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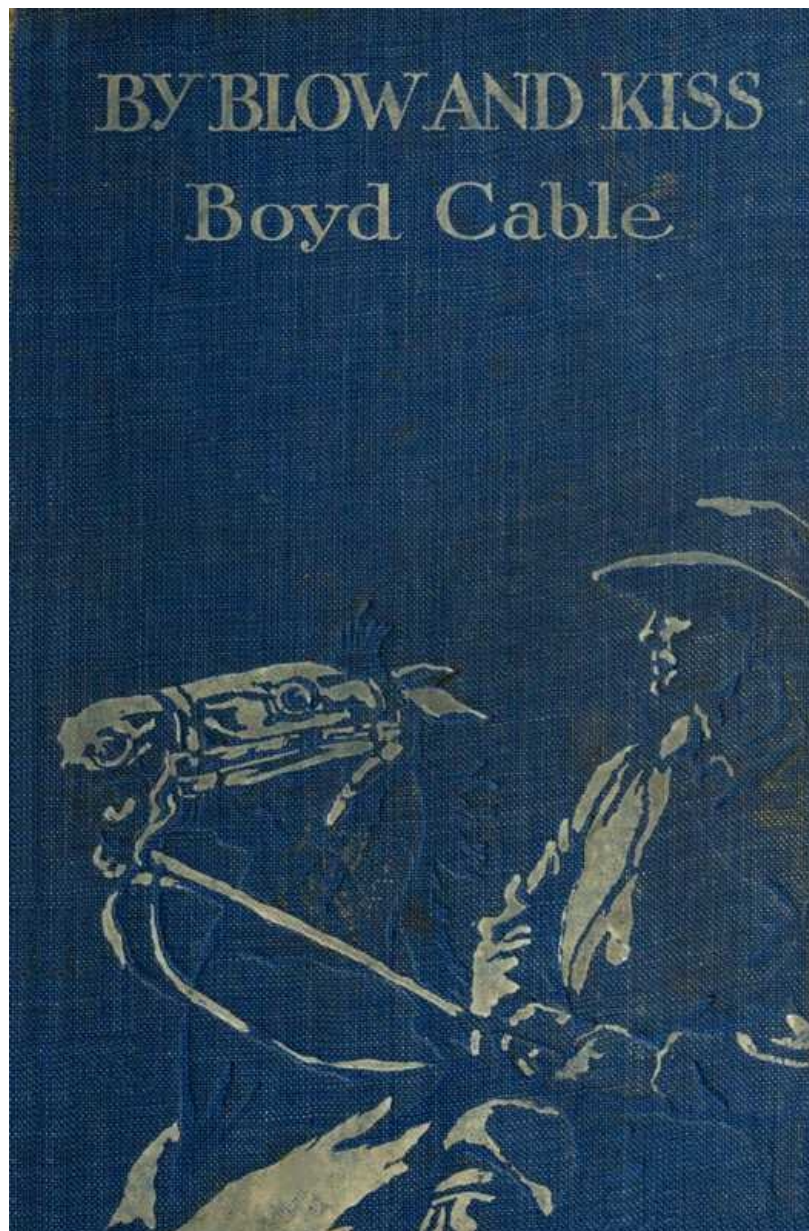
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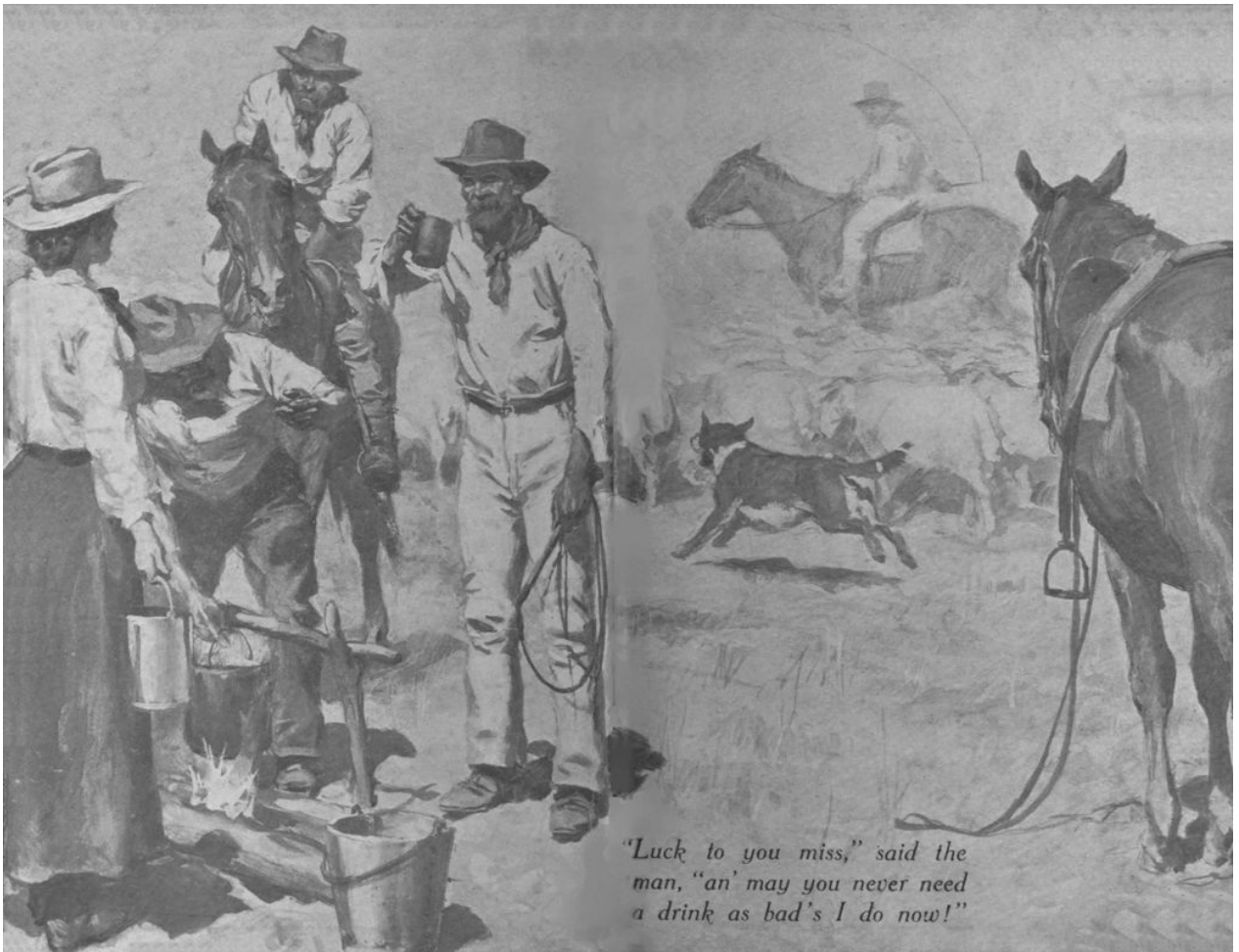
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BY BLOW AND KISS: THE LOVE STORY OF A MAN WITH A BAD NAME ***





"Luck to you miss," said the man, "an' may you never need a drink as bad's I do now!"

"Luck to you miss," said the man, "an' may you never need a drink as bad's I do now!"



Steve stooped and slid his hands under her arms, and lifted her till her face was level with his, and kissed her full on the lips.

BY BLOW AND KISS

The Love Story of a Man with a
Bad Name. (Published serially under
the title *Unstable as Water*).

BY
BOYD CABLE

By manhood blood of birth and brood,
That loves the fight that wins to love;
By breath we drew of woman, too,
That sets the prize aught else above;
By that and this, by blow and kiss,
By Nature beaten to her knees,
The prize that's wet with blood and sweat
Lies closer to the heart for these.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

Printed in 1914

BY BLOW AND KISS.

It was fiercely hot inside the hut, although the click and snap of the tin roof spoke of its cooling now that the sun was off it. The men eating their supper at the long deal table sat with shirt sleeves rolled up and collars open at the throat, and the sweat drops glistening on their browned faces, brick-red arms, and lean throats. In spite of the heat they ate hugely, as men do who have spent a long day in the saddle, and "Blazes," the cook, was kept busy replenishing the heaped-up plates.

As they finished, one by one the men pushed their plates back and loaded their pipes, and the reek of strong tobacco mingled with the smells of cooked meats and the kerosene lamp on the wall.

"Scottie" Mackellar, slow and deliberate in eating as in most things, was the last to finish and light his pipe.

He had been down to the station that day, just returning as supper was served, and although the men waited expectantly for news or orders, they waited without questions, knowing Scottie and his ways, and that questions were more likely to delay than hasten his words.

"Whip" Thompson tried gently for a rise.

"What's it looking like below, Mac?" he asked.

"Dry," said Scottie, slowly, "vera dry." As they had all been thinking and talking of little else but the dry spell that had lain hot and heavy on the land for months past, this did not convey much fresh information.

"How d'you think the sheep are makin' out?" tried Whip Thompson again.

"They might be better," said Scottie. "But then again, they might be worse."

"Wot's the boss sayin' about it?" asked another man.

"What would he be saying?" countered Scottie.

"If I was 'im," struck in Jack Ever, a little man with a peaky face, "I'd be sayin' something in sulphur-coloured langwidge wi' purple trimmin's."

Scottie made no reply, and the men began to drift slowly out of doors to lounge and smoke, or perch themselves on the rail in front of the hut.

"E's a bloomin' hencyclopeedy, ain't 'e?" said Ever, disgustedly, when he had settled himself comfortably.

"You'd have got more if you'd asked less," said Aleck Gault, with a light laugh.

A lumbering man, with a heavy jowl and a thick neck, sprawled his arms on the top rail of the fence and laughed hoarsely.

"It's ver-r-ra dry," he mimicked. "Never a spit or a spot o' rain for this month o' Sundays; the sheep eatin' the skin off'n the country, an' the seeds below the skin; the paddocks bare as the back of yer hand an' even the hills gettin' eaten out, an' the cattle wi' as much flesh on 'em as a post an' rail fence; the sheep droppin' dead in droves like flies in a frost, an' good for nothin' 'cept to fatten the crows; the bottoms o' the tanks dry mud this month back, an' the river mostly dry sand. An' I believe ye, Scottie—it's dry, ver-r-ra dry."

"Here's Scottie comin' now, Darby," said Whip Thompson. "Wot's he goin' to do wi' the broom?"

"If you never want to know—just ask him," grunted Darby.

Scottie approached with the broom under his arm. "I'll be wantin' three o' ye to go down to the station to-morrow," he said. "You, Aleck, an' Ned an' Jack."

"Wot to do?" said Jack Ever.

"The boss'll tell ye that," said Scottie. "He was speakin' o' shiftin' the sheep out again tae the back paddocks an' mebbe up into the hills."

Whip Thompson whistled. "Goin' to be some graft presently," he said. "Handlin' silly bleatin' jumbucks over the Pinnacles country an' through the Whistlin' Hills'll be some sport."

"You an' Darby'll stop an' gie me a hand," said Scottie. "I'll be puttin' the little hut in some sort o' shape. And, Steve Knight, ye might tak' a turn up by Split-the-Wind, and push back ony o' the cattle beasties ye see intae the hills a bit."

Steve Knight looked up from the stockwhip he was plaiting. "Stay out or get back at night?" he asked.

"Get back," said Scottie, and moved slowly away.

The men watched him go to the old hut that stood a couple of hundred yards from the big one, untwist the bit of fencing wire that held the door, and pass in with his broom.

"Put the little hut in shape," said Darby. "What d'you suppose..."

He interrupted himself. "An' what's wrong wi' Blazes? He looks mad over suthin'."

The cook had bounced from the door, dashed out a basin of greasy water, and flung himself inside again with violent anger and indignation in every motion, and then the men could hear him rattling and slamming dishes about as if they were his personal enemies.

They were all too well accustomed to the blazes of anger that had earned him his name to pay much attention to it, and just at present they were much more concerned over what Scottie was going to do with the small hut. But it appeared there was a connection between the two things.

"'As he tole you?" Blazes demanded, coming over to them. "'As he tole you 'e's bringin' them blighted sheep up 'ere?"

"Yes," said Darby. "But I dunno why it should worry you, Blazes. You don't 'ave to cook for the sheep."

"Cook for the sheep, you mutton-'ead" retorted Blazes. "Don't I 'ave to cook for the shepherds though? Don't I know wot it means too? Men comin' in all hours day an' night, and wantin' feedin'. An' makin' up tucker for you an' the rest to take out on the 'ills. An' extry 'ands 'ere from down

below....”

“Wot’s Scottie doin’ wi’ the old hut?” put in Whip Thompson.

“Do,” said Blazes, angrily. “‘Ow do I know wot ‘e’s goin’ to do? I asked ‘im civil as you please wot ‘e wanted the broom for. ‘Tae sweep’ ‘e says.’

“Perhaps the boss is goin’ to move in here while the sheep are up,” suggested Steve Knight. 9

Scottie emerged again, and as he passed them he halted a moment. “If there’s ony o’ ye has some o’ the weeklies wi’ picturs in them,” he said, “mebbe ye’ll lat me hae them tae put on the walls. I want the place tae look as nice as it will.” He paused a moment, and then went on slowly, “I’m movin’ in there, an’ I’m bringin’ ma niece up tae stop wi’ me.”

He moved off before the men could reply, and he left them staring in amazement.

“That’s it, is it?” exploded Blazes. “Bring ‘is sheep first, then ‘is nieces, then Lord knows wot. ‘Is niece’ll be some ‘alf-baked jackeroo new-chum I suppose. Men’s hut isn’t good enough for ‘im evidently. Must ‘ave a separate ‘ouse. Well if ‘e expecks me to carry ‘is meals over to ‘im——”

One or two of the men were laughing, and Blazes stopped and glared at them.

“Isn’t a niece the same as a nephy?” said Darby the Bull, hesitatingly. “Only a woman instead o’ a man?”

“He said niece, didn’t he?” said Aleck Gault.

“He said niece right enough, and a niece is a woman right enough,” said Steve Knight. “Fancy Scottie with a niece!”

“Wonder what she’s like,” said Whip Thompson; “young or old, pretty or ugly.”

“Pretty,” snorted Blazes; “she would be pretty, bein’ a niece o’ his, wouldn’t she? She’ll be some long-nosed Scotchman, wi’ eyes like a boiled Murray codfish, an’ teeth stickin’ out like tombstones, an’ a face that’d turn a tin o’ condensed milk sour. Nice sort o’ fancy flamin’ trick bringin’ a woman up ‘ere to Thunder Ridge. That’s the finish, that is—the dead finish.” 10

“Oh, I dunno,” said Whip Thompson, vaguely. “Mebbe she won’t be too bad.”

“Wot’s ‘e want ‘er here for?” demanded Blazes, resentfully. “Why couldn’t ‘e keep ‘er down at the station below?”

“P’raps he’ll get ‘er to cook for him,” said Darby the Bull, grinning. “You know you could never make burgoo to his liking.”

“First time he had it,” said Aleck Gault, “Scottie wondered if it was a plate of porridge or a grindstone. Said it was thick enough to jump on without dinting it. And next time when it was thin enough to wash your face in he wasn’t pleased. I don’t wonder at him bringing someone to cook for him.”

“Well, she can cook for ‘im an’ you too, for all o’ me,” snapped Blazes. “I’m done wi’ this job. Sheep here’s bad enough, but a woman—that’s the finish, that is,” and he stumped off.

He had threatened to throw up his job too often for the men to believe it, and now their minds were on something more interesting.

“D’you s’pose we’ll ‘ave to wear jackets when she’s knockin’ about?” said Whip Thompson, glancing at his bare arms.

“You’ll have to wash your shirt oftener,” said Aleck Gault, laughing.

“I haven’t seen a woman for more’an hour or two in months since I was a kiddie,” said Darby the Bull. “It’ll seem odd-like allus havin’ one about the place.”

“Seems to me it’s going to be a blame nuisance,” growled Ned Gunliffe.

“Give ‘er a chawnce, mates,” said Jack Ever. “She may be all right, an’ anyways she’s a woman. There’s plenty places where the men ‘ud give their ears to have a woman round all the time.” 11

“They’re some as could give longer ears—an’ that’s asses,” said Ned.

“Hush, children,” said Aleck Gault, reprovingly. “I’m afraid, Steve, our Happy Home is to be broken with strife and dissension. Just the bare word of a woman, you see, and the quarrels break out.”

“Paradise invaded,” scoffed Steve Knight. “Look at the Paradise around you, and glance at us, the angels who fear a woman will disturb us.”

“It’ll please you, I suppose, Fly-by-Night. Save you some moonlight trips if you’ve a girl to spark right at home here,” said Ned Gunliffe.

“You’re right, Ned,” said Knight, good-humouredly. “First thing I want to know is whether she can sew and darn. If she can, I’m going to spend all my spare time courting her while she sews patches on my breeches and darns my socks.”

“Why not marry her an’ done with it while you’re at it?” said Gunliffe. “You’d only have to ask ‘er you know. Was there ever a woman yet could resist Fly-by-Night when he rode up a-courting?” He spoke with a hint of a sneer in his tones, and, remembering an old tale of an episode in which Knight and he and a girl had been concerned, the men guessed at a hidden edge to the words. But if there was, Steve Knight ignored it.

“No chance, Ned,” he said lightly. “You see, my trouble with the girls is that the good ‘uns find me out, and the bad ‘uns I find out, and, either way, marryin’ is off.”

“Couldn’t ye choose a middlin’ one?” said Whip Thompson, banteringly. 12

“No,” said Steve; “a middling girl would be like a horse that would always trot—too slow for me if I want to go fast, and a nuisance to have to hold in if I want to walk.”

“I knew a gal once——” said Darby the Bull, and paused.

“And a safe way to know her too, Darby,” cut in Steve. “But when you marry her you must know her for always.”

“I asked ‘er to marry me—I was half drunk at the time—an’ she said if I meant it I was a fool, an’ if I didn’t I was a rogue, and either ways she was better without me. I allus remembered that

though I never knew just what she meant."

"Did you still mean it when you sobered?" said Steve, chuckling.

"I did," said Darby, solemnly.

"Then she was right, only there was a pair of you," said Steve. "You were a fool to ask her, and she was another not to say yes."

Darby the Bull looked puzzled. "D'you think every man that marries is a fool then?" said Whip Thompson.

"I wish I could think so," said Steve, gravely, but with his eyes twinkling, "but I'm afraid not, worse luck for him."

"You'd think women was man-eaters t' hear you," said Jack Ever.

"Most of them are," said Steve.

"Huh," grunted Jack, "if we believe all we see an' 'ear you ain't scared enough of 'em to keep away from 'em."

"No," said Steve, lightly; "but I'm scared enough to keep outside the cage they're in. When you're married you're inside the bars, and can't get away if you want to."

"D'you ever tell your girls all these things you think o' them?" asked Thompson.

"I do," said Steve, promptly, "and a lot more I don't think of them. And, mostly, they don't believe I mean what I really think of them, and do believe the lies I tell them. That sounds a bit mixed, but I mean they usually believe the lies and disbelieve the truth."

"Rot," said Gunliffe. "I reckon a woman can spot a lie quicker 'n a man."

"Yes, when she wants to," said Steve, "but—she doesn't always want to."

"If I felt like you, Fly-by-Night," said Darby the Bull, "I'd run a mile if I saw a pretty girl comin'."

"If you were like me," said Steve, laughingly, rising and stretching himself, "you'd run many miles—to meet her. Be glad you're not like me."

"I am," said Darby, so simply and earnestly that the others roared with laughter, and Steve Knight winced in the darkness, though his laugh rang as loud as any.

Aleck Gault rose to his feet. "Well, it's time we turned in," he said. "Perhaps we'll dream of the bright eyes of Scottie's niece."

"Let's hope they're not what Blazes supposed—eyes like a boiled cod and teeth like tombstones, wasn't it?" said Knight. "Though, perhaps for the peace of Thunder Ridge, it'll be best if the prediction's right."

"ARE ye tired, lass?" said Scottie.

Ess Lincoln straightened her bent shoulders.

"Yes," she admitted, "I am, rather. It was so bumpy and rough and dusty in the coach. But it was interesting in a way, and the driver was so good. I think he was delighted to get an ignorant city new chum to tell his tales to, of the wonders of the back-country. He was astonished that I'd never been anywhere in the real out-back, but he didn't seem to think I'd any reason to be astonished when he told me he'd never seen any of the big cities in Australia, and had never even seen the sea."

"There's more like him about," said Scottie, "though they're gettin' fewer."

"When do we come on to the station?" asked Ess.

"We've been drivin' through one of the paddocks of it since half an hour after we left the township," said Scottie.

"But isn't a paddock where you feed the sheep?" said Ess in surprise.

"Aye, when there's feed on it," said Scottie. "There's sheep in this paddock now, but it's big an' they're scattered lookin' for feed."

The girl gasped. "But there isn't a sign of grass," she protested. "Why aren't they in a paddock where there's more grass?"

"Because this is one of the best we have left," said Scottie, grimly. "It rins up to the foot o' the hills ye'll see and it gets the last drain o' the water off them. But there's been a dry spell awhile back and most o' the grass is gone."

"How dreadful," said Ess Lincoln, gazing with wide eyes on the bare plain that shimmered in the heat. "I've heard of how little grass there is out here in dry weather, but I never dreamed it was as bad as this. Why, there's *no* grass."

"The sheep can still find some," said Scottie, "though I'll admit they'll no find it much longer. The front paddocks is eaten as bare as a city sidewalk, and when these back paddocks is cleaned...." He broke off and shrugged his shoulders.

"What will happen then?" asked Ess. "You mustn't mind me asking questions, you know. It's all so new to me."

"It depends what the boss thinks," said Scottie. "We may turn them up on the hills, or we may keep them alive a while longer in the mulga paddocks, cuttin' down the trees for them tae feed on—or we may kill them tae the last one an' boil them down for tallow."

"What a cruel business," said Ess.

"It's a cruel country whiles," said Scottie. "Cruel tae man and beast. But if it came rain to-morrow ye'd see this plain as green as a cut emerald in three days, an' wi' plenty of rain the grass would soon be higher than the fence there."

"I've heard of that," said Ess. "But never thought the ground the grass came from could be so bare."

She took out a handkerchief and tried to wipe the thick dust from her face. But the dust defied her efforts. It was crusted thick on everything—on the backs of the horses, on every inch of the buggy, on their knees, shoulders and heads. It rose swirling from the feet of the horses, floated past them and hung in a still cloud that trailed for a mile on the road behind them. Out on the plain, to one side of them little dust-devils rose and twirled in the air and moved in twisting spirals across the flats. The boulders on the hills that rose on the other side of the road glared in the light of the sun, and the heat waves along the surface of each spur quivered and danced exactly, the girl remembered, as she had noticed the air quiver over the surface of the locomotive boiler at the sleepy, sun-smitten terminus.

"There's some o' the sheep," said Scottie, pointing with the whip to a string of tiny dots on the horizon. "And there's all that's left o' some more," as they drove past a dozen skins hung over the fence and the huddled red heaps that lay on the ground beyond. A score of crows were busy rending and tearing at the carcasses, and they rose, cawing hoarsely, and flapping heavily away a few yards as the buggy passed.

"It's horrible—horrible," the girl said, averting her face as the birds flopped back to their feast with harsh croaks of satisfaction.

"They were lucky to be dead afore the crows got them," said Scottie. "When they're a bit weaker the crows'll take the eyes out o' them afore they're dead—ay, an' afore they drop at times."

Ess shuddered. "Are there any of these sheep about where—where we'll be living?" she asked.

"No, no," said Scottie. "Thunder Ridge is back on the edge of the hills, an' we keep the hills for cattle. An' even if we shift the sheep tae the hills they'll no come near the house."

"I'm glad of that," said Ess. "I couldn't sleep if those poor things were about."

Scottie looked at her in surprise. "I forgot," he said. "Ye're no used tae this sort o' thing, an' it'll be—unpleasant tae ye. I wadna mentioned that about the crows if I'd thocht."

"But I'd rather you told me," protested Ess. "I'm going to live with you now, and amongst all this, and it's better for me to know."

"It's a peety ye hadna been comin' tae it at better times," said Scottie. "But come a sup o' rain ye'll see it bonnie enough yet."

They drove in silence for another hour along the edge of the hill, and then turned in round the shoulder of one of the spurs and trotted steadily into a narrowing valley. The road crept into the side of the valley, and presently the shuffling thuds of the horses' hoof-beats in the dust gave way to sharp clicks and rattles as the road climbed gradually up the side of the hill. Beyond the head of the

valley the hills rose blue and hazy, and Ess sighed with relief.

"I'm so glad the house is up in the hills," she said. "They're bare enough near at hand, but the distance at least looks better than that dreadful flat. But how still and dead everything seems."

A high fence came creeping down the hill to join the road, and where it crossed their path Scottie pulled up his horses and jumped down to open the gate.

"That's the last o' the out paddocks," he said, when he had led the horses through and closed the gate, and climbed to his seat again. A heap of whitened bones with a horned skull amongst them lay just inside the gate, and Ess pointed to it. "More dead things," she said; "we seem to have seen nothing but dead things all the way. Why is this fence so much higher than the others we passed, uncle?"

"Tae keep the wild dogs—dingoes—off the flats. They're murder amongst the sheep, but they'll no tackle the cattle. They'll hae a merry time if we hae t' shift the sheep up here."

"Murder and killing and dead things," said the girl. "It's worse than a battlefield."

"Maist o' the outside country is a battlefield, lass," said Scottie. "We're battlin' wi' the drought or the floods, or bush an' grass fires, or starvation an' disease, or rabbits an' dingoes, or ae thing an' anither near a' the time. Up here a man pits his brain an' his money, an' whiles his life, against Natur' an' a' her warks. There's nae bullets nor bay'nits, bit it's juist steady battle a' the same."

He had lapsed into the broader speech he always used when he was moved to deeper feelings or excitement, and the girl glanced at his set face curiously.

"I wonder you get men to face it," she said, "when there are easier lives to be lived elsewhere."

"Aye, aye, whiles I wunner mysel'," agreed Scottie. "But the breed o' men ye get here's hardened tae't. It's a hard life, but they're hard men. Ye'll meet some o' them up at the Ridge. Ye'll find them rough an' ready mebbe, you bein' used wi' city folk. But they're good lads at heart maistly, though they hae their faults mebbe."

"They won't get drunk and—and swear—and that sort of thing before me, will they?" asked Ess, hesitatingly.

"Na, na," said Scottie, hastily. "A man micht lat slip an oath mebbe without thinkin'—I micht dae the same mysel'—but ye'll hae to lat that pass by an' no hear like. They think a lot o' a lassie oot here, an' ane like yersel' they'll be like tae let ye use them for a doormat tae yer feet."

Ess laughed. "I'm glad you think they'll be kind to me," she said. "I like people who are, so I'll like them all."

"Ye'll get all the kindness ye need, an' a when o' compliments, I'm thinkin'," said her uncle, smiling. "An' if ye think at times they're rough like, ye'll just mind they're well meanin'. An' they wadna put a thocht or a word on a decent lassie that she could be shamed to hear. There's just a single man that ..." he hesitated, and mumbled a moment over his words. "I don't rightly know if it's fair tae a man to prejudice ye against him, but there is a man there that the less ye hae to do wi' the better I'll be pleased. He has light thochts an' ways wi' women, though he's no likely to use them wi' you. But we'll say nae mair, an' if I think it needs it I'll just tell ye again—or tell him."

"One word to me will be enough," said the girl, proudly. "And if you tell me who it is I'll take care to avoid him. I hate coarse men."

"He's no coarse. He's smoother than silk an' finer than lawn linen. He has the tongue o' a politician an' the manners o' a dancing master, an' if his acts was as good as his looks he'd be the best man I ever met."

Ess's lip curled a little. "He must be a fop," she said; "I wonder he's any use in this country."

"I've painted ma picture wrong if it gie's ye that notion. He's as tough as fencin' wire, an' can out-fight, out-drink, an' out-devil the wildest o' the gang. He puts himself out to please nobody but himsel', but I never knew the man or maid, horse or dog, that didn't like him."

"You're making me wildly curious," said the girl. "And I believe you like him yourself in spite of your warning me against him."

"There can be no harm in me likin' him," said Scottie, evasively. "An' there can be no good in you doin' the same."

"There's the house," he said presently. "Ye can see the smoke, an' ye'll see itsel' when we rise the crest."

The valley curved sharply, and the road followed and ran over a shoulder of the ridge and down on to a little plateau, where the out-station buildings and horse paddocks were set.

No men were about the houses, but half-way down the slope, and watching up the valley, they saw one man.

"That's the cook," said Scottie, getting down to open the yard gate; "He hasna seen us, an' he's watchin' for some o' them bringin' down a few cattle. The station sent over yesterday for meat Hark—I can hear them comin'."

They could hear from up the valley the pistol-like cracks of a stockwhip, and the deep lowing of cattle, and the rattle of stones. The sounds increased and swelled suddenly to a roar, as a mob of cattle swung round the corner and came surging down towards the slope, at the top of which Ess and Scottie stood. A man cantered easily behind the mob, the long-thonged stockwhip swinging in his hand, and snapping swiftly at any beast that swerved from the mob.

Ess watched the scene spread at her feet, and her eyes shone with pleasure and excitement at the sound of clattering hoofs and rumbling lowings, and the sight of the tossing heads and horns, and shifting colours of the rushing bodies.

"Wait a minute, uncle—*please*," she said breathlessly, as Scottie started to lead the horses on. "Isn't it splendid? I'd no idea cows could run so fast."

"I keep forgettin' these things is new t'ye," said Scottie, halting the horses again. "They're runnin' easy enough, though. Ye'll need tae see them when they're in a stampede. A good horse has tae

stretch himsel' tae pass them then."

"How beautifully the man rides; oh—" Ess caught her breath at the whirling speed and suddenness of what followed. Horse and rider shot forward with a rush, swerved from the track, and went clattering and scrambling along the face of the hill past the cattle. The mob was a small one of twenty or thirty, but the track and valley bottom was narrow, and gave no room to pass otherwise. Fifty yards past the head of the mob the rider turned and swooped down to the track again, the loose stones and rocks clattering and roaring at his heels. For an instant Ess thought the horse had fallen, but at the foot he picked up his stride and swept round in a curve. The mob had checked and half turned on itself at sight and sound of the horseman before them, and next moment he was crowding them back, his body swaying lithely in the saddle, and the whip pouring a volley of crackling reports about them. They swung outwards towards the slope where the cook was standing, and the horseman circled round and round them, his whip falling in lightning strokes on any of the brutes that tried to break out. Gradually they steadied and stood, crowding into a compact bunch, heaving restlessly and rattling their horns.

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Ess let her breath go with a deep sigh. "It's wonderful," she said. Below them they heard the rider shout "Which one, Blazes?" and saw the cook cautiously approach and scrutinise the shifting bodies.

"There y'are," he shouted suddenly; "that one—see—the brindle wi' the white face."

"Ye never saw ane thrown an' tied, I suppose," said Scottie, glancing at the girl's excited face and chuckling. "Watch then."

The rider slowly approached the mob, the brutes flinching and crowding back from him. Suddenly the whip flickered out a few swift cuts, swung back and snapped out a string of reverberating cracks, the horse leaped forward and crowded into the opening the yielding bodies gave him, and horse and rider and cattle grew dim and indistinct in the dust that churned up and hung about them. Out of the haze the cattle broke with terrified bawlings, and scattered galloping over the valley and the slope.

The brindle with the white face went tearing down the track, the horse thundering at his heels and forging alongside him. The slashing whip turned him, and they came racing up the lower slope. Straight for the cook they came till to the watchers above it seemed they must run him down. Then they saw the horse quicken his stride, and, as he came alongside with a rush, the rider leaned out and snatched at the waving tail beside him, whipped it in to his leg—and with a crash the bullock came down head over heels. At the same instant the horse propped sharply, and before he had fully stopped the man was down and running to the fallen beast. As he flung himself on it the dust hid them again, but in a few seconds he was up and running back to his horse, leaving the bullock struggling helplessly on its side with tied feet. The horse stood till the man was almost touching it, and then, as it moved forward, with a clutch and a spring he was in the saddle and the horse was off at a gallop, sweeping round the scattered herd. In less than a minute they were swept together, and being pushed up the valley and round the corner.

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"That's all," said Scottie. "Quick work, eh?"

"Quick," said Ess. "Oh—I can't tell you—I'm tingling all over. What a wonderful rider. Who is it?"

"Naething wonderful," said Scottie, calmly. "There's no a man on the Ridge here but could do the same within a second or two. But yon's the man I was speakin' o'. The best horseman and the worst character on Coolongolong station—Steve Knight."

NONE of the men saw Ess Lincoln that night. She was dead beat, Scottie said, and had turned in after some tea and tucker. Next morning they were all up and away about their work before Ess was up or out, but after supper that evening Scottie brought her over and introduced her to the men.

Steve Knight was not there at the time. He had been over to the head station, and the men were either in their bunks or getting ready for them when he came in. But if he did not see her, at least he heard enough of her.

"Ullo, Steve," said Jack Ever, as soon as Steve set foot inside the door. "You've missed the 'bus. She was over 'ere to-night, and we was all interdooced."

"I've missed my supper," said Steve. "And that's more important at this moment. See if you can hook me out some tucker, Blazes, and about a gallon of tea. I'm dry as the drought itself."

"Wait till you see 'er," said Whip Thompson. "You'll think different. She's a bonzer; she's—"

"Let's get a wash, Whip," said Steve, picking up a tin pail and making for the door, "and then you can sing a song about it."

"We're to start cutting the mulga trees for the sheep to-morrow," he said when he came back. "I just brought word back to Scottie."

"Did you go to the 'ouse?" said Jack. "Did you see 'er then?"

"No, Scottie came to the door. He asked me to go in, but I said No, I wanted some supper."

"You was both ends an' the middle of a fool then," said Jack, warmly. "You could 'ave seen 'er."

"I wasn't hungry to see her," said Steve, calmly, "and I was hungry for my supper." He seated himself and commenced to eat.

"It's getting near the finish for the sheep down there," he remarked, "and there isn't mulga enough to keep them going long."

"D'you think we'll have to camp up in the mulga paddocks?" said Aleck Gault.

"Good Lord, I 'opes not," said Jack Ever, in dismay. "We won't see 'er till next Sunday if we does."

"The boss said he'd be coming over here in a day or two," said Steve; "I expect we'll be shoving the sheep back here on the hills when the mulga gives out."

"Does the boss know she's 'ere?" asked Whip Thompson.

"The boss was too busy thinking about his sheep to bother, I expect," said Steve.

"I'm goin' to break in a 'orse for 'er," said Whip Thompson. "None of 'em would stand a skirt on 'is back, I s'pose."

"I'd try the Roman if I was you, Whip," said Aleck Gault.

"He's quiet, but he's an ugly brute," claimed Ned Gunliffe. "You want a nicer-looking crock for her."

"She can ride all right—she tole me," said Darby the Bull.

"I might len' 'er my 'orse," said Blazes, reflectively. Now Blazes' horse was the standing joke of the Ridge. The men swore he'd been crossed with a sheep and was born too tired to feed himself. But Blazes thought a lot of his horse, and was most jealous of anyone using it, although he had little riding to do himself. His offer to lend it made the men laugh, but it made Steve open his eyes.

"You too, Blazes," he said. "The whole camp seems to have gone crazy over this girl."

"Reckon you'll go crazy too when you see 'er," said Jack Ever.

"What's she like then?" said Steve. "Let's hear all about her, and then we may get talking of other things. Now then, Jack—fire ahead."

"She's pretty as a pictur in a gilt frame," said Jack. "She 'as 'ands like a duchess, and a figure like a green goddess."

Steve spluttered over his tea. "Didn't know there was an assortment of colours in the goddess line, Jack," he said. "But we'll let it go at Greek goddess."

"I read it in a book somewheres," said Jack. "One o' Nat Gould's, an' the chap was ravin' about the gal's figure."

"She has a figure that makes you think how well she'd look on a horse," said Whip Thompson. "And she carries her head as high, and steps as dainty, as a thoroughbred."

"Come on, Darby," laughed Steve. "You next."

Darby the Bull pondered. "When I'm drunk—or half drunk—I always see every woman's face sort o' soft an' sweet an'—an'—happy. I see this gal like that—an' I was sober ... I didn't think," he finished reflectively, "a man could ever see one like that—when he's sober."

Steve chuckled. "You're a poet, Darby," he said, "though you'll not believe it. But all this doesn't tell a man much. Is she short or tall, dark or fair, young or old? Eh, Aleck, you've observing eyes."

"Tall, or tallish," said Aleck Gault. "Slender, dark, brown eyes, age about 20, very pretty."

"That's better," said Steve. "Can you add to it, Ned?"

"A lady," said Ned, quietly, "speech, manners, and dress of a lady."

Blazes pounded the table. "You 'ark to me, Steve, an' I'll tell ye. Them an' their river or Creek godses, an' walk like a 'orse, an' a face like when you've got the rats, an' speech o' a lady. She didn't make no speech. Jus' said 'how d'ye do,' an' chatted pleasant like. She don't walk—she floats, just as gentle as a chip in a puddle. She 'as eyes as big as a bullock's, an' a pleadin' look in 'em like you see in a sheep's when its throat's cut. 'Er 'air's black as the bottom o' an old billy-can, an' shiny as a sweatin' nigger. She 'as a voice like the low notes o' a tin whistle, an' a skin as clear as the white o' a hard-boiled egg an' as soft as well-dressed kangaroo hide. She's a beauty from the tip o' 'er shoe-string to the button on 'er 'at. When she's speakin' to you, you feels you wants to go to

church, an' give your money to the poor. Th' only thing as beats me," he finished reflectively, "is 'ow she come to 'ave Scottie Mackellar for a uncle."

"Thanks, Blazey," said Steve, his voice bubbling with laughter. "Now I know exactly what she does look like. And for the peace of all our minds, I hope she won't stay long on Thunder Ridge. I must tell her so when I see her."

"You go gentle, Steve," said Jack Ever. "Don't you go hintin' that to 'er. We all 'opes she stays years an' is 'appy as long as she's 'ere."

"You all seem to have fallen up to the neck in love with her already," said Steve, commencing to pull off his boots. "I suppose I'll have to do ditto to be in company with you."

Jack Ever was sitting up in bed smoking. He took the pipe from his mouth and fixed his eyes on an empty corner of the room.

"Mebbe we're in love wi' her, meanin' nothin' disrespec'ful by the word. Mebbe there's some o' us 'ere will get to love 'er real, an' hope for 'er to love 'im. I reckon the rest will wish 'im luck if that 'appens—long as he plays a straight game. But God 'elp the man as tries to fool 'er."

The other men were carefully avoiding his eyes, but Steve Knight knew as well as if he had been addressed by name that the warning was spoken to him.

There were grunts of acquiescence from some of them.

"That's right—no foolin'," said Whip Thompson. "Straight game," murmured Blazes, and Darby the Bull growled a "That's right."

"Shut it, you fools," said Aleck Gault from his bunk. "There's nobody here that doesn't know how to treat a decent girl decent when he meets her."

"I should think Scottie Mackellar knows enough to look out for his niece, if she doesn't herself," said Steve Knight, smoothly. "But if she wants to play the fool d'you think she won't do it in spite of all you self-appointed wet-nurses?" He dropped his sarcastic smoothness, and his voice took a more savage ring. "And if these elaborate warnings are aimed my way, you can go to the devil with them. I've grown out of Sunday Schools, and I've pleased myself for a long time back how I behave myself."

He blew out the light and flung himself angrily on his bunk.

Next morning, when the men were saddling up in the paddock after breakfast, Ess Lincoln came out to wish them good morning.

"It's too bad we haven't got that horse ready for you, Miss Lincoln," said Aleck Gault. "You might have ridden part way with us. This is the best time of the day for a canter. It's hot later."

"I'm takin' Diamond down wi' me, Miss," Whip said. "And I'm going to put a blanket round my waist and mount 'im when we get down on the flat. I'll have 'im broken to it in a day or two so you can ride 'im. 'E's a good 'orse."

"Thanks so much, Whip," said Ess. "It doesn't matter about this morning, really, because I have such a lot to do to get the house to my liking. My boxes came up yesterday, and I have to unpack and put the place tidy."

"Sure you won't be lonesome, Ess?" said Scottie. "I might drive you down in the buggy if you like."

"No, uncle, thanks. I'll be all right. I'll have cook here to look after me, and perhaps if I've time and he's not too busy, he'll show me how he makes that cake—the brownie, you know, cook."

