fiercely, yet pleadingly, "God—if there is a God—give me that courage!"

The next instant he was gone. Tess, sitting like a figure carved in stone, heard the quick beats of his horse's hoofs on the stony road, their splash in the river, then dying away far out on the other side. Like the beating of a drum, she heard them, and to her heated imagination, they seemed to be saying: "Courage! Courage! Courage!"

## CHAPTER IX.

TESS suddenly felt limp and exhausted; she was waking some terrific experience. Something like a whirlwind had caught her, and now had passed on. The wind, rushing, whirling, agitating, had gone, and in its path left the usual trail of debris and dust. Why was it Henderson affected her like this? Could such a stormy emotion be love?

A great weariness assailed her as she climbed from her seat and made her way to her horse. The storm had left its wreckage: her emotions, keyed up like a finely strung harp, had been played upon so violently that they were now strained and discordant. Little had she dreamed when she set out in search of quiet and tranquillity that she would again encounter this strange man who had crossed her path with such disturbing results. Was she sorry? No; in spite of the pain and chaos in her soul, she felt a glow of power, and was glad.

Coming round a bend in the road a little way down the river, she caught sight of Steve riding towards her. He was coming for her. Suppose—an uncomfortable sensation assailed her at the thought—suppose, now he knew 'The Lookout' was her favourite resort, he should come again sometime and find . . . . No, she dismissed the thought; she would never wish Steve out of the way. He had been a friend ever since she first came, a stranger, to Allynburn; had done all he could in every way to make her stay more pleasant. Here he was now, anxious

for her safety. She became suddenly conscious that the sun was not shining and that dark clouds were rising rapidly over the mountains.

As she came up to him, his face was alight with a friendly smile—a smile that carried the conviction of sterling friendship and comradeship to the heart.

"Mrs. Brandon was getting anxious about you on account of the storm," he explained. "Jack said you'd be up here, so I rode along to see you safely home."

She smiled back at him, and they galloped homeward. She was silent most of the way, and was rather glad when they reached home. She was glad, at the same time, that Steve was there; his presence soothed and strengthened her somehow.

"I thought you'd get into it properly," Mrs. Brandon called out as she came in. "I sent Steve out to look for you—not that he took much sendin'—he was lookin' at the sky at least an hour before I spoke about you. I knew he was wonderin' if he ought not to go."

Tess smiled again as she glanced at Steve. What wonderful understanding he possessed! His was the natural delicacy which no veneer of education or social convention could impart. He had sensed her love for the solitudes, and refrained from intruding. A flush of shame arose as she remembered the half-formed thought that he might become a nuisance. All her association with him should have taught her better. Was that fascination that swept her soul like a fire, blinding her to the sterling worth of this other man whose advances she had rather encouraged a few short weeks ago? She felt she had been guilty of disloyalty to him. What was she to do? Surely he deserved the fullness of her friendship even if she could give him nothing more.

Tea was a merry meal. Brandon was in a particularly jolly mood. He talked and teased till they all wondered what had come over him. Tess threw off her preoccupation, and joined in with the fun. She was finding her way back to normal in this atmosphere of domestic happiness. Henderson receded to the background. This home was so healthy, so happy. Nothing of the mire could survive here; no shadow ever seemed to fall on the beauty of this home-life. She studied Mrs. Brandon, the ideal mother; then Harry Brandon, placid, persevering, one of the pioneering type which had won Australia from the grip of drought and flood. Her thoughts turned again to Steve; he, too, was of that type, possessing the same qualities, with something added. His was a finer mind, and a more sensitive nature with the benefits of a liberal education added.

On the verandah, after tea, they sat looking out over the hills where the storm clouds were now breaking.

"The nights are wonderful," she murmured, half to herself. "One could scarcely imagine anything ugly or horrible in this place, it seems so pure and beautiful, so serene—full of all the things that make life worth living."

"You have caught the spirit of the bush," Steve assured her. "To those who love her she shows her treasures."

She listened to his voice: it was strong and deep. It thrilled her—always had thrilled her, but not in the same way that Henderson's did. There was a difference—a difference very hard to define. Yet above it all, she was conscious of the strong influence Steve was exerting over her. Their spirits seemed to touch; there was a growing understanding between them. Yet she was confident that their comradeship was not love. Her heart beat faster

as her thoughts carried her memory back to her experience at 'The Lookout.' What was that fierce flame Henderson kindled in her heart? Was it love? Why did the flame burn so fiercely and then die down like that when he was gone, leaving her so weary? Was she mistaken? Was it possible she was turning away from the reality to chase a mirage? She wished that deep rapture she knew in Henderson's presence would continue. Was it only fascination? A mesmeric influence? No, no; her heart rose to defend itself against the charge. It was love—real love—love that blessed . . . and burned. Was it not right that love should dethrone reason, and sweep the soul with its ravishing flame as the bush-fire scorched the forest, awaking the dormant seeds of greater beauty. Yet passion also scorched, her woman's heart warned her, love could be withered and destroyed in the flames of passion. But this new thing that had come into her life was not merely passion, she was sure of that. But would it stand the test of time and the common walks of life? She thought of the home. Every woman was a potential home-maker, a mother. The thought disturbed her. Steve had those qualities that harmonised with the idea of home . . . yet . . .

"I expected you would be lonely," he was saying, breaking the long silence. "After the bustle of the city, one is apt to feel the quietness of the country depressing. It takes most city people a long time to grow into an appreciation of the country, but you have it in your blood."

"Yes, it's hereditary in my case," she replied. "My father had it, yet all his life had to be spent in the smoky old city which he hated."

"It's a tragedy, Miss Gordon, to be tied to an office or some other class of toil for which the temperament

is entirely unsuited, when a person's whole soul burns with a love of the country. In fact, such a fate is about the worst kind of slavery. It ties a man to a galling bondage, and doesn't even relieve him of the ordinary responsibilities of life. They are like birds in a cage—everlastingly beating their wings against the bars. I hate to see a bird caged; yet a lot of poor devils are worse off than that. I often think how lucky I am. Mind you, the land is a hard master to serve, and imposes many hardships, especially on those who don't like it, but to those who do . . . what freedom it gives. Heredity has been kind in giving you this deep love for nature. At least. I should consider it a kindness; some might hold a different view."

"I'm not quarrelling with it," she answered with a laugh. "I think heredity plays a greater part in the making or marring of all lives than we sometimes give it credit for; it plays a greater part in the general progress of the race than we think."

"You're right there," he warmly agreed. "There are thousands of poor devils making their way to hell, or rather making their own hell largely because of heredity. Poor unfortunates—damned before they come into the world by the sins of their parents or ancestors. In my opinion, no persons should be allowed to marry if they are unfit in mind or body. It's the biggest problem the race has to face."

He suddenly found himself embarrassed; it was such a delicate subject. But Tess was listening gravely. Strange that Steve should speak on this subject tonight. Children . . . her face burned, she was glad of the dark . . . yet every woman thought about children in connection with marriage. It was natural to desire children, marriage

seemed incomplete without them; and should not these unborn little ones not be considered beforehand—given the very best heritage a clean parenthood could bequeath? The figure of Henderson loomed up before her mind. What was the shadow that darkened his mind and poisoned his whole life? Love might heal with its light; but would the shadow fall upon his children?

She shivered as with sudden cold. If only he had not crossed her path—filled her with such disturbing emotions—how readily she could have given Steve her love! With his splendid manhood, what better could any girl wish? Yet, between them loomed the figure of Henderson.

Mrs. Brandon's voice, calling them to supper, brought her back to reality.

When Steve had gone, the two women were left alone, Harry having retired long before. Tess usually wasted no time in getting to bed where she often spent an hour with a favourite book. But tonight, she felt lonely, disturbed, at sea; she lingered in the warm glow of Mrs. Brandon's company. She felt drawn to confide in her, but still hesitated. Her natural reticence and habit formed from being thrown so much, since her father's death, upon herself, held her back. She was conscious that Mrs. Brandon was prejudiced against Henderson, and it was scarcely fair to him.

She helped clear away the cups, then asked if she couldn't help put up the lunches for Jack and his father, who were going at four the next morning.

"But you must be tired, dear," Mrs. Brandon protested.

"No, I'm not a bit tired."

"Well, you must be excited over something Steve's

been talkin' about? Come on now, what was the big discussion."

Tess laughed merrily at the other's teasing.

"Would you really like to know? Well, we were discussing heredity, and preventing unfit people from marrying."

Mrs. Brandon stared in amazement.

"Well, I never! How different things are since I was young! Do you think young people would have talked about things like that in my young days? Why, the girl's would ha' fainted. Well, it's a good thing young people are beginning to talk about things like that; they think about them when it's too late, often enough. There's too much keepin' young people in the dark about such matters, and bein' horrified when anybody dares to say something a bit out o' the ordinary. Young people ought to think about the responsibilities of parenthood."

She paused to ponder the problem a few seconds.

"I don't know how they'd manage, though, if they tried to stop the unfit ones from gettin' married. They might stop them from marryin', but it'd take more than a law to keep them apart—that's the difficulty. If we could make everybody feel their own responsibility, it would help a lot."

"Yes, but do you think people could ever reason calmly on the matter when it came to their own case? Love seems to dethrone reason, to take the reins out of hand and drive recklessly on regardless of consequences. Would the knowledge of a physical or mental defect be allowed to intervene?"

"In most cases, it wouldn't," Mrs. Brandon agreed.

"Nature is too strong."

"And the children have to pay the price. Women

should be educated in these matters. I say women, because I think it lies in the hands of our own sex mostly. Fatherhood doesn't mean, even to the best of men, what motherhood means to a woman."

Tess was surprised at her own words. They were the expression of a deep conviction which had been growing in her heart. It seemed to her that her womanhood was rising up in alarm to defend the heritage of the unborn.

The elder woman regarded her with a new light in her eyes. It was as if they had suddenly come very close to each other. Woman to woman, they were speaking of the deepest things of life, understanding each other as they had not done before.

Mrs. Brandon smiled.

"I'm in a talky mood to-night. Somehow, you've set me going. I don't know just how it is, but you seem to have changed just lately—come closer to me. I couldn't have talked like this to you a month ago. I don't mean that you were ever stand-offish: I can't explain, but perhaps it's just that we're getting more used to each other."

Tess could have explained it: she had awakened: was glimpsing the things that were deepest to a woman's heart, and she wanted to understand them. She was rather in the dark, groping her way to light. She was puzzled, bewildered; had been drawn nearer to Mrs. Brandon as one who might understand. She caught herself imagining Steve by her side, his arms around her, his voice—Steve had a lovely voice—whispering sweet nothings in her ear. Would that satisfy her? She was lonely: she wanted to be understood, comforted, loved.

What satisfaction would be afforded her in the end by the all-sweeping fire that had blazed in her heart

that day? Even now, she was conscious that it had given her pain; and it might be only an hallucination—a dream that could never come true. Love was eternal. Steve would love like that. Could she respond? What of this other voice that fell on her ear with such all-fascinating magic? Was it only a mocking voice, calling like the sirens of old, calling to destruction?

Never had she found herself so storm-tossed and desolate. Her eyes were misty as she looked at Mrs. Brandon. Tonight, she had seen more of the other's kindly sympathetic soul than ever before. She wanted to throw her arms about that motherly neck and pour out all her troubles. These people, though living so simply and contentedly, yet seemed to possess a depth of understanding rarely found in the more superficial circles of acquaintance she had known in the city. The people here were nearer life and reality.

Never had Tess felt such need of a confidante: Mrs. Brandon would understand, would advise. She must know the dark shadow that enshrouded this man who had come so strangely into her life.

The question trembled on her lips.

A footfall in the hall interrupted, and Harry Brandon's voice cut across her thoughts.

"I guess that pork we had for tea upset me, Mother: where can I lay my hands on the castor oil?"

Tess almost laughed aloud: the situation was too ludicrous. Castor oil!... And she was about to speak of the most sacred thing in her heart!

Mrs. Brandon went in search of the castor oil; and the spell was broken. Tess went to her room wondering whether she was glad or sorry for the interruption. Would the opportunity come again? If it should, would

she have been swept far beyond the point where it could affect her? A line she had read came to her mind—'The merest trifle in the most haphazard manner will often change the whole current of life.'

## CHAPTER X.

ALLYNBURN was settling down to normal after the rush of shearing. The days came and went with a sameness that, in less peaceful and picturesque surroundings, would have been monotonous. Brandon paid attention to broken fences, rabbits and dingoes, his brain busy with the problem of laying out the wool cheque, when it should come, to the best advantage. Tess carried on uninterrupted instruction, with Jack, now shorn of all excuses, applying himself to the accumulation of knowledge with what grace he could muster.

Mrs. Brandon took the opportunity to snatch a few days' holiday. Tess undertook to keep an eye on the house, with the help of a girl from down the river, while Mrs. Brandon was away. She was glad of the extra work; it afforded a distraction for her mind. She was too mentally weary to become agitated over the burning problem confronting her; it must stand in abeyance for the time being. The mental rest would freshen her mind for the time when the issue must be faced. In the meantime, she would find out something about the shadow under which Henderson lived.

Many weeks had passed since she last heard from home. She had written several letters and no answers had come. Evidently they were forgetting her.

Mrs. Brandon returned recharged with energy, and with a mind full of new schemes for running the house. The first item on the programme was a general clean-up.

"Suppose you take the children out for the morning,

Miss Gordon," she suggested. "Give them a lesson on botany or something about the stones down at the river. Then I could go right through the house without worrying about disturbing you."

Tess agreed, and her pupils were in hearty accord. Jack entertained a good deal of scorn for "learnin' names o' flowers;" but it was a deal ahead of being cooped up in the stuffy school room. He grew almost enthusiastic in pointing out various weeds, and their effect on the land and the stock.

It was a pleasant morning, and the time passed so rapidly that they were surprised to hear the sharp beating of a kerosene tin—the signal for lunch. They hurried up the river bank and made their way toward the house.

Topping the rise, they were surprised to see a strange car at the house. It was a new car, flashing back the sunlight with its gleaming paint.

"Golly! Who's car? Isn't she a beauty?" Jack exclaimed. "Don't belong to anyone about here. Must be some toff."

They hastened on, suppressed excitement in their tones. Mrs. Brandon was waiting for them on the verandah. It seemed strange—her waiting there like that, just at lunch time, too.

"Must be someone up to look at cattle," Jack suggested. "We had a chap up last year, but he didn't have a car like that: suppose he's got a new one. They always make a lot o' money, these agents."

But the sight of Mrs. Brandon's figure perturbed Tess. She had a distinct presentiment that somehow the car was connected with her. The thought frightened her a little: she felt sure something was going to break in upon

the tranquil routine and upset her plans. "Miss Gordon, a gentleman is here to see you—Mr. Graham. He has motored through from Tamworth."

Tess caught her breath sharply. Mac! Why had he come? She had fancied her association with him at an end: looked upon it as a finished page, turned and forgotten: yet here he was at Allynburn. Of course, it was to take her back: he was carrying out his threat. Well, she would just show him how foolish he was to entertain such an idea.

She left the children admiring the car and went to her room.

"It's worth a thousand!" she heard Jack's voice in awed appraisement.

Worth! Yes, that was what one would expect to hear when Mac was around. The world would always be impressed with the worth of all things Mac touched.

Still, she was a little extra careful with her toilet; she must look her best. Blue—yes, she looked well in blue; it matched her eyes. Mac had a liking for blue, she remembered. The meeting was going to be a bit difficult: she must not fail in her part.

When she came out to the dining room, they were all assembling for lunch. Steve was there; he had come to help Brandon with the cattle for a couple of days. Mac rose to meet her with a confident smile.

"I've run you to earth at last, you see."

She held out her hand with an easy laugh.

"Yes, and you've surprised me." The meeting was not going to be difficult after all. Was he adopting this calm manner to put her at ease? It would be like him; everything—life itself—was to him a very calm business. To see Mac shaken out of his calm would be a novel

experience. Nothing seemed of sufficient importance in his eyes to warrant excitement. He would endeavour to envelope her in his superior calm.

"You're looking well," he commented with an admiring glance. "The country air must agree with you."

Banal! she thought as the conventional answer came to her lips. "You will be tired after your long journey, Mr. Graham; would you care to stay the night here?"

It was probably his reference to the country air that had led Mrs. Brandon to make the suggestion.

"If it wouldn't be troubling you too much, Mrs. Brandon, I would be glad of the extra time to talk with Miss Gordon. It's good of you."

Tess noticed Mac had made a good impression upon Mrs. Brandon. She was glad; for, after all, he was one of her friends from the city.

During lunch, Mac chatted with Brandon with such ease and interest that Tess found herself genuinely surprised. Steve refused to be drawn into the conversation. He sat silent on the other side of the table with an expression of worry in his eyes. Every few minutes, he turned a pleading gaze toward Tess that touched her heart with compassion. Mac's advent was troubling him: he was afraid of losing her—afraid Mac would persuade her to go back. In spite of herself, she felt a tinge of exultation—an instinct handed down through a thousand generations from the time when men fought for the love of woman, and the strongest carried her off. Yet she felt a keen desire to reassure Steve. She noticed Mac eyeing him across the table with a good deal of speculation. He also was summing the other up, and finding the summing up somewhat disturbing. Steve could hold his own, Tess reflected with a glow of pride. With all his

city training and city polish, Mac could show no advantage over this splendid son of the bush. Tess read the question that flashed through Mac's mind—was this the reason she had refused to return to the city, the reason she had written that letter? A strong possibility.

When Steve glanced again in her direction, Tess's eyes met his, and she gave him a smile full of encouragement, a smile of understanding. "I'm not going; don't worry," it said.

Steve's lips answered the smile, and his face lighted up. How vital, how attractive his face was when it lighted up like that! He had caught her message: he understood. Wasn't that the test of the deepest friendship—ability to understand?

She found that her determination not to leave was growing firmer. Life was full and real here; she would never go back—never.

She turned her attention to Mac's conversation with Brandon.

"At heart, I suppose most of us feel the pull of the country life," he was saying. "But there are other considerations. We are not all fitted to endure the hardships of the land. At times, one does grow tired of the city life, with its never-ending rush. Even money-making loses its charm." He laughed. "That's a strange confession for a Scotchman to make, now, isn't it?"

"I think it's the first time I ever heard anyone make it," Brandon laughed. "We never grow tired o' money-making up here. You see, we're never able to make enough to say we've really succeeded, so our appetities are never satisfied. It takes us all our time to keep on our feet. When we do strike a good year, we only just about pull up after the bad, then the bad ones start

again. So we're never likely to grow tired o' money-making; but I suppose there's more charm in the money we do get than there would be if we were millionaires. They tell us millionaires are never happy."

"Maybe they're not, but I could do with a good deal more money without being unhappy," Mrs. Brandon broke in.

"You'd find the country pretty slow after city business life, Mr. Grham." Steve spoke slowly, carefully. "You've been accustomed to living at high speed: we're rather a slow old crowd up here."

Tess caught the sarcastic inflection in his voice. Steve evidently felt that Mac was talking merely for effect—wanted to impress Brandon and the rest. She recognised at once that Steve was right: Mac really cared no more for the country than a bookmaker for a church service. He had always jeered at her desire for the country. These were the tactics of the professional salesman. She had expected better of Mac than this. It wasn't fair: Brandon was taking him so seriously.

"How about having a look at the cattle," Brandon suggested as they rose from the table.

Tess tried hard to suppress a smile: Mac was caught in the meshes of his own net. He couldn't refuse after such a eulogy of the country and all pertaining to it. It served him right.

Mac accepted with alacrity. He was a good actor, and Tess was forced to admit admiration. One would have gathered he was delighted at the very idea of seeing cattle.

Steve lingered a few moments, the pleading expression in his eyes again. They walked together to the verandah.

"Allynburn will not be the same if you leave it," he said in a low voice from which the music had gone.

"Don't rush to conclusions," she advised. "Allynburn won't lose me. Do you think that the first voice from the city can bring me flying back? You have a poor opinion of my love for this"—she waved her hands toward the hills.

"Old association have a strong appeal," he replied softly. "God forbid they should ever appeal strongly enough to take you away."

"Don't worry," she reassured him as he turned to go.

## CHAPTER XI.

TESS had finished school for the day, and was resting on the verandah when Mac returned from the cattle inspection.

"Suppose we stroll down to the river," he suggested. "It will be cool and quiet there."

As they walked along, Mac chatted about Sydney and all the life in which once she had mixed—the pictures and theatres, the people she had known and the gossip of the city.

Why had he come? The question was beating itself through and through her mind. Did he think his chatter would set her longing for the old life? Perhaps . . . . . she had missed the theatre a little; but life here had compensated her a thousandfold. But of course Mac was not to know that.

They strolled along the river bank till they came to a grassy spot shaded by tall gums, sloping down to the water's edge where willow wands kissed their reflection in sparkling water.

"A pretty spot," Mac commented as they seated themselves on the grass.

Tess leaned back against a boulder. She was tired and found it good to lean back and relax. When was Mac going to unfold the purpose of his coming? One thing she resolved: she wouldn't help him in the least. He must break the ice himself.

Through half-closed eyes, she watched him as he sat looking down the river. How stern he looked all at once! His mouth, when it set into those lines, looked very hard. Yet his face was rather charming when he smiled: he had smiled a lot during lunch: but now, for the moment, he seemed to have relaxed. Yes, his face was decidedly hard. She noticed his fingers toying with a pebble, and her eyes suddenly opened in astonishment. She was dreaming! Mac nervous? Impossible! But the twitching fingers placed it beyond doubt. She looked up at his face again, a queer tightening at her heart. The next moment, he was speaking.

"Tess, it's your mother; she's ill, and needs you."

She straightened up defensively.

"Mother! Mother's never been sick in her life; and they've never said a word about anything wrong in their letters. She was staring at him angrily. This was a ruse concocted between them to get her back home. If her mother were ill, why couldn't she write and say so? It was like their meanness to attack her in this underhand way; but she wouldn't be caught. She looked at Mac's face again: he was shrinking from her angry gaze; but something in his expression gave the lie to her accusing thoughts. Her mother ill! A lump came in her throat, her eyes began to sting. Her tears were not of sympathy, however. This was a cruel jest of fate. It wasn't fair! She wouldn't go back! Even if her mother were sick, there was her sister. Her mother had never shown any preference for her company before. Anyway, it was probably only a bilious attack.

Mac was watching intently, sensing the struggle. To her excited imagination, he seemed to be exulting in it, knowing she couldn't refuse such a call of duty. She

hated him! Hated them all! Fiercely, she turned on him.

"What good can I do? You know there is no bond between Mother and me. Kit is there. Mother always preferred Kit. What is the matter with Mother? Has she seen a doctor?"

Mac shook his head. He only attempted to answer the last question.

"That's one of the troubles—one reason why I came for you. She ought to have seen a doctor long ago, but she won't: you could persuade her to do so."

Tess laughed harshly.

"You credit me with great influence. Has she been telling you what wonderful faith she has in my opinion?"

"It's not that, Tess," he pleaded. "But you are strong-willed, and she'll have to submit. She'll make a thousand objections, but you'll simply have to overrule them all, and take her. Kit is... well, you know Kit; she's absolutely useless, careless, and in fact quite heartless. You are her only hope, Tess. I know what it means to you, but you are needed: you'll regret it all your life if you don't go now."

"How can you know what it means to me?" she demanded, shooting an hostile glance at him. "What's up with Mother?"

"She complains of not feeling well; and I've noticed her clutch her side as though in pain; but she's afraid, and fear is driving her mad."

"Afraid!" Tess turned her eyes upon him in amazement. "Mother afraid! Whatever is she afraid of?"

"I don't know; but she is afraid, and needs you desperately."

"Did she say she needed me?" Tess grasped at any

straw; her mind was in confusion. It was difficult to imagine her mother afraid of anything, that was one thing she had always admired in her mother—her fearlessness. How did Mac know she was afraid? Had he simply sensed it?

Mac answered her question reflectively.

"Not exactly, but I know she wants you. When I suggested coming, she almost wept for joy. After all, she is your mother, Tess, and, whatever it costs you, you will never regret going to her now in her need, even if she hasn't given you much consideration."

Tess shivered, yet only a few minutes ago the day seemed hot. The sun seemed suddenly to have grown dim, or was it a mist before her eyes? Must she leave all this? Must she go back to that old miserable existence? Like a hideous octopus, that old life was fastening its horrible tentacles around her, drawing her back, back, back into the seething whirlpool she loathed, away from the light and the sunshine, from liberty and... love. Oh, it wasn't fair! She wouldn't go back! What right had Mac interfering in her life like this? What claim had her mother upon her? Surely she had worked off any debt in that direction those long years she had waited upon her, looking after the home! Her mother had shown little enough affection or favour when she was home. No, she felt no moral obligation in that way; she would not go back. She would send Mac back alone with a message that if they really needed her to write and say so. How was she to know the whole thing wasn't merely a hoax to get her back? Her mother was quite capable of doing a thing like that. She looked at Mac again. No, Mac wouldn't be a party to that. He was upright even if he was hard. Her mother frightened. She set

her teeth hard. Her mother had nursed her as a little child, maybe she had some love for her then, but now—. In spite of her effort to control her emotions and speak calmly, tears came into her eyes.

