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EQUALITY

ROAD

BY VERA BAKER.

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# EQUALITY ROAD

BY  
VERA BAKER



—Percy Lindsay—

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# EQUALITY ROAD

BY

VERA BAKER

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Valentine was flung violently from her seat on to the rough track.  
*Equality Road.* (See page 17.)

## CHAPTER I.

AT the loud barking of the dogs, Guy Amery lifted his face from the towel in which he had buried it and turned to see a jinker, with the dogs at the horse's heels, entering the wide gate.

"Lie down, there!" he shouted; and at the well-known, deep tones the collies crouched into silence.

The name which the owner of that peremptory voice held seemed not at all fitting. As the gig passed, the girl seated therein would have raised her eyebrows had anyone at that moment told her the name of the man who stood there, towel in hand. She knew of him only as "the man," the occupant of the hut in the east paddock; and this was the first time she had set eyes on him. She now looked frankly at him as she drove past.

His face was still red from the vigorous rubbing it had just received, and his hair was wet and ruffled. A man of medium height, but strong in build. The blue shirt was open at the throat, exposing his broad chest, and the rolled-up sleeves displayed brown, muscular arms. He looked what he was, a worker—one used to the open skies and wide stretches; to the plough and the handling of horses. He worked for the owner of the plain, yet comfortable-looking house in the home paddock. The girl who was now driving in the jinker was the sister of his employer's wife, and he knew that she had come to Myalla but three days before.

For just one instant the man met the girl's glance. It was such a glance that she might have given to anybody or anything that for the moment claimed her

interest. But, suddenly, she smiled and spoke. It was only the day's greeting she gave; but it resulted in a quick uplift of Amery's head, and the light of surprise that showed in his eyes.

"Good afternoon," he answered, and watched the jinker along the track till it disappeared round the side of the homestead; then he entered the hut, and turned to the preparation of his tea, still wondering, and once a smile, touched with sarcasm, crossed his features.

His employer was a "decent enough chap"; but his wife totally ignored the worker. This girl was her sister. She had never seen him before, and yet she had broken caste and had spoken to him—to him, "the man," the worker.

He threw on the fire some pinewood, which caused a spluttering and crackling and filled the air with a delightful aroma. Then, taking a piece of bacon from a large cupboard which all but covered one wall of the hut, Amery cut from it some rashers, which he placed in a pan on the hearth. His method of setting the table was simple. A tin plate, cup and saucer, knife, fork, a loaf of bread, some butter and a tin of jam do not lend themselves to artistic arrangement; so it mattered little how they found place on the small, rough table. The kettle commenced to boil, so tea was made, and soon "the man" was sitting at his solitary meal.

An hour later found him seated on the step of the hut, smoking, with one knee—about which his hands were clasped—crossed over the other. On every hand stretched flat, bare lands. Soon it would all be covered with green crops, though at present it looked dull and exceedingly uninteresting in its monotony.

It was not yet dark, and the stars were just beginning to show—pale, shadowy glimmers. But there was one thing which would have bound a newcomer to the broad lands here. One thing above all—the silence. It cast its spell about everything, that great

silence; and the man seated within the hut looked like a brooding figure in the dusk, so still did he remain, till, with an abrupt movement he rose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and stretched his arms above his head. He entered the hut, to emerge again a minute later, carrying a gun. Closing the door, he pushed his hat a little further back from his forehead and, with the gun in his right hand, strode across the paddocks towards the western plains.

The moon was rising, a great ball of light against the horizon, and moon-shadows took the place of twilight-shadows.

Amery walked slowly, now and again pausing to look about him. Life, as he saw it, held nothing for him beyond his own existence. He looked no higher, since he aspired not to anything greater, being content with life as it came to him. His father had been a farm-hand before him, his mother a working-girl. He had been an only child, born to work—and that for others. He had learned his lesson early and well: of deference towards his employers; of freedom of speech and braggadocio towards his equals. He laughed and whistled when he felt like laughing and whistling; and frowned and swore when he felt inclined that way.

A small object bounded along some yards in front of him, and with a quick movement he raised his gun to his shoulder and fired. The object leaped into the air, turned once, and fell, to lie motionless.

"Unlucky devil, you," said the man with the gun, as he picked it up a minute later. "See what it is to be born a bloomin' brother rabbit. Hope I find a few more of your relatives kickin' round."

He was not long in finding a few more of the "unlucky devil's relatives," and tumbling them over, for he was quick of sight and anything but a poor marksman, especially when the skins of his victims had a marketable value to him.

The moon was now high in the heavens, and save

when the rifle cracked, the silence was intense. The hunter suddenly stopped short, his head upheld, in an attitude of listening. A pair of rabbits fell from his shoulder to the ground; but he took no heed of them. His eyes were watching the road that ran about a hundred yards to his left, and when a dark object, purring and throbbing, glided swiftly along, he watched it down the road till it turned into the wide gate leading to his employer's home.

"That's the third time running," he told himself; "an' she's been here three days. Your game, Charley Swanson, is easily seen. Looks as if you're holdin' up your hat to a certain young lady. Well, you're worth some thousands, and a bonza car. It's what they all look for; so I suppose you'll win."

He stooped and, picking up the fallen rabbits, again slung them across his shoulder, and continued his way. And when Valentine Hood came out on to the verandah of her sister's home a while later to greet the man who motored up, she looked across the clear, moon-lit plains, and wondered at the shadowy object that showed in the distance, knowing not that "the man" was out a-hunting.

Charles Swanson, with hand outstretched, advanced to where the girl stood on the verandah. "Beautiful evening, Miss Hood."

She touched his fingers lightly with her own. "Good evening, Mr. Swanson. Yes, it is a perfect evening——" She broke off as a shot sounded in the distance. "Somebody has been out in the paddocks since dark," she said; "and sport seems to be pretty brisk."

He pointed towards the distant figure. "Amery is busy among the rabbits."

She looked at him, a puzzled expression on her face. "Amery?" she said, questioning.

"A flash name, eh? Guy Amery—the chap at the hut, who works for Stringer, you know. Haven't you heard his name yet?"

"He's 'the man'?" she answered slowly. "Where on earth did he get his name—Guy Amery? His mother must have read novelettes, surely. Guy! He looks like a pugilist. Are you coming in, Mr. Swanson?"

"Well, look here, Miss Hood. It's a perfect evening, you know, and my machine's in great order. Now, how about a spin?"

She looked back at him over her shoulder. "Well, and how about it, Mr. Swanson?"

"You will come?" And he took a step nearer to her.

"I? No, thanks. I was out for a spin—in a jinker—this afternoon, and prefer to remain indoors this evening. This way, Mr. Swanson. My sister and brother will be pleased to see you."

In the room into which she led the way, a young woman and man were seated, both of whom now rose, the woman advancing.

"Good evening, Mr. Swanson," she said. "Valentine, take Mr. Swanson's coat and hat and hang them in the hall."

"Mr. Swanson knows where the pegs are," answered her sister, smiling slightly. Her brother-in-law laughed outright.

"Good for you, Val! Let Charley look after himself, and hang up his own dust-coat and hat, and he'll soon learn your ideas as regards a man waiting on himself."

"Are they so strong?" asked the newcomer, and stepped into the passage.

When he returned, Valentine was sitting sewing beside her sister's husband. Charles Swanson was not a bad-looking young man; but his face lacked strength, and he carried himself with an air of one perfectly satisfied with himself, speaking in thin, mincing tones. His character can be fully described in two words. He was—a snob.



The girl's sister, Mabel Stringer, was an elegantly-dressed, rather dainty creature, with ideas the very opposite to those entertained by her candid sister. Her husband was just an ordinary-looking man, with blunt features and an agreeable manner, so agreeable that, as Swanson entered the room he rose, saying: "Take a seat, Charley."

Charley promptly seated himself by the side of the neatly-dressed, frank-faced girl, who did not as much as raise her head from her work.

"Valentine!" came in her sister's coldly-reproving voice.

The girl raised a pair of clear blue eyes, and turned to her sister. "Yes?"

"Surely you have plenty of time for that sewing. Have you no manners?"

"I didn't think," replied the girl. "I'm sorry, Mr. Swanson, and hope I haven't committed an unpardonable offence." And she proceeded to fold her work.

"Not at all, Miss Hood; not at all. Pray don't stop on my account," he replied, not too sure as to whether she was making fun of him or not.

"It really makes no difference, you know," she answered him. "As my sister said, I've plenty of time in which to do my sewing."

She rose as she spoke and, moving to a sideboard, placed her work on one of the stands. Swanson's eyes followed her movements, while he spoke to Stringer.

"Your man is either wasting bullets, or giving the rabbits a bad time of it. I noticed him in the paddock, and he's making enough noise with the gun."

Stringer, standing with his back to the fire, and his arms folded, lifted his head and surveyed the ceiling.

"Well," he said, "I don't think he's the sort to waste cartridges, and when his gun does talk, it's pretty effective talk, and doesn't spare the rabbit. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he's been getting ideas lately, that chap. He's pretty keen on the pennies.

Some of the rabbiters are making big money these days."

Mrs. Stringer turned her head. "Ideas? In what way?"

"Towards cockying," replied her husband.

"But the man's not educated," she returned.

"How do you know he's not? You've never spoken to him," teasingly replied Stringer.

"He can't be," was her emphatic answer. "He's only a worker."

"And does a man require education to start on the land?" asked Valentine from where she stood.

Swanson answered her: "Oh, well, you know, Miss Hood, a man must have something——"

"In what way?"

"In the way of knowledge."

"About the land?"

"Of course, about the land. And not only that, you know; he must have brains. Now, look at my position——"

"I should think this man would know something about the land, seeing that he's always working on it," she again interrupted unceremoniously. "And as for brains—why shouldn't he have his share? Why shouldn't he make as good a farmer as any man?"

"What notions you do get, Valentine!" impatiently put in her sister, as she rose and moved to the piano.

Valentine did not answer, but, slowly crossing the room, resumed her place on the sofa. Swanson smiled amiably at her, and moved a little closer.

"Did you always hold such—notions, as your sister calls them?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so. I don't see why a man, even if he does work for others, shouldn't be given credit—or, perhaps, I should put it this way—shouldn't be credited with brains."

"If the man we were speaking of should happen to possess any, he wouldn't be where he is," again answered her sister.

"You won't permit him to rise," said Valentine, quickly. "When Ted said he thought that the man was getting ideas, you jumped on him immediately. But I don't want to argue. For goodness' sake change the subject!"

"That's to admit you're beaten, you know, Miss Valentine, to toss the argument like that," said Swanson, softly.

She faced him. "Why should it? I hate arguments"; and she turned from him again. "Sing something quiet and peaceful, Mabel, there's a dear." And she laughed as she spoke.

While sweet melody filled the prosperous grazier and wheat-farmer's home, "the man," with the victims of his rifle hanging limply from his shoulders, was returning to his hut. And as he made his way in the beautiful moonlight, with the silence of the Mallee deep about him, he whistled softly to himself, walking with a wide, swinging step, his head upheld.

He was thinking of the girl who had smiled at him that afternoon, and his mind seemed to be lifted above its usual sphere. As Ted Stringer had said, he was "getting ideas." Perhaps the silence and moonlight encouraged imagination; but such was the result of a gracious smile and a cheerful word from one considered so much his superior, that he dared to dream.

## CHAPTER II.

NEXT day, Valentine was going out for her usual afternoon drive, in spite of her sister's efforts to dissuade her. "You may consider yourself a good hand with horses, Val; but I wouldn't drive behind that brute for a fortune. The one you had yesterday was bad enough; but this is a wild animal. I wish you weren't taking him."

"Wild?" laughed Valentine. "Just look at him. He's quiet enough for anything."

"He may look quiet enough now; but you can't go by that. Why didn't you bring up the mare?"

"She was too far away—out in one of the back paddocks. I couldn't be bothered chasing her up. Besides, this one has been stabled over-night."

"Still, I do wish you were not taking him," said Mrs. Stringer.

The girl gathered the reins into her hand. "Don't you bother yourself, Mabel," she said, as she drove off; but she had gone only a few yards when she turned in the seat. "If you're going out for tea you'll not be home when I return, then?" she called.

"No, I hardly think so," was the answer. "You can just get your own tea."

Valentine waved her hand, and drove off.

As she neared the gate, she saw the figure of Amery, who had apparently come in for his midday meal, putting up food for his horses. His back was towards her, though he must have known she had driven up. Even if he had not seen, he must at least have heard the jinker and horse along the track.

"Mr. Amery!"

He swung round at her call, still holding the chaff-bags.

"Will you open the gate for me, please?" she asked. "I'm afraid my horse will not stand quietly."

He straightened himself, and came forward, his eyes looking not at her, but down, and opened the gate. But the girl did not pass through immediately. Though she made a move to do so, she checked it, and turned again to the man, saying:

"You were out shooting last night?"

This time he raised his head and watched her closely. "Yes, miss."

"Always rabbits?" she asked.

"Rabbits an' hares. There's nothin' else, except a fox now and again."

"I heard your rifle several times. You must have found plenty of sport," she said.

"Not too bad, miss. About a dozen rabbits an' a couple of hares. But that ain't very much." He was now speaking with more ease. His first words had been somewhat stilted.

The girl looked straight ahead across the plains; then back again at the man standing there, and suddenly came to the conclusion that he was rather good-looking, and showed strength.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Four years gone, at Myalla. But I've always been used to the plains."

"Always at this work?"

"Yes, miss. Nothing else."

"You must get tired of it—at least, I should think so. Don't you find it lonely? This place is anything but lively."

He looked down, kicking one foot aimlessly against the ground. "Well, I don't know; one gets used to it when it's the only life one has ever known. I go into the township every Saturday, an' meet some of the blokes there. We often have a bit of a hop, or something like that."

"How do you go there?"

"Ride. There ain't too many motor cars knockin' round," he said, cheerfully. "You want to be careful with that horse, miss. He's a lively beggar. Too flash for a young lady's handlin'."

She shook the reins, pointedly ignoring his last words. "Will you close the gate again when I go out, Mr. Amery, please?"

"Yes, miss." And he raised his hat as he spoke.

"Mr. Amery!" he said to himself, as she drove off. "Don't know you, old chap. Not too much of the 'Mr.' She's a jolly fine girl, and not a high and mighty piece like her sister. Now, I wonder how she talks with Charley Swanson? She's too good for his sort, by a long stretch."

Valentine Hood was making full use of the beautiful afternoon. She was fond of driving, and feared no horse. As her brother-in-law once said: "She'll ride or drive any outlaw you bring up, and devil take the risk."

The girl was an orphan, both parents having been dead for some years. Before her coming to Myalla she had worked as a clerk in one of the city establishments, hating the work intensely, but unable to let it go till her sister—and only living relative—had sent for her.

"... It's a quiet place; but I think you'll like it," her sister had written; "I want company and help, and can't get a decent girl. If you will come up I'll make it worth your while. There is plenty of driving and riding to be had here, and I know how you hate the office. Besides, the change to this part will do you good, and the office is really no place for you. I don't like to think of a sister of mine working for her living. . . ."

And Valentine had accepted her sister's offer, said good-bye to the detested office, and taken an early train for Myalla. But she was not happy; nor yet was she exactly unhappy. Valentine had never, since

she was a child, known many joys, and, in time, her chief attitude towards life itself had developed into indifference, and her actions were at times inclined to verge on recklessness. Having been much alone, she had been inclined to study human nature; but she had never, as yet, reached its depths. There were times when she had gone out of her way to pass along some of the poorer city streets. She had learnt that money holds more weight than anything else in the world, and can buy social position if it cannot buy happiness.

The girl wanted happiness. She wanted companionship. True, she had her friends; but always their views were opposed to her own. Even her greatest friend, Grace McDermott, was sometimes puzzled by what she called "Val's strange views"; and yet she knew Valentine better than anybody.

"Val," she had once said, "do you know, you seem to me to be looking for something."

"I am," her friend had replied. "I'm looking for a great truth."

"What a strange girl you are. What is the 'great truth'? The equality and brotherhood of man?" And Grace laughed as she said it.

Yet the two girls had been the best of companions, and had ever found pleasure in helping each other and sharing confidences. When Valentine had left the city they had agreed to hold their friendship fast by writing regularly.

Valentine was thinking of Grace now, wondering if it could be true that absence lessened, rather than held fast, the bond of friendship. She did not believe that "absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Somehow," she told herself, "I think that it lessens." Nevertheless, she vowed that, if the estrangement should come, the fault would not lie with her.

She flicked the whip and the horse, roused from

his lazy trot, bounded forward, but her hand soon restrained him.

It was a warm, drowsy day. A day to set the mind of one dreaming. Now and again the girl passed between thick belts of scrub, beyond which stretched, mile upon mile, rich lands, which would soon be covered with tall, yellow, waving corn, through which the harvester would whirr its way.

It was fairly late before the jinker was travelling smartly along the homeward track, and the sun was sinking ere Valentine Hood came in sight of the home-paddocks.

Away in the distance she could see a dark, slowly-moving object, and she knew that "the man" was making a last round of the paddock before driving the team of eight horses to the stables for the night. Before long, the girl was near enough to hear his voice as he turned the plough.

Streaks of crimson and gold drew vivid pictures across the western sky; and the dark, freshly-ploughed soil, with the team, guided by the strong hand of the plainsman, slowly making its way, appealed strongly to the girl's fancy. In Amery, the worker, she saw a picture of strength and mastership, even as the deep, curt commands he directed to the horses held her.

Suddenly realising her thoughts, she laughed at her fancies, born of the hour, and lifted the whip. As it touched the horse, the animal leapt forward; but this time her hand could not hold him, and the next instant he was tearing along the road, while the girl was flung violently from her seat on to the rough track.

For one second she felt the shock, and seemed to feel herself sinking into darkness; but the mist cleared, and she rose slowly to her feet. Though badly shaken and bruised, she was practically unhurt, and, after standing a moment, motionless, seeing as if in a haze the bolting horse and jinker, she shook off the feeling of dizziness that possessed her, and made her way slowly along the track.

She was wondering if the horse would pull up when it reached the gate, and was also wondering how long it would take her to walk that distance.

"Thank goodness there's not much damage done," she told herself, "else I'd have never heard the end of it."

She did not hear a leap over the three-rail fence or the step that followed, and started when a hand touched her shoulder.

Amery was breathing quickly, for it was no easy work running across ploughed paddocks. "I didn't expect to see you get up," he said. "I was watching you driving along and saw what happened."

"It was a good bump, wasn't it?" And she made a grimace as she spoke. "Do you think that horse will stop at the gate, Mr. Amery?"

"It's bound to stop somewheres, for it can't go forever. I say! Are you sure you ain't badly hurt?" He still held her arm in a firm grip, guiding her steps.

"If I were," she answered, "I wouldn't be smiling. Is your team all right?"

"It will stand. I'll go back to it when I've helped you to the gate, and looked after that bolting devil."

She pointed ahead. "Look! It's slowing down."

"You're right, miss. It's pulling up at the gate. Well, it'll save me a chase, anyhow. I'm glad you ain't hurt none."

"Mr. Amery."

"Yes, miss?"

"Keep this to yourself, please. Nobody knows of this accident but you and I; and I don't want any-one to know, either."

"I'll keep quiet, but your sister 'll find out, won't she?"

"How will she? I do not intend saying anything to her, and if you keep quiet—as you say you will—how can she find out?"

He looked at her in surprise. "What'll she think when you git back to the house like this?"

"She's not at home; so she won't see me."

"Oh!"

She looked at the dark face beside her; but the man, after one swift, searching glance, did not look at her again, but stared straight ahead. Valentine Hood dropped her glance to the hand that was holding her arm, as though she had just awakened to the fact that it was there. It was large, strong, and not over-clean.

Amery did not speak again, though he turned his head sharply and tightened his hold on her arm when she stumbled a little.

The horse was standing just beyond the gate, and, freeing the girl's arm, the man cautiously approached it. "Steady there!" he said, and the girl marvelled at the gentleness of the tone. His hand secured the reins, and he turned the horse's head towards the gate.

"Give me the reins while you open the gate," said Valentine.

"You're not scared?" he said.

Her only answer was: "Give me the reins, please."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, as she got up into the jinker.

"Drive up to the house. I can unharness there, and shall just turn the horse out. No, I don't want any help. You had better get back to the team."

"Yes, miss."

He turned without another word, and, as she drove to the house, Valentine Hood once looked back to see the vigorous-looking figure that strode across the paddock on to where the team, now a dark shadow, was halted.

When Mr. and Mrs. Stringer passed Amery's hut at about ten o'clock that same evening it was in darkness. A rifle shot suddenly cut the night air.

"He must be out shooting again," said Stringer. "Don't blame him. I believe that skins are up to

eight shillings a pound. It's a paying game, rabbiting."

His wife did not answer. The price of rabbit-skins interested her no more than did the man who worked for her husband.

Valentine was up and waiting for them, and her greeting as they entered was, "Did you have a good time?"

"Not too bad," answered her sister, as she threw off her cloak. "Ted, bring me a glass of water, there's a dear. How did your drive go this afternoon, Valentine?"

"Fine," was the prompt answer.

"You needn't have waited up for us. You look very tired," said Mabel Stringer.

"And feel it. It must be the weather," was the girl's smiling answer, as she rose to her feet.

"Well, you'd better get to bed straight away. What's that on your sleeve?"

Valentine looked down at the sleeve of her dress and saw there four distinct marks. For one instant a puzzled expression showed on her face, but this suddenly clearing, a light smile took its place. Those marks had come from the fingers of Amery when he had gripped her arm after the accident of the afternoon.

"It's nothing," she answered lightly. "Good-night, Mabel."

"Good-night," abstractedly answered her sister.

She did not observe that Valentine walked a little stiffly as she left the room, passing Stringer as he returned with the glass of water for his wife.

"Off to bed, Val?" he said, cheerfully. "Good-night, and sweet dreams."

### CHAPTER III.

LIGHT and glitter; glamour and show. The continual hoot of a motor-horn. The continual human stream flowing between the lawns and along the garden paths to the wide steps, over which it passed into the fairyland beyond. And a veritable fairyland it was. The whole hall seemed ablaze with light and colour.

Men and women in evening dress were laughing and talking softly. Among the great palms which almost hid the stage from view, one caught a glimpse of a burnished violin and heard the low, pulsing note of the 'cello. Festoons hung from the walls, draped the balcony, and shaded the electric lights.

As with one movement heads turned towards the doorway as a young woman, escorted by a young man, obviously—judging from his looks—her brother, entered.

Like a tropic flower among its paler garden sisters the newcomer stood out. In height she was above the average, and she carried herself perfectly. The head, with its black waves of hair simply, yet smartly, dressed, was carried high. The lips were clean-cut and vivid, the olive skin slightly pink-tinted, and the dark, sleepy-looking eyes touched with disdain, as though she saw much in life—or these makers of life—to be slightly amusing, slightly deserving of contempt.

The men admired this brilliant-looking flower; so did many of the women; but most of the latter—let them go. Petty minds need no words to speak for them, they speak for themselves; and Grace McDermott, open-minded and generous herself, was above petty-mindedness.

"They say that the Reverend Mr. Cameron has been

making himself rather conspicuous by his attentions to her lately."

A young woman had half-risen from her seat in the balcony to obtain a better view of Miss McDermott.

"Is that so?"

The answer, deep with interest, came from a woman who might be anywhere between thirty and forty, but who tried to look eighteen.

"Yes. June lives down her way, you know, and sees a good deal of her. She was telling me that twice Mr. Cameron has driven Grace McDermott home from tennis, and on several occasions his motor has stopped at their place. Things are beginning to look up."

"Well, it will mean a little excitement, anyhow, if the affair goes smoothly. And it will be a lucky thing for her. I've heard that he's got money."

"I've heard that, too. And the McDermotts themselves are not too well-off, you know. That dress she is wearing is last year's, re-modelled. Grace won't be the one to fling a good chance away when it comes along."

"You wouldn't think so; but there was young—what's-his-name?—Callon. Yes, Lee Callon. You remember that she turned her back on him, and he was supposed to be worth a good deal."

"But wasn't that on account of Val Hood? Lee was very keen on her; but I heard that she laughed at him. Then he turned to Grace, but she wouldn't have anything to do with him, either."

"I wonder what's happened to Valentine Hood?" asked the other after a pause.

"Didn't she get to stay with her sister in the country, somewhere?"

"Did she? I often wondered. She was a very peculiar girl, don't you think?"

"Yes, rather. But I liked her well enough in some ways."

"So did I. But the way she cleared off was very

strange. No wonder people asked questions."

"I did hear that——"

"Upon my soul! Do you always take hearsay for granted, and give a repetition? You're worse than a pair of parrots."

The two women started, and turned sharply to see a woman well past her first youth regarding them. To judge by the expression on her face, one would have thought their remarks had been directed straight at her. She did not speak again, but met the indignant glare with which they favoured her by a steady glance, and smiled a little when they moved further away.

"Gossips!" she muttered to herself.

"Who on earth is that creature?" asked the younger woman of her companion, when they had moved to a safe distance.

"Isn't she Carl Breen, the artist?"

"Oh, is that the woman? Well, no wonder everybody who does not know her thinks she's a man. Her name, paintings and manners all point in that direction."

The other sniffed and tilted her nose a little higher into the air. "What can you expect from a creature like that? Her studios are open to all the rag-tag of the city: There's the first dance commencing. I have this with Den. Come along."

Two young women and their partners were seated on the roof-garden of the hall. Grace McDermott was leaning back in her seat, looking now beyond the roofs of the houses below them, and now at the star-flooded heavens, which seemed so near. How beautifully fresh it all was after the heated atmosphere of the ballroom.

"I say, Grace!"

The girl addressed turned her head. "What is it, June?"

"Have you heard from Val Hood lately?" was the question.

"Yes. I had a letter from her two days ago."

"How is she?"

"Well."

"Where is she?" persisted the other.

"With her sister."

"In the north."

"I know that; but where is her sister?"

"How exact you are, Grace," was the sarcastic, yet smiling answer. "Does Val want her whereabouts kept secret?"

"I don't doubt but what Val's indifferent as to whether you know her whereabouts or not," was the reply. "But when I tell you that the place is Myalla, and is exactly fifteen miles from Koonawar, are you any the wiser, June?"

June Robinson gave a short laugh. "Can't say that I am. What terribly outlandish places they must be; but, somehow, I fancy they'd just suit Val."

"Does that mean to imply that Miss—er—Hood is outlandish?" laughingly asked her partner.

"She is," was Miss Robinson's answer.

"She is not," quietly contradicted Grace. "Val's ideas may be different from ours; but she's a grand girl, nevertheless."

"A girl who'd sooner ride a horse wild in the country than drive a motor-car in the city; who'd sooner walk down a poor street among poor people than ride on a tram-car——"

"Your remarks don't hold," interrupted Grace McDermott. "Valentine loves the country and riding, but merely likes the city and motoring. She walks down the poorer streets to see things, sooner than ride on a tram with her eyes shut——"

The second man roused himself and spoke for the first time. "See things?" he asked.

"Yes. See how the poorer classes live."

"I understand. She's something of a philanthropist, then, this friend of yours?"



"I beg your pardon," he said in the same quiet tone. "I am sorry if I made a mistake in thinking that you worked."

*Equality Road.*



"Not altogether, in the way you mean. She didn't have the chance to be."

"She was only a book-keeper," declared Miss Robinson, "so didn't altogether belong to our set, Mr. Blake. But before her parents died, she didn't have to work—"

"Why 'only a book-keeper'?" he interrupted, quietly.

"Oh, well, you know, a girl who has to work for her living like that—"

"Excuse the question, Miss Robinson," he interrupted again, "but don't you work for a living!"

"I!" she exclaimed. "I—work!"

"I beg your pardon," he said in the same, quiet tone. "I'm sorry if I made a mistake in thinking that you worked."

There was a moment's awkward pause; then June Robinson, to hide her annoyance and confusion, resumed: "Anyway, she'd no right to think herself one of us, if she held such views."

"Let Val alone," said Grace, shortly.

But Blake was apparently interested in the subject and wanted to know more. "Were her views—degrading?" he asked; and a faint touch of satire gleamed in his eyes.

"She believed that the working classes are as good as the upper classes, and even went so far as to say once that there were men and women in the—back streets—better than us."

"Better than you?"

"Better than some of us, she said, anyway."

"Such audacity!" smiled Miss McDermott, and the disdain in her eyes deepened.

"So she was a socialist, eh?" mused Blake, a light of amusement on his face.

"No," answered Grace.

"She believed in equality," flashed Miss Robinson.

"Hum. Then where must one draw the line?" asked Blake.

"There is a line surely," put in Miss Robinson's partner.

"Between the working and—what shall we call the other, the class that doesn't work?"

"Well, the one you belong to," suggested June.

"Oh, but I belong to the workers."

Grace looked surprised, but said nothing, while the other girl exclaimed: "You're joking, of course?"

"Not I," he declared. "I'm a farmer. In my time I've milked, ploughed, picked fruits, felled trees, rounded cattle, and all the rest of it."

"For yourself; but there was no need. You merely did it as a—"

"But I assure you there *was* need, Miss Robinson—the need for money. I did all that for others, my employers."

After a pause, Miss Robinson ventured again: "But you have money now, and land."

"Does that signify that I'm not a worker? I certainly have as much as I can do with; but I've paid for it in toil and graft since I was a lad. It didn't come my way for nothing. Perhaps I have really no right to be here to-night. I cannot do your dances, and I'm a working man. But the man at whose request I came makes up for my deficiencies in both cases." He rose as he spoke, and turned to Grace. "The conversation seems to be boring you, Miss McDermott. Shall we go back?"

She placed her hand on his arm, and together they spoke.

"Valentine Hood is my friend," she said, warmly, "and in spite of all that has been said, and all that is thought of her, she's far and away above any girl here to-night."

"You are loyal," answered Blake.

"I hope so," was all Grace said.

"Anyway, I think, somehow, that your friend must be a girl worth knowing. I would like to meet her."

"Then," came the smiling answer, "I'm sorry she is not here to-night, instead of about 200 miles away."

"Old Cobban—he considered that if the Government had only kept up the prices of skins last year there wouldn't be even a rabbit's hair on the place now."

"Anyhow, the price skins is now 'll keep a few busy, includin' the bunny."

"There'll be no need for inspectors, whatever," remarked a third.

A horse galloped past the group, and round to the Hall paddock.

"Who's that?" asked one.

"Amery," was the answer.

"Guy Amery? He's late, isn't he?"

"No. He was up here early enough; but went off awhile back to meet the train."

"I was thinkin' it would be something new for him to be late in here."

Even as the man spoke, Amery, this time on foot, re-appeared round the corner of the Hall.

"How's things going?" he asked.

"Well, the rabbit's been given till next year t'have its say," drawled one.

"Next year!" laughed Amery, lighting a cigarette.

"The rabbit'll see you out, Ab."

"What's the call at the station?" asked another.

"It's not often you're there to welcome the bus."

"Just called to get a parcel that came up by the mail on her," was the casual answer.

He leaned back against the wall, folding his arms, and only the dark outline of his figure and red ash of the cigarette between his lips could be seen. The parcel for which he had ridden to the station was safe in his coat pocket; but the address did not hold his name. It held that of Valentine Hood.

"Select partners for circular waltz!" came from the hall.

The men, throwing away half-finished cigarettes, and leaving arguments for further settlement, entered the hall again, each to claim his particular partner.

"Come along, Guy!" called one, as he made to enter.

But he against the wall did not move. "I'm not on for this," he answered; "an' want to finish my smoke."

The other paused. "What's stung you?" he asked, laughing a little, and knowingly.

"What do you mean?"

"You've had only two dances to-night, an' your tongue's been taking a holiday. My opinion is that you've been stung by an arrow."

"An arrow?"

"Ay, Cupid's. Know the little bloke? Who is she, Amery? I had an idea once that you were for Nell Holt; but this puts the killer on that. Whoever she is, she ain't in that hall, else you wouldn't be hiding out here."

"Dry up!" said Amery, briefly, but good-naturedly enough; and the other, knowing his man, knew also how far to go, and "dried up."

Amery continued to smoke. He lit another cigarette, and did not move from his position against the wall. With the other's words realisation had come to him. "Know the little bloke," he repeated to himself, and smiled in the darkness.

The dancers were gliding round to the time given by the accordion. The music, and the scraping and shuffling of feet were the only sounds to be heard. Without, the silence of the plains hung over all.

A form moved to Amery's side. "Guy," said a soft voice. "What's the matter with you to-night? Why are you keeping away from me?"

He moved impatiently. "I don't feel like dancin'. It's too bloomin' hot in there."

A hand touched his arm, and the form moved closer. "But there's no need to dance, is there? You've said hardly a word to me all night." The voice was slightly petulant.

He did not answer, only moved his arm a little under her touch.

"Guy, I haven't done anything to make—you angry—have I?"

"No, nothing like that. I say, Nell, get inside, will you? I want to be alone. That's why I stayed out here."

"Then there is something——"

"Yes, there is something," he broke in, suddenly. "It's this, Nell—we'll have to cut. It can't go on; so you'd better look out for another bloke."

For awhile there was silence between them; then the girl spoke, slowly, deliberately: "So you're tired of me, are you? All right, I won't weep for you. And whoever she is, well—she'll find you out in the end!"

He made a quick movement with his hand. "Cut that! I've done you no harm."

"Only made a laughing stock of me. Your troubles, though. That doesn't hurt you at all."

"They laughed at you because you chased me up," said the man, brutally. "They don't laugh at me."

"But some day they will. Wait till some girl turns you down, and then you'll see. You—you——"

But without finishing the sentence, she turned from him, her face white with anger, her hands clenched.

The man leaning against the wall slowly raised his hand, and rested it upon the pocket which held the parcel he had, awhile back, received from the mail.

"Know the little bloke?" he said again to himself. "Too true, worse luck; but he's too damned high for me!"

## CHAPTER IV.

VALENTINE HOOD was showing a daintily-worked slip-bodice to her sister. It was a flimsy pink and white affair, and the girl herself was delighted with it.

"Where did you get it from?" asked Mrs. Stringer, taking the dainty article in her hand, and closely surveying it.

"Grace sent it before she left for her holidays. It came up by yesterday's mail."

Mrs. Stringer looked up a little wonderingly. "How did you get this out yesterday? There was no mail for Myalla, and you didn't go to the township."

"Don't you think it's lovely?" asked the younger girl, evading the question.

"Very. It would match my new blouse perfectly. I'll give you my white georgette for it."

Valentine laughed. "No, thanks. I'll keep my own."

"But if it came up by yesterday's mail, how did you get it up to-day? Our mail doesn't come from the township till to-morrow."

"I knew that Amery was going in last night, so I got him to bring it out for me."

A shade of disapprobation crossed Mabel Stringer's face. "I wish you wouldn't, Val. Of course, the man's there to be made use of; but there's no need for you to speak to him, and you might have had the patience to wait till the mail came out here."

"Oh, he didn't mind doing it," lightly answered Valentine.

"Mind!" exclaimed her sister. "I shouldn't think he would mind, considering he's employed here."

"He seems a very decent man," said Valentine,

daringly. "I've spoken to him once or twice, and he seems rather nice."

"Nice! Don't be absurd! Whatever is there about him to appear 'nice'?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," returned the girl, lifting her head and coolly surveying her sister; "the first thing I noticed about him was his voice. His great bass would completely drown Mr. Swanson's falsetto. You should see how the dogs crouch when he speaks to them; and yet I don't believe he would lay a hand on them."