"Course I will, Miss," said Blazes, eagerly. "I'll be makin' it this afternoon, an' you can come over any time."

"All right," said Scottie; "I'll leave you to look after her, Blazes."

"She'll be all right," said Blazes, importantly. "You leave me to see to that."

"Blazes was saying he'd lend you old Shuffle-foot, his horse, Miss Lincoln," said Ned Gunliffe. "He'd easy stand the skirt, and you might come with us after all."

"No, no, Miss," said Blazes, hastily. "I didn't think when I spoke o' that. He'd be sure to make a terrible bobbery if you mounted 'im with a skirt. Far better stop 'ere to-day, Miss."

"All right, cook, but thank you for thinking of lending him all the same," said Ess. "Where's the other man—the one I haven't seen except in the distance—Steve Knight, wasn't it?" asked Ess as the men mounted, and Scottie placed his foot in the stirrup.

"They tell me he finished his breakfast first and went straight off," said Scottie. "I don't know what his hurry was, but he's the sort o' chap that does unexpected things."

He swung himself into the saddle and gathered the reins up. "We'll be back soon after sundown," he said, "Ye'll see him then most like."

The others found Steve waiting for them at the dingo fence of the back paddock. He was sitting smoking, and as the others came near he opened the gate to let them through, closed it behind them, and joined them without any remark.

He rode beside Aleck Gault as they jogged along across the dusty flat, and when he pulled up to light his pipe again Gault pulled up and waited for him.

"What made you swallow breakfast and clear in such a hurry this morning, Steve?" said Gault as they moved on again.

Steve laughed shortly. "I hardly know," he said; "or rather, it was because I didn't want to meet that girl this morning, and I guessed she might come out. I hardly know why I didn't want to see her though."

"She was out," said Aleck Gault, "to wish us good morning. But you can't well avoid her always, Steve, and anyhow, why should you?"

"It was those cursed fools talking last night that upset me," said Steve, "although I'm a fool to let it. I know I'm no stained-glass-window saint, Aleck, but I don't quite see that everyone should jump

to the conclusion that I can't behave as anything but a blackguard to a girl. What sort of girl is she really?"

"You'll like her, Steve," said Aleck Gault, quietly.

"I hope not," said Steve, shortly. "For her sake and my own. If I liked her I'd want to be seeing her and talking to her, and I'd do it as often as I wanted, in spite of that mammying lot. And they'd be hanging about and consulting with each other as to whether I was 'playing straight' or 'fooling her,' as they put it. Pah!" he finished with an expression of disgust.

"For two pins," he went on presently, "I'd go right in and make myself infernally agreeable and worry the lives out of the lot of them."

"That might be all right for you," said Gault.

"But it wouldn't do the girl much good to be having her name bandied round as one of your girls."

"There you are," said Steve, with an angry oath. "You're as bad as the rest. I mustn't speak to a girl, because it'll smirch her reputation. To blazes with her. I don't care if I never see her." He put his hand on Gault's knee as they rode side by side. "Look here, old mate, you know me, and you know if she's a pretty girl and a smart girl, and all that, I'm bound to get making the pace with her and making violent love to her, just for the fun of it. I can't help it somehow. So if this thing is going to be the dash nuisance it threatens to be, I'm going to get my cheque and clear out. Would you come with me again?"

"I'll come with you, Steve," said Gault. "But wait till you've seen her before you say anything."

Steve threw back his head and laughed out. "Sounds funny, doesn't it, Aleck, lad? Fly-by-Night running away from a girl he's never seen. There's some men I know—and girls too, for that matter—would think that something of a joke. But things might be worse, old owl. Here's a bright summer morn, as the songs say, we've a good meal inside us, good horses below us, and a long day before us. So blow the girl, old son. Though I'm getting most fierce curious about her, and that's a bad sign, isn't it?"

Which was something very near what Ess had said to her uncle about him, if you remember.

WHEN they did meet, the encounter was not in the least like what Ess Lincoln had expected, and more or less planned with herself. She had made up her mind that Steve Knight had probably been completely spoiled by the women he had met. He was evidently a handsome man by all accounts, and had an all-conquering way with women, and would take it as a matter of course that she should add her share to the usual feminine admiration. No girl likes to think she is held cheaply, and Ess was determined she should not be. Besides which she was a good girl, as the expression has it, and took it to be her duty to be casual and distant to any man with the reputation she had heard this man bore.

Consequently, when she was standing talking to her uncle at the door next morning, and he called Steve Knight over to them, saying "I'll just introduce ye to Steve, Ess," she waited the meeting with a quietly reserved air, and an odd unaccountable little flutter of her pulse. But, to her surprise, he made no endeavour to impress her, or be particularly nice. In fact, on going over the interview to herself afterwards, she had to admit that he had been very much the reverse. He had merely taken her hand in a perfunctory grasp, quietly said "Pleased to meet you, Miss Lincoln, nice morning," and then turning to Scottie had remarked that the men were ready and would they be going on. "Just gie them five minutes," said Scottie, and Steve raising his hat said he would tell them so, asked Ess to excuse him, and walked briskly off.

He left Ess utterly bewildered. "Well, if that's your ladies' man, he strikes me as having a most unceremonious manner," she said to Scottie, struggling between an inclination to laugh and be angry.

Scottie was a little surprised himself, but he merely grunted and made no remark.

Each night and morning for the rest of the week Ess was in the yard to wish the men good evening or good-bye as they came or went, and usually spent a few minutes chatting to one or the other of them. But she never chatted to Steve Knight, and it was impossible for her to help noticing that he did nothing more than raise his hat and murmur a conventional word, and then ignore her.

No girl likes to be ignored by a man, even a wicked man, and especially if he is good-looking as well as wicked. So Ess was annoyed, although she would have denied it indignantly if it had been suggested to her.

She saw very little of the men that week, as they were away from dawn to dusk, and coming in dead tired, did little more than eat their supper and go to bed.

Ess was looking forward to the Sunday, when Scottie and all the men would be resting at the Ridge, but it was with a sense of the most unmistakable disappointment that she heard that Steve Knight had gone off the night before to ride in to the township to spend the Sunday.

"He keeps a horse o' his own," said Scottie, "and of course he can do what he likes wi' his Sunday. He's made o' steel an' whipcord though, tae stand it as he does. He was warkin' wi' the best the whole of the day—an' cuttin' down trees in that sun isna easy wark lat me assure ye—he rides back here an' has his supper, changes his clothes an' his saddle, an' starts off for the township. An' he'll ride back here on the Sunday nicht, just gettin' here tae change again an' eat his breakfast and start t' ride out tae work wi' the rest o' us. He's weel named Fly-by-Nicht."

"What does he do there?" asked Ess.

"Oh, just drinkin' maybe, or it micht be on some ploy wi' a lassie." Ess asked no more.

She looked curiously at Steve, though, on the Monday morning when she went out to see the men saddling up. He certainly seemed quite as fresh as anyone there, and greeted her with a cheerful nod. "Getting hot again, Miss Lincoln," he said. "The night is the best time for riding just now. It was beautifully cool on the hills last night." He turned and moved away without giving her a chance to reply.

"It's rather fun in a way, Aleck," he said to Gault that morning as they rode together down the path to the plains. "She doesn't quite know what to make of me. I'll bet anything you like that Scottie warned her I was a bad lot, and to have nothing to do with me. I could see it in her eye that morning I first met her. And it took the wind out of her sails when I treated her as if I didn't care a rap whether she existed or not. And I suppose she thought I'd be shamefaced and afraid of her, knowing I was in town till late."

"She must be rather sick of being stuck up there all day alone," said Aleck Gault. "Blazes' society must get rather monotonous in a week, and she sees little enough of the rest of us, and even of Scottie."

"I know I'm getting mighty sick of the way the rest of the gang keep yarning about her night and day. And you're near as bad as the rest, Aleck, boy."

"Me," said Gault, laughing; "I'm getting deeper and deeper in love with her every day. I'm more relieved than any of them that you haven't come poking in, old buffalo. But what are you thinking of doing about leaving now?"

"Leave nothing," said Steve, cheerfully. "I'm getting real interested. One of these days I'm going to dive right into the mob of you, and talk myself black in the face to her, in spite of you all. I'm wondering if she'll snub me. Think she will?"

"Not she," said Gault; "what on earth for?"

"Bet you," laughed Steve. "Drinks on it, Aleck. Now, wait and see."

The opportunity came that same night. When they came to the back paddock fence on the way home, they found Ess waiting for them on Diamond. Whip had had little difficulty in getting the horse used to the skirt, and after a few days he took no more notice of it than if he'd been used to it all his life, so Whip was ready to hand him over and see Ess mounted on the Sunday.

They rode quietly towards the Ridge, and Steve pushed his horse alongside her. "I must

compliment you on your seat on a horse, Miss Lincoln," he said.

He spoke rather loudly, and Ess felt a pang of anger. It sounded as if he was showing the others what an easy way he had with girls; but she was not one of these, and....

"I suppose I ought to say 'Thank you,'" she answered evenly, "but I won't because I don't like compliments." She was puzzled and rather resentful of the smile that twinkled on his face, and was quickly suppressed, and she turned her shoulder squarely to him and commenced speaking to Scottie.

"Looks like the drinks are on you, Aleck," said Steve, grinning as he dropped back beside Gault. "But I must say I liked the cool way she turned me down."

As she rode on, Ess had some compunctions about the way she had "turned him down," and wondered once or twice if she had not misjudged him. If she had, she had been extremely rude as well as unfair. He gave her no opportunity of making amends on the way home, so, after she and Scottie had ridden to their own door and dismounted, she walked across with him to where the men were unsaddling and feeding their horses.

She walked straight up to Steve, and spoke clear enough for the other men to hear.

"I'm afraid I was horribly rude to you," she said; "and I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

Steve was thoroughly astonished, and for a moment taken aback. Then he barely bowed his head to her. "That is very kind of you, Miss Lincoln. Kinder than I deserve, perhaps, but—thank you."

"I feel better," said Ess, lightly; "I hate being mean. Now, good night all."

She walked back to the house with Scottie, feeling curiously elated and happy. "Did I do right?" she asked him.

"Hech, lassie," said Scottie, smiling under his moustache. "How's a mere man tae follow the workin's o' a woman's mind? If ye think ye did right, then ye did. I wunnered some at your checkin' him as ye did, for naething I could see."

It was more than an hour after, when they had finished supper, and Ess had washed up and sat herself at the table where Scottie sat reading, that she went back to the subject. They had talked of other things between, but she picked up the conversation as if it had never been broken—which is significant if you come to think it out.

"I put him in rather an awkward position," she said. "But he got over it most gracefully."

Scottie looked at her a moment in silence. "Aye," he said, vaguely but satisfactorily.

"Do you know," Ess said, "I believe he is not as black as he has been painted." She looked at him a little defiantly. "It's horrid, being stand-offish and nasty to anyone, especially meeting him every day." Scottie knew where she was now, but wisely attempted no argument.

"Aye," he said again.

"So I'm just going to treat him the same as all the others," she said. "And if he presumes on it, I think I'll know how to stop him. He's a gentleman, I believe, and won't persist in ways a girl plainly shows she doesn't like."

"An' what if they're ways she does like?" asked Scottie, gently.

"Well?" she asked, the note of defiance a little more marked.

"Well, I hope," said Scottie, gravely. "He's a good enough lad at hairt, I believe, but he's unstable as water wi' wimmin folk—unstable as water."

Ess laughed. "Don't be afraid, I'm not going to fall in love with him. But I believe we're going to be very good friends."

Before she went to her bed that night she stood long looking out of her window.

"I'm not going to love him," she said again to herself.

And that again was significant.

Over in front of the men's hut Aleck Gault and Steve sat on the rail, after the others had gone to bed.

"You ought to pay the drinks after all, Steve," said Gault. "She snubbed you all right, but she made a most handsome apology for it."

"She did so," said Steve, emphatically. "It took some grit to do that in front of the crowd, Aleck. I'm getting to like that girl. She's something out of the ordinary."

Aleck Gault smoked on in silence. "Any objections?" said Steve.

"You're such an ass about girls, Stevie," said Gault, cheerfully. "I suppose you're going to fall in love as usual."

"I never fell in love in my life—but once," said Steve. "And that was lesson enough not to again. If I thought I was going to do that now, I'd clear out to-morrow."

"You may not fall in love with them," said Gault, "but they do with you—some of them, anyway. And somehow I wouldn't like this girl to feel that way for any man that didn't love her."

"We're gushing about love like a pair of sentimental old tabbies, or a page out of a woman's novelette," said Steve, contemptuously. "Love be blowed. The girls like a lark as well as I do, and that's all."

"If that's how you feel about this one, best let her alone," said Aleck Gault, slowly.

"Oh, shucks," said Steve. "Anyway, I'll try what it's like to be friendly without making love."

"Seems to me I've heard of something about Platonic friendship before, and the way it ends," said Aleck, grinning at him.

"It won't be any Platonic friendship basis then. Tell you what, I'll start off by warning her that I'm an unmitigated blackguard, and that I have an infallible weakness for falling in love with every pretty girl I meet. And if I show any signs of the disease with her, will she please kindly bump me over the head with a half brick and chase me off the scenery. How'll that do?"

"You might try it," said Aleck Gault, reflectively. "Will you let me come along and rub in the

warning of your character?"

"Surely," assented Steve; "and we'll refer her to Scottie, and each individual of the crowd for confirmation."

"I think it's likely you'll be late at that," said Aleck, drily. "She'll have had it already."

And in view of what he had just said, it was unreasonable of Steve Knight to feel annoyed because it might be so.

"STEVE," said Scottie next morning, before they started work in the mulga paddocks, "we're tae camp here for a few days. Ride back t' the Ridge, will ye, an' bring Ess back in the buggy. Bring the six b' eight tent, and tell Blazes to bring the cart wi' blankets an' tucker for the men."

So Steve dropped his axe and flung the saddle back on his horse, and in ten minutes was cantering hard across the flats under the scorching sun. "Wonder why Scottie picked me to come," he thought. "Won't the others be mad?" and he chuckled in high spirits.

As he came over the rise of the road to the plateau he saw Ess Lincoln and Blazes at the cook-house door. Steve came down the slope with a rush, lifted his horse and leaped the gate with a ringing whoop, and pulled his horse to its haunches within a couple of yards of the astonished pair.

"Orders, Miss Lincoln," he said gaily. "Pack up and move. Sling together any things you need for a week's camp-out, and get ready to come back with me in the buggy. And, Blazes, I'll help you meantime to load the cart—blankets, tucker, and the rest—and you're to drive it down."

"Camp where—what for?" asked Ess in astonishment.

"In the mulga paddocks," said Steve. "Boss was over this morning, and gave the order. I've been expecting it myself for days. It's rather senseless riding up and down here every day."

"But I never camped in my life," said Ess; "I don't know a thing about it. What do I wear—what do I take—how do I sleep? Couldn't I stop here?"

Steve laughed out. "You can't be a real out-backer till you've boiled your billy over a camp fire," he declared. "I suppose it sounds very peremptory and offhand to you, but there's nothing in it really. You'll get used to it in no time, and will learn to roll your swag and hit the track for a camping trip with less bother than you have now to get your dinner ready."

"It's all very well," broke in Blazes, angrily. "But here's me wi' the spuds peeled, and half the things ready for cookin', an'—"

"Blazes," said Steve, gravely, "I'm surprised at you grumbling at a little thing like that. And if Miss Lincoln hears an old battler like you grumbling about going to camp she'll think it is something serious. I thought you'd have told her she could count on you to pull her through," he said, reproachfully.

"Why, so she can," said Blazes, eagerly. "You'll be all right, Miss, don't you worry none. I'll look arter you."

"Now, if you'll get your things together, Miss Lincoln," said Steve, "Blazes and I will have the cart loaded in no time. We have a light tent for you. You don't have to trouble about anything except your own personal stuff. That's simple, isn't it?"

He turned to the men's bunk-house. "Come on, Blazes; you dig out the provisions and I'll get the men's blankets and things."

An hour later Ess was staring helplessly at the chaos in her room when she heard a cheery shout of "Tea-oh!" and going to the window saw the cart loaded, and the buggy standing ready beside it.

She heard a knock at the door and Steve's voice.

"All ready, Miss Lincoln? Come over to the cook-house and have a cup of tea, and then we'll be off. Blazes has to get down to get the dinner ready you know, so we must move."

She came out to the door. "I'm in an awful fix," she said. "There seems so many things I might want, and the only box I have seems too big to load on the buggy."

"Box?" said Steve, opening his eyes. "It's too bad of me, though," he said, laughing. "I should have told you more exactly. But come and have some tea, and I'll give you a load of advice on camping out. Advice is easy to carry, and doesn't take much room, and 'travel light' is the great essential of camp trips."

They walked across to the cook-house, where Blazes had a meal of cold meat and tea ready for them.

When the hasty meal was finished, "Come on now," said Steve, jumping up. "It's high noon, and we must be shoving off. They'll think we're lost. Blazey, you push along with the cart, and we'll catch you before you reach the flat."

"If you drive, what about your horse?" said Ess, when they came outside, and she noticed Steve's horse with the saddle still on.

"He'll follow," said Steve, easily. "But that reminds me—you ought to have your horse. You'll miss the fun else. You go and get into riding rig and I'll bring him in. I'll tie him back of Blazes' cart."

He was into the saddle and off with a rush, and Ess looked at Blazes and laughed ruefully.

"This is the most offhand arrangement I ever met," she said. "You people seem to expect me to go for a week's camp as easy as I'd ride down to the gate with you. And what to take and what to leave behind I don't know a bit."

"Jest take them things you'll need," said Blazes, comfortingly, but vaguely. "Here's Steve again. He don't waste time, do he?"

"Now, Blazes, push off," said Steve, when he had fastened the horse to the tail of the cart with a long leading rope. "And, Miss Lincoln, we'll get your things."

Blazes drove off, and the other two walked across to the house.

"Now look here," said Ess desperately, "you'll just have to tell me everything I must take."

"Put on your riding kit," said Steve. "What you stand in is all you need in the way of clothes, except one change. Dark blouse—water's scarce, and more like mud than washing water."

They came to the house, and Steve opened the door and walked in after her.

"Now you go into your own room and change, and I'll call the things you need, and you can pick 'em out. Don't waste time, please, Miss Lincoln."

Ess went meekly to her own room.

"If you'll give me a couple of blankets, I'll go and get a spare bit of oilcloth for a ground sheet and roll a swag for you," called Steve, and in a moment Ess brought out the blankets. Steve ran over to the bunk-house, and came back in a few minutes with a square of American oilcloth. He found Ess waiting dressed in her riding skirt and soft hat.

"Good," he said, heartily. "We'll make a campaigner of you in no time. Now go and pick the things I tell you."

Ess went obediently.

"Got a small dress basket?" said Steve.

"Yes," came the answer.

"Really small?" persisted Steve.

Ess brought it out.

"Nothing smaller?" he asked, looking at it.

"Only a very small one," she said meekly, and went and brought it.

"That'll do," he said.

"But I'll never get all my things in that," declared Ess in dismay.

"Yes, you will," he said. "Now go and pack. Give me a small cushion or pillow first, though. That's a luxury, and outside the strict necessities, but we'll allow it this time."

She brought the cushion, and he spread the oilcloth on the floor and the blanket over it. The pillow went in the centre, and he commenced to roll the bundle. Ess went back to her own room at his command.

"Hand mirror, brush, comb, toothbrush," he called, and presently "Yes" she answered. "Put the basket middle of the room and sling the things in as I call," he instructed. "Towel and soap." "Yes." "Two or three pair of stockings, and a change of under things." He heard her movements suddenly cease, and the sound of a smothered laugh. Then "Yes" again, very meekly. "That's all," he said. "Cram them in, and I'll strap the basket."

She brought the basket out. "But how do I wash?" she said. "Don't I need a basin or anything?"

"Pails in camp," he said, promptly. "Don't I need candles?" she asked. "Sun, moon and stars are your candles," he said, picking up the basket and blankets. "You go to bed in the dark and get up in daylight." "Uncle has a canvas camp bed here. Can't I take that? Don't I have a bed?" she said.

"Make a bed of leaves on the ground. Come along, I assure you there's nothing else you need," and they went out to the buggy. "Your saddle, bridle, and a pair of hobbles," he said, flinging them under the seat. "And now we're off. See how easy it is?"

They trotted over the Ridge, and Steve snapped his whip about the horses till they broke into a canter.

"Take a grip and hang tight," said Steve, flicking the horses again.

"Why—are you—in such a hurry?" she jerked out as they bumped and rattled down the slope.

"Oh, this isn't hurrying," he assured her easily. "Just a fair pace. I like moving fast as the horses can with comfort. It'll be slow enough jogging across the flats."

She said no more till they caught up Blazes and the cart.

"Shake 'em up, Blazey," he shouted cheerily. "We'll go on and tell 'em you're coming. Pull in and give us room to pass."

"There isn't room to pass here, surely," said Ess in alarm, looking at the steep slope below the road, and the bank above it.

"I think so," said Steve, casually. "We'll see," and he laid the whip across the horse's flanks. They shaved past the cart wheels by a bare inch or two, and on the other side their wheels scraped along the very edge, grinding and rasping and actually dipping over the edge for a few yards. The buggy tilted sharply, but almost before Ess could make a frantic clutch at the sides, they were past the cart, and rattling down the road again.

"After that I think you might almost compliment me on my seat—in a buggy," she said, demurely.

He looked at her and laughed out loud, but in a moment dropped again to seriousness.

"I didn't half thank you for that last night," he said. "It was really plucky as well as kind—"

"No, no," she said hastily. "I didn't mean—don't let's talk about it again."

"But there's something I want to tell you about it," he said. "I'm afraid you may not like it, but I ought to tell," and he told her of the talk, and the bet between Aleck Gault and him.

"Are you angry?" he asked when he had finished.

"Not exactly," she replied hesitatingly. "Although, of course, a girl doesn't care about her probable actions being discussed and bet about."

"Bless you," he said laughing. "Don't you know that there's been nothing else but you discussed ever since you came here?"

"I hadn't thought of it," she said, a little startled. "But I suppose it's understandable.... But what made you think I would snub you?" she went on. "You know we'd hardly spoken before."

They had passed through the gate now, and were moving at a fast trot across the flat.

"I just guessed you would," he said slowly. "You see I had a notion that you were forewarned, and therefore fore-armed against me." He shot a sidelong glance at her, and noticed a faint flush on her cheek. She said nothing, however. "I know the reputation I carry round these parts—some of it worse than I deserve, and some of it not as bad; and it was a fair guess that your uncle would warn you against—er—falling in love with me," he finished coolly.

Ess sat up straight very suddenly.

"You're rather presuming," she said quietly, but very coldly. "Do you imagine my uncle thinks I cannot meet a man without falling in love with him? Or is it that you consider yourself so utterly

irresistible?"

"That goes with my reputation—deserved or undeserved," he said imperturbably.

"And of course you believe it, and try to act up to it," she said in her most sarcastic tones. "May I ask if you're trying to do so now?"

"Do what?" he asked. "Be irresistible? If so, you can see for yourself that the reputation isn't deserved. I'm only succeeding in making you thoroughly angry, aren't I?"

She only closed her lips tightly, and they drove in silence for nearly a mile.

"Look here, Miss Lincoln," said Steve at last. "It's rather hopeless for us to keep on like this. We'll be running across each other every day, and it's a nuisance for me to have to try to keep dodging you, and I'm sure it must be uncomfortable for you if you have to freeze up and put your nose in the air every time I come along. I haven't the faintest wish to fall in love with you, and there's no need for me to have, any more than there is for you—"

"The latter certainly need not trouble you," she could not help retorting.

"There you are, then," he said. "That being understood, can't we just get along same as you do with the others in camp? Forget my reputation if you can, so long as I don't obtrude it on you. Just let's be ordinary friendly. I'll promise not to fall in love with you—if I can help it ..." he saw the shadow of a smile quiver about her lips, and went on: "I assure you I'd be really afraid to fall in love with any girl and especially with you. I've been most clearly warned what will be done to me if I do."

"Done to you? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I've had very broad hints as to my conduct from some of the others," he said lightly.

"How dare they?" said the girl hotly. "As if I was not able to take care of my own affairs."

"Exactly," agreed Steve. "But that's my reputation again, you see. They're afraid you may go down before my fatal fascination."

"I hardly know what to make of you," she said, looking at him curiously. "If another man spoke as you're doing, about his 'reputation' and 'fascination' and so on, I'd think him the most insufferably conceited prig. And somehow you don't seem that."

"I'm not," he assured her promptly. "It's other people who seem to insist that every girl I meet must admire me. I know better, thank Heaven. I don't want 'em to, and least of all do I want you to. It would be a most confounded nuisance for one thing. You might expect me to take you out walking when I didn't want to walk and want to go riding with me when I wanted to go by myself, and forbid my going to the township, and expect me to give up drinking and smoking, and think I ought to go and sit in the house with you every evening."

She could contain herself no longer, and her laugh rang out ripplingly.

"It's all very well to laugh," he said reprovingly. "But you know what the average man and girl are when they're courting. It must be deucedly awkward when they're living on the same place. It's all right to be making love to a girl, coming across her at odd times, if there's nothing else to do, but I fancy it would be too much of a strain to keep it up."

"I could imagine it would be," she admitted.

"I know I should get horribly tired of it, and of her," he said; "I do of most girls, anyway—"

"Unstable as water," she put in softly.

"Now I'll bet that's a quotation from your uncle's warning," he said triumphantly. "You gave it away that time."

"Not necessarily," she retorted. "I might merely have quoted it as applying to your own description of yourself."

"Well, anyway, I hope I've made it clear I don't want any love business between us," he said. "So is there any reason we shouldn't just be plain friends without any frills? Of course if you're afraid of falling in love with me—" and he paused suggestively.

"You put it rather cunningly," she laughed. "If I won't be friendly it's because I'm afraid of you, and..."

"Is there any reason you shouldn't be, then?" he asked.

"No," she said slowly. "Except that you have rather a—well, your reputation, you know. That isn't meant unkindly, but if we're going to be friendly, we must be frank."

"Surely," agreed Steve, heartily. "But it will take more than my reputation to smirch you. And although mine is nothing to me, I can assure you yours is. You can trust me that far, in spite of what you may have heard of me."

"I'll trust you," she said, and held out her hand impulsively. "We'll be friends then."

He took her hand and shook it. "And I'll ask nothing better," he said. "Now there are the mulga trees ahead of us. You know we're cutting them down to feed the sheep on."

"Yes, I know," she said; "Uncle told me all about it. He called this country a battlefield in describing it to me, and he said the mulga was almost the last ammunition you had left to carry on the fight with."

"Almost," Steve said, "and the hills are our last trenches. When the mulga gives out we'll have to retreat to them, and that's going to be a bad business. The sheep are too weak to travel far, and it's a long way for them."

A faint wavering cry came across the flats to their ears.

"Hark! the sound of battle," he said. "The sheep bleating, in less poetical language. Well, you'll be right up in the firing line here, and I'm afraid it will be rather sickening for you some ways."

"I'm so sorry for the poor sheep," she said.

"I'm sorrier for the poor boss," said Steve. "He's losing hundreds a day, and it'll be thousands presently, and the lot if it doesn't rain soon."

"It's long past the time the rains should have come, isn't it?" she asked.

"Months past," he said. "They're talking of it being the beginning of another long drought. But we're hanging on and hoping for the rain any day."

"Any day?" she said, in dismay. "What will I do if it rains while I'm down here? I've no dry things to change."

"Do?" he said laughingly. "Do if it rains? You'll stand out in it, and let it soak you to the skin, and throw up your hat and cheer, same as the rest of us. Do you realise that an hour's good rain would save the boss thousands of pounds, and a long day's rain might keep him his station and run, while without it he might have to sell up and get out—a beggar? And he's an old man, too."

"He is married, isn't he?" she asked.

"Yes, and his wife and girls are down in the city. Best place for 'em, too. It's no place for a woman up here in a dry spell."

"Thank you," she said primly.

"Sorry," he laughed. "I wasn't thinking of you, though honestly I'm afraid it's rough for you, and may be rougher. By the way, what a nice way out of my difficulty it would be if you could marry. Won't you think it over? You could have your pick of anyone on the Ridge for a start."

"Is that a proposal?" she asked. "I thought we agreed—"

"Most certainly not," he protested indignantly. "And if you're going to twist my well-intentioned remarks into proposals of marriage, I'll get out and walk. I shall have to appeal to your uncle to protect me."

"Well, if you don't mind, sir, I won't be married to-day, thank you," she joked. "But if I think of it later on, I'll apply to you, as you seem so confident of finding a husband."

"I'll round you up a whole mob, and let you take your pick," he said. "Don't let me hurry you, but it would be such a blessing if we could be pals without being accused of having other ends in view."

"Even for that great boon I'm afraid I can't oblige just now," she laughed.

As they approached the trees the cry of the sheep rose to one long, thin, continuous wail, and through it they could hear the ring of axes at work.

"There's Scottie," said Steve, pointing to a figure waving a hat in the air. "He wants us over there evidently."

He wheeled the buggy, and the horses cantered across to where Scottie waited them.

Steve jumped down and helped the girl to alight, unharnessed and hobbled the horses, and turned them loose.

"Blazes is following on with the cart, Mac," he said. "Now, Miss Lincoln, I'll be off and fling my weight into the assault on the trees."

"Why did you send him for me, uncle?" asked Ess, when Steve had gone.

Scottie looked at her. "Why no him as any o' the others?" he said.

"And why not any of the others as well as him?" she retorted. "I only wondered at your sending him after warning me of the sort of man he was."

"That was pairtly the reason," replied Scottie. "I saw ye were actin' on my judgment, an' I thought it better to give ye a chance to hae a talk to the man an' form yer ain opinion."

"Well, I'm rather glad you did," she confessed. "We had a long talk, and he certainly made no great pretensions about himself. He told me very bluntly that he knew I'd been warned against him, and that the warning was quite unnecessary, as he had no wish to fall in love with me or have me love him."

"Talk o' love is apt tae be a risky thing between a man an' a maid," said Scottie, slowly, and eyeing her closely. "It's chancy wark, the handlin' o' an edged tool."

"But better surely to know it is edged," she said, "and to put it in a stout sheath, and bury it away. And that's what we've done."

"Well, well, ye're old enough tae pick yer own road," said Scottie. "An' I'm aye within reach o' yer signals if ye get slewed."

A light sulky, drawn by a pair of fast trotting horses, whirled into sight from amongst the trees, and spun up to where the two were standing. "Here's Mr. Sinclair, the boss," said Scottie, as he approached.

The driver was a tremendously stout and heavy man, with a full round face, which he managed to keep cheerful even now, in the face of all his anxieties.

"Ha, Mackellar," he said. "So this is the niece, is it? How d'you do, my dear. So you're going to try camping out, eh? Hope you won't find it too rough. Couldn't leave her alone up there, of course, Mackellar, but I'll take her over to the home station while you're out if you like. He didn't tell me you were so young and pretty, Miss—er—Lincoln. Really, I don't know it's safe to leave you here, you know. Have the men quarrelling and cutting each other's throats instead of trees."

He laughed heartily at his own joke. "What d'you say, Miss Lincoln? Care to come and put up at the station for a few days?"

"No, thank you," said Ess. "I want to see something of the work you're doing here, and the fight you're making."

"Heart-breaking work," he said soberly. "And the worst is it's little enough we can do. Stand by and watch the sheep die mostly and hope for rain. But we may win through yet, eh, Mackellar?"

"I hope so, sir," said Scottie. "But we'll hae t' move the sheep soon. The mulga's gettin' thinned, and there's no more than a few days' water in the last o' the tanks."

"We'll hold on to the last here," said the boss, "and then settle whether it's to be the hills or a boiling down. But every day gained is a day nearer the rains, Mackellar."

"Oh, I do hope the rain will come, Mr. Sinclair," said Ess impulsively.

"Thank you, my dear," said the old man, very softly. "If the prayers of the women will bring it, we'll surely have plenty. It's hard on the women, Miss Lincoln. My wife down yonder writes me that the girls are round to the post office every day to see if there's any bulletin posted of rain in the back country. They know what it means, and it's hard on them waiting. But we'll battle through yet, maybe, or we'll go down trying. Eh, Mackellar?"

"We'll dae that at least," said Scottie.

"I've good men, Mackellar. Good men. There's not a lad amongst them wouldn't spend his last ounce to win through. It helps an old man, Miss Lincoln, to feel that good men are at his back to hammer things through. It helps a lot—a lot."

He dropped the whip lightly on his horses.

"I'm going to have a look at Number Seven tank, Mackellar," he said. "Good-bye just now, Miss Lincoln. Cheer the boys up. A woman can always do that, and it all helps—all helps."

He slacked his reins, and the trotters sprang forward with a jerk and a rush.

"Poor old man," said Ess. "And poor Mrs. Sinclair. Uncle, you will tell me if there's anything I can do to help. I would so like to."

THE chiefs had met in council, and cast their plans, and outlined their campaign. The council itself was not an impressive affair, although large issues hung on it; in fact, it had a decidedly casual appearance. The boss was there, sitting in his sulky and leaning out, resting heavily on one arm. The manager stood with his foot on the step, and his fingers drumming a tattoo on his knee, and Scottie slowly and carefully whittled tobacco from a flat cake, and hardly raising his eyes from the operation.

They all looked as if they had met by chance, and were lazily passing the time of day. From the shade of her tent, Ess watched them stand so for ten minutes, and wondered why they idled there. The boss was not given to idling, she knew. Too heavy to walk or ride at a rapid pace, he relied on his trotters and his sulky to get him over the ground, and she rarely saw him that he was not tearing off somewhere or sitting with the reins gathered up ready to move on, while the horses gleamed with sweat, and their sides heaved quickly.

But he stood there now for fully ten minutes, and then Ess saw the council break up. Casual it may have looked, but actually it decided the fate of some twenty to thirty thousand sheep, the ownership of Coolongolong station, and—if she had only known it—incidentally, of Ess's own life.

The tank was almost dry. Only a tiny pool of foul, thick, muddy water remained in the middle of a stretch of clay that ran from dry, cracking cakes round the outside edge to slimy, greasy, sticky mud near the centre. For days now a gang of men had done little else but toil in the gluey mess, black and fouled to the waists and the armpits with hauling out the sheep that were too weak to extricate themselves. A small army of men worked at top pressure cutting down the trees—all the men of the station and extra hands hired in the township. They lived in calico tents that shone white in the glare of the sun, and at nights their fires flickered and danced in the darkness. All day long the ring of the axes and the wail of the sheep went on under the pitiless sun; the dust lifted lazily, and eddied thick under the feet of everything that moved; the mirage danced and quivered out on the plains.

Ess was fascinated with it all—fascinated, and day by day growing more fearful. She was coming to understand better what lay behind all this activity of man and placid indifference of Nature. She could appreciate better what every twenty-four hours meant as she saw the increasing numbers of the sheep that had to be dragged from the mud of the tank, and noted the thinning of the remaining trees, and she began to fear this cruel, relentless sun, and scorching air, and hot, dry barren earth.

The boss was whirling past her tent when he saw her, and pulled his horses down to a fretful walk.

"You're looking tired, my dear," he called. "Don't let the sun get you down, you know. Come over to the station any time. We're making a move to-morrow, back to the hills. It's the last ditch you know, but we'll win through at that, we'll hope. We're not beaten yet—not beaten yet," and he slacked his reins and disappeared in a smother of dust.

Ess sent a scribbled note to Steve that night, asking him to come over, as they would be moving off next day.

Steve had dropped in on their camp-fire circle on several of the past nights. Ess made welcome any of the men who cared to come and sit and chat with her and her uncle, for the old boss's words stuck in her mind. "Cheer the boys up—it all helps" he had said, so she was doing the little she could to help.

Most of the men were shy and quiet, but she set herself to draw them out, and led them to talk about the sheep, and the weather, and their work—things they knew well, and were interested in, and at home with, and could make talk on.

And Steve came over alone, or with the others, and every time he came she was a little the more glad of his coming.

His wit was so keen and his tongue was so sharp that she enjoyed talking with him, and the play and fencing of words and ideas brightened and livened her, she told herself.

Usually, she had to admit ruefully, she had the worst of the bouts of fence, and only the night before she had again suffered defeat.

They had been arguing over the sentiment of the verses to the refrain of "He travels the fastest who travels alone," she attacking and he defending it.

"It's a most abominably selfish creed," she cried.

"The writer wasn't concerning himself with the ethics of it—he was merely stating the fact," he retorted.

"I don't admit it is a fact," she said.

"Few women will admit the truth of what they don't like," he said, and "That is mere instinct," she answered, "because mostly what they like is good, and the truth is good surely."

"Sometimes truth is only a point of view," he said.

"Nonsense—truth is truth, as right is right."

"Then how do you account for it that I claim this writer's words as the truth, and you claim them to be untruths? The world judging it might be divided as we are. How can you say which is the truth?"

She could not answer this, so swiftly struck at a side issue. "Badness is worse than untruth, and if the principle is bad, why glorify it in verse?"

"But I say it is true; if you admit the truth, to attack the badness, you're saying the truth is bad."

"The truth may be a very bad truth," she cried triumphantly. "It often is. You are a truth, but you may be very bad. You'll notice I spare you, and don't say you *are*."

"Thanks. But my badness again is a point of view. Here, as I am, if I marry three wives, I'm very bad; if I'm a Mormon or a Turk, I may still be a good one."

"We're leaving the subject," she said; "I began by saying it was an abominable sentiment. It is."

"Reiteration isn't argument," he returned coolly.

"What authority has he for a statement of the sort?"

"Some writings are on conviction, not authority. This may be one; or it may be from experience."

"Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne, He travels the fastest, et cetera," she quoted. "How can that be experience? He hasn't been to them."

"Not the physical ones, if there are such, but mental ones possibly. Have you never touched a Gehenna or a Throne?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"You will some day," he said; "every woman does, and unfortunately she usually drags a man or men along with her."

"But if she drags him there, he travels the faster for it. Therefore the writer is wrong."

"Cleverly turned," he admitted. "But I fancy the Throne the writer speaks of is Success. It appears so from the context."

"You said the writer probably spoke from experience. You admit that he has that, and has travelled fast and far to Success?"

"Decidedly so," he agreed.

"Then I have you," she cried, clapping her hands in triumph. "You know that he is married?"

"Yes," said Steve, grinning at her. "But he travelled his fastest and farthest *before* he married. You must admit that."

"I don't. I don't know enough of his work or current opinions of it."

"You know that he made his name and his way to Success before he married?"

"I know you agree with him because it's an excuse for your own possible wickedness. And I hope you'll always be forced to travel alone and prove the truth or untruth of your theory."

Steve dropped the bantering tone he had used throughout, and leaned forward to look hard at her.

"That's hitting below the belt," he said, and rose abruptly. "And you've missed your best argument. To travel fast and far is not everything; it may be a very little thing compared to a corner in a dark humpy; and the 'warm hearthstone' be worth far more than all the 'high hopes.'"

Then he said good night smoothly, but abruptly, and went. And Ess that night was not a little thoughtful—and sorry.

She was afraid that he might stay away this last night, and because all the time in camp had been so happy for her, she had no wish for him to take away unhappy thoughts of it.

So she scribbled her note, "Come over to-night. Sorry I was rude last night, but remember our compact. E.L.," and folded it and wrote his name boldly on the back, and gave it to her uncle to read and to carry to Steve. "I was a little unkind last night, uncle," she said, "and I don't want to be that."

When he came over this last night, she smiled at him and asked "Have I apologised enough for my rudeness?" and "The compact is more to me than the rudeness," he told her.

"Very well," she said gaily. "Now I've an endless string of questions to ask. Uncle here never understands that I don't know as much about sheep and the rest of it as he does, and he gives the most meagre information. Now you tell me all sorts of wonderful things—not too wonderful, I hope. I always had my doubts about the stories of the foxes biting the tongues out of the live lambs, and not making another mark on them. Is that strictly true, uncle?"

"Too true, unfortunately," said Scottie. "Ye'll see plenty o' them if ye see a lambin' season here."

"How perfectly horrible," she said. "But I wanted to ask about this drive. How do you do it? Do you men walk behind or ride?"

"We ride, thank Heaven," said Steve, fervently. "I tell you my legs are aching to get a grip on a saddle again. This sheep work doesn't suit me, and I'm sick of the sight and sound and stench of the brutes. Give me a good horse on the hillsides, and the cattle charging to—er—billy-oh, and there's something in it."