"I can't!" she whispered. "I can't!"

Mac's arm was laid gently on her arm, and his voice—was it his voice—was speaking ever so gently in her ear.

"I understand, Tess. I understand more than you know. I don't want you to think I've allowed my own desires to play any part in this: I know you too well for that. Come back and see for yourself."

"How can I go away and leave Laddie," she wailed, half to herself. "Just when he's getting on well. He's lame; he can't go to school like the others. I can't leave him."

Her restraint broke down, and the tears flowed unchecked. It was heart-rending, this smashing of all her hopes and happiness, and going back to the old life, leaving Allynburn with its beauty, its deep interests and its enthralling problems forever. Yes, it would be the end; she would never come back. Fate was against her, and the break would be forever.

As if in reply to her thoughts, Mac's soft words came to her ear.

"Allynburn will be here when it's over, and you can come back. They will appreciate you all the more for your absence. You won't be leaving it forever."

"Oh, yes I will be," she sobbed. "I feel it in my heart; I'll never come back—never!"

"Nonsense, Tess. Don't work yourself into hysterics."

It was the old Mac back again, the Mac she had known before, the Mac she had fled from.

"You used to be sensible enough," he continued. "Able to face any crisis calmly. I shall begin to think the place hasn't improved you. Why shouldn't you come back?"

"Oh, I don't know," she retorted wearily, rising from the grass. "Let's go back; I suppose I'll have to get my things ready."

Mac wisely said no more, and silently they made their way to the house.

Mrs. Brandon was bending over the stove when Tess walked into the kitchen. She started up in alarm on catching sight of her red eyes.

"I—I have to go home. M—my mother is ill," Tess explained.

"Oh, mercy! Not dangerously, is she?"

"No—I mean, I don't know; I don't think so."

"Let us hope not," she exclaimed, a little puzzled, yet sensing it was not only her mother's illness that was upsetting her. She watched her go to her room with anxiety in her motherly heart.

"It won't keep you away from us very long, will it?" she pleaded later, when Tess had calmed down.

"I hope not, but I can't say till I find out what is the matter. Perhaps you had better look out for someone to take my place."

"Oh, no, no. I'd rather wait six months than do that. We'll hope for the best. The children have managed for long spells before without a teacher, and they'll do better to wait a year for you than have anybody else."

Tess smiled.

"Jack won't worry you very much, will you Jack?"

He had just entered in time to hear his name.

"Won't worry? What for?"

"Not having school."

"Not much," he admitted. "But what do you mean?"

"Miss Gordon is going back home," his mother explained.

Jack's face fell.

"Not through me?" he gasped. He looked at Tess, and seeing something of the trouble in her eyes, turned quickly away to hide his face from her.

"No, no, Jack; I owe a lot to you. Think of all the lovely rides we've had together."

His voice was trembly.

"I—I don't like school, but if you'll stay, I'll try as hard as I can. Anyhow (defiantly), I'll never go to school for anybody else."

"All right Jack, I'll come back if I can. You see, my mother is ill, and I have to look after her."

She went to her room to pack, but sat on the bed for half an hour, looking dejectedly through the window. So she was going back after all. She would see Steve tonight; he would be upset. And Henderson—would she ever see him again? She doubted it. Leaving this place was like being torn asunder. Some very real part of herself would remain here. She would be but an incomplete being away from this place which had shown her what life and freedom was. Freedom! She had imagined herself free! There was no freedom. Fate allowed you to enjoy a little liberty so that it could pull you up the more sharply, and the better to amuse itself with your sufferings. She was amazed at her own thoughts: how bitter they had suddenly become! She remembered Henderson's words. How horrified she had been at his outlook on life, yet . . .

She sat dreaming a long time, her mind idly wandering over the events of the past few months, speculating on

the future. What of joy or sorrow would it hold for her? Her mother—what was she afraid of? She had never suffered much in her life; it wouldn't take much sickness to frighten her, maybe. Probably it would turn out to be indigestion or a touch of neuritis, she thought with a tinge of contempt. Too much gaiety and too many late nights and suppers. Her mother had loved the giddy whirl; probably she was paying the penalty now—the penalty of forgetting she was no longer in her teens, that age brings limitations, and that the pursuits of youth demand a greater price from the middle-aged.

She rose and looked at her suit cases. Her packing would have to wait till the morning; she really only wanted an excuse to get alone for a space to collect her thoughts and adjust herself to changed conditions. Out on the verandah, Laddie was talking to Mac. The boy's face was alight with interest as he drank in every word.

Mac smiled as she came out to them.

"I've been telling Laddie about the big steel works. He's dying to have a look at them."

"Golly! It must be great. Golly, you've seen a lot of things, Mr. Graham," a wistful note crept into his voice. "I've never seen the city. Guess I won't ever, either."

"Don't be pessimistic, old chap, you never know what life holds for you. Even now, fate may be opening a door that will lead you to all these things. All kinds of unexpected things happen when you're looking out for them. You'd like to see the big city, would you?"

"Oh, wouldn't I? All the trams and the sea and the ships!"

Tess was amazed at the change that had come over Mac. She had never seen him with children. He was as

one transformed. There were hidden depths in every heart, Tess conceded. Mac might have been a different personality had life brought him more into contact with youngsters and less with the hardheads of the commercial world.

"You won't mind if we start early in the morning, Tess? Mac inquired. "It'll take us all our time to get through in the day, and an earlier start will mean an easier trip."

"As early as you like," she replied rather indifferently.

She saw Brandon ride in from the paddocks, heard the kookaburra's pealing laughter, heard the cockatoos calling as they flew high overhead to their homes in the tall mountain gum trees. When would she hear it all again? Her heart was full of dull pain and foreboding. Only by a determined effort was she able to refrain from breaking down altogether.

"Where's Steve?" Mrs. Brandon asked as they were assembling for tea.

"He went home this afternoon," Brandon explained. "We saw dingo tracks in our back paddock, and he's afraid they've been round his way. He went to see if his sheep are all right."

Tess's heart sank; she would have to go without seeing Steve after all. She had been looking forward to the comfort of his calming presence as a balm for her wounded spirit; but it was not to be, fate decreed otherwise. It came forcibly to her mind that fate seemed to be doing its worst; it was determined to cut her off from this life she loved, and force her back to the old which she loathed.

## CHAPTER XII.

TESS was shocked. One glance satisfied her that the sickness was no mere excuse to get her back home; her mother was haggard and thin, and a strange feverish light burned in her eyes, as if she had been gazing upon some dreadful sight until the dread registered indelibly in her eyes.

"Afraid!" She remembered Mac's words. He was right; her mother was afraid. A sudden horror clutched at her heart—drugs! One of her mother's friends was a drug addict, confirmed, hopeless. No, it could scarcely be that, she assured herself; perhaps it was just fear.

"So you did come home!" her mother greeted her, a querulous note in her voice. She had scarcely expected Tess to return, and had been robbed of a good cause of complaint and self-pity.

"You've been long enough away. You know, I never liked your going away; it was absolutely absurd. It isn't as though circumstances forced you to go to that dreadful place among strangers."

Resentment burned in Tess's heart, but the sight of that pathetic expression restrained her, her mother must be humoured.

"It's not half such a dreadful place as you imagine, mother, and the people are quite charming. Where's Kit?"

Her mother heaved a deep sigh.

"She's out. Kit's never home. I didn't notice it when I was well, but now . . . I don't know . . . children are

really very ungrateful. I've done everything I could for you both, yet Kit can't even spare the time to spend a few hours with me—always out . . . doesn't get home till after midnight sometimes." Tears of self-pity gathered in her eyes. "And you go off to this outlandish place. What with the worry of you both . . . You don't seem to realise how a mother does worry when her girl goes away like that. How do I know what kind of people these Brandons are, or what associations you are brought into there? One reads such dreadful things in the paper. I used to lie awake at night thinking about you alone in that place so far from civilisation, and I don't suppose you ever gave me one thought."

Tess was feeling the strain of the long journey—over three hundred and fifty miles. Her mother's absurd grievances fell like acid upon raw wounds. Then her sense of humour came to her rescue. She smiled as she thought of the dangers at Allynburn. She thought of the city, and of Kit flying round in all sorts of places with all sorts of company. It was well her mother didn't know all the places Kit did explore. It was a pity her mother hadn't worried a bit more a few years earlier. The habits of years were not to be thrown off in a few weeks, even if her mother was ill. Probably Kit didn't realise that her mother had anything very much wrong with her. The resentment smouldering in Tess's heart gave way to compassion. What had her mother to fall back upon now the giddy whirl could no longer be pursued.

She studied her mother's face. How ill she looked! Her skin, always so clear and the pride of her heart, looked parched and lifeless. Her eyes, generally bright and sparkling, were now dull and frightened.

"Poor mother!" Tess's heart sympathised as she thought of her living always in the gaiety of artificial life and then, suddenly, brought face to face with realities. The butterfly, after summer's brilliant sporting, was wilting before the autumn chills. Tess recalled her father's face—her father with the intelligent brow and the dreamer's eyes. The union had not been happy; he had never been in harmony with the irresponsible partner he had chosen. "Why is love so strangely blind?" Tess questioned mentally, her memory running back through the years. "Why so often this tragedy of incompatibility?"

Somewhere there must be the right partner for everyone, she felt. But so many seemed to make a mistake in their choice. Was there no way to be sure? Was it just a matter of luck?

Her mother's querulous voice recalled her wandering thoughts.

"You've no idea how terrible it is to feel ill; you are so strong. Kit is never sick either. I suppose that's why you're so unsympathetic."

"Haven't I come back when you needed me?" Tess was on the point of retorting, but the pathetic note in her mother's self-pity stirred her compassion, and the words remained unspoken. To argue with her now would be **crue**

"Tell me about your sickness, mother," she coaxed gently. "You haven't been to the doctor, yet, have you?"

"I saw Dr. Harlowe here, but he's a fool—knows about as much what's wrong with me as I know about his Latin. I've never had anything to do with doctors except when you and Kit were born, then all they did was to take the money; the nurses did all the work."

"And what did he say about you, mother?"

"Oh, he wanted me to go to some other doctor—some fellow in Macquarie Street. More waste of money, that's all. I was disgusted with him; I wouldn't bother. He'll only want to cut me up if I do go."

"But you'll have to see someone: you can't go on like this. You are really ill and need treatment of some kind. How do you feel? Have you any pain?"

"I feel sharp pains sometimes—here in the chest; and I feel tired: I don't care about anything. I'm run down and weak—I've lost weight—you can see how thin I am getting. I'll be quite scraggy soon, and I'll begin to look old. I didn't want to get fat; I used to be just right, but it's terrible to waste away to a scare-crow."

"You are thinner, mother." Tess was worried. How like her mother to be thinking most of all about her appearance! The more she studied her mother, the more worried she became. Did her mother know how really ill she was? She watched the restless, frightened eyes: yes, she knew, but was trying to deceive herself. She complained of being frightfully ill, yet she was "kiddin' herself," as Jack would have said, that she would not have to undergo drastic treatment. The fear of this treatment had kept her from the specialist. "I'll have to lie down, Tess, the excitement has been too much for me."

Tess made her comfortable, then snatched a few hours of perturbed sleep.

Kit didn't turn up that night—she was away with friends somewhere.

Tess was at Dr. Harlowe's consulting room before he had breakfasted in the morning. She was determined to lose no time in finding out what was this terrible thing which her mother sensed, yet refused to recognise.

"I'm so glad you're back," he greeted her. "Your mother's condition is serious. I'm not sure about it—I wouldn't say until I had the opinion of another doctor. That was why I suggested seeing Dr. Spended, but . . . you know your mother."

"Did you tell her what you feared?"

"No, I didn't think it wise. For one thing, I wasn't sure, and for another, I feared the result. Her heart is not too strong. Patients with your mother's temperament are not easy to handle; one never knows just how they'll take things."

Returning, Tess made straight for her mother's room.

"I've seen the doctor, mother, and he says he isn't sure about you: that's why he wants you to see another doctor. There's nothing else for it. Why ever didn't you go when he suggested it?"

"Oh, I don't know. If he couldn't tell, I didn't see how anyone else could. Did he tell you what he thought was wrong?"

"No, he thinks it's serious, but he wouldn't give you any anxiety when it might not be necessary. It's no use putting it off any longer, mother, you had better come with me today. It may be nothing serious at all. If that is so, look at all the worry you will be saved. If it is anything serious, the sooner you get treatment the better. For all we know, delay may mean losing your life."

"Oh, dear! you are cheerful!" her mother moaned.

"Nonsense, mother, you simply must face the facts. I'm going to ring up and make an appointment for this afternoon if I can."

Tess sat with set, white face as she listened to the specialist's verdict.

"I'm afraid Dr. Harlowe's suspicions were only too well founded, Miss Gordon. Your mother has a growth in the breast. It may not be malignant yet, but is sure to be come so unless removed. The only possible treatment is an operation; and as the disease is only in the early stages yet, there is every reason to expect the operation to be perfectly successful."

"You mean, speaking plainly, that it's cancer."

"Well, it will certainly develop into cancer very rapidly unless removed."

"Poor mother!"

"Yes, it's unfortunate; an operation is rather a fearful thing to face, but it means everything to get it early. Growths of this kind are by no means rare at your mother's age. Do your best to persuade her to have the operation without delay."

The specialist delayed his verdict, and Tess had taken her mother home and returned. She made her way home again now wondering how she could break the news, and very thankful to the doctor for having insisted on her taking her mother home before discussing her malady.

"What did he tell you, Tess?" her mother asked impatiently as she came into the house. "He looked as though he thought it serious; I'm sure he frightened me enough. I suppose they have to frighten people, then they take all the more credit when they cure them."

Oh, how could she tell her? No use prolonging the agony—she must be told, and the quicker, the less torture.

"He says you have a growth in the breast, mother."

Try as she would, she couldn't keep the tragedy from her voice. A gasp from the sofa greeted her words, but no surprise flashed into the stricken eyes—she had known.

"Cancer! It's true then. Oh, my God! Cancer!"  
Tess knelt by her side and took her hands gently.

"No, no, mother, he says the growth is only in its beginnings, and can easily be removed, but everything depends on getting it in the early stages."

She felt the shudder of horror that ran through her mother's frame.

"An operation! The knife!"

"Operations are so common now, mother. People think very little of an operation, the doctors are so skilful these days."

Her mother sat with her head in her hands, and made no reply.

Tess sat watching intently, wondering what she could do. Presently the stricken eyes looked up pleadingly.

"Tess, you won't leave me?"

"No, mother. I've come back and I'll stay with you till you are quite better."

For an hour Tess knelt by her side, her soft hands soothing the aching head.

After a time, the eyes opened and studied her thoughtfully.

"Seems queer, me wanting you to stay with me—we've always been such miles apart. Somehow, you never seemed like my own child—all your father's. I can see him now in every line of your face. Your father was a good man. Oh, if he were only here now . . . Yet, we always bored each other. He was good to me, and now I'm glad you're like him."

She lay silent and thoughtful a few minutes, then:

"You'd better go to bed, now. I want to be alone to think. God! If I dare!"

"But mother, are you well enough to be left alone?"

"Yes, yes. I won't want anything more tonight. I'll go to bed when I'm ready. Leave me, now; leave me to think."

Tess went.

Later in the evening, Mac called in and heard the verdict.

"I was afraid it was something like that," he admitted. "It's hard. . . . It'll be hard on you, too. Remember, if there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to call on me. Don't forget, Tess—I'm standing by in readiness."

Tess felt grateful to him now: it was good to have someone to go to. He was never upset, either—always calm and practical. She smiled to think she would ever be feeling glad he was so practical. Her thoughts turned to Steve . . . and Allynburn. Surely it wasn't only yesterday morning she left Allynburn! Wasn't it months ago? How dim and far away it all seemed. A wave of homesickness passed over her. She thought of Henderson, and her heart quickened. How strange life was! Would she ever see him again? she wondered. Would she ever get back to that beautiful life again? What a difference those few months had made in her! Life would never be the same again: something new had been born within her being.

Several times during the long evening, she went to her mother's door, but found it locked. Once, her mother called out impatiently: "I'm all right; go to bed."

Tess was more deeply worried. It wasn't going to be easy: there was so little in common between them. Even this crisis couldn't be expected to bridge the gulf of years and bring them close to each other. It couldn't be expected suddenly to fill their hearts with love; for, after all, love was the only thing that could really bind them

together. Did her mother love her? Did she love her mother? She supposed she did love her in a way: or was it rather just attachment through association? Love enriched life, she meditated; and without it life was a mockery and a farce, an empty show.

She was just getting into bed when the door opened and Kit came airily into the room. She made a pretty picture in her clinging blue dress, which shimmered under the electric light. Kit, she reflected, had always managed to look dainty and petite. What a contrast they were: Kit with her dark hair and mocking brown eyes, her dare-devil spirit and irresponsible outlook on everything; herself, fair, cautious, and inclined to studious pursuits.

"So the prodigal returns," her sister laughed mockingly. "Leaving behind all the eligible young farmers in the far country, she comes flying home in the arms of her old lover. Can't say the holiday among the bees and the flowers has improved you; you look a bit washed out."

"Where have you been, Kit?" Tess asked rather sharply. Kit's manner jarred her horribly. "Mother has been worrying about you."

"Worrying! Really? Old age must be creeping on our mother when she takes to worrying in that direction. I was visiting some friends at Cronulla, my dear. Quite respectable people, I assure you; no late hours—the early ones are the most interesting—no beer—only a little champagne. Really ideal friends."

She sat down on the foot of the bed, and surveyed her reflection in the wardrobe mirror; seemed satisfied with what she saw, and proceeded to light a cigarette.

"So you've had to come flying back from the paradise of cows and cockies to look after Mother. You've always been the sacrificial one of the family. Mother hasn't been able to stand the usual pace lately; has the sight of your smiling face cheered her up at all?"

"For Heaven's sake, don't be so sarcastic, Kit. Mother would be in a bad way if she had to depend on you for anything. She's been to Doctor Spender to-day: he says it's cancer."

She ground the words out with a certain measure of satisfaction: she would well and truly shock this giddy empty-headed fool. She succeeded. Kit suddenly dropped her cigarette to the floor; her mouth twitched and her dark eyes opened in horror. The artificial colouring on her cheeks was not sufficient to hide the whiteness of her face.

"Cancer!" she gasped. "My God!"

"She'll have to have an operation," Tess continued. "She's going to need all the sympathy we can give her."

"Oh, isn't it terrible?" Kit wailed. She was silent for a while and seemed to recover herself somewhat.

"I knocked at her door as I came past, but she didn't answer. I thought she must be asleep. I'm glad now I didn't go in. What could I say to her?"

Tess was surprised when she carried her mother's breakfast in the next morning to see Kit perched on the foot of the bed chatting gaily about her experiences at Cronulla, and her mother smiling as though she were enjoying it.

"She's taking it better than I expected," Tess thought with a sigh of relief. "If only she will agree not to delay the operation...."

All the morning, she waited for her mother to speak about it, but, though she gave plenty of openings, the subject was studiously avoided. At last, Tess grew desperate. A lot of preparation would be necessary, and time must not be wasted like this.

"Well, mother," she began, "what shall we do about it? Have you been able to make up your mind about the operation?"

"Oh, Tess, don't worry me so: you know I can't bear to be worried. Can't you see I'm tired? I must have time to get used to the idea. I don't want to talk about it at all. I simply can't make up my mind in a hurry."

"But, Mother—"

"Oh, there you go! How can you be so persistent? You don't care a scrap for my feelings: you're absolutely heartless. I can't bear to talk about it now; leave me alone."

Tess bit her lip and said no more.

The days dragged by and still there was silence.

"Every day means so much," Tess complained to Mac. "She won't allow me to speak of it at all: the suspense is awful."

"But she will speak," Mac said, calmly. "She will weary of the suspense herself, and have to say something, and do something. And after all a few days won't really affect the issue."

Mac was right. At the end of the fourth day, Mrs. Gordon had made up her mind.

Tess had come in to see if she needed anything, and found her reading in bed, looking quite comfortable and bright.

"Tess, I'm not having the operation."

Tess stared in consternation. This was something she hadn't prepared for. Delay, she had expected; but never once had she faced the possibility of her mother deciding against the operation.

"Mother!" she gasped at last. "Mother!"

"I know a man in town," her mother continued, "who cures this kind of thing without operations. He has made some marvellous cures. I've been to see him. I'm starting his treatment to-morrow."

"Oh, Mother," Tess cried in distress, "you're throwing away your chance. There never has been a real case of cancer cured by men like him. They're all quacks, just fattening on poor unfortunate people who clutch at any straw to save themselves from the knife."

"How do you know?" her mother demanded angrily. "What experience have you had, I'd like to know? Just like your father: you know everything—always wiser than anyone else."

Tess flushed resentfully.

"I might as well have stayed at Allynburn. We'll never agree—never. This is absolute madness."

"My life is my own," her mother retorted. "If I choose to take the risk, surely I have the right. Anyway, I never craved for you to come back and boss me around. It's no use arguing; I've made up my mind absolutely. I believe in this man, and I'm going to take his treatment."

### CHAPTER XIII.

TESS faced Mac with tragic eyes. An hour's bitter weeping the night before had left its mark.

"She has made up her mind, so what am I to do? How can she be so foolish, so mad? Simply throwing her life away—that's what it amounts to, trusting an old quack like that. I can't understand it."

"I can, Tess," Mac answered feelingly. "Put yourself in her place: can't you guess how she feels when she knows only one case in fifty is cured by operation? Can't you understand what it means to have a straw to grasp at? This quack is the straw. I'm a strong man; yet the bare idea of the knife would turn me sick—sick! I'd grasp at the slenderest hope to avoid it. It's the awful thought of it: the imagination conjures up a terrible army of ghosts and skeletons. I can understand it, Tess."

She stared at amazed. Mac, feeling like this! Mac, whom she thought cold, hard, self-sufficient! He understood, where she had felt exasperation. How sadly she had failed her mother in her hour of need! Straws! Yes, what else had this poor frightened mother of hers to cling to? She saw it all, and almost wept with self-condemnation that she had not seen it before. What horrors might have been leering out of the darkness upon that poor tortured soul!

"I— I was blind," she murmured, with downcast eyes. Mac's hand was laid gently upon her arm. He was a comfort—always standing by. What would she have

done without the assurance of his help and sympathy? It meant a lot having someone with whom to share the responsibility.

Softly, she stole into her mother's room. Huddled on the couch, her mother lay, her shoulders heaving as dry, bitter sobs shook her.

"Mother! Oh, my mother!" It was the cry of anguish. She gathered the shrinking, sobbing figure in her strong arms, and showered caresses upon the burning face, holding her close as though to protect her from those hideous demons of fear that mocked from every shadow.

"Oh, Mother, forgive me for being so harsh."

She felt a responsive quiver in the arms that clung to her.

"Oh, Tess, I'm frightened, I'm frightened."

In that moment, two hearts, almost strangers to each other, drew nearer than ever they had been in twenty years of acquaintance; and never again did they drop quite so far apart. Tess, at least, was conscious of a bond she had never known before—a bond of understanding and compassion.

\* \* \* \*

The herbalist was a withered old man with deep, inscrutable eyes that seemed to look away into infinity. To Tess, he was fascinating, yet repulsive. She felt herself shrinking from him, yet drawn, drawn to him against her will and judgment. He was magnetic. Her mother's faith in this strange old man was pathetic. Tess felt a pang of sorrow as she watched: she experienced a foretaste of the despair that would be when that faith would die like a shattered romance in a rude awakening.

The medicines were strong-smelling and vile-tasting

enough to cure anything—or kill the patient, Tess thought. She settled down to an apprehensive waiting for the dread day of awakening. When it should come, it would be a season of direst disaster; she steeled herself to meet the crisis.

Days passed: weeks began to merge into months. Tess did her best to brighten her mother's lot, and never hinted at her own disbelief in the treatment. Her mother had chosen, and she would not irritate her now with useless opinions on the matter.

There were times when she found her disbelief shaken. Her mother was decidedly better she maintained her weight, and the swelling in her breast seemed to disappear. It was slow treatment, but her mother was quite certain of its success.

The strain of waiting was telling on Tess, her nerves were on edge. Her task was not an easy one. She often felt the call of the singing river and the towering hills.

Christmas came, and the old year passed out. Tess comforted herself with the thought that she would have been home at this period in any case; and her 'school' was not suffering. But what would she do when the time came that Vi and Laddie could remain untaught no longer? A deep pain came into her heart at the thought of someone else taking her place. The prospect was not bright, but hope still lingered that somehow she would be able to return. Yet, how could it be? Was her first intuition going to prove correct—was it to be a final break? Even if the treatment proved successful, it would be a long, lingering wait; and if it didn't . . .