"I won't have you speaking to him. The idea——"

"But you can't stop me," said Valentine. "Besides, you're such a snob."

"I'm not a snob!" was the sharp answer; "but you—you're too much the other way. Surely you know when to distinguish?"

"I do—sometimes. Anyway, why distinguish? It seems to me that money makes the world every time. Just think how little the district would think of Mr. Swanson if he had no money."

"Oh, talk sense—if you possess any!"

"I *am* talking sense. We're all equals——" commenced the girl, warmly; but the other cut her short.

"You're a fool, Valentine! An absolute fool! Don't preach socialism. There's no such thing as equality, and never will be. If you're going to start on that, you'll have to accept the Chinaman and Negro as your brothers."

"They're different."

"Now you're beginning to twist your argument. How are they different?"

"They belong to another race. I'm referring to our own countrymen. Australia has no class distinction. She can't have. You know well enough yourself that some of our 'moneyed' men wouldn't care to be reminded of how their parents came to Australia."

"Is a man to blame for the wrong-doing of his parents?"

"I'm not saying that he is; but I'm just showing how little one can afford to distinguish——"

"Socialist!"

"I'm not a socialist! At least, not the so-called socialist of to-day, and I despise all red-raggers. But Australia can't afford to believe in class distinction."

"I wish I could convince you that she can; but you'll find that out for yourself some day. By the way, Mr. Swanson was here this afternoon while you were away, to see if you'd go to the dance with him on Wednesday. I accepted for you, and said that you'd be very pleased to go with him."

"Then I'm sorry you did; for I'll not be going—with Mr. Swanson."

"Why not, may I ask?"

"You may, my dear. Mr. Swanson worries me. He's so abominably self-opinionated, and does nothing else but talk about himself and his possessions. He's really frightfully ignorant. You see, money doesn't count in the least with me; as long as a man's a man, that's the main thing."

"And that's why you won't go with Mr. Swanson, is it?" asked Mrs. Stringer, coldly, trying to hide her annoyance.

"That's one reason; but the other is—it's simply because I've promised to go with someone else."

"You have? With whom?"

Valentine Hood laughed. "I told you I make no distinctions, didn't I?"

"Val! What on earth do you mean?"

"Just what you're thinking of," was the answer.

For a moment there was a deep silence, then the older girl rose in anger. "You can't do it, do you hear! You won't go! Good heavens! Have you no pride?"

Valentine rose, too, her face white, her eyes bright

with sudden passion. "Don't talk to me like that! You overstep the mark. You may be my sister; but you're not my mistress, and I won't be dictated to by you. I'll do as I please, remember that!" And turning smartly, she left the room.

It would seem that, acting on sheer impulse, and encouraged by the girl's notice of him, Guy Amery had made a bound, and, leaping the barrier of class, had dared to ask Miss Hood if he might drive her to the dance that was to be held in the township on the following Wednesday; while Valentine, seeing a chance for a little excitement, did not refuse, to the man's frank amazement and deep pleasure.

Mrs. Stringer had not spoken to the girl again. She was wise enough to see that any effort to dissuade would be futile; though she urged her husband to speak to Valentine, and, if that had no effect, to speak to Amery himself.

"I'll do what I can with Val," agreed Stringer; "but I'll say nothing to Amery. He does his work well, and that's all that concerns me. Besides, if we did speak to him about this affair, it would only make us look small, and would probably make no difference as far as Val's concerned; and—well, it wouldn't improve matters at all."

"Perhaps you're right," answered his wife. "But what about Mr. Swanson? He's so particular. It may spoil all her chances with him."

"She won't have Charley, in any case. Goodness knows what the girl wants. He has the money, a car, and a good home; but she turns her back on him every time."

And Stringer sat down heavily, as if the eccentricity of his sister-in-law was more than he could understand.

"I can't understand it at all," declared his wife.

"No more can I. Charley's not a bad old stick——"

"I don't mean that. I mean that she should be

my—that my sister should be like that. We're so different."

"We'll just have to see if we can't check her," was Stringer's reply. "I'll mention it to-night."

And he did.

At first, Valentine felt hot resentment at his interference; but, beating down her anger, she laughed at him instead.

"Val, you've got to remember your position here, and that he's only a common working man—and I pay him wages——"

"But I have no wish to remember," answered Valentine. "Besides, what is there debasing in receiving wages from you?" And she turned her back.

Stringer, seeing it would be useless, made no further attempt to argue.

At the beginning, the girl had been doubtful as to whether or not she would go with Amery. She knew that, should she go with him, it would be an unwise action on her part. But there was no doubt in her mind now, only firm resolve. What right had either her sister or her sister's husband to tell her what she should or should not do? Once her mind was set, Valentine could prove as stubborn as a mule, showing herself heedless of consequences.

And so it came about that Guy Amery escorted the sister of his employer's wife to the social and dance.

The girl's face was burning when she entered the hall. In spite of herself, she half-regretted her coming, and felt that every eye was on her and her companion. True, some of Amery's acquaintances had the two well under inspection, and she could not help but hear a remark passed by one to another:

"Cripes! What do you think of it? Amery's goin' in for swell-lookers, ain't he? Who is she?"

But Amery, quiet and attentive, and—strange to say—more at ease than the girl herself, took no notice whatever of the slight sensation they caused. Perhaps it was not altogether unexpected by him;

and his calm indifference reassured the girl, so that she raised her chin a little higher, and looked well about her.

She saw Charles Swanson, who had been staring in astonishment at her, turn his head sharply to avoid her glance. Valentine's chin tilted itself a little higher. In spite of Swanson's social position, and in spite of her present escort, the girl felt above the snubbing of a small-minded snob. "It's a wonder he troubles to attend these affairs at all," she told herself. Swanson's was the only familiar face in the hall, and she no longer felt embarrassed.

As the evening passed, Amery brought up first one, then another, of his friends, and Valentine, striving to be agreeable, found herself—as her escort later expressed it—in the boom. But Swanson did not come near her.

At midnight, they left for home. Little enough was said on the way; but when she stepped from the jinker, Amery turned to the girl.

"Miss Hood, I want to thank you for the pleasure you've given me this evening, and I want to ask if—I might—take you—out again?"

He spoke in a somewhat stilted fashion, much as when he had first addressed her, and the girl instinctively knew that he had been forming the words on the homeward journey.

Valentine paused. She did not want the man to be too sure of her agreements. She had enjoyed this evening, that she could not deny. She was tired of convention, and Amery's company had proved congenial; still, something held her back, and she could not find an immediate answer for him.

"Will you come again?" asked the man. He had been steadily watching her dark figure, trying to read her face in the dim night light.

"I'll see," answered Valentine. Then, impulsively, she held out her hand. "I have had a very pleasant evening. Good-night, Mr. Amery, and thanks."

## CHAPTER V.

VALENTINE was returning from her afternoon drive, and had just arrived at the gate when Charles Swanson motored up.

"How do you do, Miss Hood?" he called. "You must have known I was coming this afternoon to see you."

"Why do you say that, Mr. Swanson?"

"Because you are here just in time to meet me. Did you enjoy your drive?"

"Yes, it was very enjoyable, thank you."

"Well, I suppose a jinker's right enough when there's nothing else. But you can't beat motoring, you know. There's nothing like it."

"It's a long while since you've been round this way, Mr. Swanson," said the girl.

"Yes," he said, slowly; "it's a fair while——" He looked sideways at her. "I think the last time was—let me see——"

"Just before the social and dance in the township," she answered promptly, watching him closely.

"So it was—so it was. I remember now," he replied, and the expression on his face told only too plainly that he required no reminding of the fact that the last time he visited the house had been to ask if Valentine would accompany him to that social and dance she now referred to. Valentine, thinking she had cut herself off entirely from his regard, was wondering at his coming again—as he said—to see her.

Swanson raised his voice, calling to the man who had just come from the hut. "Hey! Open this gate, will you?"

Amery came forward slowly, ignoring Swanson, and looking at the girl, opening the gate in such a

manner as to imply that it was for her he performed the act. She drove through, followed by Swanson, and Amery in silence closed the gate after them.

Valentine stepped from the jinker, saying: "It will save a little bother if I unharness here at the stables. The horse has to be fed."

Swanson, leaving the car, came forward to assist her. "I'll take the rug, Miss Hood, and drive you up to the house. The man here can unharness the horse."

Amery's hands were already busy with the harness, and when the horse, startled by a whirling piece of paper flying before its eyes, swerved sharply, Swanson, with an exclamation, leapt back, leaving the girl standing there; but the worker's sure hand steadied the horse.

Valentine looked from one to the other of the two men, and formed a contrast. In her mind she saw Swanson weak, effeminate, indolent, and conceited; beside him, Amery showed strength, manliness, and fearlessness. The one unreliable in time of trial and trouble; the other a wall of protection. The one idly existing on his wealth; the other making his way in the world as a man should. So her mind fancied; so she made herself believe.

Leaving the horse and jinker with Amery, and thanking him for his service, Valentine motored with Swanson to the house. As they stepped on to the verandah, she said:

"If you'll just excuse me, Mr. Swanson, I'll call my sister——"

"Wait a moment," he said hastily. "It's you I want to speak to, Miss Hood. I have something I—er—wish to say to you. Something rather important."

"Yes, Mr. Swanson?"

Valentine, standing against the verandah post, turned her head a little as Charles Swanson moved to her side.

"In fact, it's most important," said the man. "I did intend speaking of it sooner; but—er—you know—that night of the dance made me re-consider my intentions. Still, I decided to overlook that unwise step on your part, on condition——"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Swanson?"

The quiet tone and her cool regard made him feel somewhat flustered, so that, for the moment, he could find nothing to say, but only stared at her.

The expression on his face caused Valentine some little amusement, and a shadow of a smile showed in her eyes. She was not aware of the fact that the man witnessed it, and was reassured by that smile.

"You know," he said, with renewed confidence, "I'm not a poor man, Miss Hood."

"So I believe, Mr. Swanson. You must have had to work very hard to acquire your—wealth."

"Well, you know, I never had to work. My father did all that part of the business, so that I came in for a good thing when he died."

"I see. The father worked, that the son might reap the benefit and take it easy."

He was too self-satisfied to read the irony underlying the words.

"Yes, a man in my position is able to take it easy, you know. I have a nice home up there, Miss Hood."

"So I have heard my sister say," she replied.

"Yes," he emphasized; "it's a grand place. I'd like you to see it——" He moved nearer to her. "I would like to know what you think of it."

"Would my opinion make any difference?" she asked.

He looked at her as though he were preparing a pleasant surprise. "Well, you know, when one is going to live in a place, one likes to see it first, don't you think? And perhaps there are some little touches that could finish the place off."

"But what is all that to me?"

He took her hand in his, and tried to place an arm about her shoulders, but the verandah post prevented. "Do you know, I was thinking of asking you to marry me," he said, softly.

"How very kind of you," quietly retorted the girl.

He was not quite sure how to take her remark and attitude. He would have understood better had she snatched her hand away; but this she didn't do. It was still passive within his own.

"It's a chance any girl would be pleased to have the opportunity of taking," he said; "but I want you for my wife."

The astounding conceit of the man! Valentine freed her hand. "I wouldn't think of standing in the way of 'any girl'," she remarked, and stepped from the verandah.

For an instant he looked after her, then moved quickly to her side. "You don't mean to say that you refuse my offer?" he asked, as though the thing were unbelievable.

"Thanking you for the offer, Mr. Swanson; but I do refuse." She turned so that she faced him again. "Money does not count with me," she said. "When I marry, I'll marry a strong man who will work for me and look after me. One who can stand up against the world and be afraid of nothing. A man who will fight and work his way through life, and will not sit back and idly watch it pass by, without making any effort to show why he has the right to be here. The world was not made for his kind. What can you do beyond drive a motor-car? You look down on the working-man, forgetting that a hard working man—your own father—made your money for you!"

For a while they faced each other; then, when he had recovered from the shock, Swanson remarked: "You're pretty frank, I must say."

"It's just as well you should know what I think, Mr. Swanson," she answered, "in case you did think of again asking me to be your wife."

"Oh, I won't ask you again; but one day you will realize that you made a big mistake when you turned me down. You'll not get such an offer again. A man in my financial position generally looks for a girl in a higher social position than yourself to become his wife."

"Don't you think you've said quite enough?" asked the girl. "I wonder if you realize how contemptible your words are."

Without another word, Swanson walked smartly down the path, and outside the gate. As his car was disappearing down the wide road, Mabel Stringer came out on to the verandah.

"Is that Mr. Swanson?" she asked in surprise.

"It is," replied Valentine, shortly.

"I didn't hear him come up; but he's going off early, isn't he? He didn't stay any length of time, and it's some time since he has been this way, too." Something she saw in her sister's face checked her for a moment; then—"What did he come for?" she demanded.

"That's his business—and mine," was the girl's reply.

Her sister quickly caught up her words: "And yours, eh? Then it does concern you. He has asked you to marry him, hasn't he?"

"Not exactly. He let me know that he did me the great honour of considering it——"

"Don't talk in that foolish manner. Did you refuse him?" asked Mrs. Stringer.

"I did."

Valentine, reading the expression on her sister's face, added, in a softer tone:

"Mabel, be reasonable. It's no good crying out against it because I refused him. If you'd been here a minute ago to hear him, you'd understand. An hour in that man's company near worries me to death; then think of what it would mean to have him for life. Heavens! He's an absolute weakling;



and I like strength in any man. Why! You should have seen him this afternoon when the horse played up a bit, I was nearer to it than he was, and yet he got back as if he were afraid of it. I really believe he *was* actually afraid, and I could never imagine such a thing of any man before—for so little a thing—”

“That’s nothing, girl. Little things like that do not count.”

“They do with me,” replied Valentine, quietly.

“You’ve thrown away the chance of a life-time,” cried Mrs. Stringer, her anger rising.

“It’s not one I’d care to take—if he were the only man in the world.”

“He’s likely to be the only one, too, for you. The fact that he ever looked at you was enough. Goodness knows what there is about you to attract any man.”

Valentine did not answer. She was doing her best to remain calm, striving to control her rising temper.

“I told him you would consider it a big thing—”

Valentine’s lips whitened. “*You* told him! How dare you!”

“I’m your only living relative, and you’re in my care!” returned Mrs. Stringer. “The wonder of it is that Mr. Swanson ever came back here at all, after the disgraceful way you permitted that common, ignorant man to take you to the social; but I said that you did not realize what you were doing, and were not responsible. Mr. Swanson’s a gentleman. There’s nothing he wouldn’t have given you—”

“What would he *have done* for me?” involuntarily broke from Valentine’s lips; but her sister did not heed her words, and went on hotly:

“I sometimes wonder if you’re so utterly without sense. I had to make some excuse to him for you, you’re such a fool! No wonder people can’t make you out. You puzzle me. Nobody understands you;

nobody can be bothered with you—unless it’s that lout at the hut—”

But Valentine had found her tongue. “Stop!” she cried. “You’ve said enough—more than enough! Nobody can be bothered with me? Alright, I’ll not forget those words of yours, nor that you said I am not responsible—inferred that I’m a senseless child. Perhaps that appealed to Mr. Swanson, that he should come to me after you spoke so of me. I’ll never forgive you, though you are all I have in the world. And let me tell you this: That ‘lout at the hut,’ as you call him, is twenty times the man Mr. Swanson is!”

She would have said more; but the words choked in her throat, and she stood, breathing quickly, her lips quivering, facing her sister.

“Some day,” slowly said Mabel Stringer, breaking the silence, “you’ll wake up.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE days went by. Valentine Hood and Mabel Stringer were no longer on a sisterly footing. The former spent as much of her time as possible out of doors, finding it hard to tolerate her sister's cold, formal civility.

"I put myself out to come up here to see her," thought the girl, forgetting how she had welcomed the relief from the office; "and I'll not put myself out to go back before I want to."

Her brother-in-law was a little more agreeable; but Valentine avoided him as much as possible. Time had not checked her attitude towards Amery, nor his regard for her; rather, it had resulted in bringing about feelings that, on his side, held something more than friendship. The girl thought she knew the man perfectly, picturing him to be strong and reliable; but he was not so sure of her. There were times when she was puzzling to a degree; when she appeared to be laughing at him. As a matter of fact, neither really knew the other in the least.

Then, one evening, things came to a sudden head. Mrs. Stringer had made it plain to her sister that, if things continued as they were, she must leave the district.

"It's disgraceful, the way you permit that man to take notice of you!" she said.

"I can't prevent him from taking notice of me," was the smiling answer.

"You encourage it! I'll put up with it no longer!" hotly retorted the other.

"You needn't," replied Valentine. "I came up here to please you; but I made it plain that I wanted a free rein, and I'll have it."

"Then you won't get it here," returned her sister.

"Remember that you're here only on sufferance."

"On sufferance!"

"You have practically nothing of your own, and nowhere to go; what is there for you to do?" taunted her sister.

"If I can't get what I want here, then I'll get it elsewhere."

"Where do you think you can get it, my dear?"

"I'll get it *somewhere*. I won't be dependent on you any further."

Valentine was never the one to prolong scenes such as these. Her nature was inclined to be impulsive, and she acted on foolish impulse now as she turned away, and deliberately made her way to where Amery was walking towards the hut from one of the paddocks.

They met at the big chaff-shed, and she, laughing lightly, yet nervously, gave him the evening's greeting.

Surprise showed on his face as he answered it; for never before had she come to him like this. Always, he had gone to her.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"Why should anything be the matter?"

"I thought you—coming down here—like this—perhaps something had happened," he said.

"Are you sorry I came down?" she asked, easily.

"Sorry?" he echoed; then abruptly: "What did y' come for?"

"To see you, of course," she answered, daringly. She was playing a mad, dangerous game; but her sister's taunting had roused her to utter recklessness.

"Gammon," he replied, and laughed shortly.

"Is it?" And she laughed again as she had done before.

The sound roused him, as did the reckless light in her eyes. Making an abrupt movement forward, he caught her by the arm.

"Look here," he said, breathing hard, "you're playing with me, and I warn you that I ain't the

sort to take it mildly. I know you're a cut above me, an' all the rest of it; but I'm not such a fool as to be made game of, and take it like a lamb. Perhaps I was a damn fool for taking any notice of you that first time you spoke, but if you've been foolin' me, you'll pay."

She turned her face away, and tried to free her arm.

"Look at me!" he said, shaking her.

"You're hurting my arm," she said with forced calmness. "Guy, don't be so rough."

Her first use of his Christian name had its effect on him. His grip on her arm loosened, so that she freed it. For a while there was silence, then she turned away, while he stood motionless, watching her. But she had taken only a few steps when she faced him again.

"I suppose you'll tell the boss?" said the man. There was a smile, slightly sarcastic, on his face.

"Why did you think I was playing with you?" was all she said.

"Were you in earnest?" he asked, almost fiercely. She did not answer.

"Were you?" he demanded.

"Why shouldn't I be?" She was not looking at him now, but away towards the south, and she spoke the words as though to herself.

"God! What a fool you make of a man," he said, bitterly. "There's Charley Swanson, with his thousands—you sent him packing. When you came driving with me, I was mad enough to think—such things have happened before, they could happen again—and I thought that there might be a chance for me. But I think you'd laugh at and fool the very devil himself—"

"I might," she said, softly; "if the devil chanced to be anyone but you; don't think I'm inferring that you are His Majesty of the Lower Regions—"

"What do you mean?" he asked, slowly.



But she could say no more, and the next instant Amery had her in his arms.  
Equality Road.

"Can't you see?" she flung back, changing her tone, and flinging pride and self-respect to the winds. "I wasn't playing with you! I'm—I'm—not fooling you!"

"Is it possible that you mean that? Would you—marry me—me?"

Again she did not answer, and he took a step nearer. "I love you," he said, earnestly. "If you're not playing with me, be serious for once—don't fool a chap. Will you marry me?"

She saw again her sister's coldly smiling face; heard again the mocking voice: "*You have nothing of your own, and nowhere to go.*"

"Will you?" said the man again.

"Yes—I think—so," she answered.

He was at her side in an instant; but she put out a hand. "Wait! I've never met a man I could really fall in love with, and why I should meet you, like this, passes my understanding. It seems against everything. But you're different to other men I have met. I liked to see you handling the horses, you were so strong. I've heard that men who are kind to animals are kind to women, and I—and—I want someone—and——"

But she could say no more, and the next minute Amery had her in his arms.

Before she left him, she said: "But I can't live in a hut, and we can't stay on here. Nor must my sister know anything, yet. Can't we go away anywhere?"

He laughed softly. "I would not ask you to live in a hut, or would I expect you to remain here. I have enough money saved to start a farm going. Of course, it will mean hard work at first; but—I'd work my hands off for you."

A day later, Valentine Hood left Myalla for the city, and before the week was out, Amery, whom she had chosen to be her guard and keeper, joined her there.

## CHAPTER VII.

THE sun blazed down on the scorched plains of Korrington. The miles of dry, level country, with the steel-blue sky glinting mercilessly overhead; the hundreds of croaking, ill-omened blackwings; dead and dying stock on every hand; and the heat—the dead heat—was typical of the Australian plains during a drought season.

It was a bitter struggle for the settlers. A hard, cruel fight against the overpowering element. How utterly hopeless it all seemed. They prayed for rain; but the weather-god remained adamant, and in their despair the men cursed all. When failure and disaster loom dangerously near, and hope is abandoned, man will always curse.

A woman was sitting near the kitchen window of her home. What need to give her thoughts? They were the thoughts of many during these dark days. She did not look up as the door opened, though there had been a time, and that not so long ago, when she would have turned with a smile and a pleasant word of greeting at the sound of that hand on the latch.

Her husband slammed the door, flung his hat on to the table, and drew a chair clattering up to it.

"It's got us fast and strong," he said, harshly. "A curse on the weather, and this God-forsaken country!"

She made no response. All that she had to say about the drought had been said before. Once, she had given words of comfort and of cheer; but now, her well-meant efforts had come to be swept aside

by his declamations against the element. Once, he had said angrily:

"Confound it! You don't know what you're talkin' about! Can't you understand what we're up against? So much a woman thinks of it. But it don't count with you!"

Not count!

Now, she had little or nothing to say. She had learnt that silence is best and wisest at certain moments, and this was such a moment.

She was only young, and life is ever unjust to the young—so they think. It is the old who understand, with the knowledge born of years.

But it would seem that Fortune had never favoured these two since the day of their coming into their own home: their own world about which they had built so many wonderful pictures. But those pictures had fallen long since, and the awakening to stern reality had been a severe blow. They had battled, willingly and cheerfully enough at first, only to be beaten at every turn. The man had been the first to weaken; but the wife had buoyed up his hopes with cheerfulness and faith.

When first married, the two had made their home in the Goulburn Valley district, and, for a time, the wheel ran smoothly, and they were happy—till the heavy rains came, and flood-waters swept over the Goulburn's banks, wreaking damage and destruction.

Amery and his wife, with a few belongings, escaped the greedy waters: but their little home was taken by the tide and with it went Amery's stability—what little he had possessed of it.

Had it not been for the girl, he would have drifted about the country, dragging her with him; but, in this instance, she proved herself stronger than her husband, for, battling against his indifference, she managed to persuade him to make for further north,

and, with the money that remained to them, start anew.

Later, she often wondered how he came to follow her advice; but the fact was that the man at that time was not utterly indifferent as to his own existence and the girl's welfare.

And he was to have been her wall of strength. The irony of it! Flood waters had been the first factor in bringing forth his true nature, and the drought was now to be the second in proving it. It had never before been tried, as his path had hitherto been along a level road. Now had come the bumps and ruts, and he was being put to the test.

They had striven against misfortune during the flood—the wife striving to keep up the husband's spirits—and they were now battling against the drought, hoping against hope; praying for the rain that meant so much to them. It had not come.

The girl tried to picture the near future, and shuddered. She thought of her husband, changed from the cheerful companion into a sullen, disappointed man, and the tears rose to her eyes. Alas! He was going down quickly under the devouring drought, which eats life and manhood from those who strive against it. Strong wills emerge from the struggle even stronger in heart, and defiant; but the weak will succumb, and unfortunately, Guy Amery was not blessed with strength of will. His true character was beginning to assert itself under the trial.

The man rose, taking his hat from where he had flung it a few minutes back. His wife rose, too, asking quickly: "Where are you going to? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going out," he answered, briefly.

"But it will be tea-time in a few minutes."

"You can have it on your own, then. I don't want any."

"But you've just come in. There can't be any

need for you to go out again. You might stay. It has been lonely for me all day."

It was something new for her to complain of loneliness, and he looked keenly at her. "Lonely? Ain't you alone nearly all day, when I'm working?"

"Yes, but that was different—somehow. Don't go out now, Guy. Stay home this evening."

"I can't. I've got to get out—to do something!" His tone was rough, but not unkindly. "I'll go mad if I just sit about and think, and think. I must get away from it all."

"And what about me?" she asked, looking intently at him.

"You?"

"Yes, me. Must I just stay alone, and think? I have no chance to get away from it, remember."

"That's nothing. It's different with you. You're only a girl."

Different! Only a girl! Misfortunes were making him selfish, or thoughtless. She made no further protest then, but watched him go.

Back in her seat at the window, she sent her mind speeding back through the months, and renewed old scenes. Better to dream in memories of the past than exist in bitter realities of the present. She had had few chances in life—a girl alone in the world, with none to guide her save a selfish sister. How thoughtless she had been before her marriage, with never a care for the future; confident that things must run smoothly. But with ill-fortune following ill-fortune; with the knowledge of the vast difference between her husband and the world to which she had belonged; the absence of refinement—which she had in vain tried to make the leading feature of her home—with all these had come her awakening.

At first, it had seemed easy enough to keep herself above her environment; but later, her husband's will at times dominated so that she realized to the full her present position in life as compared with

the past. She was no longer a free independent girl of spirit; but the wife of one whose education and ideals were somewhat lower than her own.

She had never written to Grace McDermott since she had left Myalla; for though she could not altogether explain it, something held her hand. Nevertheless, often a longing came to Valentine for a word from her friend—for the sound of a single, friendly word, a touch from the past, even though it had not granted her much happiness.

But two days ago Amery had said to his wife: "Well, I can see only one thing for it. It means I'll have to get a job like I had before you came along. We can take a married couple's place on one of the big farms or stations. It's no good hangin' on to our own little bit here. The job's too big, an' it don't pay."

The girl's face had grown cold, and her heart beat quickly. "The drought hasn't beaten us yet," she had said. "Don't give way too soon. Isn't there anything I can do at all? The other settlers——"

"Damn the other settlers!" he had broken in. "Hasn't got us beaten!—with nearly all the stock gone, an' not a green blade, or a dry one, either, to be seen, an' them dam' croakers everywhere! They're hell's own birds—black devils o' crows! You do anything? What can you do? It won't be long before the last of the stock's down, let me tell you, and us with them. Not beaten! A hell of a lot you know about it!"

And what could she say?

The girl roused herself to the fact that her dreams had brought her back to the present she was trying to forget awhile. So one could not get away from it, even in thought.

"Oh! for rain," she breathed.

There had been black clouds in plenty during the last week or so: black, mocking clouds. But where was the rain? How the parched, cracked earth

called for it. How the weary, worn men and women watched and waited for it. In vain.

A dark shadow passed over the house, trailing smaller, shadowy patterns in its wake. Bitterness was deep in the girl's heart. She knew the meaning of that shadow. It was but a passing cloud—a mocker which gives no answer to the crying lands below.

Her husband drowning his sorrows at a wine-shanty; she, a woman left to fight her way as best she might. How she longed for rest from it all. She had striven and battled, and now—she was so weary, and there seemed no hope—no hope. . . . . Everything was red-hot. . . . . It was like a hideous nightmare, where she was alone in a world of flames and torturing fantastic shapes. . . . . Soon she would wake up in the city boarding-house, and have to prepare for the day's work in the office. . . . . She felt herself sinking. Everything was growing cooler, as though she were passing through pure, fresh atmosphere. The heat had died off, and the hideous figures had vanished. A peacefulness and a soothing seemed to envelop her, and she let herself drift with it. . . . .

It was past mid-night when Amery returned. Having closed the door, he drew a box of matches from his pocket and struck a light setting it to the lamp standing in the centre of the table. Something made him turn to the window as if someone there had called to him, and he saw the figure of his wife in the big chair, asleep.

For awhile he stood gazing her, then stepping softly, he moved close. Her lips were slightly parted, her eyes inflamed, and her forehead damp. He could see that she had been weeping, and he had never known her to weep before. But she was resting now. This was her first sleep for many a night, and little did he know that it was the saving of her, since

sleepless nights play havoc with the mind and nerves as nothing else can.

The man put out a hand and lightly brushed back the damp hair from her forehead. She did not move. Stooping, he touched her hot face with his lips. And still she slept. Though he had been drinking heavily, the man's mind seemed clear. The fact that she had been weeping appeared to worry him. It was so unlike her.

"Oh, hell!" he muttered. "I can't help it. And she used to laugh such a lot. It's a long while now since she's laughed. Why did she cry? Her eyelids are swollen, and her face—"

He stood uncertain what to do; then, drawing up another chair, he extinguished the light, and seated himself beside her for the remainder of the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE next morning, Valentine woke to find herself in the big chair by the window. When she first opened her eyes, she fancied that she must still be dreaming, or wandering in mind; for it was hard to grasp the fact that she had slept there throughout the night.

Something else dawned within her mind. Could it be that the sun was at last conquered by clouds? What was that newness in the atmosphere—that strange newness that crept in through the open window? It sent a thrill through her veins, and set her heart beating to quicker time. She sat up straight in her chair. What was that drumming and pattering over the iron roof of the verandah without?

Then she knew. It had come at last—the glorious, saving rain! And the earth was drinking deeply, greedily. How heavily she must have slept not to have awakened to it before. Oh! the wonderful smell of the damp earth—the fresh, moist atmosphere!

Amery entered the room to find her standing there at the window, gazing out upon the wonderful sight. He was carrying a tray, and as he placed it on the table she heard the movement, and turned around, her face alight.

"Oh, Guy! Isn't it wonderful!"

"Yes, the rain's come at last. You've had a good sleep, Val. I heard your chair move, so knew that you was awake. Here's some tea and toast for you."

Never before had he prepared a meal for her like this, and the action spoke volumes. A sudden tender-

ness made itself felt in the girl's heart, and, moving to where her husband stood, she placed an arm about his neck.

"Thank you, Guy," she said.

And then she saw the shadow on his face; noticed how unenthusiastically he answered her eager, joyous remarks about the coming rain, and she felt greatly puzzled.

"What is it?" she asked. "What is the matter?"

"What is—what?" he parried, looking not at her, but through the window.

"This change should make you feel mad with joy. Think of all it means. Everything seems so full of new life, and when I woke up I could hardly believe it, it seemed too good to be true. But you—you don't seem to care so much. What is the matter with you?"

"If you *will* have it, Val, the rain means little enough to me now, because it has come along too late, that's all."

"Too late?"

"Too late for me to keep this place going. I wonder if you realize the little we've really got. We never did have any to spare—never did have much; but now, we've less."

"What does that mean, then?" she asked, quietly.

"That the place's got to go; that's all there is for it."

"Go! And what, then, will become of us?"

"I'll just have to get a job."

He turned and looked steadily awhile at her; then, as she did not speak, moved closer. "It don't bind you, you know," he said, with an effort. "I could get a place for a married couple, or else get a single job."

"A place for a married couple?"

"Yes. There'd be a place for me an' you to live in. It would be ours as long as we stayed there; but, of course, it would be on the boss's land."



"Does that mean I'd have to work?" she slowly asked.

"Not unless y' wanted to," he replied, rather shamefacedly. "Unless to give a hand at shearing-time—just help with the meals, y' know."

She could find no words to answer.

"Of course, please yourself," he said then. "If I get a single job you could board somewhere—"

"Where?"

"Well, where y' like. In the city—"

"The city! My place isn't there now. What board could I get in the city for all you would be able to allow me?" She checked herself from expressing what she had been on the point of saying: "As if I could return to the city like that."

The thought of all it meant swept over her, and she exclaimed impulsively: "Get a married couple's place, if you can, and I'll stay with you. After all, a woman's place is with her husband."

"I knew you'd say that," he answered, quickly. "I knew you would: that's why I accepted."

"Accepted what?" she asked.

"A chap was along at the—I met a chap yesterday, a big land-owner from just across country. He heard me tellin' one of the others that I was givin' up this bloomin' place, and offered me another on his. Blake, his name is."

Suddenly she laughed. "Do you know that when my sister sent for me to go to her at Myalla, it was because she didn't like the idea of my working in an office? What would she think, I wonder, if she knew that I was 'booked' to cook for shearers?"

"You won't *have* to do it," gruffly answered her husband. "There's generally a man to do the cooking."

"Then I'm to be waitress? To wait on them—to answer their call—to be like a general rough servant—to smile at their coarse remarks as though—as

any common slavey would do. Oh, the drought! What it costs to pay it!"

"Oh, Lord! Dry up!" groaned her husband.

"Don't you think it cost me nothing?"

"You! What fight did you put up? You just let everything go without making any effort to hold it. No wonder it beat you! Other men managed to hold their places alright, why couldn't you? The little you did save you passed over the wine-shanty for—"

He caught her roughly by the shoulders and shook her. "Shut up! D'ye hear?"

She saw that nothing was to be gained by opposing him. She could never again return to the city and meet old friends and acquaintances. A feeling of resignation swept over her, and she felt that there was nothing to do, nothing but follow her husband. After all, this was the man she had married, the man she had tried to better. The mistake was her own, and no other but herself could rectify it. Perhaps, in the end, things might not be as bad as she imagined. She looked up into the dark, scowling face and spoke, quietly enough now: "Let me go, Guy. I won't say anything more."

Yesterday, she had wanted his company, and he had kept away from the house, leaving her alone to brood over her troubles. To-day, when she wanted to be alone, he stayed, tramping indoors and out, talking and whistling loudly.

"I say, Val," he said once, as he watched her prepare the midday meal: "have you heard anything of your sister at all since you left her?"

"No, nothing."

"If you'd been like her, you'd never have given me a look," went on the man, musingly. "You wasn't a scrap like sisters, you two."

Valentine did not answer. She was wondering what would have become of her had she never given Amery 'a look' or had never spoken to him. Was

it for this that she had come to the north? Was this where her views and opinions had led her—to her union with a man socially and intellectually her inferior by such a degree? Equality! Was he, then, her equal? Had she ever really believed him to be? She had taken the strongest test in trying to prove her theories, and she had only reached this unequal, one-sided union, in which he gave her nothing but failure and disillusionment.

"Y'know, he really wasn't such a bad sort of cove."

"Who?" asked the girl.

Amery perched himself on the edge of the table, swinging one leg. "Ted Stringer," he answered. "I think this Blake is a good sort. I like his ways. They suit me."

"Is he married?"

"Dunno. Hardly think so."

"Then he'd live alone?"

"His mother is with him, he told me. But he didn't say nothing about no wife."

"When are you going to him?" asked Valentine.

"In a fortnight's time," answered her husband.

"Was that unconditionally?" she asked, then.