"Never mind the cattle now," she said; "tell me about the sheep. Can I help drive them?"

"I'll lend you my stockwhip," said Steve. "All you have to do is ride behind the mob and crack the whip. And it's *so* easy to crack a stockwhip."

"Now I know you're fibbing," she said accusingly. "Because uncle warned me, one day I had his, that I might cut my head off with it. Didn't you, uncle?"

"Maybe no cut it off a'thegither," said Scottie, "but ye can gie yersel' a nasty bit slash wi't."

"Then I'll cut you a long pole, and you can prod them in the ribs, and punch them up with it," said Steve.

"Why prod them and crack whips at them?" asked Ess. "Is there any need to hurry them?"

"Need enough," said Steve. "See here...." He dropped on one knee and picked up a stick, and scratched lines in the sand: "Here's the camp, here's the line of the hills, and here's the valley leading to the Ridge. The hills in the back of the Ridge have the most feed left, and have some fairly level patches, so we're pushing the sheep for there. You know how far it is to the valley leading to the Ridge, and you know there's no water between here and there. And the sheep are weak enough now, *and* they're getting weaker every day, *and* the longer they take to get there, the more will die on the road. So you see there is some need to hurry them. You'll see some mighty unpleasant and apparently cruel work this next day or two, and I don't know but what your uncle is making up his mind to send you to the station till it's over."

He glanced at Scottie as he spoke, but Ess spoke quickly.

"Uncle is going to do nothing of the sort," she said. "I want to go right through this thing and see everything. I'm not going to be chased away when I don't want to go."

"We'll let you do one day," said Scottie, "and then you'll mebbe go on ahead. I'll likely be sending Blazes back to the Ridge then."

"What time do we start, uncle?"

"We'll be off at the first glint o' licht," said Scottie. "You can get some breakfast from the cook after we're gone, an' he'll tak down the tent and pack it."

"May I ride then? But who'll drive the buggy back?"

"I can ride back after we make camp and bring it on," said Steve; "we won't move very far each day."

"That'll do," said Scottie.

Steve had been sitting fastening a new cracker to his whip, and when he had finished Ess took it and tried to handle and crack it, he putting her grip right and showing how to hold and swing it, and the two of them laughing and playing like children with a toy. Steve praised her quickness in learning, and she was pleased out of all proportion at the praise. And when he left her that night she said: "I'm sorry we're done with Mulga Camp. I've been so happy."

It was still dark next morning when Ess heard the shouts and whip crackings, and bleating of the disturbed sheep, and when she emerged from her tent soon after light there was nothing to be seen of them but a heavy dun bank of dust on the horizon. She hurried over to the tent and cart where Blazes was busy packing up. "We're completely left behind, Blazes," she called. "Do let's hurry and catch them. They're ever so far away."

"'Tain't so fur, miss," said Blazes; "you sit down an' eat these chops, and we'll soon be off after 'em, and catchin' 'em."

Ess ate her breakfast and helped Blazes to pack and take down her tent, then watched him take the horses down to water, and let him help her to the saddle. They trotted off over the broad track of the innumerable pointed dots of the sheep's footprints, and as they came near to the dust Blazes swung well out on the flank of it. "We'll dodge as much o' that as we can," he said; "it's too like breathin' solid sand to ride behind it."

"But don't the men have to ride behind it and in it?" asked Ess.

"They do, but we don't," said Blazes; "so we ain't goin' to."

"What are those men doing with the carts?" asked Ess, pointing to one or two carts that zigzagged back and forth across the plain in the rear of the sheep.

"Pickin' up skins," said Blazes, briefly. They passed one or two of those ghastly red heaps, with the busy crows already at work, and Ess shuddered in spite of herself.

Through the dust she could see the horsemen looming dimly, and hear the clamour of cracking whips and barking dogs, and the scuffling rushes of the driven sheep. More horsemen were strung along the length of the sides of the moving droves, the whips snapping and lashing at the laggards.

As Blazes and Ess passed along the line they heard a hail and saw a dim figure waving through the haze. "How d'you like it, Miss Lincoln?" called Steve Knight, pushing his way out to them. His horse was wading knee deep in a slow-moving river of dirty grey backs, and carefully picking his way so as not to tread on the sheep that crowded under his hoofs.

"Seems to me that veil of yours is a useful idea," commented Steve, as he emerged beside them, and tried to spit the dust from his lips. His face was coated and grimed thick, and nobody could have told the colour of his clothes, his hat, or even of his horse, for the clinging red layer.

"Aren't you dreadfully thirsty?" asked Ess. "I know I am, in spite of my veil, and I've only just caught up, and have kept fairly clear of the dust."

Steve made a grimace. "I'm thirsty—I believe you," he said, "but the day's hardly begun, and it's early to bother about thirst yet. But you'd best push ahead and catch Blazes up. He'll go ahead to where we'll halt to-night, and he might scratch a cup of tea for you. I must be shovin' 'em on. Wouldn't care to take the whip and have a smack at 'em, would you?"

She shook her head. "Poor brutes," she said.

He laughed. "The sheep or the men?" he asked.

"Both," she said. "I'm sorry for you both."

"All in the day's work," he said, and turned to the sheep again. "Get well out from the dust," he shouted to her, "and canter till you're clear."

The spot selected for the night's camp was by an old well, nearly a mile wide of the line of march the sheep were taking to the hills.

The well was almost dry, and would provide barely enough water for the horses and men, and when Blazes got up the first bucketful, he looked at it ruefully.

"Seems ter me we won't need to put no tea in that," he remarked; "pretty near thick enough an' black enough as it is."

Ess inspected it gravely. "I should rather say it will need a lot of tea in it, to kill the taste it looks like having," she said.

Ess and Blazes were acting advance guard, and none of the others had arrived, although, far off on the horizon, they could see the dust cloud that heralded the coming of the sheep. Blazes had brought a load of wood from the last camp—there was not a stick or a chip or twig in sight on the glaring, sun-scorched plain round the well—and immediately got to work preparing a meal for the riders, who would arrive later on. Ess insisted on helping him, although he tried to protest. "I dunno wot your uncle would say to see you stabbin' round wi' that knife," he urged. "Choppin' up sheep carcasses ain't no work for a girl."

"There are some parts of the world—and even of Australia, Blazes—where they'd tell you that,

and all sorts of cooking, was a woman's work, and decidedly not a man's."

"Mebbe," said Blazes. "But 'tain't the way 'ere, an' I don't see it's right. I can easy manage myself. I'd 'ave brought my 'elper along, but knowin' how stiff the sheep was, I knew they'd be glad of 'im there to give a 'and, so I said as I'd do without 'im. But I didn't think you'd go messin' yourself up like this."

By the time the vanguard of the sheep was abreast of them out on the plain, the first of the meal was ready for the men, who began to canter out from the moving dust cloud towards them, and for the next hour they were fed in relays, and pile after pile of chops and pot after pot of tea vanished rapidly.

Ess's face was scorching and her knees trembling under her when her uncle and Steve Knight rode up.

"Making myself useful, you see, uncle," she called gaily, and Scottie Mackellar looked at her dubiously.

"So I see, lass," he said, "but I doubt if it's wise for you to be workin' in that sun."

"It's all right," she assured him. "Blazes rigged a sort of shelter with the tent, and I've kept under that mostly, and helped manufacture chops. But now I'm coming to have some tea with you, if Blazes will let me spell off."

They sat round the cook cart, from the top of which Blazes had rigged the tent as an awning, and ate their meal in the roughest sort of picnic fashion. Ess had a box to sit on, but the two men simply squatted tailor-wise with a plate between their knees.

"Lord, but that's good," said Steve Knight, sipping at the hot tea, and blowing it impatiently. "Worst of hot tea is it's so tantalising. A man wants to lift the billy to his head and swallow a quart of it right down, instead of taking dainty little sips at it like a lady at an afternoon tea party."

"I'm sure the ladies would feel flattered at the comparison," laughed Ess, "if they could see you holding a black tin billy-can with both hands, and gulping out of it, and blowing on the tea like a grampus between gulps."

"If the ladies had been bucketing about in a red-hot sun on a red-hot saddle, over red-hot sand all day, I'm thinking they'd gulp too," retorted Steve.

"And the poor sheep have the same sun and sand, and nothing to drink," said Ess, pityingly.

"Poor sheep!" snorted Steve. "Silly staggering blighters. Here we're working ourselves to death just to persuade them to hurry up to their chance of salvation in the hills, and they go crawling along, and standing up to look at you, and trying to run the wrong way, while we sling whip-cracks and cusses at 'em till our arms, lips, and language are stiff."

Scottie Mackellar had been munching at his bread and meat, and swallowing his hot tea in silence. "How are they making out, uncle?" she asked him.

"No' very good," said Scottie. "They're beginnin' tae drop in droves, an' they're too weak tae more than crawl. We're keepin' them on the move through the night."

"Forced marching, you see," said Steve; "it's do or die with them now. If we can get them into the hills by to-morrow night we may pull them through; if not—" he broke off and shrugged his shoulders.

"Are ye going back for that buggy to-night?" asked Scottie.

"Yes," said Steve, "I'll start inside half an hour."

"Oh, I'm so sorry I didn't drive it instead of riding to-day," said Ess, in dismay. "You must be dead tired, and will have little enough rest to-night, as it is."

"Hutt!" said Steve, lightly. "I'll be glad of a straight-on-end canter, after dodging about like a cat on hot bricks all day. And the drive back here in the buggy will be a rest enough from the saddle, and I'll get an hour or two's sleep when I get here."

"I wish—I wish I might ride over and drive back with you," said Ess. "Do you think I might, uncle?"

"Please yersel', lass. If it's no tirin' ye too much."

"Good," said Steve, enthusiastically. "The sun's down now, and it'll be a bit cooler. I'll get the horses, and we'll start right off."

"I don't quite see how you know your way," said Ess, a quarter of an hour after they had started, and had settled down to a long, steady canter.

Steve laughed. "Look down," he said; "don't you see the sheep tracks?"

"I don't," she confessed; "it's too dark to see anything but a blur of sand."

"Look up, then," he answered; "the stars aren't blurred anyway, and they point the way. I wish they weren't so confoundedly bright. A bank of thick black cloud would mean a lot to me just now."

"You're thinking of rain?" said Ess.

"Does one think of anything else these days?" he said. "And now, to-night, rain would mean more to me than ever it did."

"Why more than yesterday?" she asked.

"Wait till we're driving back and I can talk in comfort, and I'll tell you," he said, and thereafter they rode in silence, the shuffling hoof-beats in the sand and the creak of saddlery the only sounds that broke the stillness.

"There's the clump of trees we were camped at," he said presently. "And there's the buggy. We'll find the horses near—hark! There they are," as the buggy horses neighed loudly.

"Now we'll have a cup of tea," he said. "I haven't got to-day's dust out of my throat yet, and I don't suppose you have."

He leaped from his horse and helped the girl down, and fastened the reins to the buggy wheel. In three minutes he had collected a handful of sticks, started a fire, and stood the billy beside it, tilted

the water into it from a waterbag, and left it to boil while he went off after the buggy horses. It was boiling when he came back, and he dropped a handful of tea in it and lifted it off the fire.

"Cups," he said, and produced them from his pocket. "Sugar," he tipped a screw of paper from a cup. "Milk—you must imagine ... and there you are," dipping a cupful of tea out and putting it beside her. "Spoon—" he picked up a twig and handed it to her. "Everything kept on the premises you see."

In ten minutes they had finished their tea, the buggy horses harnessed in, and Ess's horse fastened to the buggy with a leading rope. "We must train him to follow as mine will always do," said Steve; "I simply fasten my rein back to my stirrup, and there you are."

"Now," said Steve, when they had started and were bowling along at a rapid trot, "I was going to tell you why I'm more anxious than ever for rain."

"I warn you I'll expect something thrilling after these preliminaries," she said.

"Thrilling enough if you're anything of a gambler," said Steve. "You know, and have seen something, of the struggle going on to battle the sheep through. Well, I'm sitting into the game and taking a hand to play out against the weather and the country. I had a long talk with the old boss to-day, and I've made a deal with him for some of his sheep. I've bought some thousands of them—I don't know just how many exactly."

"Bought sheep?" said Ess, in some astonishment. "But surely this is a bad time to buy sheep—when you see them dying under your eyes."

"Bad time for an investment," said Steve, "but a good time for a gamble. The odds are long, but the stake is more worth the winning. I've bought on peculiar terms. I've had a few hundred pounds put away—I made it once on a turn of the hand, and always saved it for a fling at something worth while—and I've paid that for a proportion of the total number of sheep the boss has left at the next lambing season. If half his sheep pull through I'll double or treble my money. If they all or nearly all die, I lose the lot. By the way they're travelling to-day, and the looks of them, it's a toss-up whether they reach the hills; so I may be broke, and the game finished by to-morrow night. If they are not into the hills by then it's hopeless for them. If they are, I win the first hand, and they may manage to hold on till the rain comes, or at least enough of them to bring me back my money."

"It is thrilling," said Ess, "and thank you for telling me. It makes the whole thing doubly interesting for me—and I wish you luck."

"Thanks," he said; "I don't want you to mention this to anyone. I've told your uncle, but I'd rather not tell the others."

"Very well," she promised, "I'll say nothing. But, do you know," looking at him quizzically, "I'm rather surprised to hear that a man like you has managed to save some hundreds. It was agreed that we could be frank to each other, so you see I'm taking full advantage of it: Honestly, I thought you were such a reckless profligate spendthrift that I imagined you frightfully hard up."

"You're quite right, and I usually am," he admitted. "But I always had this little lot banked away for just such a chance as this. It was an awkward amount you see—too big to splash on a spree, and not enough to do anything big with. It just fits in here."

"But why take such a heavy risk with it?" she asked. "Surely there were safer things to do with it?"

"Have you ever gone to a horse race?" he asked.

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"Then you've had a bet on a race—a shilling, or a box of chocolates, or a pair of gloves, perhaps?"

"Yes," she admitted again.

"Then you know how much more interesting the race is when you have a bet on. Same thing with cards, a game's mighty poor fun unless you play for coins or counters. Well, the sheep here are the coins and counters in the game we're playing out, and I want to have my stake on the table along with the rest. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, "I understand, although I don't need anything of my own in this to give me an interest. I'm hugely, tensely interested as it is, and I want to see the sheep pull through, and the boss and all of you win, as if every sheep were my own."

"That's because you have the personal interest," he said. "Because your uncle and every soul you know here is doing nothing else, and thinking of nothing else, but whether we're going to win, and how we're going to win."

"Yes, that's true," she said, "and I confess I am keener than ever since I've met the boss, and will be more so since I've heard of the personal interest you have in it."

"Thank you," he said laughingly, "that's a very pretty compliment. I see you know how to pay them even if you jump on a man for paying them to you."

"You're too greedy for them," she laughed, "or you'd know that the interest would be added the same if it were Whip or Blazes, or any of the others had bought the sheep."

"Now I suppose that serves me right," he said, with a sigh of mock resignation. "I should have been content to take the compliment, and gloat over it in secret."

"Isn't it a beautiful night?" she said serenely. "Excuse the transparent method of changing the personal conversation."

"I've noticed," he said, "that when a woman runs away from a subject, it's usually because she's afraid of it."

"And you might have noticed," she countered, "that when she does start to run away she can't be persuaded or lured into facing it again—till she's ready. It's a beautiful night."

"Yes," he said a trifle bitterly, "but a beautiful night out here is mostly like a beautiful woman, sweet and caressing maybe, so long as she wins her game, but hard enough and bitter enough back of it."

"I certainly can't twist a compliment out of that," she said drily; "I'd be interested to know whether you think me ugly, or merely bitter and hard."

"You're pretty enough," he said bluntly, "but I've no doubt you could and would be hard enough if the occasion arose."

"This is being frank with a vengeance," she said ruefully. "But I suppose I brought it on myself. I can only hope, then, the occasion will not come."

"Perhaps," he said gently, "it might be more useful if you hoped I'd prove a false prophet—perhaps you'll remember that one day, and some poor devil may have reason to thank me for the suggestion."

"Aren't those the lights of the camp?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "and I'm sorry to see them. Please take that as it's meant, and don't spoil it by being nasty."

"Very well," she said quietly, "I have enjoyed it too."

They drove into the camp and separated, she to her tent and he to snatch an hour's sleep on the ground, without further word than a simple "Good night."

But Ess lay long that night and thought of their talk. And always her thoughts came back to the one point, and over and over she asked herself "*Would* I be hard—would I be hard if..."

IN the morning the sun was up before Ess was, and she came from her tent to find the sheep out of sight over the horizon, and the plains empty and silent. Two or three of the men had just finished their breakfast, and were mounting to ride on and overtake the mob, and Blazes told her he had been feeding them in relays for the past three hours. Ess found him in the full flight of one of his outbursts of rage.

"I'm sick o' the 'ole thing," he declared, "expeck a man to cook chops, and bile gallons o' tea, an' wood as scarce as snowballs in 'ell—beg pardon, Miss—" and he subsided as suddenly as a pricked toy balloon.

"Go on, Blazes," she said cheerfully; "you once told me it did you good to work your tempers off, you know. Don't mind me."

"Ah," he said, solemnly shaking his head. "But a temper's no good to me if I can't swear. An' 'ere's your breakfast, Miss."

"What are you going to do this morning?" she asked.

"Drive right through to the Ridge," he said. "There's no water this side of it, so I can't do anything."

"And will the men have to go on all day without tea?" she said.

"They will so," he said, "an' all night too, if they don't get the sheep to the 'ills. It's tough, in that dust an' all, but wot's to be done for it?"

"Couldn't we carry some water from here," she suggested, "and at least make tea somewhere on the road for them?"

"Nothing to carry it in," he said; "a pail or two, and a keresone tin bucket, an' we'd spill most of it in the cart."

"Let me take them in the buggy," she said eagerly. "I could drive slowly, and the plain is level and smooth enough. You could fasten my horse behind, or to your cart."

Blazes seemed inclined to grumble at the suggestion, but she cut short his objections. "Do let me, Blazes—please," she said earnestly; "I know it will mean work for you boiling the water, but I would so like you to—won't you, *please?*"

"Right you are, Miss," he said, suddenly cheerful. "And won't it be a surprise to the boys when they comes up to us and we sings out 'Tea-oh'? They won't 'arf jump for it wi' their tongues hangin' out."

So the buckets and tins were filled to the brim and carefully loaded on the buggy, and they drove quietly off. They passed wide out on the plain, clear of the moving sheep that were strung out for long dusty miles. At a point which Blazes reckoned the men would reach by noon they swung in to the line of the march, which by now was running along close to the hills.

"Why don't they let the sheep up on the hills here," Ess asked, "instead of taking them so much further?"

"Too steep, an' bare o' feed, an' not a drop o' water for miles," said Blazes. "They'd only do a perish there. The only chance is to get them to the valley to the Ridge. It's easier going for 'em there, and it leads into some gullies, where they'll scrape up a mouthful o' feed an' a chance o' a drink. But we'll get some sticks for the fire off the 'ills 'ere."

They halted and lifted down the precious water, and Blazes had to confess that not nearly as much of it had been spilt as he had expected. They gathered firewood, Ess insisting on helping, and got all ready to boil up the buckets as soon as the men began to come within reach.

But it was a couple of hours after Blazes had expected before the first of the mob went drifting past. Their heads were hanging, and they were moving at a snail's pace, in spite of the efforts of the men and the dogs. The mob was split into several lots, each with two or three men, and dogs driving.

The first of these men came eagerly across at the hail from Blazes. "Tea," said one, smacking his lips; "my oath, this *is* good."

"Thank Miss Ess 'ere for it," Blazes said; "it's 'er notion to cart the water along."

"Luck to you, Miss," said the man, "an' may you never need a drink as bad's I do now."

Blazes went through the same formula to each of the men who came up—"Thank 'er—it's 'er notion," and the men thanked her with rough but eloquent speech, or with even more eloquent silence, and eyes that glistened at her over the steaming tea.

They were gone as soon as they could swallow their tea, and the next men were just as hurried in their movements.

It was this haste and hurry that struck Ess as the dominating tone of the whole picture. In spite of the slow dragging of the tired sheep, the lazily floating dust clouds, the weary, staggering, halting pace of the march, at the back of it all Ess could see the fierce unflagging energy, the remorseless cruel driving haste. It was plain in the whistle and crack of the stockwhips, the yelping rush and snap of the dogs, even in the little spurts the sheep were roused to as whip or dog came on them.

Scottie and Steve came over to the fire at a hard canter and flung themselves from their horses.

"What's this, lass?" said Scottie, "acting the cook, eh?"

"Acting the good Samaritan," said Steve. "I don't know if angels are supposed to serve out hot tea, but if so, you and Blazes can put in an application for an outfit of wings right away."

"Thank 'er," murmured Blazes. "It's 'er notion."

The two men gulped the tea down. They were caked with red dust from head to toe, the sweat was smearing and streaking their faces, their eyes were red rimmed, and their lips dry and cracking, and bodily weariness was plain in every line of their figures. But they swallowed the

scalding tea and leaped for their horses again as if their lives hung on the passing moments.

Then the boss flashed up to them out of the smother and dust of the rear guard.

"They tell me you've tea, Miss Lincoln," he cried. "May I—ah, thank you," as she handed up a pannikin to him where he sat in his sulky.

"How are they going, Mr. Sinclair?" asked Ess.

"Slowly, slowly," he said; "they're beginning to lie down to it, and it's harder each time to get them on their feet and moving again. But I've hopes yet—I've hopes yet."

"Will you get them in to-night, do you think?"

"To-night—or never," he said grimly. "Another day will finish them clean out. We might save the skins of some of them, but I'm staking on getting them through. Thank you for the tea, my dear. It freshens a man up—freshens a man up," and he settled himself back in his seat, and clucked to the trotters, and was off to the rear of the drive again.

It was here, as the rear trailed past, that Ess saw the full extent of the battle between the tired sheep and the tireless men. At different points along the column she had noticed some of the sheep, where the men or dogs had drawn off a little, lie down to rest. She had seen the men have to come right up to them and push them, and the dogs leap and bark in their faces, before they would struggle to their feet again. She had even seen the men stoop and lift them and push them forward, and at times when the brute simply dropped again the man might lift it and carry it clear of the line, and leave it lying to gather up a few more ounces of strength from its rest.

And here in the rear were the weakest and slowest of all the mob, the ones that had given in, or dragged behind, and dropped back from one bunch to the other till they came to the men of the rear-guard. Most of these were on foot. One or two horsemen still rode from flank to flank swinging their whips, but the others were wading into the blocked masses and pushing them into motion, running out to lift the ones that had been left lying on the wayside, back again to urge on the harrying dogs, up and down, back and forth, shouting, stooping, lifting, and pushing.

And behind them again came the two carts and the sweating butchers. The sheep that were too far gone to offer any chance of picking up strength for another effort were killed swiftly. They were slain in bunches of half a dozen to a score, and before the whistling breath was out of the last one the skin was being stripped and torn from the first. The men were coated with the red dust, and splashed and spotted with the deeper red. Their boots and legs were soaking despite the dust, their arms dripped red from the elbow, and their hands were almost too wet and slippery to hold the blunted knives. They worked doggedly, and with swift machine-like motions, slashing and ripping, heaving the carcase over, wrenching and tearing the skin off the quivering flesh. The cart drove up, the skins were hastily flung on, the men wiped their hands a couple of times across the wool of the last, drew a hand across a streaming brow, and ran to the next group that lay huddled awaiting their coming.

Blazes carried the last of the tea to these men. They would not leave their work even to walk the few score yards to the fire, and when the tea was brought to them they set the pannikins beside them to cool instead of waiting to sip at them, and went on with their stab, slash, rip, with the sweat dripping off their chins and noses, and their faces grimed with a horrible mask of blood, and sweat, and dust.

Then Ess and Blazes drove on again, past the long straggling column, and on across the heat-quivering silent plain, till they came to the gate of the valley, and on up to the Ridge.

They drove in silence. Blazes had been up half the night, and was drooping half asleep over the reins, and Ess, driving the buggy behind him, simply let her horses follow the cart he drove.

She felt deadly tired; her head ached with the heat and dust, and sun, and, long after they had passed the head of the drive, her ears throbbed to the pitiful wavering cry of the sheep.

When she reached her room she lay down on her bed to rest, but she could not sleep. In her mind she could still see those limping sheep struggling across the hot sand, the looming figures of the men toiling in the dust-fog, the blood-stained butchers at their gruesome work, and the heaped piles of dripping skins on the carts. Her ears still echoed to the monotonous scuffling of feet, the bark and rush of the dogs, and scurry of the driven brutes, the thudding hoof-beats and the hoarse shouts of the men, and reports of the whip-cracks and—steady, unceasing, and unbroken—the long-drawn quavering bleat of the sheep.

She rose at last, and went to find Blazes. He was busy in the cook-house preparing meat and boiling water. "Likely the men'll take it in turns to ride up when they gets as far as the gate. I thought some o' them would 'ave been 'ere by now. It's near sundown, an' they'll 'ave to come up to water their 'orses."

"I think I'll ride down to the gate and see if they are near there," said Ess; "I feel I can't wait here, I'm so anxious to know if they're going to get through."

"I 'ears someone comin' now," said Blazes, and presently she too heard the rattle of stones on the track, and three or four of the men came in sight. They rode their horses straight down to the little dam, and Ess went out and watched the poor brutes wade into the water up to their girths, and bury their muzzles almost up to the eyes. She saw them drink, and drink, and drink again, and reluctantly lift their dripping muzzles and stand, and dip them again and drink till they could drink no more, and even then stand, unwilling to leave the water.

As the men rode up again, Whip Thompson grinned to Ess.

"Decent sort o' drink they takes when they're at it," he said. "Reckon they was pretty near what you might call thirsty then."

Ess thought to herself that the men themselves must be "pretty near thirsty," but she noticed that they had sat patiently on the horses till they were satisfied they would drink no more, and that they gave them their feed after it, before ever they thought of drinking or eating themselves.

"How far are the sheep?" asked Ess, anxiously.

"'Bout a mile from the gate," said Whip. "But they'll take all of an hour to get to it, an' some more hours 'fore they're all through it, and fit to start climbin' the hills. We're puttin' them up the slope across the road if they'll climb. There's some feed an' a few trickles o' pools beyond there. They'll have to come on up the valley else, and that'll be further, though it's an easier grade."

"Are you going back now?" asked Ess.

"Yes, we're takin' turns to ride up. The 'orses is near doin' a perish. We won't do much ridin' now though, after we're back. It'll be foot work mostly, to get 'em up the hill."

When their horses had finished feeding, the men rode clattering over the Ridge and down the track, and presently another batch came up. It was dark when they came, and they said the sheep were almost at the gate when they left.

"When will my uncle be up?" asked Ess.

"E's not comin' up," said Jack Ever. "We led up 'is 'orse an' Steve Knight's, and we're to carry 'em down a bite an' a billy o' tea when we go down again."

"Will one of you drive me down in the buggy?" asked Ess. "I'll take down some food for them and Mr. Sinclair, and some tea."

So it was arranged, and Jack drove her down in the buggy.

Half-way down they met a man flogging his horse up the track at a hand gallop. Jack shouted at him as he passed, and "Goin' for axes" the man shouted back over his shoulder.

"Axes," said Ess to Ever. "What do they want axes for?"

"Lord above knows," said Ever. "An' they wants 'em in suthing' of a hurry, too, evidently."

They were driving slowly and carefully so as to avoid jolting and spilling the tea, and just as they came to the gate the horseman came tearing down the road again with the axes balanced across his pommel.

They pulled off the road, and Ess took the reins. "I'll wait here," she said, "if you'll find them and tell them I have some tea."

Jack Ever jumped down and disappeared in the darkness, and she sat on patiently, although for long there was no sign of the other men.

The first of the sheep were crowding through the gate now, with half-a-dozen men trying to force them through and avoid blocking it. Outside the gate the mob was spreading slowly along the fence, and she noticed that the moment they stopped they lay down with their heads hanging. Then Ess heard the ring and thud of axes, and, driving cautiously, found some of the men furiously hacking at the fence posts. The staples were being hammered and wrenched out of others, and, as fast as it could be done, lengths of the high fence with the close-set rabbit-proof meshes along the foot and the wide dingo-stopping net above, were wrenched down and hauled away to leave a wide opening.

Immediately it was down the men started to rouse the sheep and hustle them over the line, and towards the hill.

Then her uncle and Steve Knight cantered up, with Mr. Sinclair driving close behind.

"Feeding the firing line again, Miss Lincoln," he called cheerily. "No, I won't get down, thanks. If you'll just hand me up a bite and a pannikin of tea. We left a mob a mile or two back that were too dead beat to come on, and I want to see if we can rouse them up again now the sun's off them. Must save all we can, y' know—save all we can," and the trotters pounded off into the darkness.

"Doesn't spare horseflesh," said Steve, "and doesn't spare himself." He dropped wearily on the ground.

"So you've got them here?" said Ess.

"Aye," said Scottie; "question is, will they stick here?"

"There's the hill to get them up yet, Miss Ess," explained Steve. "That's going to be the worst of the lot. The brutes are done—can hardly hobble. It's a mile or two of rough going over the hill to water, and we can't carry 'em in our arms."

"Oh, and I thought you'd won when you got them to here," cried Ess, in dismay. "Don't say we're beaten after all."

"Mebbe no just beaten," said Scottie, cautiously, "bit I'm no sayin' we've won."

"There's whole bunches of them strung out for a couple of miles back," said Steve. "We might let them go if we could push these up. If not, we'll have to kill them to save them, as the Irishman said. And the skins are all we'll get for our trouble."

Scottie rose stiffly to his feet and climbed into the saddle. "Ye'd better go home, Ess," he said. "This is goin' tae be an all-night job. We'll be there by sun-up. If they're no ower the hill by that, we're beat."

"I'll wait here for a bit, uncle," she said. "I couldn't rest not knowing how it's going to finish."

Steve stood for a moment before mounting, while Scottie moved away.

"Looks like Buckley's chance for my spec., Miss Ess," he said.

"I'm so—so sorry," she said.

"We'll fight it out to the finish, anyway," he said. "The boys are keeping at it good."

"They must be more dead beat than the sheep," she said, "but they still go on working. I do wish that bleating would stop for a minute. It sounds so pitiful—as if they were crying to us to save them, and wailing with the torment of thirst and fatigue."

"The wail of the lost," he commented grimly; "they've lost, and we've lost—or nearly."

All through the long night the men slaved, and toiled, and fought the unwilling brutes. But it was no good; they could not be stirred to another effort. The men even carried some of them up the slope of the first hill in their arms, in the hopes that they might lead the others to follow and join them. They dragged, and pushed, and hauled, they "sooled" the dogs on to them, they tried to drive

them with noise, and blows, and kicks; they built fires and carried the whirling brands amongst them, but even the fear of fire—the deepest rooted and most awful of animal’s fears—failed to rouse them, or put a last spurt of energy into the tired limbs, and sore feet, and parched bodies. All night long the men fought on savagely and stubbornly, drenched with sweat, and aching to the finger-tips with sheer bodily fatigue.

Then the word passed round, and one by one they ceased their efforts, and stumbled clear of the sheep, and dropped to the ground.

A figure leading a horse limped up in the starlight, and Ess spoke eagerly, “What is it—what next?”

Steve Knight flung himself down on the ground.

“The dawn,” he said briefly, and nodded to the faint grey in the eastern sky. “The dawn—and we’re done. The poor old boss has just passed the order to let go. We can do no more—we’re beat.”

Ess said nothing. She felt there was nothing she could say.

Scottie and Mr. Sinclair came up, steering for the little fire one of the men had lit for her beside the buggy.

Ess looked at the old man with her heart swelling. It was so hard—so hard. He had done everything, spent his all, and fought, and borrowed, and fought again, and now he was beaten, and those sheep lying there, instead of a mile or two over the hill, meant Coolongolong slipping from his hands, and himself and his wife and girls left penniless to face the world and begin anew.

Ess could not trust herself to speak, and when the old man clambered heavily down from his sulky, she moved over to him, and slipped a hand inside his arm.

“Well, well, my dear. So you had to stay to see it out? I’m sorry we couldn’t show you a better finish; but never mind, we made a fight for it—we made a fight for it.”

She brought a cushion from the sulky and put it for him to sit on by the fire. He sank slowly on it. “So,” he said quietly. “And that’s the last of Coolongolong—the last of...” His voice trailed off into silence—a silence unbroken except for the baa-ing of the sheep that had slackened, but never stopped.

“Is’t as bad as that, sir?” said Scottie.

“Ay, Mackellar—it’s the finish. I’ve plunged to the hilt on saving them. The skins won’t pay off enough to clear me, even letting the station go. But I’m sorrier for—” he was looking at Steve, but he checked himself and glanced at Ess.

“I’m sorry for yourself only, sir,” said Steve, quietly.

“Thank’ee, lad, thank’ee. That’s kindly said,” said the old boss. “Well, well, maybe they will leave me in charge as manager, when they take over Coolongolong.”

“I’m sure we a’ hope that, maist airnestly, sir,” said Scottie.

The silence fell again, and they could hear in it the faint hiss and spurt of the flames of the tiny fire.

Ess shivered, and sat closer to the warmth.

“Are you cold, Miss Ess?” said Steve.

“It’s the dawn win’,” said Scottie, “an’ you bein’ up a’ night.”

Ess had lifted her head, and was listening intently.

“What’s the matter?” she said. “The sheep—don’t you hear? They’ve stopped crying.”

The men stared at her, and at one another. She was right—the sheep had stopped calling, and the silence after that night-and-day unceasing cry was eerie and strange.

Then high up the slope from the few sheep that had struggled there came a faint “baa-a-a.” The dense masses of sheep on the flats below raised their heads and answered the call—a few of them staggered to their feet and stumbled feebly towards the slope.

Scottie leaped to his feet, and his voice shook with excitement.

“It’s the win’,” he said hoarsely. “The dawn win’. It’s frae the east, and blawin’ ower the hills and the water, an’ they’ve smelt it. Eh, thank God, sir—ye are saved Coolongolong.”

Less than an hour later Steve stood on the track beside Ess.

“Your uncle sent me to drive you home,” he said. “There’s nothing more to do to-day. It’s not driving they’ll need now. They’ve winded the water, full scent, and while they’ve a breath of life or a drain of strength in their bodies they’ll go on till they reach it.”

“They’re crying again,” said Ess, and they stood and listened. The last of the sheep were trailing over the skyline, and the quavering call came faint and thin down wind to them.

“Does it sound different now to you?” said Steve. “Hark—did you ever hear a crowd of men in the distance cheering ... like that ‘Hoo-ray-ay-ay’?”

“It is,” she said, “exactly that. And we’ve won—we’ve won.”

And over the hill a stronger puff of wind sighed gently, and brought the pulsing waves of sound back clear to them—“*ray-ay-ay-ay.*”

"CONNOR'S LEAP" the little township called itself, and was deeply indignant with the men of Coolongolong for twisting it into "Gone-Asleep"—a name which stuck more closely than its own, and had more than once been the gage of battle between the men of the town and the men of the stations.

And at any rate there was to be little enough sleep this night for the township or its inhabitants, for it was Saturday night and the station men were up and out in full force—the men from Coolongolong and its back station of Thunder Ridge, and even the boundary riders from the lonely huts on the back paddocks.

The sheep were in the hills, and Sinclair, the boss, had said that the men had earned a night's spree, and had given them leave for the trip to Connor's Leap.

Trooper Dan Mulcahy, the red-faced Irish constable and sole representative of the law in Connor's Leap, left his peaceful dinner hurriedly and ran out into the drowsy heat at the sound of the first long yell and the roaring thunder of hoofs across the planks of the bridge that led to the town. Then he went straight to the cells and turned out two sleepy and half-sobered townsmen and pushed them into the road.

"Go home," he said; "go home an' sober yerselves. 'Tis willin' enough I am to help a man in disthress an' put him where the shnakes won't get at him. But it's no room there'll be for the likes o' you this night, wid the station bhoys ragin' through the township like flame through a grass paddock. Go home wid ye, an' don't be sthandin' there like a pair o' trussed owls wi' th' blind staggers. D'ye take this for an Orphin Asyl-i-um or a Soberin' Home for Insoberables?"

He went back and finished his cooling dinner, and took off his boots, and stretched himself on an easy chair with his feet up on another.

"Lave me shleep for an hour or two," he said to his wife. "They won't be burnin' the town down, or horse-racin' in the main street, or tearin' the hotel bar out b' the roots for a two-three hours, so I'll shleep whoile there's a chance."

The station men wheeled off the bridge and pounded down to the river edge and watered their horses, and then rode them round to the hotel stable and fed them, and sent the horse boy with them stringing down to the hotel paddock.

"An' now that's off our minds," said Whip Thompson, "I reckon I can put some severe punishment on a long beer."

"Coolongolong-go-long-long-beer," chanted one of the men softly, and the crowd surged for the bar and pounded it, and demanded long beers of the publican with clamorous threats to come and help themselves if he didn't hurry his fingers.

"'Nother one—quick," said Darby the Bull, thumping his empty glass back on the bar. "That sizzled an' dried out 'fore it reached my throat." He lifted and tilted the next one, and it slid down between breaths. "I can feel myself beginnin' to irrigate," he said complacently. "That got half-way, an' another should reach the back paddocks inside me."

"It's a long dry spell," said Cookie Blazes. "But if the rain don't come, be thankful the beer does."

"Tap another barrel, for the well's gone dry," sang Jack Ever, and the men took the chorus up and yelled it till the tin roof above them danced again.

"Hit 'er up and fill 'em up," cried Ned Gunliffe. "Come on, Never-Never Jack—next verse"—and again the chorus was bellowed in the ancient and accepted fashion, with the long-drawn up-running note on the "We" and the boot-stamped emphasis on the "*must*."

We-e-e *must* have a long wet wash and bath,
We've got to drink or die;
So tap another barrel o' beer,
For the well's gone dry.

"That's it," laughed Steve Knight. "Tap us another barrel, boss. We're out to irrigate to-night, as Darby says."

A boundary rider from the back paddocks was the first to show the bite of the drink. He was a slip of a lad with the face of a schoolgirl, and he stood swaying uncertainly on his legs and called for silence.

"Silence," yelled Whip Thompson. "Silence f'r a speech from Dolly Grey."

"Fren's, Romans, hic—Countrishmen," "Dolly Grey" began solemnly, "an' townsmen," he added as an afterthought. "Thish meet'n oughtave a chair—mushave a chair—hic. I beg t'move—I wantsh move...."

"Come on then," said Darby the Bull; "move if y' want. We 'aven't a chair for ye, but ye can sit on the floor," and he hauled Dolly Grey, protesting feebly, into a corner, and compelled him to sit down by the simple method of leaning on his weight on his shoulders.

"Here, let's move down to the other hotel," suggested Steve Knight. "Distribute trade; encourage home industries; advance Australia."

There was a chorus of approval, and the men poured out and marched up the street to the other hotel.

"Glory be," said Trooper Dan, waking suddenly and reaching hastily for his boots. "Are they at it already?" The tramp, tramp, of heavily marching feet passed up the street, a chanting chorus marking the time—"Coolongolong go-long-long-beer," and Trooper Dan settled back with a sigh. "'Tis early to tackle them," he sighed; "'twould only be the sthartin' av a foight, an' there'll be enough o' that in its own good time. They're barely ripe yet."

With a good deal of argument the men counted back the number of drinks they had had in the first hotel, and set themselves industriously to level the tally in the second one. That accomplished, they commenced to march from one hotel to the other, and have one drink in each. The procession got noisier each time, and took longer and longer to cover the journey, and Trooper Dan, an hour after dark, thought it time to make an attempt to try peaceable persuasion.

He broke into the ring that had been formed in the middle of the street for a station man and a townsman to settle an argument on the pronunciation of the township's name.

Steve Knight caught his arm as he pushed through.

"Let 'em alone, Dan," he said; "they're both fighting drunk, and there'll be no peace or quiet till they've had a hammering. Like enough, they'll both go and sleep it off quiet after."

"'Tisn't Dan Mulcahy that ud be afther spoilin' a good foight," said the trooper; "but there isn't light enough for 'em to see to foight proper."

"Thas ri'," said Jack Ever, catching at the words. "They mush 'ave a light t' see to kill eash other. Wait a minnit—lesh 'ave a light."

"That's right," chorused the others, "let's have a light. Pull the post an' rail fence down an' make a fire."