She was determined to stand by her mother, cost her what it might. Had she been too venturesome in her

desire to explore whatever life might hold? Had she ventured beyond her depths? Was this the guiding hand of destiny holding her back from disaster?

She thought of her earlier philosophy that life could deny us nothing provided we had the courage to lay hold of the desired thing. 'No chains strong enough to hold us . . . if we're determined to break them,' she had said. Did she still believe it? Letters came regularly from Mrs. Brandon and Laddie, occasionally from Vi; and, on one notable occasion, a wonderful epistle reached her from Jack. It told of long-continued dry weather, of cattle-mustering, dingoes, mountains, rivers, and, above all, of the wonderful hack Henderson had made of the outlaw filly.

Steve wrote sometimes. Tess smiled at his efforts; letter-writing was not among his chief accomplishments. Yet his letters somehow breathed the bigness of the man.

Mac was still 'standing by'—a reassuring help in times of trouble. Life was very monotonous: worry and foreboding were sapping her strength. Mac's personality inspired her with confidence: his kindness to her mother made her feel ashamed of her former antipathy toward him.

So time wore on, the monotony increasing, until, with dramatic suddenness, the whole dark scene was transformed with sudden light. She was hurrying along the city street from the herbalist's with a supply of medicine, when, turning the corner, she almost collided with Henderson.

"Miss Gordon! Well, I'm amazed! You, of all people in the world."

Tess laughed as she held out her hand.

"I ought to be the surprised one: after all, I live down here."

"So you do, but one so seldom meets a friend down here. Then, I always associate you with Allynburn. Of course, I knew you went away. I don't think you look so well: the country agrees with you better than the city evidently."

"My mother is ill. Probably nursing isn't exactly in my line; then, the city never was my favourite place of abode."

"I hope your nursing soon restores your mother. How fortunate to meet you, especially when I'm down only for the two days—I return to-morrow."

Tess noticed the sensitive lips: they had a decidedly humorous curve, yet they drooped at the corners. Cynical, she thought. He was regarding her meditatively.

"I wonder if I dare," he mused aloud, his eyes twinkling.

"Dare what?" she asked, smiling in answer to that reckless, fascinating smile of his.

"Dare to ask a friend to take pity on my loneliness and spend an evening at the theatre with me? I had hoped to go back this afternoon, and thus escape the boredom of the city—it always bores me when I'm not definitely on holiday; but business kept me. Now I take off my hat to prosaic business: it has given me the pleasure of meeting you."

Tess found her pulse racing. As at every meeting with him before, recklessness took possession of her: she would have acceded to almost the wildest request—it was the hand of fate.

"Yes, I'll come," she smiled.

They parted to hurry on their ways in anticipation of a pleasant evening.

Kit was home, and, as she wasn't feeling too well, agreed to stay home and keep her mother company.

"I say, what's the joke?" she exclaimed, noticing the special care Tess was bestowing on her dress. "Is Mac—? No, he's away. Some other sheik blown along? Gosh! There something doing. My word! 'Still waters run deep.' Anyway, have a good time. Remember, youth doesn't last forever. Gather the roses while you may. There, I'll blossom out into a blooming philosopher, poet or something yet."

Half an hour in Henderson's company sufficed to bring Tess absolutely under the old spell.

"Let us lay aside dull care and forget that life is full of shadows," he suggested. He was particularly light-hearted, and Tess was soon infected by his mood. As her spirits rose, she laughed and joked in joyful response to his gay shafts of wit and satire. Never had a theatre been so satisfying. Why couldn't life be always like this? These few hours at least were hers: they would leave their imprint upon her mind forever, even though life should deny another such hour.

The last curtain fell; they were out of the theatre. Soon, too soon, the brief hour of delight would end: she would be back in the weary treadmill, and this shining hour would be but a memory—sweet, yet bitter memory.

Supper . . . . a lingering to stretch out the delight a little longer; then a taxi home. What was the secret of the fire that ran through her as his hand touched hers? She leaned back in the cushioned car, breathing deeply. She was lifted up in a dreamy chariot of fire. Her head

almost whirled with the delirium of delight that swept over her.

Sudden panic overtook her as they were nearing her home. Kit must not see him. What was she to do? It was so late; Kit would be watching. She simply couldn't bear to have this sacred hour spoiled by the desecrations of Kit's questions and cheap witticisms. She wanted it all kept to herself—a precious, guarded hour. As if he divined her anxiety, he asked her where she would like the taxi to stop; and she mentioned the end of the street. She was relieved, yet it somehow hurt a little; she would rather he had intended coming right home with her. Why shouldn't it have been his right and hers to come to the door together? Always the shadow!

"I'll walk to the station," he announced to the driver as they alighted. She watched the taxi drive off, and was glad he hadn't gone with it.

He took her arm as they walked along. Just out of sight of the house, she stopped, and they stood together, lingering in the shadows—the last precious moments of a golden hour.

"A brief interlude," he was saying. "The Devil's glimpse of Paradise." His voice was tense with emotion. Suddenly he drew her passionately into his arms, his lips meeting hers almost fiercely. Abruptly releasing her, he turned, and, before she had recovered, he was striding away into the darkness.

She stood staring after him. He had gone. Gone! Down in the depths of her soul, the word rang out like the tolling of a bell. She was trembling, the fire still leaping through her veins. At last, with an effort, she turned away, and hastened into the house.

The light was out in her mother's room: softly she made her way to her own room. Kit was seated on a chair by the window.

"Gee! You have made a night of it. Must be catching something from the atmosphere. Who's the lucky chap? Mother's sleeping. I felt a bit lonely, so I waited for you. Didn't expect to wait so long."

Tess wished with all her heart her sister hadn't felt lonely. She wanted to feel lonely just then: it was too much of a contrast after the great mountain-top hour to come right down with a bump to the level of Kit's chatter. She began to undress, her limbs still trembling. Kit's next remark brought her to earth with a suddenness that made her wonder if she had lost her senses or were merely dreaming.

"I wanted to tell you about it before it really happened: I'm getting married next week."

Tess stared in a bewildered way: could she be hearing rightly?

"Getting married!"

"Yes, why the surprise? People do occasionally get married. It's a jolly good idea, too, especially when one lands a gold-fish like the one I've caught . . . a bit on the aged side, certainly—past the age of youthful indiscretions; still, Tommy's not a bad sort, and his banking account makes up for all deficiencies, especially when one has the expensive tastes I have."

"Oh, Kit, how can you treat such sacred things so . . . so jokingly? It's not decent. But are you really getting married, or are you just pulling my leg? I never know when you are serious."

"Oh, this is serious enough . . . especially for Tommy. He's not a bad sort, really. How awfully horrified you do look, Tess!"

"But think of Mother, Kit."

"Well, I flatter myself I am thinking of her. There are several ways one may think of Mother. I think it will be rather a relief to her, under the circumstances, to pass the expense on to someone else. Mother is quite satisfied. Of course, the wedding will be quiet. Mac and your dear self will be present to see that the life sentence is duly passed in a legal manner. I don't fancy a public exhibition with all the dear pussies exclaiming, 'Oh, my dear, he is so old . . . just a matter of cash, you know.' And most of them would give their last stocking to be in my place, even if Tommy has lost most of his hair and is rather fat—"

"Kit, how can you do a thing like this? It's nothing less than selling yourself."

"I wonder if it has ever struck you that the Mater has found it rather difficult at times to make ends meet? You know she likes to do things well, keep up a decent style. Heavens knows, she has never stinted us in dress—it would have been a bad investment anyway."

"But she's had plenty to be quite comfortable."

"So she always led you to believe; but, you know, Tess, your type would never have understood. You'd have insisted on cutting down . . . living economically and all that. I'm different. I'm not burdened with your scruples—I'm just bad enough to be comfortable. You see there's a happy medium in badness even: if you haven't enough, it's inconvenient, and if you have too much it brings difficulties and unpleasant associations. Mother knew any revelations would be a nuisance to you;

but she knows I understand all her plans. So I have known all about it, while you've sailed on in ignorance, thinking things were quite snug and comfortable. There have been times when the exchequer has been in a drastic condition, and if it hadn't been for Mac—"

"Mac!" Tess stared incredibly. "You don't mean that Mother has borrowed money from Mac?"

"Absolutely! She called it borrowing; but I don't like Mac's chances of ever seeing it again."

Tess paled and felt weak. Thank God she had been independent enough to go out on her own.

"If she'd found someone as obliging as Mac at first, she might have had a chance to clear it up," Kit went on. "But when she got in the hands of some of the obliging sharks in town who ask no questions, and make you sign up to repay some time in the distant future . . . . You don't know what it means till the time's up, and you find the amount had grown to four times its original size . . . . There's no hope unless someone will come to the rescue. How did you suppose she was managing for money now? Where do you think she is getting the money to pay this Egyptian or Hindoo or whatever he is? He doesn't give his treatment for nothing, you know. Mac again."

Tess felt a cold hand on her heart. There were possibilities in this situation about which she scarcely dared to think. Mac paying the bills! Her independent spirit revolted and turned sick. Kit was watching her intently.

"So that makes her squirm," she thought with satisfaction. Aloud, she said:

"Shocking lot to be related to, aren't we? Pity one can't choose one's relations."

Tess turned on her fiercely.

"What have I done to you, Kit, that you should stand there sneering at me like that? I, at least, wasn't a burden upon Mother the moment I could get away."

"What have you done?" Kit laughed curiously. "I suppose you have done nothing . . . . only trampled on the thing I would have given my life to possess. I thought, when you went away, there might have been a chance for me; but you held him in spite of yourself . . . . And he will win in the end: Mac's always a winner."

Revelations were moving a little too fast for Tess.

"You mean . . . you . . . you love Mac?"

"I mean I could have loved him," Kit corrected. "I am too wise to waste my affections upon the desert air; but I could have loved him. Anyhow, love seems to be an uncomfortable business—always demanding; you can't love unless you give . . . give. No doubt Tommy will be the best for me in the long run. Don't go losing any sleep over the fact that I might have cared for Mac if I'd have the least encouragement: I assure you I don't lose any."

Tess stared at her wonderingly. In spite of her jaunty air, there was a hidden note of tragedy in it somewhere. What loneliness, what emptiness she must face throughout her life! If only it might have been! Poor Kit! Half her gay manner was only affectation. Underneath . . . .? Were there depths unrealised—well seldom sounded even by Kit herself? Oh, the tragedy of it all!

"Now you know the truth," Kit concluded. "And I'll be off to bed." She went, leaving a very bewildered and disturbed sister to wrestle with strange joys and fears through long troubled hours.

The revelations concerning the family finances, and especially Mac's association with them, were not very gratifying to Tess's pride. She felt she was now a party to the shameful, humiliating acceptance. Yet she was helpless. She had very little money of her own: not enough to supply her own requirements for very long. It hurt—cut her sensitive heart to bleeding point . . . . And Kit marrying this elderly man for his money . . . . What a commercial spirit there was in the family! Would she, in the end, marry Mac for the same reason?

She turned over and over in bed, bewildered, disturbed, shadows where, a little while before, she had felt the fire in her blood when Henderson pressed his impassioned kisses upon her lips. Away from the fascination of his presence, dark, chilling doubts began to crowd her mind. The very fact that he so readily accepted her silent suggestion to remain unseen troubled her. The kisses . . . . her cheeks burned. What had they signified? For all she knew, this might be a habit of his. Some men were like that—made love carelessly to every girl they fancied, surrounding themselves with a halo of mystery . . . philanderers. Was he one of these? Her heart rose in protest with an emphatic 'No,' but still the doubt remained.

A desolate longing came over her—a longing for the hills of Allynburn, and the voice of one she had learned to trust. Steve at least was solid and true—no shifting sands in his nature.

She turned over and over in bed, bewildered, disturbed, baffled—almost afraid. Here she was, not long away from the embrace of a man who had roused most violent emotions in her heart, desiring the company of another. What was the meaning of it all? Then there was Mac.

She had begun to value his friendship because of qualities she had never before dreamed he possessed; yet her thoughts of him left her entirely cold. Mac, even at his best, could never thrill her in the slightest degree.

At last, she slept. In her dreams, Steve Drummond and Barrie Henderson became strangely intermingled in the scene, interchanging places in a way that confused her dream beyond recollection. But, even in her dreams, Mac found no place.

## CHAPTER XIV.

LIFE again settled into the common round. Weeks passed. Kit was married and had gone back with Tommy to America. The thought of the fat, pompous little man caused Tess to smile, partly in amusement, partly in pity. It was consoling to remember, whenever the pathos of the whole thing came uppermost in her mind, that good nature was written large all over his round face. She wondered sometimes just how big was the cheque he had left her mother as a parting token of friendship. How much of the debt to Mac had been paid out of it? Very little, Tess feared: that wasn't her mother's way. She had attempted to lead the conversation round that way once, but sudden hysterical symptoms turned it quickly in another direction. Tess wondered if her mother's ailment—or its treatment—was responsible for these frequent attacks of hysteria.

More than ever, Tess was feeling the strain of her task. Her mother was more difficult than ever: one day, up in the clouds, declaring with shining eyes that she was practically cured, the next, plunged into dismal depths of despair. These gloomy fits were the dread of Tess's heart: her efforts to combat them left her limp and worn out. The lump in her mother's breast seemed to be slowly disappearing, but she still complained of severe pain there. Always, they received the same answer from the inscrutable old wizard of the herbs. "She is improving; nature heals slowly. Be patient."

Letters still came with unflinching regularity from Allynburn. But for them, Tess would have fancied Allynburn and all that happened there nothing more than a vivid dream. It was already growing unreal, misty, like something she had known in some other life that had no definite connection with this existence—some dreamland, the memory of which came to her in the midst of her turmoil like snatches of beautiful song. She felt that Allynburn days would never come again: they were a memory only. In time, she would be but a memory to the people there. Time would dispel the sense of loss—she believed they felt a sense of loss—but, after all, she had only touched the fringe of their lives. They would speak of her sometimes; but, in time, even that would cease. Life would flow on tranquil as ever in the beautiful valley. She could see it all now as, with closed eyes, she leaned back in her chair: the river rippling over the stones, the old knarled tree at 'The Look-out' standing sentinel over Boorendabri. Sweet, familiar sounds came to her ears. She was looking down the valley from the verandah: there was the shearing shed; Harry Brandon coming up the road with his old lorry. Further over were the stock-yards: she caught her breath as she saw again the lithe figure sitting on the black, foam-flecked horse. . . . —it was all a beautiful mirage receding to the horizon: and in its place, the roar and scream of trams and busses. What would they be doing at Allynburn now? It was near milking time: she fancied she could hear Jack's voice shouting to the cows. . . .

"Miss Gordon, there's a Mr. Drummond here asking for you."

It was the voice of the girl who helped in the house. What was she saying? Surely she was dreaming.

"Mr. Drummond?"

"Yes, he's at the door."

Steve! Here! Was it all part of her dreaming? No, it was real enough. He was holding her hand, his keen eyes alight with a glow she could not misunderstand. Her own heart was pounding harder than she would have admitted. It required an effort to recover her self control.

"Steve, you've quite taken my breath away; you, of all people! Whyever didn't you write and tell me you were coming, then I would have had the joy of anticipation?"

He smiled boyishly.

"I suppose I wanted to take you by surprise. I've been trying to get down for ages, but something has always cropped up. I'm here at last."

He studied her face seriously.

"You look fagged out: you're not overdoing it, are you? Is your mother improving?"

"Yes, I think so. You know, I had no faith in this herbalist, yet I'm wondering now if I were not wrong; he seems to be curing her. I must tell her you are here: she will be glad to meet you."

Her mother looked up suspiciously when Tess explained who the visitor was.

"What has he come for? I wish those people up there would leave you alone; you'll be unsettled now, wanting to rush off back to that beastly place. Anyhow, I detest country people; they always bore me stiff."

Tess flushed angrily.

"Oh, well, you needn't see him: it doesn't matter. I can say your're not well enough."

"No, no; you can't say that. Don't be horrid. I'm not going to let this country fellow think he isn't welcome."

Hiding her resentment behind a smile, Tess went back and brought Steve into her mother's presence. She was surprised at her mother's changed manner: cordial was scarcely the word: it was almost affectionate.

"Poor Mother," Tess thought. "She's trying to make up for her outburst; I suppose she's excusable."

She noticed the way her mother watched Steve, weighing him up, studying him from every standpoint. Steve talked well. She felt a tinge of deep satisfaction in the way he conducted himself. This would show her mother what kind of people these folk were. There was nothing uncouth about Steve. Her eyes were shining and she was glad as she chatted merrily with him, while her mother lay back, watching, considering.

He stayed to dinner. It was the happiest meal Tess had known since she sat, months—or was it years, ages—before, at the Brandons' table at Allynburn. With Steve sitting opposite her, Allynburn seemed very near again. Her mother seemed pleased too: she was so bright and merry. The company was doing her good, Tess thought.

Mac had also dropped in for dinner. He was rather silent. She supposed he could scarcely be expected to go into raptures over this visitor who was so manifestly a rival.

Afterwards, Tess sang to them. She was conscious of Steve's eyes feasting upon her. It was pleasant, singing to Steve. She glanced at her mother. How bright she was! Her old vivacious self again: Tess was delighted with her progress.

"Sing 'Love's Old Sweet Song,'" her mother suggested. "I haven't heard you sing it for ages."

Tess paused as though listening. Out in the shadows somewhere, she seemed to hear it again—that voice with the peculiar, flute-like note. The vision of burning eyes, handsome, finely-shaped head, sensitive, clear-cut features—the fine, soft notes held her spellbound. No, she could not sing that song, even for Steve. She excused herself on the plea of hoarseness, and rose from the piano.

"You'll come again?" she invited as he bade her good-night at the door.

Steve smiled into her eyes.

"If I may; perhaps we could arrange to do some show together. You know best what's on worth while."

"If Mother is well enough," she conceded. "I'll let you know if you call to-morrow afternoon."

Mac had gone and her mother had retired. Tess reflected joyfully on the change Steve's visit had wrought. Going to her mother's room, she was startled by the sound of sobbing, and hurried across to the bed.

"Mother, whatever is wrong? You've overdone it: the evening has been too much for you. Oh, I was selfish, keeping you up so long." A more violent burst of hysterical weeping answered her. She slipped her arms around the sobbing form, wondering just what was the cause of the outburst. Her mother had never been so violently upset even in her worst fits.

"Oh, Mother! Mother! What is it?"

Suddenly, her mother sat up and stared at her wildly, her eyes blazing with injury.

"What does a mother count?" she shrieked. "Nothing! It's nothing but selfishness right through. Her

children would bleed the last ounce of her blood, then throw her in the gutter."

"Mother, whatever do you mean?"

"She gives her very life for them," her mother went on, growing more and more excited. "She watches over them, she suffers for them, works like a slave to satisfy their demands; and they just make a convenience of her till they've found something better, then just throw her off like an old, worn-out glove."

"No, no, Mother," Tess protested, shocked and amazed at her mother's bitter words. "I'd never do that, Mother."

The twitching hands were thrown out in a helpless gesture.

"Kit's gone and left me . . . . didn't care a rap . . . . Now . . . . I'll have to go to some hospital . . . . among strangers."

Frightened and bewildered, Tess tried to soothe her mother, tell me what you're thinking. I can't make out what you're trying to talk about. Why shall you have to go to a hospital?"

"If you go away, I'll die . . . I'll die . . . I'll die!" her voice rose shrilly, till she sank back on the pillow, her glittering eyes fixed on Tess's face.

"But I'm not going away, Mother."

For answer, her mother broke into harsh, hysterical laughter.

"Oh, yes, you will: I saw it in his face. He came to take you back. I'll be alone . . . alone!"

"What nonsense you're talking, Mother. I can't understand what you're driving at."

"Oh, you can't deceive me; you know . . . you know. I always knew there was some attraction in that horrid place; you've been longing to go back ever since you

came home. Now, he's come. You'll leave me alone. What does he care about me? It's you he wants. Men are all selfish; he won't care what becomes of me."

So Steve was the trouble! Tess almost laughed, but the delirium in her mother's brain frightened her.

"Mother, you're a foolish old goose: I never had a thought of going back."

"No," her mother retored, with a tone of finality. "But he has. I saw it in his eyes. He hates me; I stand between him and you. He wants you: he will soon sweep me out of his way. He'll have his way . . . I know. He's strong, and he'll win . . . I'll be alone." The storm went on in spite of all Tess could say. The strained, rigid stare in the eyes alarmed her. She called for the girl, telling her to ring Mac. Her mother settled down into a quietness more dreaded than even her wildness: her heart was palpitating unduly.

Mac's coming was a tremendous relief.

"I suppose we really ought to send for a doctor," he suggested uneasily, when she had described the outburst and taken him to see her.

His remark roused the figure on the couch. The eyes opened wide and apprehensively.

"No, no, I won't see a doctor. I want Omar Khanda."

Her eyes closed again and she sank into a trance-like stillness.

"She wants the confounded herbalist," Mac muttered as they turned away. "What about it? I'm in favour of a doctor."

Tess was worried. She knew her mother better than Mac did. If a doctor came, there would be a scene, and more harm than ever.

"No, we had better get him," she whispered. "After all, she's his patient."

"All right! I'll get a taxi, and bring him. All the same, I wish I was going for a doctor."

It was like Mac, Tess thought, conventional in all things. He had understood her mother wanting the herbalist's treatment; but now he felt it was useless going on with him any longer. They came at last, and the little withered man was in the room. He stared hard at Tess, and she felt as if those eyes were reading her inmost thought; he always made her feel uncomfortable.

"Better leave me alone with her," he suggested. "She will talk to me: I will understand."

Tess joined Mac in the dining room.

"I had a tremendous job to get the old fool to come," Mac told her. "It seems he doesn't make a practice of visiting his patients; and if I hadn't looked capable of picking him up and bringing him by force, he wouldn't have come. He wanted to send some rotten stuff along; but I brought him."

She smiled at the formidable expression on Mac's face. He would frighten more than a weak, old Persian doctor when he set his jaw like that.

They waited in silence for the most part. Mac was curious about the cause of her mother's outburst: evidently expected her to tell him more; but she felt a sudden shyness about it: she couldn't tell him—it was too ridiculous.

At last, the old man came to the door and beckoned her, and she found herself facing the piercing eyes again.

"She told me," he announced cryptically. "Your mother's heart is weak: she must not be excited. You

must avoid anything that will excite her. If you continue seeing this young man, she will worry, and the worry and excitement will bring on this hysteria. She imagines herself left alone; she has a horror of loneliness. Perhaps she loves you much; perhaps it is only selfishness—but she is your mother.” He directed his intense gaze upon her eyes. “You acknowledge her claim . . . many do not. You are right. If you fail her now, your good work is lost, and a bitter memory will destroy your peace and happiness for life. Love must wait; this lover must not see you at present. Your mother’s mind must be put at rest; her condition demands it.”

Tess flushed. It was no use explaining it was all imagination on the part of her mother—it would make no difference.

“I have left some medicine,” he went on. “She may not need any more: I hope she will not. She is sleeping now; and will be calm when she wakes. Remember—no excitement.”

As the sound of the car died away on the midnight air, she stood looking down on her mother’s face. Tears were very close. What did the old man’s order mean? That she would not be able to enjoy the little pleasure of Steve’s company while he was in the city. She would have to lead him to think she had no desire to see him. How could she explain? How could she say, ‘My mother is afraid you are going to take me away from her; she doesn’t like me seeing you’? She had been so happy: he had brought those beautiful Allynburn days back again; but fate—brutal, relentless, jealous fate—had stepped in again and snatched the flowers from her grasp. Her mother woke, restless and fretful, clinging to her piteously, pleading with dumb misery in her eyes, throwing herself

upon Tess’s mercy until she found herself promising to see nothing of Steve even while she protested there was nothing in her imaginations.

“But I know men,” her mother persisted. “He is strong. Promise me, Tess. Promise me.”

It was the maid who met Steve at the door next afternoon, bearing regrets from Tess that she would not be able to accompany him that evening; her mother had had a serious turn and could not be left.

The glow of anticipation died from his eyes as he turned regretfully away. He was hurt, although he hid the hurt even from himself. She couldn’t help it if her mother had taken a bad turn; yet she might have slipped to the door, if only for a moment. There was no invitation to come again. Perhaps she had seen too plainly in his eyes what was in his heart . . . and there was Mac. He would go back home. After all, he couldn’t blame her for anything. His hopes had little foundation; she had never given any definite sign that she cared. Yet, he had fancied . . . . .

He sighed, and went sadly on his way.

Tear-wet eyes watched from a side window as his manly figure disappeared. He would not come again. She knew how his sensitive soul would be hurt. These men of the bush would never force their company where it was not invited. He had gone . . . . . Gone!

## CHAPTER XV.

FROM her bedroom window, Tess gazed out upon the dreary street. It was raining and a cold wind was blowing. She felt numb and cold at heart. Cruel hands had reached out and snatched all the happiness from her life.