"What if the drought had not broken?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. But evidently he's something of a weather-prophet. He saw this comin'. The place is furnished, so we might be able to raise a bit of cash on the things we've got here. The only trouble is that it's a bad time for gettin' rid of things. If there's anything in particular you want to stick to, perhaps we can take it along with us. We'll just have to take what we can get for the rest: it won't be much, anyhow."

"It's all the same to me," replied Valentine, indifferently.

"Well, there ain't much, is there? Is dinner nearly ready? I've the devil of a hunger up."

## CHAPTER IX.

IN three weeks' time, Amery and his wife were quite settled in their new home. It was a neat, well-furnished, four-roomed cottage, and lay about one hundred yards west of the homestead, which was a picturesque building, surrounded by trees and the remains of what had once been an extensive garden, which the drought had ruined.

Valentine Amery had not seen Stephen Blake since her arrival at Diermorne. She remained within the little cottage, seldom venturing out.

"One thing about these folk," said her husband to her, "they ain't uppish. The boss gave me a message for you from his mother, saying that she'd be pleased to see you any time y' cared to go up there. There's no need bein' stand-offish. It don't pay. You knock down that high air you've got hold of lately, an' go up."

His wife did not answer, nor did she accept the invitation in the message her husband conveyed to her; with the result that the old lady, though she had made a kind effort to cheer the loneliness of the young woman at the cottage, wondered at her reserve.

"She must be lonely there, Steve. He's only a fairly young man himself; so she can't be so old."

"She's not," answered the son; "but perhaps she's the sort of woman who doesn't care much about meeting people, and keeps to herself."

"But, my dear boy, it was only out of kindness that I asked her to come up here to see me. It was because I thought that she might like a little com-

pany occasionally. Her husband is employed by you, so why should she stand off so?"

"Perhaps the fact that her husband is employed by me is her very reason for not coming to see you, mother."

"It's a very foolish reason, if that should be the case. I think that she must be inclined to be ungrateful."

But to this, her son did not answer.

So, in the land of vast spaces, Valentine Amery went her way alone. Her husband was away from the cottage during the day, but it was not on account of his absence that the girl felt the bitterness—the longing for companionship and freedom. Without a doubt, Mrs. Blake pictured her to be of the general type of the woman on the land—bright, able, and hardy.

Because of her husband's negligence during the drought, and his indifference at the present time, the girl had become more reserved, and, as it were, had crept into herself. It was more on account of this, than of her husband's position on the place, that she did not go to the homestead. She realized that she would have to meet Mrs. Blake and her son in time; but that time would come soon enough. Meanwhile, her little wheel of life went its quiet round.

Then, one day, that wheel caught, and the monotony was broken. Visitors, in the persons of a Presbyterian minister and his wife, one day came to Diermorne. It happened that they were old acquaintances of Stephen Blake's, and, on their way further north, had broken the journey to make a visit at the home of their friend.

When they were leaving, a sudden inspiration came to Mrs. Blake, and she directed them to the cottage. "It's a minister's duty, isn't it?" she said, when telling the Reverend gentleman of the couple at the cottage. "I do not know to what denomina-



Valentine's lips parted, her eyes widened, and remained fixed, and, for one instant she stood motionless.

Equality Road.

tion they belong; but that's for you to find out. Mrs. Amery never goes to church. See if you cannot encourage her to do so." And she laughed as she bade them good-bye.

Amery, sitting on the doorstep in the cool of the early evening, cleaning his rifle, saw them coming, and stepped inside.

"Hi, Val! Where are you?" he called.

His wife's answering voice came from the sitting-room, and the next moment she appeared in the passageway, asking: "What is the matter?"

"Here's a parson come to see you, so you'd better tog up in your best," he answered, and grinned broadly.

"A parson!" she exclaimed, in dismay.

"Too true," he nodded; "an' his wife's with him as well—at least, I suppose it's his missus. They're comin' along the track, and'll be here any minute."

"Are they driving?"

"No, walkin'. The gig's outside the gate."

"Just look at me! I must tidy my hair before I see them. I wonder what they are coming here for?" And with this the girl hurried into the bedroom.

As she passed the window, she saw them coming along the path. Valentine's lips parted, her eyes widened, and remained fixed, and, for one instant, she stood motionless. Then, taking a deep breath, she moved quickly from the window, sitting heavily upon the bed's edge, with her hands clasped and her eyes looking down, but seeing nothing.

Footsteps without roused her, and she rose to her feet, calling: "Guy!"

"Hullo!" He was entering the room even as he answered her call.

"Guy, you must see them. I—I—can't."

He stared at her. "What's the trouble with you? You're looking white and—scared."

"I've got—a headache. There they are now——" She spoke nervously, breathing quickly. "Make some excuse. Tell them I can't see them—anything. Quickly! I'll tell you later." She started as a knock sounded on the door.

Frankly puzzled her husband looked at her. "Alright, don't get excited over it," he said, somewhat roughly. "You just stay right here, an' I'll soon get rid of 'em."

Valentine heard the opening of the front door, and the sound of a strange voice.

"Good-evening. Is Mrs.—er—Amery in?"

"She's home alright," was her husband's casual answer; "but she ain't feelin' up to seein' visitors to-day."

Valentine felt a sudden desire to laugh at the straight-out answer. She heard the minister make some reply; then the door slammed again and, the next minute, her husband was standing at her side, watching her curiously.

The Reverend Mr. Cameron turned to his wife, and laughed a little. "Well," he said, "he was pretty straight spoken, if you like. You admire frankness, my dear. What did you think of his?"

She gave a contemptuous shrug of her shoulders, and said: "Ill-mannered creature!"

Amery placed a hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Now, we'll have the why of it all. Did you by any chance know that preacher chap?"

"No," she answered at once. "No, no."

"Then look here, Val., what's the game? You've got no bloomin' headache. I can see that much. I ain't blind. There's something else. Out with it!"

"I—I couldn't go out. She was my greatest friend once."

"She?"

"His wife—the minister's."

His surprise deepened. "She was? Down there, in the city?"

"Yes," replied the girl, nodding her head; but not looking at him.

"You've got me beat. If she was your greatest friend, why didn't y' rush out to meet her, instead of going on the way y' did? Have y' had a row?"

"No; but how could I go out?"

"How the devil couldn't you?"

"Don't swear like that . . . It's such a long while since I've seen her, and I didn't know she had married. I couldn't go out. You wouldn't understand; but—look at her, and then—look at me. How could I let her see me here—like this?"

For awhile there was silence; then a dark flash swept over the man's cheek.

"I think I see it now. This is what y' call pride, ain't it?" he said.

But she made no reply.

"Looks as if you're ashamed of me," he said evenly.

"It's not that. It's—it's——"

"Well, go on. It's what? Speak, can't you?"

The girl tried to answer; but no words would come. She stood silent, looking anywhere but at him. He knew that he had spoken the truth—that she was ashamed of him. And he rightly guessed the meaning of her silence. Again he caught her by the shoulder; but this time his grip was stronger.

"So you're ashamed of me, are you? That's all the trouble. But don't you forget it, young lady—I'm your husband. Understand? Your husband. Which means that you belong to me. Pride! Damn it! I'll soon knock that out of you!"

With a flash of her old spirit, the girl straightened herself. "How dare you speak to me like that?"

"Dare!" He laughed suddenly. "Dare! Don't be foolish, my dear."

"I might have known what to expect when I married a man of your education and class!" she cried, roused by the sneer.

"Why did you marry me, then? Perhaps it was because you couldn't get a man of your own class to look at you," he answered.

"Heaven knows I made myself cheap enough, and came down a big step when I *did* marry you! I can understand now why my sister would have nothing to do with me. She was right, after all. You're ignorant and you're rough! Instead of fighting like a man during the drought you acted like the coward you are, wasting your time and money at the wine-shanty. And heaven knows we needed every penny. You *let* the stock die; for you made no attempt to save any! And little you cared what might have happened to me. I came here with you because I was ashamed to go to the city. And how could I let Grace see me this afternoon—as *your* wife? I would die sooner than acknowledge you as my husband to those who were my friends! Of course, I know it's all my own fault. I acted like a fool. That's just what I was—an ignorant fool, when I married you; and I hate myself for it as much as I despise you—*you*——"

But her wild talk ceased abruptly, for her husband struck her with a heavy hand, so that, reeling, she fell to the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

There followed nearly two dark months for Valentine Amery, and, when they cleared, the girl woke once again to life. It was an unwilling awakening; but she woke because perforce she had to.

It was a nervous, shame-faced husband who crept into the room and, taking her hand, blurted out:

"Val—I didn't think—I'm sorry."

And it was a tired, pale-faced, quiet-voiced girl who said, with a ghost of a smile: "Forget it."

## CHAPTER X.

THE old lady seated herself in the chair, the girl placed before her, and looked long at Valentine's pale face.

"Do you know, Mrs. Amery, when you ignored my message and kept so well away from me, I determined to let you go; but, as you've just come from the hospital after having had such a bad time, I thought that I'd run down to see that you look after yourself, and that you're getting along all right."

"Thank you," replied Valentine. "I am almost well again, and have been taking things easy since I returned here two days ago."

"You look anything but strong; still, it's to be hoped that you'll soon pick up, and be quite well again. But tell me, why did you not come up before and see me when I asked you?"

"It is not usual for the wife of a worker to visit his employer's home," was the simple answer.

"I see. And that was why you didn't come up to see me?"

A faint colour tinted the girl's cheek, a sign which Mrs. Blake noted. She was a keen observer, and a quick reader.

"I didn't like to," was Valentine's answer.

"I see," again said the visitor, and added: "Don't think me too personal; but remember that I am an old woman, therefore, to a certain extent, privileged. You must have been very much in love."

"Why do you say that?" asked the girl, the nervous fangs again betraying her.

"Well, the fact does not require pointing out that you're not in your right place. That's obvious. You didn't always live in the country?"

"No," answered Mrs. Amery. "I came originally from the city."

"And have been well brought up, with the best of education?" continued Mrs. Blake.

"Yes."

"I thought so. Well, let that go. I'm an inquisitive old person, am I not? My son has told me that Mr. Amery will probably be away for a fortnight or longer, after to-morrow; so I want you to come up and see me. Come along for tea on Saturday. Now, will you promise?"

"Why do you ask me?" The girl's voice was low.

"Perhaps, my dear child, I see below the surface."

Valentine lifted her head. Her cheeks were flushed, though her voice was still low as she said:

"Mrs. Blake, I do not want anyone's pity."

"I am not aware that I am offering it," was the reply.

"The fact that you ask me up to the house suggests it."

"Not necessarily. But—I must admit I would like to know you better, and I am alone up at the home-stead, save for the house-keeper. You have not given me your promise yet," she said, gently.

Touched by the kind tones, Mrs. Amery answered: "Then I give it now. I shall come, and thank you."

At that moment, Guy Amery entered the room. He had come direct from the paddocks, and his clothes and hands were soil-stained. A black streak ran across his right cheek, and the shabby felt hat was pushed far back on his head, leaving a red line to mark his hot forehead. He knew that Mrs. Blake was with his wife, for he had seen her enter the cottage, and curiosity bade him find some excuse to dis-

cover the reason of her visit. He had come into the room without knocking upon the door.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Amery," was Mrs. Blake's greeting. "I was just this minute telling your wife that she shuts herself up in the house too much."

"That's what I'm forever telling her," was Amery's answer; "but she won't listen to me, an' won't go nowhere; so——" A gesture completed the sentence. He shrugged his shoulders, and thrust his hands into his pockets, giving a side-long glance at his wife.

"Well," said Mrs. Blake, "I have managed to get her to promise that she'll come as far as the homestead next Saturday to visit me." And she rose as she spoke.

"Next Saturday? I'll be away," said Amery quickly.

"I know it. That's why I wanted your wife expressly for that time. She would find it so lonely here without companionship."

"Val, where are the matches? I just come along for a box. I've got t' git back to the paddock."

"You will find plenty of matches in the kitchen cupboard," answered she.

"Well, get 'em for me, will you? You know where they are," he said, curtly.

"And so do you, since I have just told you," she replied.

The cool, formal tones used between the two did not escape Mrs. Blake; nor yet the silence the girl maintained when her husband was in the room. Until he had spoken directly to her in asking for the matches, Valentine had said nothing.

When Amery had gone, there followed a pause, till the elder woman said: "My dear, do you think that you make the best of things?"

"I did once," was the girl's brief answer. "I tried hard to do what I thought was best for us both;

but now—I suppose I'm to blame, really. I can't help it."

"You're depressed, and you're looking at the world through dark glasses," said the other, cheerfully. "You are only making things worse for yourself, instead of better. There's no need to be pessimistic over it all. Now, good-bye for the present, and don't forget your promise for Saturday."

"I'm not likely to forget it," replied the girl.

And when Saturday did come round, Valentine, true to her word, walked across to the homestead, and nervously knocked at the half-open door. The next minute, Mrs. Blake was welcoming her, and, before long, the two were talking together in the sitting-room.

Then did Mrs. Blake set about to make the girl forget her worries. She talked much, turning from one subject to another, nor was she at all surprised at the girl's knowledge of things and her intelligence.

It was her son who received the surprise when he found his mother and Mrs. Amery talking and laughing together, for his mother had told him nothing of the girl's intended visit. He shook hands with Valentine, and for an instant, her face showed the pink of embarrassment; for this was the first time since coming to Diermorne that she had met Steve Blake face to face. But her nervousness soon cleared in the kind and friendly atmosphere that surrounded her.

"Do you know, you are the first people who have been kind to me since I have been married," she said, once.

"Why, surely not!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake. "Did you have no friends—no relations?"

"Yes, once. But my relations—I had only two—let me go; and I let my friends go. It wasn't to be helped, I suppose. The girl who was once my dearest

friend was here just before my illness; but I couldn't face her."

"Your dearest friend?" repeated Blake, leaning forward a little.

"Yes. I don't know her name now that she is married; but she was Grace McDermott."

Stephen Blake said no more, but sat back in his chair, though he watched Mrs. Amery with curious intentness. After a few more remarks, Mrs. Blake rose from her chair.

"If you will just excuse me," she said, "I'll see to the tea."

When she had left the room, her son drew his chair nearer to the one occupied by Mrs. Amery. "Your friend is now Mrs. Cameron," he said, and added slowly, very deliberately: "I wonder if you are—were—Valentine Hood?"

She looked up in quick surprise. "How did you know?"

"I, too, knew Mrs. Cameron when she was Miss McDermott. I happened to meet her evidently just after you had left the city for the country. She spoke of you to me."

"Grace has spoken to you—of me?"

"You need not have feared to see her that day, Mrs. Amery. She has been a loyal friend to you."

"I believe it," answered Valentine; "but I couldn't let her see me—not like this. I'd feel too guilty. You see, I had strange ideas once—"

"Because you believed all people equal?" Blake half-smiled.

"So she told you even that?" slowly replied Valentine. "Well?"

"She did mention it. To a degree, all people *are* equal; but you must make allowances, Mrs. Amery. Besides—excuse this—you were not consistent. The views you tried to hold, and pride, do not go together. You have your shade of pride. It was that which would not permit you to see your friend the

day she was here, and it's pride that makes you keep so much to yourself—these days."

Valentine did not answer at once. Blake, watching the face before him, wondered at the step the girl had taken in marrying Amery, and then wondered what would be the end of it all.

"Of course, you big land-owners can afford to talk like that." The girl's voice broke the silence, and she spoke in low tones.

"I have the right," he answered, smiling. "I was a hired labourer myself once; but I was determined not to remain in that one groove, depending on others for my mother's and my own living; so I snapped at every chance that came along."

"Which goes to show that there is a difference between the worker who aspires to something higher, and pushes his way up to it, from one who is content to just plod along the one level, and have his time employed by others?" asked the girl.

"Well, it would seem so," replied the man. Then changing the subject abruptly, he asked: "Do you care for driving, Mrs. Amery?"

"Yes, I enjoy it very much, but it is some months now since I have done any driving at all."

"You must come driving with us sometimes. Often, my mother goes alone, just for an outing. I'm sure she would be glad of your company at times."

"So she would, my son," came in Mrs. Blake's pleasant voice, as she entered the room. "And now, if you two folk will just come along this way, tea is waiting."

It was with an old-world courtesy that Blake conducted the two women into the dining-room, waiting till they had seated themselves, before drawing up his own chair.

The meal was bright and cheerful, and once again Valentine forgot her worries and her reserve, and laughed and chatted merrily. Her eyes grew bright, and her cheeks glowed; and the two entertainers



knew that their efforts to break the girl away from the sordid groove in which she was burying herself were successful.

Later in the evening, mother and son walked with her to the cottage, and as the former bade her good-night, she said: "Now, remember, my dear, we're not strangers."

"You have certainly treated me as anything but a stranger, and I am very thankful to you," was Valentine's answer.

And as she looked at the dark figure of Blake standing there beside his mother, and heard his voice bidding her good-night, a feeling she had never before experienced swept over Mrs. Amery, and she suddenly woke to a new knowledge—one that she dared not analyse.

## CHAPTER XI.

THE following evening, Valentine Amery, awakened from her apathetic attitude towards life, heard the call of the open and answered.

Out in the still night, with the great, silent stretches on every hand, a sudden love for the wonder and grandeur of Nature possessed her. The bright stars above appeared to call to her spirit, and she lifted her head, feeling a strong desire to cry joyously aloud in answer. The wide horizon showed open paths, which beckoned her onwards, and a longing for freedom came to her there. If only she could fly beyond these vast, silent lands!

She thought of the brilliant world of light and laughter—and sadness. A world made for pleasure; a world made for—sorrow. A world that tried to hide all that was sordid within it, and turn the gay, laughing side to those who sought it—the city. Was it there that the seeker after life would find comfort and rest?

And then she knew that it was not so. No longer was her world in the city. In spite of flood, drought, and sorrow, these silent lands held her in a bond from which she would never be free. Little did it matter how far and how long she might wander, they would ever call, and she would have to return.

She thought of Blake and, like a sinister shadow, her husband's face rose before her mind's eye.

"I was mad! I never really loved him; and now—I think I hate him!" It was a bitter, terrible thought.

The call of a single plover broke the stillness, and the sound but emphasized the silence that followed. A cool breeze swept across the plains, wrapping her round. The girl shuddered. It was like the touch of an evil hand.

She turned to retrace her steps, having already gone farther than she had intended; but the light of the stars gave little guidance, and, after an hour's

search for the cottage, she realised that she was lost on the plains.

For a time, Valentine stood deciding which would be the best course for her to follow; then, remembering the direction of the pathway of stars known as the Milky Way when she set out, she determined to follow its guiding, knowing not that the Milky Way is ever turning, changing its course.

To be lost in the bush is far from pleasant; but to be lost on the plains at night is, if anything, worse. In the forest one has at least the companionship and shelter of the trees; while on the plains there is nothing but vast, lone lands, and stars that but a moment before had seemed so near and friendly, now distant and mocking.

Valentine's consolation was that she could not be so very far from the homestead, as she had come to no fences in her roaming, and was, therefore, still in the home-paddock. Even did she have to spend the night under the open sky she would, of a surety, find her way with the dawn-light. But a night on the plains!

For another hour the girl wandered about the paddock in a vain attempt to find the home track. Strangely enough, she was quite calm, even cheerful. Her coo-ees echoed throughout the night but brought no response. She started to sing a little to herself, and when she had wandered a little further, stopped, and coo-eed again.

With a sharp movement, she lifted her head higher. Was that an answer? She called again, and this time, from some distance to the left of her, came an unmistakeable echo in a man's voice.

The girl swung round; but a wall of darkness rose before her till, like a fairy torch, a red light glimmered in the distance. Towards the lantern's guiding light she hurried, calling again, and before long, she and Blake had met.

The light flashed in her face. "Anything the matter?" asked the man, quickly.

"Nothing much. I lost myself, that's all," was her reply.

"In a home paddock? Well, you must be a champion, and no mistake."

"It's so big," was her defence; "and there's nothing whatever to show the way. I did not think for a moment that I could get lost; but——" The sentence finished itself.

"How long have you been in the habit of taking these evening strolls?" asked Blake. "And how long have you been out this evening?"

"I don't happen to be in the habit of taking evening strolls at all, else I wouldn't so easily lose myself," she answered. "This is the first time I've been out like this. I can't exactly say how long I have been out—since shortly after sun-down. Is it midnight yet?"

He smiled in the darkness. "Hardly. No more than ten o'clock—if it's all that."

"It seems to me that I have been roaming about for hours."

He placed a hand under her elbow to guide her steps. "Be careful, Mrs. Amery. There's a burrow there."

"I wonder if that is the one I tumbled over a minute ago?" And she stepped carefully as she spoke. "I can't make out how it is that, after wandering about so much, I couldn't strike the homestead or the cottage."

"You have very probably been walking round them all the time. That's a habit of one who is lost," he answered.

"I was walking in the opposite direction when you answered my call," she said.

"And yet you couldn't have been more than half-a-mile off then; but it's very confusing at night. You must be tired."

"I am rather tired," she confessed. "I was beginning to think that I'd have to spend the night on

the plains." She laughed, and, lifting the lantern, the man again turned it full on her face. Blake was amazed at what he saw there.

There was no trace of sorrow or care; rather, she looked reckless, free, and full of life. By the light of the lantern her face showed vivid and alluring, and her eyes shone with defiance. Could it be possible, thought Blake, that she could be identical with the sad-faced woman he had met at Kooringlong during the drought? Considering her late illness, this night's experience should have left her completely worn out; but instead of that, it appeared to have filled her with new, buoyant life.

"If none had heard your call, Mrs. Amery, what would you have done?" Blake slowly lowered the lantern.

"There would have been no alternative but to have slept out here," she replied.

"Sleep out here—on the plains! Could you do that knowing that you were lost?" he asked, curiously.

"Why not? It would be only till morning, and, after all, what are four walls?"

"Shelter," he answered at once.

"What shelter does one need a night like this—as long as there are not too many wandering breezes. A cool breeze across the plains in the dark of night gives one rather a creepy sensation."

"Yet you called for help," he countered.

They walked awhile in silence, then she laughed, softly: "I admit it. I was a bit scared at feeling so much alone. It seemed to me that I was the only living soul in the whole universe. And yet, somehow, although I was a little frightened, I didn't altogether care. It was a bit sensational, you know; and I rather like sensations. . . . Here is the cottage at last, and it seems an age since I last saw it. Thank you, Mr. Blake. I hope you're not annoyed at my calling you out."

"I'm only too pleased to think that I've been able to help you," was his answer.

Valentine forgot that she was the wife of his worker, and held out her hand, saying: "May I have the lantern for a second, please?"

He handed it to her, and she turned it so that his grave face showed clearly in its light. What she saw in his eyes made her lower the lantern, and hand it again to him.

"I wanted to see your face," she said, lamely, and her voice trembled a little.

"Perhaps I should have turned the light on it before," he said, smiling a little as he had done before.

"You turned it twice on me, you know," was her answer.

"Yes," he returned, quietly. "I wanted to make sure that I was speaking to Mrs. Amery; but you have not been at all like Mrs. Amery this evening. And yet," he added slowly, "I seem to know you better."

And she answered in the same tone: "Nor, strange to say, do I feel in the least like—Mrs. Amery."

"Who then?"

"Valentine Hood—once again," was her low reply.

"Valentine Hood, without her old ideas."

"That must be the reason why I feel that I know you better; for it seems to me that I have known Valentine Hood for some considerable time; ever, in fact, since her friend first spoke to me of her."

Again there was silence for a space; till the girl spoke again: "I must go inside now. Thank you again, Mr. Blake, and good-night."

"Good-night," he answered; and turning, made towards his own home.

When the last glimmer of the lantern had died, Valentine closed the door, and made her way to her room. There she flung herself—all dressed as she was—face downward on the bed, and remained thus, motionless.

CHAPTER XII.

ONCE again the world smiled for Valentine Amery. Once again she saw the sunshine. Freed for the time from her husband's influence, she seized with open arms—regardless of results—all chances of life and happiness that came her way. She did not permit herself to think deeply, and accepted eagerly the warm friendship offered by Mrs. Blake. If the weather proved agreeable, every other day found the two women driving along the road in one or the other direction, enjoying the freshness of the open; and the old lady wondered more than ever at the care-free nature of the girl who was Guy Amery's wife.

"How long will it last, I wonder?" she said once to her son.

He looked keenly at her. "Is that suggesting that it will *not* last, mother?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm sure I don't know, son. The whole thing's complex. But I really don't see how it *can* last for all time. The girl is naturally buoyant with life. Haven't you noticed it?"

"Yes," was the man's reply.

"I don't know whether she's afraid of her husband, or whether she just gives in to him. Somehow, I don't think she's afraid."

Blake crossed one foot over the other, and did not answer. There was a slight pause, till Mrs. Blake asked: "When is her husband coming home, Steve?"

"Day after to-morrow, as far as I know," he answered.

"Was there very much for him to do?" asked the mother, reflectively.

"Back to the house for a second," was all the satisfaction he got.

"No, not very much. He has to attend to that mob I sent down south about the middle of the drought, that's all."

"I remember." Changing the subject, she added: "Mrs. Amery will be along this evening. The fortnight she has been coming here seems to have done her the world of good."

He merely nodded his head by way of answer, and, taking a pipe and tobacco-pouch from his pocket, proceeded to fill the former.

"The Melbourne sales will be along in a fortnight's time," he said.

"Will you be going down to them? But then, of course, you always do," remarked his mother.

Having lit his pipe, Blake leaned one elbow against the mantelpiece, and gazed down at his mother, seated there in the rocking-chair before him.

"Very probably I shall go down—for part of the time, at least. I'll send Amery ahead of me to get things fixed up." Suddenly he straightened himself. "Well, the work won't finish itself, will it, mother mine? I had better be getting back to it."

"You work too hard," she told him, smilingly.

"Why don't you get more men, my son?"

"The number of men I had would make no difference as far as that goes. What would I do if I didn't work?" he replied, answering her smile.

That same evening, Valentine was sitting with mother and son in the dining-room, when a sharp knock sounded. Mrs. Blake rose from her seat and, entering the passage, opened the door. The next instant, a man's deep voice was heard:

"Good-evening, Mrs. Blake. Excuse my comin' up here like this; but is the missus with you?"

With a low exclamation, Valentine rose quickly to her feet, and stared at Blake, who was sitting opposite.

"He's back?" she said.

"Seems like it," he answered. "Don't you trouble

to move, Mrs. Amery. Just stay here, and I'll go out to your husband. There's no need for you to hurry off just because he happens to have returned."

But she was already outside the door, and the next minute was facing her husband.

"Do you want me, Guy?"

"Hullo! There you are," he said; and bending his head, Amery kissed her cheek, a caress which she accepted as indifferently as it was given.

"I thought that you must 've bin here," went on the man. "The cottage's all in darkness, an' no sign of life about the place except the cat." Then, seeing Blake standing in the passageway, he made a slight movement with his hand towards his hat. "Good-evening, boss!"

"Good-evening, Amery. You're ahead of yourself," was the answer.

"Yes. Quick work, eh?" was the confident reply. "Got 'em all up, too—the whole bloomin' mob, an' with still two days to spare. Good going, that. I've left 'em at the yards for the night. I suppose they'll be alright there? Old Clifton 'll be along to see you first thing to-morrow."

"Right you are. We'll see to them early in the morning. Had dinner?"

"Not yet. I had a bite along the road, that was all. The missus here can come along and git dinner for me now."

"Yes," said Valentine, moving from Blake's side. She tried to smile; but it was a nervous attempt. "I'll come at once, and get it for you. I had no idea you would be home this evening." She turned then to Mrs. Blake and the man who stood in the passage there. "Good-night," she said, and went off with her husband.

A few yards from the house, the girl stopped. "Wait here, Guy," she said. "I won't be more than a minute."

"Where are you goin' to now?" he demanded.

"Look sharp, then. I'm starving. I can't see why you want to go back there again now, and——"

But Valentine was already half-way back to the house.

The old lady opened the door at her knock. "Back again, my dear. Have you forgotten anything?"

"No—yes—I want to thank you for your kindness to me. You understand, don't you?"

Blake had followed his mother out on to the verandah, and the girl looked across to where he, big and silent, stood. Once, he had been even as her husband was to-day—a hired worker. But he had been a battler as well, which her husband was not.

Mrs. Blake took the girl's hand within her own, and held it awhile. "Yes, dear. We understand. That's all right. Come and see us again very soon, won't you?"

Valentine lifted her head a little higher with a vague movement. She looked again at Blake, smiled somewhat wistfully at the old lady, and the next instant was hurrying along the path to join her husband, who was impatiently awaiting her return. The thought dominating her mind was that Blake, though he had spoken no word, understood better than the old lady.

And he did; for, as he closed the door, he said to his mother: "Well, my dear, it will be some little time before you see Mrs. Amery here again."

"Why do you say that, Steve?" she asked, turning to face him.

The man placed his arm affectionately about her shoulders. "And you said that you understood, mother. Can't you realize why she came back like that to thank you? Couldn't you read the look she gave as she turned away?"

She was silent; and the man added: "'Tis her husband who holds the ropes."

She looked up at him.

"Can't you see it?" he asked.

"It would seem very much like it," said his mother, then.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amery, leaning with folded arms against the table, critically watched his wife as she wiped and placed away the last dish.

"You're lookin' swell, Val. More like you was when I first knew you. Strikes me that you ain't missed me none, eh?"

Valentine turned and met his searching glance, laughing lightly. "Surely you're pleased to see me looking 'swell,' as you call it?"

"Well, you certainly wasn't lookin' up to much before I went—more like a washed-out rag you was; but you're bloomin' now. Agrees with you bein' left alone, what? Looks jolly like it. I notice that y' never call out now about bein' lonely an' all that."

She only laughed again. "Did you want me to weep and pine for your return?"

"You can just cut that out of it, Val. No slingin' off! Tell me—how often did you see the Blakes?"

"Pretty often," she replied; but she did not laugh this time, knowing that it would only set flame to the ominous quiet of his voice.

"I thought so. Was you down there every evening—like you was the evening I come home?" Amery moved a little closer to her. His arms were still folded; his head bent forward a little.

"Don't be foolish, Guy," quietly answered his wife. "Of course I was not there every evening."

"Only 'pretty often,' as you said."

"Not so long ago you told me to go there," she retorted; "and now you're ready to complain of it because I *do* go."

"I ain't a mug," he replied. "Things seem to have turned round a bit. You don't go to the home-stead just because of what I said to you some time

ago. Not you! Of course, every time you showed up, *he* was home?"

"What do you mean?" She straightened herself, looking directly at him.

"What I say!" he rapped. "How often did you see Blake?"

"Guy! What do you mean? Do you realize what you are inferring?"

"Damn well!" He caught her wrist in a strong grasp. "You haven't worn clothes like these you've got on, or worn your hair done that way, for a long time; but as soon as I'm out of sight, back come y' fine ways an' y' fine looks. Oh, I'm blind, I am—I don't think! An' then a chap has to come home starvin' to an empty house, to find his wife gaddin' in style at the boss's place. Ask her how often that's been goin' on, and he's told 'pretty often.' What the blazes am I to make out from that?"

"Whatever you like!" she flashed, angrily. "Let me go! You're hurting my wrist!"

"Whatever I like, eh? All right, I'll make a mighty big lot out of it, and I don't think I'll be very far off the right track, either——"

"Mr. Blake——"

"Blake can go to hell!" he exploded; "but I'll shape you, my fine lady!"

"As you tried to once before!" she cried, boldly; but her lip trembled ever so slightly.

He started a little, and released her wrist. Then, forcing himself to calmness, he said evenly, emphasizing each word by a tap of his finger on her arm:

"You consider yourself hard done by when I'm around, don't you? But as soon as you've got me out of the way, you show a different spirit. Listen! Next week I'm goin' to the Melbourne sales, an' you're comin' to the city with me."

"I'm not going to Melbourne," she answered.

"You *are*! You'll come if I have to drag you;

an' if there's much cryin' out against it, I'll quit this job, an' git another; one that won't be so darned easy for you, my lady."

She caught her breath, and her face grew a little whiter. To leave Diermorne and for where?

"You couldn't do it, and forfeit wages," she said.

"Couldn't do it! I'd do it quick an' lively, let me tell you; and be damned to the wages, to you, and to everything else! I'd jolly well soon let you see whether I could do it or not! Now don't you forget it—you're comin' to Melbourne, or you know what to expect!"

"Guy," she said; and the unexpected quietness of her tone and demeanor much surprised him. "You wouldn't hurt an animal, would you? I've never known you to be cruel to either a horse or a dog; yet the horses follow you, and answer to your whistle; and the dogs fawn—to you, who have never as much as laid a hand on them, unless to caress." She clenched her hands, and looked closer at him, while her voice deepened. "Nevertheless, you'd bully and strike your wife. Am I less to you than a horse or a dog?"

Slowly his arms moved towards her, and his eyes softened. It seemed for the moment that the appeal to his better nature had succeeded; when before his mind's eyes rose a picture of Blake, and there came the demon jealousy, which swept away his good impulses, and brought his bad passions to the fore. His arms stiffened, and his eyes hardened again.

"Sometimes," he said, slowly, "you are less. But—who knows? Perhaps, when you come at my whistle, and fawn to me——"

He laughed as she turned and left him; but it was a cruel, taunting laugh. He knew that she was above him in every respect, as he also realised that Blake was a better man than himself; and inwardly he cursed them both.

### CHAPTER XIII.

THE week following Amery and his wife were in the city. To Valentine it was like a return to an old dream—a dream she had thought never to face again—and it was forced upon her mind how far apart from it she had grown; how much indeed it was lost to her. Nothing here had changed, the only change was within herself. The Block still showed the crowd of fashionable idlers. The same buildings were there; the same familiar names. All was as she had left it.

The second day of her arrival she accompanied her husband to the heart of the city, and as she entered one of the stores, Valentine drew back a little, and watched the passers-by.

Something rose within her; a feeling of rebellion against her present state of existence. Her throat ached, and her eyes burned. She asked herself the world-old question of why these things should be; why the city idler, care-free and indolent, should find life so easy, and the path so smooth, while the keepers and makers of a nation should struggle and battle for existence in offices or in the back country? She condemned this, and the one big step she had taken which had altered the whole course of her life, turning it on to a track that was anything but smooth. She thought of the great, silent plains and of Blake. She thought of what might have been had her husband been true to her belief.

A young woman had paused at her side and was looking closely into one of the shop windows. As Valentine glanced half-abstractedly at her, she started,

and the next instant had turned so that her back was to the other.

The whole street, with the constant stream of traffic, waved mistily before her; the voices of the city seemed as distant echoes. To escape observation she bent her head, pretending to look at some articles displayed in the shop window before her, though she saw not one article there.

But she could not hold back. She remembered certain words Blake had once said to her—"She was a loyal friend"—and she felt herself giving way. The young woman had turned to move, when Valentine, impulsively taking a step nearer, silently touched her on the arm.

The other faced her, stared awhile, then exclaimed in deepest surprise: "Why, Valentine!"

At the sound of the familiar voice, and the sight of a dear, familiar face, tears rose from Mrs. Amery's heart; but she choked them back, and laughed somewhat tremulously.

"Yes, Grace, it is I. Oh, it's good to see you again."

"But Val—my dear old Val! It is such an age since I last saw you, or heard from you. I wondered what could have happened, for you ceased writing. What on earth are you doing now? Are you back in town for good? You—look different."

"Grace, how long is it since we really last saw each other?"