"Hold on, bhoys, now," said Trooper Dan. "Ye want a light. Wait now and I'll give ye a light. Wait a bit." He fumbled long and slow in one pocket after another. "Ye want a light. Never-Never wants a light now, mind ye. Well, I can give him a light. Here ye are now, Jack," and he pulled a match out, and struck it, and held it out to Jack, who blinked owlshly at it.

"Thanksh," he said, and stretched out his hand and took the match with clumsy fingers. "But wh-whersh m' pipe?" he said suddenly. The men roared. "Hasn't got 'is pipe. Got a light an' hasn't got a pipe—silly fool—"

The two fighters had completely forgotten their fight, but they were quickly reminded of it, and proceeded to stagger round and aim violent blows at one another.

In the midst of the uproar Jack Ever suddenly remembered what he wanted the light for, and tried to stop proceedings again, but the men would have nothing to do with him, so he borrowed the constable's matches and stood there lighting match after match, and holding it over his head so that the fighters could "see proper."

The men had drunk too much to do any great amount of damage, and when they clutched each other and wrestled staggering round the circle, Trooper Dan slipped a foot out quietly in the darkness and tripped the pair up. They lay still for a moment with the breath bumped out of them, and Trooper Dan hurriedly ran over "the count." "One—two—three," he called solemnly, standing over the pair. "Lie sthills, ye fool, till I finish countin'." The men obediently lay still, and "five—six—seven—" he put his foot heavily on one man who made another attempt to rise, and rattled off "eight, nine, ten—OUT."

"Out," yelled the ring; "he's out—he's out."

"They're both out," said Trooper Dan. "Now who'll help me put 'em to bed?" There was a rush of volunteers, and the townsman was picked up and hauled off to his house, his late assailant doing his best to help.

"Here's yer man. Take 'im an' put 'im to bed, or it's a plank bed he'll slape on this night," said Trooper Dan to the astonished woman who came to the door. Her husband was shot in, and the slam of the door cut off the stream of abuse the woman was commencing.

"Now where's the other man?" said Trooper Dan. "We said he was to go to bed too. He's far an' far from his own bed; but is it Dan Mulcahy would see a man want for a bed to rest his battered bones? I'll take him in me own house."

"Don' wanner gorrobed," grumbled the fighter.

"Hear that, boys—won't do what ye tell 'im," said Dan.

That settled it. He had to do what they told him, and off he was hauled to the police station. Trooper Dan helped him over the door and shut it in the faces of the others, telling them he'd see the man to bed. Inside the cell door clanged on the man before he realised what was happening.

"Shut your door and put all yer lights out," said Dan to the hotel-keeper ten minutes after. "They'll never notice the place in the dark."

The men marched past the hotel on their next visit, and to their astonishment found themselves on the bridge outside the town.

"What's this?" cried Whip Thompson. "We haven't come t' the middle o' the town where the pub is, an' we've come to the bridge that's outside it."

"The town's inside out," said Darby the Bull, gravely. "Inside out an' outside in. We've come to the outside 'fore we've lef' the inside—I mean we've lef'—we've come—we're outside in."

"Darby," said Dolly Grey, who had revived enough to join the processions, "I do b'lieve you've—hic—been drinkin'. Thash *norra* bridge—thash fensh roun' hotel horsh paddock. I'll—hic—show y'."

He proceeded to climb the bridge rail, and was restrained with difficulty.

"You're all drunk," he asserted positively. "All drunk—I'm thonly man can drink 'thout gettin' drunk—Harrow on th' Hill f'rever."

A cautious return to the town was made, and the closed hotel discovered. Steve Knight had been drinking with the rest all night, but he was one of the sort whose wits never drown. He was enjoying the sport and didn't mean to be cheated of it. "Come on, boss," he shouted gaily, hammering the door. "If you don't open, something 'll get broken down."

Trooper Dan came up and tried to persuade them it was after closing time.

"Run away, Dan," said Steve. "We haven't begun yet. Don't make trouble." So Dan wisely advised the publican to open again and went off. The men started for the other hotel again after a few more drinks, and, in order to make sure the door would not be shut when they returned, they took it off

its hinges, carried it down to the bridge, and threw it over into the river.

The fun was waxing furious by now, and there were several fights, which, however, usually ended in the combatants halting between the rounds and going off for a freshener.

Then Trooper Dan got to work. One man he captured by simply stepping out of the darkness round the police station, grabbing his man by the arm, and gently shunting him into the open door of the station. His wife quietly shut the door, and, after that, Dan's experience, knack, and sobriety combined made short work of the prisoner.

"That's wan," he said to his wife after the cell door clanged to. He went into the street again, and when the revellers went past—they were keeping strictly to their drinking hotel about—he took Whip Thompson aside. "Will ye come an' have a drink wi' me, Whip? Ye're the only wan sober enough for me to be safe offerin' it, so say nothin' t' the rist."

Whip accepted the invitation and disappeared into the station—and thereafter into a cell.

Trooper Dan made haste to the Stockman's Arms, and found Cookie Blazes in a raging storm of anger.

"He called me drunk," he vociferated. "Ye're drunk yershelf, Bardy the Dool. Me drunk—me that's been roastin' the skin off me face an' the flesh off m' bones cooking chops for you an' th' likes. Look at them chops—where's the shops—gimme the shops—I'll cook 'em. Drunk am I?" he grabbed his hat and flung it on the floor. "I'll fight anyone shays I'm drunk."

"Shut up, Blazes," said Steve. "You are drunk."

"Hear that," yelled Blazes, waving his arms. "Says I'm drunk—I 'peal to ev'ryone—am I drunk?"

"Yes—you're drunk," shouted the men, laughing.

"'Course he's drunk," said Trooper Dan, quietly. "Don't ye think ye'd better help him along to my place an' let him sober off a bit? I'll help ye if ye need help."

The others protested they didn't need help. "Yes, ye do," said Dan. "Ye could never put him in yerself." The men said they'd show him if they couldn't, and Blazes, who had listened in some bewilderment to the argument, found himself seized, hoisted up and carried, kicking violently, to the cells. There were three of these, and all the other prisoners were crammed in the first. Each had obligingly gone to sleep as soon as he was shut in, and roused too late as each newcomer intruded.

"Wait a bit, Ned," said Dan, as the men were leaving the station. "Hadn't ye better bring back a bottle for Blazes? He'll want a drink, an' ye wouldn't see a mate do a perish."

Ned went off post haste for a bottle, and when he brought it back, Dan ushered him into Blazes' cell and shut them both in.

"Four," said Dan. "If I could get that Darby in I'd be aisy in me mind. He's too big an' bullocky to handle be force."

A fight between Dolly Grey and "Cocky" Smith gave him his next chance. Dolly Grey was climbing on the bar and calling for cheers for Harrow. "Harrow on th' Hill," he cried, waving a glass and showering beer in circles, "Harrow on th' Hill f'rever." Cocky Smith objected, saying he was a farmer and had ploughed and harrowed before Dolly Grey was pupped. "Ye couldn't harrer no 'ills roun' 'ere," he asserted positively. "They're that steep th' harrer 'ud fall off 'em, t' say nothing o' bein' too stony for a plough t' touch."

"Fines' Hill in th' worl'," said Dolly, angrily. "Don' you 'nsult Harrow—you never saw Harrow—y' wouldn't know Harrow if..." Cocky Smith violently cursed him and all his harrows together, and Dolly attacked him instantly.

"Now ye wouldn't let that poor lad be gettin' the pretty face of him spoilt," insinuated Dan, and with very little persuasion he had the men carrying the pair to the cells.

"Six," said Dan. "Two at a time'll soon thin 'em out." He caught another of the station men by the shoulder as he left the station, pulled him inside and shut the outer door quickly. He was the last man going out, and the others never missed him, and Dan was too expert for a single man to give him more than a slight scuffle.

"Seven," he said. "If only I had Darby the Bull I cud handle the rest."

But Darby refused to be caught. The more he drank the more stolid and bull-like he became, and he clung to the others like a leech. "Can't leave 'em," he said to Dan's persuasions to come and have a quiet drink, and come and see something he had to show him, and that a girl outside wanted to speak to him. "Can't leave 'em. Y' see I'm lookin' arter 'em. They might get drunk an' get into trouble wi' the polis."

Of the Thunder Ridge men there were only Darby, Aleck Gault, and Steve Knight left, and two or three of the station men kept them company.

Dan managed to detach two of these on different excuses and get them under lock and key, and the others were invited by the publican to come and have a game of cards in a back room. Two or three of the townsmen went with them, and they settled down to a rather noisy game of euchre.

"Where are all the others gone?" said Steve, suddenly, looking round. "Seen any of them, Darby?" Darby shook his head and looked round. "Room's full," he said. "Must be all here." He tried to count, but gave it up, as even the figures in the chairs kept moving and had a puzzling way of multiplying themselves.

Dan went out to the bar, where the remaining few of the station hands were drinking with men of the town—hangers-on who, Dan knew, would keep them quietly there as long as they would pay for the drinks. Darby the Bull came out and went up to Trooper Dan. "D'you think them others have got into trouble wi' the polis?" he said confidentially.

"Shouldn't wonder if they might," said Dan, gravely. "S'pose we just walk quietly up to the police station and ask about them."

Darby agreed, and they went off together.

Ten minutes after, Steve and the others heard a pandemonium of noise break out up the street. They hurried out, and met a wild crowd whooping and cheering and laughing, stamping down the street, and giving vent to long-drawn chorus-yells "Coolongolong-go-long-long-beer."

They swarmed into the bar and shouted again for beer, and called for three cheers for Darby the Bull. Darby had slouched in at the rear of the throng, blood trickling from a cut lip, and one eye slowly closing in a purple swelling.

"What is it—where have you been?" shouted Steve, through the uproar. He got the tale by degrees. All the men were there—Never-Never and Whip Thompson, Dolly Grey, Cocky Smith, Blazes, and everyone of the others. Darby the Bull had gone unsuspectingly with Trooper Dan to the station, and Dan had opened a cell door to show him a Thunder Ridge man who'd been locked up. But from there the Trooper's plans had miscarried. His push had not sent Darby right in, and the rest of the prisoners woke to the sound of a murderous scuffling and stamping and shouting, and, after this had been brought to a full stop by a door-slam that shook the building, their doors were unlocked and—here they were.

"I let 'em out," said Darby, simply, in answer to Steve's questions. "They'd got inter trouble wi' the polis—so I got 'em out. That's all right, isn't it?"

"We'd better clear," said Steve. "Trooper Dan'll be round raising Cain, and we don't want to hurt him."

"No, he won't," said Darby. "I locked 'im in where 'e tried to shove me. 'E 'ad the keys with 'im."

"You didn't hurt him much?"

"No," said Darby. "I just bumped 'is 'ead on the wall once or twice."

More cheers were called for Darby, more drinks were swallowed, the crowd stormed up the street to the police station, where they stood in the road and passed remarks which they hoped Trooper Dan would hear, and Never-Never serenaded him with "We will meet, but we will miss him," and a vociferous chorus requested him to "Tap another barrel, for the well's gone dry."

"Now, then, all together," cried Never-Never. "The Long Yell, an' then we'll go an' go a long beer. Take the time from me.... One—two—three—Coolongolong go long long BEER."

Steve Knight got the keys from Darby and slipped away to the police station and saw the trooper's wife.

"Ah, Steve," she said, "let him out, please. I'm afraid he's hurt, though he says No. But you know the strength of that Darby...."

"He won't make a fuss?" said Steve.

"I'll promise you that," she said. "He'll keep out of the way—I'll give you my word for that, and tell him I've given it."

So Steve unlocked the door, and Dan emerged ruefully.

"That Darby—him," he said. "It's the wise man I'd 've bin to have lave him be. Kape them quiet as ye can, Steve. I'll not come near unless it gets too bad and there's risk o' life."

But there was little quiet in the township that night. The men from the cells had partly sobered, and hastened to make up for the lost drinks, and the others kept pace with them. They took off their boots and ran foot-races, and thereafter at intervals through the night had to keep changing boots, each to find his own; they pulled a buggy from the hotel yard and piled themselves into it, and had shoot-the-chute rides down the hill to the bridge, till the buggy cannoned the post and dissolved in splintered wreckage; they went then for the stage coach, but instead brought out the coach horses and captured a pair of stray bullocks, and held handicap races down the main street; and then by the light of blazing bonfires of straw from the hotel stable held a buck-jumping competition with the coach horses and bullocks. The horses put up a creditable performance after wisps of smoking straw were flourished under their noses, but they were easily outclassed by the bullocks after knots had been tied in their tails.

It was getting towards dawn when fun turned swiftly to tragedy. The men were congregated in the bar again, and were getting past the stage of noise and exertion, when a chance remark from one of the townsmen started the thing. He was a fat tub of a man with a bloated red face, and he had been drunk early in the evening, had slept himself sober, and was now hastening to get drunk again.

"What's this I'm hearin' about a woman up at the Ridge?" he said. "Startin' a harem, are ye? Do you ..." and he made a particularly unmistakable and coarse question.

Steve Knight was the only Thunder Ridge man who caught the remark—but he was enough. He was on the man in a flash and struck him heavily across the mouth, "You filthy foul-mouthed brute," he grated between set teeth. The man staggered back and recovered himself with an effort. The other men crowded round, and the remark was repeated angrily from one to the other. Some of the Ridge men pressed forward threateningly, but Steve turned on them with a savage snarl. "Leave be," he said, his livid face working and his eyes blazing. "This is my job...." He turned back to the man. "You ..." and he called him a name which in the outside country a man must resent with blows or for ever lose the respect of his fellows.

"I hadn't heard—" stammered the man, "I didn't know, Steve, that she was your woman...."

Steve Knight had him by the throat before he could say more, and was shaking and choking the breath out of him till his red face grew purple and his tongue protruded. The other men threw themselves on the pair and tore them apart, Steve fighting to get free and the other cowering back shrinking and coughing.

"Serve 'im right," "Tar an' feather 'im," "Chuck 'im in the river," stormed the Ridge men, but some of the townsmen held them back and pushed the man outside. "Get off, Durgan," said one of them. "Get away home quick. We'll try an' hold 'em back, but they look ugly. Keep outer sight," and he slipped back to the others while Durgan went reeling and lurching down the street.

After a little the men went back to drinking, but half an hour after a white-faced townsman burst in on them.

"Durgan's dead," he gasped. A sudden stillness fell on the room. "Dead?" said someone.

"Dead," said the messenger. "His neck's broke. His wife's just run to the police station, an' she's in shriekin' hysterics there, an' Mulcahy's found Durgan dead beside his own doorstep."

Durgan's house was just on the outskirts of the town.

The men looked round one another. "Where's Steve Knight?" said someone, and there was an instant and awful silence.

"He was there a little ago," said one. "He slipped out quiet 'bout quarter an hour back," said Darby the Bull. "Said suthin' about 'is 'orse."

Now Steve's horse was in the horse paddock with the others, and Durgan's house was close by the horse paddock on the outskirts of the town.

The men looked uneasily at one another. "Shut up, you fool," whispered Whip Thompson to Darby, and Darby stared at him in bewilderment.

They moved quietly to the door, and outside found Trooper Dan in earnest conversation with several of the townsmen. It was just commencing to grow light, and when he saw them coming the trooper stepped over to them. "Where's Steve Knight?" he asked quietly, and the men moved uneasily and made no answer.

"He went for 'is 'orse ..." began Darby, when Aleck Gault nudged him violently.

A town man whispered to the trooper, who nodded and walked to the gate of the hotel stable yard. As he did so Steve Knight walked out of the stable leading his saddled horse. He stopped short when he saw the trooper and the men, but almost immediately walked on towards them, leading his horse by the bridle.

Trooper Dan stopped him when he came abreast and put a hand on his arm.

"I want you, Steve Knight," he said gravely. "An' I must warn ye that anything ye say may be used in evidence against ye. I arrest ye for the murder o' William Durgan."

"What's that?" said Steve, sharply. "Who says..."

"Stand back there," snapped the trooper to the men who were pressing round him. "You must come wi' me, Steve. I'm sorry, but—" A pair of handcuffs dangled in his hand as he spoke, and Steve took a step back. Aleck Gault was at his side and whispering rapidly in his ear, but Steve shook his head.

"Will you put those things away if I promise to come quietly?" he asked, nodding at the handcuffs.

"I'm sorry, Steve," said the trooper. "I know yer word's good as gold, but I have my duty, an' I must do it."

Steve looked at him evenly a moment, though his face was pale and set. "Then—do it," he said suddenly, and on the word he snatched his sleeve from the trooper's hand, leaped back a pace, and with a spring was in the saddle. The trooper clutched at him, but missed as the horse reared, plunged, and sprang forward with a bound, dashed out of the yard, and whirled round the corner.

With an oath Mulcahy leaped after him, and now a heavy police revolver swung in his hand. Some of the men crowded in his way, but he burst through them and ran to the corner. Steve was a couple of hundred yards away, going at a gallop, and within a few score yards of the dip leading to the bridge.

"Halt, or I fire," shouted the trooper, and as Steve ducked flat on his horse's neck and plunged the spurs in, the heavy revolver barked once—twice. Next instant horse and man disappeared over the crest with a rush. Mulcahy ran after him, but he ran slowly, and long before he was near enough to see over the crest the men heard the rolling drum of hoofs across the bridge and their clatter up the rocky slope on the other side, and saw Mulcahy turn back.

He said nothing to the men, but walked straight past them and into his own house.

"He'll be after him in a minute, boys," said Aleck Gault, quickly. "Steve'll take the Toss-Up Track to the hills, and the trooper will follow. Who's game to help me? Come on," and he ran for the horse paddock without waiting for an answer.

"What's the game, Aleck?" said Whip, as they hurriedly flung the saddles on. "There's some o' us too drunk to walk, but none o' us too drunk to ride. What is it?"

"Dan'll take the hill track hell-for-leather," said Aleck. "We'll get there first, and block the path through the Axe-Cut."

"How's the woman, mavourneen?" asked Trooper Dan.

"She's clean crazy, I think," said his wife. "She sits there moaning an' wringing her hands, an' not a word out o' her but 'He's dead—he's dead.' She was screaming crying a while, then laughing to herself, then crying again, then over an' over 'He's dead—he's killed.'"

"Killed," repeated the trooper, thoughtfully. "She said he was killed, but not a word who killed him. Ah, well, there's divil a doubt, I'm feared, who 'twas did it. They'd been quarrellin' an' tearin' their throats out, an' he'd swore he'd kill him...."

"Who swore?" interrupted his wife.

"Who but Steve Knight?" said Dan, sadly. "An' he shlipped away from the rest—but I mustn't be sthandin' talkin' here. He bate me an' got away on his horse, an' he'll be off t' the hills, an' I must take after him. I'll go get me ridin' things on. I must be out o' here in fifteen minutes."

Mrs. Mulcahy watched him go, and then tiptoed softly across the room to the clock, and put the hands back a good seven or eight minutes.

"Five minutes on a good horse makes a world o' difference sometimes," she said to herself, and went back to the woman, who sat twisting her fingers together and shaking her head and moaning with an empty look in her eyes.

"You've been quick," she said to Trooper Dan, as he came out buttoning his tunic. "Quarter past when you said you'd go in fifteen minutes, and I thought I'd have time to get you a bite o' breakfast. You might have time for that inside your fifteen minutes yet, though."

Dan looked at the clock and then sharply at her, but she was busying herself with the kettle with a face as innocent as a child's.

"Get yourself the bread an' the butter," she said. "I'll have the tea made, and there's a slice o' bacon in the pan."

"There's hardly time for that," he said doubtfully.

"Time—nonsense. You'll ride the harder an' the stronger for some food. It's a terrible hurry ye are in to be after poor Stevie."

"Aye, though, if I'd my own way ... d'you think it's pleasure I'm takin'—you an' yer poor Stevie?" he finished irritably. "I'll go'n get my saddle on an' swallow a bite when I'm back."

"Dan dear," said his wife, softly, "I didn't mean that, an' you know it. It's me that knows you hate huntin' the lad as much as I hate you doin' it."

"If I was a good policeman, I wouldn't hate me job," said Dan, and "I'd rather a good man than a good policeman any day," said his wife, and kissed him.

When he had gone she hesitated a moment, and then went and put the clock back another few minutes. When Dan came back his breakfast was on the table, and when he wanted to stand and drink his tea and take some bread and bacon in his pocket, she would not hear of it, and made him sit down.

"Get me the cartridges from the office," he said.

"An' ye might load the two chambers I fired." She brought the cartridges and broke open the revolver and extracted the empty shells. Her fingers moved slowly, and then stopped. "I heard you shoot," she said. "You missed him?"

"I missed him," he said, "be yards."

"How could ye know it was by yards?" she asked.

"How should I not know?" he answered, with his mouth full. "Me that took the Constable's Cup an' can hit a runnin' rabbit at—well, well, never mind that," he finished hastily.

A smile was playing about her face, and she picked out the two cartridges. "You missed before," she said, with her fingers still again. "But, Danny dear, suppose—you might meet him—it might be him or you—you'd have to...." She twisted the things. "I just don't like to do it, Dan," she said suddenly. "I know you might have to, but I'd never have peace after, to think 'twas me loaded the gun that did it. You might shoot him, Dan, an'...."

"Shoot him? 'Course I'll shoot 'im first chance I get," he said, with mock ferocity. "I'll shoot 'im full o' holes as yer kitchen colander. Don't I owe him wan for the kiss I saw him give you before me very eyes?"

"You saw that?" she said defiantly. "An' you might have seen the one I gave him back. Ye owe him one for that, Danny, an' of course you owe him nothin' for ridin' fifty mile through the rains an' swimmin' the Staked Crossin' in a ragin' flood to bring the doctor to poor little Danny, that wouldn't be with us now but for him."

"Be quiet, woman," said Dan, fiercely. "Is it wi' that in my heart ye'd send me out to meet a man I may have to shoot or be shot by? 'Tis a nice choice, too."

He finished his breakfast and stood up. "Ye'll stay by the woman an' watch her careful," he said. "Will ye manage that all right? Keep her to her bed, or make her lie down on the sofy. She can't well go back to her home while *he's* bein' got ready. She's crazy enough now, poor thing."

"Her child was to be born in a month or so, Dan," she said, with tears trembling in her eyes. "She might never get her senses back after a shock like that at such a time."

"I'll telegraph to the doctor when I go," he said, "an' I must be wirin' to headquarters. They'll likely be sending a sergeant and another man or two to help fetch him in."

"I can get one of the neighbours in to help me if need be," she said. "Maybe I'd better get Mrs. Wilson now."

"Maybe ye had," he said hesitatingly. "An' you must listen careful what Mistress Durgan says—an' if she mentions Ste—, any name, you ought to write it down, maybe. It might be if she didn't pull

through that you'd have to go in the witness box and swear to who she said it was did it."

"Me swear Steve Knight's neck into a noose!" she said. "It's likely now, isn't it?"

"They'd make ye go in the box," he said. "An' they'd make me say if I warned ye to write down anything she said, an' me bein' a constable an' knowin', ye see...."

"I see, Dan," she said. "I'll write down everything, never fear. You can swear you told me to. I'll write now what she's said." She sprang up and got a piece of paper and pencil. "He's dead' an' he's killed,' that's all she's said till now."

"Are ye sure—about the 'killed,' mavourneen?" he said slowly. "It doesn't mean just the same...."

"Of course not," she said hastily, and tore the paper to little shreds. "I never heard such a word. Whatever did you put that in my head for?"

"It just shows the need of writin' things down," he said severely. "An' if Mrs. Wilson's by when she says anything, ye needn't mention to her about writin' down. Just slip away an'...."

"I'll not get Mrs. Wilson," said his wife, quickly. "There's not a soul will come nigh or near her till the doctor comes. An' who can say there's anyone better fitted to nurse a sick woman an' take her evidence down than the constable's wife?"

"'Tis yersilf that's the treasure, jewell o' me heart," said Trooper Dan, kissing her warmly. "An' who knows but that atween us—but it's black enough an' clear enough the case looks, widout any swearin' from you or me, I doubt, I doubt."

He went out, and Mrs. Mulcahy went softly into the bedroom where the woman lay, moaning and twisting her fingers and plucking at the coverlet. "He's dead," she whispered.

"Hush, dearie," said Mrs. Mulcahy, soothingly. "Lie still and forget everything. Think only on the baby that's comin'." "He's dead—he's killed, killed, killed." Mrs. Dan Mulcahy hushed her again and laid gentle fingers on her lips. Then she went and fetched a slip of paper and the pencil. "I ought to write it down," she said, and wrote carefully "He is dead. He is dead, dead, dead." She looked at the writing a moment and then thoughtfully crossed it out. "The baby is dead, dead, dead," she wrote again. "It was the baby we were talking about. She must be clean crazed, for how could she say the baby was dead? Any court would see that," and Mrs. Trooper Dan Mulcahy carefully folded the paper and slipped it in her bodice.

Up and down the track across the hills a string of men clambered and bumped and pounded, the stones rattling under the horses' hoofs and the sand whirling behind them.

Some of the men rode swaying in the saddle, and some with drowsy heads hanging, but Aleck Gault and Whip Thompson sat with their shoulders hunched and their heads crouched forward, and keen eyes set on the difficult track. They plunged down the stony dips, the horses at times sitting back almost on their haunches, and sliding down with the loose rocks and dirt rolling and cascading around them; they drove headlong across the patches of open, picking their way amongst the rabbit burrows and paddy-melon holes without checking their stride; they spurred up the rises, the horses' heads outstretched and their sides heaving, swept over the crests, and went swooping down the hills again. Far behind them came Darby the Bull, his simple mind in a whirl of dismay and anger with himself. He couldn't rightly understand what it was all about, or how he had said anything that betrayed Steve, but Whip and the others had assured him with vituperative emphasis that he had "blown the whole show," had laid the hounds straight on the scent, had given Trooper Dan no choice of thought or action but against Steve Knight. Darby the Bull couldn't understand all this, but he could understand the simple fact that his mates were riding to help Steve and to defeat the police, and that his (Darby's) help might be useful and his bull strength most acceptable. So Darby pounded along over rock and ridge and hollow, his heels banging his horse's flanks and his knees gripped tight to the saddle. It seemed to him that it was madness to be galloping the horses this way, besides being cruel to them. But Aleck Gault and Whip were ahead of him, and they had told him to keep up if he could. That was plain enough, and any man could understand. All he had to do was follow and keep as near as his horse would take him; so he wrenched the brute's head up when he stumbled and flung himself recklessly down the steep drops. He lost sight of them when they dived into the Axe-Cut—the steep bit of track that drove straight into the face of the "Wall-of-a-House" cliff, and made a narrow gorge, which offered the only way up the cliff for three or four hours' ride round either way.

When Darby got to the top of the Axe-Cut a loud coo-ee made him look round, and he saw Gault and Whip Thompson hard at work lifting rocks and carrying them to the edge of the gorge and piling them in a heap there. He swung his horse round and joined them, and Whip called to him to hurry up and put his back into it. Darby didn't trouble to ask questions, but merely set himself to lift and carry the biggest rocks he could move. One by one the other men joined them, and as soon as the last man was through Gault set them to rolling the stones over. There was a drop of about thirty to forty feet down to the path at the spot they had chosen, and although some of the boulders they flung over smashed to fragments, they gradually piled up till they formed a barrier utterly impassable to a horse and difficult to a footman.

"That'll do, boys, I reckon," said Aleck Gault at last, and Darby the Bull sat down and mopped his streaming brow.

"What's the notion?" he asked, with a puzzled frown. "We'll never be able to take the short cut to the township till we've shifted that. An' there's no other way for miles roun'."

"We won't be able to ride down, and Trooper Dan Mulachy won't be able to ride up," said Aleck, while the men grinned at Darby. "And Trooper Dan's on one side of that heap of stones and Steve Knight's on the other. Do you see it, Darby?"

A slow grin spread over Darby's face, and he smacked a huge palm on his thigh with a report like a gun. "Haw, haw, haw," he guffawed. "'Course I see it. It's dead simple," and he laughed loudly again.

"Now, boys," said Aleck, "we can just ride on slow and taking it easy. Steve will have made for the Ridge first, or I miss my guess. But *we* don't want to see him there, and we've no idea of his being there if any inquisitive policeman come poking questions at us. Do you understand, Darby?—Steve hasn't been to the Ridge far as we know."

"But you just said ..." began Darby, with a puzzled frown.

"Oh, Lord," groaned Aleck. "Here, do you understand this? If anybody—policemen or plain-clothes men—anybody walking on two legs, asks you if Steve has been to the Ridge since we all left it, you tell them you don't know—you haven't seen him, or heard word of him, or a guess about him, since he rode out of Connor's Leap. See that?"

"I see that," said Darby, slowly. "But if they ask me what I think about it myself...."

"If anybody asks you anything about Steve," broke in Whip Thompson, "you just tell 'em to go t' blazes."

"That's all right," said Darby, brightening visibly. "I can do that o' course—that's simple."

"Come on, boys," said Aleck again, "and we'll stop for an hour at The Trickle, and anyone that wants it can have a snooze. I guess there's some here could do with it."

"I could do with a drink," said Blazes, plaintively. "I wish we'd some o' that beer we was so everlastin' extryavagant wi' last night."

"Tap another barrel, for the well's gone dry," hummed Never-Never, and they rode slowly off.

"Why did you think Steve will have made for the Ridge, Aleck?" asked Ned Gunliffe, as they rode together.

"Because for one thing I had a word in his ear while Mulachy was speaking to him," said Aleck, "and I know he'll want to see——" he broke off and glanced sharply at Ned Gunliffe, cleared his throat and finished "see about some tucker and so on. He'll want that of course, as he'll have to keep clear of stores till he's clear away."

SCOTTIE was sitting on the verandah enjoying an after-breakfast smoke, while Ess was busy inside washing up.

It was wonderfully quiet and still, and the hills lay drowsing in the heat, though, back on the Ridge there, a pleasant breath of wind sighed soft and cool.

The rapid tat-at-at tat-at-at of a horse at a hard canter and the clash of iron-shod hoofs on the rocky track made Scottie look up sharply. It was early for any of the men to be back from the township he knew, and this man was riding hard. He glanced quickly inside the room at the girl, rose quietly and slipped off the verandah, and walked with long unhurried strides towards the gate. The clatter rose sharply as the horseman cleared the crest and rode down for the gate. Scottie saw it was Steve Knight, and as he came nearer saw too that his horse was black with sweat and had been ridden cruelly hard. Steve took the rails at a leap, pulled his horse up hard, and slid to the ground, while the horse stood with legs propped apart, his head hanging, and his sides working like a bellows.

"If it's bad news lat's have it afore Ess comes oot," said Scottie, quietly.

"It's bad for me only, Scottie," said Steve. "The pol—" he checked himself, and looked hard at Scottie for an instant.

"The less I say the better perhaps, Scottie," he said slowly. "Then if you're asked questions you can't answer them, and you can't be blamed for not—er—persuading me to stay. Do you understand, Scottie? I want some tucker, and a waterbag and billy, and a fresh horse, and I'm just going for a little bit of a canter by myself. And I want to start without wasting any time, Scottie, though I'd like ten words with Miss Ess if I might."

"That's enough, laddie," said Scottie. "Leave that saddle on, and I'll go'n run the rest o' the horses up. Go to Ess and tell her what you think fit, an' ask her to make ye a cup o' tea and put some tucker up for ye. Are ye like to be gone long? No, never min' that, never min'," he said hastily.

He turned and hurried back to the house as Ess walked to the door.

"My stockwhip, quick, lass," he said. "Here's Steve comin' tae tak tea wi' ye—in the quickest kind o' hurry. Ask me naething"—and as he came out again with the whip, "hark this, lass—ask him naething—d'ye understan'—*naething*."

He hurried off, and Steve walked slowly to the verandah steps. "Good morning," he said. "May I..."

"Come in," she said brightly. "I have my orders. Tea—in a hurry, and you're to sit down and rest a minute while I get it."

He walked in and sat down, while she bustled about to spread a cloth and put food on the table. Steve sat back in his chair and watched her, and the strained look on his face relaxed a shade.

When she had poured the water on the tea and put the pot on the table, Steve sat up. "Thank you," he said. "And now while I eat you might—your uncle said I was to ask you if you'd please put me up some food."

"Yes," she said, "if you'll tell me just what you want—"

"A few handfuls of tea, a loaf, any meat you have—a piece of corned beef or a chunk of bacon."

Scottie rode into the yard with the horses careering before him as she got the things. "Anything more?" she asked. "Sugar?"

"No, I can do without. Flour, though—not too much. I'm travelling light—forced marches again, you see," and a smile flickered on his lips.

She brought little calico bags of her uncle's and put the things in. "You should have been a soldier's daughter, Miss Ess," he said. "Prompt, obedient, and unquestioning. I hardly thought a girl could fill the essentials so well." He was eating as he spoke, and drinking eagerly at the tea.

Scottie tramped in. "I've saddled Vulcan," he said. "He's the best barrin' yer own. An' I've strapped a blanket an' a billy on. Is there aught else?"

"Nothing," said Steve. "Miss Ess has kindly seen to the rest. Unless—have you any money by you? Can you lend me any?"

Scottie went to a chest in the corner and pulled out a worn pocket book. He put a few notes on the table and some pieces of silver. "I'm sorry there's no more in the house, Steve," he said.

"I have a couple of sovereigns," said Ess, quickly. "Might I lend you those?"

"No, no," said Steve, hastily, then more slowly, "But I don't know. Yes, I think I will, and thank you."

"I've a few pounds in the bank, Steve," said Scottie. "I'll gie ye a blank cheque if ye're going by the township again."

Steve shook his head. "I'll not be going by the township just yet a bit," he said.

On the hillside outside a loose stone suddenly fell rattling down the slope. Steve leaped to his feet and was at the door with a bound, his eyes fixed on the track and his ears strained to listen.

Scottie watched him beneath bent brows, and the girl stood startled gazing at him.

They saw him draw a breath of relief, and his attitude relax. "It's nothing," he said, and then as his eye caught their arrested looks of expectancy he laughed shamefacedly. "I'm sorry," he said; "I'm afraid I scared you. Nice thing for Steve Knight to be boasting of a set of nerves." He lowered his voice and turned to Scottie. "But you might slip over to the bunk-house, and you'll find a revolver and a box of cartridges in my kit there. I'll say good-bye to Miss Ess, and then I must be off."

"I'll bring them," said Scottie, "and then I might just tak a climb tae the top o' the Ridge. I can see a piece o' the track a mile off from there, and if I saw anybody comin' I could gie a bit coo-ee."

Steve stepped to the door with him. "Thanks," he said gratefully. "That'll give me some more time." He hesitated, and then spoke slowly, picking his words carefully. "I'm going to tell Miss Ess something of my trouble if I may. And she can tell you after I'm gone. And thanks for all you've done, and for making it easy as possible for me, Scottie, without asking any questions."

"Hoot, lad," said Scottie. "I'll fasten the things tae yer saddle. It's no that it maks a grain o' difference tae me, Stevie, an' I'm no just curious, but I micht be better able tae help. Is't onything vera bad, an' can I dae onything?"

"It's the worst," said Steve, briefly. Scottie held out his hand, and when Steve took it, wrung it with the grip of a vice.

"Man," he said, "I'm sair sorry for't. But good luck tae ye, lad."

He turned to go, but Steve stopped him. "It looks black for me, Scottie, but maybe you'll take my word for it. They're wrong—I'm innocent as you are."

Scottie gripped and wrung his hand again. "Man, man, I'm glad ye tell't me that," he said. "No that it maks ony difference, but just that—I'm glad o't."

He hurried off without further word.

Steve walked into the house again. "Miss Ess," he said, "I couldn't tell your uncle, as it might have made it awkward for him to answer the questions that are sure to be put to him, but I want to tell you something of this business."

"Is it necessary for me to know?" she asked. "I can guess at a good deal, of course, but——"

"I'd like to tell you," he said, "You'll hear a good deal of it, and I'd like you to have my word on it. The police are after me—I just got away by seconds, and they'll be hard on my tracks now. I'm wanted for—murder."

He watched her closely, and saw the blood ebb from her face, but she made no sign of shrinking from him.

"I did not do it," he continued. "I know nothing whatever of it." He saw relief flash across her face. "But it seems to look black against me. Dan Mulcahy tried to arrest me, and when I rode for it he shot at me. Dan's a friend of mine, and he wouldn't have done that if it hadn't looked clear against me. I had fought with the man half an hour before; we'd all been drinking through the night, and there was some wild work, and this man said—something that angered me. I fought with him, and when they separated us I threatened to kill him. He went off, and shortly after I left to get my horse. I brought him back to the hotel and saddled him, and in the interval the man was found dead beside his own door, and that's next door to the horse paddock I'd just left. You see, it all fits in. I'd have gone with Dan, but he wanted to handcuff me—I couldn't stand that. It was foolish, maybe, and it made it look worse if possible for me to bolt. But I was hot with anger at the thought of Dan refusing my word to go quiet, and—well, we'd all been drinking heavy, and maybe I wasn't as able to think clear as I am now. Anyhow, I ran for it, and—here I am."

"Is it too late—couldn't you go back and give yourself up?" asked Ess.

He laughed bitterly. "No," he said, "I've chosen, and I'm not fond of going back on things. And innocent men have swung before now. I won't risk that. So I'm for the hills and away; and this is good-bye. Maybe, a last good-bye."

"I hope not, Steve," she said, lifting her eyes to his. "The guilty one may be found, and that will clear you, and you can come back. I'll hope to see you again—here or elsewhere."

"You don't doubt me—you take my word?" said Steve.

"That of course," she said simply.

"Thank you for that—Ess," he said, and his voice quavered in spite of himself. "And I hope you'll make some excuse for anything you hear of me. I shouldn't have fought as I did I know, but I was a wild beast at the time..."

"Steve," she said, suddenly, a cold fear clutching at her heart, "you weren't—you remember everything that happened—you couldn't have——"

"No," he said, "I had been drinking—put it I was drunk if you like, but drink doesn't drown my senses, though it might affect my reasoning powers. I can remember and go over every minute, every incident of last night, to the last detail. And I did not touch or see the man after he left me with the others."

She sighed with relief. "I was afraid for the minute," she said. "Not that it would make me think different of you, although it ought to with a girl perhaps. But I'm glad you are sure. And I'm so sorry, Steve, so sorry."

"Sorry?" he burst out passionately. "Ess, if you knew what it means to me. If you knew what I feel to know that I'm going to be hunted like a wild dingo with a price on his scalp; to know that you'll have to listen to all sorts of tales and speculation and gossip about me. And this smashes everything for me, everything I've been gradually building to myself day by day lately, and hugging to my heart. I was going to make you love me, girl—love me as already I love you. I was going to marry you and settle down—" he broke off and laughed harshly. "Settle down—and instead of that I'll be slinking about the hills till I can get away, if I ever do; and skulking about under another name, and running like a hare put up from her form every time I think the hue and cry comes nearer. Yesterday morning my heart was singing aloud with hope and happiness and love, and now—and now I am despising myself for even telling you what I've less right than ever to tell you."

Her face was white now, although the colour had flooded it full tide at his first words.

"It's only my right to know," she said. "And I thank you for telling me. And although I can't say now—" her voice faltered and broke—"I don't know—my heart is brimming with pity, and I can't tell if..."

He leaned over and took her hands in his own, that shook under the strain he put on himself.

"No need to say more, girl," he said. "If I get clear away I'll write to you—if it's safe. And I'll—but

it isn't fair of me to try to mix you up in my life if it's going to be one of a constant flight from the law. I won't let you do that, Ess."

"But you'll come back, Steve, if you can?"

"Do you want me back, Ess?" he said steadily. "Think before you answer me. If you say yes, I'll take it to mean that you do care something for me. I'll take it that you're willing to listen to love talk from me, and for me to strive to the limit of my heart to make you love me. I'll understand I have a chance, that you won't hold it hopelessly against me that I've been many things I oughtn't, and that I have the name of loving many and leaving them lightly...."

"I don't believe that, even now," she interrupted. "Not that you ever loved them—really loved them. And letting you take it to mean all you've said, I can still ask you to come back if ever you can. And I wish I could tell you now that I loved you. But you mustn't count it against me, Steve, that I can't—that I don't know. I would tell you if I could, and you'll believe that this crime they've charged against you counts as nothing, and less than nothing, with me."

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

"And we'll work for you here, Steve, while you're away. You have good friends you can trust for that."