A month had passed since Steve had turned so sadly from the door. How hurt he must have been! A short note had reached her by the postman, bearing his regrets that her mother was worse, and hopes that she would soon recover.

That was the end of it: his friendship was a thing of the past, and with it went the last link with the Allynburn life. What a dreary prospect life held out to her now! She still had the friendship of Mac, certainly. He was still standing by, calm, helpful. Mac would probably make a very complacent husband. She shivered. Was that the goal toward which fate was.....—yes—kicking her? She supposed she might do worse.

Henderson's kisses suddenly came back to her memory. The hot blood surged to her face. What was the explanation of his conduct? She felt humiliation to the depths of her soul. How cheap she had made herself!.....Unless.....unless his kisses had been genuine. But then surely he would never have left her thus without another word. He had probably kissed others in that same light, easy way.

Her heart rose in protest; no, surely he wouldn't have treated her so cruelly. He was not like Steve, she re-

flected. Steve was so frank and solid: the other man was different.

She turned away from the window, trying to throw off her depression. No use spoiling her sacrifice now with useless regrets.

Her mother was improving, but still subject to fits of depression. Tess was pleased at the prospect of her being cured, but was she doomed to spend the rest of her life trying to soothe her mother's nerves? It seemed hopeless to suggest leaving her, even if she were quite cured. Her heart would still be weak, and the thought of being left alone would bring a return of hysteria.

Her mother's attitude was one of conciliation: evidently she was endeavouring, in her own way, to make some recompense for the loss she had caused.

"I'm getting better," she said triumphantly when Tess went to her that night. "It seems like a miracle. I couldn't face the operation; the thought of the knife would have killed me. I hadn't the courage. Oh, I know I'm a coward; hundreds go through operations, but I couldn't bear it. I had a feeling that I had something like this wrong with me before you came back. I could feel the lump; and then Dr. Harlowe's strange manner. Oh, you don't know how glad I was to have you back. I do need you, Tess."

Tess wondered: she wanted to believe her mother did really need her. She had sacrificed everything she treasured; yet, if her mother's need was so great, ought she not feel satisfied? But regret was not to be driven away: it lingered like a canker in her heart. She was miserable, run down, generally out of sorts. She went to bed feeling blue and ill.

The next day, her mother had an appointment with the herbalist. She was not visiting him so frequently now. Tess had always accompanied her; but to-day she was too sick to get up. To her surprise, her mother didn't seem the least put out—rather made light of it.

"I'll manage all right, Tess. Really, he only talks to me when I do go now."

Tess thankfully lay back on her pillow and turned her mind upon her own problems.

Her mother returned with more color on her cheeks than she'd had for months. Tess looked at her wonderingly.

"Mother, you do look well: you are as fresh as a rose." She noticed the flush of pleasure the remark brought to her mother's face.

"Tess, you'll make me vain. Do you really think I look well? Do I really look young for my age? I was often told how young I looked: very few would believe I had a daughter as old as you . . . but—sighing—"I suppose I've gone off a lot lately."

Tess smiled. It was so like her mother: she was surely feeling well again.

"You've picked up wonderfully," she assured her. "To-day, you look as young as ever. I'm sure no one, seeing you now, would believe I was your daughter. In fact, I think I look older than you—if I look anything like I feel."

Tess was soon better. As the days went by, she watched with surprise the rapid transformation in her mother. Dress and social engagements occupied all her days now. Mac was jubilant with satisfaction.

"Your mother is herself again."

She was. The old sparkling vivacity returned, and the old giddy whirl was resumed. The visits to the herbalist were now made alone.

"Why should I bother you, dear," she said sweetly. "He only wants to make sure I'm progressing favourably."

Tess had taken complete charge of the household management; and her mother seemed quite content to leave it in her capable hands. The old light, irresponsible mother had come back; and Tess began to speculate as to her own future place in the scheme of things.

"You really seem quite healed," she commented as her mother spoke of her appointment with the herbalist. "He must be a wonderful doctor."

Her mother smiled, and raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, he is; but, you know, Tess, the growth was not really malignant."

Tess stared in astonishment.

"You mean it wasn't a cancer at all? How do you know? Did he tell you?"

Her mother hesitated.

"Not exactly, but he gave me that impression. Anyway, it couldn't have been; cancer is not cured as easily as that. I never quite believed Doctor Spender was right. If I'd taken his advice, I should have been carved to pieces half a dozen times by this: if I were still alive, I'd have been something like mince meat."

"Oh, not so bad as that, Mother. If it were not so serious, they would have found out in time."

"Let's talk of something else—something pleasant."

Tess was puzzled. It was amazing that the old herbalist should have told her or even allowed her to guess the trouble was less serious than the doctors made out;

it was against his own interests. More naturally he would try to exaggerate the trouble. However, she was better—that was all that mattered.

Coming in a couple of afternoons later, she discovered her mother sitting on the couch very close to a fair-haired, youthful-looking stranger. Stranger? No, where had she seen him? Oh yes, at the herbalist's the last time she had gone with her mother. He was the old man's assistant and secretary.

Tess regarded them attentively. There was no mistaking the intimacy. So this was the reason of her mother's sudden rejuvenation! It was easy now to understand how her mother had discovered the truth about herself.

Tess realised rather bitterly how small a place she really occupied in her mother's life: her whole interest was absorbed by this stranger. Tess felt herself excluded, ignored. Was it for this she had wrenched herself from Allynburn... sacrificed Steve's friendship—a dutiful daughter watching over her delicate mother's lonely days. She glanced at her mother now—the picture of health; while as for the dutiful daughter, she would soon be an encumbrance. Daughters were inappropriate when mothers returned to courting days. What a farce it all was!

After he had gone, her mother chatted excitedly for a time, then leaned back in her chair, regarding her speculatively.

"What do you think of him?" she asked with a side-long glance.

Tess answered coolly.

"Can't say I've formed an opinion on so short an acquaintance."

"No? You would be sure to want to weigh everything up carefully before committing yourself; you are critical."

"I suppose so. How did you come to know him?"

"Oh, I saw him with old Omar a few times; then, one day, the old man was busy and sent Charlie to see me. We've seen a good deal of each other since then."

"Evidently," Tess couldn't forbear a touch of sarcasm that found its way into her voice.

"In fact—" her mother hesitated, then plunged ahead.

"We're going to be married soon."

She looked at Tess as though expecting hostility, and continued defensively.

"After all, you can't blame me. You may take it into your head any old day to go back to that never-never place; there's that fellow, Drummond, there. I suppose I can't expect you to stay with me forever. Life gets very lonely." She threw a pathetic note into her voice. "Kit has gone, and I have no guarantee you will stay; you're sure to get sick of it sooner or later. I hope you're not going to be nasty about it, Tess. After all, we have to live our own lives. You didn't consider me when you went off to this Allynburn before."

"No, perhaps not," Tess's voice was very weary. "I only hope you will be happy. As you say, we all have our own lives to live."

"Of course we have. I'm glad you're sensible. I'm very glad you stayed with me so long; glad too that I'm better now, and needn't keep you away from your friends any longer. I know you'll never be happy till you get back up there again... and really, Drummond is a good looking fellow."

Tess bit her lip. Steve would be likely to welcome her with open arms after the way she had treated him. After

all she had done and all she had sacrificed, her mother simply wanted her out of the way—an encumbrance, something used and finished with.

"I'm off to bed, now," she said wearily, her voice cold in spite of her attempt to make it casual.

Her mother glanced at her sharply, yawned and muttered a sleepy "good night."

"A most uncomfortable person," she mused as the door closed behind Tess. I believe she's jealous. Selfish, after all I've been through, grudging me a bit of happiness. Children are like that, these days."

With another yawn, she rose and went to her room.

Tess couldn't sleep. Bitterness swelled up in her heart. To be thrown aside by her own mother—discarded like and old garment.

She had been so long away from Allynburn that the people there had ceased to mention anything about her returning—had taken it for granted she could not leave her mother.

She reflected bitterly on the words of the old Persian doctor, when he had insisted on her foregoing her own pleasure and devoting herself to her mother. 'A bitter memory will destroy your happiness,' he had said. Well, what had she gained anyway: life would all be a bitter memory, she felt.

Yet, strange how fate relents: the very next morning, while she was still numb and depressed with gloom, the sunshine burst upon her—a letter from Mrs. Brandon, telling that Laddie was ill and fretting for his beloved Miss Gordon.

"I think we all feel like Laddie," the letter ran. "What happy days they were when you were with us! It isn't the same now. Even Jack says he would go to school

if you were back again, even if he did have to learn about 'blokes who've been dead fer hundreds o' years'..... But there, you've your poor mother to look after: we shouldn't be selfish."

Her poor mother! Tess laughed excitedly.

Even Sam's motor lorry was too slow a process for the message that sped back over the wires:

"Returning Allynburn to-morrow's train,  
Tess."

Resentment mingled with relief in her mother's surprised eyes.

"You do fix things in a hurry. I was hoping you'd stay a few weeks and help me get my things together. But, there, I know these people come first; I simply mustn't be selfish."

Tess only smiled: she could afford to smile now—she was going back....going back...the words seemed to be singing themselves into her brain—"Going back.... home!"

## CHAPTER XVI.

LEANING back in her chair on the wide verandah, Tess gazed far out over the blue ranges. How fresh and sweet the air was! How calm and tranquil the atmosphere! It was like awakening from a horrible nightmare, and finding herself safe at home after all. All her past life seemed to have been lived here: somehow she felt it was here she belonged. Her emotion was so deep that she felt she could have wept for joy to know she was free again, back among these people who welcomed her as one of themselves.

"It's lovely to have you back," Mrs. Brandon had said: and after her recent experience, the welcome healed her wounded soul. She had been more deeply hurt by her mother's treatment than she realised at the time. She had never known before how little she really counted with her mother. Yet now she could laugh over it. After all, neither of them could help their being strangely apart. The mere fact of relationship couldn't bring affinity. She had thought her mother needed her, and that behind the need there had been the awakening of love. Her experience had brought disillusionment. The need had been there, but her mother had only desired her while the need remained: as soon as it was gone, the old jar returned, stronger than ever, and life would have been very irksome had she remained. They were better apart. Here, she was valued for herself. These people were loyal. It was refreshing to her thirsty soul. Loyalty

was surely one of the greatest virtues—an indication of noble character.

Her presence acted like a tonic on Laddie: he was as bright as ever the day after she returned. Jack's grin was a welcome in itself.

She was now drinking in the impressive beauty of the massive hills. They too seemed to be speaking a welcome to her. They were brown; the folk were all complaining of the dry weather. But they were beautiful even in their brownness. She had never seen them the delightful green she imagined would clothe them in a good season.

Turning, she found Jack standing beside her.

"You're always gazin' at the hills, Miss Gordon."

"Yes, Jack, I love the hills; don't you?"

"Maybe. I suppose I do; I never thought about it. They've been there ever since I can remember.

"That's human nature, Jack. We get so used to things we scarcely realise we love them; but when they're taken away from us, then we know."

Jack fidgetted.

"I suppose so; but I came to ask you if you'd like to come with me to-morrow morning. I'm takin' a mob o' sheep over the river. We're gettin' shott o' feed on our paddocks. It'll be Saturday, and I thought you might like the ride."

"Won't it be delightful? Thank you so much, Jack; I'll come."

"Good! There'll be only you an' me. We'll have ter get off the mark pretty early: sheep travel terrible slow."

The rising sun was tinting the distant mountain peaks with gold as Tess and Jack started out over the dew-wet ridges. Summer had gone, and the Autumn freshness

was in the air. A bank of mist hung upon the mountain side, its fleecy silver irradiated by the brilliant sunlight. Tess's spirits rose, enraptured: this was life.

Away over the river, they could see Steve's land. He had been at Brandon's the evening she had returned. She had sensed a slight difference in his attitude towards her. He was more diffident, not so much at ease. Conventional barriers had been down and formalities dispensed with before she had left to look after her mother. Now, he was friendly, but more distant. He could do nothing else than misunderstand her motives in refusing to see him in Sydney. To him, it must have been a plain hint not to presume upon their intimacy at Allynburn.

She could see he had been hurt. How could she explain? She could do nothing now. Better leave it as it was; time would bring its own remedy. When they had regained their old intimacy, she might—. A deep flush came to her cheek as she checked the thought, and she smiled at the boldness of her mind.

"We're making towards 'The Lookout,' Jack."

"Yes, Miss Gordon, we'll cross the river just this side of it."

To Tess, it was like a fairy dream; the sun ascending from behind the blue-misted peaks, flooding the dew-pearled trees with a soft, white glory; the sheep stringing out along the track, with Paddy, the sheep dog, barking excitedly to turn some eager stragglers back to the flock; Jack's echoing, "Hi there, Paddy! After 'em!"—it was all too idyllic to be real.

Getting the sheep over the river was an exciting experience. The water was trickling over the stones not more than six inches deep; but the sheep objected to wet feet and a lot of ringing round, barking on Paddy's part,

and shouting on Jack's were necessary to get them started across.

"Ain't she low?" Jack commented, as they splashed through after the last of the flock. "I never see it so low fer years. Been no decent rain since you left, an' it was dry then."

The sheep had smelt and tasted the better grass already; and, with the restless, eager leaders darting away and the stragglers trailing behind, Jack and Paddy had a lively job keeping them decently together.

"Oh, Steve won't mind if they eat a bit of his grass," Jack excused himself, as the sheep spread out so fast that even his vociferous shouts and Paddy's mad barking could not keep them together.

"We've only a mile or so of his paddock."

Paddy's throat was working overtime—trying to keep up to his excited imagination and lightning feet. Tess did her part as well as she could, laughing from sheer delight as she watched it all. She loved to see some bold, enterprising sheep nibbling for its life at a special piece of grass in order to have it demolished before Paddy's sharp eyes spotted the transgression.

Paddy will be hoarse, Jack, if he keeps it up like this."

Jack laughed at the idea.

"No dog ever gets like that, Miss Gordon. They can bark all day and all night, fifty times to the minute, an' keep it up fer a week, an' their throats never give out. Isn't it funny?"

At last they sighted the fence and the gate through which the sheep had to go.

"You ride ahead and open the gate, Miss Gordon, and leave the mob to me and Paddy."

It was another exciting business getting the silly animals through the gate. More shouting and more barking, until at last they were racing through with mad leaps that suggested the devil was hiding somewhere in the ground just through the gate, and had to be avoided by the highest possible jump.

As the last sheep cleared the imaginary enemy in the ground, a horseman rode out of the tall brush beside the track and flashed up behind them. Tess turned as he drew rein.

"You!" he exclaimed.

She found herself gazing into the dark, unfathomable eyes of Henderson. The sight of him sitting so lithely, so easily upon the flashing black animal, which once she had seen madly trying to fling him to the ground, made her catch her breath with admiration.

He urged the graceful, black animal a little nearer.

"The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on," he quoted. "Fate decrees we meet again . . . I thought—but never mind what I thought: you are here. Sufficient unto the day . . ." he smiled, and the smile lighted up his face like the sun coming from behind clouds and illuminating sombre hills, "is the good thereof."

Tess smiled back at him, relieved that he had so adroitly turned the awkward situation.

"Will you slip along to the two-mile gate, Jack, and leave it open. Then the sheep will have the run of the two paddocks; they seem to appreciate the grass."

He turned again to Tess.

"So the joys and attractions of the city couldn't hold you, Miss Gordon? Surely that's a triumph for the country. Have you been back long?"

"Not a week yet, Mr. Henderson. I prefer the country, you know it was only my mother's illness took me away."

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten. Is she better?"

"Yes, she is quite well, thank you."

She was a little self-conscious; his burning gaze was upon her. Her thoughts went back to that never-to-be-forgotten night and the burning kisses with which he had left her. She reflected upon her intention to snub him if ever they met again—to retaliate for being made so cheap, and to put him properly in his place. Now, with his grave, deep eyes upon her, it all seemed to fade into nothing. His presence somehow compelled her to take a broader view of things. Trivialities, formalities, the ordinary conventions of life seemed to have no place here.

The sense of his power gripped her afresh, and she was afraid of it. She felt herself trembling; she had scarcely courage to look up and meet those strange eyes.

They were silent for a little space—a silence burdened with a thousand messages more eloquent than a speech could ever be.

Paddy's bark in the distance broke the restraint. Henderson spoke softly, a tender caressing note in his voice.

"Tomorrow afternoon, will you ride down to the river over there? He pointed with his stock-whip handle.

"There's a tiny creek winding into the river there. It's a lovely spot. Will you come?"

They were riding along leisurely side by side. The clatter of hoofs sounded ahead; Jack was returning. What would she say? Would she dare? Why should she be afraid? Adventure was before her again, why should she be less eager to explore than before fate had stepped in and interrupted? What was it that drew her toward

this man? What was the mystery? What was the foundation of this surging emotion he always inspired? She would find out; she would know herself; she would explore.

He was watching the struggle, seeming to divine every step of her thoughts—the urge to accede, and the hand of caution holding her back.

Jack was coming, the moment would soon be gone.

"I'll come," she said quietly.

A light of admiration leapt into his eyes. "She's game," they seemed to say, while his lips answered:

"Believe me, you shall never regret it. I thank you. Life has its splendid moments—even the devil can be a gentleman sometimes . . . . Until tomorrow, farewell!"

He rode off, calling out a cheery "good-bye" to Jack.

## CHAPTER XVII.

SUNDAY found Tess filled with bitter resentment against the hand of fate which had laid her aside with a sprained ankle. It was like foundering in sight of the harbour or fainting within a foot of the prize.

She had set her whole heart on the expedition to the little creek. But was it the creek? The dull pain in her heart told her it was not. The creek would always be there, but would she ever again have the opportunity of seeing it in company with the mysterious owner of Boorendabri.

A month ago, she would have given her all to be lying on this same couch in the present company, a sprained ankle notwithstanding. But now even Steve bending over her anxiously with sympathy written in every line of his manly face, his eyes conveying the message his tongue was not yet bold enough to speak, could not compensate for the lost opportunity of a few hours with the shadow-wrapped Henderson, who intrigued her, yet caused her uneasiness.

Looking at Steve's eyes, she realised that one day his tongue would grow confident enough to speak what was in his heart. What would she answer? He was so solid and safe. Surely that was the rock upon which successful domestic life was built up. But where did romance come in? Was that an empty dream? Was marriage, after all, only a wise choosing of a steady, safe man to support one? Wasn't a woman a coward to marry just for that?

But far more than that lay behind her feeling for Steve. Just what was that feeling? She couldn't give it a name. If it hadn't been for—. She suddenly checked her thoughts. What was she admitting to herself? Suppose this accident hadn't happened, and she had gone to meet the man who had such power to kindle fire in her blood, what effect would that meeting have had upon her feeling towards Steve? Would it have deepened her sense of Steve's safety? Or would it, once and for all, have settled her disturbed mind—given her the assurance that she must weigh all anchors and sail the seas of love and romance with him who had opened the golden door?

If only she could have gone . . . . If only! Those "ifs," what a tremendous part they play in our lives!

Steve was chatting brightly; and every now and then, Mrs. Brandon came in, her face alight with sympathy, inquiring how the poor foot was, Tess would force a smile, thinking, with a fullness in the throat, how kind and sympathetic these dear people were. How refreshing this genuine, good-hearted human nature was!

Yet, even while she chatted, her thoughts would continually stray to the other side of the river, and she would become confused, losing the thread of the conversation. Fortunately, they put it down to the pain in her foot, and were more sympathetic than ever. What would he think? That was the question hammering itself into her brain all day. If only she had been able to let him know. . . . He would suspect that she had deliberately turned him down. She knew he was somehow shut out of the society of the district; he would think the conventional opinion had proved too strong for her. She writhed at the thought. He was proud—it would hurt. She sensed just how deeply it would hurt; it would

burn and torture . . . and here was she, tied to this beastly couch, helpless.

It bewildered her. She had been smitten an unexpected blow; her disappointment sent a chill to her heart. If only she could let him know!

Then a measure of consolation came in the thought that, after all, it was only a slight sprain. In a few days, she would be able to ride again. She would be sure to see him somewhere, and could explain—of course she could. Things would easily be cleared up—why worry?

But the disappointment was not to be side-tracked so easily; the shadow remained on her heart.

She was glad when Steve went home and she was left in the dark.

The week that followed was the worst she had ever spent. She fretted and chafed till even Mrs. Brandon was surprised at her impatience.

"Easy to see you've had very little sickness, my lady," she laughed. "You're lucky it's only for a few days, some sprains keep you in bed over a fortnight."

Tess pulled herself up with a jerk. What was she doing? What sort of a fool was she making of herself? Inflicting her bad temper on her friends because she had not been able to keep an appointment with a man who was little more than a stranger. Probably he had forgotten all about it before this.

But deep down in her heart, she knew he hadn't forgotten, and although she tried to convince herself he wouldn't care, she knew he was still smarting from the wound she had unwittingly inflicted.

Even the most unpleasant things come to an end. The next week-end, Tess found herself again riding the familiar track towards The Lookout.

But, though she rode far across the river, even to his boundary gate, she didn't catch sight of the flashing, black filly.

Did she expect to find Henderson waiting at the river crossing for her? No, fate didn't do things that way. She would be sure to meet him sometime.

Still, she couldn't conquer the depression that had settled on her. She knew it was unreasonable, but all the reasoning in the world wouldn't banish her disappointment.

Time and again, she rode in that direction, each time coming back with a deeper sense of depression. The opportunity had gone, she concluded bitterly. Probably she would never be able to remove that burning hurt from his heart; he would go out of her life feeling she had mocked him.

Tess was not one to accept undesirable circumstances without a struggle. By the fourth week after her accident, she was desperate. Such a deep restlessness seized her that she could scarcely concentrate on her work. Sunday came again, and she decided she would explore the creek of which Henderson had spoken. Maybe, fate would relent: he might be there. The longer time went on, the more she burned with the desire to explain. She couldn't bear to have him misjudge her. Why should she allow herself to be put in the wrong? She must see him even if she had to . . . No, she couldn't do that. Even though this thing should eat like a canker into her soul and cloud all the sunshine of life, she couldn't deliberately go to his home.

The day was very warm for so late in autumn. The mountains were almost hidden in haze. "The weather to bring rain," Brandon had said, and Tess was the

more anxious to see the site of the creek before the dry weather should break. According to Jack, there was generally a flood when rain eventually came after a drought.

With every beat of her horse's hoofs, Tess felt her spirits rise, and she knew the stirring of expectation, the pulsing through her being of powerful emotions with which, until recently, she had been unacquainted. Yet, in spite of the exhilaration it gave her, she was bewildered, baffled. Her heart told her Henderson was true and honourable, yet what made him so strange in his attitude towards her? Something kept him from taking the usual course under the circumstances. Was that something connected with the shadow in his life?

If only she knew what it all was, she could endure it, she felt. Her horse splashed through the river. It was very low, had almost ceased running in places. It was difficult to credit the stories she had heard about this tiny stream transformed, in a few short hours, to a raging flood a quarter of a mile wide, bearing great trees and logs upon its swirling bosom, tearing huge stones from its bed and swirling them along in its angry fury to deposit them upon the flats lower down.

It was like human emotion, she thought. She could never have believed a year ago, that the quiet stream of feeling in her heart could have swollen as it had done until it became a violent flood, tearing down old landmarks and carrying all before it.

The heat of the day made the beautiful brush more attractive. She rode in among the trees and vines as far as the track would allow; then left her horse and walked in along the little creek where a tiny stream babbled and sang.

To Tess, it was like walking into a vast cathedral; it inspired her with a sense of awe. The light fell dimly through the heavy foliage of the tall trees wreathed with brilliant, green climbers and invested the delicate, shimmering ferns with a fairy-like halo. Soft, green fronds peeped out from every corner, and the moss-like growth under foot provided a rich carpet. Long ribbons of "stag-horn," interlaced with leafy tendrils, hung from above, while the sigh of the breeze in the branches mingling with the song of the stream and the melodious note of the bell bird, swelled like a sweet organ recital befitting the solemn cathedral atmosphere.

Tess clambered along the bank of the creek to a spot where a miniature waterfall tumbled into a great, deep pool. On a moss-covered rock, she found a seat, and leaned back with a sense of deep rest. Her agitated heart found something soothing in this beauty, and her restlessness slipped from her. She unpacked and ate the lunch she had brought, then fell to dreaming. She found herself caught up in the arms of nature; its glory and majesty lulled her into a tranquillity she had not known for months. All her problems slipped away, her soul was resting undisturbed by any fretting care. She breathed new strength here, and found courage to face whatever life might throw in her path.

The warmth made her drowsy, and she dreamed on and on, forgetful of all but her dreams.

A distant booming startled her into sudden activity. She sprang up and stared about her. She must have been mistaken; the sun was still shining and she could see no clouds. Was it also a dream? Another rumble, louder than the first, convinced her.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed. "I'm in for it. I'll be drenched."