"How long? About three years, isn't it? But Val, what have you been doing to yourself, dear?"

"About three years?" said Valentine, meditatively. "Is that all? And it seems ever so much longer—till I look at you. You are just the same. Grace. You haven't altered a scrap. But heaven only knows what has been happening to me. I hardly know myself. What are you looking at me like that for? Doesn't my costume appeal to you? It's not very striking, I know; but you must make

allowances, Grace. It has seen a good deal of wear, summer and winter, during the last two years."

"Don't talk like that, Val. I don't know you when you do. Oh, my dear, you have altered! Have you seen hard times?"

"You are right, Grace. I *have* seen hard times."

"You have left your sister, of course?"

"I haven't seen or heard from her these last two years."

"But what—Come where we can talk together. There is a nice, quiet little tea-room in the Block Arcade——"

"Thanks; but I'm afraid not. You see, I'm not alone, but am waiting for my—waiting for—a friend—for someone."

The eyes of the two girls met and held. Those of one were puzzling and searching; those of the other brilliant and restless. Valentine Amery made to speak; but, checking herself, remained silent.

"Valentine," said her friend, kindly, "what is the matter? You're beating against a storm, I can see. Won't you tell me? There was a time when you told me everything——"

"Can I forget it?" Valentine turned her head a moment, then again faced the other. "Grace do you believe in class distinction?"

"The old argument," replied the other smiling.

"I don't know whether I do or not. Anyway, what has that to do with it?"

"Everything. Listen! You remember what I was—how I held to the idea that all men were equal? I was a fool! I put it down to circumstances that he was inclined to be rough and—common, and told myself that he hadn't had the chance to be anything else; but it was natural with him, and you can't alter nature. He was uneducated and rough-living. I saw *only* his good qualities, and was blind to his faults. Now, I see only his faults, and cannot find his good qualities. I tried to raise him to



my level; but I think he is dragging me down to his, and I—I'm afraid."

"Hush. Don't speak and look like that. The people are staring at you. *Whom are you speaking of ever?*"

"My husband. Who else?"

"Your husband! You're married, then?"

"And well do I know it! Don't turn from me when I tell you he was working on my brother-in-law's farm when I met him."

Grace hesitated but an instant, then, "Why should I turn from you?" she asked.

Valentine clasped her hands a little nervously. "My own sister did, and you were always so particular, you know—here he is, now. I must go."

Grace Cameron's eyes were beautifully soft as they rested on her one-time friend, and her dark face was glowing.

"Valentine, is that all you're worrying about so much?"

"All! If you understood, you would think it quite enough. Good-bye, Grace. Think of me sometimes—not as I am; but as I was."

"Valentine, tell me one thing: Are you afraid of your husband?"

"Afraid of him? No, I'm not afraid of *him*; but I am afraid of other things. I can't explain. I have just that fear."

"Well, my dear, don't let it get the best of you. Where is your old spirit?"

"Heaven knows, Grace."

"What is it, Val?" asked Mrs. Cameron, gently.

"Do you remember when you and your husband visited Mr. Blake at Diermorne, and the man at the cottage there excused his wife from seeing you when you called?"

"What on earth do you know of it?" was the amazed question.

"Why—only that—I was the wife at the cottage.

My husband excused me, that's all. I saw you—from the window, and was too ashamed to go out."

And she turned quickly away before the other could prevent her. Grace Cameron watched her join the man who stood waiting outside an ironmongery store, and wondered what lay behind it all. Was Valentine such a pessimist? Then, remembering her friend of three years ago—her dreams, her confidences, and her ideals—she seemed to see the shattering of those old-time dreams, and, realising that Valentine had awakened to find ideals but clay, understood.

"And her husband works for Stephen Blake," she mused.

Her mind flew back to an old scene; to the time when she and Blake had sat together on the roof garden while dancers made merry below. What had he said? "I would like to meet this friend of yours." Well, he had had his wish; but—

"Does he know?" Grace asked of herself.

CHAPTER XIV.

"YOU can get back home to-morrow, Val—back to Diermorne. I suppose you're pinin' for the old home, an' all that, eh?" Amery's smile was a trifle scoffing; but his wife did not observe that.

"Back to Diermorne?" she repeated. "But why? I thought you said that you'd be here at least a week, if not longer."

"I will, my dear wife; but *you* won't. And don't forget to be home when I return this time. It don't suit me goin' home to a dark, empty house. No gallivanting, mind you that."

He sat back on his bed and surveyed her. Their room was on the top floor of a second class hotel, and Valentine had been looking from the window to the street below. She now faced her husband, both her hands resting back against the window sill.

"May I ask why this sudden changing of plans?" she asked.

"You may, an' I don't suppose it will hurt me to answer. I want a change of company, that's all, the boss's comin' down here to-morrow, so you're going back. Savvy? When he's down here, it won't be no place for you. The two of you might be goin' gay together, seeing you hit it so well. Don't glare at me like that, as it don't improve your looks—and now, you turn your back on me. Well, that don't do no harm. It's a nice view from the window there, ain't it?" And he laughed. "By the way, who was that swell-looker you was talkin' to in Elizabeth Street to-day? Looked like the wife of that preacher chap who called on you at Diermorne. Remember?"

"It was she," coldly replied the girl.

"The devil it was! So you've struck it together at last, have you? What did she have to say to you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! Must have bin mighty interesting, that." He rose and stretched himself. "You can toss in. I'm goin' to get a drink. You'll want to be out early to-morrow morning to get that train. It leaves about 6.30."

He sauntered across to the doorway, but suddenly, as if on impulse, stopped short, and turning, looked steadily at the girl standing silent near the window.

As she returned that look she saw again the worker on her brother-in-law's farm. The man that had then stood to her as all that was strong and helpful. He had been a lie. Whose fault was that? Was it her own, or Nature's? She had thought she loved him; but it had been only loneliness, and mistaken ideals. Who was there to blame but herself?

Valentine left the window and, moving quickly to her husband's side, lifted her face to his.

"Good-night, Guy," she said, softly, and there were sudden tears in her eyes.

Surprised, he looked hard at her upturned face, then, bending forward a little, he kissed her twice.

"Good-night."

His voice may have sounded a little gruff, but that was because he felt, at the moment, half-ashamed of himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the following morning Amery saw his wife off by the North-Western train. That she might procure a window-seat, they gave themselves plenty of time.

"So long," said Amery, as the whistle blew. He was standing on the platform close to the window, and she put out a hand.

"Behave yourself while I'm away," she said,

softly, with an attempt at pleasantry. He shook hands with her and stood looking after the train as it steamed out; then, thrusting both hands deep into his pockets, he strolled off the platform.

The train sped on its way north-west, and the girl turned once again to the wide stretch of the plains. Every minute took her further away from the turmoil of the city; every minute took her nearer to the great silence.

Because Blake was arriving in the city this day her husband was sending her home. She smiled to herself, then sighed.

"Oh, God," she thought, "how tired I am of it all!" Then added: "Not of life; but of the world—this world."

After what seemed an eternity the train reached Bendigo, where it would wait twenty minutes before resuming its way to the land of vast spaces. Taking her suit-case from the rack, Valentine left the compartment, deciding to get a cup of coffee before securing another seat. She had left Melbourne without having any breakfast, and felt in need of refreshment, more so as her head was aching violently.

Having had a cup of coffee and a sandwich, she was leaving the refreshment rooms, and, in turning towards the train, ran into Stephen Blake, whose train, on its way citywards, had come into the station on the other side a few minutes after her own.

Both stopped short, the man lifting his hat and exclaiming in a low voice: "Mrs. Amery! You here! I thought you were in Melbourne."

"I was—till this morning," she answered; "but I have turned back."

"Is your husband—"

"He is still in the city, and is, of course, expecting you this afternoon, Mr. Blake." She smiled a little mockingly. "He has grown very solicitous, and declared that the city does not agree with me, so kindly saw me to the train this morning. But I am

not sorry to be returning to Diermorne. I grew so tired of the city."

"Well, mother won't be sorry to see you back. She was wishing only this morning that you had remained up there, instead of going to Melbourne. But, of course, quite understood you wanting a change to Melbourne when the opportunity came along. Which is your compartment?"

He had taken the suit-case from her hand as he was speaking, and now turned to the train.

"I am changing my compartment," Valentine informed him. "There were some men, pretty rough in manner—and I felt—I thought it would be better if I got another seat. But the train seems to be very full."

"You are travelling second-class, are you not?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm afraid that you'll find all the second-class compartments the same—as far as room is concerned. It's a pity you happened to get into that particular one in the first place. Wait a bit, though; there's a remedy. Where's your ticket?"

"What are you going to do?" she asked, as she handed in to him.

"Change it for a first-class. Just wait a minute here, Mrs. Amery."

And he left her, to return in the space of a few seconds. "That's all fixed up," he said, cheerfully. "And now for a good seat."

"I never thought about changing the ticket," said Valentine. "Mr. Blake, what was the difference?"

"The difference?" he queried; then, letting her question go, he said: "Here we are. How will this suit you, Mrs. Amery?"

He set her suit-case on the rack above a corner seat. It was a first-class compartment, and there were but two other passengers occupying it—an elderly woman and man.

"Oh, what a change from the other," murmured Valentine.

"Now for some tea—or would you sooner have coffee? There's just about time for it," said Blake.

"I had some just before I met you, thanks, Mr. Blake. Are you sure that you will not miss your train?" she asked, looking across the platform.

"Positive," he laughed; "with half-an-hour to wait."

"Mr. Blake," said Valentine, "how much extra did you pay for my ticket? What was the excess?"

He looked at her awhile in silence; then—"I don't see how that's any concern of yours," he said, quietly.

The girl's face coloured at the tone. "Oh, but it is. I cannot permit you to pay for that."

"You cannot help yourself," he replied, and asked: "Is it arranged how you are to get out to Diermorne from the station?"

"My husband told me to go to Miller's livery stables and hire a man to drive me out," replied Valentine. She did not pursue the question of the ticket. The deliberate manner in which Blake avoided it prevented her from again referring to it.

Blake was silent awhile, apparently in thought. One hand was holding the rack; the other was in his coat pocket.

"Look here," he said. Mr. Clegg is in. I was speaking to him this morning. He will be meeting this train and his way lies past the homestead. You know Clegg, of My-iammio?"

The girl shook her head. "No, I do not know any of the settlers," she told him.

"You can't miss him, anyway. A tall, iron-grey chap, with a scar across the right cheek. Just tell him who—where you're bound for, and he'll be only too pleased to run you out. He's got the best pair of goers on the plains, and is himself a fine fellow."

"All aboard, please!! All aboard!!" called the guard.

"Ashore, one," said Blake, laughing a little as he moved off. "Now, don't forget Clegg, Mrs. Amery."

He jumped from the train just as it commenced to move out, and, looking after it, he muttered, as he drew his brows together: "Why is he sending her home? What the devil——"

The frown was still on his forehead as he stepped into the city-bound train.

CHAPTER XV.

THE following Saturday Blake and Amery returned together to Diermorne, to commence preparations for the shearing, the season being at hand.

The yards and sheds were about a mile's distance from the homestead and the men rode away every morning at sunrise, to return weary and hungry at night.

"When are the shearers expected to arrive?" asked Valentine of her husband. He had just come in after a long day in the saddle, and had not troubled to wash himself before sitting down to the meal she had waiting for him. He stretched one arm, leaned back in his chair, and answered briefly:

"Day after to-morrow."

"Is everything ready for them?" was her next question.

"Yes. We've been bringin' in the sheep and yarding them. I had to ride out to the Six-mile to-day to bring in a mob. There's about 200 short; but that ain't my funeral. I didn't take the tally. Fill up this cup, will you?"

She took the cup from his hand, and poured out the tea. There was something she wanted to ask but she could not bring herself to speak the words on her mind, till her husband opened the way for her.

"The boss's got a cook comin' along, too. Some chap from one of the stations across the border—Bangeree—Bangeroop—something like that, anyway. A pretty hard-doer, I believe he is, too. A couple of hard-doers are always welcome. They keep a place alive, and this lay is gettin' dead slow."

"Yet I remember a time when you never felt it slow."

"Things was different then. That was before I woke up. Wait till the cookie comes along, and see how things look up."

"And does the cook do everything?" she ventured.

He continued his meal without answering. One would think that her question required considering.

"Where do the men have their meals?" she asked then.

"There's an eating-house near the shearing-sheds," he replied.

"And the cook attends to the meals and everything like that?"

He looked sideways up at her, moving a little so that his elbow sent a knife clattering from the table. Pushing back his chair he stooped to pick it up, saying as he did so:

"That all depends. As a rule, the woman at the cottage helps. In this case, you happen to be the woman."

"Is it necessary that I should go up?" Her voice was low.

"I don't see why you shouldn't," he answered.

"It will only mean a hand with the things at meal-time, and will bring in a little extra cash, you know."

"I—," commenced the girl, then stopped. She tried to picture herself in the stifling iron shed which did duty as an eating-house; pictured the long table, with coatless, perspiring, noisy shearers seated round it, and she attending to their wants. A crowded iron shed in hot weather . . . rough men

"Guy, do you want me to help in that way?"

Valentine spoke slowly, still in that low tone. She watched her husband closely; but he did not meet her glance, and continued his meal.

In his heart he knew that he did not wish to see her there, working for the shearers; but—"She's

too dam' high," he told himself, "and wants bringing down a peg or two. She ain't got no regard for me, and if I—just let her see—if she goes to the shed it'll take this uppishness out of her, an' then, perhaps, she'll look up to me a bit more. As it is she don't suit me with her high ways."

So he thought, and then he answered her question: "It won't hurt you, and, as I said, it will mean extra cash. You used to be always at me at one time, askin' if there wasn't something you could do. Well, here's your chance now for something to do."

"Things were utterly different then. You were not working for anyone. There was nothing I wouldn't have done then, when we had our own place, and things were in such a bad way. But you—you only laughed at me when I offered my help."

"Well, then, I won't laugh when you give a hand with the things over at the eating-house," he replied.

The expression on her face changed to one of scorn as she turned away; but he called her back.

"Here, Val! Give us some more tea! An' you needn't look like that, neither."

"Would it hurt you to say 'please' when asking for anything?" she suggested, quietly.

"It might; y' never know," he responded, easily, and stretched out his arm again.

Valentine was determined not to go to the sheds. Her husband had evidently decided that she should go; but she would make no further appeal to him. She would appeal elsewhere.

She waited for her opportunity the next day, and, seeing Blake ride up to the homestead, she closed the cottage door and made her way to him.

He had just thrown the bridle over a post and was entering the gate when he saw her hurrying along the path, and awaited her coming.

"Mr. Blake," she said, without preliminary, "am I obliged to go to the sheds and help with the shearers' meals?"

A shade of surprise crossed his face. "That is hardly necessary, Mrs. Amery. A man is coming who will attend to such things."

He noticed the relief that chased the shadow of doubt and nervousness from her face, and she laughed a little, slightly-tremulous laugh.

"I was wondering, you see. I wanted to know—to make sure. Thanks, Mr. Blake."

She turned quickly, having no more to say; but he called her back: "Mrs. Amery."

She faced him again, still smiling, a touch of colour in her usually pale face. The man took a step nearer to her.

"Why did you come down here to ask that question?"

"I just—wondered," she repeated. "I have heard that women who live on their—who live with their husbands on an employer's property—as I do, you know—usually help when there's shearing or any extra work being done. Isn't that true?"

"It does not always apply," he answered. "When—and where—did you hear that?"

Blake had not moved his eyes from her face. She was looking very girlish at that moment, not in the least like the apathetic wife of Guy Amery. She was embarrassed. Blake could tell that by the way her eyes now met his, now looked beyond him; by the half-smile that hovered about her lips, and by her broken speech. It did not occur to him that his steady gaze in no wise tended to set her at her ease.

"Where did you hear that?" he repeated.

"Hear what?" she asked; though she knew well enough what he was referring to; but she had no words to say in answer, for she could not very well tell of her husband's words of the day before.

"Never mind," said the man, then. "I can surmise enough, if it comes to that. Your place is not at the sheds, Mrs. Amery—unless you would care

to have a look at the men shearing; but as for the other—for heaven's sake get that idea out of your mind!"

"Thank you," she said again; and this time he did not call her back.

Blake had said that he surmised enough, and he surmised rightly. He felt indignation rise strong within him.

"Is that all he thinks of his wife, a girl like that, with her refinements, that he would put her to work among a crowd of rough-and-ready shearers? Is he trying to humble her? It looks mighty like it. That girl hasn't the patience of any meek and mild Griselda, and she'll prove it one day, if he doesn't watch out."

Blake was thinking, not of Mrs. Amery, but of Valentine Hood.

The following morning, before setting out, Amery said carelessly to his wife:

"Well, to-morrow will see things humming. Everything's waiting, and the stores are coming up in the morning."

Valentine moved to where he stood in the doorway and looked over his shoulder and across the plains.

"Well," he said again, without looking at her: "are you ready to do your bit?"

"My bit?" she answered.

"Ay, over yonder," and he nodded towards the direction of the sheds. "A mile ain't far. You can easily walk there and back again."

"Yes," she answered; "but as there's nothing to take me there there's hardly any need for me to go, is there?"

He swung round so that they stood face to face. "What d'ye mean?" he asked.

"I am not going to the sheds, Guy," she said, softly, half-smiling.

"The devil you're not!"

"There is no need for me to go," was her reply. "Oh, isn't there? Where did y' get that idea from, eh?"

"Mr. Blake told me yesterday that it was not necessary for me to go near the sheds. He appeared surprised when I even mentioned it to him."

The man's eyes narrowed. "So ye've bin talkin' to him about it, have ye?"

"I merely asked him if it was expected of me——"

"I told you yesterday what was expected of you! Wasn't that enough? What right had you to put it to him?" he flashed, and his face was white with sudden anger.

"Every right, seeing that it most concerns me," was her quiet reply.

"A nice excuse to get a word with the boss. I suppose you cried and begged yourself off. Wasn't it enough that we settled it all yesterday that you was to go? Wasn't it?"

"We didn't settle it."

"I did!"

"You might have; but you're not my master, Guy."

"I'm y' husband."

"Does that give you the right to dictate to me and set down your commands?"

But, with an oath, he swung down the steps, mounted the waiting horse, and rode off at a gallop.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shearing was full speed ahead.

Every evening Blake returned to the homestead, but Amery's movements were erratic. As often as not he would spend the night with the shearers. Sometimes he would return to the cottage in time for tea; or, again, it would be close on midnight before his step was heard at the door. Valentine was, therefore, left much alone. Nor was she sorry. Her husband made plans to suit himself and they suited her no less than they suited him.

Many a night rough laughter and loud talk drifted

across from the shearers' huts to the cottage, and the girl, sitting on the step, or perhaps seated at an open window, would lift her head a little higher and listen; for generally her husband's laugh rang the loudest and his voice the roughest.

"He is enjoying himself," she would think. "It is a long while since he has laughed like that."

And whatever might be her feelings towards her husband, this thought pleased her—that she was free with her thoughts, while he appeared happy with the shearers.

But up at the homestead, when the rollicking sounds rang through the night, mother and son would regard each other, and the man would say:

"He evidently finds more to keep him there than to take him home."

While the mother, with a little smile, would answer: "Somehow, I do not think she worries herself much over that."

And a frown would mark the forehead of Stephen Blake as he lost himself in thought. Who was to blame if these thoughts were of the girl at the cottage, while at the same time her thoughts were of the man at the homestead. Human nature is strong; but between the two, like a colossal statue, stood the man who made merry at the shearers' huts.

## CHAPTER XVI.

"GUY, Mrs. Blake has asked me to go to the township with them to-morrow evening."

"What's the call there?" asked Amery.

"There's to be a social in the hall," replied his wife. "It is a long while since I have been to anything like that; so I think I'll go."

"Well, you can just unthink it, for you ain't going," he said, coolly, lighting a cigarette as he spoke, and throwing a match upon the floor.

Valentine looked up inquiringly. "Why not?"

"Because it don't happen to suit me, that's why not!" He swung round with one of his abrupt movements, a deep horse-shoe marking his forehead. "I thought you understood that I won't have you speaking to the boss!"

"You annoy me," quietly answered the girl; but impatience was apparent by her attitude. "I said that Mrs. Blake, not her son, has asked me to go."

"But he'll be there, won't he?"

"No doubt."

"Then that settles it. You ain't going."

"Since you object so much to my going with Mrs. and Mr. Blake, perhaps you will take me yourself?" she asked, quickly.

"Not I."

"It is not often that I go out, and I would like to go, Guy. Won't you take me to-morrow evening?"

"Hang it all! I can't be bothered with these shows."

"No, you would sooner play cards with the



shearers, I've no doubt. I am going with Mrs. Blake, then."

"I don't think so," he said.

"I'm going whether you thing so or not," she said, determinedly.

"You've got to remember that you're my wife, and these people employ us. We're dependent on them, don't forget."

"There's no need for the reminder. But for to-morrow night, at least, I am going to try and forget it. You may not be equal to them, but don't you forget, I was."

He took a hasty step forward, then stopped. "Maybe you was; but you have come down a peg since them days, remember," he sneered; then changing his tone, he said, evenly and slowly: "If you go to-morrow night, you'll be sorry for it."

"Yes?"

"You'll be sorry for it," he repeated.

She laughed a little. "Why, what will you do that I'll be sorry for it?"

"I'll thrash you!" he said, quickly.

"How absurd you are!" retorted Valentine. "I'm not a child; but mistress of my own mind and opinions. Thrash me!"

"I mean it!" he cried. "If you'd been a man I'd have belted you long ago."

"If I'd been a man you wouldn't have had the chance—you wouldn't have dared," was her answer, and she laughed again; "or if you did, you'd have regretted it."

"By heaven! Don't you laugh at me, Val! I mean what I say!"

"So do I. Whatever you say makes no difference to me," she replied. "I have made up my mind, and I am going."

And before he could answer she had left the room.

Taking up his hat Amery left the cottage, slamming the door after him, then walked smartly to-

wards the shearing-sheds. Hearing him go out, Valentine came again from her room and, opening the door, stood on the lower step, looking across the plains.

Under the clear, starlit sky, they stretched far—far beyond, and the stillness of the night was profound. In the silence of the plains there is a void; but in the silence of the forest there is mystery and beauty. Such is the difference. The one is as the silence of forsaken lands; the other, the silence of reverence.

Valentine Amery, standing on the step of her home there, wondered—as she ever wondered—at this country which held her. It seemed that nothing could be hidden here, where even the true nature of man asserted itself.

The cry of a single curlew sounded through the night; then all was again still and deep.

The moon had risen, and on every hand stretched the plains—vast, flat, and seemingly without end.

A wandering breeze played for a moment about the girl's head, and with its coming, she felt a quick thrill as of new life, such as had come to her on the night she had wandered out on to the plains; and a great longing came anew to her to roam into the night; just roam—on and on to the world's end. It was the call of the clear sky, the open lands, and the moonlight.

The hour was one of rest and peace; but no peace came to Valentine Amery.

## CHAPTER XVII.

AMERY returned to the cottage late that night, making as much noise on entry as possible. Valentine heard first the door slam, then the clatter of a chair as he knocked against it, and the grating of the table as he pushed it to one side, before tramping heavily into the passage. It was enough to tell the girl that he had returned in no pleasanter a mood than he had gone out.

In the morning Valentine was up with the sun to prepare breakfast for him before he departed to the sheds for the day's work. Scarcely a word passed between them, though the girl made an attempt at one or two cheerful remarks, but his gloomy spirit acted like a damper on the atmosphere.

Having breakfasted, he took his hat from the chair where he had flung it the night before, and went out. He did not return for tea, and his wife, leaving the meal set in case he should come back, made ready for her evening's outing, and was waiting when Blake and his mother drove up to the cottage for her.

"Is your husband inside?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"No," was the girl's answer; "he must be still at the sheds, for he has not been home for tea. But I have left it all prepared for him should he be back this evening."

No further word was said, and the girl, having seated herself at the side of Mrs. Blake, they drove off.

It was past midnight when they returned. Blake let his mother down at the homestead before driving

Mrs. Amery up to the cottage. As she stepped from the buggy, he said, briefly:

"I'm glad that you followed your own mind and came along with us this evening."

"How?" she asked, looking up at him.

The man bent forward a little. "Was your husband pleased at the thought of you going out to-night?" he asked.

"Why not?" she asked, in turn, though she felt her face warm.

"Why not? You yourself can answer that better than I can. Forgive me for being personal, Mrs. Amery, but it was pleasing to see you play your own hand this evening. Good-night."

"Good morning!" she emphasised.

"And good morning it is," he answered, and laughed.

And she, forgetting that Amery's domineering attitude could not help but be apparent to the two at the homestead, wondered how much they knew of the relations existing between her husband and herself.

Everything in the cottage was just as she had left it, therefore it was evident that Amery was spending the night with the shearers, and Valentine, having fastened the door, entered the bedroom and prepared for a few hours' rest. Hardly had her head touched the pillow than she was fast asleep.

It was the evening of the day following before Amery returned to the cottage. Roughly pushing open the door with his foot, he entered, to find that Valentine had finished her tea and was placing away the dishes.

For one moment the two faced each other; she with an uncertain smile on her face, he with set lips and frowning eyes.

"Have you had your tea?" Valentine's voice broke the silence.

Then he spoke, shortly: "Never mind my tea! You went with Blakes last night."

"You knew that I was going," she replied.

"I told you you *wasn't* to go!"

"But I told you I *was* going. Be reasonable, Guy, if you can."

"It's no good arguin' with you," he said. "I told you plain that you wasn't to go. That was enough."

She did not answer, but in silence folded the table cloth.

"It's about time you learnt that I'm master here," went on the man, and he moved nearer to her.

Still Valentine did not answer. She felt that whatever she might say would be useless. She knew her husband's temper. Putting the cloth away in its place, she closed the cupboard door.

"So you won't answer me, won't you? Why did you go out last night, eh? I'll teach you!" Amery's voice had quickened, and his eyes gleamed with anger.

But the girl could hold back no longer. "Teach me!" she answered, scornfully. "How? As you threatened last night, I suppose. Thrash me!"

Her words and attitude fanned the flame. "Since you look for it, you'll get it!" he cried. "I told you I would, an' it's what you need to put you in shape—a good tanning."

"I'm not afraid of you!" she flung back at him.

"You're not, ain't you? Then here it is for you!"

He snatched a short riding-whip from a peg where on it hung, and advanced. As he neared her, the light in his eyes frightened the girl for the moment, so that she threw out her hands, crying sharply:

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me!" And she sprang to the other side of the table.

Amery paused, then gave a short laugh. The sound of that taunting laugh steadied the girl's

nerve, so that, when he came round the table she did not move, but, with head upheld, faced him.

"Listen," she said in low, even tones. "If you dare to touch me with that whip, I swear that I'll have absolutely nothing more to do with you."

For one minute her earnestness checked him; then he again laughed and, lifting the whip, brought it down across her shoulders.

It was by no means a heavy blow, far from it; but with the ignominy of it, Valentine felt as though it cut her in two. Without moving she took it, and the two that followed, without the slightest protest; but her face was white, and her eyes brilliant. To be whipped—like the merest cur. . . .

With a curse Amery suddenly flung the whip to the ground and turned from her.

"Have you finished?" asked his wife, and her voice was quite steady.

He did not answer, and, moving past him into the passage, she entered the bedroom, locking herself in.

A few minutes later he knocked at the door.

"Val—I was riled—Val—"

But the girl's cool, deliberate voice came in answer:

"Keep away. I have finished with you."

"Val!" There was a note of apology in his voice.

But she had said all she had to say, and he received no further answer.

Amery waited a moment, tried the handle, put his shoulder to the door, and—did not push. Slowly he turned away, with set lips and lowering brows.

Some time later, after he had gone across as usual to join the shearers, Valentine came out of her room. Her face was still white, and her eyes unnaturally bright; but there was a look of determination about her as she closed the cottage door behind her and walked towards the homestead.

Mrs. Blake was sitting on the verandah and her son standing below the step when the girl entered the gate. They both looked across at her, the woman

rising and giving her a cheerful good-evening, which she answered. She declined the chair Blake offered, and, without preliminary, explained her errand there.

"It's a favour I have come to ask. I wish to get to the station to catch the first train for the city to-morrow, and I was wondering if you could let me have a horse and jinker. I could get one of the men in the township to bring it safely back to you."

They watched her, wondering, and it was Mrs. Blake who said: "I don't quite understand. Are you going away on a holiday, Mrs. Amery?"

Valentine smiled a little. "A long holiday. I am going away—not to return."

"But Amery has said nothing whatever of this to me," declared Stephen Blake.

Valentine faced him. "He does not know," she said.

And then they understood.

"But, my dear," gently protested the old lady, "don't you think that you're doing an unwise thing? Think of all it means; of the big step you are taking——"

"He whipped me this evening," quietly interrupted the girl.

"What!" The exclamation came from Blake. His mother only stared at the girl.

"It's true," said Valentine. "I felt like a—dog."

"Good Lord!" Blake took a hasty step forward, then checked himself. His eyes were dark, and his hands clenched by his sides.

There was silence. Mother and son looked at each other in the dim light, and then at the girl who stood straight and still before them.

"You have been so good to me," she said, "that you have encouraged me to ask this of you. I have no one else to go to."

"What if we hold back the horse and jinker?" said the man, slowly.

"Then I shall walk the distance to the station," said the girl.

"There will be no need for that," said the old lady. "The horse and jinker will be ready for you in the morning."

"Forgive the question, Mrs. Amrey, but how do you stand for money? If you are in need of any I should be only too pleased to assist you. Don't be offended. It is the offer of a friend."

"I am not offended, Mr. Blake, only thankful to you for your offer. But I have managed to save a little since coming here, so have enough to keep me going for awhile, till I can find work."

"But won't your husband try to prevent you from going?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"He will not know till it will be too late to stop me. He is with the shearers to-night, and most probably will not return to the cottage till to-morrow night."

Mrs. Blake came forward, taking the girl's hand in hers. "Oh, my dear, I'm sorry—so sorry!"

"You can't expect me to stay—after that?" said Valentine.

"Perhaps it is wrong of me to say it, but I cannot blame you for going."

"I must go back now. No—I won't stop. Shall I see you to-morrow morning?"

"We shall both be here to see you off," was the kindly answer.

After she had gone, Blake said to his mother: "I'd feel justified in shooting a man like that. To think that he whipped her—*whipped* her!"

Thus it happened that, when Amery returned to the cottage the following afternoon, it was to find his wife gone.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AND so, as Valentine Hood, the girl returned once again to the city; but it was not the city she had hitherto known. Her world there had previously been south of the Yarra; she now made it north of the river, for she was starting a new life, trying to forget the old. She had found no difficulty in securing a position, and the one she now held, as doctor's attendant, suited her well. The hours from nine till five, being taken up with her work, left her still plenty of time for herself, and she boarded in a cheap, though clean and homely enough, boardinghouse in one of the suburbs.

Valentine kept much to herself and made no friends, though there were times when she welcomed the companionship of the woman of the house and her daughter, a common, good-natured girl of Valentine's own age.

Though they made every effort, with the natural curiosity of their kind, mother and daughter had failed completely in drawing the newcomer out of herself, and formed their own ideas about her, the while treating her with every respect.

Once, driven by sheer loneliness, Valentine had actually accepted the daughter's invitation to a local picnic; but she had derived but little enjoyment and companionship from it, after all. The other girls might not object to having men's arms about their waists and receiving occasional caresses, but Valentine kept herself aloof, thereby making herself feel wretched and disagreeable. She discouraged any attempts on the part of the men to be friendly, so that their good-natured intentions to

make the girl feel more at her ease failed completely. Valentine was more than glad when the day was done, and the party arrived home once more.

"I am afraid that you didn't enjoy yourself very much to-day, Miss Hood," said Dora Green, the landlady's daughter.

"If I didn't it was my own fault, I suppose," replied Valentine, smiling a little.

The other girl put her head to one side and caught her hands behind her back.

"Well, you know, you ain't our class, that's just what it is. It was mother who said that I might ask you to go to the picnic; but neither of us thought that you really would, so you gave us a surprise. I'm willing to bet anything that it's the very first time you've ever been to a picnic like the one you was at to-day. You'd be far more used to motors than to vans, eh?"

"By no means," replied Valentine. "I am more used to tramcars than to either vans or motor cars."

"Of course, you tell us that, but we ain't blind to you, you know," was Miss Green's answer; and the words were accompanied by a sly little wink.

But Valentine only laughed at her and said no more.

Sometimes the girl would find her way to the back premises of the house and enter the kitchen there, where Mrs. Green and her daughter might be busy among the dishes, and then there would be three pairs of hands at work. There were three other boarders beside the girl, but she seldom saw them since they left the house before she breakfasted and had their tea later, before spending the evening out.

One evening, having left her work somewhat later than usual, Valentine decided to take a short cut homeward through one of the back streets. It was long, fairly narrow, and ill-lit, and she hesitated a moment before entering it.

She was not half-way along it before she saw three



Then, with a "Hands off, Rip! Go easy, man!" he freed the girl's arm from the other's grasp.

Equality Road.

men walking towards her. She could hear their deep voices and see their dark figures. As they drew nearer the girl quickened her step, and the three, who had dropped their voices to a lower tone, watched her curiously as she approached; but she looked beyond them and straight ahead.

As they passed, the man nearest to her—a sturdy fellow dressed in dark, with the front of a soft, white shirt showing, and his hat pushed back a little from his face—swung close to her, so that his arm brushed her own, and at the same moment he gave a very soft whistle, audible only to the girl. But the man next to him, dropping back a step, caught the girl roughly by the arm.

Throwing back her head she stopped and faced them, whereat the one who held her arm moved closer to her, leering into her face.

But one hasty glance showed Valentine the most presentable-looking one of the three to be he who had brushed her arm in passing, and with a look, and a slight gesture of her hand, she made a voluntary appeal to him.

He hesitated but an instant before responding to that appeal; then, with a "Hands off, Rip! Go easy, man!" he freed the girl's arm from the other's grasp, and held it in his own strong hand.

"Don't be frightened, miss," he said, reassuringly. "It's all right."

"I am not frightened," she answered him; "but I do wish you would let go of my arm."

He released her, while the man he had addressed as Rip started to remonstrate.

"Steady on, son," came the good-natured reply. "This young lady ain't used to rough handlin'."

Valentine turned hastily to resume her journey and be free of such uncongenial companions, but she

hesitated at sight of a party of noisy revellers who now stood along the road. Two of the men near her grinned, but the third, taking in the situation, said quickly and determinedly, as one who suddenly makes up his mind: "I suppose you're goin' to the end of this here street, miss?"

"Yes," replied she, briefly.

"You're scared of them chaps along there, ain't you?" he said.

"I don't know that I am exactly scared of them, but still—I don't much like the idea of passing them."

"That's all right. I think I understand. You needn't try to explain, y'know. I say! Would you object to my company to the end of the street?"

Her hesitation was but momentary, while she glanced keenly at him, as though piercing the gloom in an attempt to see his face more clearly.

"I would thank you for it," she said, then, somewhat shortly.

"Right you are!" He turned to the other two, who were waiting in silence, with an occasional knowing wink at each other. "I'll meet you chaps at the top corner," he said, and, without a word, they continued their way.

The girl's escort took his place at her right hand. "Do you know," he said, "a girl like you shouldn't be walking along a street like this—alone, and at night?"