"I've good friends," he said brokenly; "God knows, I've good friends if ever a man had. I wouldn't be here else. Hark, Ess—" They moved to the door and stood listening, and from high up the Ridge a faint coo-ee floated down to them.

"I must go, Ess. Good-bye," and he kissed her hand again and leaped from the verandah.

But before he had gone three strides a choking cry turned him back. She was standing with her hands pressed to her face.

"Steve, Steve—I said I didn't know," she wailed. "But I do know—I know now."

He was back beside her with one leap, and in an instant was straining her to his breast....

Three minutes later another, a louder and more imperative coo-ee, made them start, and they saw the figure of Scottie running down the slope, his arm and hat waving a signal to go.

She thrust him from her.

"Go, Stevie, go," she panted. "Go quickly, or they may take you under my eyes—I should go mad now if...."

"Never fear, girl," he cried exultingly. "They'll never take me now—never alive. And I'll come back for you, or send for you."

"Yes," she said hurriedly. "But go now, if you love me, Steve."

He kissed her again and turned and ran to his horse. He plucked the revolver from the strap under which it was thrust and slid it into his pocket, and swung himself to the saddle.

Ess saw the action. "You won't use it if you can help, Steve?" she cried. "You'll not—but, yes, you must." She stamped her foot fiercely. "Shoot them, kill them, do anything. What should I care if only you win free? Now ride, and remember you take the heart of me with you."

He stooped to her as she stood beside the horse and slid his hands under her arms, and lifted her till her face was level with his, and kissed her full on the lips.

Then he let her slip down, and speaking no word, struck spurs to his horse, and was gone in a whirl of dust and scattering gravel.

THREE nights after the day of "The Murder at Connor's Leap," as the papers called it, Aleck Gault was sitting drowsing over a fire high up on the hills, his dog sleeping near him. He was roused by the growl of the dog, but although he sat up and strained his ears for a sound, he could hear nothing, till the dog sat up with ears pricked and suddenly rushed off into the darkness barking loudly. Aleck rose and followed him and called out "Anybody there?" He heard the barking of the dog suddenly hushed, and then no further sound.

"Is that you, Steve?" he called. "This is Aleck, and there's nobody else here."

"Right," a voice answered immediately, "I'm coming," and presently Steve Knight moved slowly into the light of the fire.

Aleck Gault looked at him in an amazement that gave way to pity. "Lord, Stevie boy," he said, "you look bad. What's wrong? I thought you'd be miles away."

Steve dropped by the fire. "I suppose it's safe here?" he said. "I've been creeping up to the light to try and see who it was for an hour past. The dog spotted me before I could make you out."

"There's not likely to be anyone within miles," said Aleck. "The dog would scent them in time. I guessed it was you when he went off barking glad-like that way. He wouldn't to any but a Ridge man, and no Ridge man but yourself would be trying to come up quiet. But what's the matter?"

Steve unbuttoned his jacket and held it open, and Aleck leaned forward with an exclamation of horror. Steve's breast was bare, save for a bloody bandage made from his torn shirt and wound tightly round his body, and even as he looked Aleck could see the red of fresh blood oozing from beneath the rags.

"My horse came down before I'd gone a mile," said Steve. "He pitched me clear, and I fell on my chest and side on some sharp-edged rocks. They're flesh wounds only, I think, though maybe one of the ribs is cracked—it hurts enough for it. But old Vulcan broke a leg, and I had to finish him. Poor brute, I had to make him hobble on three legs over to a gully, where I could drop him to be out of sight, and that hurt worse than my side."

"Let's have a look at it," said Aleck Gault, throwing off his own jacket and starting to pull his shirt off. "We'll make you some more bandages and fix you up better. And to-morrow I'll bring up anything I can to dress it, and proper bandages."

"Is there anything fresh, Aleck," said Steve, "from the township?"

"Not much," said Aleck. "His wife has been ill ever since. She is lying at the police station, and Mrs. Dan is looking after her. She only spoke a word or two over and over in the first day—something about 'he's dead'; and she's been lying doing nothing but breathe and swallow the food they've given her since. The doctor examined *him* and the police, and they say he had been struck over the head from behind, and had fallen or been thrown, and broken his neck. They had black trackers on to see if there were signs of a scuffle, but too many people have been moving back and fore for any readable sign to lie."

"Struck from behind," repeated Steve, thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Aleck Gault. "I was glad to hear that."

"Glad?" said Steve, and looked at him sharply.

"Yes," said Aleck, simply. "I knew then it wasn't you. But the police don't look at it that way, Steve. The doctor says the blow was struck by something blunt and light—like a stick, or the handle of a stockwhip."

"I didn't have a whip," said Steve.

"Take that jacket off so I can get at you," said Aleck. "So—steady now, till I get these rags off. No, we all swore you had no whip when the police asked us, but of course they knew we wouldn't say anything to give you away. Man alive, that's a shocking mess," as he took the bandage off.

"I'd nothing to dress it with, and I'd no water to wash it properly at first," said Steve. "It's inflamed a little by the throb. Have you spoken to Ess—Miss Ess, of this affair? And how is she?"

"All right," said Aleck. "Though she's been upset, naturally enough, over the whole business. I say, you'll need to be careful of these wounds. You don't want to be stuck in these hills longer than you can help."

"I've stuck too long as it is," said Steve. "I'd hoped to get clear away before the police could get a right watch set, but by now they'll be looking for me at every railway siding, and my description in all the papers and police-stations I suppose. Well, they won't fetch me in alive, I'll promise you that."

"Rot," said Aleck, sharply. "We'll get you out, or we'll keep you here in the hills for six months, till the thing blows over. You're bushman and hillman enough to dodge them for years in this patch of hills, and we can help you to some of the other ranges if necessary, though you're better sticking here where you know the country."

"If this wound thing doesn't mess me up, I'll make out maybe," said Steve; "I'm all right for food now the sheep are in the hills here."

"You'll have to be careful about that," warned Gault. "There are some extra police drafted over, and a tracker or two—we don't know just how many men altogether. They'll watch the hills where the sheep are, so be careful in daylight. Perhaps you'd better leave the sheep alone. There's always the skin and so on, and these black fellows have the noses of hounds for blood. I'll manage to bring rations up to you to keep you going. We're all out shepherding now, and trying to keep the sheep from scattering too much, and from the dingoes getting too many."

"They're looking pretty poor," commented Steve.

"Poor?" said Aleck. "They're all that, and the feed even up here is nearly petered out. The cattle

have been hard enough put to it and have scoffed all they can reach, and now the sheep are cleaning up the remains."

"Poor old boss," said Steve.

"It's rough luck on him all right," agreed Aleck. "We are losing them in bunches too, for all we can do. The dingoes are playing havoc, and I suppose the ones that stray will all fall to them. Poor Dolly Grey lost his way in some of the gullies when he was rounding them up for the night last night, and one brute killed forty-seven at a sweep."

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"I don't think, Aleck, you'd better say anything to Miss Ess about seeing me here. You'd have to explain that I was hurt, and that would only worry her."

"All right," said Aleck. "I think it's wiser so, maybe. Now is there anywhere near here you can hide up during the day? And be careful coming to the fire, in case anyone is with me, or I'm shifted and someone else put here. Of course you're safe enough with any of the Ridge men, or I suppose the Coolongolong men—don't you think so? Or is there anyone particular you think doubtful?"

"Just one man," said Steve, "though I may be unjust to him even to think anything of the sort. But we had a falling out once, and he was pretty bitter over it."

"That's Ned Gunliffe," said Aleck. "He's the man I had in mind. But I'll say no word to anyone, and then we're safe. Tell you what—if I'm alone here and it's a safe thing for you to come along, I'll keep two little fires going—one of just a few sticks. If there's only one fire—keep off."

"Good enough," said Steve.

They sat talking together till the first chill of dawn—the chill that comes even before there is a hint of light—warned them it was time for Steve to go, and Aleck walked down the hillside with him, and left him, and saw his figure vanish silently as a ghost into the darkness.

On two more nights Steve saw the double fire burning, and came up, and sat and talked with Aleck Gault, and spent some hours and had his wounds dressed, and took away replenished stores of food with him.

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But on the third night there was only one fire, and he crept hurriedly but cautiously back to his hiding place, and when on the third and fourth nights the single fire still warned him off, he knew he was running heavy risks to remain near, and painfully shifted his little camp some miles away. He was growing thin and gaunt, his wounds were swollen and inflamed and stabbed him with burning shooting pains, and his store of food was running low.

Twice he saw a policeman and a tracker in the hills, and he knew they were casting back and forth in the hopes of cutting his tracks and guessing how he had headed. He was too good a tracker himself not to have taken care to walk lightly, to keep to bare stone and rock wherever possible, and to cover his tracks as well as he could, and he had no fear but that he could keep out of reach provided his wounds got no worse, and he could get food without leaving traces.

He sighted a small mob of strayed sheep and herded them into a gully, and killed a score of them, ripping the skins and tearing the flesh down to the livers and kidneys, which he wrenched out. He had seen the dingo marks on dead sheep often enough to be able to imitate the rending signs of their savage destruction, and when he had finished, he drove the rest of the sheep back and forth till all possible signs of his own tracks were trampled out. He was satisfied that if the carcasses lay there without being found for a day or two, even a black fellow would hardly tell that they were not the work of a wild dog.

He saw several fires on these nights, but he was afraid to venture near, not knowing whose they were, and remembering how Aleck Gault's dog had scented him and given the alarm.

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He began to lose taste even for the little food he had left. He commenced to think how nice it would be if he could go back to the Ridge, and how his mates would look after him, and bring him plenty of drinks and dress his wounds. And perhaps Ess's cool fingers ... and her kisses.... He wouldn't stand this any longer. Why should he? He would go back to the Ridge, and to her at once.

He was actually walking openly over the hills when he realised what he was doing, and with a shock decided that he was growing light-headed. He went back to his hiding and washed and dressed his wounds as well as he could, and made himself tea, and forced himself to bake a flour-and-water damper in the ashes, and to eat it.

He set himself to watch his own movements, and even his thoughts, and to set every nerve of his brain to keeping himself sane and under his own control.

But that night he decided to go back to the Ridge and leave a message for Gault. He couldn't be quite sure whether or not this was rankly foolish, and a plan born of his pain and illness, and he tried to reason the thing out and to see it in every possible aspect. He tested his own brain and sanity by every means he could think of. He worked out little sums, scrawling the figures on the sand with a twig; he went over in detail incidents that had happened weeks before; he put dates to various periods in his life, and recalled the names of people and places he had met. One thing he would not allow himself—and that was to think of Ess. He felt that if he did his reason would not stand against the temptation to go straight back and risk everything for the sake of seeing her.

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And he decided again to go down quietly, and at night, and try to get a message to Aleck Gault. He realised the risk. There might be a policeman there, the dogs might rouse everyone, the black fellows might pick up his tracks in the morning. It was all risk, but stopping there was more than risk; it was certain death, or, worse, a losing of his senses and a wandering on the hills or down to the Ridge, and being captured and taken in alive.

So that night, when Ess waked at the faint rustle of the blind drawn down on her open window, she thought it no more than the puff of a wandering breeze. And she lay awake for a time thinking of Steve, and wondering if he was lying out somewhere in the open under the starlight with the breeze fanning his cheek; or was he safe down in one of the cities; or perhaps somewhere out at sea making for another place round the coast, or over to New Zealand. And as she lay there, there was nothing to tell her that Steve at that instant was within whisper-reach, that he was standing

listening for the faint sound of her breathing, that the rustle of her bedclothes as she moved set the blood racing in his veins and pounding in his ears.

And when she woke again in the morning and went to pull her blind up, she stared in amazement at the dirty smoke-blackened billy that stood on her window ledge just inside the blind. She picked it up wonderingly. She looked inside it, but it was empty. She took it out to her uncle at last, and told him where and how she had found it.

Scottie took it quickly and, without an instant's hesitation, turned it over and handed it back to her, pointing out the scratches under the bottom.

"It's an old bush trick for sending a message when a man hasna pencil or paper," he said. "It's like tae be a message for you."

Plainly enough now Ess could read the printed letters scratched on the burnt and blackened surface with the point of a knife. She read, and then handed it to Scottie without speaking.

"Tell Aleck meet Fri. where we killed dingo pups," she read. There was no signature, but neither Ess nor Scottie had need of a guess to tell who it was from.

"What does it mean, uncle?" whispered Ess. "I thought he—he was far away by this time, and safe. And he must have been here last night—outside my window—and I might have spoken with him. Oh, uncle...."

"Whist, lass, wheest," said Scottie. "If ye had known he was there, wad a minute hae satisfied you—or him? And every minute he stood there, when he should ha' been hastenin' tae his hidey-hole again, wad have been paid for maybe wi' his life or lang years in a jail. Be glad he didna wake ye."

"Yes, you are right," she said soberly, "and I'm glad."

"It's Aleck Gault he means," said Scottie. "I mind Steve an' him got a litter o' dingo pups up in the hills somewhere a year ago, an' Aleck will ken just where. I'll gie the message tae him. He'll be down this mornin', an' I'll send him off on some job tae gie him a chance tae meet the lad. An' now...." He took a knife and carefully scraped the last trace of the message from the bottom of the billy.

So that afternoon Aleck Gault met Steve again, and felt a chill of apprehension and pity run through him as he stared at Steve's sunken cheeks, tight lips, and hollow eyes.

"I've been breaking my heart to get a word to you or with you, Steve," he said, "but I couldn't risk letting you come to the fire. I had my suspicions that I was being watched, and some of those cursed trackers found the dead horse, so they know you are somewhere about and afoot, and will be likely to need food. We should have arranged some place to leave messages if we couldn't meet. But now let's have a look at those wounds. How are they getting along?"

Aleck Gault noted the glitter in the bright eyes and the shaking of the thin hands, and he spoke soothingly as he knew how, and made Steve strip, and dressed his wounds and rebound them afresh. He was alarmed and sore afraid when he saw the state they were in, the angry inflamed flesh and the raw unhealed cuts.

"You'll have to be mighty careful of this, Steve," he said gravely. "You'll have to lie up and move as little as you can. I'll take you along to some place to-night and leave you. I've brought a good stock of tucker with me to-day, and I'll bring more, or get it to you again day by day. But I'll have to be careful, for now they know you're in the hills here they're like to set a keen watch on me. I'm half afraid I was followed to-day, but if I was, it was by as cunning a man as I am, and I couldn't spot him. We'll wait now till dark and move you, and I'll cover the tracks behind us."

"All right," said Steve, dully. "I'll be right enough if I don't go light-headed, Aleck. That's what's scaring me. I sit by the hour sometimes just doing nothing but trying to keep a grip o' my senses. It's wearing work, Aleck. Is there any fresh word from the township?"

"Nothing," said Aleck. "The woman is still lying dazed and not speaking a word. They say she's not likely to get over it, and may die when her kiddie comes. They think, too, she must have seen her man killed, for Dan says the breath was hardly out of his body when she came shrieking to him."

"If she saw it done and could speak, it would clear me," said Steve, slowly. "Have you any suspicion who it could have been?"

"Not a hint," said Aleck. "And I've talked with Dan Mulcahy, and he can't find a grain to go on against anyone. He's your friend, Steve, and would give a hand to find anyone else to fasten it on, but he admits that there wasn't a man in the township known to have an atom of a grudge or quarrel with Durgan. He was a harmless, inoffensive sort of chap. You know, Steve, although Dan hates to admit it even to me, he thinks you did it—did it in drink, maybe, and forgotten it yourself. I laughed at him."

"Ah well," said Steve, wearily, "I don't want to bother thinking about it. What did Ess say when she knew I'd been down to the Ridge and was in hiding here?"

Aleck Gault told him, and re-told him, and spoke of every scrap of Ess and her doings he could think of. It seemed to be the only thing Steve took any interest in, and even discussions or suggestions for his getting out of the hills did not stir his apathy.

Aleck took a very troubled mind with him when he left that night, and it was a rather short-tempered answer he gave to Ned Gunliffe when he rode into the Ridge, and Ned looked at his sweating horse and drawled "Been ridin' hard, Aleck? Haven't run across the runaway by any chance, have you?"

A thought struck Aleck as he was turning his horse loose in the horse paddock. He caught his own horse by the mane again before it moved away, swung himself on to its bare back, and cantered over to the feeding mob of horses. The saddle marks were still plain on Ned Gunliffe's horse, and by the black sweat marks it had evidently been ridden just as hard as his own that afternoon.

Aleck went straight to Scottie.

"Was Ned Gunliffe out this afternoon?" he asked. "I'm asking for a reason, Scottie."

"He was out," said Scottie, "went just after you did. Said he was ridin' over to The Trickle for his pipe that he'd left there. He's no long back, an' I heard that he said he'd sat down for a rest when he got there and had fallen asleep."

"The Trickle is half-an-hour's easy ride," said Aleck, thoughtfully, "and it's a long and a hard half hour his horse did this afternoon."

He thought it over for a minute, Scottie watching him and waiting in silence.

"Perhaps I'd better say nothing more to you about it, Scottie," he said at last. "Whether he gets away or not, it would make trouble if it was known that you were helping to harbour him or to get away. For the same reason I'll tell Miss Ess as little as I can, although of course she knows I was going to see him, and will want to know about him. But I'll just tell you and her this—Steve's all right, and will be looked after and given the first and the best chance to get clear away. I'm going to run his horse out on the hills somewhere, so he can get it when it's sure the horse hasn't been found or followed. Now I'll go and see Miss Ess. And if you can keep Ned Gunliffe busy, so much the better. You know he and Steve had a row once, and Ned is the sort to carry a grudge long and well."

He was not allowed to get off so easily when he saw Ess. She wanted to know where Steve was, and why he had not made an attempt to get away before, and whether he had sent any message to her, and half-a-dozen other things.

"He just said to assure you he was all right," said Aleck. "And look here, Miss Ess, we decided it was best that you and your uncle should not know anything about where he was or that sort of thing. I fancy neither of you would make really good liars you know, and if the police try to pump you, you might let something slip, or at least let them see you knew. And that would be a pity."

"But when will you see him again, Aleck?" she asked. "Could—do you think I might write a letter for you to take to him?"

Aleck looked at her keenly, and she blushed a little. She would have liked to have told Aleck something of what was between her and Steve, but evidently Steve himself had said nothing, so it would be wiser for her not to.

"I won't be seeing him again for a bit," said Aleck; "but he's all right. He couldn't get away without a horse, but that'll all be fixed up for him."

"But how is he doing about food?" persisted Ess.

"Don't you worry about that or anything else," said Aleck, evasively. "He's all right every way."

And so Ess had to content herself with that. Her thoughts were busy enough about Steve afterwards, but she was soon to have something else to think over, and make her puzzle whether she ought to speak of the love between her and Steve Knight.

SCOTTIE found enough to keep Ned Gunliffe busy about the place for the next day or two, although all the other men were kept hard at work on the hills amongst the sheep.

He saw a good deal of Ess one way and another, and Ess had an uneasy feeling that he was making chances of speaking to her more than she thought right. She was half inclined to speak to her uncle about it, but a girl shrinks from talking of these things to a man. Men are so dense at times, and inclined to want something more tangible to go on than an inflection of a voice or a sidelong look, although these perhaps speak plainer than words to a woman.

But Ned Gunliffe soon removed any chance of doubt of his feelings. He met Ess after the men had gone to the hills, and there was no one about the place but Blazes, and he asked her point-blank if she would walk over the Ridge with him, as he had something to say.

"Won't it keep, Ned?" she asked brightly, but with an inward qualm of premonition. She called all the men by their Christian names, on Scottie's advice. It was obviously ridiculous to speak to "Mr. Blazes" and "Mr. Whip" or even "Mr. Thompson," and she could not use the Mr. to one without using it to all. "I'm rather busy this morning. I have to—a lot of things to do."

"I won't keep you ten minutes," he said eagerly. "Just stroll across to the edge of the Ridge with me. It's something rather important." 143

After that she could not very well refuse without being downright rude, she decided, so she turned to walk with him with a quiet "Very well, Ned."

They walked in silence to the edge of the Ridge, where it ran down into the valley below, and stood there a moment looking along it and out across the dusty plains shining in the sun.

She tried to stop him speaking after his first few words, but he begged her to let him finish, and went on to pour an impassioned love speech on her troubled ears.

"Stop, stop, please, Ned," said Ess, when at last he allowed her to speak. "I don't want to listen to you. It isn't right for me to, for I can never feel for you in any degree that way. I cannot be any other than a friend."

"A friend," he said scornfully. "The same as Whip Thompson, and Darby the Bull, and Blazes, and the rest are your friends. I want more than that, Ess. I want *you*. I want—"

She stopped him again with a gesture.

"I can hear nothing more," she said, with quiet dignity. "You must take my word as final. There can never be anything more between us than there is now."

"Is there no hope for me?" he said. "I don't want to press you now, Ess, but perhaps later—"

"There is no hope," she said, with an air of finality. "Now, or ever."

He was silent a moment, fiddling nervously with a button on his coat. She moved as if to turn back, but he stopped her, and burst out suddenly "You've given me no reason.... Is it—will you tell me if there is anyone else?" 144

"I think that is more than you have any right to ask," she said steadily; "but perhaps...." She stopped and thought again with a troubled mind. She felt she would have told him openly that she was pledged to Steve Knight, and that would have settled the thing for good; but Steve had said to say nothing, and her uncle had agreed that it was wiser not to.

"I can only tell you that there is a man I care for more than for any other," she said at last; "and you must be content with that."

"Is it Steve Knight?" he shot at her.

She turned without making any answer.

"You can never be held to any word—if there is any word between you—to a man who is an outlaw, and running from the police," he said hotly.

"That," she said sharply, "is entirely my own affair. I have mentioned no names, and if you wish to keep any spark of friendship between us, you will let the matter drop now, once and for ever. I have said all that I mean to say."

She walked back to the yard, Ned Gunliffe striding beside her with a sullen face, but saying nothing more.

She was upset and a good deal afraid that night when she told Scottie something of what had passed, and saw how it disturbed him.

"I wish Steve's name could have been held out o' 't," he said gruffly. "I dinna just trust that same Ned Gunliffe, and if he thocht it was Steve that was atween you an' him, an' he had a chance tae pit Steve oot o' the road, I'm thinkin' there wad be a word passed whar it wad dae the maist damage tae the lad." 145

"But what could I have done—what can I do now?" she cried, in distress. "Oh, if any harm came to Steve through me it would kill me."

"Hoot, toot, lassie," said Scottie, soothingly. "Dinna pit yersel' about. Like enough, Steve is far enough awa' by this time. His horse has been gone this two days back."

She worried more than ever about Steve that night, and a talk with Aleck Gault gave her no comfort.

"I can't tell you anything about him," said Aleck; "I haven't seen him since the last time I told you. I can't go to him, for I'm afraid of being watched there, and of him being found. But he's all right, never fear. His horse was left where he knows to look for it, and likely enough he's miles away by now. And you know the trackers are taken off the hills. There's no fear but what Steve can outwit any white police trooper."

But Ess, uneasy as she was, would have been doubly so if she had been able to see Ned Gunliffe's movements that night.

He had caught his horse, and quietly left the Ridge between the fall of dark and the rise of the moon, and now in the bright moonlight he was pressing on over the hills as fast as the rough ground would let him. He went straight and without drawing rein to the spot where Steve and Aleck had met that night—where they had killed the dingo pups—and he halted and dismounted, and searched the ground where they had sat and talked.

He picked up a burnt match, with triumph written on his face. "I couldn't see their corroborree together," he muttered, "but I saw them far enough to guess just where they met evidently. Now what is the likeliest spot for him to have gone to hide from here?" He stood and gnawed his underlip in uncertainty for a moment. "He hasn't gone yet, that's clear," he said again. "His horse is still there, so..."

With an impatient oath he turned to his horse and mounted again. "I'll try the Scoop first. That's near here, and he could light a fire there without it being seen."

He rode as near the Scoop as he thought safe, and then left his horse tied to a bush and reconnoitred on foot.

There was nobody in the Scoop; half-a-dozen sheep were foraging there for the scanty herbage, and he knew they would not be there if a man were. The moon was down again by now, and it was a long way back to the Ridge, and he reluctantly turned his horse's head and abandoned his search for the night.

He was making his way to the hill track between the township and the Ridge, when suddenly his eye caught a quick flash of light on a hillside on his right front.

He pulled up short and sat staring, but there was no further gleam. He thought intently for a moment, and then a look of exultation flashed over his face.

"The old dogger's hut," he said triumphantly. "He's there for a thousand. It hasn't been used for years back, and it's so near the township he'd hardly be searched for there. But I must make sure and hurry up about it—it'll be coming light soon."

He rode on a few hundred yards with the greatest caution, tied his horse, and set himself to scramble up the hill. It was a stiff climb, and there was light enough to see the dim outlines of the hut when he came to a little spur just below it. He halted and rested there, watching the door which faced him, and when he saw it open he dropped flat and peered close. What he saw brought keen disappointment to him but this quickly gave way to a savage joy, and then, as all the possibilities of his discovery came home to him, he gave a long chuckle of satisfaction.

The door had opened, and a woman—he could see distinctly enough even in the half light that it was a woman, though he could not distinguish who—had stepped out. Then a man had appeared in the doorway, and Ned heard the woman say lightly, "Good night, Steve."

"Good night—or rather good morning," came the answer in Steve's voice.

"See you again to-night—take care of yourself till then," the woman said, and, with a wave of her hand and flutter of skirts, she was gone round the corner of the hut and into the track that led back towards the township.

"So-ho," said Ned, softly, as the door closed again. "At the old game again, my bold Fly-by-Night. And that's what you're hanging on round here for, when you might be down to the coast and safety by this time. It's like you to be risking your neck in a noose for the sake of some fool of a woman. Comes up and stays the nights with him evidently. 'See you again to-night,' eh? Well, I'll see if I can't fix it that you see someone else to-night, and that they see you."

He slid gently back from his post of observation till he was safe out of sight, and then turned and ran for his horse, and rode his hardest for the Ridge. The heap of stones had been removed from the Axe-Cut, and he was able to get back early enough for breakfast, and to get in without attracting undue attention, although he noticed Aleck Gault look at him sharply as he sauntered in.

Ned Gunliffe turned over several plans in his mind, but the one he decided on called first for an interview with Ess, and it was not till after tea-time that he was able to make the first move in the game. Some of the men came in for the meal, but before sunset went back to the hills to round up the sheep and watch them for the night. Even Scottie had gone off on a round of inspection, and nobody was left about the place except Blazes, Ned Gunliffe, and Darby the Bull. Just before tea a saddle-weary trooper had ridden in and had a meal with the men. Ned Gunliffe left him in conversation with Darby—rather a one-sided conversation it was, as Darby had been warned and rewarned to be careful of what he said to any troopers, and being doubtful of his own abilities in returning answers which would give no information, took the simple plan of giving no answers except Yes and No.

"Roastin' day to be out in," said the trooper, affably.

"Yes," said Darby, cautiously. He had need of his caution. The troopers had discovered that he was the one least skilled in following the trend of their questions, and of understanding the deductions they might draw from his replies. Certainly they had not got much from him up to now, but then at other times there had usually been some of the other men about to relieve Darby of the responsibility of answering questions—a responsibility he had cheerfully left to them. So the trooper eagerly seized on the chance given him by the withdrawal of Ned Gunliffe, the only other man in the hut at the moment beside Darby.

"S'pose," he said, "you chaps is all as sick as we are o' bucketing over these hills?"

"Y-e-s," admitted Darby.

"You know all the country round here well?" asked the trooper.

Darby considered this carefully. "Yes," he admitted again.

"I dessay now," he said, looking at Darby with simulated admiration, "a chap like you would know every crack in these hills where a man could stow himself. There's that place—sort o' cave—up beyond Split-the-Wind now. Know any more like that?"

Darby shook his head.

The trooper tried another tack. "Course I'm not on duty now," he said. "Just dropped in in passin'. I wasn't sorry to be took off that job. I suppose Steve Knight's well down to the coast by now. He was makin' for there, wasn't he?"

"You go to 'Ell," said Darby, briskly and cheerfully.

"Well, that's a nice answer to give a civil question," said the trooper, indignantly. "D'you s'pose Steve 'imself would talk to a man like that?"

Darby wasn't quite sure if this came under the heading of a question about Steve. He pondered a moment. It *might* be so.... "You *might* go to 'Ell," he said, highly pleased to think of his satisfactory solution of the difficulty. This sort of thing was complicated though, and to stop it he rose and sauntered outside. The trooper walked to the door and sat down where he could keep an eye on him and on Ned Gunliffe, who was talking to Ess at her door.

Ned had seen no sign of Ess when he went out, so he went boldly to the door and knocked.

"I'd just like a word with you, Miss Ess," he said.

"Yes," she said doubtfully. "If it's not about—"

"It's not about myself in the first place," said Ned. "It is about Steve Knight."

"I have no wish to discuss him," she said, drawing herself up slightly.

"Neither have I," he returned. "But I suppose you will admit you are a friend of his, and don't wish him to come to harm. So," he added significantly, "you will listen to what I want to say."

Ess shivered a little at something sinister she fancied she detected in the man's voice.

"I don't suppose you know just where Steve is, or why he hasn't cleared well away by now?" He paused, but as she made no sign of answering, he went on, "I do, and I can tell you both. But before I go further, Miss Ess, I'd like you to understand that I'm not working solely for my own ends in speaking to you about this business. I could have gone straight to the police with my information. I prefer to come to you."

"Why do you come to me?" she asked, her heart turning cold within her.

"I'll answer that by asking you a question," he said. "Would you do anything you could to save him from the police? *Anything?*"

She groped for his meaning a moment, and began to fancy she could see it, and that he meant to demand herself as the price of his silence.

"I would do anything which I was sure he would wish me to do," she answered.

"That is hardly the point," he said, "although I doubt if there is any point he'd stick at your doing to save him."

"I can't agree with you," she said; "but may I ask what all this is leading up to? I'd rather you said plainly what you have to say."

"Tell me plainly one thing, and I'll speak straight enough," he said. "But I won't unless you satisfy me that there is need for me to prove to you that Steve Knight is a cur and a blackguard."

That roused her, as he meant it should.

"Steve Knight is more to me than any man will be till I become his wife," she said hotly. "And so you can understand what I think of a man who uses such words about him—behind his back."

"I thought so," he said sadly; "and God knows I've no wish to hurt you. But I'm saying nothing about him behind his back I would not say to his face. I'll do so before the night is over if you like. But, whatever he may be to you, I think I know you well enough to know that when you have heard all I can tell of him you will fling him out of your mind, and that you'll use worse words to him than I've done."

"This is all rather idle," she said scornfully. "I am not likely to believe anything you may say against him. You have given me reasons for wishing to lower him in my estimation. You cannot do so."

"We'll see," he said coolly. "I don't want to hark back and rake up the past records, and the name that Steve Fly-by-Night has here and round about. But perhaps I ought to warn you that although he has many friends, there are none who will deny that his—well, say—inconstancy to his fair ladies is notorious."

"That may all be," she said, with white lips; "but that is all past, and if I choose to overlook it, it leaves little room for others to speak."

"If it were all past—" said Ned, significantly; then roughly, "See here, Ess, I won't hint and beat about the bush. I've got to speak out, whether you like it or not. Steve Knight is living close to here at this moment, and—he is living with a woman."

She flinched from him for an instant, but recovered herself. "That," she said deliberately, "is a lie. And if you think, Ned Gunliffe, you are improving my opinion of you...."

"I'm thinking of nothing of the sort," he broke in. "And I am doing no more in telling you this for your own sake than any man on Thunder Ridge—than your own uncle—would do. As to it's being a lie, that is easily proved or disproved. Are you willing for me to prove it?"

"You can't prove it," she said shakily. She was sure of Steve, of course, she told herself, but the man seemed so quietly confident. But there might be a mistake somewhere.

"I can prove it," he returned. "And if you will come with me now—to-night—I will prove it. It will have to be at night, because the woman, whoever she is, leaves him at daybreak to get back to the township, I suppose before she will be noticed."

She felt weak and sick. She was angry with herself for her doubts, but—her mind went back over the warning her uncle had given her, the half-jesting remarks Steve himself had made—unstable as water—unstable as water. The words rang in her ears. But she would have the proof first, and if it were a lie, she would humble herself, oh so gladly, to Steve for all her doubts.

"Very well, then," she said, "prove it."

"You will have to get into your riding things and ride," he said. "You can trust yourself with me, but if you like, I will give you a pistol to carry, and I'll ride in front of you all the way."

She looked at him doubtfully, and wild ideas began to work through her brain.

"If you look at it reasonably," he said quietly, "you will see that there is nothing to fear from me. I am hardly likely to hurt you. These hills would never hide me if I did. And if I kidnapped you—" he smiled slightly as her start told him how near the mark of her thoughts his words came, "it is hardly likely to benefit me. But if you are still afraid—there is a trooper over there. We will take him along, although in that case I need hardly warn you that there is likely to be some shooting done, or an arrest made."

"I'll come," she said suddenly, "though I despise myself for my doubts. But I believe you have made some mistake, and it will be a satisfaction to prove it to you as well as myself. Will you promise to let him go free and not divulge his hiding place if you are wrong?"

"Yes," he said boldly, "I will promise anything if I'm wrong. Dare you promise me as much if I'm right?"

She was silent.

"Ess," he said earnestly, "believe me I am not only doing this to harm Steve. He could go where he will for me. I've no wish to see him again. But it is of you I am thinking. We have all more or less made a jest of Fly-by-Night and his love affairs, or flirtations, or whatever you care to call them. I couldn't be expected to stand by—especially you knowing what I have told you of my feelings—and see you fooled and made a sport of and a byword in the countryside. None of the men of the Ridge would let him do that and live, and I least of all. And you ought to thank me if I prevent it."

"I will thank you—if you do that," she said with shaking lips and voice. "But I'll curse you, Ned Gunliffe," she added tensely, "if you've made me hate myself for my weak doubts without reason."

"Be ready in ten minutes," he said quietly, "and I will show you the reason."

NED GUNLIFFE walked across the yard to where Darby the Bull was leaning on the rails of the fence, and smoking a contemplative pipe.

"Darby," said Ned, "I want you to do something for Miss Ess. We want to go for a moonlight canter, and I suppose if that trooper sees us running up the horses or taking a saddle down, he'll want to interfere. Now do you think you could keep him inside for a few minutes till we get away?"

Darby took the pipe from his mouth and looked at Ned.

"Did ye say Miss Ess wanted to go alone wi' you?" he asked.

"Yes," said Ned. "Go and ask her if you like."

Darby turned without a word and walked across to the house. Ned saw him knock and heard him speak to Ess. Presently he came back and nodded to Ned. "I'll fix 'im," he said.

"Just entice him inside for five minutes," said Ned. "We don't want any fuss, you know. Say you want to show him something—anything you like, and keep him talking. Look at the clock when you go in, and allow us a good five minutes. Persuade him to stay inside that length of time."

"Right," said Darby, and strode off to the bunkhouse.

He found the policeman sitting in the doorway smoking. Darby walked in. "Look 'ere, mate," he said confidentially, "there's somethin' 'ere I want to show you."

"Hey? What is it?" said the trooper, looking round lazily.

"Can't you stir your stumps enough to come an' look?" asked Darby, and after another look at Ned, strolling quietly across the yard, the trooper rose and went inside. He found Darby lighting a match and looking at the clock on the shelf.

"It's too dark to see much 'ere," said the trooper, "unless you wants me to see that clock."

"No, I wants you to see more'n that," said Darby. "Wait till I light the lamp." He fumbled with the lamp for some time, and when he had it lit saw with satisfaction that a good minute of his time had already gone. He looked vaguely round the room, and wondered what he was to show.

"Well, what is it?" said the trooper. He glanced suspiciously at the door and took a step towards it.

"Here," said Darby, sinking his voice to a mysterious pitch. "Come inside; I don't want anyone to see me show this." He glanced round the room again, and inspiration came to him. These chaps was always interested in Steve, so—

"D'you know whose bunk that is—was?" he asked, jerking a finger at one of the bunks ranged round the wall.

"Is—was? D'you mean Steve's?" asked the trooper, with suddenly aroused interest.

Darby restrained himself from uttering the usual formula. He nodded. "That's what I want to show you," he said. The trooper approached the bunk curiously. "What about it?" he asked. "See anything in it?" said Darby, hugely pleased with himself. This was simple, he thought. "Blankets," said the trooper, and ran his hand over them. "Anything else?" said Darby, sitting down and crossing his legs complacently. The minutes were flying steadily. The trooper jerked the blankets off the bunk, and after a look at Darby suddenly hauled the mattress up and ran his hand underneath. He had vague thoughts of finding the weapon which did the deed, or something equally important. He found nothing. "There's nothing 'ere," he said, "excep' blankets an' mattress."

"Like to see what's inside the mattress?" asked Darby, smoothly. The trooper felt it all over. He turned it over and felt it again. He occupied two or three minutes in convincing himself there was nothing there but straw.

"There's nothin' in it but straw, far's I can make out," he said, with a puzzled look at Darby, sitting there and smiling contentedly at him. "Wot's the game?"

"Now wot d'you think could be in wi' straw in a mattress that you couldn't feel from the outside?" asked Darby. The trooper thought it over. "Papers—a letter?" said the trooper, excitedly. "Papers, or a letter," agreed Darby, with great satisfaction. He had been vainly racking his brain to think of something to suggest himself. The trooper whipped a knife out and slit the end of the mattress open, and commenced to grope in it. It was well over the five minutes, but Darby watched him, with the greatest interest in what he would suggest next, or do when he found there was nothing. But the trooper suddenly raised his head. He had heard the faint far-off click of a horse's hoof on a stone. Darby heard it the same moment, and with one stride was beside the trooper.

"Show 'im something, an' persuade 'im to stay for five minutes," thought Darby, with a sudden spasm of doubt as to whether that meant five minutes for each item or for both.

"It's all right," he said to the trooper. "I just want to persuade you to stop 'ere a minute or two longer."

But the trooper's suspicions were thoroughly roused now, and he jumped for the door. Darby caught him by the skirt of his coat in passing and swung him back violently. The trooper's hand went to his hip, but Darby's hand went to his and took a grip. And what Darby gripped usually held still. The trooper recognised this, but he made a desperate effort to free himself. Darby twirled him round and threw his arms round him, pinning the trooper's arms rigidly to his side.

The trooper could use his tongue if he could use nothing else, and he did so with fluency and effect. But Darby held him till a total of ten minutes was gone, and then quietly released him.

The trooper faced him with another burst of language and a heavy revolver pointing in his face. "What—d'you mean?" he demanded.

"It's orright," said Darby. "I've showed you something, an' I've persuaded you to stay five minutes. It's orright. You can go now," and he waved a huge hand towards the open door.

The trooper sprang through it, but was back in a few minutes. "Where's yer mate gone, blast ye?"

he shouted.

"Gone for a moonlight ride wi' the gal," said Darby, soothingly. "They'll be back by'n'bye. You wouldn't want to go runnin' after a young couple that way, would you? And besides," he added, "I dessay Ned shoved the 'orses to the back end o' the paddock while 'e was at it. But go'n catch yours if you want to. In fac', I'll 'elp if you like."

But the trooper had had enough of Darby's assistance. "You'll hear suthin' more o' this," he said viciously. "I suppose you know what you stand to get for interferin' wi' a constable in the execution o' 'is duty."

"No," said Darby, with interest. "Tell me. An' tell me wot was the duty—an' I didn't execute you any," he shouted after the trooper as he hurried out and down in the direction of the horse paddock. "An', hi you!" he yelled into the darkness, "'adn't you better come back an' tidy up that straw you spilt?"

In the meantime Ned and Ess had made good use of the start Darby had given them, and they rode forward in silence at a hard canter. The moon made the track clear to be seen, and Ned Gunliffe rode well in advance. Ess rode with a mind whirling with doubts, anger with Ned and with herself, with fears—fears for herself and for Steve—and, worst of all, with a dreadful and sickening apprehension of what she was going to see.

They rode steadily till they came to the spot from which Ned had first seen the light, and he pulled up there and slid to the ground. "Can you dismount, or shall I help you?" he asked smoothly. Ess was riding across-saddle, and she caught her divided skirt up on the off side and swung neatly to the ground without answering.

He took the reins and tied the two horses to a bush.

"They are up in the old hut a wild-dogger used to live in. It's empty now, and Steve and the woman are there."

"So you say," she said stiffly. "I am here to see."

"Then follow me, please," he said. "I need not warn you to move quietly, unless you wish to warn him and give the woman time to slip away. I will go slowly, so that you can keep close."