She raced along the track to her horse, and started him down the creek as fast as the uneven, winding track would allow. Before she had reached the open, the clouds had risen overhead and shut the sun from view. The lightning quivered brilliantly, the thunder rolled ominously, then roared and crackled overhead in an alarming manner, while the rain began to fall in a heavy down-pour.

She was six miles from the river crossing with ten more on to the homestead. She turned here eyes to the right as she noticed a track branching in that direction. Someone lived in there: she would run for shelter. It couldn't be very far, for the wall of mountains rose steeply behind not three miles distant.

She sent her horse full gallop, and was soon at the top of the rise from which she could see the house away in a sheltered spot beneath the towering hills. She urged the horse on, hoping to reach shelter before she became soaked. It was exhilarating even in spite of the unpleasantness of being wet.

She didn't know where she was, but a tingling glow in her heart told her she really expected this to be Henderson's house, she knew it must be somewhere in this direction. The gate leading into the house paddock was open.

"Inviting me in," Tess thought as she galloped through and on up to the house itself. Her heart was beating faster. Would he be there to meet her? Should she go up and knock, or should she call out?

Then the door opened, and she saw a woman come out. Slipping off the horse, she dropped the rein over a

post, and ran up the short path to the verandah where the figure was waiting.

"You caught in storm?" a high-pitched, treble voice called out.

Tess stared in surprise—a black girl! Then she remembered hearing of the blacks living over in this part of the mountains. Henderson evidently employed them.

The girl called out something she didn't understand, and a tall aboriginal appeared round the corner. Tess saw a row of white teeth and two glistening black eyes in a grinning black face.

"I feed him," he said briefly, taking the horse from the fence.

It was a little startling and unexpected. Tess hesitated as she stood in front of the girl. The winsome smile was reassuring, the girl's face expressed the utmost friendliness. A soft, black hand was laid gently on her arm.

"You all wet! You come in, take 'em off."

"Oh, thank you."

She was soaked to the skin, and wondered just what she could do. The black girl led her inside, and taking her to a room, again felt the wet folds of her dress.

"Too wet! You take some Winni's dress till this fella dry."

She disappeared, returning a few minutes later with a change of garments. They were not the best fit, but the girl was near her own size, and they didn't look too bad. Winni laughed with childish glee as she gazed on her.

"Oh, fine! Come in here." She led the way to a big dining-room where a fire, just lit by the same dusky boy who had taken her horse, was burning brightly. Her clothes were carefully arranged before the blaze.

"Soon dry," Winni commented. "Boora make good fire."

The boy grinned at her praise, and seemed very pleased. Tess wondered if Boora found pleasure in Winni's smile. She was studying Winni. It was the first time she had come into contact with an aboriginal, and she was rather surprised. They were always pictured as such objectionable people, yet Winni was good-looking and neat.

She watched Winni's deft, graceful movements as she busied herself getting some tea. The black girl's face was aglow with happiness at being able to offer this service. Some winning grace in the lithe movements won her admiration. The only difference between this girl and her own race, as far as she could see, was one of colour. Her feet were large and not so shapely, but her hands were small and well formed. They were well kept too, she noticed; Henderson would be fastidious; he would insist on neatness in any maids in his house.

She glanced around the room. Plainly furnished, but comfortable. Clearly a man's room; no touch of the feminine decoration about it. But stay, it mightn't be Henderson's place. Perhaps he had an overseer or stockman. She turned to Winni.

"Is this Mr. Henderson's place?"

"Yes, Missie. He not here now—away over there." She pointed towards the river. "Come home when rain stop."

"You think it will stop soon?"

"All big thunder, soon gone. Big rain soon come now; not to-day. Nex' week, maybe . . . I know . . . soon river run big flood—no more dry—plenty grass."

She smiled cheerfully as she made her prophecy; and Tess felt herself irresistibly drawn towards this simple,

good-natured child of the wilds. She imagined it would take little to please these people, they seemed so good-natured, yet, probably underneath this child-like simplicity lay the primitive instincts of the savage that made them sometimes so cruel and brutal. It would take generations, Tess reflected, to overcome that innate savagery. They lacked balance. She had heard a good deal of their ways from Steve and others. Theirs was the disposition of the child—quick to anger, unreasonable, regardless of consequences. Yet she could see faithfulness written on Winni's face; she would be faithful to those she cared for.

The sound of a horse galloping interrupted her thoughts: her heart registered a faster beat. Winni lifted her head.

"Mr. Henderson—he's coming!"

She heard his voice directing Boora about his horse, the next moment he was striding into the room. He stopped abruptly, staring at her incredulously, then broke into a queer laugh. She could scarcely divine the meaning of that ironical laugh.

"You!" he ejaculated.

Tess laughed, trying to cover her confusion.

"Yes, Mr. Henderson. The storm caught me, and I ran for shelter. I thought your house was this way somewhere, and, you see, I found it. I was up exploring the brush you told me about. You see, I sprained my ankle that day I saw you last, and I couldn't come on the Sunday. It was a silly thing to do; I twisted it as I was getting off the horse. Something frightened the brute and I didn't reach the ground in proper style. The jolly thing kept me in bed for a week."

His face changed marvellously during her explanation. His glance swept her face.

"And I thought . . . I suppose you know what I thought. If only I had known——" then he laughed. "How delighted Mrs. Brandon would have been had I landed at her door with flowers and chocolates for the invalid. That's the correct thing in society, isn't it? Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Winni?"

"So you have been entertaining the lady, Winni?"

The starry, black eyes sparkled, and her face broke into a smile. She glanced from one to the other with question in her eyes, and seemed pleased with her conclusions. Then, evidently taking his words as dismissal, quietly left the room.

Tess's glance followed her.

"Isn't she a wonderful girl?"

"Yes—grateful and faithful. They are such children, yet they have virtues which many whites might copy with benefit. The trouble is, they haven't the protection we give to the child, and their irresponsible, passionate ways often get them into trouble."

"You love these people?" she asked.

He turned his sombre eyes, full of strange fire, upon her curiously. "Love them? Sometimes . . . yes, I suppose I do."

He drew his chair close beside hers.

"It gives me a strange thrill to see you here," he murmured. "Almost as if fate meant it to be so . . . and yet . . ."

He broke off, his eyes staring into space, the sombre shade on his face deepening. Tess felt as she looked at him that the shadow of those fine, sensitive features had been cast by some tragedy. It had been no small sorrow nor trivial disappointment; he was not one to be crushed by any ordinary disaster.

It felt strange yet delicious to be sitting there beside him in his own home. She was excited, thrilled. It was good to feel that he liked her to be there, that she fitted somehow. There was no jarring note in the atmosphere. A quick, sensitive understanding of spirit made all harmony. It almost seemed to her that their spirits had met and communed before, as if they had never been strangers to each other: his spirit had called to hers, and she had come . . . come home, it seemed to her just then. Surely the question of her heart was answered, she knew it now. Love, deep and undying, had come to her heart—love that could not be denied.

A passionate gratitude for the storm that brought her here surged through her heart. It seemed so natural to be here. It was inevitable; the call was as irresistible as the call of spring to the flowers. This great force that had come into her life exhilarated her, yet at the same time she was a little alarmed, it was so ungovernable, surging through her like a great tide of emotion, reckless, irresistible. This man was her mate. The thought naturally led to others, and her mind trembled as it thought. He would be the father of her children. Her face was burning. Was this love? Love, she supposed, always stirred the maternal impulse. Was it love—deep, real, all-absorbing? Or was it the lure of sex only—that force which, unguided, could be so destructive to the finest and best in human life.

His eyes were compelling her to lift hers and look at him. His arms were suddenly about her: his lips touched hers. At their touch, she felt again the current of burning ecstasy pulsing through her body. It was exquisite, passionate, complete, this surrender. Yet, even as she

lay in his arms, she felt his will was holding back; she was drawing him in spite of himself.

Softly, his hands strayed over her hair, touching it reverently as one touched a sacred thing.

"Beloved!" His voice came tenderly, throbbing with tremulous passion. "Beloved!"

She lay in his arms in silence—a silence rich in its realisation of a thousand dreams, a silence of fulfilment. Her pulse beat less madly as she rested in this consummation of bliss. This was love—utter forgetfulness of all except the one beloved. No wonder men and women had risked wealth, kingdoms, life, everything, at its call. This was love—the magic of Heaven, the sweetest and most powerful force in the whole world.

"Beloved!" Again he whispered the word, yet there was not all happiness in that word: it breathed pain—as with one who bids farewell to the dearest thing in life.

Softly, he withdrew his arms, and rising, drew her up till her head was upon his shoulder again. Gently, he kissed her, lingering over the caress as though loth to break the magic current that held them together.

"The night is coming," he murmured, his lips on her hair. "They will be anxious at Allynburn."

She drew away with a sudden exclamation. "Allynburn!" She had forgotten Allynburn existed. It was selfish of her; Mrs. Brandon would be frantic. They would be looking for her. Strange that this force of love took possession of her so completely that ordinary things were entirely forgotten.

She was dressing. The same clothes as when she started out that morning, yet she could not feel herself the same personality: she almost felt she was clothing herself with the garments belonging to someone who had

ceased to be, or been transformed till she was a new being. She had been groping in the dark; now, day had dawned, the sun had risen.

When she came out, Boora, a broad smile illuminating his face, was holding her horse at the gate of the little garden. Winni watched from the verandah, an expression partly of doubt and partly of pleasure upon her face. What caused that shadow of doubt? Was it because she worshipped her master, and wondered what the coming in of a stranger might mean? The smile, bright and winning, which lighted up the dusky features when Tess thanked her and said good-bye was reassuring. Winni liked her; Tess felt glad of it.

True to Winni's prophecy, the storm had gone. The sun, bright and clear, was sinking behind the hills. Henderson rode beside her. Her horse, fed and refreshed, was in a great hurry to get home, and Henderson's mount was ready for any speed.

They said little as they sped along; the influence of the past hour still held them in its sacred spell.

As they dashed through the river, they caught sight of a horseman coming to meet them.

"Steve!" they both exclaimed.

Henderson bent nearer and spoke in low tones.

"You will come again, beloved! You will come to me, whatever happens?"

Steve reined his horse in beside Tess.

"My God, Tess!" His voice was trembling and hoarse. "You've given us a terrible fright. I've been looking for you ever since the storm started."

Henderson's voice cut in, casual as if discussing the weather.

"Miss Gordon was exploring the brush over yonder,

and got caught in the storm. The nearest shelter happened to be my place."

"Thank's for taking charge of her."

Steve's voice was cold, almost harsh—altogether unlike Steve's usual rich tones. Tess felt a tinge of resentment that he should assume such proprietorship over her.

"I will hand her over to your charge now."

Henderson lifted his hat, and with a 'Good-bye, Miss Gordon,' turned his horse and rode away.

"I'm awfully storry, Steve," Tess apologised. "I got soaked and had to get my clothes dried. I should have hurried more: I might have known you'd all be very anxious."

"It's all right, Tess. . . . now I've found you safe," he laughed—a little nervous laugh; Tess thought it tinged with bitterness.

"Imagination plays such tricks with us, conjures up such awful possibilities: we feel foolish afterwards, when we find out how unnecessary our fears were."

He was silent a moment, then curiously:

"How did you know where Henderson's house was?"

"I didn't know: I only guessed when I saw the track leading in that direction."

"I see."

Steve was frowning. "We had better hurry along. I suppose; Mrs. Brandon will be in hysterics. Jack vowed you'd be able to look after yourself."

Tess didn't hear the question which Steve's thoughts were adding: "But can she take care of herself?"

As they galloped along the familiar track, Tess's mind was busy recalling the events of the afternoon; she was living again those heavenly moments when he had held

her close. What was he doing now? Little did she guess. Had she been gifted with second sight, she would have seen a wide-eyed Boora trembling with fear as he led a foam-covered horse toward the stable; she would have seen a man with set, haggard face, eyes that glowed with the fierceness of a furnace, hands clenched till the knuckles showed white and hard, pacing up and down the dining room like a lost soul tormented with demons, drops of sweat standing out on his brow and his face lined with anguish too deep for words. She would have seen his lips, on which blood had been drawn by biting of his teeth, moving in tense agitation, while his hands waved in despairing gestures as if to push away the whispering, urging, tempting demons that tortured his soul.

"God!" His voice hissed through set teeth. "Did ever man know such hell?"

He turned and hid his face in his arms as they rested on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, such sweetness! Such divinity!" he moaned. "Was ever lost soul in hell tortured by such sweet visions of Heaven? Oh, that we knew no such manhood that stands with drawn sword forbidding us take and enjoy! She is mine by every law of the universe. God! I shall take her... I shall take her."

He turned and paced the room again.

"Why does Heaven mock me? Why does it give me this manhood and this passion and then forbid me to fulfil them? Why am I tormented by such love? Why should she be made to suffer with such love? Why?... Why?... Why?"

He stopped abruptly in his stride at the far end of the room, and turning, stared fiercely at his reflection

in the sideboard mirror. "You can't," he said, addressing his reflection. You know you can't: you love her too much..... You can't, you dare not!"

Something within himself had risen to contend with that being represented by the reflection, and in its intensity that something hurled itself in frantic alarm upon the terrible wavering will.

"You are a man," he hissed into the glass. "Will you bring such blight and poison upon the heart of this girl you love? Life hasn't played fair, and you want to revenge yourself on the one who is all the world and more to you?"

He bowed his head, and his whole frame rocked with sobs—the sobs of a soul in the bitterest gethsemane, turning toward its Calvary.

"Oh, Tess! Tess! Tess!"

A slight, dusky figure crouched beneath the window outside, sometimes peering in from the gathering shadows with eyes in which fear and passion mingled.

What was the cause of this devil of madness that had suddenly taken possession of her beloved master? She knew the fire that lurked in the bottle; but he was not drunk.

"Tess! Tess!" she heard the soft-spoken name, and sensed the despair behind it. Intuition guided her. She knew. Softly, she stole away from the window, her face set and hard, her eyes smouldering pools of hate.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

STEVE faced Mrs. Brandon at the verandah steps, his good-humoured face overcast, worried lines between his level eyes. He had called her out on the pretext of bidding her good night, but really with the intention of unburdening his heart of its anxiety.

"Did Tess tell you she sheltered from the storm at Henderson's?"

"At Henderson's!" Her voice was full of consternation and dismay. "Never, did she? She only said she managed to find shelter."

"Does she know how he is regarded in the district?"

"I don't suppose she does: we have never discussed him."

"Of course, it's none of my business; a man doesn't like interfering in something that really doesn't concern him. You know"—his voice held a note of appeal—"I have never shared your attitude toward Henderson, but . . ."

He hesitated and cleared his throat nervously. "I think Tess ought to know. After all, Henderson is an attractive sort of chap . . . not that I think for one moment he would deliberately set out to attract her; but I think, maybe, she ought to know what . . . well, just what people say. Mind you, Tess may not view the matter in the same light as you do: she may not agree with your idea of it at all: on the other hand, she may. I suppose she ought to be warned about it."

His voice was desperately apologetic; this was the sort of thing he detested: he loathed himself even while he felt he ought to do it. All the time he was conscious of an accusing voice in his heart telling him it was only jealousy that drove him to this step. If it had been any other girl, would he have been so eager to warn her of possible danger? Honestly facing the question, he knew he would not. 'Let the little fool find out for herself'—probably that would have been his attitude: it wouldn't have been his business . . . but Tess . . .!

Mrs. Brandon suffered no such qualms. Her voice cut in on his hesitating thoughts.

"Of course she ought to know. I'm a fool not to have told her long ago. You needn't worry, Steve. All the nonsense will be nipped in the bud when I tell her."

Steve writhed. He had a feeling that nothing would be lost in the telling. It was mean; like hitting below the belt or kicking a man when he was down. He hated it. He wished Tess could have heard all about it from some indirect source. Still, he would have to go through with it. His teeth came together determinedly; then, as he glanced at Mrs. Brandon's set face, he realised it was too late now to draw back, even if he wanted to; she would consider it her sacred duty to open Tess's innocent eyes to those impassable barriers excluding Henderson from the social fellowship of the district. She detested Henderson, and wouldn't have the slightest scruple in making the case as bad as possible.

He walked very slowly to his horse, and rode away with an ache in his heart.

Tess was in bed, reading, or attempting to read. In reality, she was dreaming of the strange things the day had brought to her; living again the delicious hours of

the afternoon. So sublime the heights she had reached that all problems and doubts involved were left so far below as to be insignificant for the time being. It had been a day of accomplishment, of realisation, the fulfilment of a burning quest.

"Come in," she answered in response to the knock at her door, and looked up with a smile as Mrs. Brandon's ample figure appeared. Seating herself on the bed, Mrs. Brandon contemplated Tess thoughtfully. It struck her Tess was somehow changed. She couldn't define the change; it was too subtle, too elusive; but changed, she certainly was.

"You had a bad time in the storm," she began. "Well, I warned you, didn't I, not to go too far, because there might be a storm? But there—a wilful girl will have her way."

Tess broke into a happy laugh, her thought leaping instantly to the adventure her wilfulness had led to.

"And you had to take shelter at Henderson's."

Tess came to earth in a flash, the smile dying from her eyes. Mrs. Brandon's tone sounded an ominous note. She found her mind running back to that night when she had been on the point of asking about Henderson and the reason why he was not admitted to the inner circle of friendship with the rest of the settlers. Now, after what had happened, it didn't really matter. Love had come to her, and it was the greatest thing in the world: all other matters were insignificant beside that. Probably the mystery was some old story of a man's indiscretion or foolishness. Men often did foolish things, and regretted them—paid the price in many ways; but the past was past. She wasn't going to let it spoil her happiness nor destroy her love. She rather hoped Mrs.

Brandon wouldn't tell her; yet perhaps it were best to know.

Watching her vivid face and sparkling eyes, Mrs. Brandon wondered just how much danger there was, and how best to put her warning into words. She paused a long time while Tess waited expectantly.

"You have noticed Henderson doesn't mix up with the rest of the people here?"

"Yes," Tess answered, trying to make her voice casual. "I have wondered why."

"Of course you didn't understand. I've been on the point of telling you several times, but something always interrupted me. The people here don't talk about these things; but really he's not—well, not the kind of man your mother would care to have you know."

Her mother! Tess smiled—almost laughed—at the idea of her mother worrying about her in that way. Mrs. Brandon sensed she had made an unfortunate approach, and hastened on.

"And when you understand, you won't care to have much to do with him either."

She paused again, intuition warning her that her task was not going to be as easy as it appeared.

"Of course, men don't take these things as seriously as we women do, it would be far better if they did; but even the men about here don't care to have much to do with Henderson in a personal way. It isn't that they set themselves up to be saints—some of them are rough enough, goodness knows; but they have some principles all the same. It's bad enough for a man to fly in the face of the laws o' marriage and decency; but even the roughest men draw the line at defyin' the laws o' nature and livin' with a black girl."

She was scarcely prepared for the lightning effect of her words.

Tess sprang up, her hands clenched.

"Whatever are you saying? You must be mad! How could you imagine such a thing? A man like Henderson above all—its' absurd." Her eyes were blazing, her face scarlet.

"Is it so absurd?" the other asked, her voice calm but her lips quivering. "You don't know men. The most polished are often the worst. Everyone knows about him having that girl, Winni, there."

"Winni!" Tess gasped. "Oh, it's impossible! It's not true! Oh, how can you all think such mean, contemptible things? I thought you all so...so fine. How can you charge a man with a thing like that and condemn him? Why, she's only a child."

Mrs. Brandon laid a gentle hand upon her arm.

"Think calmly, Tess. Isn't there something strange about this man? Haven't you sensed it, seen it? Isn't it queer living there alone with that girl keeping house? Ask yourself, child, before it is too late. Isn't it natural to come to the conclusion we've come to? I've met men like him before; perverted in some way. I understand he's always had a lot to do with the blacks. Perhaps some time he lost his sense of—of decency, and now finds it hard to break away. Think calmly about it, Tess; for God's sake, think."

The door closed and she was alone. Alone with the awful, hideous thought—Winni his...his mistress. It was crushing her down, suffocating, strangling her. Fear, loathing, horror struggled with love in her soul. Love! It meant trust, perfect trust; and she was doubting, doubting.

She shivered. It couldn't be true—this monstrous thing: it couldn't. Then her mind focussed on the girl—that strange expression in her eyes as she was coming away. How could one know what these people were thinking? What lay behind their smiles? Her own doubts too! They had been lulled to sleep in his arms. Dear God! Those kisses! Those caressing hands! Did those lips also kiss...hers? Even now, they might—.

She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the horrible vision. It was unthinkable, impossible.

She remembered now the things that had troubled her mind. If this were not true, why had he behaved so strangely? Why had he spoken so mysteriously, left her so abruptly at 'The Lookout' that day? What did it all mean? The explanation was easy...now.

A deep groan escaped her; she found herself shuddering violently. This was the end. Anything else, she could have forgiven. Had he been guilty of any other crime; had he even fallen a victim to the seductions of some subtle-tongued charmer—even that, she could have forgiven; but this—this was unpardonable. Love could never survive such shame: blighted and stricken, it must die. She would pluck it from her soul—an unclean thing. It lowered her to the level of the sullied creatures who lurk at the corners of the city streets. To continue the relationship was unthinkable: the very thought of the horrible thing filled her soul with nausea.

"A white man!" She shivered again: it was unnatural, disgusting, sickening.

Then, through her revolting senses, came again the feeling that the thing was impossible, untrue. For a brief space, it buoyed her up, filled her with resentment against the people of the community. How dare they

believe and say such things? Steve....surely Steve didn't believe this! Reason returned to the attack; jeered at her faith; pointed out with merciless fingers—fingers tipped with scorn—the weakness and absurdity of her hope. Had she not heard him refer to himself as a pariah? Hadn't he spoken of the Devil's hour of Paradise? Hadn't he placed himself outside the community, shut himself away from his own kind? Another violent shudder passed over her. This was the mystery—the great shadow that enshrouded him and helped to lure her toward him. What a solution? Unclean—like a leper! . . . And she had loved him! Had lain in his arms! Had felt the urge of her womanhood in response to the call of his magnetic personality—had vaguely dreamed of his children cradled in her arms. A bitter laugh came to her lips: this was reality. . . . stark, naked reality, robbed of every semblance of romance. . . . and of decency.

The next day, the folk at Allynburn were too jubilant over the torrents of rain pouring down on the thirsty hills to notice that Tess was paler than usual: even Mrs. Brandon's scrutiny could detect nothing more than that; for Tess carried her secret proudly. No one should know that beneath her calm smile a slaughtered love lay hidden. Her care-free manner must camouflage the skeleton of her shattered hope. Only when screened by the friendly darkness could she throw off the mask and weep through the long silences of the night over life's departed glory, over new-born hopes and joys strangled at their birth, over love, blighted and dead.

Would there always be that dull ache in her heart? Would there never be any filling of the dreary void in her life? Would she never lose this longing for the touch of the caressing hand and the impassioned lips of one who was not worthy of even a passing thought? Was

love so cruel that it mocked despair for ever? Would she never forget?

And during those days of forced cheerfulness and secret mourning, of outward smiles and inward despair, the windows of the heavens were opened, and the steady, pouring rain drummed on the roof; the creek bed babbled and sang, rushing down to the valley below where the river, suddenly awakened from its long sleep, leapt and roared and thundered. Far up the valley, its brown, surging waters could be seen racing madly between its high walls, far down the valley, those turbulent waters swirled on, tumbling, seething, majestic and awesome. And ever the waters rose, higher and still higher, till the rocky walls could hold them no longer, and they poured their mighty streams over the flats, sweeping away fences, enveloping unwary cattle, tearing down trees, bearing them down stream like a fleet of crazy craft with which it made sport.

Tess watched it all with dull, amazed eyes. She saw, even before the rain ceased, the velvet green appearing on the clean hills, and the barren patches breaking out into eager growth.

"Not like love," she meditated. "Once withered, it puts forth no more green shoots." The barren soil, no matter how scorched by a pitiless sun, could spring to life again, and clothe itself in glory; but:—

'The field of Love's dead pasture  
Must remain forever bare;  
Nevermore Love's harvests garner  
From the ashes of despair.'

Love claimed to be immortal, eternal. She had proved it was not: it could die, leaving the heart cold and barren. It's passing left one like a living corpse: it took away all the vitality of the inner life.

She followed the daily round mechanically, and mechanically took part in conversation, laughed, smiled or looked serious as the occasion demanded—all mechanically. She felt herself to be just a machine from which the soul had gone.

She passed her days with a dull indifference, a sense of unreality possessing her. She remembered Henderson's words, so wild, so bitter, at 'The Lookout' that day. She could understand that dark outlook now: she too had drained the cup of bitterness from the hand of fate; but she was so numbed in spirit that she did not care. Life was suddenly turned to a desert waste.

Then, suddenly, out of the grave, the dead came to life. The ice that had frozen her heart was suddenly broken, and the living waters burst forth. It was like the river, after all—shrunken away till scarce a trickle remained, then suddenly leaping, bounding, sweeping overwhelmingly, irresistibly on.