"That's my concern. Besides, it's only evening as yet," she returned.

"What's the odds, anyway—evening or night?" he replied.

"Evidently there are none in a place like this," she coldly replied. "I just took this street as a short cut."

"If you'd chosen any other night but pay night it might have bin all right," he informed her; "but take a bit of advice from one who knows and don't try a short cut like this again."

"From 'one who knows'?" she repeated, turning to face him.

He laughed softly. "Oh, I know all right. Don't I look as if I do?"

"I don't know what you look like in the ordinary light, I am sure, but in this—what I can see of you—you look something better than these."

They passed the crew of noisy revellers, who stared hard, laughed, and threw coarse banter. Two of them moved forward, with the obvious intention of stopping the man and girl; but one of them, apparently recognising the girl's companion, stopped short, muttered to himself, and fell back again, dragging his companion with him, and saying a word to the others—a word which had the effect of silencing their coarse tongues.

When the two reached the corner, Valentine looked up at the man before her. All the light of the corner lamp, dull though it was, seemed to fall on him as, hands in pockets, he stood there. It showed good features, and mocking eyes; but bitter lines were about the cruel, strong mouth—till he smiled.

In spite of herself the girl found herself saying curiously: "You surely would not class yourself as one of those men we passed along the road, would you?"

"I *am* one of them," he answered, somewhat in surprise.

"No, you're not," she contradicted; "else you wouldn't have helped me this evening, as you have done."

"Oh, hang it all! We ain't all rotters!" he said, half-angrily. "A lot of the chaps here haven't been in quod."

"Have you?" she asked.

"You bet! But it don't trouble me at all," he said, carelessly.

"For what have you been gaoled, then?"

"For knockin' a bloke on the head when I was happy and a bit tight for cash. You needn't look at me like that! I ain't going to knock you on the head! I ain't that bad that I'd harm a woman, anyway; especially if she's straight, and I can see you're that."

Without exactly knowing why, she said, slowly, as though curious to get his opinions: "How do you know I am?"

He looked sharply at her. "Know!" he exclaimed. "By the looks of you and by the way you speak. Besides, didn't I give you the office back there in the street a bit? You didn't take it, did you? I'm awake. There's no need for you to be afraid."

"I am not afraid," she answered. "Thank you for your assistance. I'll take your advice and not try short cuts like this in future. Good night."

"Good night," he answered.

He did not raise his hat, or as much as move his hands from his pockets. For one minute he watched her as she walked smartly along the street. Suddenly he laughed shortly to himself, murmuring:

"How do I know she's straight? Strewth!"

Then he turned back to rejoin the two who awaited him at the top corner.

This man, known as "Devil" Blair, was the hardest drinker, the hardest fighter, and the staunchest mate north of the Yarra. A man whose word was his bond, who would kill another man without compunction, but forfeit his life sooner than wilfully harm a woman; a dare-devil, ever under the eye of the police; a leader in the back streets; a man whom his comrades declared to be "the very devil." So had he earned his name.

Such was the man who acted as Valentine's guard this night, and as she went her way the girl found herself thinking:

"He'd scorn to harm a woman. I wonder if he is very kind to horses and dogs?"

## CHAPTER XIX.

ONE evening, when Valentine was sitting in her room sewing, a knock sounded on the door, and, at her answer, Dora Green entered.

Dora was resplendent in frills and lace, with a big coloured ribbon-bow in her hair, and an extra touch of powder on her nose. There was a note of embarrassment in her voice as she addressed Valentine.

"I say, Miss Hood. I'd like you to meet my young man. Would you mind—if I asked you—he's down in the best room now."

"But haven't I met him before?" asked Valentine.

"Oh," said Dora, scornfully, "that was the other chap. I've given him the go-by. He was no good. Too dashed mean to suit the likes of me. This is another one, and I'd like to give you an intro. Will you? Be a sport."

"Do you mean that you'd like me to come with you now and meet him?" Valentine asked.

"That's if you wouldn't mind, you know."

"Of course, I don't mind." Valentine rose from her chair, put down her work, and followed the other girl.

They entered the "best room," and a young man rose from a chair in the corner of the room. Miss Dora Green performed the ceremony of introductions.

"I thought so," the young man told himself: while, in her turn, as she gave a reserved "How do you do?" the girl wondered what it was about the man before her that struck her as being vaguely familiar, and she resented the way in which he stared at her.

Cecil Smith had a rather weak face, dark hair, and



restless eyes—except when they looked at Valentine or Miss Green. He affected a wit at which he himself laughed uproariously, but which annoyed Valentine, while it was evident that Dora thought him a remarkable humourist.

After the space of a few minutes, Valentine wished them good-night, and left the room.

"Well?" said Dora Green, in a low voice, after the other girl had gone out.

"It's her, right enough." And Mr. Smith nodded his head.

"And you say that she walked down Grady Street with Devil Blair?" asked Dora.

"Yep. But none o' your gassin', Dora. Keep this to yourself. You know what Blair is, an' I ain't none too keen on bangin' inter him."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid," answered she. "I don't talk. But she don't look anything like that sort, all the same. I can't understand it. You was walking with Gunner Grey and seen them—Devil Blair and Miss Hood?"

"Didn't I tell you before that I was—that I seen 'em?" There was a note of impatience in the tone.

"Yes—of course, you did. But are you *sure* it was Miss Hood you seen with him?"

"Perhaps there are a few more like her sort knockin' about here, eh?"

The slight sneer stung Dora. "I don't believe it was her, so there!" she said, sharply. "I don't believe she's a serap like that at all. It was someone else you saw. It must have been!"

"All right, then; please yourself about it. I ain't makin' no fuss. You know best. You seen 'em—I didn't; so take it your own way," he said, satirically.

But it was quite evident that Dora didn't know how to take it.

Valentine had come to the conclusion that she had been mistaken in thinking that she had seen Cecil Smith before. How was she to know that he was

known on the streets as "Ripper" Smith, commonly called "The Rip"?

Of course, Smith lost no time in informing Blair of his new discovery, and he did this as though the information were of the greatest value and secrecy.

"She boards with the Greens—I met her last night—an' her name's Valentine Hood. A flash handle, eh, what?" he said.

But Blair received the information coolly. "You should have been a 'tec, Rip," he said.

Ripper Smith received the doubtful compliment in silence.

"Anyway," continued the other, "what the hell does it matter to you or to me who the girl is or where she boards?"

"Thought you might like to know, that's all," muttered Smith.

"If ever I want to know anything I can find out for myself," was the answer. "I don't want you to make yourself busy on my account."

"Then you already knew what I told you a minute ago?" asked the other.

"No, I didn't," answered Blair, "and didn't want to, either. I don't want to go huntin' up the name and address of every bloomin' girl I see."

"But I thought—she's different from the others, you know."

"Then all the more reason why you should let her alone," was the retort.

Ripper Smith muttered something unintelligible.

"What's that?" quickly asked Blair.

And the other answered, sullenly: "I said that there are two kinds o' fools, an' you're sure one of them."

"There are three kinds of fighters, and I'm the whole bang lot! An' if you wasn't half-tight, or if I wasn't sober, I'd soon prove it. And look here, Rip, I'll prove it mighty quick now if you don't just shut your mouth!"

He advanced threateningly, and Rip said no more. He knew Devil Blair.

Dora Green's restless mind demanded satisfaction of some sort since Smith had told her of Valentine and Blair, and there seemed to be but one way of obtaining it; so, one day, she asked of Valentine:

"Miss Hood, do you ever pass Armstrong Brothers on your way to and from work?"

"I don't know that I do, I'm sure. Who are Armstrong Brothers?" was the reply.

"They have yards—carrier-yards—near Grady Street, where Jack Blair works. Didn't you know that?"

"I know Grady Street well enough; but who on earth is Jack Blair?" laughed Valentine.

Dora was more puzzled than ever. "You must have a double, Miss Hood," she said, slowly. "Do you know what I have heard?" And she laughed as though the thing were unbelievable.

"What have you heard?" asked the other girl, looking curiously at her, a wondering frown on her forehead.

"That you and Jack Blair was seen walking together down Grady Street," replied Dora.

"Wherever did you hear that?" asked Valentine, surprised.

"I just heard one of the men say it. He seen you," said Dora, guardedly.

Valentine was beginning to see light. "Wait a moment. Tell me just when it was, and what this Jack Blair is like."

"It was one evening a couple of weeks ago—one Friday evening. And Jack Blair's—well, he's the hardest-doer going; a don't-care sort of fellow. The men call him Devil Blair. He's a big chap, not dark or fair—just medium colour, you know. He's got eyes that look as if they're making fun of you all the time, but not in a nice way—as if he's slinging off at you, you know; and he's got a hard mouth—but

lovely teeth. He nearly killed a man once, and was gaoled for it. He's a driver for Armstrong's."

"It's all right," said Valentine, understanding now, and laughing a little at Dora's description of the man. "I'll explain this little affair that seems likely to ruin my reputation."

And she did; though she did not mention that she now knew Cecil Smith and "Rip" to be one and the same, and that she also recognised in him the informer.

Dora breathed freely. "I knew that it was all right, Miss Hood, but I just couldn't make it out. Fancy Devil Blair helping you, though. He's such a rough customer."

"Rough! I found him quite all right, and anything but rough," replied Valentine.

"Well, you should just see him among the men. He does make things hustle, I can tell you. Wild! It's no name for him. The girls are all mad after him, but he won't have nothing to do with them at all. He's never had a girl; so it isn't because he's been turned down that he won't look at any."

She paused awhile, looked at Valentine as if to decide whether or not it would be wise for her to say what was in her mind; then, deciding that it would be altogether *unwise*, Dora, after standing a moment in silence, left the room.

CHAPTER XX.

MRS. CAMERON was entertaining. Her guests were Mrs. Blake and son, who had lately sold their property at Diermorne, and were spending a few months in Melbourne.

Grace, pouring out the tea at a small table in one corner of the room, handed a dainty cup to the old lady and a larger one to Stephen Blake, before seating herself. They had been speaking of the sale at Diermorne.

"And do the people you sold the place to take over all the men you had working for you, and everything in connection with the estate?" asked Mrs. Cameron.

"No, only the housekeeper remained. Of course, as you know, most of the workers are hired only for a season—or a certain time of the year."

"But what about the cottage, and the two who were there?" was Grace's next question.

Blake looked curiously at the speaker as he said: "You mean your friend and her husband, Mrs. Cameron?"

"Valentine!" exclaimed Grace. "Then you knew?" She looked from mother to son. "How did you find out?"

"We were told of it," replied the former.

"Then it must have been Val herself who told you. I was wondering how you could know," murmured Grace. "To think that you knew she was my friend. Poor Val! Did you run against any of her strange ideas?"

"I think that she has lost them long since." And Blake smiled a little as he spoke. "When did you last see her, Mrs. Cameron?"

"Oh, it must be some time ago, now. She spoke to me in Elizabeth Street. I remember she came down to town with her husband. But I have never seen her, or heard from her since that time."

"Then you have met her husband?" asked the man.

"No, I have not met him. I saw him at a distance, that was all."

"I wonder if you know that she has left him?" said Mrs. Blake.

"Left him! Valentine has left her husband! Where, then, is she now?"

Grace was leaning forward in her chair. Her eyes lost a little of their brightness as the old lady shook her head.

"I wish I could tell you, but I cannot," said Mrs. Blake.

The girl leaned back again in her seat. "Where is he—her husband?" she asked, then.

"He cleared off when the place was sold," answered Blake. "Gathered his wages, and went. Heaven only knows where he got to."

Grace poured a fresh cup of tea for Mrs. Blake. "I knew that she was not happy," she said. "I could see that easily enough, but I didn't know it was anything near as bad as it must have been—that she should have left him. Where did she go to, I wonder? She had no relations except one sister, and I know full well that she would not return to her. I wish I could find out. What did her husband do after she left him?"

"Sulked like a youngster for a day or two, was in a raging temper for another two; then appeared to get over it," replied Blake.

"So that is where her opinions led her to," replied Grace. "I had always an idea that something disagreeable would happen to her; but who would have dreamt of anything like this? It must have been—and must be—terrible for her! I must try to find out where she is."

"What, then, will you do should you find her?" asked Blake, slowly.

"Do?" She turned to him: "What would anyone in my place do? She was my friend."

"You were always loyal," he said, and smiled a little.

"Do you remember that?" she said, smiling too.

"I remember, a few years ago, a certain girl whose name was Grace McDermott, speaking of another certain girl whose name was Valentine Hood—and who was her friend."

"Just fancying you remembering it," she laughed, softly. "And I remember a certain man named Stephen Blake saying that he would like to meet this—Valentine Hood."

"And he met her."

"Well?"

"And found that her ideas on equality—that you spoke of—had been the cause of her spoiling her own life."

"Hardly that, my son." It was Mrs. Blake's soft voice—"She is young yet, remember."

"So is he," briefly answered Blake.

"She has practically the whole of her life yet before her," said Grace.

"So has he," again said Blake.

"But they cannot go on like this forever," answered the girl, and added somewhat hesitatingly, "Couldn't she divorce him?"

"Do you really think, Mrs. Cameron, that even if Mrs. Amery did have the grounds to do so, she would divorce her husband?"

"No," agreed Grace, against her will. "I don't think she would, somehow. She would hate the idea of publicity. But if she does not go back to him, which is certain, would he not divorce her?"

"He is not likely to do that—if he is the man I take him to be. He will make things as bad as possible

for her, be sure of that. He won't set her free, unless it should be for some purpose of his own."

"Well, and isn't that possible enough?" was Grace's reply.

Mrs. Blake rose to her feet, drawing on her gloves. "Divorce! It's one of the most objectional words in the English language," she said; "and if I know your friend, Mrs. Cameron, it won't be applied in her case. It's my opinion that she was quite justified in leaving that man as she did—the most amazing part of the whole thing is that she ever came to marry him in the first place. But as long as she is free of him, I am pretty certain that she won't go any further. Still, one never knows. There must be some other way that will smooth the track for her. You are going to try and find her, you say?"

"I am going to do my very best. It will, I am afraid, be a difficult task; but I shall try, at least, to find out whether or not she is in the city."

"Well, I sincerely hope you are successful, and, when you have found her, let me know. I would like to meet her again."

Mrs. Cameron walked with them to the gate, then returned to the house, her mind sunk deep in thought and her heart aching in sympathy for her old friend.

CHAPTER XXI.

VALENTINE was hurrying along the street on her way to work. Being in haste, and not troubling to look about her, she did not notice or hear the approach of two waggons along the right-of-way till a sharp "Hey, there!" rang out.

She sprang clear just in time, giving one glance at the driver of the foremost waggon, and instantly recognising in him the man whom Dora Green had spoken of as Jack Blair. She did not observe a second driver, nor yet hear his surprised ejaculation; but with a quickened step she continued her way.

"The devil!" ejaculated the driver of the second waggon, leaning forward, and staring hard after her retreating figure.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the other, looking back at him.

"What's hit you?"

"Did you see her—that girl that just passed, I mean?" was the quick answer.

"See her! Pity her if I hadn't, seein' that she would have been run down for a cert. Anyway, it seems to me that you've seen her yourself before this. Hold on, there! You'll have that bloomin' post down in a minute, and yourself in the devil of a tangle! Look where you're drivin', man. An' how the blazes can y' expect to drive straight with the ribbons twisted? I say, do you know that there tart?"

"Know her! I should say that I do! What dam' fool wouldn't know his own wife?" was the retort, as Amery untangled the reins.

"Wife! Take a pull, sonny!" was the laughing

reply. "You're on the wrong track. That girl ain't married—or if she is, it ain't to one of your kind."

"Not married! Ain't she, though," was the reply, weighted with significance.

"To *you?*" asked Blair, very deliberately.

"Yes. To me—fast and sure."

"Go on!" scoffed the first. "You can string 'em, I don't doubt, but you can't get me on that string, lad."

"All right, perhaps you know better than I do who she is," came the heated answer, anger rising within the man at the other's doubting, taunting attitude.

"Yes," was the unexpected reply. "I *do* happen to know who she is; an' since you're tryin' hard to make out she's your wife—an' remember, you gave your name at the yards as a single man—perhaps you'll give me that girl's name."

"When it's ten to one she's gone an' changed it," called back the other. "But the name she *should* hold is Valentine Amery; an' if you call me a liar, I'll just prove that a fit for you!"

There was a second's pause; then: "Go easy," said Blair; "who was she before ye married her? An' there's no need for you to yell like that. I ain't in hell, an' can hear you all right if you speak lower."

"I don't see why the devil I should tell you everything—or who she was. Anyway, that girl who passed was my wife, and before I ran against her up country, Valentine Hood lived in one of them flash suburbs the other side of the city."

"Valentine Hood, eh?" Blair mused awhile, then laughed again. "You'd better follow another track, mate, if you want to find Valentine Hood," he said.

Amery swore at him.

"Steady there," said Blair. "You're new to this place; I'm not. Just wait a bit. If that girl is your wife, then why ain't she with you?"

"Because she cleared out, damn her!"

"Hum. How long ago was that?"

"Somewheres about three months, I daresay."

"Three months. Do you think that girl's been here only three months?" asked Blair.

"She ain't been here no longer. I'll stake my oath on that!" was the ready reply.

"You will, eh? All right, then, make your bet."

Amery wavered. Blair seemed so sure. Perhaps, after all, it wasn't Valentine. But again the figure seemed to flash before him.

That evening, as she was on her way home, Valentine was stopped not far from the boardinghouse by Blair, who, crossing the roadway to her side, said:

"I'd like to have a word with you, miss, if you don't mind."

She looked calmly at him. "I think you are making a mistake. There is nothing you can have to say to me."

"Yes, there is," he answered, coolly. "Oh, don't git the idea into your head that I'm tryin' to make up to you, an' do a line, or anything like that. Doing a line with tarts ain't in my catalogue. But—" He looked significantly at her left hand—"you call yourself miss, and y' don't wear no ring at all; yet I knows a chap who swears by heaven an' the other place that he put one on your finger, an' tacked another name on to you."

Valentine steadied herself, so that she was able to look steadily at the man before her. She did not answer his words.

"Ever by any chance heard the name of Amery before?" asked Devil Blair, casually, though watching her keenly.

"Who are you, and what right have you to stop and speak to me in this fashion?" asked Valentine.

"No right, I suppose, if it comes to that," replied the man. "And as for who I am, my name's Blair, if that makes any difference to you at all. I'm only puttin' you wise. You remember that you was nearly run down this morning by a waggon?"

She nodded her head, saying slowly: "I recognised you."

"Nobody would have thought it. Didn't you recognise the bloke behind me?"

"No, I didn't notice anyone else."

"Well, that's strange, seein' that we was pretty close. Anyway, that chap saw you all right. His name happens to be Amery, an' he swears that you're his wife, and is on the look-out for you. I thought that you might like to know. That's all."

He turned away, but this time she called him back. "Why do you tell me this? Did you believe what that man said. Do you really believe that I am his wife? Tell me."

"Yes," was the reply. "I had to believe him. Besides, I can see now by your face that it's true enough. He gave me your name, and I could tell that he was speakin' the truth; he was so dashed certain, though I didn't let him know I believed it. I am not particularly keen on the fellow and guessed that, if you did leave him, you must have had a pretty good reason for it."

"Have you ever noticed that he's fond of horses?" asked the girl, slowly.

"He has the devil's own luck. His fancies are always winners," said the man.

"I don't mean that. But if you work together in the same yards, you must have noticed how he never ill-treats animals, and is very fond of horses."

He thought it rather a strange question, asked in rather a strange way. "I know that he's a jolly good hand with horses," he answered; "and I've known him stoop to pat a wandering mongrel."

"Yes, he was always like that with horses and dogs." She spoke half to herself, unconsciously adding her thoughts aloud. "Never once did he ill-treat any of them, and to think that—he took the whip—to me."

"Eh? What's that?"

She turned her head sharply, looking at him again. His eyes glinted through half-shut lids and his lips were slightly parted.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked.

"I say—is it dinkum that he took the whip to you—that he touched you with it?"

"I didn't mean to say it, but, you see, you were right when you said that I must have had a pretty good reason for leaving him. Oh, he told you the truth all right. I was his wife; but I did not know that he was in the city here. It rather—startled me to hear of it. You are the only one who knows. He may not say anything—he is not the sort to talk much, so he may leave me alone. As far as you're concerned, you will not let any of it get about, will you?"

"Nary a word. You can trust me," said the man.

"I shall," she said, and turned abruptly away.

And that evening, while Valentine sat in her room with her mind at one moment back in old scenes—in which the forms of Blake and Amery figured—following through the months like a sinister shadow—while Blake appeared like a dim shadow on the horizon—several men, amongst whom were Blair and Amery, were in an hotel but a mile or so from where she boarded.

Amid the general talk and argument, all went along smoothly till Amery called for drinks, and the men crowded up to the bar; all save Blair, who hung back, sauntering towards the doorway.

"Come on, Jack," one of the men called over his shoulder.

"I'm not drinking," was the brief answer.

"Come up," beckoned Amery, with hand and head.

"The drinks are on me."

"I'm not drinking," repeated Blair, in the same

tone. At that Amery turned round, leaning both elbows back on the counter. "The devil you're not! Then

when a chap refuses to drink with me I dam' well want to know the reason why!"

The men looked up in silent amazement. No one but a newcomer would have spoken to Blair in the tone just used. To their further amazement, Devil Blair gave no other answer save to set his lips and narrow his eyes. But they were ominous signs, and his hands slowly clenched.

"I want a reason, d'ye hear?" repeated Amery.

"Then you can jolly well look for it," came the answer. "I've drunk with a murderer, a thief, and a forger, but I'm damned if I'll drink with you."

Then the inevitable happened, and all was confusion. The bottle hurled by Amery crashed against the wall as Blair dodged it and sprang for the other.

In vain the barman tried to stop the fight. In vain he attempted to silence them, warning them of the consequences, and of what he—and they all—would have to pay if the police were to come along.

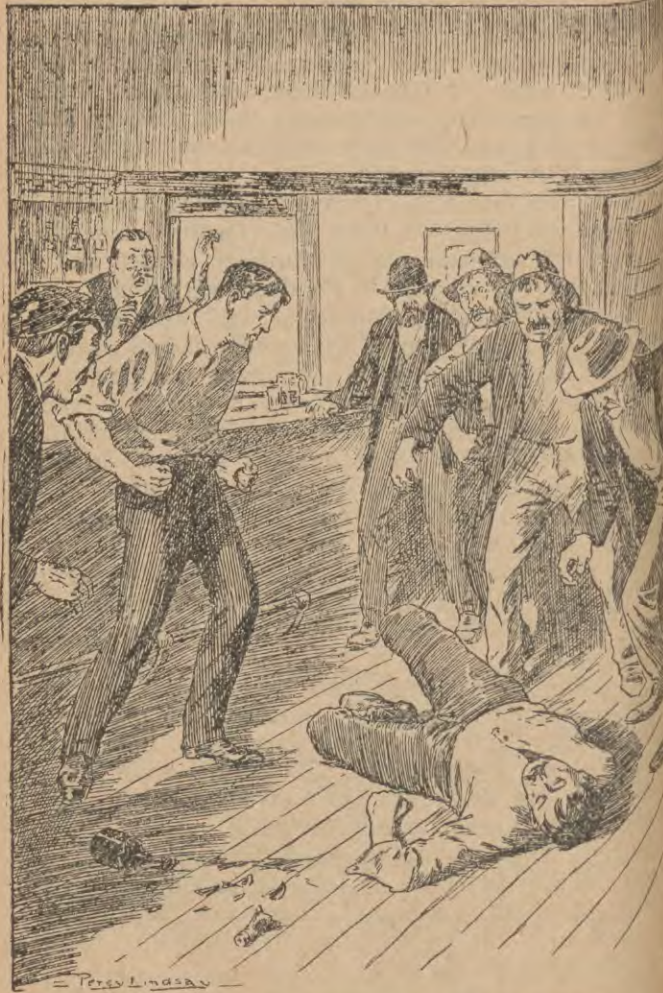
"It will cost me my license!" he cried. But they paid no heed to him.

The men crowded round, pushing and encouraging, and it was by no means strange that all encouragement should be for Devil Blair—just because he was Devil Blair.

In build the two men were well-matched, though Blair was slightly taller than the other. Amery swore continuously, and his attacks were fierce, but blind. Blair swore occasionally. His blows were more deliberate, but he fought like a savage, in a way that had helped to earn for him his name.

A blow from the fist of Amery brought the blood from the other's mouth, and for an instant staggered him, but the next moment Amery had crashed back to the floor. The force of the other's left had found its mark between his eyes.

The man lay his length on the floor, motionless. Blair, blood covering his mouth and chin and staining



But the next moment Amery had crashed to the floor.  
*Equality Road.*

his shirt-front, stood above him, his body bent and his hands still clenched.

The only sound now to be heard was deep, heavy breathing. The whisper of one man—"Strewth! What a stunner!"—sounded as if it had been shouted across the room.

Then Blair straightened himself, placed the back of a hand to his bleeding mouth, laughed shortly, and turned to the bar.

"Hand us some water," he said, "and then you can fill one up for me—a long beer. He paused, laughed again, then: "It's worth a whisky; make it a nobbler," he said.

Two of the men were bending over Amery, while the others curiously watched him, casting side glances at the victor. Then one of the men, lifting the fallen one up, propped him against the wall.

"He'll be all right after a spell," he said, carelessly. "It's a good knock-out, that's all. He'll think he's got a dozen bloomin' heads when he wakes up again."

One called aloud for drinks, but Blair lifted his head sharply and looked about him. "Just wait a bit, you chaps," he said. "The next drinks are on me, but I drink this one—alone."

Later, two of the men assisted Amery to his place of board, and they were met with a torrent of abuse from the gentle (?) landlady when she opened the door to them. It was not a reception that called for delay, and, having deposited their man upon his bed, they took their departure without any further delay.

And only three streets away Valentine was sleeping peacefully.



AMERY lost no time in finding out where Valentine boarded. This was easy enough to do, seeing that they both were residing in the same suburb, and in streets fairly close together. Also, Valentine daily passed the place where her husband worked, so that they could not help but meet some time or other.

The man was driving out of the yards one morning when the girl was passing along the opposite side of the street, and, as if he had called to her, she turned and faced him.

For an instant, it was evident that she did not recognise him, disfigured as he was by two black eyes and swollen lips, but, in spite of this, he had, the next minute, the satisfaction of seeing a new expression come over her face. She turned sharply from him and hastened her step.

"Thinks I'm goin' to run after her, does she?" he told himself. "Don't you go an' trouble yourself about that, my lady. I ain't going to chase you up. All I want to know is where's your pozzy? At least, I'll keep my eye on you. If you think you're goin' to play the grand lady here, I'll soon knock some of the conceit out of you. I'll jolly well watch you!" And he did.

Amery was out of his element in the city. Amid its turmoil he was completely lost. The crowds, company and temptations played havoc with his unstable mind. In the silence of the plains and the bush, where man touches at the heart of Nature, and communes so often with himself, the silence becomes part of his very soul. If he is strong-willed, and an earnest thinker, his character will prove itself strong and true. If he is incapable of deep thought, and allows himself to drift with the tide, caring not whither it may lead him, then, at first opportunity, when a life of gaiety and companionship presents itself, he tumbles headlong into it, as a child into some new, exciting game. Such a

man looks no higher than his own level, and sometimes his gaze will wander to the mire.

And of the latter was Guy Amery. Once in the city he became a frequenter of the bar and of the streets, one of a gang of roughs. What good qualities had been his on the plains were now completely obscured by the city element. Much though he desired to become the leader of the gang, Blair's personality and reputation held undisputed sway. This man was all the others desired to be; something of which they were—something of which they were not. His nature held something sterling that the others recognised, without altogether understanding it, or where it lay.

Blair would give his last shilling to a mate in trouble or in poverty, and many a kind deed, seemingly incapable of such a character as he possessed, was his. He blamed no one for his position in life. When he was goaled he knew in his heart that he was let off lightly, considering the seriousness of his crime. Whenever he "did his dash" he was ready to pay for it, if caught and held. But the most remarkable phase of his character was his regard for womankind.

Like Amery, he was alone in life. As a lad, he and his father had quarrelled. Their natures were too much alike to agree; so at the age of sixteen, the boy cleared out, got work at one of the factories, cut himself off from home, and took to the streets. In this atmosphere he sprang up into manhood, and established himself. What became of his parents and brother he did not know, nor did it much trouble him, since it suited better his independent spirit to be free from family ties. Probably, had he commenced life in the bush or on the plains, he would have shown forth as a man of fine character, steady and reliable; for he was a lover of Nature, though he did not know it. There were times when, had he permitted it, his thoughts would have shown him plainly to himself; but he shook off these feelings, called himself something worse than a fool for "mooching and mooning" and joined the push, where

such thoughts could not live, and would soon be forgotten.

Valentine was weary of the city. To her it was the loneliest place on earth. In the constant bustle, crowds and glamour, there was no companionship for her. The other side of the river, perhaps, might hold old friends and acquaintances, but there she dared not go. Often she would think of silent places, where the calmness and great silence itself acted as peace-bringers, and she would permit her thoughts to carry her back to these places, and to the side of another, and that other would not be Guy Amery, her husband.

The girl was inclined to be morbid, as are all who see ideals shattered. She pictured things worse than they actually were; but that was because she could not go against herself. It surprised her that she had seen and heard nothing further of Amery since she had passed him that morning in the street. At first knowledge of his presence in the suburb she had decided to move elsewhere; but then she argued with herself:

"What is the use? One place is as good as another, and he is somewhere—wherever I may be. At least, he can do me no harm and I can go my own way, free of him. He cannot make me go back to him. I know no peace of mind wherever I go, so what difference does it make where I be?"

And so she had stayed.

But she felt the loneliness. It was beginning to tell on her to such an extent that her feelings were becoming unbearable. The result of it was that, one evening, she asked Dora Green to accompany her to a theatre, and after that one night, Valentine found things much easier. The two girls were drawn closer to each other and would often go out walking together during the cool of the evening.

Dora was glad of Valentine's companionship, and confided trustingly in her.

"You know," she said once, "I couldn't be

bothered with that Cecil Smith fellow. I got fair sick and tired of him. It was him who said that he seen you and Jack Blair walking together. I let him slide; but there are plenty of other chaps to choose from—when I want a bloke again." She looked sideways at Valentine. "What about yourself, Miss Hood? Ever thought of a boy?" And she gave her cunning little wink.

Valentine turned to her, laughed a little, and shook her head. "Dora," she said, after a slight pause; "I believe you have a reputation for getting men tangled up in your heart and then letting them 'slide,' as you call it."

Dora laughed merrily. "It don't hurt to try the lot," she said, mischievously. "One doesn't get tired so quickly, then, of having a good time with them."

Two men were leaning against the lamp-post at the corner of the street, and one of them called out as the girls passed. Dora gave a sharp reply and tossed her head, whereat, both men laughed; but Valentine's own head was bent. She had recognised one of the two as Amery.

"Now, if they hadn't been drinking, they might have been all right," said Dora. "That Connelly is a decent enough chap when he is sober. I don't know the other very well, but have seen him about a bit lately, that's all. He looks all right, and nice-looking, too; did you notice? They're not really tight, you know, but they are not really sober, neither."

And though Valentine felt her whole soul crying out against it all still she said nothing.

"Dora's straight, even if she is common," was her defence; "and I can't stand any more of this terrible loneliness. It would drive me mad."

When the girls returned the two men were still there, and as Valentine and Dora passed one of the men stepped forward.

"You two girls look lonely, Dora," he said. "We'll just come along with you."

"You needn't trouble yourselves," was Dora's retort, as she made to push past him.

"Come on, Dora, don't go hard," he said, putting out an arm. "You've cut out the Rip, so I'm going to try my hand. My pal there'll look after your friend."

Dora looked back at Valentine, who met that glance, but said nothing and gave no sign. What could she say with Amery standing there at her side, steadily watching her? What would be the result did she refuse? While Connelly was "making up" to Dora Amery had whispered to Valentine:

"An' ain't it a man's place to see his own wife home?"

"Come on, then," said Dora, impatiently to Connelly. "But none of your fooling, mind you!"

And while she and her escort went on ahead Valentine and Amery followed in silence, till Amery said, as casually as if they were continuing a conversation, though he kept his voice lowered:

"Tell me, Val—how did that chap Blair come to know your name?"

"I was not aware of the fact that he did know it," replied Valentine.

"You can't stuff that down my throat, old girl. He tried to do the same thing. He knew your name all right; but tried hard to make out that you wasn't Valentine Hood—or, as it should be—Valentine Amery. Why the devil did he try to keep me off your track? You know Blair right enough. You can't bluff me."

"I happen to know the man you mean. He did me a slight service once."

"The devil he did! An' then he took it out on me. Come out of that iceberg! You're no better than the rest of us now, whatever you might have been once," sneered the man. "I suppose you thought that you was very clever clearin' out an' leavin' me as you did, didn't you? Well, you see, you ain't

clear of me yet, after all."

Valentine did not answer.

"So you still know how to keep your tongue tied, eh? That's an old habit of yours, I remember. I wonder what all the folks hereabouts would think if I was to tell 'em that we was married—you an' me?" said Amery, slowly.

The girl still remained silent, walking with head upheld, and eyes looking straight ahead. Her companion looked sideways at her.

"Cause a little surprise, eh?" he went on. "I've heard some of the blokes speak of you as a flash tart. If I was to tell 'em that you was my wife, an' no better than they are, that would bring you down slap-bang in their opinions a bit, wouldn't it?"

She gave him a swift glance of scorn, and promptly declared: "It *would*. I don't doubt that in the least. The fact that I was *your* wife would do it quickly enough. Are you trying to threaten me?"

He laughed shortly. "Wouldn't think of it, my dear. Wouldn't like to hurt your feelings, y' know. You're workin' with Dr. Cary, ain't you? I think I've heard something about it. Wouldn't be too bad a job that, I should think. Does he pay you good wages? He's pretty flush—like all them doctors, and could afford to give you high cash."

Dora Green and Connelly were laughing and talking ahead of them, and now, having reached the gate of the former's house, they stopped, waiting for the other two to come up with them.

"What Dr. Cary pays me is no concern whatever of yours," was Valentine's answer to Amery, as they reached the others, and without troubling to say good-night she entered the house, followed shortly afterwards by Dora.

Valentine, bidding the other girl good-night, went straight on to her room, to the other's disappointment.

"There's such a lot I wanted to ask her, too," said Dora to herself, as she turned towards her own room.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

"YOU know that chap who was with Pat Connelly the other night—the one that seen you home?"

Dora Green carefully folded a pleat in her skirt as she spoke. She was sitting on the step of the verandah, while Valentine stood against a post at her side.

"Yes," came the answer to Dora's question.

"He was nice-looking, wasn't he? Did you like him? I thought that he seemed decent enough, what I seen of him. But he said something to you, didn't he?"

"He certainly wasn't dumb; but if you're going to ask questions like that," warned Valentine, laughing, "I'll soon be asking what Pat Connelly said to you."

Dora tossed her head. "His talk don't count for much," she said; "but you seemed a bit riled when we got home, so I knew that the other chap must have said something to annoy you. Do you know Mary Martin at all?" she asked, then.

"No," answered Valentine. "At least, not that I know of."