He started to clamber over the rocks and up the hill, and, as silently as she could do so, she followed him. The moon was almost down now, and there was barely light to see, and the hill was rough and covered with loose rocks. But Ned Gunliffe moved as quietly as if he were on a grass sward, and moved slowly and patiently to allow the girl to keep up with him without undue noise.

"Wait here and rest a moment and get your breath," he whispered. "Can you see the hut? And can you see that chink of light? They're inside."

They waited while Ess could hear the blood drumming and thundering in her ears. "If a stone rattles or we make any noise," whispered Ned again, "lie down behind a stone or behind me. He might shoot." She nodded. She could not have spoken at that moment for her life, and they commenced to move up again, lifting each foot cautiously, and setting it down gently and slowly; and so they came to within a dozen paces of the door. They could clearly see the streak of light shining round the edges of it, and they could hear the low murmur of voices coming from inside the hut.

"You had better speak first," whispered Ned. "Otherwise he may fling the door wide and shoot, or make a rush. Stand well behind me, and call him and say who you are."

But Ess felt her courage rising. She had nothing to fear, she told herself. If it were Steve in there, he could explain everything to her. If it were not Steve, and Ned Gunliffe had some plot or purpose of his own which she had not fathomed ... she slipped her hand inside her pocket and gripped the butt of a pistol, and half drew it free. Then she raised her voice, and called sharp and clear "Steve—are you there, Steve? This is Ess speaking."

There was an instant of silence and tense suspense, and almost on the second the streak of light outlining the door winked out. They heard distinctly the thud of bare feet on the floor, as if a man had leaped from a bed or chair, then a hissing whisper, and then a voice. "All right, Ess. Just a minute. Are you alone?"

Her nerves had been singing like tensed wires under the strain of that short moment of silence, and she could have screamed aloud with joy at the relief his voice brought. It was his voice—Steve's voice—never a doubt of that. She steadied her own and answered, "Only Ned Gunliffe. May I come in?"

"No," he answered sharply. "Just give me a second, and I'll be with you."

A minute later the door opened, and Steve stepped out and closed it behind him. Ess moved from behind Ned and would have run forward, but he put a hand on her arm.

"Ask him who is in the hut there," he said quietly.

Ess stopped abruptly. She had forgotten everything else for the moment in the joy of seeing Steve there. But Ned had shown no sign, made no sound of surprise or disappointment.

"What is it, Ess? What are you doing here? Is anything wrong?" asked Steve.

"I came to—Ned said—" she faltered, suddenly burning with shame.

"I brought her," Ned Gunliffe cut in, "so that she could ask you who is the woman you have in there? Or, if you will let Miss Lincoln satisfy herself that there is no woman, I will apologise to her and to you, and we can go."

He spoke with something of a sneer, and Steve stooped and peered at him in the dim light.

"So," he said. "And if I refuse to satisfy you—and I fancy it is you and not her who needs satisfying—what then?"

Ned laughed scornfully. "Then there will be nothing more to be said, and Miss Lincoln can draw her own conclusions."

Steve stood silent a moment, and then he looked at Ess. "Will you take my word for it, Ess? There is no woman in the hut."

She uttered a glad cry. "I knew it was wrong, Steve. I—"

"Then you can have no objection to letting us see who is there. You will not deny there is somebody, I suppose?" said Ned.

Steve turned on him furiously. "I will let you see nothing. What infernal right have you to come shoving in here?"

"The right of any decent man to see that a girl is not fooled by a blackguard," Ned said, coolly. "To go no further than that, I have right enough."

"Steve," Ess cried piteously, "what need to talk of rights? Surely you will admit my right to know who is in there."

"I will admit the right of no one—not even you, Ess," Steve said, with his head up. "To doubt my word, that has never been refused by man or woman or child. I give you my word there is no woman in the hut."

"Perhaps there is a back way or a window, and she has slipped out," sneered Ned. Then his tone changed to an angry key. "What's the use of bluffing? The game's up, and you know it. You're clever enough with women, we all know, but you can't well bring two of them face to face and fool them at the same time."

"I'll pay you for that and for this night's work, Ned Gunliffe," said Steve, savagely. Then he turned to Ess. "What is it to be, Ess? Will you believe me—or not?"

"And before she answers," said Ned, "she may take my word, and set the two to choose from. Last night, Miss Ess, I saw a woman come from this door at daybreak, and I saw Steve Knight, and I heard them speak, and I heard her promise to be here to-night. That I will swear to. I brought you here to-night knowing the woman would be here. Whether I am right or not, you can judge for yourself."

"Steve," Ess said in a voice half choked with sobs, "tell me it isn't true. Tell me it's all a mistake. Let us see who is in there. Stevie, can't you see how you're hurting me? Can't you see how my love is fighting to believe you, and you won't let it? Have you none of the love left for me that my heart is craving and aching for? Steve, Steve."

"Your love must fight for its own hand, Ess," said Steve, sternly. "I can give you no help."

"You can give me no help, Steve?" she cried wonderingly. "No help?"

"I think we may go," said Ned Gunliffe. "There is no more to be said, is there?"

A cold doubt was springing up, and flooding and chilling her heart. She made a last effort to choke it back. "Tell me there was no woman with you last night—that there is no one else you love —"

Ned Gunliffe interrupted her. "For God's sake, do not lower yourself any more to that man," he cried passionately. "I cannot stand by and listen to it; and remember there is another woman there listening to it."

His words caught her and held her rigid, her face pale, and her fingers gripped and shaking on the riding switch she carried.

"A last word," she said hoarsely. "Can you deny all he has said? Is it true? Yes or No?"

Steve stood silent, and swiftly the chill waters of doubt were swept away in a boiling surge of rage and shame. She drew herself erect, and her voice vibrated with scorn and passion. "I can go then? I can tell myself that I have sunk to being merely another of your conquests—that, even as you held me in your arms, you were smiling to yourself to think I had been caught as easily as any of them—that you went with my kisses hot on your lips straight to another woman—that wherever I go I am to be pointed and laughed at behind my back as one more of Fly-by-Night's girls. Oh, I could hate myself, even as I hate you."

Steve took a step forward and held his arms out to her. "Will you let me speak to you alone for one minute, Ess?" he said. Even in that faint light she could see something of his sunken eyes and haggard cheeks. But she could see also his half-dressed appearance, his feet thrust into unlaced boots, the jacket flung over his shoulders without a shirt beneath, and the meaning was driven home to her by Ned Gunliffe's words—"Aren't we keeping you from your—from the woman you have just left?" he said sneeringly.

Steve swung round on him with a bitter oath and jerked a revolver from his pocket. "Get back," he snapped at him; "get back, you hound, or I'll shoot you as you stand. D'you think I can't see your hand in this? D'you think I don't see the game you're playing?"

He took another step forward, but Ess stepped to meet him.

"He is going," she said, "and I am going with him. He is right, and we are keeping you from—from her."

She laid a bitter emphasis on the last word, and at that his rage caught fire from hers and flared through him like flame through a dead gum.

"Then go with him," he snarled, "and let him keep you if he can. He'll find it hard to do, if you shed all your loves as easy as you shed mine."

Her anger twisted his words to even more than they were ever meant. "Keep me," she panted, "you hound—" and lifted the whip she carried and struck him full across the face. "Do you think all men and women are light-o'loves like yourself? He has asked me to marry him, and although I did not answer before, I'll answer him now—Yes, if he will have one who has soiled herself to think she ever loved you."

And now the leaping flame of his rage died down and hid itself behind light and mocking words, even as the searing red heart of the fire cloaks itself under light and feathery ash.

He stood and looked at her for ten long heart-beats, and then his taut figure slacked, he half

turned and lounged back a step, and threw his head up with a mocking laugh.

"So-ho, that's it?" he cried. "You turn the trick then, Ned? I congratulate you on the win—if not on the way you played the hand."

"Take your congratulations with you to—where you'll end," said Ned Gunliffe.

Steve laughed again. "To where I'll end? So the game's not played out with me yet. Perhaps you plan the wedding day for the day I'm hanged. But I may cheat you yet, Ned, and live to send you a wedding present. A neat design, say, of hands clasped through a hangman's noose."

"Let us go," said Ess in low tones to Ned Gunliffe. She felt weak and exhausted, and near the point of breaking down.

"Or, perhaps," said Steve, "you would prefer me to wait here till you can make sure of me. Are the troopers waiting below, may I ask?"

Ned Gunliffe turned his head. "You are free to go—for all of us," he flung back.

"Thank you," said Steve. "Fortunate for me, I suppose, that we were not married. The gallows would have been needed then to free her, and you'd have brought the troopers with you."

They went down the hill together, leaving him still standing there, laughing softly, but horribly.

THE two went back to where they had left the horses, and mounted and rode back in the rapidly growing light without speaking any word, and it was not till they were descending the slope of the Ridge to the houses that Ess broke the silence.

"There is no need to speak of this night to anyone," she said dully. "I will tell my uncle what I think I need, and no more."

"Very well," he said briefly, and after a little he went on, "Of course you will understand, Miss Ess, that I hold you in no way to what you said of myself back there. You were overwrought, and I understand, although you had better know that I will still hope."

"The word I gave I will keep," she said, "if you still wish it, as indeed I can hardly expect."

"Wish it?" he exclaimed ardently. "It is the one wish——" he checked himself and finished quietly, "But I will say no more now. You have passed through enough for one night."

"It doesn't matter," she said in the same dull tones; "nothing matters—now."

Scottie was shocked and amazed when he saw her again. "Are ye ill, lass?" he said. "Ye're lookin' like a ghost."

"No, I'm not ill," she answered. "Please take no notice of me. I'm upset over something—that's all."

"Ye'd tell me, lass, if it was onything I could help ye in?" he said very tenderly.

Her lip quivered. "Yes, uncle, I would tell you. But it's nothing you can help me in. Nobody can help me."

Later that evening, when they were sitting together, Scottie pretending to read, but covertly and anxiously watching her, and she sitting with her sewing idle in her lap and her eyes set on nothing, she roused herself and said, "I've broken everything off with Steve Knight, uncle. Please don't ask me any questions, or make it any harder for me. It is all over now." She waited a little to offer him the chance to speak, but beyond a low "Vera weel, lass," he said nothing.

"And I've promised to marry Ned Gunliffe," she continued, "although I'd rather it wasn't spoken of just yet."

Scottie sat in silence turning over the two items, and trying to find a possible reason for them.

"I'll no ask questions, Ess," he said at last, "but I hope ye're no just goin' on hearsay, or on tales ye may have heard. Whiles things get sair distorted, an' it's hard tae judge. I'm loathe to think Steve wad hae gie'n ye cause——"

"No more loathe than I was," she said bitterly. "But I'm not acting on hearsay. I've seen him, and—everything is ended. Let us say no more, please."

Scottie was a good deal worried by all this, but he wisely decided to let things take their course, and wait for what turned up. He had other worries enough on his hands at that time too, and for the next few days Ess was left a good deal to herself.

The work of keeping the sheep together, and of protecting them from dingoes and foxes, and at the same time letting them have a chance to find feed enough to let them live, was keeping all the hands of Coolongolong hard at work.

The hills were about burnt and eaten bare, and pool after pool was drying up, while the heat and the "dry spell" showed no signs of breaking. Everyone still spoke of it as "the dry spell," and none were willing to call it "the drought."

That had been spoken of and warned against often enough before, but for years now it had always broken in time, and the rains had come to turn the hills and plains into plentiful pastures and an abundance of feed. There had been good season after good season, and many of the places out back had stocked and stocked till now, when the pinch came, owners began to wonder if they had not overstocked, and if it would not have paid better not to have eaten the pastures out so bare.

Sinclair, the boss, drove often up to Thunder Ridge, and as far into the hills as his sulky and trotters would take him.

He stayed often at the Ridge for the night, and Ess was always glad to see him and listen to the cheery word he still had, in spite of the black disaster that was creeping near him again.

"We won the first round," he said to her once. "We got them into the hills, and you know how near a thing that was. Well, we're not done, and we might win through yet—might win through yet."

"If only the rain would come," she said, looking out on the aching sun glare. "I'm so tired of the sun and things."

"You're looking worn," he said kindly. "You mustn't let it get you down, my dear. It's not much of a place for a woman, I know, and I wouldn't let my own come into it just now. They'd be willing enough to come if I'd let them, but it'll be time enough for that when I can't afford to send them down to the sea for the summer. They tell me they've had good showers again round the coast."

"Oh, and not a drop here," she cried. "Isn't it hard?"

"It's hard, it's hard," he said. "But it's a hard country, one way and another."

"I've heard that before, so often," she said, "and I'm beginning to see it for myself. I wonder you don't try to find a station where the seasons and the country are kindlier."

"We're like they say a sailor gets about the sea," he said. "We curse it at times, but we get it in our bones, and we wouldn't live happy away from it. And it's not always like this. It can batter a man to his knees one time, and, if he has grit to keep on fighting, as like as not it turns round and lifts him to his feet, and showers treasure on him with both hands. A blow and a kiss, my dear—a blow and a kiss."

"And can one still love the thing—or the one—that gives the blow?" she said in a low voice. She was thinking of another blow. He looked keenly and long at her.

"Yes," he said softly, in tones to match her own; "and—it's queer enough we're built perhaps, but so that the kiss does come, we may love the giver the more for the blow that came before."

"I wonder," she said absently.

"No need to wonder, my dear," he said gently. "Take it from me, that's an old man, and has seen and taken a many blows and not too many kisses—if there's any good in the heart of a man or a woman, the kiss wipes out the blow, and is the sweeter for it." 172

"But a blow to one's heart, to one's pride, to love," she said, leaning forward and speaking breathlessly. "Can that be forgotten, or should one be ashamed to forget it?"

"We're speaking in parables, my dear," the boss said, "and that's not always wise. Straight speech and a straight road are always good things, though they don't often run between the hearts of an old man and a young maid—the worse for the maid, maybe. But here's my last word on it. If ever your heart, and your pride, and your love and life are beaten down into the dust, they can be raised up and healed by a kiss, given and taken, on the lips."

"Thank you," she said, and that was all. But to herself she said bitterly, "He doesn't know—he can't know."

There was one thing that, in her secret heart, Ess was thankful for—to the work that kept the men out on the hills. She saw little of Ned Gunliffe, and although she had told of her engagement to him, and some of the men had shyly congratulated her, she was glad to have them out of the reach of their well-meant words on the subject, or of the sly and homely jests they would offer, little guessing how they hurt her.

Scottie had heard something of the night ride she and Ned Gunliffe had taken, and although he said nothing to her, he did speak, and speak sharply, to Ned.

"Understand," he said sternly. "I'll have nae strayvagin' the hills by night or by day wi' station horses an' station men; on no business and no excuse. A man here is paid tae wark, an' every minute he can spare from sleepin' or eatin', an' every ounce o' energy an' strength he's got, belongs tae the station, an' the sheep, an' cattle that's sair needin' it. An' if I hear o' ony man ridin' but where he's bid, he gets his cheque an' his walkin' ticket that same day." 173

And now, just when he could ill spare a rider, Scottie lost one of his boldest and best, and Aleck Gault was carried in to the Ridge from the hills with a broken leg.

He had been out with two other men—Dolly Grey, who had been brought up to the Ridge from the back paddocks, where now there were no sheep to ride boundary on, and Whip Thompson.

They were pushing back into the hills in search of some of the sheep that were constantly straying in the rough country, for all their efforts to shepherd them, and when they came to the Cupped Hands, a wide bowl-shaped depression with a series of ridges running up one side, exactly like the fingers of the hands, the three men separated. Aleck and Whip rode round one side of the cup each, so as to see down into the hollows that lay outside the "Hands," while Dolly Grey rode straight through to pick up any sheep that might be hidden there, or between the finger ridges. He was half-way through when the two men on the edges heard him yell and saw him spur his horse to a gallop. They saw, too, the tawny streak that flashed over the ground and amongst the boulders, and it did not need Dolly Grey's warning yell of "Dingo" to tell them what it was. They circled round the edges, riding hard to intercept the chase, and volleying cracks from their stockwhips to keep the dog from turning up over the sides and down into the broken country below. 174

"Yoicks, tally-ho," screamed Dolly, his hat flying and his shirt sleeves fluttering in the wind. He was on a good horse, but a dingo is a fast traveller when it is pressed, and for a little it held its own. Then Dolly began to gain, and he thundered up between two of the ridges with the spurs stabbing his horse's sides at every leap, and his stockwhip slashing at the flying dog.

"Loose your stirrup—take your stirrup to him," Aleck Gault shouted, and sat down and rode hard for the point where the ridge ran up and over the edge of the Cupped Hands. The grade was telling on the horse, and he was blowing hard, and the dog was gaining as they swept up and over the edge of the depression, and went racing down the other side. Dolly was still slashing with the whip, but the dog ran without swerving under the cruel cuts. "Wot was the good o' that?" as Whip Thompson said afterwards to the contrite Dolly. "You might ha' cut 'im in two 'alves wi' that, an' the 'alves would ha' kep' on runnin'."

But Aleck Gault was up with the chase now, and, although the going was rough enough to make most men thankful of a full knee-grip and both stirrups, he was bending over and unslipping a stirrup leather as he rode. He shot past Dolly, running the stirrup iron to the end of the leather as he went. The ground was dipping sharply; it was littered with boulders and loose stones, and rotten with rabbit holes, but the men went down it as hard as the horses could put foot to ground, leaving them to go with a loose rein and pick a path, and carry their own and their riders' necks unbroken. 175

Aleck was almost alongside the dog, and was swinging the stirrup high for a blow, when he heard a warning yell from Dolly Grey. "Ware—" and the next second he found himself sliding full speed over a smooth slab of stone, as wide and as steeply pitched as the roof of a house. He was just conscious of the long harsh scrape of the horse's hoofs beneath him, of the violent wrenching side lunge of its leg to save itself toppling and keep it straight, and he was down and in full gallop again. It was over before he could draw a breath, and he had no time or need to interrupt the swing of the stirrup that began at the top of the rock and ended half-a-dozen strides below it.

Straight and hard and true he hit with the full strength of his arm, and in the same breath his horse was down and rolling head over heels, and he was down with it.

"You finished 'im," said Whip Thompson, when he recovered enough to sit up. "But 'e dash near finished you. You turned 'im over, and 'e mixed up in your 'orse's feet an'—wallop. Must 'ave been heavy gorged to be run down so quick. 'Ow d'you feel? The 'orse is all right."

Aleck tried to move his leg, and grunted at the pain.

"Broken," he said, feeling it tenderly. "Nice job to get back to the Ridge with a broken leg. Get

this boot off and slit my trouser leg up, Whip, and don't stand there glaring like a stuck pig, Dolly. See if you can find a couple of straight sticks for splints; and kill your own dingo next time, please."

And when he was brought in to the Ridge—fainting twice on the way—and Scottie came to see him, all he had to say was "I'm dead sorry, Scottie; I know you can't well spare a man these days."

He was more cheerful when Ess came over to see him, and he grinned at her and exulted openly. "You'll have to nurse me, Miss Ess," he said. "And Ned or any other man can say what he likes. Every man is wanted on the work just now, so you'll have to tend the job."

"But you're forgetting Blazes," she said mischievously.

"Blazes!" he ejaculated. "To blazes with Blazes. Fancy Blazes doing sick nurse! And, besides, *his* time will be fully occupied making chicken broth and jellies, and nourishing soups and things."

"But you won't need stimulating foods," said Ess with a solemn face. "They'd make you feverish. Low diet and not too much of it for you, Aleck. A little gruel and perhaps a milk pudding now and then. Fortunately we've plenty of tinned milk."

"Tinned milk nothing," said Aleck, firmly. "This is *my* leg that's broke, isn't it? Well, I know what's good for my own leg, don't I? And don't you imagine I don't know all about what a sick chap gets. I've never had a turn myself, but I've read heaps of books about it, and I know just how the beautiful nurse has to hold the patient's hand and soothe his fevered brow with cool fingers, and so on. D'you think my brow is getting fevered now, Miss Ess?"

Ess laughed a little, but then frowned anxiously. It was just after he had been brought in, and Scottie was finishing re-tying the splints, after satisfying himself that the setting was all right. Aleck's face was grey and drawn, and the sweat stood in heavy beads on his forehead, but he still talked cheerfully.

"Only thing wrong about this," he said, in aggrieved tones, "is your being engaged to Ned. You ought to fall in love with me, and marry me and live happy ever after. That's what the nurse always does in the very best books."

Then he quietly fainted again.

Aleck never knew how she had flinched under his gay badinage of engagements and marrying. But she undertook to nurse him, and resisted as stoutly as he did the suggestions that he should be taken down to the township, where a doctor could more easily be brought to him.

"I don't want any doctors," he said. "You're a good enough surgeon for me, Scottie, and know as much about broken limbs as any doctor" (as indeed Scottie did). "And, besides, a doctor would take all the credit of mending it. This is going to be Miss Ess's job, and if she brings it out that I have to dot-and-carry-one with a short foot or a shin as crooked as a dog's hind leg, I—I'll marry her to pay her out."

"I can nurse him," said Ess. "I'll be glad to be so useful."

She might have been even more glad if she could have foreseen the result of Aleck's staying at the Ridge.

AND even as Ess installed herself as sick nurse at the Ridge there was being enacted over at the township another sick-bed scene, which was still closer bound up with the threads of her own life.

Mrs. Durgan was sinking fast. The doctor had been called in hot haste, and the woman's child was born, and died, and the mother walked with faltering steps on the very brink of death.

She still lay in the bedroom of the house next the police station, and the trooper's wife was still attending her. The doctor had told her that the end was very near, that there was not the slightest hope, and that he must go now. So he left her there, and went out and strapped his instrument case to the saddle, and mounted and rode down the quiet dusty street, to carry himself and his skill and his instruments for long miles across parched plain and hardly discernible tracks, to where some other sufferer was patiently waiting the relief he rode so hard with.

And although the lake-level plains, with the mirage gleaming on the horizon, and the pleasantly cool trees and bushes all looking innocent and peaceful enough, there was no doctor, whoever tended the wounded under fire or carried a stricken soldier back into the friendly shelter of the trenches, who faced a greater risk or took more chances with his life than this rough out-back doctor in the wide-brimmed hat and the red-dusty clothes.

If the horse he rode put its foot in one of the rabbit holes that riddled the plains; if he dismounted to walk and stretch his saddle-weary limbs, and the horse broke away and left him; even if he strayed off the track, which was so faint that a man who was not a bushman would examine the ground for it in vain, the patient out there might wait and wonder why the doctor hadn't come when he promised, and suppose that some more urgent case had detained him. And if the doctor were missed in time, and the black trackers laid on, and no rain came to wash out his tracks, and no dust storm blew over them and hid them, he might be found alive—or dead. But in a country where the sheep tanks are the only water within hundreds of miles; where the same tanks are merely holes scooped in the plain, with nothing to mark them until you are right on them; where an ordinary paddock is ten miles across, and you may walk forty miles round the fence and see no soul, and have to cross into the next paddock and repeat the walk; where the sun is beating down like iron flails; where the ground underfoot is hot enough to burn the soles of the boots off the heat-rotted stitches; where every drawn breath dries the moisture out of a man's body, the man who is lost and without water does not walk far or live long.

So a doctor in the back country has to be a bush man who can find an unerring way by dark or light, a rider who, when his own horse is knocked up, must be able and willing to sit any half-broken brute he can pick up, or at a pinch swim a flooded river "running a banker," with whirling tree trunks and drowned bullocks to add to the hazard, as well as a man brave enough to count life and death risks as nothing worth the counting; who on every round he makes must ride, with his own life in the hollow of his hands and the strength of his knee-grip, to keep the flame of life alive in other people; and, lastly, a man who has body strength and endurance to sit in the saddle, to ride, to walk, to drive, or to swim through a long day; on again through the night, and, if need be and the case is urgent enough, to take the road and start over again. A doctor is a doctor, but in the outside country he is a great deal more—or he is a great deal less.

So the doctor left Mrs. Durgan, first, because he could do no more for her, and second, because at the end of some of those long miles there was someone else he could do perhaps everything for.

And Mrs. Dan Mulcahy saw him go and went back to the death-bedside to do her little best to carry out his orders and ease the sufferer over the end—as women so often have to do in the outside country.

Mrs. Durgan was lying still, breathing noisily, and white to the lips, that were tinted pale blue. Only her fingers were never still, and plucked at the coverlet and twisted themselves ceaselessly. Mrs. Dan wiped the perspiration from the damp forehead, and moistened the tight-drawn lips, and took her seat beside the bed.

Now and again she slipped noiselessly from the room and pushed a pot on the fire, or pulled it back and threw a billet of wood on. And when the trooper, her husband, came in, bringing the sergeant with him to dinner, she served the meal, and took her own with her, and went back to the sick room and closed the door, so that the murmur of voices should not disturb the woman.

And presently the sick woman opened her eyes and lay looking steadily at the roof over her, and Mrs. Dan saw the light of reason again in the eyes that had looked blank as the shuttered windows of an empty house for days and nights on end.

"She will recover consciousness just before the end," the doctor had said. "Give her a spoonful of this, and she may speak and tell all she can before she goes."

The trooper's wife moved quietly, but very quickly, to the door, and opened it and beckoned to the two men, and laid her fingers on her lips as a sign for silence. And the two rose and slipped the boots from their feet, and in stocking soles crept into the room and took their stand behind the screen that was placed close beside the bed, and between it and the door, while Mrs. Dan brought the medicine and held it to the woman's lips.

"Drink this," she said gently. "It will help you and make it easier."

The woman swallowed. "I'm goin', ain't I?" she said calmly; and Mrs. Dan whispered "Yes," for in "the outside" men and women are more used to the thought of facing death than the people of the cities are, and there is not held to be the same need to lie to them and cheat them about their end.

"The baby?" asked the woman.

"It died," said Mrs. Dan.

"Died?" said the woman. "Dead—he's ..." she caught back the word. "Seems like I bin sayin' that a lot o' times," she said. "I remember now—he's dead, an' how he was—killed."

The two men behind the screen exchanged swift glances, and the sergeant busied himself with the pencil. And Mrs. Dan knew what they were doing, and she thought of Steve, and how her husband believed his guilt even against his own wishes, and she could hardly bring her tongue to frame the questions that would bring the guilt home to the man who had been a friend to her and hers, or declare him innocent and free.

"You saw it done?" she said at last. "Can you tell me who did it?"

The woman slowly turned her eyes—the strength to turn her head was gone from her, even as the strength to speak was going like running water.

"You sure I'm goin'?" she asked, and again Mrs. Dan said "Yes." "No mistake—no hope," persisted the woman, and Mrs. Dan shook her head. "Please tell me if you can," she said, "before it is too late. You haven't long now, and you may lift the guilt from an innocent man."

"I'm glad o' that," said the woman, "for I'm goin' where I s'pose I'll pay for it. I killed him myself."

The horror of the thing gripped the trooper's wife like a hand on her throat, shutting off her speech. Then she thought of Steve, and joy lifted the hand. "You did it yourself?" she repeated clearly, so that behind the screen there could be no mistake.

"Yes," said the woman. "Gi' me another sip from that bottle, an' I'll tell you." Mrs. Dan gave her the sip—and wiped her lips.

"I heard him comin' that night," said the woman, speaking clearly, but with gasping efforts. "I went to let him in—an' I gave him the rough o' my tongue. He spoke back—an' said he could go'n find another woman—who'd speak decent to 'im. It made me mad—an' the child comin' an' all. I picked up the broom beside the door an' hit 'im an' knocked 'is 'at off, an' hit 'im again.... He fell off the steps, an' when I went to pick 'im up, his head lolled, limp an' slack-like, same as I've seen a rabbit's when its neck was broke.... His neck was broke, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Dan, mechanically, "his neck was broke."

"Ah.... I knowed I was right," said the woman, with curious complacency. "Well, I didn't ... break it ... did I? I only hit 'im light like.... He broke it hisself, didn't ... he?"

And those were the last words she spoke.

"Did you get it all down?" asked Mrs. Dan, eagerly, when she came again to the next room.

"We got it all," said the sergeant. "You might read this through and sign it, if you think it's same as you heard."

Mrs. Dan read it, and signed her name beneath the sergeant's and her husband's, and bundled him out forthwith to send a telegram away to headquarters.

"And tell everybody you meet," she commanded. "God forgive me, if it's a sin to feel glad, with the poor creatur lying there in the next room, but if it is I can't help it. When can we get word to—Thunder Ridge, Dan? I want them to know first minute they can. They was all so sure it wasn't Steve Knight. And who was right about that same—me or you?" she finished triumphantly.

"You were right," said Dan, soberly, "an' it's meself was never so glad to own it."

"I'll have to ride out to the Ridge and call the men in," said the sergeant. "It's been an out-an-out wild-goose chase, hasn't it? Wonder what that thick-headed fool wanted to bolt for, and make all this fuss."

"An' wasn't it a wise man he was to bolt?" said Mrs. Dan, defiantly, "when my own husband, that knows him well, went firing off his pistol at him, an' believed up to the minute the poor woman spoke that it was Steve that did it. I'm a policeman's wife myself, an' well I know the police would have held him guilty an' helped to hang him if you'd caught him, an' the woman hadn't had the strength an' the wits to speak the truth with the last breath out of her lips."

"Well, well," admitted the sergeant, "it looked black enough, I'll admit, an' I suppose some men have swung for less evidence."

When the sergeant brought the word to Thunder Ridge, there was no one about the place except the cook, Aleck Gault, and Ess. Aleck had been moved over to the house and into Ess's room, while she took possession of her uncle's camp bed in the outer room, and sent him off to sleep in the bunkhouse with the men.

When the sergeant rode up, he saw Blazes, and told him the news, and Blazes came over to the house hot foot to retail it.

Ess met him at the outer door, and seeing his wild excitement, motioned him to caution. "Aleck is asleep," she said. "He had rather a bad night, and I don't want to disturb him."

"The John 'Op sergeant 'as just brought word, Miss—'e didn't do it—the woman's confessed. Ain't that great? We'll 'ave 'im back in no time mark my words. An' won't we give 'im the Long Yell, neither—"

"But who didn't do what, and who'll be back?" interrupted Ess.

"Eh, wot? Why, Steve didn't. We knowed it all along, o' course, but there's the cussed Johns chasin' 'im over the 'ills, an' a warren out to arrest 'im—an' wot for? Wot for? For a thing 'e'd no more to do with than I 'ad. It's a cussed shame. It's a disgrace to the country." Blazes was beginning to work himself into a violent passion. "Who the—I mean who are they to go chivvyin' a man? I'll go 'n give that sergeant—"

"Wait a minute, Blazes," cried Ess. "You haven't told me anything about it, except that Steve didn't do it."

Blazes dropped his rage and apologised, and then gave her the whole story. It was a little confused, and Ess walked over and interviewed the sergeant herself.

When Aleck woke she gave him his broth, and quietly asked him if he could hear some good news without getting excited.

But the words had barely left her lips when Aleck struck in, "About Steve? They've caught the man who did it? Tell me quickly, please."

"His wife did it herself," said Ess. "It was more or less an accident. They quarrelled, and he fell off the steps and broke his neck. The woman confessed to striking him, and then she died."

Aleck dropped back on the pillows he had raised himself from. "Lord, Miss Ess, if you only knew how good that sounds to me." His face was glowing and his voice thrilled with pleasure. "I'll see him soon. He'll come the minute he can, especially if he hears I'm hurt. Steve—Lord—Stevie lad, won't I shake the hand off him."

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"You must be quiet and not talk too much," warned Ess. "You know it's bad for you to get excited."

"Tell me everything about it, please, then," he pleaded, "every scrap. I'd rather have had this than —" he broke off and tried to steady his voice, and Ess saw a suspicion of tears in his eyes. His emotion moved her to the heart, and she turned and pretended to busy herself about the room, telling him all the particulars the sergeant had given her.

"Thank you," he said. "You mustn't mind me getting worked up like this over it, please. I'm an awful kid about Stevie, you know. I feel as if I could howl like a kid, though why Heaven knows — 'tisn't anything to howl about, is it? This leg must be weakening my intellect."

Ess noticed the flush of fever in his cheeks, and tried to calm him. "It's no good," he declared; "I've got to talk, or I'll bust. You imagine if it was Ned that had been blamed for this, and what you'd feel like if you heard he was cleared of every suspicion of it. Well, Stevie's more to me than a man is to a girl—yes, I know you'll grin at that, but you don't rightly know what men are to each other out here. He's my mate—we're mates, and good mates. The marriage service says something about the pair forsaking all to cleave to each other. But it doesn't say a man must forsake his mate. They'd have to alter the marriage service for us out here if it did—a man with a mate wouldn't stand for it." He went on talking and laughing excitedly, till at last Ess said, "Aleck, I'm sure it's bad for you to talk so much. Now stop, or I'll go away and leave you to talk to the flies."

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He laughed happily. "All right, Miss Boss, I'll dry up. But I'd like to write a note to Steve—no, never mind though, he'll understand without that, and he'll be here just as hard as a horse can hammer across the Toss-Up track when he hears I'm crippled. And don't you worry about me being excited. 'Tisn't near as bad for me as lying here fretting my soul to fiddle-strings wondering if he was all right, and if he'd need me and I couldn't go. I was going to clear out and join him, and help him get away, too, soon as he was fit to travel."

"Fit to travel?" said Ess, slowly.

"Yes," said Aleck. "Soon as his wounds healed up." He stopped abruptly and looked at her. "I shouldn't have mentioned that. He said not to, and we agreed it might worry you for nothing."

Ess felt a curious sense of sickness stealing over her. She remembered again the haggard look in Steve's face.

"When was he hurt?" she asked as steadily as she could. "And what—was it anything serious?"

"He fell just after he left here," said Aleck, "and he cut himself, and I fancy cracked a rib or two. Nothing much if he could have laid up and had the things tended properly. But he'd no bandages and little water—he'd to be careful about going near water you see, knowing the trackers would be watching there—and the things got inflamed and so on. And scrambling about on his feet didn't help."

So he had been wounded and suffering when she met him, Ess thought, and he had never said a word, and—and she had struck him—struck her whip across his face. She shivered. Then she remembered that woman in the hut and hardened her heart. "But wasn't someone looking after him?" she asked. "You know you said he was in good hands."

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"Yes," said Aleck, "I fixed that."

"You—you fixed it?" she said breathlessly. "How did you—who was it—"

"Steady, steady, Miss Ess," said Aleck. "I'm talking too much. I shouldn't have said as much, perhaps. But do you know," he went on, looking curiously at her, "I was ass enough to think once—you don't mind my saying it to you? I wouldn't to anyone else—that you were rather fond of Stevie and—well, I was surprised when I heard about you and Ned."

"I was—fond—of him, Aleck," she said a trifle jerkily. "But—well, you know I'm to marry Ned."

Aleck grunted.

"Was it a girl was looking after him?" she said, trying to speak carelessly.

"I'd much rather you didn't ask me anything about that, Miss Ess," said Aleck. "I shouldn't have spoken of it at all, perhaps. I've no right to speak of what is really Steve's business. You mustn't mind my saying so."

"Of course not," she said.

After a little she said, "Aleck, if Steve comes he'll be able to look after you, so I think I'll go down to Coolongolong for a bit. Mr. Sinclair has often asked me, and I'd like to go—I've never seen it yet. They tell me they have a bit of irrigated land, and a garden, and some green trees. I'm dying to see something cool and fresh and green again."

Aleck was tempted to object strongly, but he caught a glimpse of her face, and suddenly saw that she was looking pale and worn.

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"Good notion," he said briskly. "I'm all right now, and Steve'll see to me all right. When will you go?"

"Well, when do you think Steve will be here?" she asked.

"Don't know," said Aleck. "Soon as he hears he's clear, I suppose. When did that woman confess to it?"

"This morning," said Ess. "The sergeant came straight out."

"Then Steve would most likely hear late to-night," said Aleck. "He'd have to go down to the township and get a horse, and he'll be over to-morrow morning, I expect."

"Mr. Sinclair is to be up to-night or to-morrow morning," said Ess. "So I think I might go back with him."

As soon as she could she went off and feverishly packed a few things. She was in a panic at the thought of meeting Steve, and determined if possible to steal away before he came.

Perhaps he would not come. Surely he would be ashamed to meet her after their last meeting. But she remembered again—and flushed with a little spark of anger again at the memory—his mocking speech and laughter at their parting. Very likely he would come, if only out of sheer bravado. She clenched her hands angrily, and wondered if it would not be cowardly to run away from him, although if she stayed it would be difficult, if not impossible, to treat him as if nothing had ever happened, and others might remark her behaviour if she deliberately avoided speaking to him, as she felt she would have to do.

She hesitated long, and fought the thing out with herself, and finally decided that she would wait till he came, would treat him with indifference, and make it very plain to him that he was nothing and less than nothing to her, and then go down to the station, and so get away.

She went back and told Aleck that she had decided to wait until she could hand over her nurse-ship.

As it happened, they were all very near having to wait in vain for Steve to come to the Ridge. He was not down into the township until a couple of days after it was known how Durgan's death had come about, and when he did make an appearance, everyone remarked how bitter and cynical he was over their congratulations. They noticed, however, how desperately ill and worn he looked, and when it was known that he had seen the doctor, and was suffering from wounds and a resulting touch of fever, his odd manner was put down to that.

As a matter of fact, it was Steve's heart and mind that were feeling hurt more than his body, although that was still painful enough. The doctor had told him that the ribs were not broken, but severely bruised, that he had had a very narrow escape of serious trouble from the inflamed and festering wounds on his chest, but that these were beginning to heal nicely now. He went to the police station, and met with the heartiest of welcomes from both Dan and Mrs. Dan, and Dan asked him bluntly why he had not gone over to the Ridge.

"Don't think I'll go there," said Steve, indifferently. "I'm thinking of taking the coach down country to-morrow. I'd like to see Aleck Gault first, though, and I might wait here and send him a note to come in and see me."

"But haven't ye heard?" said Dan, in astonishment "Aleck is laid up wid a broke leg. We all heard it a couple o' days back, an' niver thought to be after mentionin' it, seem' it's stale news it was." 192

"Aleck's leg broke," said Steve. "That's a different matter. I'll get a horse to-night and ride over."

"You'll do no such thing," said Mrs. Dan, emphatically. "You'll get a buggy and drive, or get someone to drive you, with that side an' chest o' yours."

Steve laughed at her. "I don't sit in the saddle on my side and chest, Mrs. Trooper Mulcahy," he said. "What's the difference to ride or drive? And, anyhow, I'm itching to feel a horse under me again."

"It makes the difference that you might get trouble wi' those wounds again," said Mrs. Dan. "You said yourself that the doctor wanted you to go to bed wi' them."

"And I told him to go to his granny," said Steve. "As if I cared a curse for all his blood-poisoning threats. What's the odds to anyone if I do get poisoned, or anything else?"

"Steve," said Mrs. Dan, looking hard at him, "what's the matter wi' you these days? You're hard as a flint an' bitter as aloes. It might be crossed in love you are."

Steve winced, but he laughed loudly.

"I am," he said; "I'm a disappointed man. I've found out I'm up to the neck in love with yourself, you dear. Come on now—will you mount and ride and run away with me?"

"Ye impident scoundril," cried Dan; "it's meself that's sorry I didn't shoot ye through the liver whin I'd the chanst."

"I'll reserve that offer, Steve," said Mrs. Dan, lightly. But her sharp eyes had noted Steve's flinching at the word of being crossed in love. "Danny," she said, "run away for a bit. I want Steve to have a chance to make love to me nicely." 193

"Faith, it's little enough givin' av chances he needs. But so be it happens I have to walk down the street a piece. I'll be back in tin minutes," and he rose and went. "What's the little woman after now, I wonder?" he said to himself. "If she hasn't wheedled an' coaxed the boy into somethin' or out av it in tin minutes, it's meself doesn't know her."

"Steve," said Mrs. Dan, the moment they were alone, "tell me right out what's the matter with you."

"Well, the doctor said it——" Steve began, but was interrupted quickly. "If it's something you can't or won't tell, Steve, say so an' we'll drop it. I can see it's a girl. Now?"

Steve dropped his bantering tones. "Yes—it's a girl. And what then? There's many to tell you that's no new thing with Fly-by-Night."

"It's a new thing for Fly-by-Night to be breakin' his heart over one," said Mrs. Dan. "Who is she, Stevie? Can you tell me?"

"No, I can't," he said. "You always told me, didn't you, that I'd find her some day—the girl I'd be ready to sell my soul for? Well, I've found her—and lost her."