Life came back; the passion she had thought extinguished flamed up, surging through her being with renewed intensity. It was true; love was eternal—it couldn't die. In spite of all, she loved this man with a love that was deep as infinity. He was hers; nothing should keep him from her. Even the ugly, hideous thing that had breathed its poisonous fumes upon her love could not stand before this all-sweeping flood. Nothing mattered, nothing existed—except remotely—but he. She had power: she felt it running in her veins like strong wine. She would draw him away from that slimy octopus of horror that had somehow caught him in its unclean tentacles. She would break the chains of his bondage. Love—it was strong enough to do that. A mother's love for her son could not die, no matter what disgrace it had to face. Her love would be like that; it would have

a redeeming power. What was it Richmond had said? "Much that needed healing"—yes, that was it. The power and sweetness of his love would heal this ghastly wound and lift him to new heights of purity and wholesomeness.

Her eyes swam with tears for his weakness—tears for the thing that life and passion had made him. She knew now, as she thought of his strange, fierce words, he had longed to break away. She was ready to go to him. Love had triumphed, as love was meant to triumph, over all obstacles.

Love was divine: no waters could drown it, no fire destroy. She would go to him. She resolutely crushed the thought of Winni from her mind. She would seek her mate and save him.

"To-morrow!" she whispered to herself as she gazed out over the moonlit hills and falling flood; and again as her head sank on the pillow—"To-morrow!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

THE river was still a raging torrent as Tess faced it at the crossing below 'The Lookout.' In her normal senses, she would never have dreamed of crossing such a flood; but the passionate fires in her heart were driving her on. Fierce, desperate love held the reins and drove with reckless hand. The obstinacy with which she had fought for her freedom in the beginning was asserting itself now, and burning as a fanatical flame. Her whole soul was clamouring for her lover: her hands were outstretched to the flame—burn if they must. Was she going to allow a river to stand in the way?

She urged her horse into the madly rushing torrent. She could have laughed as the water came up round her feet. The horse was swimming, fighting his way through. The actual crossing bore upstream from this side, but the horse was borne downward and made for the sloping ground jutting out from the other bank a hundred yards below. He struggled out, dripping at the flanks, while Tess laughed at her wet feet and legs: she seemed doomed to arrive at Henderson's with wet garments.

Once more they were flying along the road, the hoof-beats echoing strangely among the silent hills. There was something weird about this ride: it was like a dream or a story from some legend of old. As she drew nearer, she was conscious of a quickening of her pulse. Her heart was beating in a way that stifled her: her head was whirling, and she felt sick.

How would he welcome her? What was she going to

say to him? He would know she knew—how would he take it? She remembered that strange little laugh when he had unexpectedly found her at his place. She understood that laugh now. Would he be like that to-day? It was awful; yet, somehow, she felt it had to be. God only knew how a man such as he could have been caught in such a loathesome web. She must take him away; break the shameful meshes, and make him free. Surely he must have been bewitched! It was almost unbelievable... Yet Winni's eyes had regarded her strangely; had been afraid of something. And he had been afraid too—she could see it now: afraid of being with her. It wasn't his fault they had met; God knew, he had never sought her out. It was fate; they had been thrown together even against his will....and she had won. Her heart sang in spite of all the pain. Even with this terrible thing standing between them, she had drawn him—he loved her.

After all, who could tell what early circumstances might have been responsible for this lapse. Stories she had heard came back to her mind—stories of men in Africa and the Islands. These things were forgotten: they married and the past went into oblivion. Why shouldn't it be the same with him? Couldn't his past be cast behind and lived down in the same way? There were plenty of men in Australia guilty of the same thing; only they had done it more secretly, kept it out of sight and avoiding shocking society with it. His sin was unforgivable because he had not hidden it. Somehow, she couldn't imagine him hiding his sins no matter how grave they were: he wasn't that kind.

She was at the gate leading up to the house now. The place looked quiet and tranquil with the silent mountain

rising behind, the rain clouds still lingering on the rugged tops.

She was conscious of a sudden disbelief in her heart. It wasn't true: the quiet, peaceful house gave it the lie. She was mad to have believed it at all. The thought came like a shaft of sunlight through the gloom, but was soon overwhelmed by the clouds of doubt. She must not deceive herself.

Nothing stirred as she rode up to the front. The silence chilled her. Mounting the steps, she knocked.

"Anyone home?" she called out eagerly. Only the echo of her knocking answered. She made her way round to the back, only to find the door closed. She stood back, the picture of disappointment and sadness, tears in her eyes. She had never thought of this possibility—all of them out... an empty house. It seemed such an anti-climax to her wild ride. All at once, she felt very foolish; the fire had been extinguished by a sudden inundation of cold water, and only the embers were left.

Turning slowly away, she made her way wearily to her horse. She must go back with nothing accomplished, back to the same dismal struggle and doubt, with the problem still unsolved.

She felt the chill in the air: she had awakened from a warm, vivid dream to the cold reality of a drab winter's morning, and foreboding descended like a pall upon her.

"There will be other days," she argued with herself, her optimism struggling with her sudden depression; but the voice of her chilled spirit seemed to echo from some hollow vault in reply, "Will they come—those other days?"

Seated on her horse, she turned one last lingering gaze

upon the silent house. It was like its master, inscrutable, mysterious, standing alone and apart.

She jerked the rein suddenly, and the horse, accustomed only to gentle treatment, bounded ahead with a wild plunge and set off at a hard gallop. Tess let him have his way, her mind still busy with the vision of those silent walls.

Yet, if only those walls could have faded and allowed her vision to extend to the rooms within, she would have seen the amazing sight of a man huddled in a large chair, his face buried in his hands, his fingers pressed to his ears to shut out the sound of that voice—a voice sweeter to his ears than any music ever made. His lips moved voicelessly—"Beloved! Beloved! Between you and me there stretches a fiery sword." His mind had gone back to days of long ago when he had read the old story of one thrust from the gates of Paradise which were henceforth barred by the fiery sword. He was that poor exile shut out from the paradise of clinging arms and soft caresses—the Paradise of Love; shut out by this fiery sword that scorched and seared his heart because he had ventured too near.

Her voice came to him like the voice of the sirens, luring him to throw all scruples to the winds—to reach out, grasp... and possess. Like Ulysses, he stopped his ears lest the sweetness of her voice should break down his iron resolution, should kindle the irresistible fire in his veins, maddening him and tempting him beyond his strength. Perspiration stood out in beads on his strained white face. Agony, overwhelming, despairing, terrible, seized him as he caught a glimpse of her mounting her horse—and then that last sad, desolate gaze upon the doors that refused to open to her. A groan burst from

him as he saw her dejectedly jerk the horse to the road and set off at a gallop.

"It cannot be," he moaned as he threw himself again into the chair. "Love! What is this Love?" Again, from the distant years he heard the words: 'Love... seeketh not its own... beareth all things... hopeth all things, endureth all things... Love never faileth.'

"Old-fashioned stuff," his mind scoffed. It was strange to be repeating Scripture, considering the way life—and the power behind life—had treated him. Rather more appropriate to think of the Persian poet:

'Life is a checker board of nights and days,  
Where Destiny, with men for pieces, plays,  
Hither and thither moves, and mates and slays,  
And one by one, back in the cupboard lays.'

He clenched his hands and bowed his head.

Yet, what was it that compelled him to take this path of renunciation? What was holding him to a path of bitterest torture that another might not have to tread the winepress of sorrow and heartbreak? It was love. What was behind love? —God? If he had not some lingering belief in God, could he have done this thing? Would he have been strong enough? If a blind destiny ruled the universe, might he not as well have adopted the attitude: "Take—and to hell with the consequences." There came to him another picture—a great White Life with breaking heart wrestling in agony deeper than the understanding of man. Almost unconsciously his agonised soul was breathing the words, "Father, let this cup pass..." Somehow, the words brought him comfort. That other Man had gone on and drunk the bitter cup for the sake of those He loved. He must not fail. His beloved—this thing must not touch her life, no matter what he might suffer. He alone must pay.... Pay! God!

What a price! "The mills of God!... Who shall abide the grinding?"

Henderson's agonised eyes were not the only ones to see Tess come and go. Eyes, sharp as the eagle's, eyes filled with the hate of the primal savage, had smouldered and blazed as they watched from the brush that lined the banks of the creek.

So she had come again—this woman who had brought trouble to the beloved house.

The black eyes flashed, the dusky lips were drawn back, showing gleaming white teeth in something akin to a snarl. Winni was hearing again those lagging footsteps, pacing, pacing, pacing the verandah at night when he thought she was sleeping; she was seeing again the terrible agony as she had seen it in his wild eyes that day when he returned from riding away with her. Her visit had brought trouble and sorrow to the master.

And now she was here again—this white witch whose very coming was a menace. How she hated her!

She watched Tess dismount and approach the front door: watched with growing wonderment as the moments went by and the door did not open. Her master was there. Her eyes widened as she saw Tess turn away and go round to the back of the house; saw her return and make her way with lagging feet to the horse. She spoke to herself in her perplexity.

"He do not come out: he think she no good, very bad white witch—frightened!"

The thought of her beloved master frightened, startled her; her eyes widened with a new fear—the fear of the unknown. She watched with quick furtive glances as Tess mounted and rode away. She was thinking of a fairy story in a little book Henderson had taught her to read. She understood what fairy stories were, yet her

simple mind could not refrain from investing them with an underlying reality. Witches never gave up; they came and came until their victim surrendered. She would come again—this woman with the flame-coloured hair who had bewitched her master so that sleep refused to come, and made him walk about all night.

Her fear grew. She remembered with a shudder those old days before her master had come: remembered different ones who took ill or went mad. Terror came to her at the memory of the terrible old man with the hideous face and the eye that looked inside and saw all you thought. Like a sinister shadow upon the brightness of her life descended the thought of that little deadly bone planted away in some secret place. She was trembling. Did these white people do things like that? Her master had said they didn't; but maybe they had their own way of doing the same thing. This witch was casting some evil spell over her master to make him walk about all night and not sleep. The bone always meant death—would her master die?

"Him go die!" she moaned, falling back, in the agitation of her heart, into pidgin English. Her eyes blazed and filled with intensive hate—a new hate, more furious than ever.

"The white witch, she laugh,"—she could only think of Tess's purpose as something dark and evil, some malicious design against her master which would bring great satisfaction when misfortune overtook him. The fading sounds of the galloping hoofs called her to action. The witch was going, but she would come again. Fear and hatred crystallised into action. Her horse was in the creek below, and the bridle on the fence nearby, she didn't need a saddle. With quick, stealthy movements, she caught the horse, led him down to the creek out

of sight of the house; then, mounting, she flew through the bush like a swift-footed messenger of hate. One glance as she came out on the road showed her that Tess had gone along a little while before and was well out of sight.

"The river!" she muttered as she sped along in pursuit. She would race the white witch to the river; take the short cut that would bring her there in plenty of time, and then—

She laughed like one possessed. . . .

Away ahead, she caught sight of the figure, riding slowly now, and checked her own horse till he was travelling at a like pace.

Tess, in her misery, had allowed the horse to take his own pace. She was thinking bitterly of the way life seemed to be mocking her. The hills seemed to have lost their beauty and the bush its delights. Night had settled on her heart, and the stars were not shining.

And ever behind her, just hidden from view, rode the half-naked black figure, body tense with suppressed passion, face with hatred's fire—a black shadow, following like fate o'er hill and glen. She was careful not to ride too near: this white witch might be possessed of dark powers and hear more quickly than others; yet she must not drop behind, or she might not win in the race to the river after gaining the short cut. She would soon be there. Her black eyes gleamed with anticipation; she was planning. . . . planning.

Tess rode slowly on, oblivious of the dark spirit that pursued, driven by the fires of hatred. Wrapped in her disappointment, she was trying to find comfort in the memory of his caress. She scarcely dared admit to herself the longing for the touch of his hands and the caress of his lips. She would find him; there would be another

day, another chance. Fate had thrown them together; why should it part them now? This black girl—her face grew white at the thought of her—he would tire of her; she would not have the power to hold him. The time would soon come when the very sight of her would be abhorrent. No doubt he was suffering bitterly for his folly. Oh, why had he, of all men, fallen to such a temptation?

Once she thought she heard hoof-beats behind, and her heart leapt up with hope; but, as she listened, she could hear nothing; she was alone—terribly alone.

Alone, could she have known it, with the dark spirit of hatred and vengeance.

At last, the path! Tess hadn't even noticed where it branched off; but the tingling fingers of the black girl pulled her horse's head in that direction, and she was soon galloping like a mad thing through the underbrush, head down along the horse's neck.

She emerged at the river several hundred yards below the crossing, and left her horse in a secluded spot. Then, running like a stealthy beast of prey, she approached the crossing, which, from this side, turned down stream, keeping near the bank under the overhanging limbs some distance before turning and striking across for the far bank.

She glanced up the trunk of the large, leaning oak nearest the roadway. Her quick eyes noticed a huge, spotted water lizard sleeping on the fork well up the tree. No, she would not disturb him. A grin of delight spread over her face: the lizard was her particular sign in the tribe; and the old spotted fellow up there was an encouragement to her—an omen of good luck. The next tree would suit her purpose splendidly.

She looked about on the stony ground, and picked up a very smooth round stone. Its smoothness seemed to please her: she grinned at it, fingering it appraisingly. Then, darting up the leaning trunk, she hid herself in the heavy foliage right above the swirling water where the road came through. She gazed at the waters and shuddered: they seemed to be reaching out hungry hands for everything they could grasp. Logs still floated down, and the carcasses of dead animals swept beneath her hiding place.

In her mind, she could see the white witch coming down the bank there urging her horse in right underneath her. She caressed the stone with her fingers. One small blow from that stone, and then—. She visualised the helpless girl in the clutches of those mad, angry waters. There must have been a storm on the tops; the waters were rising again. No one who didn't know the currents could swim in that raging sea. She pictured the horse galloping home riderless, and, somewhere away down the stream, a white upturned face with ghastly sightless eyes half hidden by that flame-coloured hair and the debris of the flood. Dead witches couldn't make anyone walk about at night and lose sleep. Even a witch wouldn't live in that water . . . especially after Winni had thrown a stone. No one would ever know how the white witch died. He would be free again, and happy. He would laugh as he used to, and go hunting with the boys again. Her heart grew heavy as she thought of his misery these last few weeks.

Suddenly she stiffened; she could hear her victim approaching. Had she dared, she would have laughed her wild, mad laugh; but she must be silent. Winni's black heart was revelling in this easy conquest over her enemy. The wild, untrammelled instincts of her people

came into full force, thrusting aside the veneer that a few years of semi-civilisation had given her. She was now a true daughter of the wild, primitive race, hating and loving almost at the same time.

Unconscious of her impending doom, Tess rode forward. The appearance of the river startled her a little. The mad fire that had driven through her earlier in the day had gone. She was cold and miserable. But, if she hadn't the passion to urge her on, she had now a numbing indifference to consequences. She gazed at the raging flood: it terrified her a little. It seemed so heartless, relentless, bearing away everything that came within its eager reach. It was like destiny. Was destiny really as heartless and blind as those rushing flood waters? She sat still awhile, watching and thinking. How beautiful the river had been! How she had longed to see it in flood! Life had been bright and joyous then; now its glory was dead, its sun was setting, and a dull greyness as of night was settling down upon her.

The river looked fearsome. Well, it was no use standing here staring at it. She had crossed once that day and could surely cross back again. She lifted the reins, and the horse stepped into the water.

Black eyes watched every step as she came down the slope: the tense, black body was held rigid while the pause was made by the water's edge. The hand gripping the stone was lifted, muscles taut. Everything was happening as she had visioned it.

Then, the sad tear-stained face turned toward her. The deep gloom of it struck into the black girl's heart: what was the meaning of it? She had been expecting to see hardness, not tears. She remembered now that face as she had seen it that first time: remembered how winning and lovely it had been. Something of the old

spell of it came back to her, supported by the appeal of the tears.

The horse was splashing through the water: her grip on the stone intensified, as she still stared like one fascinated at the sad, beautiful face.

Her quick ears were startled by a sudden rustle in the branches of the tree beside her; and, from the corner of her black eye, she caught sight of a spotted scaly thing flash through the sunlight toward the water. Surprised by the quiet approach of the horse, the lizard had been startled from its sleep and made a sudden plunge for the water. The ugly, scaly tail struck the horse's ear and a sharp claw scratched his eye as the loathsome creature hurtled downward.

It all happened so quickly that Winni's eye could scarcely follow it—the horse's mad plunge, and the water's quick triumph. Tess came down with a terrified scream, and the waters closed over her head. . . . .

A smooth stone dropped harmlessly, and the next moment a lithe black figure disappeared with a heavy splash into the seething brown torrent to reappear yards lower down, swimming with swift, strong strokes downstream in the wake of a struggling figure which was bravely but vainly battling with the overwhelming flood. The black hands clutched the white garment, holding the body, which no longer struggled, from sinking. Forgotten the blind, bitter hate, forgotten the blazing passion and triumph, forgotten all but that sad face which had somehow claimed the help and allegiance of her primitive soul. She must save her. Why, she did not stop to consider. Some call had come to her in that moment when she saw the horse plunge. She must snatch her from the surging flood.

Fighting bravely, she struck out for the sloping ground

where Tess's horse had landed earlier in the day. But the odds were against her, she missed the smoother waters, and the current carried her toward the other shore.

The Devil's Whirlpool—she couldn't avoid it. Round and round, the seething waters carried her as she hung desperately on, growing weaker and weaker. She couldn't get out of the current; it was hopeless. Yet no thought of letting go entered her head; she had forgotten herself.

Then to her ears came the sound of a cooe, and an encouraging shout. She had felt the grip of the terrible waters: her arms were growing numb, but the shout gave her new strength; she fought on, saw the tall figure plunge in, and at last felt the strong arm relieve her. A voice shouted to her to save herself.

Relieved of her burden, she found a spurt of new energy; but the toll had been too heavy, the flood was too strong. She was tired and the light was failing; she wanted to rest. Up in the brush, the birds began to call, and she forgot the water as she listened. Presently, her eyes closed and soft darkness came over her.

It took every ounce of strength Steve could muster and all the skill he knew to drag the unconscious Tess from the deadly grip of The Devil's Pool. Many a good animal had been whirled to its doom in that surging hole. How thankful he was now for his skill in the water as he fought, not for his own life, but the life far dearer to him than any prize earth could give him. Even The Devil's Pool shouldn't hold her from him; he was winning, she was his. . . He had snatched her from Death's jaws. . . . Smoother water now. . . "That's it! Careful, Jack! Bring my coat from the saddle—quick."

Jack spread the coat on the ground and watched Steve

lay his burden down and set to work loosening the wet, clinging clothes. He was terrified and crying.

"Oh, Steve, she's. . . she's not dead. . . is she?"

"No, no, Jack: here, quick, help me."

He sprang to do what Steve indicated, then watched while Steve worked.

After ten minutes of feverish work, Steve suddenly looked up.

"God! I forgot the black girl. Did she get out?"

"No-no," Jack blubbered helplessly. "She was carried right away by a big log before you got out. It j-just pushed her into the current and she went down into the falls there."

"Oh, my God!" Steve groaned. "And she saved Tess. . . . It's no use now."

He went on with his work, the perspiration mingling with the water dripping from his wet hair.

A faint stirring of the body and a tremor told him that Tess was coming round.

"I'll have to get word to Henderson," he murmured half to himself.

"Can you ride through the river, Jack, and let him know? Tess is coming round. I'll carry her home."

He watched and worked till Tess was breathing evenly; then, wrapping his coat about her, he clasped her in his strong arms and mounted with the aid of a large rock while Jack held his horse.

"Now ride to Henderson's; and, for God's sake, take care crossing the river."

Jack, choking with emotion, rode off, while Steve, his precious burden in his arms, galloped madly toward Allynburn.

## CHAPTER XX.

It was Laddie who first gave the alarm that something was amiss. He had sensed something different in his beloved teacher these last few weeks; and he had watched her go out that day with the anxiety born of deep affection. Would she be all right? Would she understand the river crossings? He didn't know if she was going across the river, but he knew her venturesome nature, and was not at peace in his mind.

"Mother!" he shouted as his sharp eye, watching up the river for Tess, caught sight of Steve's horse galloping bravely underneath its heavy load. "Here's Steve coming down the river road carryin' something in front of him; he's coming like mad, too."

Consternation gripped the household as the galloping horse reappeared round the bend and began to struggle up the long slope.

"Good Lord! Whatever's the matter?" Harry Brandon exclaimed, rushing out to open the gate.

"Oh, my God! It's Tessie Gordon!"

Mrs. Brandon's horror-stricken cry went through the house, as Steve dropped unsteadily from his horse and staggered inside with Tess in his arms.

"The doctor, Harry!" Mrs. Brandon cried, rushing toward her husband. "Get the doctor."

"No use, Mother. It'd be to-morrow night before he could get here, and I don't think he'd get across the rivers then."

Steve laid Tess on the couch.

"Get her to bed with hot water bottles, and give her some brandy," Steve ordered in a jerky, husky voice.

Brandon's calm, practical sense asserted itself. He saw them fixing Tess up, and turned his attention to the kitchen fire and the hot water bottles.

"Better give Steve a drop o' that, Mother," he advised, coming in again as she was administering the brandy. "He looks about done." Steve drank the brandy, and, leaning back, closed his eyes for a few moments.

"What happened?" Brandon asked.

Steve looked up.

"It was at the crossing. Something frightened the horse: he reared and fell just as he was coming into the deep water. I was too far away; and when I got there, the black girl was trying to save her. I got there just in time: they were in The Devil's Pool . . . the black girl . . . was drowned."

He hid his face in his hands and trembled.

"I sent Jack to tell Henderson."

Brandon was silent. He went to see that all was going well with the patient, and finding his wife well in control of affairs, came back to Steve.

"Best thing I can do is go along and see if I can help up there. The Lookout crossing, was it?"

He dropped his voice.

"I wouldn't let her know much till she's quite strong enough to stand it."

Steve made his way into Tess's room. She was moaning a good deal, but she was recovering. Mrs. Brandon was doing her best, her eyes wet with tears.

"I'll slip out and make some hot coffee," she suggested when Steve came in. He sat by the bed, laying his trembling hands tenderly on the white brow. How cold it was! A shudder of fear ran through him; was she

safe? The fear gave place to gratitude as he realised that she was. Gently, his hands caressed the tumbled waves of hair; still wet and matted. He procured a towel and endeavoured to dry it, then, holding the cold face between his hands, he bent and kissed it again and again.

Dimly, life was coming back to the numbed senses; consciousness was struggling with the clouds enwrapping it, trying to lay hold on something that eluded it. What had happened? Her mind could not find the answer. Why was she shuddering and shivering so? Her body was numb and cold and her mind seemed numb too. Where was she? She was confused; something had happened—something terrible. Was that someone's hand on her head? Yes, a strong, tender hand—a man's hand. She was dimly conscious of kisses on her face. "Barrie!" she murmured. "Barrie!" She was soothed by those hands, and, with a sigh that was half a sob, abandoned herself to their soft caress, quite unconscious of the sudden pain in two anxious eyes looking so tenderly down on her.

The struggling mind still grappled with the elusive images that floated before it. Vague, shadowy shapes came out of the darkness only to fade away before she could grasp their significance. Far-away voices floated through the darkness: she felt herself struggling with something. Whose soft voice was that calling to her? She wanted to scream but couldn't. She was cold, deathly cold.

Mrs. Brandon bustled in.

"She's sleeping," Steve said, still gazing through the window out upon the distant hills.

"Steve you must be wet through; you must change at once. I never thought about you."

"No thanks, Mrs. Brandon: I'm dry again," he replied

without turning his eyes from the hills. He was conscious of a dull, deadening ache: he felt suddenly weary and cold.

"Well, have some coffee, Steve; you look as though you need it. I won't wake her just now, the sleep will do her more good."

Silently, he rose, and, following her to the dining-room, sat staring into the fire while he sipped his coffee. Mrs. Brandon was too busy and perturbed to notice his abstraction as he sat on, unconscious of surroundings brooding on that one all-too-eloquent word, "Barrie!" It rang through his soul like the tolling of a death knell.

He was roused by the sound of hoof beats on the road, and looked up expectantly.

"Harry coming back?" he asked, as Mrs. Brandon peered through the window.

He rose as she nodded, and came out to the verandah. Harry Brandon dropped wearily from the saddle and staggered to a seat.

"How is she?" he nodded in the direction of Tess's room.

"Coming on fine," his wife answered, glancing anxiously at his weary features. "She's sleeping. You don't look too good."

"I feel about done, but I'm all right."

"I'll get you some coffee."

As she bustled off, the two men looked at each other.

"Find her?" Steve asked.

Brandon nodded.