"She ain't much to write home about, anyway. Just a cheap piece who lives round the corner from here, and as hard as nails. You must have seen her about some time or another, because she's always knocking round the streets. Well, that chap I was speaking of—Amery, his name is—he's trying to do a line with her; or what's more likely, she's trying to do one with him."

"How do you know?" Valentine's voice was slower than usual.

"Everybody can see it. They're always about the streets together, and I've seen him with my own eyes going to the place where she lives. Pat saw them together at the Botanical Gardens last Sunday afternoon, and he said that Mary Martin was done up to the nines, too."

"People imagine a lot, and like to talk. They'll make a mountain out of an ant-hill for something to gossip about. But what do you say? Do you think anything is likely to come of it, because this man Amery and Mary Martin have been seen together?"

"It's hard to say, because, as you said, people do talk. Though all the same they seem to be going pretty strong, mind you, though what he can see in a piece like her beats me."

Dora yawned over the last words, and, hearing her mother's voice calling to her from indoors, rose from the step on which she had been seated and went inside.

The mask of indifference dropped from Valentine's face. "What will come of it? What does he intend to do?" was her constant thought.

The next time she saw Amery it was in the outer city. He was seated on his lorry, leaning forward and talking to a girl who, with one hand resting on the wheel, was looking up at him and laughing. She was a common, Irish type of girl, with a tam-o'-shanter stuck at an angle over her frizzed hair, hard eyes, and a loose mouth. A girl whom Valentine immediately recognised as having seen several times about Grady Street when on her way to her boarding-house. At any other time she would have taken no notice whatever of the man talking to a girl, but—Dora's words came back to her.

"She must be Mary Martin," thought Valentine.

She had hoped to pass by unseen, but knew, by a short expressive cough given by the man, that he had seen her. She did not look his way, however, but passed on.

Miss Mary Martin frowned. "It's that flash tart

from round our way," she said. "Don't you be doing that again or you'll be getting the kick-off mighty quick, let me tell you. I don't stand for no man of mine making up to another girl, especially a weak, stuck-up sort like that piece. It's no dam' good to me, so you just mind that."

Amery smiled at her. "Now, don't go an' get riled, Mary. Don't go hard on a chap like that. Do you think it's likely that I'd look at another tart while you're about? Hardly. And as for the one that's just passed, I only coughed to annoy her; you might've known that. I know she's stuck-up. Didn't you see how quickly she did a get?"

The girl looked doubtful. "Well, you know the right thing to do, and you know what to shy off, if you want to keep hold of me." She stepped back from the lorry, still looking up at him. "You know me," she said.

"Yes, I know you, all right," replied the man. "So long, Molly. I'll see you to-night."

And, with a wave of the hand, he drove off, well pleased with himself, and more than pleased that Valentine had happened to pass when she did. It was what he had been waiting for during these last two weeks. What would she think when she understood the footing on which he and Mary Martin stood? The game was beginning to prove rather interesting.

One evening, Valentine met Amery alone in the street and stopped him.

The man did not speak, only put his hand to the bowl of his pipe, bit on the stem, and looked at her in silence, a questioning look in his eyes, a slight, cynical smile playing about his lips.

The girl found it hard to say what was in her mind, but she made an effort: "Do you know what the people are saying about you and—Mary Martin?"

"Do you?" he returned.

"I am not deaf," she answered.

"Neither 'm I. Well, my dear, what of it, eh?"

"Are you going to allow it to go on?" she asked. "You know what it means."

"It don't signify," he replied, easily.

"Does she know that you're a married man?"

He moved the pipe from between his lips and grinned. "So you want to remind me of that, do you?"

"I would like above everything else to be able to forget it. I only want to remind you, so that I may know just what you are going to do," said the girl.

"My dear Val, does it really make much difference to you what I am going to do?" He lightly touched her arm with the back of his hand.

Till now she had kept a quiet, cool demeanour; now she quickened her voice a little. "It might. What *are* you going to do?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just—nothing."

"But it cannot go on like this," she cried.

"Can't it? Why not?"

"What about the girl?" she asked.

"Well, an' what about the girl? What about Blake, eh? Can't a chap have a bit of fun with a girl if he likes? You had your bit of fun with another man."

"It was your evil mind that mastered you and suggested such a thing!" she flung back.

"Ain't you sorry that you left me, Val? Ain't you sorry? Admit it, my dear. Wouldn't you like to try at double harness again?" His hand gripped her wrist, and she wrenched it free. Had she acted on impulse she would have struck his sneering face.

"Let me go! The maddest act ever I committed was when I married you; and the best—when I left you! Let me go! Don't you dare to touch me!"

He laughed. "When Mary Martin flares up she swears like a bloomin' trooper. You ain't reached that yet, but you'll soon learn."

"Anyway," retorted the girl, "even if she did know that you were married, I don't suppose that it would

make any difference to a girl of her sort. You're well matched. She will suit you, for you're both on the same level!"

He laughed again, then drew his brows together, scowling. "Now don't you go gettin' nasty. I know that tongue of yours. It's none of your dam' business what I do, or who I go with. I'll plough my own furrow; you get your own way. I know that you want a divorce, but you ain't goin' to get it if I can help it. I'll keep you down!"

"You fool! I could get one now, and bring Mary Martin's name into it. Besides, I didn't leave you for nothing, remember that."

The thought had never entered his mind that the other girl's name could be used. For a moment he could find nothing to say.

"You ain't got enough evidence," he said at last.

"I think I could procure it. Anyway, I don't want my name—what is left of it—dragged through the divorce court—"

"Well," he cut in, seeing his chance, "I might change my mind on the matter yet and drag it through for you. How long ago is it since you left me? Time will soon be up."

She left him standing there, gazing after her retreating figure, and saying inwardly: "So that woke her up, did it? Seems to me that I hold trumps now, an' careful playin' 'll soon leave her nowhere. Thought when she'd cleared out that she had done with me for good, did she? I'll let her see her mistake. I'll crool your pitch for you, my fine young lady!"

On her return to the house Valentine met Blair in company with two others. The three men were laughing, and suddenly, in Blair's laughing face, Valentine saw something strangely familiar, that made her feel as if she had seen him before—somewhere, far from Grady Street. It puzzled her greatly, for she could not place it.

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

DESPITE resolutions made after the last local picnic, Valentine found herself once again joining the pleasure-seekers in their excursion to one of the picnic resorts some twenty miles outside Melbourne.

It was on one Saturday—a beautiful, fresh Saturday morning—that Dora Green and Valentine Amery left the house to join the van at the corner of Grady Street. As they advanced towards the group of men and girls, Connelly came up to Dora, while curious glances were directed towards Valentine, who thus stood alone.

A wave of nervousness swept over her, and she did not know where to look. She saw Amery, who pointedly ignored her, standing with folded arms. She saw the girl at his side, Mary Martin, toss her head and pass some obvious remark. She met the sneering look of Ripper Smith, who, with two factory-hand mates, stood a little apart from the others, and she knew well enough what was passing in that amiable young gentleman's mind. One or two of the men, with evident friendly intentions, were walking towards her. Then another came within her range of vision and she encountered the idle glance of Devil Blair.

Seeing her standing there, aloof, while Dora and Connelly talked animatedly together, Blair moved quickly to Valentine's side, checking the advance of the other two men towards addressing her.

"Good morning. Surprised to see you here," said Blair, easily.

"To tell you the truth, I am a little surprised myself," she answered, laughing a little.

"Well, since you *are* here, I'll just give you a little tip: If you want to get any enjoyment out of to-day's sport, come down a few rungs and don't be as stand-offish as you was last time."

"If I intended to be that I would have turned from you a minute ago," she said.

"That sounds as if you're going to be all right, then. You needn't be afraid at all. Most of the chaps here are really decent fellows, you know, and them that are not won't bother you in any way." He looked back to where Amery and Miss Martin were watching him, the former's expression anything but pleasant; then he faced Valentine again. "Listen," he said, dropping his voice still lower, and speaking more deliberately, "it won't be very sporty of you if you go playin' a third with Dora Green and Pat there, an' it won't be too much fun for you if you're left out on your own, neither. Nearly all the other girls have blokes to look after 'em. Now, how about lettin' me take you? I ain't much, I admit, but I consider that I'm equal to any chap here."

"But wouldn't you sooner find a more interesting girl to look after?" she replied. "And one whom you know is not—married?"

"*He's* forgettin' that, so why can't you do the same? There ain't a girl here that I'm particularly shook on, an' you'll do me. I know that you cap us chaps by a good stretch; but since you're not showing a flash hand to-day, well, I'm speaking plain."

She laughed again. "Very well, Mr. Blair."

"Oh, I say! Don't do that!" he protested.

"Do what?" she asked.

"No callin' me mister, you know. That's never been tacked on to me yet. You've got two other names to choose from, so there's no call for that one."

"And they are?"

"Devil Blair, or Jack. I don't in the least object to the first; but if it makes no difference to you, I'd

rather like for you to call me Jack. It's not very often I gets it."

"Well, I cannot very well call you the first; so I shall try and remember the second," answered Valentine.

The party, couple by couple, took their seats in the van. Many were the sidelong glances given towards Valentine and Blair; but few were the whispered comments. They knew their man too well not to be cautious about their attitude and remarks. Connelly whispered to Dora something which that young lady indignantly resented.

"He's not hanging up his hat to her, Pat Connelly! He's only being decent to her, and to us, too, let me tell you!"

Mary Martin was sulking. Twice had she passed some remark to Amery about the two who claimed so much attention. The first time, he had not even troubled to answer her; the second time, he had gruffly told her to "shut up!" But before the van had reached its destination, he was once again laughing and joking with the girl who sat at his side; so that she was restored to good-humour.

It was close on noon when they reached Cockatoo Gully. The skies were blue, the sun warm, and the green gully full of melody and sweetness.

The horses were unharnessed and led to the creek waters. Hampers and baskets were lifted and dragged from the van, and while the girls began to unpack and to prepare lunch, some of the men went for water, others made a small clearing and lit a fire; while the rest hovered round—if not actually helping in any way, at least making a pretence at it: since there was not enough work for all hands, and none wished to be considered a slacker.

Dora and Valentine were emptying a hamper of its contents when Connelly came up.

"Come along," he said, cheerfully. "What's to be done here?"

"Get busy elsewhere," replied Dora ungraciously; "there's nothing here for you to do."

Whereupon he caught her by the shoulders, swung her round, and kissed her, before darting off in another direction.

Dora was deciding whether or not to be angry when Valentine, highly amused by the expression on her face, laughed. It was a spontaneous, infectious laugh, so that the others about, including even Dora herself, had to join in.

That laugh of Valentine's broke the ice, as it were. The rest of the girls, hitherto uncertain as to how any advances on their part might be taken by this quiet, superior-mannered girl, now held no doubt. Restraint was cast aside, Valentine joined in with, and became one of them, proving herself to be a most agreeable companion. But her speech and mannerisms still stood out from the many little common touches that clung to the others.

When the meal was over and the dishes cleared, the party disbanded for a time; some wandering along the track leading to the bush; some remaining to rest and talk on the picnic grounds.

"What's it to be?" asked Blair of Valentine. "Shall we stay here, or follow the track?"

"I would like to go off for a bit of a stroll," was the girl's answer. Then, impulsively, she added. "I am in my element here. To me, the bush is always a wonderful thing."

Together they set off along the track, following the others.

"When I get to places like this," said the man slowly, having lit his pipe, "I always like to be alone. A rum idea, ain't it? Don't laugh, will you—but somehow, I get the maddest idea sometimes that I'll clear out of the city one of these days, and live a hermit's life here. I'm mighty glad that you didn't suggest stayin' back there on the picnic-

ground. I wanted to get away into the bush for a bit, too."

She stopped. "If you would sooner be alone, as you said; then you don't require my company at all."

"Go easy! I didn't mean nothin' like that—" pointing ahead. "We're just followin' the mob. Then he saw the depth of laughter in her eyes, and knew that she was but joking. "Look," he went on, Listen to 'em laughing and shouting! What I meant was—I'd like to get away from all that when I'm in a place like this. Strikes me that people ain't got no right to make a bally noise like that in the bush." He paused but an instant, then continued: "At the last picnic here, I wandered off on my own, and sat down near the track, right away from all the rest. It suited me right to the ground—till a bloomin' motor-car came whizzing and whirrin' along the track, and put the killer on it all. It was murder!"

"You think that anything like that frightens away the Spirit of the Bush?" she said, looking curiously at him. "You're a peculiar man. I didn't know you were such a lover of Nature. You have poetical thoughts, though you do not know it."

"Strewth!" he laughed, mocking.

"It's true. But you don't know your own self. You said that you sometimes feel like leaving the city for this. Why don't you, then?"

"Because I can't. The streets get a hold on one. Besides, there ain't no beer in the bush."

"There is something far better. Must you have beer?"

"A spree once a week at least, and a scrap now and again; else life's no good to me. It's what I've always had; an' what I'll always want," he said.

"That's the trouble. You should get away from it all. Why cannot you let your better nature live?" she asked.



"Eh? What do you mean?"

She did not answer his question; but changed the subject: "The people will have something to talk about for some time now—the people round and about Grady Street, I mean."

"You mean about you an' me?" he said.

"Yes," was her reply.

"They won't say nothin' to me, you can bet your life on that. Would you care for their talk?"

"Care!" she repeated. "Why should I care? They are nothing to me."

"Well, there'll be no call to, y'know. Don't you worry," he said, grimly.

Silence again fell between them; but not for long.

"You know that motor I was speakin' about a while back?" asked Blair.

"Yes," replied the girl.

"You saw it when I did," he said, watching her closely.

She did not answer straight away, and when she did, her voice was low: "I know it. I saw you sitting near the track there; but I did not know that you saw me."

"Not at first," was his answer; "but just after that car had passed, I saw you back in the bush a bit, leaning against one of the trees, and you had a fern-leaf in your hand."

"Had it been anyone else but you," and she half smiled, "I think he would have come up and spoken to me."

"Likely enough. But I could see that you wanted to be alone. Besides that, I had nothing to say to you. I didn't know who you were, or anything about you at all; and you'd never seen me before. I didn't want to speak to you."

"At least you are very frank," she laughed.

They had been walking very slowly, and there was now no one in sight. Blair extinguished the light

in his pipe, knocked the ashes out against the heel of his boot, and put it into his coat-pocket.

Valentine pulled a spray of leaves from one of the trees, and looked at the man who sauntered along at her side, both hands in pockets, his hat pushed to the back of his head.

"Don't you really get tired of Grady Street?" she asked.

"No," he answered, half abstractedly.

"How would you like to travel overseas—to see other countries?"

"I don't know. Never thought about it."

Valentine stripped the leaves from the spray in her hand; then threw the stem away, and smelt her gum-scented fingers, rubbing them together.

The air was sweet and drowsy, full of joyous twittering and whistling; full of happiness, life and laughter. An extra note added itself.

"There is a wattle-bird calling." Again Valentine's voice broke the spell.

"What's that?"

"Didn't you hear the wattle-bird calling a minute ago?"

"No," answered the man. "I didn't hear anything."

The air was growing a little cooler. The sky shone, blue as ever, above the deep forest-green. The girl looked at her wristlet watch, and exclaimed in surprise: "It is half-past four, and we have come a long way. It is time to turn back."

This time the man looked directly at her. "What time did you say?" he asked.

"Half-past-four," was her answer.

"I'd no idea it was that late," said the man, as they turned back. "I wasn't thinking of the time at all. How it has gone!" He looked away, then back again at her. "I ain't very good company for a young lady," he said, half in apology.

"Why do you say that? Because you haven't talked a lot?"

"I never know what to say to a girl. I suppose you're sorry now that you let me bring you?"

"No," she answered promptly, "I am not. A man who talks a lot gets very tiresome as a rule. Very few men can talk a lot—to advantage. I have enjoyed this walk."

"Dinkum?"

"Yes—dinkum," she replied, laughing a little.

"That's good," he declared, a pleased look crossing his features.

"I think that we shall be the last to get back," said Valentine. The others would take that shorter track we passed a minute ago. We haven't passed them at all; so they couldn't have come as far as this."

But they were not the last to return. Almost at the same moment as they arrived at the picnic ground, Amery and Mary Martin came in from another track. Again the black shadow rested on Amery's face as he saw Valentine and Blair; but Mary Martin looked bright and happy.

The other members of the party were playing games—laughing, shouting, and making the forest ring; for it was a game well-known as forfeits, in which Amery and his companion immediately joined.

If Valentine had loved her husband, and had been bitten by the green-eyed monster, she must have suffered all the tortures of that demon while the game was in progress; for Amery was anything but backward in claiming payment when forfeits fell. But Blair, closely watching the girl's face, saw there only indifference.

"I believe that he could go to hell for all she'd care," he thought; and he was not far wrong.

Some of the players called to them to join in the game; but the man gave a good-natured, laughing

excuse for them both, holding out that it was now hardly worth while, since the game was nearly over. Then he turned to Valentine, saying in a low voice:

"I don't suppose you're keen to fill up a gap there, are you?"

And she shook her head, smiling. "I suppose I am a prude; but if it were anything but 'forfeits'—"

"I've known 'em not to pay," said Blair, and echoed her laugh.

"If I couldn't pay, at least I wouldn't play," she returned. "That's not sport."

"Well, that's said to be the Australian spirit, ain't it? Fair play always."

"It's to be hoped that we always hold to it, then," replied the girl.

Then came tea, and, after that, preparations for the homeward journey; for the shadows were beginning to fall.

The spell of the hour seemed to claim one and all, as they drove along the bush track. The occupants of the van were practically silent, or else spoke softly, only an occasional laugh ringing out to break the stillness, and make the forest leap at the sound.

Most of the men's arms had found resting places about the waists of the girls, whose heads in their turn found resting places on broad shoulders.

Blair's arm was along the back of the seat behind Valentine; but he made no attempt to bring it any closer to her; for the simple reason that he had no desire to.

But once free from the spell of the bush at twilight, free from the magic atmosphere that had bound them, tongues were loosed, a couple of mouth-organs brought to light, and chorus after chorus woke the still evening air to life. —

The stars looked down on Grady Street as the van emptied itself at the corner. There was a moment's conversation, then good-nights from one and the

other, and the group broke up in all directions. The van rattled off, and, save for the usual one or two night prowlers ever on the watch, Grady Street fell again into silence and desertion.

Blair and Valentine were the first to leave the corner, and, as they walked towards the girl's place of abode, the man, for the first time, took her hand within his own. She made no attempt to release it from the clasp of that big, warm, roughened hand.

"Do you know," he remarked, "'y' didn't once say my name?"

She could well have said the very same thing to him. Since learning of her relationship with Amery, Blair had never once addressed her by name. Instead, she answered him: "There couldn't have been any need to speak to you by name, then."

"P'raps there wasn't. It's just—I'd like to have heard it from a decent girl. I was hopin' you'd say it before the day ended."

"Very well—Jack; I've enjoyed to-day very much."

"That's no bluff?" he asked, awkwardly for him.

"No; it's truth," she informed him, emphatically.

"Well, don't flare up at what I'm going to say, will you? To prove that you've enjoyed to-day, will you let me kiss you?" He drew closer to her, and she took a hasty backward step. "Oh, I ain't makin' love, or anything like that," he said; every other bloke will get at least that much for good-night. I have never kissed a girl in my life. You haven't enjoyed to-day as much as I have; and you—made it for me, too. I wanted to kiss you good-night just to show you—it's just that—oh, hang it all!" He dropped her hand and stepped away. "Good-night," he said.

But he had not gone very far when she called to him: "Mr. Blair—Jack!"

"What is it?" He turned slowly, standing still some few yards from her.

"I will prove to you that I enjoyed to-day," she said, impulsively.

He stepped again to her side, and she lifted her face to his. The man paused but an instant; then his arms went round her, and he kissed her on the mouth.

When she entered the house, Valentine said to herself: "I suppose I was a fool; but was I ever anything else?"

Had she only known it, the man she had this night permitted to kiss her was a man she could have lifted above his environment to a higher level; a man who, under her influence, would have fulfilled her ideals; would have proved himself all that Amery had failed to be. But, under a rough exterior, merging at times even to brutality, Blair hid his true nature, and faced the world with a false one.

And as she stood musing in the passage-way, Valentine heard Dora and Connelly at the gate, and hastened to her room before the other girl could enter the house. She was in no mood for talking, and wanted to be alone; while Dora, she well knew, would be only too eager to go over again the happenings of the day.

CHAPTER XXV.

IT had been a stifling day, and the evening brought little change along with it. Valentine arrived at the house weary and hot after a tiring day's work, and, barely touching her tea, got into the coolest dress she possessed, and sat awhile on the verandah. It was so close indoors that she found it almost unbearable. It was bad enough here on the verandah; for the air was still muggy, warm, and smoky; but there were occasional little breezes, seeming to drift from another world—a cool, beautiful world—which carried the girl right out of herself for the moment, into wonderful space.

It was dark, not a star was to be seen in the sky. All along the street, children were playing about, calling to each other, yelling, laughing, and crying. A couple of houses further down, three or four men were having a noisy argument, and a moment later, two of them staggered past the house, swearing and shouting.

"I'll bet that the hotel-keepers bless this weather, and the women curse it. It fills the publicans' pockets all right; but it mighty quickly empties the pockets of these mugs."

Dora Green had come out on to the verandah, and Valentine was not aware of her presence till she spoke. She now gave a short laugh in answer to the other's words, but did not speak. Her mind had flown back—hundreds of years ago, it seemed—to a country far north—a drought-stricken land—and a wine-shanty at the cross roads.

"It would be just *it* along one of the beaches to-

night, don't you think?" said Dora, meditatively; then, clapping her hands at her own thought, she suggested eagerly: "I say, Miss Hood, what do you say to taking the tram out to St. Kilda?"

"Yes," suddenly replied Valentine, in a voice that surprised herself. "Let us go. It will be a change, as it is so terribly stuffy here!"

In one short moment it had swept over her: Why should she tie herself to these back places? Why should she not go to the suburbs further out? Even if she did chance to see any of her old acquaintances, she could easily avoid them—but why avoid them at all? She would defy this strange feeling that held her from familiar places; this feeling of fear that she could not analyse. Anyway, what did it matter after all? She and Dora would go to St. Kilda, and mix with the crowd there.

Fifteen minutes later found the two girls seated on the dummy of the tram-car, and before it had passed through Melbourne it was crowded.

"It's just as well we got on at the terminus, else we'd never have got a seat," remarked Dora.

"Yes," answered Valentine. She was feeling utterly miserable, in the grip of a horrible, creepy sensation. There was a Chinaman seated at her other side. The girl had always experienced this creepy sensation when occasions demanded that she should pass Chinamen in the street; but to have one seated at her side—the feeling of revulsion verged on one of horror.

"Oh, heavens!" she murmured to herself, "I'll scream in another minute!"

But she didn't; for the gentleman from China got off the tram just outside the city. The girl breathed freely; but it was some time before she could get rid of the disagreeable feeling caused by her late neighbour.

The car passed along the beautiful, broad avenue of St. Kilda Road, with its trees and gardens on either

side. No city can boast such a beautiful entrance as the south side of Melbourne possesses. The tram soon reached the junction, where it turned off to the beach of St. Kilda. At the near end of the Esplanade, the two girls got off.

"Shall we walk round in this direction? It will be cooler, and away from the crowd."

And as she spoke, Valentine faced the cool-looking, barely-lighted north avenue, running down to the open beach on one hand and banked with elms on the other.

But this arrangement by no means suited Miss Green. "Oh, don't let's miss any of the fun!" she exclaimed. "It's too dull down that way. Come along here, and afterwards we'll take a walk along the pier. There'll be a lovely breeze there. Just look at the crowd!" And she proceeded to walk along the brilliantly-lighted, crowded Esplanade.

Valentine followed. She scarcely noticed the people who jostled past her. The road showed two continuous streams of trams, motor cars, and motor cycles, and lighter vehicles. Brilliantly illumined side-shows advertised themselves along the lower beach, and opposite the Esplanade.

"Isn't it all just too wonderful! I'd love to live here, always, among this light and show. What fun it would be!" said Dora. Her face was glowing with excitement.

But Valentine was looking away across the bay, dark and deep, where lights could not reach. Dark, like a black wall, was the bay. Deep and real. The tawdry glitter on shores—

"I say, Miss Hood," Dora dropped her voice to a confidential whisper, "there are two such nice-looking fellows leaning against the rail over there, and looking at us."

"It won't hurt them to look at us," calmly replied Valentine; "and it won't hurt us, I suppose."

Dora pouted. "Oh, be a sport. You were that

night Pat first took me home, and on the day of the picnic; then why can't you be one now, and let's have a bit of fun? I——" Her tone changed to one of pleasant surprise. "Look! There's Pat now, and that man—Amery. I wonder what's happened to Mary Martin that she's not on the scene? There they are. Fancy striking the two of them down here like this!"

And "here" they certainly were.

Dora and Connelly were delighted. Amery, too, was delighted, if one could judge by the expression on his face. Only there was a touch of sarcasm in the smile that played about his lips. But Valentine's face was expressionless.

As Connelly and Dora walked a little ahead, Amery, in silence, but with a look that spoke more than words, took Valentine's hand, and drew it within his arm. The expressive smile did not leave his face. He was carelessly dressed, and carried himself with an air that seemed to say: "My troubles about the world! I don't care a damn for it or anyone in it!" It was not an air of arrogance; but one of utter indifference.

Valentine was looking straight ahead. Not a word had she spoken to Amery. He looked sideways at her, and the sarcasm in his smile deepened.

"You shouldn't be so dashed demonstrative, Val. I know it's a long while since we last seen each other, an' went out walking together; but even if you are overjoyed, y' needn't make such a bloomin' show about it. Don't have so much to say, an' don't look so dam' pleased!"

She made no response to his sarcasm. One would have thought that she did not hear it; but Amery noticed with satisfaction the fluttering of the ribbon-bow at her breast.

"Valentine Hood, eh? Not Valentine Amery. I've noticed that you don't wear no ring. Y' haven't

lost it, I hope. Cost me thirty bob, that ring did. P'raps you hold a ticket for it——"

"I have still the ring," answered Valentine, in low, deliberate tones. "I shall let you have it back. You might get something like a shilling or two on it, since you're so keen."

"Thanks. That's very kind of you, I'm sure. But you'll still be Valentine Amery all the same. Ring or no ring, that'll hold fast to you. Can't give back a name, you know. Valentine Amery—my wife. We'll have a shivoo when I breaks the news to the mob. One knows; but he don't talk, damn him! Some day he will, though, when me and him settle accounts."

"You will want to be very careful, you know. He's a hard man to cross; so go steadily." It was the girl's turn to mock, now.

"Yes," he said quickly; "you know who I mean right enough. You was pretty sweet on each other that day of the picnic, I don't forget. The wonder is that he ain't been and blurted out all he knows before this. Did you square him, eh?"

"How abominably common you are," was her quiet reply.

They had by this time reached the end of the Esplanade, and Valentine stopped. Amery stopped with her; but with a single backward glance, Dora and Connelly went straight on.

Valentine paused, irresolute. At that moment she felt angry with Dora Green.

"Come on," said Amery.

Valentine did not move.

"What are you waitin' for? Come on," repeated her companion.

The girl was on the point of refusing to accompany him any further, but, considering the scene it would most likely cause, she followed with her husband the two in front. They passed the lower Esplanade, and on to the lawns fronting the beach. They followed

on past these till the light and glitter were left behind. Twice Valentine found herself on the point of calling to Dora to turn back, but each time she checked herself.

They wandered slowly on in the shadowy coolness of night. To one side of them were the deep, dark waters, lapping gently on the beach with a cool, soothing, inviting murmur. To the other side, one or two lights gleamed a little in the distance; but that was all. The stars which had now appeared overhead were white and brilliant. Not a breath stirred the air. The little winds had passed on their way; but in their passage they had cooled the atmosphere.

Valentine felt all its allurements. She would have been content to remain forever in such a world as this, free from her present companion.

Connelly called for a spell, and the four sat on the beach facing the sea, Dora and Connelly a little ahead of the other two.

Valentine clasped both hands about her knees and stared ahead, while Amery flung himself down beside her. He did not speak, only watched steadily her figure in the starlight there. She did not move.

The two sitting before them were laughing and talking softly, Dora Green in Connelly's arms; but Valentine neither saw nor heard them. Her eyes were still watching the horizon, where the star-flooded heavens bent down to the dark waters. She appeared oblivious to everything; her mind in another world.

Amery shifted his position a little, so that his head rested lightly against her arm. As if his touch awakened her from dreaming, the girl started, and made to move a little further away; but with a swift, silent movement, the man caught her arm in his strong hand, and held it fast.

Still she did not speak, sitting quietly, and stiffening her arm against his head.

"Don't be so lovin', Val, my dear," he taunted,

softly, and drew her arm across his shoulder, bringing his face close to hers. But the girl snatched her arm from him, struck him across his mocking face, and jumped to her feet.

In answer his fist shot out, but the girl was beyond reach of the blow. By a great effort the man controlled his temper, remembering the two in front—and well for Valentine that he did so—and rose slowly to his feet.

"You're dam' particular!" he sneered.

Dora and Connelly had also risen, the former hurrying up to them, with the man following more slowly.

"For heaven's sake, Dora! Let us go!" exclaimed Valentine, in quick agitation.

Miss Green turned to Amery. "You blasted idiot!" she said, elegantly. "You might have known that she's not the sort to fool with. She ain't Mary Martin!"

He laughed at her.

"Haven't you got any blooming sense? Haven't you at least enough savvy to know a decent girl when you see one, you fool!" continued Dora.

"Go on," replied Amery. "What do you think you know about it all?"

"A mighty lot, let me tell you! I haven't lived with her without learning that much," was the young lady's answer.

"You're a clever young woman, you are; but you see," said Amery, "you ain't lived with her as long as I have."

A deep silence of startled surprise followed on his words; till Dora Green spoke again: "You're raving mad! You've been takin' a drop too much, you have, and don't know what you're gassing about."

"Don't I, though," he replied, trying to adopt an easy manner. "A 'mighty lot' you *do* know about it. Ask her, and see what she says." And he pointed to Valentine.

But Valentine remained motionless, and did not answer Dora's silent question.

"I told you so," said Amery, then. "What the hell have you got to say about it now?"

"Look here, Amery! Is that the dinkum truth you're givin' us? You know what it means, so you'd better be careful what you say," said Connelly.

"Is it dinkum truth? My oath on it! You've helped me to do a line with my own wife, you have. A jolly good joke that, but I fancy she's disappointed that I ain't a certain other bloke."

"If I was you, I wouldn't let a 'certain other bloke' hear what you just said," said Dora scathingly.

Amery turned quickly to her, but before he could answer, Connelly asked: "Then what about Mary Martin? She's tellin' everybody that you an' her's engaged."

"Serve her jolly well right!" again put in Dora, quickly. "I'm just as glad as I can be that she's been taken in. I always did hate that sly creature."

"Then she doesn't know anything about you bein' married?" It was Connelly again.

"What the devil's that to you?" was the retort.

"I wouldn't put it past her," came Dora's ready tongue. She looked at Valentine, who stood still silent, watching them. "If what you've just said is really true," said the warm-hearted girl to Amery, "then I can understand how she must feel—" with another glance at Valentine. "And if I had a husband like you I'd kill him!"

"Don't boast, my dear," he answered. "If I was your husband I'd kill meself."

"Thank you," said Valentine, then, very deliberately, smiling ironically. "Am I to appreciate the compliment that you don't kill yourself for—*me*?"

He swung round to her, taking a step nearer. His body was bent forward a little, his hands tightly clenched.

"You! Yes, I know that you want to get me out of the way; that's just why I'm hangin' on. I've got you, an' you can't git rid of me. No chance in life! In spite of everything, you're still my wife. I hold the whip; an' by hell, I'll use it! I've got you strong and fast, an' there's no lettin' go! I'll make you pay, pay, pay till you come back cryin' to me!"

Even in the starlight there he could see the look on her face—scorn and passion intermingled. The ribbon-bow was fluttering and rising quickly. The other three watched curiously her tense figure. Dora was wondering greatly, but her girl's heart seemed to understand. Connelly also was frankly astonished, and stood, uncertain how to act. He looked from Valentine to Amery, from Amery back to Valentine. Amery straightened himself, his head upheld, and a sneering smile on his otherwise good-looking face.

And so, for a full minute, they stood, with only the faint lap-lap of the waters to break the stillness, the soft sounds seeming to beat against Valentine's soul like a dreary, hopeless song, with the white stars above mocking her.

Then she spoke slowly, emphasising each word: "If I had the means here, I believe that I would kill you! I can understand now why some people commit murder. I warn you—don't taunt me any further, else I shall not be responsible for what might happen."

The tone of her words struck a chill to the other girl's heart, and she moved closer; while Amery, for once, could find nothing to say.

It was only when Valentine, fearing the rush of feelings which now began to swirl round and through her, turned away, that the tension snapped. Amery gave his usual short, indifferent laugh; while Dora—turning on him a swift look that, if only looks could slay would have laid him dead at her feet—took a few steps forward, and gently caught hold of Valentine's arm.

"Come," she said. "We'll go back together."

Valentine did not answer, but she accepted the other's company; and Connelly, understanding, did not attempt to follow, but walked off at an angle with Amery.

Amery was moody, and evidently not inclined to talk; only once he laughed as he had laughed before, but there was an uneasy ring in the tone of his laughter—betraying a mind ill at ease; and it ended in a curse.

For a time the two girls walked along the quiet, forsaken shore, with only the soft murmuring of the waters, the dark sea, and the brilliant stars for company.

"Oh!" cried Valentine at length. "I cannot stand this silence! Let us go back to the light and the crowds!"

"All right," gently answered Dora. "We'll go back. Perhaps you would like to go home?"

"Not yet—not yet."

But no sooner were they again with the lively, jostling throng than Valentine, feeling it even more than the silence, whispered to her companion:

"Yes, Dora. Let us go home."

So they took the next city-bound tram car and left the gay, brilliant whirlpool for the darker vortex of the back suburban streets.

They reached their own suburb, and, as they were walking towards Grady Street, a man passed who, on seeing them, hesitated to speak, then continued his way.

"Mr. Blair!" suddenly called Valentine.

At her call he turned, looking back at the two girls.

"Shall I go on?" asked Dora, in a low voice.

"If you don't mind, Dora," was Valentine's answer; and the other continued her way.

Blair now came up. "You called. Do you want me?"



"Yes," replied Valentine. "I have something to say to you. Will you walk to the house with me?"

Then, as he walked at her side, she told him of the night's incident, and added: "You have known this long while how we two stood, but you have said nothing because I asked it of you. I want to thank you for that, before the whole street knows to-morrow."

"Do you think, even if you hadn't asked it, I would have been likely to shout the news all over the street—that you and Guy Amery was married? Besides, do you think he'll tell even now? I don't."

"Why don't you?"

"Because he'll be only showin' himself up if he does; an' he knows that, too."

"But what about Dora and Connelly?" she asked.

"Well, of course, they might let something go. There's no sayin'."

"I don't seem to care now whether or not the people know. I don't even know why, exactly, I've been trying to hide it—unless—I felt too proud to have him known as my husband. They would jeer at me for—for—. They'd say that I was trying to be what I am not—and—"

"But you could still look down on 'em," said the man; "for they don't come up to you."