"Lost her?" repeated Mrs. Dan. "Is she dead?"

"Dead? No."

"Married then?"

"No, nor married."

"Then don't be a fool," said Mrs. Dan, scornfully. "A race isn't lost till it's won, I've heard, and a girl isn't lost till she's married or dead—and sometimes not even when she's married—if you read the Divorce Court cases." 194

"If I know anything about women, I've lost this time," said Steve.

"It's the man that thinks he knows the most about women that's usually the easiest fooled about one woman," said Mrs. Dan, quickly. "So don't be a fool, Steve; go an' *make* the girl have you. You've quarrelled, I suppose?"

"You might say so," said Steve, grimly; "and we both said some fairly nasty things. And I've a bitter tongue if I lose my temper badly."

"I've no patience wi' you," said Mrs. Dan; "it isn't the bitter things a man says that a girl minds so much—it's the sweet things he doesn't say. Go and say as many of them as your tongue and your sense—or your lack o' sense might even be better—will let you, and she'll forget the bitter things fast enough. Could *you* forgive her what she said?"

"I don't know," said Steve, slowly. "She doubted me and refused the word of honour I offered her."

I couldn't go to her, and that standing between us."

"And if that's not like a man," cried Mrs. Dan. "He'd see a girl eat her heart out because she won't eat her words, and he'd eat his out rather than eat humble pie."

"She's engaged to another man," said Steve.

"I've no doubt," said Mrs. Dan, serenely; "and just as quick after you broke wi' her as she could do it, I'll wager."

"It was pretty quick after," Steve admitted.

"She must have loved him a lot," said Mrs. Dan, drily. "Can't you see it, Steve? Jealousy is a woman's greatest weakness, and she counts on it being the same with a man, and tries to play on it. And mostly she's not far wrong. Take my advice, Steve, and the advice of one woman about another is the only advice worth having—if it's honest, which maybe isn't often, I'll admit. Go to her and ask her to forgive you."

"But, confound it all," cried Steve, "I've nothing to be forgiven for. She's altogether wrong about what she blames me for."

"The more reason for you to ask her to forgive you, then," said Mrs. Dan, coolly. "If she thinks she has anything to forgive, she'll be glad o' the chance to show her generosity; and if she knows she hasn't, she'll be the more glad."

Steve laughed. "You're a philosopher, or a cynic, Mrs. Dan."

"I'm both," she said promptly. "I'm a woman, so I must be both the others—or a fool. The men don't leave us any other choice nowadays."

"That's a nasty one on the men," said Steve.

"It's the truth, and that's apt to be nasty on the men," returned Mrs. Dan, and then after a little pause she went on more softly, "You got me a little angry, Steve, wi' your foolishness. Only get a woman angry, and you'll get the truth from her, if it's nasty enough." She crossed the room to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Promise me, Steve, you'll give her a chance to make it up."

"I'd make it up fast enough if I had a hint she was willing to," said Steve, earnestly. "But she'd never make it up believing what she does of me. Well, I've been a fool often enough, and now I'm paying for it."

"The worst of a man being a fool," said Mrs. Dan, "is that other people that can't help it have to pay for his foolishness as well. When will you see her again?"

"I'm going up to the Ridge to-day," said Steve, evasively. Mrs. Dan had no hint who the girl was, and he did not mean to drag Ess into it if he could help it. "I must see poor old Aleck first thing. He'll be expecting me."

Steve rode over to the Ridge that night, and met with a boisterous welcome from the men who were in. He was in little mood for this, and cut it as short as he could by going off to see Aleck Gault, although it was with consternation that he heard Aleck was over at the house, and was being nursed by Ess.

He walked across, and met Ess waiting at the outer door.

"You will find Aleck inside," she said quietly and coldly.

"Thank you," he said gravely, and stepped into the room and on into the bedroom.

"Hello, Aleck."—"Hello, mate," she heard, and marvelling at the apparent coldness of the greeting, she slipped out and strolled across to the Ridge, and sat down and looked long into the darkness. She felt herself trembling with excitement, and again and again had to force herself to stop thinking what the greeting would have been like between her and Steve if this thing had not come between them. She was angered and ashamed by her rioting thoughts, and tried to remind herself she was engaged to another man. She tried, too, to spur her anger against Steve by recalling the incidents of the night at the dogger's hut, but the chiefest of these that haunted her were his drawn cheeks and sunken eyes, and the memory of that blow she had struck him.

She rose at last and walked back, and as she entered Aleck called to her to come in. Steve was standing by the chair he had risen from, and when she came in Aleck said, "Look here, Miss Ess, you'll have to make Steve stop here. Says he's not fit for work, and talks about not loafing here, and rot like that. I'm not going to put up with this wholesale desertion of nurses. Miss Ess is going down to Coolongolong, you know, Steve. You wouldn't leave a chap to the tender mercies of Blazes, would you?"

"I hope you will stay," said Ess. "I have told Mr. Sinclair that I was going to pay the visit he'd asked me to so often. I shall probably go to-morrow night. I—I hope your hurts are better. I only heard of them a day or two ago."

"They are nothing much really," he said; "I'll get over *them* easily enough."

He laid a slight emphasis on "them," and Ess glanced at him. "You get over things quickly and easily," she said, and could have bitten her tongue out for the words before they had well left her lips.

"I have that reputation," he said easily, "and I find that a man can't easily escape that. There are usually plenty of ropes ready for the bad-name dog."

"What are you gassing about?" broke in Aleck. "Who's talking of dogs and bad names? Tell Miss Ess you'll stay, or she'll be chucking up this trip. And I'm sure she needs it. She's getting yellow as a duck's foot."

"Thank you," said Ess, trying to laugh and speak easily and lightly. "You'll get a dose of nasty medicine for that, or a short allowance of tea, that you always insist on having such quantities of."

"Of course, I'll stay if I'm needed," said Steve. "How long will you stay down there?"

"I'm going for about a week, but I may alter my plans, of course," said Ess.

Then Steve said good night and went.

When he came to breakfast next morning he found Ned Gunliffe at the table. Ned stared hard at

him, and Steve returned the stare coolly. "I hardly expected to see you back here," said Gunliffe, scowling.

"No?" said Steve, carelessly. "Possibly not. But you see a man sometimes gets more than he expects in this world."

"And sometimes what he deserves," said Ned, sneeringly.

"And sometimes what he deserves, as you say," returned Steve, significantly, and went on with his breakfast.

Ned finished his meal first and went outside, and a few minutes after Steve followed him.

Ned had gone straight to the house, and Ess had come out and strolled across the yard with him at his request.

"I see Steve Knight has had the cursed impudence to come back here," he blurted out, as soon as they were away from the door.

"Yes," she said. "I saw him last night."

"Saw him?" he repeated angrily. "I hope you didn't speak to the brute."

"I did," she said, turning a little pale. "I could not well avoid it without making a scene in front of Aleck Gault. I did not think that necessary or wise."

It was just then that Steve came from the hut, and he walked straight over to the two. He raised his hat, but took no further notice of Ess. "I'd like to speak to you a moment alone," he said to Ned.

"I have no wish to speak to you now or any other time," said Ned, with an insolent stare.

Steve was quivering with rage, still fresh from the encounter at breakfast time, but he kept himself under control.

"I've got something to say to you," he persisted, "and would rather not say it in the presence of a lady. May I ask you to leave us?" he said, turning to Ess.

"If it is anything concerning me or—that night, I would as soon stay and hear it," she said steadily.

Steve said no more to her, but turned to Ned Gunliffe.

"I've just this to say—if I have any more hints or insinuations like I had this morning at breakfast, in front of the men or alone, I'll give you such an infernal hammering you'll be sorry for some time to come. Is that plain?"

"Plain talk, but talk is cheap," sneered Ned. He was not lacking in physical courage, and although he knew quite well that Steve could probably do what he threatened, he showed no signs of backing down.

"And even if I took a hammering from you, it would not save you if I told my story to the rest of the crowd."

"Tell them," said Steve. "Tell them, and see what you'll get from them. You can't tell the story as it stands, as that would drag a girl's name into it. But tell them you object to my being here because I'm guilty of the dirtiest, crookedest action a man could be guilty of. And I'll tell them that what you accuse me of would be all you say, and I'll tell them, if you like, that you believe you had proof of what you say, and I admit that there is every appearance that I was guilty. And then I'll tell them that I am not—I'll give them my word that you are wrong. Who will they believe, Ned Gunliffe?"

Ned was silent, although his lips still curled in a sneer.

Steve laughed shortly. "You know who they'd believe," he said.

"And if I added my word to his," Ess put in, quietly scornful, "and told them that I had seen the proof, and was satisfied with it, and that you were guilty?"

Steve turned to her. "They would still believe me. You doubt it? Then try it. There's your uncle over there. Call him, and put the thing any way you like. I'll stand by and not say a word till you've both finished, and I'll tell him you are both wrong, and offer my hand and word on it. Try that, and see if he'll believe me. Tell him the whole thing exactly as it occurred, and every solid fact and suggestion and insinuation you can offer. I'll go away and leave you both to the telling of it. And when you've finished, simply tell him I deny any guilt or the truth of anything to be ashamed of. See who he'll believe."

He stopped his torrent of words abruptly, and waited for either of them to answer.

"This is all rather fruitless," said Ess, desperately, and with doubts shaking her voice even as they were shaking her heart. "It does not matter what he or anyone believes as long as I am satisfied myself."

"No," Steve said to her in a voice as cold as tempered steel, "nothing matters—a man's honour or dishonour, or death or ruin—nothing matters to you as long as you are satisfied. I hope that is a satisfaction to you, and that you're able to keep it. And you can't be made answer for your words—but mark me, Ned Gunliffe, you can, and will be made to, if I hear more of them."

He lifted his hat, and swung on his heel and left them.

"Ned," said Ess, shakily, "I wonder if there could have been any mistake. Surely he couldn't speak as he did if he were guilty."

"Speak?" snarled Ned. "Trust him to know how to speak to make a girl believe him. He's made you half believe him now, even after what you saw and heard the other night. I don't want you to listen to a word from him or open your lips to him again."

"I require no telling to know what is right for me to do, Ned," she answered, and Ned had to content himself with that.

Ess was not able to get away from the Ridge as soon as she had expected. Mr. Sinclair sent word that he would not be over for two or three days, and as not a man could be spared from the work to drive her down, she had no choice but to stay.

The position was embarrassing for her, but Steve saved it being too much so by avoiding her and saying no more than "Good Morning" or "Good Evening" when they met. He quieted Aleck's grumbles at seeing so little of him by saying that he could not understand why it was, but he was most confoundedly sleepy all day, and spent long hours in his bunk. Aleck thought that possibly he was feeling his wounds more than he would confess, and did not press the point, especially as he could plainly see that there was something decidedly wrong with Steve, and that he was far from being his old careless, happy self.

But Steve was sick enough of his unusual inaction, and he jumped at the chance that Scottie gave him of a day's work in the hills amongst the cattle.

"I'm terrible short-handed, Steve," said Scottie, "an' the beasties will be as wild as deer, I'm thinkin'. So if ye think ye're fit enough tae tackle them an' the Whistlin' Hills, I'll be real glad o' yer help."

"I'm your man, Scottie," said Steve, briskly. "If my old bones won't stand another day in the saddle after all this rest, it's time I knew it, and started looking for a job as a picker-up in the wool sheds or something else I can't break my tender carcase over. I'm on, Scottie."

Apparently most of the men were for the job in the Whistling Hills, for the full force turned out next morning.

All the Thunder Ridge men were delighted over the chance of a turn amongst the cattle. They were all stockmen, and sheep work was not at all to their liking, although of course they had to do that when it was wanted.

When Steve rode up from the horse paddock, he found Ess standing in the yard talking to Scottie. Whip Thompson cantered up whooping joyously, and cracking his long stockwhip in a series of Maxim-like reports, his horse prancing, and sidling, and snatching, and reefing at the bit as he came.

"Hi, hi! Walk up, canter up, gallop up!" shouted Whip, "If any o' you chaps has any little childer ye want whippin', send 'em along to me, an' I'll do the job wi' promptness an' despatch. Send 'em along to Whip Thompson at the old address," and "Crack—crack—crack" went the long whip.

"Whip," called Ess, "you once promised to let me see some proper whip-play. Come along now."

"Whip-play!" cried Whip. "Stand still then, Miss. Don't flinch." Ess stood still, and a rapid running fire of reports thundered about her ears. The action was so quick that she could hardly follow the flying thong with her eyes, and the loudness of the reports half deafened her. "Stop, please stop," she called, "my ears are cracking."

Whip never ceased the play of his arm and wrist, but walked his horse clear of the others and spun a ring of cracks in a wide circle above his head, sitting straight and motionless in his saddle with his arm straight up, and only the wrist moving. Then he flung the thong high in the air, twisted his body round and swung the whip down again in a sharp crack that bit at the ground immediately behind him, and sent a puff of dust jumping in the air. Crack, crack, crack, he went round the circle again, this time just flicking the ground at each crack, the ring of the leaping spurts of dust showing where the lash was falling. Ess clapped and bravoed as the last snap finished the circle and lifted the last puff of dust before the first one had completely floated away.

"That—that's nothing," jeered Never-Never Jack. "A school kid c'd do that with a tuppenny toy whip."

"He could, eh?" grinned Whip, and lifted Never-Never's hat whirling from his head. "P'raps he c'd do that, too," and the whip snapped viciously round Jack's feet, lifting a cloud of dust at every stroke. "P'raps he c'ud cut your corns for you, Mister Bloomin' Never-Never Jack. Will I cut 'em for you—through the boot an' all?" "Get out, you lunatic," cried Jack, uneasily. "None o' yer games." "Will I take the pipe from your teeth?" laughed Whip, and the lash snapped a foot from Jack Ever's face. Jack hastily snatched the pipe from his mouth and held it behind his back.

Another man brought an old felt hat from the hut and flung it to Whip. "Practice on that," he called, and Whip picked the hat up on the point of the lash and cut it down again. The thing leaped, and danced, and spun, and twirled under the flying whip strokes, and then as it fell again Whip cut at it with the strength of wrist, and arm, and body swing, each blow splitting the stout felt as if it had been slashed with a knife.

"Will ye stan' still again, Miss?" cried Whip. "I won't hurt you," and he flung two sweeping strokes across the front of her skirt, ending each with a sharp crack. Ess heard rather than felt the strokes, so light were they, but she looked down on her dark dress and could see the cross stripes of white dust where the whip had passed from hip to ankle. "Lend me another whip someone," said Whip. "You Steve, you carry a decent length o' leather." Steve flung his whip, and Whip stooped and picked it up with his left hand, his right never ceasing to whirl and crack his own whip. Then for a couple of minutes he gave a display of double-handed work that made Ess's eyes ache to follow. The two thongs wriggled through the air like flying snakes; they chased each other in hissing circles; they crossed and bit out at the air front and rear, and reversed and repeated; they cracked separately, and together, and then in an alternating running volley like a bursting Chinese cracker.

"Anybody got a tanner or a bob?" said Whip, and when a coin was thrown on the ground, he walked up to it, and then away for a full thirty feet. "One, two, *three*—" he cried, and at *three* his left-hand whip shot out and cracked, and the coin spun twinkling into the air for a dozen feet, "—an' *go*," cried Whip, and the right-hand thong hissed and cracked, and the spinning coin vanished.

"Pure fluke," jeered Jack Ever. "He couldn't pick it up so straight in the air an' cut it away again once in a hundred year." "Get away you," shouted Whip, "unless you want both the ears cut off you," and the lashes sang round and cracked venomously on either side of Jack's head. "You wi' the cigareet," said Whip, "stan' still till I knock the ash off for you," and he walked towards the man, measuring the distance with his eye. The cigarette was half smoked, and at the first light crack the ash vanished. "Little boys shouldn't smoke," said Whip—and the cigarette stump flicked from the man's lips.

Whip finished with a thunderous double report, swung the thongs in a sweeping curve, and caught the crackers back in his hands on their short handles.

The men laughed and clapped, and Ess drew a long breath. "It's wonderful," she cried. "Thank you, Whip. You really must give me a lesson on how to use one." Ned Gunliffe had stepped over to her side, and a pang went through Steve as he saw the air of proprietorship with which Ned laid his hand on her arm. "But surely, Miss Lincoln," Steve drawled, "er—I fancy you can use one already," and he leaped lightly into his saddle and pulled his horse round without waiting for an answer. "Now, why was I ass enough to say that?" he muttered to himself. "She's bitter enough now, without my rubbing it in."

But when they came into the hills and got to work on the cattle, Steve forgot everything else in the wild delight of tearing over the rough ground, heading and turning the mad rushes of the cattle, picking them out of the gullies and sending them flying headlong to join the bellowing mob. His horse was as clever a stockman as he was, and enjoyed the game to the full as much as he did himself. He would wait the most frenzied charge as still as if carved in stone, till the last possible moment, then the great haunches would sink, and with a bound and a rush he would avoid the sweeping horns and whirl round and lay Steve cleverly alongside at just the right distance for the long whip to get in its work. The lightest touch on the rein would bring him round in his own length as if spun on a pivot; the slightest pressure of the knees would send him hurling forward from an easy canter into his hardest gallop.

"Hi! hi!" yelled Whip, as he came thundering past on the heels of a dozen wild-eyed cattle. "This is something like, Steve. This is man's work, hey?" as Steve raced alongside him. The cattle fled bawling and threw themselves with a crash into the main mob, and the horses behind them propped and wheeled expertly. "Why don't you learn to ride, you sailor?" shouted Steve, laughing, as Whip lifted a couple of inches in the saddle.

"Hold them there—hold them," shouted Scottie from the rear, and Steve and Whip fled clattering round to the head of the mob and beat them back as they began to break out of it.

"Look at Darby," said Whip, delightedly pointing along the hillside. "That cow's goin' to prod a hole in 'im for luck." Darby was bringing down a little cluster of cattle he had collected on one of the spurs, and one brute had turned on him and was making a series of fierce charges. Darby was riding his "Blunderbuss," a big raking brute of a roan, with a head like a claw-hammer and a mouth as hard as beaten brass, and on the sloping hillside it had hard work to keep clear of the viciously lunging horns. Darby was wrenching at his horse's head and chopping at the bullock with his whip, lifting the hair at every chop, till at last, as the horse dodged one of its rushes and it swung past, Darby "tailed" it and sent it rolling headlong.

"Get at 'im, Darby," yelled Whip, and as the brute struggled to its feet Darby "got at 'im," and the stockwhip fell hissing and stinging till the brute scrambled up and, tail in air, bolted headlong down the slope. But the rest of the cluster had scattered, and Steve put spurs to horse and raced up and along the hillside, the loose stones sliding and trundling down the hill from his track like sparks from a rocket.

"Did ye see that poker?" shouted Darby, as they swept the herd together and headed them down the hill. "Did ye see 'im, Steve?" "No," said Steve, innocently. "What was he doing?" "Doin'—the brute," spluttered Darby, wrathfully. "'E nearly poked my 'orses' ribs in, and 'e's tore a hole in my trousers from yonder to yesterday. I'll 'poke' 'im," and he spurred closer and snicked viciously at the discomfited "poker."

"Take a couple o' men an' try along the Whale-back, Steve," said Scottie later, and Steve called to Jack Ever and Whip Thompson and cantered off.

The Whale-back was a long hill shaped roughly, as its name described, covered with boulders and fallen logs, scored down its sides with dry water courses and, where the tail sank, thinly covered by scattered trees. It was rough and risky going, but the men took it end to end, riding as if it were level as a billiard table. When they came to where the head of the hill fell away in slopes and cliffs too steep for horse or bullock to keep a footing, they turned and began to beat back through the boulders and gullies, picking up a stray bullock here and a couple there, till they were driving thirty to forty of them back towards the slope of the "tail." The mob went crashing down through the timber, and Jack and Whip drew rein and let them go.

But Steve yelled, and swung his whip, and lifted his horse over a fallen trunk, and went thundering in pursuit at a gallop. "What's wrong wi' Steve these days?" said Jack Ever. "You'd think 'e was tryin' to break 'is blanky neck." "Never was wot you'd call a cautious or a careful sort o' rider, but blow me if 'e isn't madder'n ever," agreed Whip, dodging round a boulder and taking a deep gully in his stride.

"Look at that now," ejaculated Whip, as the bullocks plunged into the timber, and Steve drove in hard on their heels.

The cattle were nimble on their feet and agile as deer, and they stormed crashing through the trees at full gallop. Steve rode with his head stooped to avoid the branches that swept over his head, and would have flung him headlong if one had caught him, and his horse leaped and twisted over the logs and between the rocks, in and out of steep-sided holes, and whirled inch-clear past standing trees, all at top speed.

Cattle and horseman burst out of the trees, and as Whip and Jack cleared the timber well behind them, they were careering full tilt down the slope.

"See that," said Whip, and "Clever work, but useless risky," commented Jack, as he watched.

The cattle had reached the dip at the foot of the Whale-back's tail, and when he saw that they were going to scatter and try to break up the steeper slope beyond instead of turning down the hillside to the valley, Steve touched the horse with the spur, surged past them, and wheeled them downhill. The cattle and he poured down together in an avalanche of stones and earth, and the long snarling roar of their slide came back to the two men above, mingled with the steady cracks of the stockwhip.

"He's mad," said Whip, "stark crazy," as he watched horse and man and beasts shoot headlong out into the valley, and turn and gallop down it.

"Where did you boys get to?" said Steve, grinning as the other two cantered in. "Get to?" said Whip. "I know where *you* dash near got to, an' that's a place hotter'n anything roun' here."

"You'll break your silly neck one o' these days," grumbled Never-Never.

"And what if?" said Steve, lightly. "What's a neck more or less, anyway?"

"Not much to you, maybe," grunted Whip, "but I'd rather keep mine to be hanged with."

All the stock that were gathered were drifted slowly down the valley till nearly dark, and steadied down and halted while the men lit their fires and made their camp.

It had been a suffocatingly hot day, and now after dark they could hear the faint growl of thunder back in the hills and see the flicker of lightning. The cattle were restless, and for long after the men had finished supper refused to settle and lie down, and continued to move and stir, lowing uneasily. Double guards went on to ride round the mob in case they showed signs of breaking, and the rest of the men sat by the fire with their saddled horses near at hand, and ready in case of a sudden call for quick work.

When Ned Gunliffe finished his turn of guard and came in to the fire, Steve was sitting in the glow of the firelight.

He had his pipe in his mouth and a cake of tobacco in his hand, and was fumbling in his waistcoat pockets for a knife, when Ned saw him pull a twisted piece of paper out and look at it, and absent-mindedly unfold and read it. He sat with the paper in his hand, looking into the fire, till suddenly Ned's voice roused him.

"Another billet-doux, Steve?" he said, with the faintest suspicion of a sneer.

A scowl flashed over Steve's face.

"Yes," he said; "perhaps you'd like to know who it's from next."

"Can't say it interests me," retorted Ned, and Steve laughed a taunting little laugh.

"No?" he said. "I thought it might. It's not so long since you showed a decided interest in my affairs, though, and not for the first time."

He refolded the note and thrust it back in his pocket, and Ned made no reply, although Steve caught the glance of hatred he threw at him.

Towards midnight the cattle quietened down, and in another hour they were nearly all lying down and resting.

"I think we're safe tae turn in now," said Scottie. "Those beasts have had a good bucketin' round, an' they should lie quiet enough for the rest o' the nicht. But keep yer horses saddled an' close handy in case."

Some of the men were nodding over the fire, but on the word they all rose, and there was a general unstrapping of blankets and preparations for sleep.

Suddenly, and without an instant's warning, there was a quick rustle from the herd. A rattle of clicking horns ran through them, there was a heaving and stamping, a single loud bellow, a yell from the man on guard, and they were on their feet.

"Quick, lads," shouted Scottie. "Mount an' ride roun' them."

But it was too late. With a deep sullen roar like prisoned waters bursting their barriers and pouring into the valley, with a shaking thunder of hoofs that set the solid ground quivering, the mob broke in mad stampede.

They were coming straight for the camp, and every man there knew what it meant if they burst on it before they could mount and gallop clear. There were no orders given and none were needed. Each man simply dropped everything and leaped for his horse, and flung himself to the saddle. Steve had been in the act of rolling in his blanket when the first warning came. He flung the blanket from him and ran with the rest. Ned Gunliffe was just ahead of him, and as he passed Steve's horse to reach his own beyond it, Steve could have sworn he saw Ned's wrist jerk his whip forward. In the darkness and rush it was a thing he could never be certain of, but certain it was that his horse leaped suddenly and set off at a canter—the horse that Steve had trained to stand still in any turmoil, till his hand was on its neck. He whistled loud and shrill, and his horse stiffened its forelegs and propped and slid a yard, and stood stock still. Steve ran and caught its mane and called to it, and it sprang forward with a bound as he swung to its back.

Steve was boiling with rage, and swore a bitter oath between clenched teeth to settle with Ned Gunliffe for his trick, but meantime he had other things to think of.

The roar of the oncoming mob was close on his heels; he was stretching at full gallop over sticks and stones he could not see till he was on them; black night stretched in front of him, and the pounding hoofs behind.

"Open out—open out. Get on the flanks an' haud them together," roared Scottie. But the men were edging out of the track of the mob already. In the darkness, and over country that was risky enough to gallop over in broad daylight, there were too many chances of taking a fall. And where a fall is merely a fall, with a sporting chance of broken bones at ordinary times, there is no chance

about it if the fall is in front of a stampeding mob. If man or horse went down, it would be never to rise again, and the flying feet would cut the flesh from the bones and hammer the bones to splinters, and leave a broken, bloody pulp stamped into the dust behind them. So the men swung out and clung to the flanks, and were satisfied to keep themselves on their saddles and their horses on their feet, and to ply the lashes in biting cuts and cracks.

It was no use trying to hold or stop the stampede yet—that would come later. All they could do was try to turn the head up the long hill that ran on one flank, and keep the leaders from swinging to the other side, where a maze of gullies and precipitous ridges would have caught and killed the biggest half of them.

The herd breasted a spur and topped the crest, and rolled over and down the other side without slackening their pace for a single breath. They edged downhill towards the valley again, in spite of all the men, and a fusillade of whip-cracks, and a hail of stinging cuts could do. They crashed into a strip of wood, smashing the smaller trees and bushes flat as if a cyclone had uprooted them, and the men opened out and stooped their heads, and tore on with them till they leaped clear of the trees again, and then edged in again and strove with whip and shout to turn the leaders uphill.

They succeeded at last, and as the steepness of the rise told and the pace slackened a little, the horsemen shot to the front, and the long whips came into play, slashing, snapping, and cutting. The leaders flinched and shrank back from those terrible thongs, that cut through hair and hide, and the pace slackened perceptibly again. The men fought desperately to hold them before they topped the crest of the hill. If once they were over that and went off again, there would be no holding them till the night was spent, and the whole drove was scattered and broken, and hundreds of them maimed and crippled and smashed, in the gullies and along the foot of the cliffs.

“Swing them, lads—swing them,” screamed Scottie, his voice hoarse and cracked with shouting. “Haud them tae the left—tae the left,” as the head of the column struggled over the top of the rise. And the men swung the cruel punishing lashes, and screamed, and coo-e-ed, and flung their horses bodily on the face of the mob, and beat it back and drove it in on itself, till it curled back and thrust its head deep into its own centre. The rest was easy. All the men had to do was keep turning the flood back and swinging it round in a curve, till gradually the whole mass was walking or trotting in one solid revolving wheel. It still had to be kept solid, and every now and then a spoke of the wheel would thrust out, and the wheel would check. But the men fell on the spoke, and with hand and tongue hammered it back into the wheel, that moved slower and slower, and finally stopped. It still rippled and heaved restlessly, and threatened to sway and break again, but the movement was always caught and smothered in time.

“Lat them open oot a wee,” called Scottie, and the men rode in a wider circle, and let the jammed mass slacken, and loose, and spread itself, and—the stampede was over.

“Is everybody here, an’ whole?” asked Scottie, riding up to a group of men who had slid down from their panting horses, but stood with a foot ready to lift to the stirrup.

“Where’s Darby—where’s Darby the Bull?” someone asked.

“I fancies I saw that bell-mouthed brute of his charge full belt into a tree,” said Whip. “Well, he’ll have bust that ugly hammer-head of his at last,” said another man. “Hope he hasn’t bust Darby’s as well.”

“Bust the bloomin’ tree more like,” said Never-Never, but just then a faint coo-ee came from far below. Steve lit a match, and held it screened by his outstretched waistcoat, and showing to the valley below, and presently another coo-ee and the answering wink of a match showed the signal was seen. Darby the Bull toiled heavily up the hill to them. “Where you been, Darby?” “Did you stop an’ ’ave a snooze in camp?” “Didn’t you know we was shiftin’?” showered on him. Darby grunted.

“Shiftin’? I think you was shiftin’. Some o’ you shifted in such a hurry you come without yer boots, an’ some more o’ you without jackets. I brought my boots an’ jacket *an’* my blanket. Anyone else stop to bring a blanket?”

Nobody else had, and Darby grinned provokingly, although he said no more.

“And there were some,” said Steve Knight, “who ran in such a hurry that a whip was flicking round a bit too promiscuously. One flick caught my horse, I fancy, and started him off and nearly left me there.”

There was a deep silence, which Darby broke.

“Whoever it was should have ’is own whip laid about ’im. That’s what I’d do if it ’ad a bin my ’orse.”

“If I was dead sure it wasn’t an accident, I’d have something more to say,” said Steve; “but I’ll let it slide—meantime.”

SCOTTIE, as he rode in the rear of the herd next morning, called Steve over to him.

"If ye're sure it was a whip started your horse last nicht, Steve," he said, "an' can tell me who it was, he'll get his walkin' ticket this nicht."

"I'd rather say nothing, Scottie," said Steve; "it might have been an accident."

"There's nae room for accidents when a stampede's startin'," said Scottie, grimly; "an' accident o' that sort is o' set design or it's rank carelessness—I've nae room in the Thunder Ridge men for ane o' either sort."

"I'd rather let it go, all the same, Scottie," said Steve, and the subject was dropped.

The mob was kept moving slowly back over the ground they had stampeded, and it took them all the morning to cover what they had done in their flight in little more than an hour.

They were still wild and hard to hold, and several times the men had all they could do to ride round them and steady them from breaking into another rush. They refused to open out and feed, and truly there was little feed for them to find on the ground they were covering. They packed together compactly, and walked or broke into little trotting runs with heads up and eyes alert, and twice during the morning they were only stopped from breaking into a gallop by the hardest of riding.

"What in thunder has got into 'em?" growled Never-Never, as a score of the cattle swerved from the main body and galloped down a gully. Jack and Steve had shot out in pursuit, and were riding with their shoulders rounded and crouched forward, as men ride the finish of a hard race. They caught the cattle and drove past them, and sat erect and began to pour the whips into the leaders. When they had swung and were galloping back, the men had to ride hard again to steady them and slow them down before they reached the mob.

"Hold 'em back, Jack," shouted Steve. "If they go busting in on the others at this belt, we'll have 'em starting another rush."

"Burn 'em," grunted Jack Ever; "they're crazy. Take that, you brute," and he pressed close alongside the leaders and cut across their faces with his whip. The bullock nearest him lunged viciously with its horns, and the horse evaded the thrust by a swift side leap that would have unseated many men. For all they could do, the brutes went back into the main mass with a rush. A shivering heave ran through the mob, spreading from the point of contact as ripples spread in a pond from a flung stone. The leading ranks broke into a trot and quickened to a canter, and the men tore up in front again and fell on them with the whips, and strove to beat them back. They went on so for the best part of a mile, and then Scottie galloped to the front. "Swing out, swing out," he yelled, "an' just lat them go."

The men opened and left the way clear, and clung silently along the flanks. "They've a clear road an' good enough goin' for a twa-three mile," Scottie said to Steve as he rode alongside. "It'll no hurt tae lat them gallop the win' oot o' themselves."

They were passing along a valley with steep-sided hills on either hand and fairly level going along the floor of the valley, but instead of getting winded and slowing down as Scottie had expected, their pace increased.

"Deil tak them," growled Scottie. "If only we had them past Split-the-Win' they could just gang their ain gait. Tak a man wi' you, Steve, an' cut up ower the Chow Hill and get intae the Gutter ahead o' them. Get tae Split-the-Win' an' turn them frae takin' the hill road. Ye'll need tae ride hard."

He was shouting as he rode, and two or three of the men near heard him. Steve looked round and saw Ned Gunliffe riding near. "Come on, Ned Gunliffe," he shouted loud and clear. "Come, if you think you can ride it with me," and he turned his horse and scrambled up the hill to where a spur ran slantingly up. He did not look back to see if Ned had followed, but he heard the rattle of stones behind him and grinned to himself.

Ned was at his elbow as they pressed over the top of the hill, and Steve shouted, "We've got to move in something of a hurry to get there ahead of them. Keep as close as you can," and he touched his horse with the spur and shot ahead. They dipped down over the other side of the hill, and went down with a rush into the bush at the foot. They plunged and tore a way through it, and down another swift drop. Steve took it without drawing rein, the iron shoes of the horses striking fire from the stones that turned under their feet, and picking their way in springing leaps like mountain goats. They reached the foot in a torrent of flying stones and swirling dust, and Steve heard the hoof-beats of Ned's horse close behind. He clapped the spurs in again and raced over a strip of level ground, littered with fallen logs and seamed with dry water courses. He leaped a log as high as a five-wire fence, and saw Ned's shadow rising as he landed. He took a five-foot drop in his stride, and heard the clash of the other horse landing the next instant. He raced at the wide gully of a dry water course, and took his horse by the head and sent him straight at it and lifted him over, and Ned's horse baulked and swerved, almost unseating his rider. Ned turned him and cursed savagely, and beat him about the flanks with the butt of his stockwhip, headed him back to the leap, and jammed his spurs in hard as he could drive. With a snort of pain the brute rushed and leaped and landed safe, and Ned beat at him again and kept his spurs working. Steve led the way up a spur that sloped to the rise of Chow Hill, and scrambled labouring up it, his horse climbing and clambering like a cat. The ridge narrowed as it rose into a sharp hogback, with a steep drop to either side, and the dislodged rocks rolled over the sides, and went bounding and splintering a hundred feet down. And now, as they rode along the hill that bordered the valley that led to Split-the-Wind, they could see the cattle already turning into the head of the valley, and Steve flung an oath to the wind and spurred his horse again. The two men swept slanting down the hillside,

swerved into a sloping gully, and thundered down it over tangled sticks and the dry boulders of the stream-bed, up and over the bank with a rush, swooped into another dip and over it, and flung themselves recklessly down the last steep pitch to the foot of the hill. At a less desperate pinch they would have hesitated to take that slope, perhaps, but they could see that the cattle were coming at a gallop again, and it would be a close race for the dividing roads at Split-the-Wind. One of the roads kept on down the descending valley, and if the cattle took this they could run themselves to a standstill without injury. If they took the other, they would be up and away into the broken tangle of the hills, criss-crossed with cliffs, and scored with gullies, and pitted with a hundred traps. Both of them knew this, so without hesitation took the slope and the risk of landing right side up at the foot.

Steve went down with the whirling rush of a toboggan on an ice-run, and spun clattering out into the valley. He was a good hundred and fifty yards ahead of Ned, and turned in his saddle and watched him slide to the foot, and pick up his stride and come after him at a gallop. Steve turned and sat down and rode again.

He had covered a half of the mile to go to Split-the-Wind when he heard a startled yell, a rattle and crash, and silence. He knew well what that meant, and sat back and hauled at his rein, and swung and galloped back for the spot where he could see Ned's horse scrambling to its feet and Ned himself lying on the ground. The horse went off at a trot, and Steve swerved to ride and catch it. Then, with a glance at the cattle coming down the valley, he turned again and left it, and galloped for Ned.

Ned had sat up, and was rising slowly to his feet as Steve pulled up beside him.

"Are you hurt, Ned?" he shouted. "Here—your foot on mine, and up behind me—quick."

Ned stood swaying and looking at him stupidly. "Wake up, man," yelled Steve. "The cattle are near on us. Hurry." But Ned still stood slack and inert as a drunken man, and even as he spoke Steve saw his knees give beneath him, and he almost sank to the ground. The cattle were perilously close, and Steve could see the man was half stunned. "Ned," he yelled again, but Ned's chin dropped on his chest. With an oath Steve jerked his whip round, the thong swung up, and with a hissing snap slashed down across Ned's back in a vicious drawing cut. The shirt split from waist to shoulder, and the blood sprang under the lash as if under the stroke of a knife. Ned's knees straightened with a snap, and he reached a hand up and back over his shoulder, and he swore thickly. But the sting had brought some of his senses back to him, and Steve saw his quickened glance round. "Up, Ned," he shouted. "Give me your hand, and up behind me." The cattle were almost on them—Ned reached out and took the outstretched hand. With his eye on the charging line Steve waited to feel the foot on his that would tell him Ned was mounting. Ned's foot fumbled and slipped, and Steve clenched his teeth and waited. The cattle had only fifty yards to come—thirty—twenty—Ned heaved himself heavily up, and Steve sank his fingers in his grip on the other's, and helped the heave with every tense muscle of his body. He waited till he felt the other drop into place, and then with a yell gave his horse the spurs.

It was a close thing—deadly close. The front ranks of the cattle had split a little at the sight of them, and crowded aside to try to pass clear, and for the first few bounds of his horse Steve was riding in the front rank of the mob with a galloping brute so close on either side that he could have reached out and touched it. He yelled and cut at them with his whip once or twice, and then gave all his attention to racing to get first to the fork of the roads at Split-the-Wind.

Despite the double burden the horse carried, he was gaining in the race. "Feel all right, Ned?" he asked. "Can you hang on?"

"I'm right," said Ned, thickly. "I can hang on." He was still a little dazed, but his mind was clearing, and he settled himself in his seat and took a closer grip round Steve's waist. Steve was in waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, and as he held on, Ned found his thumb in the pocket of the waistcoat. He felt a screw of paper there. He hardly knew why he did it, but his finger slipped in with his thumb, and next instant he had the twisted paper in his hand.

The horse stopped with a sliding jerk, and Steve shouted at him; he slid down, and Steve flung himself to the ground and ran forward shouting and cracking his whip, and leaving Ned standing with the paper in his hand.

Steve looked over his shoulder and shouted to him.

"Get some of those dry gum-branches and leaves, Ned, and make a blaze—quick—here they come."

Ned slipped the paper in his pocket.

WHEN the men came back to Thunder Ridge, they found that Ess had gone down to the home station at Coolongolong. Sinclair, the boss, had been up in his sulky, and asked her if she was ready to go back with him.

"We won't have room for half-a-dozen huge trunks, you know, Miss Lincoln," he laughed. "You'll have to pack close this time."

"I've got everything I'll need in one dress-basket, which will go under the seat," she assured him. "I've had some lessons on the necessity of travelling light."

She flushed a little to herself at the memory of the giving of that lesson and the buggy ride that had followed, and ran in to say good-bye to Aleck Gault.

"Good-bye, Miss Ess," he said. "Don't be away longer than you can help, and see if you can find some roses to bring back in your cheek. I'll be getting into trouble with Ned Gunliffe if you don't. He'll be saying you've worn yourself to death doing sick-nurse."

She bade him good-bye gaily enough, but went wishing that he and the others would not talk so about her in connection with Ned Gunliffe. She knew that she had no right to resent such talk or feel hurt by it, but the fact remained that she did, and again she found herself wishing that she had not agreed to their engagement being spoken of yet—she would not allow herself to wish that she had not consented to it at all.

She went out and took her seat in the sulky, and the boss laid his whip lightly across the trotters, and they spun through the gate and on down the rocky slope.

"And what are you thinking of the out-back country, Miss Lincoln?" he said. "You've seen a slice of it now."

"I still think it's rather dreadful," she answered. "It seems so cruel. The way the poor sheep had to be handled and driven nearly made me sick, and then it was such a narrow escape they had after all."

"And I'm afraid they're not quite escaped yet," he said. "The feed on the hills is giving out, and the wild dogs are playing havoc. I've nearly made up my mind to bring down as many as I can get again, and kill them all and boil them down for tallow."

Ess shuddered, and they drove in silence down to the high fence, which had been repaired again where the rails had been pulled out to let the sheep through.

"Don't get down," he said, when she made a movement to spring out and open the gate. "The horses and I have come here too often not to know the trick of doing without dismounting."