"Yes . . . at least Henderson did . . . . God! I'll never forget it as long as I live. I got there first; picked up a couple of chaps from down the river as I went up. We'd only just gone a little way along the river when Henderson galloped up. He never said a word, but just galloped

along the bank. Came a short cut from somewhere; hit the river right where we was. We was comin' down, but he wasn't satisfied with our lookin', went up past us to The Devil's Hole to start at the beginning himself, and I'm blowed if he didn't see 'er in the branches of a tree washed down by the flood right on the far side from where 'e was—an' we'd just passed the place and wouldn't ha' found her till glory knows when. He jumped straight in without a word . . . and swim! He 'ad 'er out before we could get back . . . almost. I hope I never see another man's face like his. It was awful—the look in his eyes. Carryin' that dead black girl in 'is arms! She looked just a slip of a little thing. I don't know however she could swim like that and hold Miss Gordon up so long. If things hadn't been as they are, everyone would ha' claimed 'er a reg'lar hero; men have been given the V.C. fer less." He emphasised his words with a shrug.

"But there it is. I could see what the others was thinkin' too—a sort o' feelin' that because things was as they were, she was best dead, maybe. But I don't know. I can't get over the way he looked. If ever I saw the sufferin' o' hell, it was on his face, and I couldn't help but feel sorry fer 'im. It don't seem natural, somehow, but it must ha' been pretty deep with 'im to look like that."

Steve's lips were tightly closed. The sharp agony from that soft-whispered "Barrie" still tortured his heart. He had no pity to spare for this renegade of his own race who, not content with taking advantage of the ignorance and trust of a poor little black girl, must cast the dark spell of his damnable personality upon this fairest flower of human sweetness and loveliness. Silently, Steve cursed him; pity was wasted on such as he. Winni—his eyes

grew soft as he thought of her battling in those insurgent waters for the life that was so dear to him—giving her life for the white girl.

"God bless her!" he murmured to himself. She was whiter in soul than many of his own race; poor little despised Winni!"

He was worked up, unmanned. A tear dropped from his face—a tear of gratitude and sympathy. Life was a complex problem, too deep for his weary mind.

"I wonder what Henderson will do now."

Steve's mind came back to earth with an unpleasant jar.

"Damn pity it wasn't he who was drowned instead o' that poor little black girl," he retorted fiercely. "A hell of a lot his type feel. He'll have forgotten Winni in a few days and be swaggering around as jauntily as ever. He'll take care life doesn't hurt him too much."

Brandon looked up quickly, surprised at Steve's unusual vehemence and bitterness.

"Maybe you're right, but somehow I saw something in his face today I've never seen before. I've never liked the man much, but I couldn't help feelin' today that he'd been hit as 'ard as any man could be hit and still keep goin'. He seemed fair beaten—like a man who'd been strugglin' on agen' everything fer years and then had got a knock out in the end. Anyway, he never did strike me as bein' exactly jaunty; he's always seemed as though he'd rather keep out o' sight. Seemed a bit like a fellow who's been made sour by some big trouble. There must ha' been something more than just that black girl business about it; I've often wondered."

His speculations were lost upon Steve, who sat moodily nursing his head and staring up the river. Where had Tess been? That was the question with which Steve's

mind was most concerned. What had the black girl been doing there? She seemed to have suddenly appeared from nowhere.

"Hope Miss Gordon'll soon be all right," Brandon continued. This'll be a bit of a shock when she finds out. She's a sensible sort; but still it'll upset 'er. I wonder if she remembers anything about it. I guess the missus will help 'er through; she's as good as anyone at that. Don't think we need bother about the doctor, do you Steve?"

"I'll see how she is," Steve replied, and went to seek Mrs. Brandon.

For two days, Tess hovered on the verge of delirium, struggling back to a doubtful convalescence with a heavy cold that threatened pneumonia. Her memory was grappling with the events at the river, and she was seized with a keen desire to know what had happened. Who had come to her rescue when she was struggling for her life in the water?

Everything was clear up to the moment she was plunged into the rushing current—the falling lizard, the violent plunge of the horse, the sudden over-balancing in the swirling water, the struggle . . . Then someone had come—her mind was hazy—no it wasn't he, she was sure of that, much as she would have liked to believe it. It was a woman; could it have been Winni? Surely it was Winni's voice she heard whispering encouragement and hope in those last moments of struggle! But what could Winni have been doing there? Steve, they said, had pulled her out, but someone else had come. At last she was able to collect her scattered thoughts and ask Mrs. Brandon.

"Yes, it was the black girl," Mrs. Brandon confessed.

"But how did she come to be there? I didn't see a sign of anyone as I came to the river."

"I'm sure it's very hard to say; just riding about, I suppose."

"But—but"—a sudden suspicion seized her heart—"didn't she say anything about it?"

"No, dear, she didn't." Mrs. Brandon tried to be casual, but, not being accustomed to acting, she failed. Tess struggled to a sitting posture and seized her arm.

"Is—is she all right?"

"Yes, dear, she's . . . all right, but you mustn't worry; remember you're still very sick."

"But I must know," Tess cried almost fiercely. "What happened to her? Oh, no, no, she wasn't . . . drowned?"

Mrs. Brandon laid her hand soothingly on her head. Evidently it was no use trying to hide the truth any longer.

"Dear, don't excite yourself. It's no use worrying over what's past; it's better forgotten. She was a mighty brave girl, and, considerin' all things, perhaps it's best. No doubt she can hold up her head with the rest o' them where she is; but—well, things was a bit against her down here. Now don't worry."

But Tess buried her face in her pillow and broke into bitter sobs. Winni drowned! Saving her life! And she had felt so bitterly about her! Such a child too! The picture of the big black eyes and the child-like smile came back to her, and her grief was beyond comfort. She had looked on this simple child of nature as an enemy, and now she had given her life.

"Oh, why didn't she let me drown? Why? . . . Why? her sobbing grew wilder, and Mrs. Brandon stared at her in astonishment and alarm.

"Because you were meant to be saved, dear. If you go fretting and making yourself ill, the poor child might as well not have saved you. After all, you should be thankful you are alive."

Tess looked up suddenly with misery in her eyes.

"Why?"

The question was out before she realised it. Down beneath the storm of her emotions, it had been forming for weeks to suddenly find expression.

The bewildered, pained expression that came to Mrs. Brandon's face stirred her to contrition. They were all so good to her: it wasn't fair to visit on them the bitterness of her own despair. Where had she caught that bitter, cynical outlook? She recalled the satirical thrusts Henderson had made at the conventional philosophy. She caught Mrs. Brandon's hand impulsively, and, turning away, wept afresh. Every day brought Tess more reason to hide her bitterness and make some return to these people for their kindness. In spite of their crowding duties, they all found time to think of her, and their thoughtfulness won her deepest gratitude. What friends they were! Friendship was one of the great compensations for many of the weary disappointments of life.

Not least among those friends was Steve. She was weak and tired; the effects of the shock had been more severe than any of them anticipated. In her weariness of body and mind, Steve meant a great deal. His calm yet intense personality always soothed her nerves, and helped to coax her back to strength. He was a rock in a weary land, always ready to give, asking nothing in return.

It was from Steve she learned all the details of the accident and of Winni's wonderful sacrifice.

Her weakness was a puzzle to bluff Harry Brandon.

"Strange thing," he said to Steve. "She seemed such a strong, robust girl: you'd think she'd soon shake off a bit of a shock like that. She seems to be fretting: I suppose it's because the black girl was drowned. She used to be as lively as a young colt; now she's that white and shaky . . . I can't understand it."

Deep down in his heart, Steve had a shrewd idea why Tess was so long recovering. He saw in Mrs. Brandon's eyes that she, too, guessed.

Each day, as it passed, added a measure of bitterness to Tess's already wounded heart. He never came . . . didn't give one sign that he remembered her existence. This indifference cut deep, till it inflicted the maximum agony a human soul can feel. True, he couldn't very well come to see her on account of Mrs. Brandon's hostility towards him, but there were other ways he could have expressed his sympathy. He surely must have guessed she had been at his house that day. It was all true, his heart was with the dead girl. By the act of dying, she was the victor. Alive, she could never have held him, but dead she was an insurmountable barrier between them. Who could fight against the spirit of the dead? Her love, the love that had survived after she fancied it dead, still lived. She directed the whole of her bitterness towards Henderson for his indifference, yet, in some strange way, love refused to take part in the condemnation. Like a mother's love, it still yearned for its erring object, no matter what the verdict of the mind.

Mrs. Brandon watched and kept her counsel. She, too, had heard Tess in her delirium calling for "Barrie," and recognised the terrible tragedy she had feared from the first. Her mind was busy now with the problem of healing this wounded spirit, of turning the stream of that

rich affection into another channel. When the hour came, she would not hesitate, but, like a skilled surgeon, would cut quick and deep to remove the disease which was eating into the heart of this girl who had become as her own daughter.

Mrs. Brandon judged the hour had come, when, a month after the accident they were all seated one Sunday afternoon on the verandah enjoying the sunshine. Tess, looking still pale and wistful, was gazing out to the blue heights above 'The Lookout.' Mrs. Brandon broke one of the long pauses in the conversation.

"I hear that fellow, Henderson, is selling Boorendabri and clearing out."

"Clearing out?" Brandon echoed, surprised.

"Yes, the best thing he could do, too. Everybody honours the poor girl for the way she died, and, if he clears out, they'll never have anything to remind them of the way things were. I suppose the people here would have forgotten about it in time if Henderson had only acted decently: but they say the way he goes on about it is disgusting. Mrs. Grover, from down the river, was tellin' me yesterday her husband was over there fixin' up gates and fences for Henderson and he never knew any man so cut up: says he walks about the place all night and 'ardly eats a thing, frettin' about the girl . . . and him a white man. Perverted—that's what it is. Anyway, it's just as well for him to leave the district. He's a bit of a rolling stone from what I've heard of him."

Steve shot a furious glance at her. How could she talk like that in front of Tess? It was cruel: she was usually so thoughtful and tactful. Even Harry Brandon was surprised; he stared at his wife uncomfortably. His slow mind had at last come to harbour a suspicion of some

secret influence on Tess's health, some hidden complications in the accident.

Tess sat stiff and silent. It was like a blow which she had half expected and dreaded. It dazed her. He was going away—going without a word. Perhaps he was glad he was able to go away, afraid of being enticed into a serious affair. Her eyes were stinging; her heart felt the deepest pang of pain. She had been nothing more than a plaything thrown aside after his hour of pleasure with her.

Steve was sitting near her. She felt his arm, which had been lying along the back of the settee, slip down until his hand rested on hers. It was comforting. Steve would never betray anyone, never play with the feelings of any girl. Life would have been unbearable without him in these dark days. Life was lonely; Steve alone stood between her and utter desolation. What would life offer her now? She had sailed out over the ocean seeking to explore the unknown; had pursued a phantom land of illusion and dream to find herself wrecked in the midst of a barren waste of weariness and desolation. For the first time she took stock of the future. Laddie and Vi would grow up, and need her no more. She hated the city. There would be no place here among these hills she had learned to love—and still loved, in spite of the pain they had brought her. She would be alone—drift. Would she drift away from this friendship Steve was offering her? She looked out again on the hills; heard the soft music of the wind in the trees. Would the day come when she would look upon them in lingering farewell? Unconscious of the tears that gathered, oblivious of sympathetic watching eyes, she went on with her thoughts. Was life always to be a lonely struggle? She no longer looked forward with relish to the struggle; she had

grown weary and wanted to rest. What would Steve's place in her life?

She pulled herself up shortly; surely she was not contemplating making use of him as a way out of the struggle. He deserved better than that; she could never do it. But then Steve's friendship did mean more than that to her . . . if only she had never known . . .

What a tangle it all was! Better to be like her mother—satisfied with the little pleasures, the empty things of life. Life held no satisfaction for the people who demanded great things, better things. Better and wiser to be as these people who loved the simple things and were content. Life was commonplace, and the commonplace people got the most out of it; they were content.

She sighed.

"I think I'll go in now, Steve; I'm tired."

She rose and went to her room. Harry Brandon also rose: he had to attend his horses in the stable.

Mrs. Brandon faced Steve with a smile.

"Are you feeling very murderous, Steve?"

He smiled ruefully.

"I couldn't feel murderous towards you, Mrs. Brandon, but it did seem a pity to hurt her feelings. I think it would be better to say nothing about him."

Her face set determinedly.

"Steve, you don't know the first thing about it. I guess I know more about a woman's feelings than any man would be likely to know, and I realise we've been going the wrong way about things keepin' the blinds down on some things and some people because we're afraid o' hurtin' her feelings. Supposing she loves him—which I doubt—it's a sort of hypnotism, like a bird with a snake, but suppose she does love him, well, even love needs something to feed on. It's all very fine for the

people that write books to rave about love bein' everlasting and all that bosh. Under proper care and circumstances, it is, but love, to last, must have some response—understand me?"

He nodded thoughtfully.

"After a time, love withers and dies," she went on. "And that's why I said what I did, just causal like, as though I never dreamed she was a bit struck on him. Let her grasp the fact he was only amusing himself with her—that's if he did encourage her at all—that he doesn't really care a rap; it's the best cure in the world. She isn't one o' the cheap kind, flirting with everything she meets, and she'll soon crush out any feeling for a man who treats her with indifference. She'll want something better than that from the man she loves. Give her time, and the idea will go out of head, and she'll wonder what ever possessed her."

Steve lit his pipe with fingers that were not quite steady. Suppose she were right, would there be a chance for him yet?

"It will be a long time, maybe; because she's not the kind that forgets easily. You just be patient with her, and don't get mad with me for doing what I can to make matters better." She looked at him roguishly. "Don't go worryin' about it. Remember, a smiling face is a big attraction to any girl."

## CHAPTER XXI.

STEVE whistled blithely as he rode along the narrow track by the river. The sunlight flooded the world with glory, and signs of spring were in the air. The river's song floated through the crisp atmosphere with a note of hope and joy. Steve's heart responded readily; he was feeling especially hopeful, almost elated. Tess was different these last few days: more like her old self; nearer to him than ever before. Some invisible barrier was passing away. Life was good. Pictures were forming in Steve's mind—pictures of a new home fitted up with every comfort and convenience, pictures of Tess moving about the home, the sweet light of happiness on her face. He could see her standing in the glory of the morning light, the brilliance of the sunshine reflected in her lovely hair, her graceful form framed in a bower of ferns. She loved ferns: there would be plenty at Kalonvale, enough to satisfy her wildest desires. He glanced up at the wall of rock beside him. It was draped with hanging maiden-hair shimmering in the light like living lace. A thousand fairy fronds waved in the soft shadows of the creepers and shrubs that clung to the rocks right up to the heights above.

He would build his house near such a place as this where she could come in leisure hours and enjoy the soft beauty of nature's fernery.

His dreams were broken by the sound of hoofs on the road, and, looking up, he saw the shining black horse

that had brought him such humiliation on the day of the breaking in.

It was as if a dark cloud had suddenly cast its shadow over the beauty of the morning: the brightness of his dreams suddenly faded. That day of the breaking-in was the day she first saw Henderson: why should he come riding into these happy dreams now like a sinister shadow?

He felt again a tinge of envy as he noted the easy seat in the saddle, the lithe, graceful poise—yes, Henderson was attractive, damnably so.

He nodded as the rider passed—they had never shown much intimacy toward each other—but to-day Henderson drew rein, and there was nothing for it but to stop and see what he wanted. Their eyes met—a long level glance, neither wavering. Steve could not but feel the straightforward honesty of that piercing gaze. In spite of himself, he knew, if he had been meeting this man for the first time, he would have trusted him. Honesty was stamped on that thin lined face that might well have been the face of an idealist. . . . But—a warp somewhere. . . . poor devil! Yes, Brandon was right; one couldn't help being sorry. He might have been so fine, he was undoubtedly clever; yet. . . . he had thrown everything to the dogs.

Henderson's eyes were still on him, regarding him steadily, searching the innermost depths of his soul. Gosh! It made one feel uncomfortable.

The uncomfortable pause was broken at last by Henderson's voice, resonant with that peculiar penetrating quality.

"Glad I met you, Drummond. I was trying to make up my mind whether to call down at your place or not. Now, fate has taken a hand and decided the matter for

me; one must regard the opportunities flung in one's path as a guidance."

Steve surveyed him curiously: what could he want to see him for? If he were undecided about coming, it could not be a business matter; yet, what could he want with him in any personal way? They were only passing acquaintances.

"You've heard I'm selling out—leaving the district?"

Steve's heart registered a bound of pleasure; it was really true then—he was going.

"I did hear you had your place in the market," he answered.

A cynical smile played about the corners of Henderson's mouth.

"The district won't go into mourning over its loss; it has always registered decided disapproval of me. No doubt there will be a heap of satisfaction in some quarters when the black sheep of an otherwise respectable community takes his departure."

Steve was embarrassed by this frank statement of facts. Confound it! Why was Henderson discussing with him the district's attitude? It was awkward, and it struck him that Henderson was getting satisfaction from the situation. . . . was amused at his embarrassment. He looked straight into the other's eyes; if it had to be discussed, better come straight out into the open.

"Well, damn it, Henderson, you can't expect the community to rise above all its conventions and prejudices and receive with open arms one who goes directly against its accepted code. Personally, I consider it nobody else's business but your own; but I would scarcely expect the crowd to look at it that way. It had to fight hard for its ideals, and it can't be expected to learn toleration in a few generations. Still, after what has happened, I

guess the district will soon forget: it won't hold a man's past against him forever."

It cost Steve a good deal to make the suggestion. God only knew how he wanted the fellow to leave the district; but he must play the game.

"I see," Henderson replied with a touch of cutting sarcasm. "If I reform, I may win my way into the fatherly forgiveness of the community—find a patronising toleration of the blight of my past sins." He laughed bitterly. "Strange the mentality of society can make no allowance for the exceptional case; its hidebound imagination immediately brands all circumstances outside its narrow experience as suspicious and corrupt. God! What a mind for the great ruling White Race!"

He paused and looked away, while Steve remained silent.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed, suddenly turning to Steve again. "Surely they don't think I'm leaving the district because their little minds were shocked at my immoral ways!" He laughed derisively at the idea.

"I've survived their disapproval so long, I think I could continue."

He lapsed into a reflective silence, then:

"Still, they haven't all been so bitter; some of them are decent—Brandon for instance. God! It hurt sometimes."

He seemed to have spoken almost as to himself, and, looking on, Steve was conscious of sympathy, a conviction that here was one needing the balm of understanding, one who had somehow been wronged. Tragedy was hidden here somewhere: was it the tragedy of forces out of control? The other's words broke in upon his thought.

"And you find it difficult to agree with the crowd, Drummond. Oh, you needn't look surprised; I can read your thoughts; your face is an open book, your mind is honest, clean...and tolerant. You have always given me the benefit of the doubt; you would give a man a chance—a decent chance, hold out a hand of friendship, even. That was the reason I thought of looking you up before I left. I know what I say to you will be kept as a sacred confidence." His eyes wandered up the high, fern-decked wall.

"It has always been a mystery to me that the district has always busied its mind about my affairs and assured itself it knew all about me, yet never even vaguely guessed the real truth. Have you never noticed anything about me that made me different from other men?"

In answer to the challenge, Steve looked at him thoughtfully.

"You have your peculiarities; but nothing that would lead to any special conclusions."

"Yet to me they seem so evident, so outstanding. I will tell you; and what you hear must be buried in your heart forever; you must listen and forget. I would never have opened my lips on the matter till they were sealed by the grave but for the sake of...one for whose sake I am going away. To me, love is forbidden; between me and her there flames a fiery sword driving me from the gates of Paradise into bitter exile."

His eyes seemed focussed upon some phantom picture, as if, in the blue heavens, he was visioning that fair garden from whose gates he was doomed to flee.

"I had thought of going without a word, leaving all this unsaid; but"—he flashed one of his rare smiles upon Steve—"somehow, I like you...respect you. The longing came upon me to unburden my heart to the one man

who has given me the benefit of the doubt. I suppose I have yielded to the desire for approval which is natural to us all; I wanted you to think well of me. Or, perhaps it is natural pride wanting to demonstrate that my surrender was not the outcome of necessity, to protest against the fate that made me a thing apart, a pariah, damned from before my beginning to the end of the chapter."

The beads of perspiration, the trembling hand, the tense face, as well as the strange words, gave Steve a glimpse of the gethsemene Henderson was facing.

"Maybe," Henderson's voice rang with the intensity of his keyed-up nerves—"Maybe, it will help you...with her if I tell you...You will understand why one such as she could entertain a fancy for a degraded, ostracised member of the community such as I. Could you imagine her being attracted to...to pitch? No; yet a time might come when you would pause and wonder if there were in her character some warp or perversion that drew her to the community's outcast. You suspect I love her; and you know she is attracted to me. As man to man, Drummond, you know I could have won her—taken her in spite of all. Oh my God, the temptation! Only the very strength of my love for her held me back. I have wished in an agony of soul that I were myself ignorant of the shadow that clung to me; wished that I might have taken her in ignorance and been blameless of any consequences; wished that I had never discussed the dread curse that is upon me. Then, again, I have fervently thanked Heaven that I did know. To make a mistake may be forgiveable, but to perpetuate a mistake is surely the blackest of crimes. I tremble when I think how nearly I have been guilty of it."

Steve found himself fascinated as he watched the other's face. The problem of Henderson's peculiarities

or moral delinquencies had never vitally interested him until lately. His anxiety for Tess had biased his feelings toward the community's hostility; but now, as he watched the man and listened to his burning words, his curiosity was quickened to an unusual intensity.

Henderson's words came with a tremulous ring.

"I have been afraid of myself—afraid I had inherited a kink that would ambush me and defeat my iron resolve, bringing blight on one dearer to me than my own soul. I have kicked against the bars of my cage; I have cursed fate, cursed the universe, cursed myself, cursed my father for his weakness. Yet he paid—paid in bitter remorse for the evil he could never undo. He did everything humanly possible to give me a fair chance; watched over me with a care that was a mother's as well as a father's. My grandmother was cold and unsympathetic, yet she was just. My father lavished a world of affection upon me, giving me of his best. I was just finishing my third year at college when he died. He had played his part well, kept close the secret of my mother. He had brought me to his mother a tiny infant without a mother, and he kept his lips closed through the years. But death unlocks a man's lips: his mind lost its grip, and the truth came out. It must have broken her heart. He was her only son. How she must have struggled with her conventional pride! But her sense of duty won the day."

He paused a moment as memory brought back the bygone days; a bitter light gleamed in his eyes.

"I had just finished my course at the university with honours, and taken my doctor's degree, when my grandmother took ill and died. But, before she went, she told me the ghastly truth that my mother was a black woman."

"A black woman!" Steve gasped and stared.

"Yes. Can you wonder I am bitter with life? Can you wonder that I cursed fate? Can you wonder that I threw up my career, and drifted to the rover's path? I was seized by a mad desire to find my mother away in the wilds; and went to the old diggings where my father had been prospecting years before. From there I traced the tribe till I found it a couple of hundred miles further north. I discovered that my mother was dead—died a few months before I came on the scene. Her only other child was a little curly-headed kid of eleven. I adopted her and she was with me till...she died last month."

"Good Heavens! Then Winni was your..."

"My sister, or half-sister—oh, what an anti-climax to the wonderful ideas some splendid people about here had concerning her! The vicious scandal seemed like fate's final mockery."

It appeared to afford Henderson some satisfaction to hurl this thrust at the district's self-righteous attitude. He went on in a quieter strain.

"I was in contact with the tribe for some years. Winni's father used to come around. In their own way, they are not half bad, these black people—faithful to their friends, yet primitive and utterly lacking in self-control. They have their own laws, splendid laws, many of them, when they are given a decent chance to carry them into effect; but, oh, the tragedy of intermingling! Only those who have studied them carefully, as I have, can know the full horror of it. My father—how I have cursed him...hated him sometimes! Yet he loved me as seldom a father loves; and his love was his punishment. I have come to know in these last few months what agony of suffering love can bring. What deeper pain can life know than the realisation that we have given to the one we love best on earth a heritage of bit-

terness and woe? Strange how a man such as he could so lose his self-respect—even his manhood. What a poor creature man is when, if he is thrown on himself without the constant support of the community's conventional standards, he lapses to the primitive and falls lower than the beasts. Think of it! A cultured, finely-educated man! I suppose it was the isolation and the loneliness. Some of the lubras are very attractive when they are young. Winni's mother must have been. There was just a dash of white blood too—must have come from several generations back. He was alone and near their camp."

A shiver of repugnance ran through him.

"It was my birth that brought him to his senses, and then the full horror of the thing dawned on him. He took me away."

He turned his sombre eyes on Steve.

"It may have been the touch of white blood in her; but, whatever the cause, I followed entirely my father's race . . . the great white race. I am dark, but would you imagine I had black blood?"

Steve shook his head.

"You are no darker than hundreds of other men who live a great deal in the sun."