"But I don't want to do that. Why should I look down on them? I am not a snob, really. It is just that I didn't have the courage to acknowledge my husband. I can't explain exactly what I felt about it."

"You're not saying anything about clearing out from these parts, but, somehow I don't think that you intend stayin' here."

"No," she answered at once. "I am going to try and be away before next week."

"I'll—"

But he stopped, looking steadily at her. The girl answered the look on his face. "Say you will be sorry," she said, impulsively. "Just at the present moment I feel as if a touch of sympathy would

do me the world of good. Somehow, I seem to have got to know you—not as a man of the streets, but as you really are. The day of the picnic showed me that, and I was glad to know you so. You are living against your own true nature here in the streets. Why don't you let it go?"

For the first time in his life the man felt embarrassed. The force of the girl's words had made themselves felt. To hide it, he said:

"I say, why did you marry a man like your—husband is?"

"Heavens knows!" was her reply. "I married him without knowing him. I thought that he was a strong-minded man, and besides, I was lonely."

"Pretty stiff luck for you, but cheer up! Things'll turn out all right in the end."

"How?" she asked, simply.

They crossed one of the side streets, and neither noticed the figure of a man leaning back against the wall to escape their observation. Had Valentine been alone it would have fared roughly with her. Blair was her unconscious saviour.

For one instant the corner street-lamp shone full on their faces. Blair's expression was non-committal as usual, but the girl's eyes were bright, and her lips set bitterly.

Blair opened the gate, and she entered, bidding him good-night. The sound of his step on the asphalted street died away in the distance, and a few seconds later, he who had concealed himself from notice came out and watched a moment the house which the girl had entered. His brows were lowering, and he muttered to himself:

"Not so long ago it was Blake, and now it's this Blair. Blake can go to hell! But—there's a mighty big account to settle with this chap here, and one that won't stand over much longer, neither."

And Blair, as he made his way to his own place of board, seemed to hear again the girl's words to him:

"You're living against your own true nature here in the streets. . . . I'm glad I got to know you as you really are. . . ."

"I'd clear out and make good if I had her for always," he muttered to himself; "just to let her see that—that—"

Then he laughed, shaking such thoughts from him. "You're daft, man! A gaol-bird, and all the rest of it—to think of having her near you for always. You don't know what you're dreamin' about!"

His were thoughts similar to Amery's first ones regarding the girl. Blair, however, was not like Amery. He, at least, was a man. Amery had shown himself to be less.

\* \* \* \* \*

Valentine had come to the conclusion that, after all, there was nothing left for her to do but make a move. If she remained where she was, it meant that she would either have to go back to her husband, or tolerate from him continual insults. Would she never be free of him?

She was beginning now to be afraid of him; afraid of herself—of what she might do if Amery pushed himself further. The limit to her endurance was reached; beyond that, there was fear and dread. It was a terrible thought, and to get rid of it she must get as far away as possible from her present abode, and from familiar scenes. She was utterly weary. If only she could start life afresh from where she had made such a mistake of it, knowing all that she now knew! But she had paid for this knowledge. She had learnt her lesson, and learnt it at the cost of her own happiness.

Equality! Her lips curled at the thought. There was no such thing. Class distinction—yes; but not so much between the independent and working classes as between the man of high thought and action, and the groove-sticking dullard, both of whom can be found in the so-called "upper" as well as in the

"lower" circle. And Valentine's mistake was that she had married one who could never be her equal, since he had proved himself to be but a "groove-sticking dullard." But mistakes such as these are always paid for in full.

The girl was up and ready for breakfast at the usual hour the following morning. Dora, though eyeing her covertly, curiously, asked no questions. She had enough common-sense to know that to do so would avail her nothing.

The air was close and oppressive when Valentine set off for her day's work. Throughout the day hot north winds had frolicked, sending the dust swirling and flying in every direction; but towards evening the wind dropped. With the first shadows came the rain, accompanied by a thunder storm, and the girl remained within shelter till this had passed. But the storm was of short duration, and she set off—at a later hour than usual—for home. The downpour of rain had settled the dust, and purified and made cool the atmosphere.

Valentine, in spite of the lateness of the hour, made her way slowly. With the wet pavement underfoot, and the fresh air about her, it was too beautiful an evening to hurry to a close, uninteresting boarding-house.

A stream of lorries was rattling and rumbling along the road on its way to the yards. The drivers, strong and grimy-looking, were calling one to the other. She saw Blair, his hat as usual pushed back from his face, with damp waves of hair clinging to his forehead. He was sitting carelessly on the box, driving easily the three horses, and laughing heartily.

Again Valentine was puzzled by the illusive likeness of his laughing face to one other she had seen. When he looked seriously out on the world, with cruel, yet well-formed lips, and mocking eyes, he was "Devil" Blair, but when he laughed, so amazing was the transformation that he appeared as another man.

His grey eyes and white teeth gleamed in his brown face, and he looked a picture of reckless good nature.

It was quite evident that he saw and recognised Valentine walking along the footpath. He looked at her a second longer than the usual casual glance of a passer-by occasioned. The smile on his face may have been for her, but it might just as well have been the unconscious aftermath of the pleasantries he was, a moment ago, laughing at so heartily; still, he gave no actual sign of recognition.

One of the drivers called a greeting to her, and another followed his example; but Valentine, having grown used to these ways in the streets, took not the slightest notice of them.

That evening the pavements echoed to more steps than usual. The cool change had called the people from the houses. Along the streets children were playing. At every house, either sitting on the doorstep or leaning over the gate, men and women were laughing and talking, and at every corner, groups stood about the lamp-posts; while outside the hotels stood the largest groups. In the middle of one of the side-streets, under the dull flicker of the lamp, some youths were playing that forbidden "luxury," two-up. But in some of the darker back streets, night-hawks were abroad. It was a night above all others for one to avoid these evil precincts.

Over all was the dull, grey sky.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

THE next evening Amery, prompted by the demon, made a sinister purchase at one of the city stores.

In some of the suburbs there are times when one wonders if there exists a police force. If the police had been anywhere handy this night it would be difficult to say what turn events would have taken, surely a very different course from what actually happened.

Two men were having an altercation, or, rather, one listened, while the other, in the heat of passion, said a few unmentionable things to him. One was Blair; the other—it is hardly necessary to state—Amery. There were two other men present, who watched the proceedings with silent interest.

Then, naturally enough, Blair protested at Amery's attitude towards him; protested actively, but not quickly enough, for, even as his arm lunged out, the other dodged, turned swift as a dart, and ran a few yards down the street. Here he again swung round, and the next instant there was a simultaneous flash and report; then came the chase.

It might have proved indeed exciting, but for its short duration, for it lasted but the length of the street. At the corner, Amery turned off into a lane, scaled a fence, and found himself in the stable yards.

It was fairly dark, so that he could see little; but his trained sense instantly detected—in spite of his own danger—a restlessness among the horses. They were whinnying and chawing at the ground. All this came to his mind like a flash as he dropped from the fence into the yard. On the alert, he listened a space.

The horses were beginning to tramp about; he

could hear them thundering and kicking. Now they were beginning to squeal. Amery's violent temper of a minute before had dropped from him. It was as if for the moment he forgot his own danger in his passionate consideration for horses.

"What the devil's the matter with them?" he said, half-aloud.

His pursuers had reached the corner, and one of them entered the lane. There was a loud clatter as he accidentally kicked against a kerosene tin, and he rapped out a sudden oath.

But Amery had moved towards the stables, and with a sharp movement he lifted his head and sniffed at the air.

"By heaven! Fire!"

Those outside had now likewise heard the horses, and were clambering over the fence to investigate. Here was Amery's chance to make good his escape; but here it was that his love for horses urged him to risk his own safety—for the first time in his life place himself second—and stay.

From one of the loose-boxes a thin stream of smoke drifted through a chink in the door. In the semi-darkness it looked like a miniature cloud. To this box Amery gave his attention.

"Stand back, there!" he shouted to the three who had now come up, and, pausing but a moment to collect himself and take a deep breath, he opened the door of the loose-box and entered.

"Damn fool!" ejaculated one of the men. "He'll be kicked to atoms!"

But he was wrong. In a few minutes Amery emerged, holding the plunging horses by the bridles. His coat was torn, his face blackened and streaked with red, and both hands cut and blood-stained.

"By hell!" said Blair. "You must be made of iron!"

Amery gave a backward jerk of his head as he said, breathing heavily: "You chaps put out the blaze,

will you? It ain't much. . . . I'll steady these—horses."

Blair and one of the others, who had already procured a couple of buckets full of water, attended to the fire which, as Amery inferred, was just beginning to flare; while the third man stared at him, saying slowly:

"Strike me pink! But you're a cool customer, an' no mistake! Try to do a man in, an' then risk your blanky life for a couple of blanky horses!"

Hammering, clammering, and confusion was going on outside the yards, and soon the gate was broken down as more men, hearing the commotion, poured in. The situation was simple enough to grasp, and admiration for the action of the man who had saved the two horses from the burning box was not slow in coming.

"By the way," suddenly cried one, "us chaps thought that we heard a shot from somewheres hereabouts. Did any of you blokes hear it?"

By a swift glance Blair silenced his companions. "Yes," he answered. "We heard it; but it couldn't have been nothing much, else there would have been something further ahead."

"I suppose you're right there," was the reply of one of the newcomers.

"Well, the bonfire is settled, so everything is all right now. One of you blokes must have been smokin' in that box this afternoon. Here, steady up, man! Here, Dan, take those horses from him, they're quiet enough now."

And as Dan took the halters into his hands, Blair caught hold of Amery's arm, steadying him. "One of you chaps get to the pub," he said. "Are you goin', Rip? Right you are. Get brandy."

"I'm all right," muttered Amery; but his eyes were heavy, and he swayed as the other momentarily released his arm.

Blair made no other answer save to again take a hold on his arm and assist him to the gate, a noisy

group following at their heels.

"There's no need for you chaps to track us," he said, shortly. And, at his words, they fell back.

At the corner the two nearly collided with a girl who was running along. She stopped short, then caught at Amery's free arm, looking hard into his face.

"I heard—down near the pub," she panted. "Ripper Smith told me."

It was Mary Martin.

"Nothing to bother about," Amery tried to say, but the words were no more than a confused murmur. He was still weak and stiff, for he had received some hard knocks. Blair had taken no notice of the girl. He said nothing when she took Amery's other arm and walked along with them till they reached his boarding-house, where the Rip, with a flask of brandy in his hand, was talking with Mrs. Fenton.

Valentine heard of it later, when Connelly came along to tell Dora of it.

"It was a brave thing for a man to do," she said, slowly.

"Brave!" echoed Dora. "I should think it was! I didn't know he had it in him."

"Perhaps, had it been for anything but horses——" commenced Valentine; then stopped, since it would be a contemptible thing after all, to attempt to belittle a man's courageous action. "Perhaps I should go up to see him," she said. "I don't know exactly what to do." But in the end, she saw that there was nothing for her to do.

But neither knew anything of the shooting affray. How could they, seeing that four alone knew of it—two of whom would not speak, and two of whom were bound to silence by their leader?

But the next evening saw Amery again on the streets, his iron constitution little the worse after the incident of the evening before. That Blair should let the shooting affair pass, and that he should have

sworn the others to silence, more than surprised him; but he was by no means grateful to the other for the act of clemency. It seemed rather remarkable that Blair should treat with such apparent coolness what might have been a tragedy; but Amery's action in saving the horses from the burning stable the night before spoke in favour of the would-be murderer; besides, what held Blair's hand was the thought of Valentine Amery. If Amery were convicted, her name would necessarily be involved. Blair would have seen Amery sentenced or hung, with pleasure, but he could not face the thought of scandal that would fall on the girl's defenceless head. He might very easily have warned the man off remaining in the vicinity, but even if that idea did enter his mind, it did not get very deep. Perhaps he thought it hardly likely that the other would make a second attempt at his life, especially when the two who had witnessed the whole affair could tell so much.

But Amery was a marked man. He felt humiliation to its depths when Blair said to him the following evening: "It's a dangerous game, playin' with guns. Drop it; or it'll drop you—by a rope!"

"Curse you!" was the violent reply.

Blair laughed lightly. "All right, if that does you any good, keep goin', so long as it doesn't get any further than cursin'. It don't hurt me, I can tell you. But watch your step, man. Watch your step! If you don't, you'll come a big cropper!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THOUGH Valentine had determined to make a move before the week was out, Friday found her still in the same place. Her financial position was not sound enough to permit her to move about as she would wish, and it had not been so easy as she had thought to procure another situation. But it was on the Friday that her chance came in an advertisement she noticed in one of the daily papers: a position as maid to an elderly lady going abroad; and applicants were to apply before ten o'clock that same morning at Room 8, Warwick's Hotel.

Abroad! Surely that would take her far enough away, and once she left familiar shores she could start all over again. Memories might follow her over the water, but that was all. She would, at least, be free from Amery, and her own thoughts.

She put in an appearance at her work earlier than usual that morning, and asked for time off from her duties, time which the doctor none too willingly granted; but it was ten minutes after the hour before she reached Warwick Hotel, and knocked at the door of Room 8.

There was no response. She knocked a second time, before gently trying the handle. The door was fast. So she was too late. The girl frowned, and bit her lip in disappointment and vexation, and was turning away when a man, obviously the manager of the hotel, came up to her.

"Is there anything I can do for you, madam?"

She explained the situation, and he slowly answered, rubbing his chin:

"Well, I cannot say whether or not the position has been filled, but if you would care to leave your name and address, in case the lady is not suited, she may drop you a line to call again. Would you care to do that?"

Valentine paused. "Is it worth while? It is almost certain that by now the position would be filled. Applicants were to be here before ten, and it is now some minutes after that. It was exceedingly annoying that I could not get away sooner."

"Please yourself, madam, but I'd advise you to leave your name, nevertheless. One never knows what may happen, since it is not certain that the position has been fixed up."

"Very well," answered the girl. "I'll leave it." And, taking a small notebook and pencil from her handbag, Valentine wrote down her name and address, and handed it to the man.

"Lenroy Street," he said, as he read it. "May I ask what part that is in?"

"You would know the principal street of that suburb?"

"Grady Street, is it not? Yes, I know of it."

"Lenroy Street is third to the left off that. It is easy enough to find."

"I see. Well—er—I'll just give this address to the lady, anyhow; and—er—wish you luck."

"Thank you."

But as she walked along the polished floor of the hotel, and out into the street, Valentine did not in the least expect any word in answer to the address she had left. It seemed rather strange, and most unusual, that the manager of the hotel should have asked her—in such a case as this—to leave it. And that gentleman himself was even now wondering greatly what had prompted him to do so. But how could either girl or man know that Fate was using the worthy manager of Warwick Hotel as a tool in her hand?

Valentine took her time in returning to the doctor's rooms. She had hurried into the city only too late to receive any satisfaction for her purpose in going there, and she would not hurry back.

The day was warm and sultry, and she felt it robbing her of energy. She walked along King Street on her way to the tram, and in passing an hotel, almost ran into three men who were at that moment coming out of the bar. She gave each a quick glance, felt her face burn and her heat quicken, and, without any sign, passed on.

One of the men gazed after her. "Strikes me I've seen that cliner before," he said.

"I suppose you have," replied a second, with a slight sneer. "An' unless you're keen to run slap-bang against Devil Blair, y' won't as much as wink at her. She's his bit o' prize."

The third man laughed suddenly—a loud, boisterous laugh; then swore violently.

"Strikes me you know something, Rip," replied the first. "P'raps it's from experience, eh? Maybe you ran slap-bang against him yourself," he taunted, good-naturedly.

"Get a move on, Dandy!" The third man spoke curtly. "Don't you ever work down along at your factory, Rip? Glide away. We've got time to make up."

And while the Ripper walked off, Amery and his companion mounted to their lorries standing nearby and drove off.

\* \* \* \* \*

One of the drivers was late returning to the yards of Armstrong Brothers that evening. A quarter-of-an-hour had passed since the last man's lorry had rattled through the gate, and the driver unharnessed and fed the horses before leaving for the night.

Amery was cursing inwardly as the horses trotted smartly along Grady Street. A call at the last moment had kept him back, and had by no means improved

his temper; rather, it had fanned the smouldering fire.

The lorry approached the right-of-way leading into the yards. Save for two men coming from between the wide gates, the place was deserted.

"Hullo, Guy! Been joy-ridin'?" shouted one, good-humouredly, and received an oath by way of answer.

The devil had possession of Amery this evening. His mind was black with rage and bitterness, and in his heart he felt murder. Well for Valentine that she was not within reach of him; and well for Blair and Amery both that they did not meet then and there!

The horses, as usual, slowed down when they reached the right-of-way, but the driver, in a fit of passion, and for the first time in his life, brought the lash heavily down across the horse under the whip. At such unaccustomed treatment from its driver, the animal plunged and, without slacking, the horses took the dangerous curve.

The two men, wondering and curious, had stopped to watch. They saw the box on which Amery was seated tilt sideways as the lorry swerved round; saw the driver hurled to one side; heard a startled shout above the clattering of hoofs and wheels over the rough stone yard—and together they rushed back to the open gates.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN elderly woman and her son had stepped off the tram at the terminus and were walking along the street cutting off the road at that point. It was a long, fairly wide street, but ill-lit.

"The third street off Grady Street—but where is Grady Street?" remarked the woman.

"We'll soon find that out," was the man's reply. "This is not a very pleasant place to bring you to at night, mother; but we shall be out of it again before long."

"Yet she lives here. Just imagine it, Steve, that she should choose such a place to live in. The atmosphere is almost eerie. It's—it's unholy, son. How on earth does she endure it?"

"It may not be as bad as it seems," was Blake's reply. "It's just that you are new to it, mother."

"I suppose that is really it. How will you find Grady Street?"

"There are some men standing at the corner. I shall ask them," replied the son.

And when they reached the corner, Blake stopped before the small group of men collected there, asking: "Good-night. Can you direct us to Grady Street?"

"Right here," came the prompt reply. "Follow this line up. This is Grady Street."

"And—Lenroy Street? That is up here, is it not?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"Yes, lady." And the man touched his hat as he spoke. "Third up this side."

"Thanks," said Blake, pleasantly, and turned to his mother. "Now, third street up, and we're right."

But neither Blake or his mother noticed that, as they had stopped before the group about the lamp-post, one of the men had moved back into the shadows, where he could watch and hear, without himself being seen. This man came forward again later, and, as far as the light permitted their figures to be seen, watched mother and son along Grady Street.

"New customers for these parts. Wonder what they're after?" was the remark of one of the men.

"Who are they after? you mean. Well, that's easily guessed at, ain't it? There's only one person in Lenroy Street that people like them would go after, an' that ain't Mary Martin. P'raps we'll be hearin' a few things soon."

But the man who had come forward did not appear to hear the words. He heard nothing, saw nothing, save the woman and the man who had just passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

To Valentine there was a strangeness in the atmosphere, as if, like an electric current, a sensation were passing through it: a weird, gripping sensation, that sank deep into the girl's heart. What was it—this new, yet familiar force that entered within her? The voices of the streets were still the same; yet they appeared to come from far away, as though the atmosphere were compelling silence; and the girl's mind appeared to be listening—listening. What was it?

And, then, she knew. . . .

It was the call of the plains. An echo from the lonely, open lands. She sensed the deep stillness; felt the fresh, wandering breezes—the little winds; heard the great heart of it calling—calling. It was the old bond asserting itself.

A longing seized her; a longing for the peace she could never find here in the city. Her eyes were dry and brilliant, but her heart was weeping. Though times without number she had thought of that northern land, never before had she felt so strongly for its



blessed peace and sense of security as she did this night.

She sat at the sitting-room window looking across—at no broad expanse of country, but only a small, vacant allotment.

She did not see two men cross it to the street opposite. She did not hear a harsh voice calling to a boy who was fighting another further along the street. The sky was clear; stars were beginning to glitter and the air to grow cooler. But Valentine was aware of none of these things. Her soul was away in big, silent places.

The voice of Mrs. Green calling to her daughter roused her, and rising, she went out on to the verandah. At that moment the gate opened, and a woman passed through, followed by a man.

The girl stood motionless. She was unaware of the woman's soft voice, or steady regard of mother and son. It was only when Mrs. Blake placed her hand on the girl's arm that Valentine asked, tonelessly:

"Why are you here?"

"Why! Because you left me your name and address, my dear. Are you sorry to see us?"

"Sorry! I feel as if I am in some mad dream—seeing you again!" A little of the colour returned to her face, and her eyes lost their strangeness. "I have just been thinking of the plains, and when I saw you, you at first appeared as part of my picture!"

She smiled at them both, but the old lady felt her arm burning under the girl's touch as Valentine led her indoors to the sitting-room.

"Tell me how you discovered me? Tell me how you come to be here," said the girl. "I know now that I am not dreaming, but I am wandering in a maze. You say that I left you my address?"

"Of course, you did. This morning, at the Warwick Hotel. Did you not give it to the manager to pass on to us?"

"You! Then it was *you*—your advertisement I went to answer? *You* are going abroad?"

"Didn't you know that we sold Diermorne? We are going abroad for a time, and that was my advertisement for a maid," was Mrs. Blake's reply.

Valentine started to laugh; but there was little merriment in the sound. Tears were in her eyes. "To think that I answered *your* advertisement!"

"You don't know how glad I am that it has brought me to you," said Mrs. Blake. "Have you a good home here, my dear? Tell us what you have been doing since you left us. I thought that you might have written."

"I couldn't write. Yes, this has been a good home, and I have a fairly good position. I think I was contented here—till you sold Diermorne."

"Till we sold Diermorne!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake. "What difference could that possibly make? We have not met till now."

"No—but my husband and I have, and he has made my life almost intolerable. I get no peace. When Mr. Blake sold Diermorne Guy came down to the city and, of all places, must strike this particular one where I happened to be. He's a driver in one of the carrier or timber yards about."

Since his coming, Blake had said nothing. In the silence that now followed on Valentine's words, he stepped forward.

"Mrs. Amery, is not this one of the worst suburbs to live in?"

"Of course, it's entirely different from the other side of the river," was her answer.

"Then why on earth did you choose it?" asked the man.

"Just because, Mr. Blake, it is *this* side of the river."

"Excuse plain speaking, Mrs. Amery, but that is not pride, it is foolishness, and you have done yourself a great deal of harm by it." He turned to his

mother. "I'll leave you two together for a while, mother, and shall return for you in about an hour's time."

The girl watched him as he left the room. She knew what prompted him to make this move. She could now speak freely with Mrs. Blake; but had the man remained, she would have said little of what she had to say, and he realised this.

The two women had been together about a quarter-of-an-hour, when Dora Green entered, saying:

"Excuse me, Miss Hood, but Jack Blair is outside. He wants to see you."

Valentine turned slowly. "Jack Blair—here? He wants to see—me?"

"Yes. I believe—it's important. You had better see him, I think—Miss Hood."

Valentine looked hard at the girl before her. Dora's eyes were a trifle wider than usual; and Dora's face was a trifle paler than usual; so that Valentine, excusing herself to Mrs. Blake, rose and went out on to the verandah.

Blair was standing, hands in pockets, facing the street, and he turned smartly as Valentine came to the door.

"Dora said that you wish to see me," she said.

"Yes. There has been an accident up at the yards," he said, without preliminary.

With a quick intake of her breath, she asked: "Is he badly hurt?"

So she guessed that much. Of course, the man told himself, who else could it have been to have brought him here to her?

"Mrs. Amery"—for the first time he addressed her thus—"your husband was killed outright."

The girl trembled, and put one hand to the door to steady herself. There was an awkward pause.

"Tell me," she said, in a voice strangely quiet.

"How did it happen?"

And, in as few words as possible, he told her all

that he knew. "He must have been thrown head-first on to the stones, and that's what finished him," he concluded.

"Thank you," said the girl.

The man hesitated a little. "Anything I can do for you, Mrs. Amery?"

"Will I have to go up—and see him—and see about the funeral?" she stammered.

"The firm did not know that he was a married man. I think they'll see to everything—as far as that's concerned—seeing how he was killed."

"Then there is nothing I ought to do?"

"I think not. Not unless y' wish to do anything."

"Perhaps I should; but I am a coward, not a saint. I am not going to pose now as a wronged and forgiving wife. We were both to blame. And now—this is the finish. I think it will be better if I just stand back."

"Well, there's nobody to thank you if you come forward, and it will only bring abuse down on your head, I suppose."

"If I trouble about him now, you mean?"

"That's what I mean."

"I suppose——" But she could find nothing more to say. Blair stepped nearer, and put out a hand.

"If there's anything I can do for you at all," he said, "I'd like for you just to say so. I'd be proud to do it for you; an' perhaps, bein' a man, I could do for you what you couldn't do for yourself. You said something to me once—I ain't forgot; an' I'd like to prove that word of yours."

Earnestness robbed the little speech of awkwardness. It was a most unusual thing for Blair to speak in such a tone.

The girl smiled at him and placed her hand in his. "You have already proved it," she said. "There is nothing you can do for me. Thanks for your offer, and for coming here to tell me, Mr. Blair."

"Mister? Do I deserve it?" Both humour and reproach showed on his face.

"Good-night, Jack," was all she said. She again entered the house, and the man stepped off the verandah and passed out through the gate. In the darkness, the girl did not observe the shadow that clouded his mocking eyes, nor the set of his lips.

The expression on Valentine's face—though she strove to appear natural—could hardly pass unnoticed the keen observation of Mrs. Blake.

The elder woman asked no questions, and the girl gave no sign for some time. When she did speak her voice was low and steady.

"It was one of the men from the yards." She moved from where she stood near the doorway and took a seat close to the other. "Guy has been killed."

Mrs. Blake's calm demeanor was shaken, and she started a little.

"Killed!"

"Yes. Thrown from his waggon. Do you think it can really be true? It's hard to believe; yet, it must be true, since the man came round here to tell me of it. Killed—dead—not to see—or feel—any more. He was so full of life."

Mrs. Blake recovered her self-possession. "My dear, if it is true, it's a terrible thing; but I'll not be such a hypocrite as to offer you my sympathy."

There was a long pause, till the girl spoke again: "He was my husband."

"Whom you did not love," was the reply of the other woman.

"But—I hold his name. He has given me that, and could not take it away with him. It's his—legacy to me." She half-smiled. "I didn't love him, but there was a time, long ago, when we were happy." She paused again, and continued: "This evening, it seemed to me that the spirit of the plains came down through the months to me here in this place. Was it a portent? This evening brought you to me; this evening Guy

was killed; and this evening—the whole world has turned for me. Is there such a thing as Fate?"

She walked to the window, then back again to her seat. "What does it all signify? The past done with, and a new life to commence?"

Half-an-hour later a step was heard outside, and, following a knock upon the door, Stephen Blake entered. He answered the look on his mother's face by saying simply: "I know."

"What do you know?" asked the girl.

"That Amery has paid his last account."

"How do you know it?" It was his mother's question this time.

"One of the men mentioned it to me awhile back. Have you finished your visit for this evening, mother? Perhaps Mrs. Amery would like to be alone for a while."

But for the tone, quiet, yet expressive, the words would have sounded somewhat callous. But Blake wanted to be away. His own mind was heavy with a new knowledge.

As she was leaving the girl, Mrs. Blake said: "Think over what I have said, my dear. Don't let the news you have this night received make any difference to your decision. Remember, I ask it as a favour, and shall call again to-morrow evening to hear what you have to say."

And impulsively she kissed the girl's cheek, which warmed at the caress.

Valentine stood on the verandah till the sound of their footsteps was swallowed up by the distance; then she turned to the solitude of her room.

Though Blake had said nothing, the friendly clasp of his hand and his steady glance were enough, and touched in comfort the girl's aching spirit. But she realised that his presence held now no influence over her heart. That, too, had gone with the past.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

AS Blair made his way along the street after leaving Valentine, he collided with a man who happened to be turning the corner just as he was passing it. Naturally, both men were brought to an abrupt halt, one instantly recognising—by the light of the corner lamp—the figure before him; but Blake, a look of puzzled surprise on his face, eyed the other steadily; while Blair returned his look with a somewhat dogged glance, though one almost fancied a smile—slightly mocking, slightly bitter—playing about the lips and eyes.

“Your face seems familiar,” said Blake. “Haven’t we met before?”

“You bet that we have!”

Blair accompanied his words by a sudden, short laugh. Grey eyes now steadily looked into grey eyes. Blake, well-dressed, was standing upright. Blair, careless to recklessness in his appearance, slouched a little, both hands clenched in his pockets. A swift gleam shot across the former’s face.

“By heaven!” he cried. “Jack!”

His hand went out, and, instinctively, Blair’s went to meet it. The two gripped hard, and words fled. There, in the dusky light, they could only look at each other—brother and brother—but the bitterness had left Blair’s face. He was the first to speak.

“I saw you before, this evening, you an’ mother,” he said, very quietly. “You stopped at the corner to ask about Grady Street. I got out of the lime-light.”

“But, man—why—why?”

“Would *she* be pleased to see me like this, do you think?”

“But, good heavens! Jack! You’re her son, man. What else matters with her?”

“How could I shame her before those chaps back there? I’m a regular man of the streets. Don’t you know what that means?” He straightened himself up again thrust his hands into his pockets, and smiled inscrutably. It is difficult to say what impression he thought this announcement would make on his brother, though his heart suddenly longed for brotherly sympathy.

Though three years of age separated them, they had, as lads, been the best of pals. They were both spirited, sturdy boys; but where the younger was steady-going, Jack, the elder, was reckless to a degree, continually at war with his stern father, with the result that, at the age of sixteen, he cleared out from home. The mother’s heart wept for her truant son, and the younger boy’s sympathy went out to his rascallion brother; but the father never spoke of him without anger and bitter words, making no allowances for the fact that the boy had inherited his own spirit.

Shortly afterwards, the family left for the northern plains, and life commenced anew for the three of them, while the memory of the absentee became softened. They had been on the plains but a year when Mr. Blake died, and then it was that the true nature of his younger son, Stephen, asserted itself; for the lad spared no effort in trying to keep the home together. A great deal of his time was spent in different parts of the country, toiling first in one district, then another; sending his earnings to the mother who waited on at the old home.

Meanwhile, his brother made his way among the streets of the city, already a leader of mischief, and at war with law and its officials.

In time, as years went by, Stephen Blake reaped the reward of his labours, and prospered, pushing his

way, urging and striving for higher, bigger aims, till he stood as a man of means; but still a worker, and proud of it. He was not born to be idle. Now, when his mother's ill-health demanded that he should sell out and sail overseas for a time, he was only thankful that he was in a position to make his care of her possible.

But devil-may-care Jack had grown to the streets, and they held him still; but a saving grace was bred within him—a saving grace that had warded off evil vices. A man of the streets he might have been, but Nature had intended that he should be a gentleman, and of this she gave constant reminders, though there were times when her enemy scored. Stephen Blake had given no answer to his brother's last words.

"I've done my time in gaol," said Jack, still smiling slightly, and still steadily regarding the other.

Then indeed did his brother start a little. "For what?" he asked at once.

"For assault—which nearly finished up with murder," was the answer.

"Assault! Nearly murder! How long have you been on the streets like this, Jack?"

"From the beginning." Then he spoke out: "Listen, Steve. I'm an out-and-outer—not a rotter; but a waster. I've gone practically the whole length here, and there is not a chap on the streets, or a cop at his beat, who doesn't know me. I've served my time in gaol; drank till I thought I owned hell, and fought till I'm leather against blows. Do you know what I am known as? Devil Blair! Yes, I changed the old name; had decency enough for that. Well, after that brief and flattering account of myself, can you wonder that I hid myself from the mother?"

But, in spite of himself, there was just the slightest touch of appeal in the deep voice. It came from the softer sense which Valentine had unconsciously awakened in him.

"Jack," slowly spoke his brother, "why do you

stick to this? Doesn't it make you feel pretty wretched at times?"

Blair laughed. "Wretched! Great shakes, no! I made my own life, why should I be unhappy? I don't care a damn for the world." And he meant it.

It was Stephen Blake who broke the silence that followed. "Mother and I are going abroad next week. Toss this up, Jack, and come along with us."

"Do you mean that—after what I have just told you?" Blair's voice sounded incredulous.

"Did you try to condemn yourself in my mind? Bosh! All that you have gone through was just your own bad luck, old boy. Because ill-fortune grabbed you at the beginning, and the two of you went along together. Jack, think of all it will mean to mother—to have you back again.

"I *am* thinking that. It would break her heart if she knew."

"Not it," said Blake, determinedly.

"I know better. I can't go, anyway. I haven't a bean, hardly. Pay my board every week, and bust up the rest." He laughed, and again Steve saw the old reckless light in his eyes.

"Hardly a bean?" he said. "What matter? I have a few thousands of them. They'll do the both of us."

A dark shadow swept across Blair's face. "Do you think that I'm such a low-down cur as all that—to take your money and sponge on you? Whatever else I might be, remember that I told you I wasn't quite a rotter."

He turned angrily away, and the other, stepping after him, caught him by the shoulders.

"No offence meant, old chap; but—good Lord! Just think a minute, Jack—of all it means!"

"The more I think of it, the worse it gets," was the short answer.

"Come with us," urged Blake.

"No."

"After all these years! Have you lost all consideration for your mother?"

"No, damn it! If I had, I'd go with you to her now."

"But you're only looking at one side of things. Look at it in the other light—"

Blair stepped closer. "There's no other light. See here, Steve—if you say a word to mother that you seen me, I'll—I'll—"

"You'll do something desperate, eh? There's no need for you to threaten. If you're so blanky obstinate, and refuse the chance to make good, do you think that I am likely to mention your name to her at all, and endure reproaches on your account? Credit me with some sense."

"I will. By the way, how the devil do you come to be in these parts at all? Where have you left the mother?"

"Well," replied Blake, hesitatingly. "Mother came round here to call on someone she happens to know, and whom she hasn't seen for some time. I am going back for her shortly."

"I watched you up Grady Street till you turned off into Lenroy Street," came the slow answer. "There's only one person hereabouts that mother would be likely to know."

"Yes?" questioningly.

"An' she's known as Valentine Hood. Am I right?"

"Valentine Hood! How the deuce did you know, Jack?" exclaimed his brother.

"Then I *am* right?" quickly returned the other.

"Yes, you're right."

"By all the powers!" softly ejaculated Blair, and gave an expressive laugh. "If I'd only known at the time, and if she'd only dreamt who was on the verandah—"

"What's this you're saying?"

"I have just come from the place that mother is

visiting—where this—Valentine Hood boards. Listen, Steve—do you know her well?"

"Yes, fairly well."

"Fairly? How far does that go? Do you know all about her?"

"Yes," answered Blake.

"Then you would know that she was married?" persisted Blair.

"I'll have to untwist this little tangle, it seems," said Blake. "Her husband worked for me at Diermorne—"

"Diermorne?"

"Property I had in the north. The two of them lived in the cottage there, not far from the homestead."

"Till she cleared out," finished Blair.

"How do you know that?" asked the other.

"I know. Things are rather astonishing, ain't they? You look as if you'd been knocked flat. I have—what you've just told me has got me beat. But we're coming out of the maze. Tell me, do you know that Amery is dead?"

"Dead, Amery dead?"

"He was killed only this evening at the yards—reckless driving. That's why I went round to her this evening—to let her know of it."

"Dead," repeated Blake. "He was here, near her; and now—dead!" He was not looking at his brother; but straight ahead.