"True: yet there is a difference—very subtle, but there. I have many characteristics that belong to the natives. I have discovered them myself. My walk is theirs . . . and riding—I ride like them. It would never be noticed except by one who had studied the blacks closely. Can you realise what all this means to me? No, of course you can't; only one who suffers it can know just what this mixed blood means to me. Times have been when I have gone almost mad at the thought of it, cursing myself, life, God—everything. The only joy I had in

life was Boorendabri. I love the bush, the towering hills, the wild life, the rush of the wind in my ears as I flew along on some splendid horse such as this. I loved . . . my little black half-sister, and found life worth while trying to educate her. The love of the bush was in my very soul: it was the one heritage of my native blood. My father didn't love the bush. Prospecting! Gold! That was all he associated with the bush; but to me . . . . In a measure, I settled down to reconcile myself to life, and expected to make the best of it till the end . . . then . . ."

He paused again, gazing far up the fern-draped wall.

"Then she came. I knew that day as soon as I saw her that here was the final test, the last hurdle, the unexpected crisis—a great uncounted force in the battle with life's problems and temptations. It was nature . . . fighting, fighting. Reason and knowledge warned me, but nature—who can master nature?"

His hand waved in a gesture of despair.

"Man, do you know what temptation is? Not a soul on earth knew—the secret was mine alone. There was nothing to prevent me winning her—taking her and hiding the secret. Nothing . . . but my love for her. That love is the fiery sword that guards the door of the garden it has created. How could I shadow her life with this curse that has made my life a hell?"

He flung his arms wide.

"These hills have witnessed the deadliest struggle ever fought out in a human heart. Hour after hour, I have ridden blindly on and on, fighting, while demons tortured my soul—tempting, tempting. I have faced the issue from every angle. I argued that she would never know. But I am a doctor, and I know the deadly menace of that mixed blood. Nature will always be revenged . . . some

day. I fancied her as my wife; fancied her with my children in her arms—dark-skinned children against her white bosom—children growing up with that primitive moral sense that would come to the surface soon or later, breaking her heart....never, never! Never! I know her womanhood would not be satisfied with anything short of its true fulfilment: she has a strong maternal instinct, and would be unhappy without children."

His voice was low and full of pain.

"And I love children....but to hand down to them....this! I have faced it all: even entertained the idea of telling her, of throwing myself on her mercy, suggesting we marry and deny ourselves children....but it must not be....it would blight her life."

A wistfulness came to his eyes as he gazed out over the soft blue hills.

"I love my country. Maybe my love flows from a double fountain—the patriotism of the Anglo-Saxon, and the primitive passion of the race that peopled its shores long before they were marked by the white man's foot. This great land needs sturdy sons and daughters—such as she would give it; but not such as I....cursed with the mongrel's strain."

Steve's eyes were alight with wonder, with admiration. What a man was this! What towering character was here!

"I have told you because of her," Henderson concluded.

"She loves you," Steve brought out impulsively. "I have struggled against the thought, but in my heart I know it's true; she loves you."

The other looked at him gravely, consideringly.

"She would have loved me," he corrected. "But in spite of all, she is not sure. She has never been able to understand my attitude. In moments of weakness, I

have torn aside the veil and allowed her to glimpse my feelings—moments when they got the better of me. She loved me then....but I have managed to struggle back to sanity; then she hasn't been sure. Tess is proud; the thought that I was only amusing myself would be bitter—galling. Nothing would kill her love more quickly. Besides, with the doubt always in her mind, love has scarcely been able to take root. No doubt she has suffered, and her very soul has been scorched, but it will be as the brush land under fire: it will soon grow with new beauties as good influences play around her. Of course, if she knew....no power in Hell or Heaven could take her from me....But the doubt is there, and I have tried, God help me, to foster it."

Steve was silent, and Henderson's eyes rested on him in another long, piercing gaze.

"Then—there's you."

Steve looked up quickly, questioningly.

"Oh yes, you have played a greater part than you know. She feels you are solid: she knows you would make a true husband—the ideal father for the dream children who live in the shadowy imagination of the true woman's heart. If her mind and heart had not been swept away by the influence of my passion for her, she would have chosen you....and she will choose you now. I have heard men say they would rather see their loved one dead than in the arms of another.

"To me, there is something unnatural and horrible about that; it is only half love and half animal passion. If Tess is denied me, why should I wish to see her go through life robbed of all that makes for happiness—home, love, children? My love for her will not grow any less because she is your wife. Love does not depend on possession for its life: it is an eternal quality.

When I think of her, the ache in my heart will be eased by the thought that she is happy; and I shall be glad to know that your protecting love is about her, because I know you are straight and clean. Clean!" He lifted his head. "Thank God, I am clean. Because I know what uncleanness means, I value cleanliness above all things. I know the world generally doesn't think it matters... unless it happens to be a case of transgression—as mine was judged to be. Wild oats are considered the proper sowing for young men."

Steve's face was a little contorted by the intensity of his emotions. Thank God, I know now. I ought to have known better."

"Tess must never know," Henderson broke in. "She must not guess my real reason for leaving Boorendabri. I must go out of her life, leaving the impression that because of my love for Winni, I can't bear to stay in the place. When the long, bitter waiting for me is over, and she has convinced herself I am nothing more than a gay philanderer not worthy of one bitter tear, she will pluck the memory of my mad kisses from her heart: in fact, the memory of them will sting and burn. Then your opportunity will come. She will turn to you: your strength and straightness will appeal to her more than ever because of the contrast. After a time, I will be nothing more than a memory of—" his voice sank, "of what might have been."

"Henderson, I couldn't do it," Steve protested. It would be living a lie—taking advantage of another's nobility. You can't go out of her life like this. Surely you will not want the impression to remain that Winni was—"

Henderson held up his hand.

"Drummond, what impression the district has doesn't concern me a damn. Tess—Heaven knows I would give anything to efface that thought from her mind, but . . . it cannot be. I would become a glorified hero, and nothing on earth would make Tess marry any man: she would be faithful to the memory of what might have been for us, and her whole life would be blighted. No, she must never know. This is a secret between you and me alone. If you benefit by my silence, remember, so does she. That is all I ask. It is for her salvation."

He held out his hand.

"This is good-bye. I have made all arrangements. To-morrow, I go."

Steve grasped the outstretched hand.

"You are a great man, Barrie Henderson. God grant I may be worthy of so great a trust."

He sat watching until a bend of the road hid the retreating rider from his sight.

"Could I have done it?" he asked himself again and again as he thought of Henderson's sacrifice.

## CHAPTER XXII.

STEVE watched the car in the distance with anxious eyes. Was it the one he was watching for...or only a neighbour's from down the river? He sighed impatiently as it came nearer—it was not the car he wanted to see. As it came to a standstill, his heart bounded with relief, for he saw the doctor alighting from it. It was Richmond, the parson, who followed the doctor up the garden path, and gave him a cheery greeting.

"The Doc's car was out of action, old chap, so I acted as taxi-driver for him. My old bus isn't quite as speedy as his; and I suppose you're about frantic with worry and impatience. Well, we're here at last. I say, you must be a wizard with the garden, old man; or is it the wife who looks after the flowers? What sort of soil is it when you can get a show like this in a little over twelve months? I wish you'd send a few cart-loads down to me: the wretched sour stuff down there nearly makes me swear."

He followed Steve inside.

"How is she, Drummond?" he queried as the nurse conducted the doctor into Tess's room.

"I—I hardly know: she doesn't seem too good; but the nurse says she alright."

Steve sat in silence listening to the other's talk, waiting in dread suspense, for the doctor to come out again. He wasn't hearing a great deal of the other's talk, but was glad of it all the same: Richmond's was a soothing per-

sonality—a great help in a crisis. It was rather fortunate the doctor's car was out of action: he would have gone mad had not someone like Richmond been there to distract his mind from its worry.

Richmond could scarce forbear to smile as he watched Steve's anxious eyes. He could understand how awful this ordeal must be—waiting, waiting in such utter helplessness.

Steve lit a cigarette with unsteady fingers.

"A chap feels—" he paused. "It's impossible to put into words just how a chap does feel, but it's pretty rotten. I'm jolly glad of your company."

"I see; I'm a kind of moral support, eh, old chap? Well, I'm glad to be of any service even if it's not a practical one. But you needn't worry, old man: Tess is in good hands. There's not a better doctor in the country than Davis; and I can assure you the nurse you have won't let you down. Still, I can quite understand how nervous and scared you must feel. You're fortunate in the weather: it will be splendid for Tess when she's convalescent. I've never seen the country look better: the Spring's wonderful up here. One appreciates this country after seeing the country away out in the interior. I've just come back from three months' holiday away in Central Australia. It was a wonderful holiday; but it's a tremendous relief to see again the green hills and sparkling rivers after hundreds of miles of dreary wastes."

"Yes," Steve nodded absently, his ears strained to catch any sound from the room where the doctor and nurse were busy. "I heard you were away."

Richmond was wise enough to know it was best to keep on talking: it helped to relieve the tension of the other's mind.

"Yes, I decided to make a real trip of it this time, so I went out to an old college pal who is in charge of one of our Inland Mission Stations. I saw more country in one month than I'd seen in thirty years before. I'd never been outside New South Wales. Some of the country is enough to frighten anyone—terrible, but there are some wonderful pieces of country there too. Water's the problem. A lot of the country they call desert will be all settled and improved some day; but at present it's a tremendous problem. The people out there are frightfully isolated. You fancy being out there at a time like this, Mr. Drummond, with no doctor for five or six hundred miles, and maybe not any white folk at all within a hundred."

The prospect struck sudden chill to Steve's heart: he was roused from his brown study.

"Good God, man! It would be ghastly. How can they face it?"

"You may well ask it. They are wonderful folk. It's nature in the rough out there; and nature can be rough too; one scarcely realises how rough till one sees what they have to contend with out there. It takes a mighty big heart and a deuce of a lot of optimism to settle there. Still, they are the type of those who have made Australia. It's a magnificent work—laying the foundation of civilisation and progress in a vast land like that. But talk of hardships! It was an eye-opener to me. I used to think the outback parts of New South Wales were pretty rough and isolated; but, good Heavens! They're suburbs of Sydney compared with out there."

Steve moved uneasily, he had lost the thread of the story again. Any other time, Richmond's talk would have interested him deeply, but now... he wanted Tess, wanted to feel her soft hand... to press his face against

hers. Surely hours had passed since the doctor had disappeared with the nurse into that room. What was Richmond saying? Oh yes, the isolation.

"This seemed far enough out for me while I was waiting for the doctor to-day."

"I guess it did. It's in a time like this they feel it. I was deeply interested in our mission work out there. My pal does a good deal of work for the sick. It's a glorious work: quite unsettled me... made me feel dissatisfied with a cushy job like mine here. I suppose it's a case of every man to his work: I doubt if I could fill a job like Bassington's."

He paused a moment, and Steve looked again toward the door in the hall.

"It must be getting late." His voice was not quite steady. "We seem to have been sitting here for hours."

Richmond shook his head.

"Not so long: it won't be sundown for a couple of hours yet."

Sundown! Suppose it should be sundown for Tess! And he had to sit here doing nothing.

Richmond's calm voice went on; and, in spite of the fear that had gripped him, Steve felt the calming influence.

"Yes, it wasn't till I'd seen the country out there that I understood how tremendous are the problems of our country. The work out there is a grand work—a man's work."

He paused to light his pipe; and Steve, looking up, was suddenly arrested by the glow in his eyes. Radiant—that's what it was. Surely no ordinary memory could impart a light like that to a man's eyes!

"By the way," Richmond continued. "Whom do you think I came across out there?—Barrie Henderson."

"Barrie Henderson!" Steve stared in amazement. "Whatever is he doing out there?"

"The finest job I ever knew a man do. Did you know he was a doctor? He's doing medical work among the isolated settlers and prospectors: works from a centre where he has built and equipped his own hospital."

Steve's abstraction was gone; his interest was thoroughly aroused.

"Barrie Henderson—out there doing doctor's work! I—I can't believe it. It's too wonderful to be true; it's splendid."

Richmond was surprised at Steve's interest.

"Yes, life's queer, isn't it. I don't think I ever realised how queer it is till I ran against Henderson out there."

Memories of that last interview flashed across Steve's mind. Strange that at this critical time, Henderson should suddenly have been brought into his life again. 'This great land needs sturdy sons and daughters, such as she would give it. . . . She knows you would make a true husband.' He found himself repeating the words, and they breathed help just now.

"I believe I knew Henderson better than anyone else in the district did," Richmond continued. "I often dropped in and stayed the night with him. But even our friendship wasn't quite sufficient to lift the veil that screened his soul from all eyes; yet I always believed in Henderson: never credited the stories that floated about. Somehow, I always felt that life had robbed him of some great thing and given him a heap of ashes in return. Whether he, himself, had lit the fires, I couldn't say, but even if he had, one couldn't help feeling it was a bitter, blighting tragedy. At times, one caught glimpses of a soul writhing in agony. But I always felt there was something great about him. Well, thank God, he has

not allowed the past to ruin his whole life. The darkness has passed away, and the barren wastes of his life have been filled with beauty. Here, I knew him as a man scarred and broken by some blighting force beneath which he could do nothing but writhe; out there, I found a man triumphing over life, regenerated, giving himself unsparingly, heroically, revelling in the giving. To me, it was a revelation of the Divine. I'll never forget that night I met him. Old Bass and I were out at one of the outposts of his district, when we heard of trouble at a lonely home sixty miles from where we were. We found it a desperate case. Bassington could do nothing worth while, and we just had to wait for the doctor. They'd sent for him—fifty miles to the nearest telephone, and then a couple of hundred miles to the doctor. He had to come by aeroplane. I didn't expect the doctor would be able to do much when he did come. How we watched! Talk about looking to the heavens for help! . . . That's what we did. When the 'plane came, and I saw Barrie Henderson crawl out, I nearly fainted. Then when I found he was the doctor they were expecting, I wondered whether I was in my right senses. My! But it was a wonderful piece of work he did that day. He has his own 'plane, and flies from place to place with it, working from the hospital as a base. It's all fitted up with the best staff and equipment. Most of his money has gone into that hospital. Oh, man, I wish I could unfold to you like a picture on a screen what I saw, so that you might understand what a mighty work he is doing. Before he established that hospital, many of those brave women died simply for want of skilled treatment. Hundreds of miles from a doctor, and often the only mode of travel, the camel, . . . it was terrific. While I was there I heard of one woman who travelled four hun-

dred miles by camel to the hospital, then back the same way after her baby was born. Fortunately, she got over it all right, but many are not so fortunate. Even apart from the danger, just think of it—alone in that fearful wilderness, not another home for a hundred miles in some cases. Henderson visits these isolated homes occasionally, and pays regular visits to certain places within possible reach of all. They almost worship him as a god out there.”

He pulled a piece of newspaper from his pocket.

“This is the kind of thing he’s doing. I cut this from the paper last week. It’s a long article dealing with his work, and especially with one trip he made in his little plane, four hundred miles through the worst storm they’ve had out there for years. They all tried to dissuade him; but he would go: arrived in time to save a woman’s life and her baby’s. It was terrible risk, but he won through. It must be a wonderful sensation battling through clouds in the fury of a storm, feeling that one is conquering forces which are trying to destroy one. It takes a strong nerve to battle with such terrific antagonists alone—one tiny speck in the midst of the vast heavens. I tell you, my heart tingled with admiration and joy when I read the story. He always seemed to me a man to play his part alone. Once, he was alone through mystery and darkness around him; but now he has risen above the cloud and found the light. Even the ashes of life have become fertile. Let me have the paper back when you’ve read it, I want to show it to Mrs. Brandon.”

Silence reigned in the room while Steve read. It was broken by the opening of the door and the doctor’s jovial voice.

“Well, Drummond, the awful suspense is over: you’re the father of a fine little son.”

Steve sprang up excitedly.

“And my wife—?”

“Doing splendidly.” The doctor grinned at Richmond.

“I’ll wager he’s been wondering if I were quite competent to handle the job. These young husbands are all alike. Ah well, I suppose, from now on, he’ll think old Davis is a marvel; and, after all, I’m not sure that the nurse couldn’t have done just as well without me. Anyway, you’re off your pedestal now, Drummond; you’ll play second fiddle in future. You may go in and see the family now. Tell the nurse both His Reverence and the doctor will be glad of something hot before they go back. A man needs something to fortify his nerves on these roads in that old bus. God only knows if I’ll live to see another patient: I suppose the sacred calling of the driver is something of a protection; and then I’ve heard it said the Old Gentleman takes care of his own, so I expect we’re doubly safeguarded.”

\* \* \* \*

Steve lifted the tiny bit of humanity tenderly in his strong arms.

“Shall we call him Barrie?”

Tess, her eyes shining with the wonder of her new motherhood, looked up a little astonished.

“Barrie?”

“Yes, and may he grow up to be as good and great a man. Listen, Tess, while I tell you.” Bending tenderly near her, he poured out the story Henderson had told him, a glad light breaking over Tess’s face as he proceeded.

“I promised never to tell you; but I simply couldn’t help it. I couldn’t bear the thought of him being wronged in your mind. It lay like lead on my heart.”

"I'm glad you've told me," Tess murmured, laying her hand on his bent head. "I'm glad my memory of him will be the memory of a noble man. Perhaps it hurt deeply to feel that one who meant so much in one's life was unworthy." Her voice faltered a little.

"Doesn't it seem sad that such a blight should shadow so noble a life?"

Steve smiled as he pulled out the paper from his pocket.

"Mr. Richmond has just shown me this: he met Barrie Henderson up in Central Australia. Listen—I'll read it to you."

As he came to the end of the great story, tears of admiration were in her eyes.

"Australia should thank God for such a man," Steve concluded. "In spite of all the tragic handicap life laid on him, he has risen on the stepping stone of his own suffering to the Mount of Transfiguration. No wonder you loved such a man, Tess."

She slipped her arm about his neck.

"I love you, Steve; you won't be jealous?" Her eyes rested adoringly on the tiny Barrie. "Even though I did love him, I felt that somehow he was apart; and he is apart. It seems almost as though it had to be so. Right through history, the great lives that have moulded and led have been given to the world from hearts that are broken and souls tempered in the furnace of pain and sacrifice."

She pressed him affectionately.

"I am content: I have no regrets. I'm glad we met and loved...and parted. He was wise and strong. We will remember him....." she looked at the tiny face reverently—"in our own Barrie."

THE END.

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—KENNETH SLESSOR.

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by J. J. HARDIE

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"CATTLE CAMP" is a Bush story with brisk vigorous action. The setting is mainly on and about Corella, a Queensland cattle station and the scene is handled as only one who knows the Great North could handle it. There is a thrilling beginning. Margaret Kennedy, going on a visit from southern New South Wales to Corella, is left alone on the box-seat of a coach when the horses bolt. She is rescued by Ken Craig, a woman-shy bushman, some of whose unattractive reputation has been given to her by the coach driver. The story unfolds on Corella, where we meet Scotty of the ginger hair, Alan Gordon, the likeable old Head Stockman, "Dusty" Rhodes, and the mysterious old Larry Nolan, the horse miser, whose destinies mingle for a while with those of Ken Craig and Margaret against a moving background of horses and cattle on the open downs and desert country of the Never Never.

An unexpected twist comes into the story when the War takes the principal character to France and Scotland, and the ensuing complications are skilfully handled.

"CATTLE CAMP" is a sincere, convincing novel which will bring the Bush home even to many who think they know it. The author, J. J. Hardie, has a first-hand knowledge of the scenes of his story and handles them as they have been rarely handled in Australian fiction, and he tells a gripping story into the bargain. "The BULLETIN" recommends "CATTLE CAMP" for its vigor, its fine pictures of cattle and horse camps, and of furthest out station life.

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Here is an Australian novel with an entirely new setting, far from the drought-stricken wastes and arid plains that fallaciously represent Australia in the minds of some readers. The central figure is "Lanky" Walker, the casual, cheerful owner of a picturesque past, who forsakes his wandering life to settle on a banana plantation amid the rich scenic beauty of the Northern Rivers. There the story unfolds in a land of lakes and fertile hills flourishing their tropic vegetation to the blue and silver margin of the Pacific, and through the epic struggle with Nature—typified by the lantana, her swift-growing emissary that is to-day a seed, then an inconspicuous bush, then a high, impenetrable barrier of saw-edged, interlacing arms, hungrily reclaiming the clearings and inroads of man—emerges the indomitable cheerfulness of Walker.

Out of the host of interesting characters that live again in the book, rise two women—a blonde and a brunette. One begins by hating Walker until she finds herself a guest in his bungalow, undergoing a change of heart in the most romantic circumstances. The glamour of the tropics lives in the book—the steep, jungle-clad hills teeming with unseen life and heavy with hidden scents—and there is a ring of authenticity in the colourful writing that makes its characters vibrantly alive; it is packed with interest and action from the first page, and the plot will keep the reader guessing to the last line.

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## THE GIRAFFE'S UNCLE

by LES. ROBINSON.

Price 5s.

In the rich paddocks of Australian humour, Les Robinson will always have a corner of his own—not a big corner, it is true, nor a particularly ostentatious one. It will be under a tree, and there will be grass to drowse on and sky to stare at, and the air will be lazy with birds whistling. And though other fields may show deeper and more swaggering crops, that of Les Robinson will endure, for a few readers, when the rest have been trodden naked by the centuries.

The comic spirit of Australia, so closely married to the spirit of pure fantasy, has been established by a group of writers whose genius frequently transcends the conventional landscape of the circus. In this respect, the superb madness of their fantasy merges into the freedom of a poem. From the enchanted adventures of James Edmond, the fantastic tradition has been developed by "Kodak," Hugh McCrae, Norman Lindsay and a few others, till it has reached to-day an area that is peculiarly Australian, and fully as ingenious as the humour of England, which is at present engaged in feeding on itself, or the humour of America, which is preoccupied with the sharpening of its claws. Indeed, contemporary Australian writers such as Frank Middlemiss, R. J. H. Moses and L. W. Lower display a vitality of satire and invention against which the standardised rabbit-out-of-hat technique of such a writer as P. G. Wodehouse seems noticeably thin.

From this influence in Australian humor, Les Robinson has always stood apart. It is true that he shares, and in instances excels, the fantastic imagination of his contemporaries; his "nonsense," in fact, almost approaches the grand style. But whilst they go down the main stream, he is content to float exquisitely by himself in a rock-pool that may be tiny in dimensions, but is crystal in its depths.

Les Robinson as a human being, subject to a human fondness for eating at least twice a day and sleeping on a dry  
(Continued next page.)

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## THE GIRAFFE'S UNCLE (Cont.)

bed, represents a problem of letters that is confined to countries that, like Australia, are emerging from the provincial stages of their growth. In reality, he is an exiled stylist. But in the bread-and-butter scuffle of current journalism, there is little demand for style or a fixed point of view. Writers like Robinson are forced, if they would survive by writing, to daub their faces with alien chalk and join the chain-gang of the clowns. Those who are cursed with any rigidity of mind or form, and who have no other resources, find it hard to live at all. The public that would exist in older countries for Robinson's true work is not here; not, at least, in numbers sufficient to make the writing of it a means of existence.

One of the fables in this book is called "The Giraffe's Uncle." I picture Robinson himself as the Giraffe, constantly prating of another world to a menagerie which has lost interest in everything but the dinner bell. His precise and fastidious manner, his dreamy charm, the Gallic exactitude of his language, all are lost, are exiled. Such a piece as "Ferdinand and Jolinquitus" will survive as a fragment from a field of Australian letters that will find more readers in 1993 than in 1933. For other evidence of Robinson's restricted genius, his talent in little and the clear light of his individuality, any page in this book may be consulted. He typifies the intellectual trapped in a factory, mocking his own impotence for consolation. He has an open hatred of work—i.e., the cramping labour thrust on the unfitted by economic laws. As for any other sort of work, the pumiced care with which each line is written speaks of a labour that is none the less arduous because it has not been performed in a stone-quarry.

Les Robinson's essays and fables, collected here, represent his best work of the last decade. They could have been written by nobody else. And, finally, they are all quite useless.

—KENNETH SLESSOR.

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"For a long time we've been advocating putting red stripes on the each end of sheep intended for making blankets."

"The tadpole is an apprentice frog. Tadpoles born in May are Maypoles."

"Whether A plus 2 equalled Y minus 1 left us still mending our catapult. Our attitude towards A and Y was 'Let 'em.'"

"The sardine lives in a tin slum."

"The best way to tell gold is to pass the nugget around a crowded bar and ask them if it's gold. If it comes back, it's not gold."

"In catching the black snake, grasp it firmly behind the back of the ears and ahead of the squirm. Should it bite, on no account bite it back, as snakes are poisonous."

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Till, huff down in the closing mist,  
I lost them in the rain.  
So now and then I wonder  
If any Grecian boy  
Climbed to the highest hill to watch  
The ships put out for Troy;  
And on his thumbnail biting,  
While they went out to war,  
Fain would have gone a-fighting  
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People sneak,  
(What's the use?)  
All that Hatty can produce.

Days and days,  
Hatty lays  
Eggs that stupify the gaze—  
Robbers take the lot and then,  
Hatty lays an egg again.

450