"She won't weep for him," ventured Blair. His lips were again slightly smiling, and his eyes mocking.

Silence followed. . . . Blair was steadily watching his brother, and suddenly the other again looked directly at him. For a time, their eyes held. Valentine was forgotten; forgotten was Amery. The brothers were each trying to realise the years between.

It was Blair who made the first move. "I'll be

getting," he muttered, and turned his head.

"Jack, old fellow," appealed the other, catching him by the arm.

"Forget it, Steve."

"How can I? Are you determined to continue on like this?"

"I am not going to twist. Good-bye, old man. We're not likely to be meeting again. A pleasant journey overseas."

He turned abruptly away, and the next minute Stephen Blake was alone.

Blake walked towards Lenroy Street, deep in thought, and all at once a question presented itself: "How did Jack come to know so much about Valentine Hood?"

And he repeated the question to himself when, in company with his mother, they left Valentine some minutes later.

## CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN mother and son had gone, the girl sat for a long while trying to think; but her mind appeared to be in a whirlwind.

Going up to her room, she went straight to the mirror, and peered at her own reflection there. Lines showed under her eyes and at the corners of her mouth; while her hair was loose and untidy. She felt suddenly as if she had belonged to the back streets all her life; that it was a mad dream that she had lived the other side of the river. Then another thought swept through her mind—that she should be mourning a dead husband.

"I'll not play the hypocrite. There is another who will perhaps mourn for him. Her tears will suffice. I have none."

She turned again to her reflection, and shook her head. "You are a miserable creature," she said to the mirrored face. "You were never a beauty; but your looks are now worse than ever they were. Yours are twenty-six years of wasted life."

Between the death of Amery and the coming of Mrs. Blake and her son, her mind was in a chaos.

"Blind—blind! We are all blind to a certain point, and then we wake up; and the trouble is—some of us wake up when it is too late."

She was going back over past scenes, living them again with the man who had been her husband—the man who lay lifeless in a house but three streets away. . . . There had been happy days; but they had been few.

A knock sounded on the door of her room, and she started up, exclaiming: "Who is there?"

"It's only me. I—Jack Blair is downstairs again, wanting to see you. He was asking if you had gone to bed, and if you hadn't, could he speak to you?"

"Again?" Valentine opened the door to Dora, who stared at her, uncertain what to say or do. Valentine's appearance stirred her heart to pity.

"Is there anything at all—Miss Hood—that I can do for you?" she asked. The tone of her words and her attitude expressed sympathy as nothing else could, and Valentine, understanding all the other girl tried to convey, smilingly shook her head.

"There is nothing you can do for me, Dora, thanks. I shall go and see Jack Blair. I suppose he is at the front door?"

"Yes, he is waiting at the door; he wouldn't come in. Miss Hood—I want you to know that I haven't said anything about—you and—Mr. Amery. You know what I mean; and I have made Pat keep quiet, too; and—"

Valentine put the girl at her ease by saying gently: "I know, Dora, that you wouldn't talk; and I can tell you that it has helped to make things easier for me, in a way, that you did keep what you learnt to yourself."

Careless as to her untidy appearance, Valentine went downstairs to the door where Blair was waiting.

"You again," she said. "What news do you bring this time—since I don't suppose that you have come for nothing."

He looked hard at her, observing her brilliant eyes, her face that flushed and paled alternately, and the nervous way she brushed her hair back from her forehead.

"Are you mad with me for coming again?" he asked. "Even when what I've come to say don't much concern you?"

Even as he noticed the change in Valentine, so did she mark the difference in him. His usually de-

fiant demeanor and rough and ready manner were not so pronounced. His voice, too, sounded softer and slower.

"You see," he went on, as she gave no answer to his first words, "you helped to bring this about—you made me think of it; so it seems to me only the right thing to do to thank you for it. I felt that I couldn't go off without doin' that much, an' without seein' you again to say—so-long."

"I don't quite understand what you mean," she replied. "Are you, then, going away?"

"That's it," he declared. "I'm clearin' out to try an' make good."

"But why—why come here to thank me?"

"Because it was you that gave me the idea that perhaps a chap *could* make good—if he's given a chance. You were a big step above the likes o' me; but you didn't look down on me as others of your kind would—not that I'd care a damn for what they *do* think. But you—you always made me think thoughts worth while; an' you didn't laugh that day in the bush when I told you how I felt when I was right away from the push. You made me believe that a chap that sees good can make good."

"If you set out to do it, you will not fail," she assured him. She drew her brows a little closer together. "Isn't it a very sudden move on your part? You are losing no time. I take it that you are leaving to-morrow, since you have come to-night to say good-bye."

He did not give her a direct answer; but turning, looked towards the street, as though his eyes would pierce the gloom and see far beyond. Then he turned again to the girl, his head held a little higher than before; while the bright gas-light from the passage threw shadows across his features.

"Yes, I'm off first thing in the morning. I'll tell you everything. You trusted me, and it's up to me now to do the same by you——" He paused but a



second, before continuing. "You had someone here last night to see you?"

"Yes. How did you know of that?" was her reply.

"I met—my brother. She who visited you is my mother. I am really Jack Blake."

"Your mother! Mrs. Blake your mother! How can that be?"

He told her all, and she listened, slowly comprehending; but saying nothing, for words were beyond her.

"She does not know, and my brother will not tell her anything; that is why I am going away—that she will not find out," concluded the man. "You gave me that much faith in myself—that I am able to leave here as I am doing. She must never know me as—Devil Blair."

"Mrs. Blake your mother!" she repeated slowly, as though trying fully to grasp the fact. "There were times when I wondered at your likeness to one I could not place. Now I know—it is your brother. When you laugh, you are very like him." Her voice changed, and with head back-thrown, and hand out-flung, she exclaimed almost passionately: "I envy you! You are going away, confident and strong. You can strike out, sure that you will win—and you will do that; while I—I can only keep on battling, just waiting for what will turn up. I cannot strike out as you are doing—being only a girl! He is dead, and somehow, it doesn't seem to matter much, after all, to me, whether he had lived or not. There was a time, not so very long ago, when I wished that he *would* die—or something! Was it a very wicked wish? Now, it makes no difference—I don't seem to care for anything—for what happens to me! I am so weary of it all! Everything has turned round, and I seem to be groping for a hold. I must just trudge along—day after day—till I die—and sometimes—it takes such a long time to die—"

Her outbreak had, for the moment, amazed him.

Now, he stepped nearer to her, his strong hand closing over her outheld one.

"Steady—steady," he said, consolingly. "You're all broke up. You've been a regular Briton up to now. Not many girls would have stood out against what you have, and kept—as you have. You've turned me against the streets and set me on this track, so it ain't for you to go under, now. Buck up! You're not going to toss the rag now, are you?"

His kindly, if somewhat rough sympathy calmed her. She took a deep breath, and leaned against the doorway, watching him.

"That's better," he said, then. "You're knocked out. Just take a good rest, an' you'll be as right as rain to-morrow. I'll get going now. Wish me luck, will you? I want nothing else as I want your good wishes."

She smiled a little. "You have them, always, my very best wishes. But tell me, what are you going to do?"

"Try across the border first, at some of the stations there. I am not particular what kind of a job I start on, as long as I get going; then I'll just work about from one district to another. When I do make good, I'd like you to know; but—" he hesitated an instant—"you will have forgotten all about me by that time, I suppose." His tone changed to one of deep earnestness. "Look here! I hope you'll be happy, and all that. And, if you will, I'd kind of like you to give me a thought sometimes; for I'll never forget you. So-long!"

He gripped her hand, released it almost roughly, and was gone before she fully realised it.

Slowly she returned to her room for the night. At least one good thing had she done during the twenty-six years of her life: She had helped a derelict on to the right course. Would he reach safe port?

Before she fell asleep under the anaesthetic she

took in the form of chlorodyne, she repeated to herself, over and over again: "Mrs. Blake's son—her son—Devil Blair—Jack Blake!"

\* \* \* \* \*

And in a neglected-looking house just around the corner from Lenroy Street, a coarse-looking man and an untidy woman were talking in loud tones, high pitched in anger; while, in a small room apart, another daughter of Eve lay face downwards on the bed, her face buried in the pillows, both hands pressed close to her ears to shut out the wrangling voices. She was sobbing bitterly. Poor Mary Martin! For this night, at least, she was just a woman, weeping for a worthless love.

#### CHAPTER XXXI.

WHEN Mrs. Blake arrived the next evening, Valentine, heavy-eyed and listless, greeted her mechanically.

"You are looking very tired," was the elder woman's greeting. "You must be worn out."

"I haven't been able to sleep lately, and the doctor gave me some chlorodyne to take. I don't know whether or not I took a little too much last night; but I have been feeling very stupid and drowsy all day. I was very late, too, this morning."

"Chlorodyne! Do you mean to tell me you take that stuff!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake.

"Last night was the second time only," was the girl's defence. "It makes me sleep."

"Sleep like that is no good for you, my dear. You're worrying, and taking chlorodyne won't improve matters. Once you start taking a drug like that to send you off to sleep, you'll find yourself continually doing so, and you should know what that means."

"I don't intend to make a habit of it, Mrs. Blake."

"You won't be able to help yourself, if you are not careful. Don't touch it again. If you want sleep, I shall find that for you."

"You will? How?" asked Valentine.

"My prescription is a long sea voyage. It will put new life into your body, and new thoughts into your mind. It will make a new girl altogether of you. I hope that you have made up your mind to come with us."

"No," Valentine slowly shook her head. "No."

"No?"

"I have grown away from you—in that sense,"

said the girl. "Were the position not filled, I would willingly have gone as your maid; but otherwise—how can I?"

"Not as a friend?" said Mrs. Blake. "Not as a companion?"

"Had I the means; but I have not. I have barely enough to keep me going till I have secured a new position. I finished my work with Dr. Cary to-day. He has dispensed with my services." And she smiled a little bitterly.

"My dear, the means are at your disposal—as I have said before. Take them, and so favour me. Are you just going to let yourself drag along here? How long do you think you will hold on?"

"I am going into the country—to try and find a position there—in one of the country towns. I cannot stay here."

"You say that you cannot stay here; you are going back to the country. Then I cannot see what is to prevent you from coming with us. Are you so very independent—or obstinate? Wait, and see if two of us cannot persuade you. Perhaps this little surprise will help things along the right way."

She left the room, to return almost immediately with a young woman—tall, dark, and handsome, with expressive eyes, now full of affection and compassion.

"Grace!" stammered Valentine.

"Yes, Val—Grace."

Neither girl was by nature demonstrative; but the next moment found them in each other's arms. Mrs. Blake was, for a time, forgotten; but she was quite content to sit back and watch the two in front of her.

Valentine's eager face showed some of its natural brightness, and Grace watched her closely, touched by the change she saw in her old friend. She looked worn, and very tired; though there was, at present, an unnatural look about her eyes.

"Val," said Grace, after awhile. "Mrs. Blake has told me of your husband's death. I do not know

whether or not I should express sympathy with you on that account—don't think I am callous; but I know how everything stood between you."

"Don't express sympathy with me at all, Grace," answered Valentine, a shadow for an instant crossing her face. "Say nothing about it."

"Val, you must have had a wretched time of it altogether. You have been battling alone against hard times, and now, what you require is a good holiday—a good sea trip to start all over again; so that you will hardly know yourself when you return again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Grace. I understand what you are trying to convey," was the answer.

"You have a good chance——"

But Valentine rose to her feet, and in her agitation beat one hand against the other. "I cannot take it, Grace! Mrs. Blake, don't urge it, please. I thank you more than I can say for the offer, but I cannot take it. Can't you see—if I were to go with you as you suggest, it would be too much like imposing on your friendship. You have always been kindness itself to me, and I can never repay you. Besides, it's not only that. I feel that I have altered in some way—a way that makes the acceptance of your offer utterly impossible—something——" She stopped short before the old lady, with both hands outstretched, appealing: "Oh, can't you—won't you—understand?"

Silence followed; then Mrs. Blake, taking both the outstretched hands in her own, said: "I will try to understand, and shall not press the matter. But I want you to make me a promise. You are determined on going again to the country?"

"Yes."

"Then give me your word that we shall not lose touch of you altogether. Promise that you will always let me know where you are, and that you will answer all my letters."

"Answer all your letters? Are you, then, going to write to me?"

"If you will keep us posted with your address, you will hear regularly from us. Also, I want you to promise me that, if ever you are in need, you will inform me."

Valentine looked at her, but gave no answer.

"Now, will you make those promises?" asked the older woman.

Valentine moved her glance to Grace, who was sitting back, steadily regarding her; then she turned again to Mrs. Blake.

"I give you my word—my promise," she said.

"That, of course, applies also to me, Val," quickly put in Grace. Then with an abrupt movement, she sat up straight, making a sharp downward movement with her forefinger. "Why! I didn't think of it before! You are looking out for a position up country? What kind of a position do you want, Val?"

"I am not particular—anything that will keep me going. Clerical work for preference."

"The very thing! George was speaking only yesterday of a man who had written from a place called Daya—I think that's it—who is wanting a clerk. I don't know him, but he's an old friend of George's family, and is a storekeeper up there. I don't know whether—but even if the place is filled, he can fix things up for you all right. Valentine, how would that do? Would you take it?"

Valentine had never before heard Grace mix up her words so much, or speak so quickly, and she laughed a little.

"Why, Grace, you are excited. Would I take the position? Only too readily, and with many thanks for it. You can hardly believe how hard it is to get such a position these times, and this one has come as a God-send. Daya, I know where that is. It is a fair-sized town, and a big district in the west—a grazing district, mainly. I should take it to be a fairly

wealthy district, too, so that the position should be a good one. Grace, is there any chance of my getting it?"

"Every chance..... Steady, Val. Who's excited now? Val—Val——"

But conflicting emotions were too much for Valentine. The night before had brought trials enough, and now, with the coming of her friend, excitement had worked her mind up to such a pitch that overwrought, it gave way. She tried to speak, but stood staring into vacancy, her face growing ashen; then, making a helpless little movement with her hands, she fell forward into a chair.

Mrs. Blake and Grace Cameron that evening left Valentine sleeping peacefully. She had recovered consciousness to find herself in the large armchair in the sitting-room, with the two women, one holding a glass of water, standing nearby; while Mrs. Green and Dora stood back a little further.

Soon, with the aid of Grace, she was in her room, undressed and between sheets; and, after a glass of hot milk, slipped off to sleep.

Three days later, Valentine was on a train bound for Daya, a township towards the western country of Victoria.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

ARMSTRONG BROTHERS had lost their best driver. Some few miles beyond the border of New South Wales, Blair followed the sheds, working his way down south.

While it lasted, shearing proved very trying work. It was anything but easy, and the conditions anything but good; but compensations balanced all, and the wages were high.

During the heat of the day, perspiring shearers bent over their work in the long, stifling sheds, reeking with unhealthy odours: with the sun seeming to beat through the iron roof above them on to their backs and heads. The bleating of sheep, elick of the shears, an occasional oath, and the call of the ringer, filled the heavy atmosphere. Now and again there would be a call for tar as the shears nipped deeper than the wool; and should a shearer by any chance clip his own flesh, the same remedy would be applied.

Then there were spells for smokes, when tongues were loosed, and jokes and laughter rang high till work again called. At five o'clock, the men finished work for the day, had their tea, and spent the evening each in his own way; playing cards, smoking, talking, and filling in the hours till bunk time.

Every Saturday found a troop of horsemen galloping into the nearest township to liven up the air there; to keep the hotelkeepers busy, and the police on the alert; till the revellers returned to the station on the Sunday night, with lighter pockets and lighter hearts.

Among companions such as these, Jack Blair made

his way—one of them, and yet apart from them. The majority of the shearers, after finishing a season at one district, would “blew their cheques and go on the spree,” before commencing to follow the sheds south. But Blair held apart from their revels. To follow their lead would not help him to “make good.” He had not cleared out from the city streets to live a roysterer’s life in the country. Though many a time he felt sorely tempted to join in with his companions, a stronger power held him back.

By the time he had followed the fleece to the southern districts of Victoria, he had managed to save a neat sum of money. He knew what he wanted; and this was not life in the city, nor yet life on the plains. He had no wish to become a big station owner; to possess broad lands in the north or north-west; but, some forty miles east of Melbourne, he pictured a large, well-bearing orchard—a valley of trees surrounded by forest mountains. He heard no call across the plains; it was the land of giant gums and purple ranges that lured him. Some day he was going to follow that call east.

Then came a break. After a fortnight of the most trying conditions, the man weakened and, having been urged by the others to join in their revels for the week-end, found himself galloping with them for the township.

Naturally, he tried to excuse himself for the lapse, thinking: “After all, it matters to no one but myself. If anything happened to me to-morrow, is there a single soul who would care? You’ve had the blues all the week; now’s your chance to drown ‘em.”

Nevertheless, such thoughts as these, with which he tried to defend his action, did not entirely ease his mind. He realised his weakness. The thought of Valentine rose before him; but he tried to put it from him.

“She does not care. Why should I think so much of her? I wonder where she is now?”

Had he but known it, the girl was not ten miles away, in the town towards which he was riding. During the fortnight he had been at Wangneerie Station, at the nearest township, Daya, twenty miles away, Valentine was working in the office of the store, from which the station ordered its provisions. A year had passed since she had first taken her place at Daya. A quiet, uneventful year, which had brought contentment to the girl who had set out to find it.

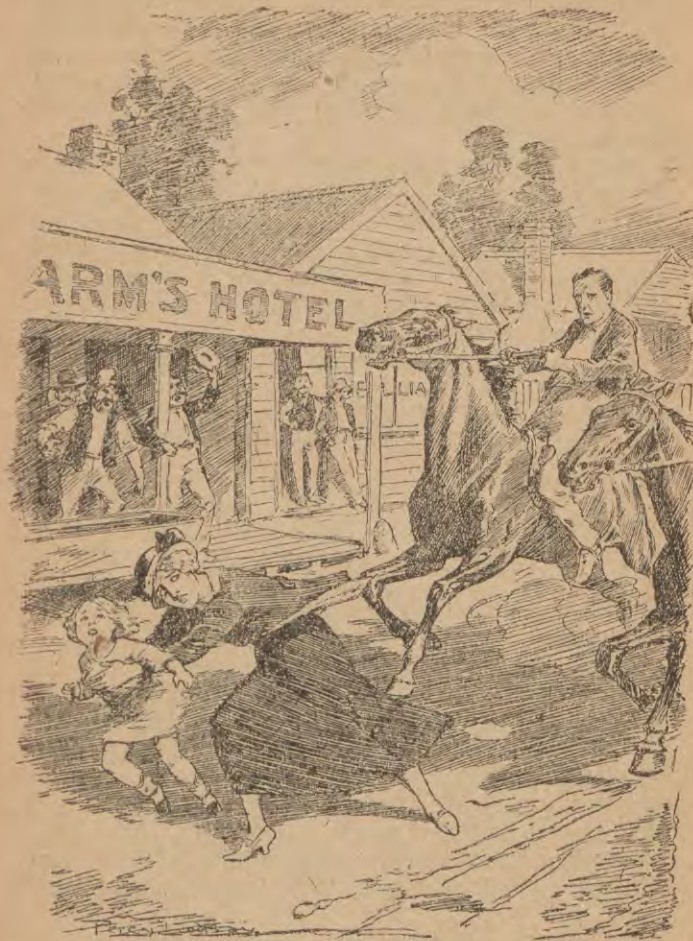
Valentine was happy. She had no desire to leave the township that had granted her this peace of mind. Now and again she heard from Mrs. Blake, who, with her son, was still abroad, and regularly she heard from Grace Cameron. The old life had passed like a bad dream, leaving behind it occasional memories; but even these were being softened by Time's soothing touch.

It was on one sunny Saturday afternoon, when Valentine was walking along the main street, with its flowering gums on either hand, that an argument over the merits of two horses had arisen between their owners. It was decided to put them to the test, the loser to pay up a week's wages.

The girl, on turning a corner, paused at sight of a crowd of men collected outside the hotel—a crowd that halloed, shouted, and cheered, frantically waving their arms. Looking back, she saw two horsemen tearing along the road at a break-neck speed. She also saw something else. . . . .

Crossing the roadway was a child, having evidently escaped for a time from its mother's watchful eye. All others, intent on the race, had no heed for anything else, and had it not been for the prompt action of the girl, the race would in all probability have terminated in tragedy.

Valentine awoke to sudden action, and darted across the road. Blair's horse on the offside was leading by a length, and in another moment the child would have been tangled up among the racing roofs. What



As Valentine sprang in front of the horses she pushed the child before her.  
*Equality Road.*

happened passed like a flash. As Valentine sprang in front of the horses, she pushed the child before her; but so closely did the horses sweep past before them that, instinctively putting out a hand, while she held the child with the other, the girl lost her balance and fell.

Pulling up his horse, Blair leapt from the saddle and ran back to her as she unsteadily rose to her feet. They faced each other and, for the time, recognition robbed them of the power of speech. The man's face reddened under its tan, while a warm glow covered the girl's cheeks. She was the first to collect her senses, and speak.

"When you go racing mad, you want to watch where you are going," she said, quietly, her voice trembling ever so slightly. "How would you have felt if you had killed this child—you and that other man?"

The "other man" had now come up, and some distance behind him the shearers were pouring along the road towards them. Already a curious group had gathered.

"Where is the kid's mother?" gruffly asked the second rider. "Why the hell don't she look after it?"

"Why don't you go somewhere else if you want to go racin'?" demanded a hard-faced woman, coming forward and taking charge of the child, who was now crying lustily. "The main street ain't no place to be racin' in; but you shearers are all the same, the way you go on! If Trooper Crook did his duty, he'd have the whole lot of you in the lock-up, that's what he would; but he's never where he should be!" And without a word of thanks to Valentine, she whisked off.

Feeling the curious eyes of the crowd intently watching her, the girl moved away, followed by Blair.

"I suppose it was a fool thing to do," he said at last. It was all he could find to say at the moment, for he had not yet recovered from the surprise of

seeing her. "If there'd been any damage done, I'd never—I'd never——"

"If there had been any damage done," she interposed, "it's the law that would have decided for you."

They had been walking fairly quickly at first, leaving a wondering crowd staring after them; now their steps slackened. Turning, the girl looked directly at the man, and he fancied that he read reproach in the depths of her eyes.

She looked fresh, bright, better than he had ever seen her look; but still a girl in spite of her years and all she had gone through. While to her mind, there was an improvement about the man before her. He held himself erect, whereas he had once slouched. His eyes were clearer, greyer if possible, and the mouth, though still stern-looking, had lost its bitter lines.

So, for a time, they looked at each other, then the man spoke.

"I'm fair knocked out at seeing you here," he said.

"You can be no more surprised at seeing me here than I am at seeing you," she replied, smiling a little.

"I know what you're thinking," he said; "but I want you to understand—yes, I've been drinking; but I am not drunk. I daresay you think that I'm just another sort like Amery was."

He had no qualms about the illusion, being frank and natural to the last degree.

"I tried to believe that you were not," she said.

"Go on believing it," he answered, and added earnestly: "I know I've been a hard liver, and all the rest of it; but—I've been going steady, that's honest. Since I first went up country I've gone on the level, and this is the first time I've gone off it. Won't you believe that? Perhaps, after all, there is something behind it. If I hadn't come in to-day, I'd never have known you were here. Listen! I might have done you an' that kid in for life. If I'd as much as given you the slightest scratch, I'd never have forgotten it."

I can't tell you how I felt when you went down—and that's dinkum."

"You are very profuse," replied Valentine. "Anyway, it's only a case of what might have been; but what, fortunately, isn't. Let it go. Tell me, what have you been doing since you came to the country?"

"Anything I could turn a hand to. Shearing, mostly."

"You told me that you were going across the border."

"So I did cross the border, and worked my way down to these parts. I haven't forgotten what you said—that I can make good. I've got a nice little sum banked up, and in a few more months, I am going to toss this up, and hit out on my own."

"On the plains? With wheat or grazing?" she asked.

"No, not on the plains. They don't make no appeal to me. Have you forgotten the time when you let me take you to that picnic? That was when you first set me thinking. That's the country for me—the bush. I'll try at fruit-growing in a district like that. You see, I've been reading it all up——" He paused, looking keenly at her. "What's up?" he asked.

"How? What do you mean?" she said.

"What are you looking at me like that for? Are you laughing at the thought of me takin' up fruit-growing?"

"Why should I laugh? I was just thinking how changed you are," she answered.

"I feel different, somehow. But you are changed, too, you know."

"Well, like you I can say—I feel different, too."

"Have you been here long?" he asked, then.

"At Daya? I came up three days after you left the city, and have been here ever since."

"Daya was made for you," he said, simply.

"You're looking just Al. You've said that I have changed. I say, are you pleased?"

"I am not sorry," was her guarded reply; though in truth she was greatly pleased as well as greatly surprised at the new light she saw him in, at the same time realising that he was appearing at his best before her.

He watched her steadily, making no further remark; while she felt her face grow warm under his gaze.

When they reached the gate of the pretty-looking house where she boarded, the man said slowly: "Is this to be the finish? Won't I see you again?"

"It's likely," she answered. "If you're in Daya again."

"I say, is there anyone about these parts who's likely—who's keen on you?" he asked.

"I hope so," was her answer. She laughed lightly, though her heart was beating to quicker time.

"And who you care for?" he asked, then, in the same even tone.

"Yes, I think there is someone," she told him, teasingly.

"You think, but you ain't sure?"

"No, I am not sure. You see, if he were to think very much of me, it's then that I'd feel sure; but I don't know whether he does or not."

"An' you a girl, an' can't tell that. You're bluffing me, aren't you?"

"Tell me," she said, "would it make any difference to you if there were someone else?"

"You ask that?" he said, quickly. "I was hoping; but—it was a fool's hope. I was thinking that, when I make good, and do something big, that maybe you'd come to care for me. I wouldn't dare ask unless I had everything for—to offer you."

"I do not think you would have dared down there in the city to even suggest such a thing as you are now doing," she quietly answered him.

"No, I wouldn't have—being what I was. But the country makes one feel that there are always chances for everything. Whatever I've done in the country,



I've done in thought of you. You might never have known, but your memory would always have been with me, and that would have satisfied me. But meeting you to-day—I do not like the idea of not seeing you again. I want you, and I would work my hands to a bone for you."

Once another had said the very same thing to her, but how different had been that other from the man who now stood before her. That other had proved himself to be everything but what he should have been: this one was proving himself to be all that was best in a man. There would be no danger of any mistake should she follow her heart into his keeping. She had discovered long since why Steve Blake had passed from her mind.

"Why don't you answer me?" said the man. "Are you offended?"

"No, I am not offended," she answered him. "I was only thinking. I have faith in you, and believe all you say."

His hand went out and caught hers. Neither noticed the couple passing along the opposite side of the street.

"When I am able to offer you a home, with every comfort, would you accept it?" He was breathing a little unevenly, and the grip of his hand on hers hurt Valentine, but she answered steadily:

"When you offer me that, with your love, Jack, I shall accept."

"You'll never regret it. I'll make up for all you have gone through the last few years. The day after to-morrow finishes Wangneerie, and on Wednesday I'm off across the bay. When the New Zealand season finishes, then, I'll come back to you."

More people were passing along the street. The shadows were beginning to fall as dusk set in. From inside the house a bell clanged.

"There is the call to tea," said Valentine; "but somehow, I don't feel that I want any."

He could see the smile on her face, and the light in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Oh, my girl!" he said, suddenly—"I love you!"

"I've always liked you," said Valentine slowly. "But it wasn't till we met again to-day that I fully realised how much I have missed you, and since you have been talking to me, I have learnt something else: that my liking for you has grown. Will the world call me a fool because I love you so? But I do not care for the world. I will have you, and in the bush we should be happy together. I do not like to see you go so far away when you start for New Zealand; but you must go, else we'll not have our little world in the bush. But come back soon. Don't keep me waiting too long."

"Keep you waiting too long! Valentine!"

"Do you know," she said, smiling whimsically, "that is the first time you have ever called me by my name?"

"Before, I dared not. But now that Devil Blair has gone to the pack——"

"I would not like to think that he has," she returned. "Although you are now Jack Blake, retain a little some of the old ways of Devil Blair. In spite of all, he was a good fellow."

The bell rang again, and Valentine turned. "I must not keep them waiting. Jack, come down to the house here this evening, in about an hour's time. Since I have come to Daya, I have almost known what it is to have a home and parents, and I would like the dear old folk to meet you. Will you come?"

"I will come," he answered.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IT was eighteen months later before Valentine became Mrs. Jack Blake, and, with her husband, entered her new home.

It was a picturesque place, surrounded by creeping plants and an old-world garden. Beyond the garden fence, stretched acres of healthy-looking fruit trees: apples, cherries, pears, plums. To the rear of the house were strawberry plots and berry bushes of all descriptions.

Jack Blake had reached his goal, and things had turned out even better than he had dared to hope. In buying over the orchard and house from a retiring orchardist, he had secured a bargain, and was more than satisfied. As for Valentine, secure in her husband's strength, she had come to the conclusion that all the sorrows and worries of her former life were worth the ordeal, since it had brought her to her present happiness.

She had been at Ashvale a month when, in a letter forwarded from her old address at Daya, she learnt that Mrs. Blake and her son were on their way home. Within three weeks' time from her receiving the letter, the others would arrive back in Australia.

Then Valentine began to scheme. Writing to Mrs. Blake, care of the vessel by which she was travelling, she informed the old lady that she had moved from Daya to a far better position east of the capital. . . .

"The place is called Ashvale," she wrote, "and the scenery and all is simply beautiful. I am perfectly happy, and quite content to settle down here for the rest of my life. I am afraid I shall not be able to go to the city to meet you when you arrive—as you have asked me to do, but there is nothing I would like better than for you and Mr. Blake to come up here and see me. It is only a couple of hours' journey

from Melbourne, and I could meet you at the station. I have a surprise for you, so do come. When you answer, address to Valentine Hood. . . ."

Grace had heard from Valentine of her marriage, and the news had troubled her. She felt that, after all, Valentine was not worthy of consideration; that she had made one foolish mistake, only to repeat the error. But when, on meeting her friend in the city, and on being presented to Blake, she noticed the great change in Valentine, Grace judged Blake accordingly, and, after a few minutes' close observation, understood that Valentine had at last come to the end of her trials.

"Valentine," she said, when the two girls were alone together one evening. "I am so pleased to know that you're happy. You are looking so well—so much like your old self."

"You are satisfied that I have not made a mistake in the man I married?" asked Valentine, smiling slowly.

"I am sure that you haven't."

"All right," smiled Valentine. "Now, Grace, just listen a minute: My husband was once a leader of roughs—yes, that's true. Wait till I tell you how I first met him. . . ."

And when she had told the other everything, Valentine added:

"At least you must admit that I am consistent—no, I've lost most of my old views on equality, but I still hold to the fact that there's no 'class distinction' as the world judges it. For many years Jack lived among the lower element of the city streets. It took him only three years to rise above that, and in spite of what the past holds for him, I maintain that he is now the equal of practically any man. Not every man has been put to the test, either. It is all very well for a man who has had—all his life long—everything he wants, to condemn another man who has been put by chance on the lower rung. But put those

two men on an equal footing, and try them both—that is when nature proves itself. If my husband has been a man of the streets, and has been in gaol, I am all the prouder of him now that he has pushed his way so far up the ladder in such a short while——”

“Hear! Hear!” heartily laughed Grace. “Hark to Valentine, the orator!”

Valentine blushed, laughed, and became silent. She knew that she was right.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Jack, I have a couple of visitors coming up to-day. Could you be at the house early for tea?”

“Visitors?” repeated Jack Blake. “Who are they? Mrs. Cameron——”

His wife shook her head. “No, not Grace; and to make you curious, I am not going to tell you who they are. I am going to drive to the station this afternoon to meet them; so harness up——”

“A fair thing’s a fair thing,” he answered. “No harnessing up till I know who’s coming. Out with it, Val!”

“All right, if you won’t harness up, I’ll harness up myself,” was her ready reply. “I just won’t ‘out with it.’”

“If you can bring in the horse, and find the harness, turn to. I am getting to the back paddock, and won’t be home till pretty late. So long!”

Valentine laughed softly. She knew her husband, so that she did not trouble to see about harnessing up the horse before getting ready for her drive to the station.

Sure enough when, with the rug over her arm, she walked to the big gate, there was the horse and gig waiting; but her husband was nowhere to be seen. Probably he was away in the back paddock, as he had said he would be; but that didn’t worry Valentine in the least. He had brought up and harnessed the horse, and he would not fail to be back for an early tea.

Nor did he. Hearing his step on the verandah, his wife, excusing herself from the two visitors, hurried out to him. “Jack,” she said ingratiatingly, placing one arm about his neck, and placing one of her hands in his grubby palms, “the visitors are here.”

He looked down at her glowing face. “Why so excited about it?” he asked, smiling.

“Because—because—Jack, there’s warm water in the kettle to wash and shave, and I have put out your good clothes ready for you. Hurry, there’s a dear; but tell me, first, that you are not cross.”

“Cross?”

“For not letting you know sooner that they were coming, and who they are.”

“I ain’t cross. What is it?”

“A surprise. Hurry, dear.”

She released his neck, withdrew her hand, and re-entered the sitting-room.

About ten minutes later, she said to the old lady sitting opposite where the girl herself was standing near the window: “Mrs. Blake, I want you to forgive me for something.”

“You do? For what, my dear?”

“For deceiving you. This is my own home I have brought you to. Yes, you have guessed that much; but it did not occur to you that I might be married again.”

“Again!” exclaimed Mrs. Blake. Her son said nothing. He knew only that there had been no mistake this time. The change in the girl herself, and the cheerful home conveyed that much.

“Why do you say it like that?” gently the girl reproached Mrs. Blake. “Because I made a fool of myself once, do you think it likely I would do the same thing again?”

“No—I wouldn’t think it likely; but——”

“You don’t understand, do you?” said the girl; “but you will when you meet my husband.”

In a few more minutes Jack Blake appeared at the

doorway, where he stopped short, staring at the old lady who, on seeing him, had leaned forward in her chair, gripping both the arm-rests with nervous fingers. Steve Blake swung round, starting forward.

"Mrs. Blake," said Valentine, "here is my husband. Now do you understand?" Then turning, she left the room.

Steve Blake, making his way to the dining-room some little time later, found Valentine preparing tea. She faced him and, going straight to her, he placed a hand on her shoulder.

"So this was your surprise, sister," he said, kindly. "Your letter made us wonder; but who would ever have dreamt of this?"

"Tell me," she said. "Is it a good surprise?"

"The best possible," he answered her.

His brother at that moment came hurriedly into the room, and Steve, without another word, left husband and wife together.

For awhile there was silence. There was nothing to be said. Words at times are very unnecessary, and there was no need for them now. Valentine was rewarded by the light she saw in her husband's eyes. It told her all that she wanted to know; and, as he took her in his arms, she felt the tears in her eyes.

They were tears of happiness and of love; for her the world now held naught but happiness and peace. It was the calm after the storm. She did not know that, by her act in bringing mother and son, brother and brother, together again, she had repaid tenfold all that had been done for her by the kindly old lady and her son.

Valentine's head went to her husband's shoulder.

"Oh, Jack! I am so happy," she said.

And the only answer he could give was to tighten his arms about her, and hold her close.

[THE END.]



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