He drove alongside and lifted the latch, and pushed the gate open with the butt of his whip, whirled the horses round and trotted through, leaned out and swung it back, so that it slammed to and the latch clicked into place.

"It's hot down here," he said, lifting his hat and wiping his brow. Ess laughed.

"It's hot everywhere, isn't it?" she said. "I'm really forgetting what it feels like to be cool."

"You'll get the heat into your bones if you stay here a time," said the boss; "most of us do, and we shiver like a wet dog if it comes a cold wind. We get them cold enough in the winter sometimes in the hills—cold enough for us, anyway."

"You might almost think we were at sea here," said Ess, looking round the straight-edged empty horizon.

"We have plenty of space round us," agreed the boss. "Ten thousand acres is a Small Holding with us. And some of the holdings run up toward the million acres. Big figures, eh, but this is a country of big figures. It's eight miles across this paddock as the crow flies, and it's longer the other way. You don't find the like of that in the inside country now, do you?" He spoke with an air of subdued pride, and Ess looked round her at the flat dead plain, with nothing in sight but an occasional scurrying rabbit, and wondered that a man could find anything to be proud of in such country.

"There was a man lost in one of our back paddocks that's not as big as this," the boss went on. "One of the boundary riders found his bones and rags of clothes near two years after, and there was a note safe and tight in his billy can. He'd tried to take a short cut from one tank to another, and it had come on a grey day or two—the sun clouded over so he couldn't steer his way—and he wandered round and round and crossways for four days, and then wrote the note. And Lord knows how long he walked or crawled after that. And one of my own men lost the track coming across this very paddock, although the road's scored plain enough, as you see. He took a track that branched off, and he thought was the main one, and it petered out, and he tried to cut across to the other track. He missed it somehow, and was out for a day and a night. You'd wonder a man could get lost with the hills back there to guide him, but he said a mirage or something hid them. But he's no bushman of course—he's an Englishman. And often men lose their heads when they first find they're lost."

After they passed through the next fence and trotted some distance in the next paddock, Ess pointed.

"Are those trees?" she asked. "Or another mirage?"

"They're trees," said the boss; "dead ones. There's quite a clump of them, and nobody knows where they came from. They grew where there wasn't a sign of one before, and died in a couple of years. It was the rain that brought them up. It's fair wonderful what the rain brings up at times, and how quick. You wouldn't think now to look round you that a week's good rain would be enough to fetch the grass out up to your knees. But I've seen the time when the kangaroo grass came to my waist, and me sitting in the saddle. I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever see Coolongolong green again," he finished with a little sigh.

"Why, surely, Mr. Sinclair," said Ess. "It must rain before very long now."

"There's no must about that out here," said the boss. "It mightn't rain enough to spoil a lady's silk dress in the next twelve months. It mightn't rain a good heavy shower in the next five years or twenty-five for all we know, though that would be worse than is ever likely. Five is easy possible, though. And, then again, it might start to-night, little and all as it looks like it, and not stop for a month. We're fifteen miles from the nearest bend of the river here, but I've seen it flooded and running like a river over this very paddock. You spoke of it looking like a sea, but I've seen it like a sea—water from one horizon to the other."

"Let's hope we'll see it again," said Ess, brightly, "although not if it's going to flood Coolongolong out. I'd rather be in the hills then."

The boss smiled at her. "The home station stands higher than ever a flood has reached yet," he said, "but I'd be glad enough to see it washing round the walls of it to-morrow. I could build another one if I wanted, with the money that would mean. There it is amongst the trees now—can you see?"

"How beautifully green the trees are," cried Ess. "They look so cool and refreshing, too."

"Yes," said the boss, proudly. "And I can give you fresh fruit and green vegetables for your dinner to-night, and you can walk on grass as thick and soft as velvet in the garden. And it's all the work of man's hands, and I've watched every blade and leaf grow. I put an oil engine pump in, and we carry the water from the river by a pipe."

"Why did you put the house so far from the river?" said Ess. "I should have thought it would have been so much nicer right on the banks."

"So it would," said the boss, laughing; "so it would—as long as it stayed on the banks. But the first time the river came down in flood——" he finished the sentence with a significant sweeping gesture.

They drove in through the homestead gate, and Ess's eyes sparkled at the sight of trim green hedges and vivid green grass. The contrast was the more pleasant after the heat and dryness and dust of the arid wastes they had been driving over.

"Oh, I'm so glad I came, Mr. Sinclair," she cried. "It is beautiful."

"You'll understand maybe how proud I am of it," said the old boss, lovingly looking round, "and what it would mean to me to lose it."

"Don't," she pleaded. "You won't—you can't lose it."

"Well, well, I'm glad to have it to show you while it's still my own," he said. "Now jump down. There's the housekeeper at the door. She'll show you your room and make you comfortable. And you can have a real bath and a shower, and maybe Ah Sing will let you walk in the garden and pluck a flower or two." He nodded towards the Chinaman who was spraying the grass with a hose, and oddly enough the thought in Ess's mind as she watched the sparkling shower fall was the pity that such beautiful water should be wasted—she would have liked to drink it all.

Ess stayed at the home station for over a week, and the old boss and the housekeeper made much of her, and petted her, and let her ask questions to her heart's content.

Indeed it is doubtful if the boss did not get more pleasure from answering her questions and showing her the house than she had from asking them and being shown it.

He took her round the outside and pointed out the walls made of concrete—concrete brought up in bags from the coast, and carried by the station waggons the long miles from the railway to the township, and the township to the station, and mixed and moulded in moulds made on the station, and built in walls by his own men's labour. Everything had been done under his own direction and planning and eye. He had drawn his own plans, his own men had hewn the timber from his own trees, and sawn them in the saw-pit by hand. They had dug the foundations, and laid the floors, and built the walls, and cut joists and rafters, and put the roof on; they had made and fitted every door and window, and done their own plumbing and glazing and painting and papering—only in one or two of the bedrooms was there any wall paper in the house, though; the other rooms were walled with beautiful light-coloured native woods. A considerable amount of the furniture was station made, and, looking at it, Ess could hardly believe that it had not been turned out by a city factory. There were no carpets on the wood floors; they were merely stained, and scattered thick with rugs made from the black and white skins of the station sheep, or of the foxes trapped and killed on the run. The wide hall from which the living rooms opened was hung round with native weapons, boomerangs, and spears, and waddies, the huge head and sweeping horns of an immense bull, the masks and brushes of foxes, the skins of kangaroos, wild dogs, black swans, and snakes.

This hall was the boss's chiefest pride, and he told Ess endless tales of the trophies round the walls; of how much he had paid for that ram, whose head looked down on them—"the first stud ram I bought, Miss Lincoln, and I'd only about twelve hundred sheep then. I've shorn over sixty thousand in one shearing since then"—the ancestry for generations back of the prize bull; the tale of the riding down and killing of that fox; the long hunts and innumerable traps and poison baits it took to kill that dingo; this skin of a snake that had been killed when they were clearing the ground for the foundations of the house ("he bit me too, and I'd a bad day from the bite I tell you. And I said I'd have his skin, and hang it over where he was killed; and so I did—right under where we stand was the spot").

And as the stories went on, and the boss ran back over the years and told the tales of his first days there, when the country was rank wild and there wasn't a fence on or near it, the thought kept haunting Ess—"And now what if he loses it?"

And then one night the boss came back from Thunder Ridge and told her quietly and simply that he was at the end of the string—he had given orders for the sheep to be brought down, as many as could be rounded up and were fit to travel in, and killed to boil down for tallow.

Ess could have wept for very pity.

"I brought you a letter," said the boss, and handed it to her. She took it mechanically and glanced at the strange writing, and when the boss left her she tore it open and looked first at the signature.

It was signed "Ned."

With a little gesture of impatience—she hated the thought of receiving or having to write anything in the way of a love-letter, she told herself, although, if she had analysed the feeling, she would have known it was love-letters from or to Ned that she disliked the thought of—she turned back and read the letter through.

Her amazement grew as she read—grew and changed swiftly to indignation, and then to hot anger.

"MY DEAR ESS," the letter said, "I was sorry to find you had gone when we returned here, especially as I had something of importance to say to you. I had meant to wait till you returned here or till I could see you, but I feel that it is a thing I ought not to delay letting you know my views of, as possibly your knowing them, and how emphatic they are, may check the mischief. If you will look at the enclosed note, you will understand what I refer to. No matter how it came into my possession—it is enough that it did so, and that it shows me clearly that you have been led, cheated into it perhaps by a misguided sense of pity, to meeting secretly the man I told you I wished you to have nothing whatever to do with. I am not concluding that you meant any harm by these meetings, but whether harm would come of them or not I do not care—I wish them to stop for ever. My own feelings to you have in no way changed, but—"

Ess ceased to read, with an angry exclamation. "What does he mean? What note—?" She looked in the envelope she still held, and plucked a twisted scrap of paper from it.

On the outside fold was clearly written "Steve Knight," and inside was a scribbled pencil note—"Come over again to-night. Sorry I was rude last night, but remember our compact.—E.L."

She recognised the writing and initials instantly. They were her own.

Ess went to her own room and wrote two notes. To Ned Gunliffe she wrote: "I have received your letter and enclosure. I have only to reply that I refuse utterly to have anything to do with a man who distrusts me or imagines me capable of the conduct you evidently do. I never wish to see you or hear from you again.—ESS LINCOLN."

To her uncle she wrote: "Will you, please, in Ned Gunliffe's presence, show the enclosed note to Steve Knight, and tell him I wish him to say where and when he received it? You will remember my sending it to him by you when we were all in camp. I have just received it from Ned Gunliffe, and have told him I never want to see him again. Please say nothing of this to the others at the Ridge—only that Ned and I are no longer engaged.—Ess."

She left the letters in the rack in the hall, knowing that they would probably be taken over next day.

Usually a man rode over to the coach road twice a week—once to leave the letter bag hanging on the roadside for the passing coach to pick up, and once to bring back the bag it dropped. The incoming bag was due next day, and a man would ride over with the Thunder Ridge letters, and would take hers with him.

Next day, when the man brought the mail in, she went to the hall where the boss was sorting it out, and got hers—she still wrote to and heard from her friends in the city—and heard the man say "The river's coming down good an' heavy, an' they tell me there's been a lot o' rain out-back in the hills."

The boss looked at him quietly. "And how high is it in the river?"

"Up to the seven-foot peg," said the man, and the boss nodded and picked the Ridge letters out, and gave him Ess's from the rack and sent him off.

"Rain in the hills," said Ess, who had listened breathlessly to the conversation. "Does that mean we'll get it here?"

The boss smiled at her sadly. "I'm afraid not, my dear. They often get rain up there, where we don't get a drop. It's a long way from here, and much higher you see. But if the river would rise another three foot, we might have it running up the billabongs. There's an old channel that runs out for a dozen miles beyond the station here, and curves round and back to the river again. If the river rises high enough to flood that, we'd have a few hundred acres in grass soon after. But it's just as likely to drop the three foot by morning as to rise it. Still, you know, we can hope—we can hope."

"I do hope, oh, indeed I hope," said Ess, earnestly. "And if it rose more than the three foot?"

"Every foot it rose would flood hundreds of acres more of my paddocks," said the boss. "There's another billabong further over towards Thunder Ridge that begins to flow even before this ten-foot mark is covered. Twelve or fourteen foot would mean thousands of acres flooded, and it might keep the sheep going quite a spell longer. But twelve foot and over is running a banker, and we can hardly expect that."

It was evident however that hope had risen in his heart, for twice that day he sent a man to the river to see how it was, and twice the report came back—"Still rising."

The next time the old man had his own sulky brought round, and Ess asked that she might go with him. They drove fast, the boss flicking constantly at the horses, and when they dodged through the trees and swept up the slope of the river banks and halted abruptly within a pebble toss of the steep cliff that dropped to the water's edge, Ess looked eagerly at the crawling brown flood, and then—for that told her nothing of what she wished to know—at the boss's face.

"It's dropped a couple of inches," he said quietly, and Ess could not understand his calm in the face of such possibilities as hung on the rise or fall of inches of water. "A couple of inches," he repeated, "since the last man was here, and that's only a few hours ago. I'm afraid it's only been a heavy shower in the hills, and it's over."

He pointed out the pegs he had had driven deep in the steep bank opposite, so that he could mark the rise and fall, and he drove along the bank amongst the trees to show her the entrance to the billabong he had spoken of. "You'll notice that the banks are several feet higher than the plains

beyond," he said, "and here at the entrance to the billabong there's a cut out of this embankment. When the water rises to the level of the cut, it overflows, and wanders round the depression in the plain till it finds its way back lower down."

"Wait," said Ess, and jumped down and ran to the break in the bank, and slid down into it, and stooped and laid something in the centre of it, and clambered out again and ran back to the sulky.

"You'll think me horribly childish, or foolish, or superstitious, or something," she said breathlessly, "when I tell you what I was doing. It was a little charm I had, something that was given to me by a very dear friend years ago, and has always been dear to me. It's a luck-bringer, and I've laid it there with a little wish that it will bring the water up and up, and flooding over it, and out across the plains."

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But there was no laughter in the eyes of the boss as he looked at her, only his unspoken thanks for the thought and the wish.

They drove back in silence, each busy with their own thoughts.

And next morning Ess was wakened by a shrill coo-ee and a rattling at the door just after daybreak. She heard opening and shutting doors and the boss's voice at the front door.

And in five minutes there was a tap at her door, and in reply to her quick "Yes—what is it?" the boss's voice came, steady and quiet as ever, but with just a trace of excitement and jubilation in it. "She's up, Miss Lincoln—up over the ten and still rising—and your luck-bringer is under water."

ALL that morning low clouds drifted across the sky, and Ess was in and out to examine them, and look long across the plain in the hope of seeing the rain clouds looming up.

And when a thin light shower drifted down, Ess sang for very joy, and ran to the old housekeeper, and begged her to come out in it and feel it falling. The housekeeper laughed at her and shook her head. "Wait," she said, "wait, my dear. It's soon yet to be rejoicin'. 'Tisn't a shower like that we're needin', and I fancy the boss is countin' more on the water from the river than from the clouds."

"It's going to rain; it's going to rain," sang Ess, and danced out to the verandah again to watch the moisture dripping slowly from the trees.

But within half an hour the shower passed and the sun came out again. Ess went down to the gate and looked across the plain. It was steaming like a cauldron, and when the boss drove up he pointed to the vapour and laughed. "There goes your rain," he cried, "off back to the clouds again. But, never mind, that sort of watering-can sprinkle isn't much good to us. Come and I'll show you something, though—something that's coming in over your luck-bringer."

She jumped up, and he drove to where a silver streak was showing on the horizon, and when they came to it he pulled up, and Ess watched the trickle of water creeping slowly, so slowly, across the plain. She gazed at it in fascination—this fraction-of-an-inch-deep flood—that seemed so stealthy and deliberate in its movement. The dry earth yawned hungrily for it, and the hot sand drank it in, but still it crept on and on, widening and spreading towards their feet even as they watched.

"It's like some beast crawling on its prey," said the boss, "or a snake writhing across the ground."

"It's not," she cried indignantly. "It's an army—an army advancing bravely with banners flung and spears glancing in the sun. The army of the relief, marching to battle the drought, and the dry spell, and the heat, and bring succour to the parched land. Can't you see it? Look, there is one of the enemy's citadels," she pointed to a clod of dry earth that the waters were slowly creeping round. "It is falling—it gives—it is down—" as the clod crumbled away—"and the army rolls on." And indeed if one watched the edge closely, and the little drops of water gathering and running in the tiny scratches of channels, and filling them, and gathering again and surrounding another morsel of earth or pebble, it was easy to picture in it the rushes of armed men into the trenches, and their gathering and sweeping round the squares of the enemy, and attacking them fiercely and riding over them. One might be inclined to cheer the victorious advance—until one lifted eyes and looked across the vast plain, and things fell back into their true proportion—a thread of inch-deep water draining slowly across a Sahara desert.

But Ess asked the boss to drive through it, and laughed like a child at the splash of the horses' feet and the water running dripping off the wheels.

About noon the clouds banked up rapidly, and the rain commenced to fall—really to fall—straight and heavy and drenching, till the gutters spouted and little rivulets ran foaming down the garden walks. It drummed fiercely on the roof and swept roaring down on the foliage of the trees. It rained so for half an hour, and then slackened to a thin drizzle and stopped.

A couple of hours after a buggy splashed up to the gate, and Dolly Grey came squelching up the path. He was dripping but immensely cheerful, and he stood out in the verandah and waited for the boss, and gave him Scottie's message that they had had a shower in the hills, and there was word from the township of the river being up further up country, and would he say if Scottie was to go on bringing the sheep down, or would he wait and hold them in the back pastures or the hills yet a little.

And the boss called Ess, who had walked to the end of the verandah when he came out to Dolly Grey, and asked her. "Tell me, Miss Lincoln—will we have more rain or not? Will I bring the sheep down or hold them? It's all a toss-up whether it comes more rain or not, and you seem to be a good prophet."

He was half laughing, but Ess was very grave, and answered him straight and unhesitatingly. "It's going to rain, and rain, and rain. There, I've told you."

The boss chuckled deep in his throat and turned to Dolly. "You hear," he said. "Tell Mackellar that I have it on good authority that it is going to rain, and rain, and rain, so—hold the sheep meantime." He turned to Ess. "Will you get him some tea, Miss Lincoln, and bring a little table out and have a cup with him? He won't like to come in soaking like that, I suppose."

"Mr. Sinclair," she said suddenly, "I want to go back to the Ridge with him if you'll let me. I was with them there all through the dry and the cruel heat and the rest, and I want to be with them in this—this glorious rain."

"You're so sure of more rain," he said quizzically. "But, yes, of course you can go. I'll be missing you, but if you're a true prophet, I'll be having my own women folk up to cheer me in my solitude again," and he turned to the house with something more than the wet of the rain in his eyes.

She ran and packed her things while Dolly drank his tea, and was down again before he had finished. The boss had waited to see her off. "You're getting a real out-backer," he said. "Pack and ready for a twenty-mile drive as easy as a town girl goes down town to shop. Take my big waterproof with you. Happen you might get another shower. Is it easy crossing the billabong yet, Grey?"

"Quite easy, sir," said Dolly. "Not up to the horses' knees."

"If the river keeps rising it'll be deepening every hour," said the boss. "Don't waste time when you start, or it'll be over the buggy floor."

"I'll push 'em at it," said Dolly, cheerfully.

"Horses all right?" said the boss. "Fairly fit and strong?"

"Strong as steam engines," said Dolly, confidently. "They've had a feed now, and they'll rattle us

back in no time."

"Be off with you, then," said the boss. "Tell Mackellar I'll be over in a day or two. Good-bye, Miss Lincoln, and thank you for staying—and for the luck-bringer."

"Good-bye," she cried; "and the luck isn't finished yet, you see," and she waved her hand as Dolly pulled the pair round.

"Isn't this rippin', Miss Ess?" he said, as they pelted on at a sharp trot. "Listen to the wheels churnin' through the mud, and the horses' feet slop-sloppin' in it. Great, isn't it?"

"Fine," she agreed enthusiastically, and then laughed. "It's so funny to think this way about rain, Dolly. I've always been with people and in places where the rain was voted rather a bore. Spoilt the picnics, and boating, and so on, and made the streets messy, and greasy, and dirty. And now I'd just love to get down and splash through mud and water up to the ankles."

"It surprised me at first when I came out here," said Dolly. "I was down in the cities a spell at first, y' know, and I wondered a good deal at the cheerful way men used to go about and smack each other on the back and say 'Fifty points of rain at Bourke, old chap,' or 'The Paroo's in flood—good business, eh,' and that sort of thing. But I found, when I got here, that rain here means money, and money here means money in the cities by an' by. And money makes the cheerfuls go round, y' know."

"I haven't had time to think of the moneys," she said. "It's just the country, and the sheep, and—oh, everything."

"That's it," said Dolly, smacking his whip. "It's just everything. This shower will bring a bit of grass along, and if we get more, or the river floods over, as it's like enough to do if these tales from the township are true, you'll see the grass springin' like one o'clock. And in a few weeks' time we'll be able to take a gallop over green turf and hear the horses' feet swish through jolly long grass."

"I wish it would hurry up and rain while we're out here. They won't let me outside I know if it comes a downpour later, and I do so want to feel it pouring on me and over me."

"Here's the billabong," said Dolly, "and runnin' strong too. Come up there, come up. So long since the brutes have seen water they've forgotten what it looks like," he chuckled.

He drove in cautiously, and the horses advanced step by step, till the water rose almost to their girths, and a splash swilled across the buggy floor.

"Here I say, y' know," said Dolly, anxiously. "I'm afraid this is hardly good enough. We'll have to try higher up."

"Go on, go on," cried Ess. "I'll tuck my feet up. Let's go through it."

Dolly drove in deeper, till the water was swirling across the bottom of the buggy.

"No good," he said, pulling the horses round. "I can't take you swimmin', you know. We'll try higher up."

They waded out and trotted along the edge of the water for a mile, and tried again, but this time very few steps took them still deeper. "'Igher up, 'igher up," cried Dolly, pulling out again. "Bank, Bank, penny all th' wye." He plied the whip briskly. "It'll be dark long before we're in, as it is," he said.

They tried again and again at several points, and at last Dolly said despairingly, "I'm afraid there's nothing for it, Miss Ess, but chance a wetting and swim it if necessary. There's nothing to be scared of, y' know, but you may get beastly wet. D'you mind?"

"Not a scrap," she assured him gaily. "I'll stand on the seat and hang on to the back. On, Stanley, on!"

Dolly piled the cushions on edge, and turned and drove into the brown water. He scrambled up and stood crouching on the seat himself, and whipped the horses on; and the water rose and rose till it lapped to the edge of the seat, and the horses were almost swimming. Then the water began to drop, and shoaled and lowered till at last they crept out on to dry land again.

"Through," said Dolly, triumphantly. "I say, though, isn't it a stretch across? Well, it means good grass all over where it's running, so let's be cheerful. And we didn't get wet."

"It's coming on to rain," said Ess, suddenly. "Here it comes."

"Get that waterproof round you, quick," said Dolly. "It's coming a soaker, too. Look at it behind us there."

A cloud swept over the sun, and a few heavy drops splashed down on them, then faster and larger they came, and then, with a sudden burst, the cloud opened and the water fell in sheets. After the first minute Dolly pulled the horses to a standstill. "Can't see where I'm going," he shouted. "Might as well stand and let the best of it over."

They stood there for ten minutes, while the rain deluged on them. Ess could feel it beating like something solid on her shoulders and the cape over her head, she could hear it roaring on the ground like a waterfall, she could see solid sheet after sheet fall sweeping on the ground. Then it slackened, although it still poured heavily.

Dolly chirruped to the horses, and they plodded off slowly through the streaming rain and over the wet ground.

"We've got a long stretch back to strike the track, so as to get through the gates," he remarked. "Hope you won't mind it being after dark before we get in?"

"Who minds anything, Dolly," she cried gaily, "in all this lovely rain?"

"Not gettin' wet, are you?" said Dolly.

"Not a scrap," she answered. "This cloak keeps every drop out. Dolly, isn't it first-rate to feel it pelting like this?"

"That last burst was a caution," said Dolly, peering ahead. "Must have fallen solid points in the few minutes."

"Yes," said Ess, hesitatingly. "How many points do you think it would have made?"

Dolly looked at her, and then he threw his head back and yelled with laughter. "You've clean bowled me," he declared. "I say, Miss Ess, you'll think me an awful new-chum, but I've a confession to make. I don't know what a point of rain means. There, now, it's out. D'you know, ever since I came out here I've heard people talk casually of so many inches of rain and so many points in a year—everyone here will tell you there were twelve points fell here last year, and how many points a year for generations back—and seeing that everyone knew so much about it, and took it for granted I did, I never liked to own up I'd never heard of a point of rain till I came here. Now please tell me just how much it is."

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Ess smiled and looked at him, and smiled again, and then burst into a peal of laughter. Dolly pretended to be highly offended, and grumbling, said something about never making confessions to her again. But when this only sent Ess off into fresh peals, he looked hard at her again and began to chuckle. "Don't—don't say you don't know," he gurgled. She shook her head, still laughing, and Dolly yelled with laughter and stamped on the floor of the buggy, and held his sides and yelled again.

"I never did know," gasped Ess at last. "All my life I've heard people discussing the 'points,' and I've read the papers every rainy season about 'Magnificent rains at Oodnadatta. Nine points registered,' and that sort of thing. And I never knew and never dared to ask." They drove on gaily, chuckling, and laughing, and joking, and poking fun at each other about the points of rain. They were like two children out on a holiday, and even when they found the gate standing in an inch of water, and trotted splashing for half a mile before they cleared it, never thought of danger. It was only when they reached another stretch of water, running wide and strong back towards the river, that they fell suddenly grave, and Ess said in some alarm, "Dolly, is it all right? We—we can get through, can't we?"

"Why, of course," said Dolly, cheerfully, although his heart had jumped at the look of that water and the width of it. "If we can't make it here, we can higher up. Gerrup there," and he drove the horses into the flood.

They splashed along for nearly a mile with the water little more than over the horses' fetlocks, and Dolly made jesting remarks about a five-mile drive through a duck pond, and tried to make light of the thing. But when the water deepened rapidly and the horses sank to the knees, and then the girths, he began to feel really alarmed, especially as the sheet of water stretched for miles ahead, and the current was beginning to run stronger every few yards they advanced.

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"This isn't good enough," he declared at last. "I don't know how far this deep water runs, and it's too far to chance swimming the horses if it's all the way to the other side. We'll have a shot at it higher up again."

They wheeled and splashed back, and Dolly urged the horses to a hard trot. But the heavy going was telling on them, and they were beginning to flag. They had done a long drive from the Ridge that morning, and would have been easily fit for an ordinary drive back, but the wading through mud and water, and dragging the buggy, with its wheels sinking deep in the mud, was too much for them, and Dolly's heart sank as he noticed their hanging heads and labouring sides. He pulled them up and dropped the reins. "We'll give 'em a five-minute spell," he said; "they'll be gettin' tucked up if we don't. Then we'll have another whack at Crossin' the Rubicon." He jumped down and went to the horses' heads, and patted and talked to them, and pulled their ears; and the brutes rubbed their heads on his chest, and one of them playfully bit at his hand.

"They're good-oh," he said, climbing back into the buggy, "chock full o' ginger yet. Now then, my beauties, come up," and he headed them into the water again.

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They went deeper and deeper, until Ess had to scramble up on the seat again. Dolly sat still—couldn't get wetter, he said laughing, if he got out and swam. When the water was up almost over the horses' backs and the buggy was nearly afloat, he turned to Ess. "We'll have to whale 'em through this time," he said. "Maybe they'll have to swim for it. If they do, I'm goin' to slip off behind and hang to the cart. You take the reins, but leave 'em hanging slack. They'll steer themselves all right. Sit in the middle, and don't get scared."

Suddenly the horses plunged and sank, struggled for their footing, plunged again, and struck out swimming. In a flash Dolly had slid over the back of the buggy, and was hanging on and swimming. "This is ripping," he called to Ess. "First bath I've had for months, and the water's warm as toast. Sit still, Miss Ess. They're doing fine."

Ess clung to the buggy seat in silence. The rain had been so good and meant so much to them all. She had looked on it as a friend coming to their help, but it began to frighten her now. The carcass of a drowned sheep came swirling down on them and struck the buggy with a bump, making it rock and sway. She half screamed, and caught it back at the sound of Dolly's voice. "Steady, Miss Ess, steady. Nothing to be scared of. Sit tight—eyes in the boat."

They scrambled out at last, and the horses dragged heavily to firm ground, and halted, and stood with the water streaming off them, and their legs trembling under them. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still banked thick and heavy with black clouds. It was beginning to darken, too, and Dolly was afraid to wait there and be caught by the night, although he was almost as afraid to push the horses at once, in case they foundered. As he mounted again he noticed with a shock of fear that the water was lapping about the buggy wheels again, although they had been yards from the edge when they halted.

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"River up and still rising," he quoted. "We're off again." He could hardly urge the horses to a feeble trot, however, and presently pulled them to a walk, and jumped down and walked by their heads, talking to them and patting them. "Poor old Spot an' Pot," he called back; "they're not used to this aquatic sport racket. Never trained for any mile championship swims. They'll buck up presently, though, Miss Ess. Don't get scared."

"Dolly," she said quaveringly. "I'm an awful coward, but I'm—I'm getting frightened. I remember

Mr. Sinclair told me there was another channel further on that filled before that one we've come through. How will we get over that? And it's almost dark too."

"We'll get over right enough," Dolly said encouragingly. "And look here, y' know, Miss Ess. I know it looks awful dreary an' dangerous an' that sort of thing, but there's nothing to be scared of really. Why, I could take you on my back and swim from here to our hills."

"But what will we do when it comes dark, Dolly?" she persisted. "There are no stars and no track."

"If we're stuck, we'll just have to halt and camp down till morning," he said. "Bit rotten for you, I know, but there's no danger. And it isn't as if it was cold, is it?"

"No," she said doubtfully. "But I'm afraid you'll be chilled through. I'm not very warm, and I'm dry enough, where you're saturated through."

"I'm certainly carryin' as many points of rain about with me as a Weather Bureau Report," he agreed; "but I don't mind—rather enjoy it. And this is a heap better sport than riding round a fence all day and every day."

"I think I'll get down and walk a bit," she said. "I'm getting cramped sitting, and the walk will warm me up."

"So it will," he said, "and it'll ease the horses. Poor brutes, it's heavy goin' in this soft stuff."

He halted the buggy and helped her down, and then they plodded on again, their feet sliding and slipping on the wet ground. It had begun to rain again, softly but persistently, and the light was fading rapidly. The ground was alive with swarms of rabbits and paddy-melons, and once they saw a fox sneaking away from them.

"D'you notice those things are all making off to the right?" said Dolly. "It must be higher ground up that way. I've half a mind to follow them. Can you make up your mind to a night of it, Miss Ess? I'd be afraid to chance you swimming it in the dark."

"Just whatever you think, Dolly," she said bravely. "I'll leave everything to you, and do just whatever you say."

"You're a brick, and a real good plucked 'un, Miss Ess," he said warmly. "We'll stick it out for the night, then. I'm sure it's the wisest."

He edged off to the right, and presently, when they came to the water again, turned further to the right, and kept along the edge of it. It was almost dark now, and they were plodding along in silence when Ess said suddenly, "Listen—what is that?"

They halted and stood listening. At first they could hear nothing but the seep seep of the rain, the panting of the horses, and the rattle and clink of their bits and harness, and the sucking splash of their feet as they moved uneasily. Then, faint and dull at first, but growing louder even as they listened, there came a low and long-sustained roar like the far-off thunder of surf on a beach. A full five minutes they stood there, and then suddenly a swirl of water splashed foaming about their feet, and a wave washed past them and ran hissing round the buggy wheels.

"It's the river," said Dolly, springing back to the buggy. "Up with you, Miss Ess, quick. She's up and over the banks in earnest now, and we'll have her running like a mill race presently. We've got to hit for the high ground in a hurry."

Ess scrambled into the buggy, and Dolly Grey gathered the reins and lashed at the horses with his whip.

"Where are you going? How do you know the direction?" asked Ess, anxiously. "You can't see any high ground, can you? I thought it was all level plain about here."

"It looks level," said Dolly, "but it rises in long gentle swells. We ought to be somewhere in One Tree Paddock, and I know that's high ground because there's a mark on the tree—a big gum it is—of an old flood that had all the country round here under water."

"But do you know where it is?" persisted Ess.

"Not a notion," he said, "nor whether I'm going north, south, east, or west. But I'm leaving the reins slack, and letting the horses have their own way. Their instinct should take them the farthest from the water they can get. And, besides, you'll notice all the rabbits and things are making back the same way as we're going."

He flogged at the horses again, while the roar of the river beat in their ears, and the rain drizzled steadily down. The animals were thick and close about them now, and more than once Ess felt a soft bump and heard the sharp squeal of a rabbit under the wheels.

"Whoa," shouted Dolly, suddenly. "We've hit it, Miss Ess. Hoo-ray—now we're all right. There's One Tree, and we're about as high as we can get without climbing the tree. We may have to do that presently, but we'll wait and see."

He got out and unharnessed the horses, and stripped them, and fastened them to the buggy wheel with the reins.

"Better crawl in under the buggy," he said. "I'll put the cushions for you to sit on. They're wet outside, but they're leather, and the water won't go through them."

He put the cushions down, and they crawled under and squatted there, Ess insisting on him squeezing up on to a corner of the cushion. The rabbits and paddy-melons crawled in beside them, and scuffled out in alarm at Dolly's "Shoo" or kick. He felt Ess shudder as the wet things brushed against her or scampered over her feet, and he crawled out and got the whip, and swiped at any that came in near them again.

"It's stopped raining again," he announced.

"Now if I only had some dry matches I'd make an attempt at a fire. There's any amount of dead wood lying round, where branches have fallen."

Ess laughed faintly at him, thinking he was joking, but Dolly suddenly jumped, and crawled out, and leaped on the buggy, and she heard him yell joyfully. Ess heard a rummaging over her head and

Dolly's flopping jump down.

"Saved, saved," he cried dramatically. "Come forth, bewchius maiden, and behold thy deliverer-r-r."

"What is it—what have you found?" demanded Ess, eagerly, scrambling out.

"Look," he said, capering before her. "Thank your cautious and long-thoughted uncle, Scottie. I remembered he always had something stowed away in the buggy for emergencies. See—a bag of flour—it's pudding now, but never mind it; a tin of tea, sopping wet as pudding, but still good enough; a billy, and a little bottle of matches. Cheers, wild cheers! We'll have a fire. Now isn't that like Scottie to go carting round matches so they won't get wet even when there hasn't been a spot or sign of rain for a year? But, look here, this is the cream of the joke—a huge bottle full of water," and he went off into shouts of laughter.

"But what's the good of all these things, and even of the dry matches," said Ess, in bewilderment, "when there isn't a dry stick or splinter within miles?"

"Wait and see," said Dolly. "See the skill of Dolly Grey, the bushwhacker. They'll tell you on the station that I'm a no-good ignorant Englishman, but after this you can tell 'em how my bush-craft charmed a fire and hot tea out of the desert and the soppin' wet wilderness. Go'n gather sticks now. Every bit you can find, and the bigger the better. Come on, I'll help you."

They hunted round and collected a pile of broken branches, and as Ess felt their clammy wetness and shook the water off them, she was more mystified than ever how the fire was going to be produced.

"I'm going to sacrifice a cushion if need be," said Dolly. "They're full of kapok, I expect, and that's good tinder. But I want to show you how this thing is done without any luxurious aids of civilisation like kapok. See here now."

He took a stick as thick and as long as his thumb, and split it in halves, and split the halves again, and shaved a splinter off each of the inside corners. He did this with several more pieces till he had a good handful of dry splinters carefully placed in his hat on the ground. Then he went on to split thicker pieces with his jack knife, and to break them into short lengths. When he had his hat filled, he dug at the ground with his knife and scooped with his hands till he came down to dry earth, built his fire of dry chips in the bottom of the hole, and touched a match from the bottle to it. It caught and flickered and flamed, and in a moment was blazing and crackling. He built thin bits of branches across the blaze, and, although these hissed and steamed at first, they also caught and burst into flame. Ess had been watching with breathless interest and excitement, and as a substantial crackling blaze shot up, she clapped her hands and called out to him, "Well done, oh, well done, Dolly. I wouldn't have believed it could be done. You *are* a bushman."

Dolly bowed melodramatically, with his hand on his heart. "I thank you," he said humbly, and then sprang erect. "Now for the tea—interval for light refreshments, please." He tipped Scottie's bottle of water into the billy, hooked the handle over a stick, and held it in the blaze till it boiled, lifted it off and dropped in a handful of the wet tea, and put the lid on again for a minute.

"No sugar," he said. "Dear, dear, I must speak severely to your uncle about this. Most careless. And please excuse the shortage of cups. Here, you can use this," and he turned the lid of the billy upside down and gave it to her to hold, and poured some tea in it. "It cools quicker so," he said, "and we'll have turn about."

They drank their tea, and Ess felt grateful for the warm glow it sent through her chilled body.

"I call this jolly," said Dolly Grey; "really, it's not half bad sport, y'know."

"Well I don't know that I'd go so far as to say jolly," said Ess, "but, really, it's a lot better than it was. What a difference a fire makes, Dolly. It was all so dark and dismal before, and now the blaze seems to make a nice cosy room, with the dark walls outside us."

"Take your boots and stockings off," ordered Dolly, "and dry them. You'll feel so much more comfy. I'm going to dry my jacket."

He piled the branches on the fire, and heaped the others beside it to dry, and to support his jacket and Ess's boots and stockings. Everything else about her was quite dry, she assured him. When Dolly's jacket was dry, he pulled off his shirt and spread it to the blaze, and put his jacket on, and stood in front of the fire and gravely turned himself round in a cloud of smoke and steam. "I'm drying beautifully," he said.

"I do hope," said Ess, "I suppose it's an awful thing to say, Dolly, but I do hope it doesn't commence to rain again."

"Hush," whispered Dolly, "don't tell anyone—so do I."

"But I hope it will rain *lots* more when we're back to the Ridge," she said loudly.

A moment later a sprinkle of rain fell. "Good Lord," groaned Dolly, "you've done it now. It heard you, and it's starting again so's to be in good time." He grabbed his shirt and put it on, and Ess hastily resumed her boots and stockings.

Dolly piled the wood heaping on the fire, in the hopes that the rain would not be heavy enough to drown it out, and they crept back under the buggy. But the rain came heavier and heavier, till soon it was pouring a deluge again, and beating on the buggy and hissing on the wet ground. The fire was drowned out in a minute, but Ess hugged an armful of dry sticks under her cloak, and Dolly assured her he would have it going again in no time when this shower went off. But the shower gave no signs of abating, and Ess sat watching the water spouting off the buggy and splashing down, and shivered at the thought of sitting there all through the long night. She had hardly a thought beyond the coming of daylight, and never considered the plight they would find themselves in, nor how they were to ever reach the Ridge. But Dolly gave plenty of thought to it, and was in no ways cheered at the outlook, although he laughed, and chattered rubbish, and joked, to keep the girl from guessing at his thoughts.

The animals were scuffling in under the buggy again, and Dolly could not beat them out faster than they came in.

Dolly knew that they were now on an island, and he knew too that the closer pressing of these beasts meant that the island was growing smaller. He got up at last to look, and before he had taken ten steps from the buggy he found the water lapping round his feet. Behind him and beyond the tree he could still see dark ground, and he made his way round the edge, kicking the rabbits from under his feet as he walked. He trudged back to the buggy. "The water's almost upon us," he said. "We'll have to go and roost in the trees like the crows."

Ess scrambled out with expressions of alarm, but he laughed, and joked, and made light of her fears, and together they went to inspect the tree. Ess clung to his arm and shrieked as they trod their way through and over the squirming masses of rabbits. The ground was packed and carpeted with them, and they found that the things had climbed on to the buggy and were clustered thick all over it.

"This will save some work for the poison carts and trappers," said Dolly. "The boss spent £400 last year keeping the brutes down, but the water will save him that expense this year. Here's the tree—now for a climb." But the tree trunk stood up bare and smooth without projection or foothold, till it forked full twenty feet up. They ran back to the buggy, and found it already lapped about by the rising water. They hauled it to the foot of the tree, and Dolly tried to climb from it, but had to slip back in despair.

He sat down heavily on the seat, and Ess climbed beside him.

"It may not come higher," he said, "but the old flood mark is above our heads. And the trunk is too big round for me to swarm up and too smooth to climb. I'm afraid we'll just have to sit here and see it out, and then swim for it if need be."

"All right, Dolly," she said calmly; "you've done your best, and we can't do more. But I'm not afraid."

"You're a sport," he said huskily, "a real sport. I wouldn't care for myself—but I hate to think of you."

"Don't give in, Dolly," she whispered. "I can be brave as long as you are, but—I'm frightened if you're not."

"All right, Miss Ess," he said cheerily, "never say die. We'll live to look back and laugh at this yet."

And the water crept to the buggy wheels and commenced to rise slowly higher and higher on them; and still the rain poured down as if it would never cease.

They sat crouching in silence through the long dragging hours, till the waters of the flood rose lapping to their feet and the waters of despair rose in their hearts, and they turned their haggard faces to the grey light of the wet dawn.

THE men of Thunder Ridge were revelling in the rain and playing boisterously in it like children at the seaside, or ducks in a pond. They had come splashing into the hut in the afternoon, laughing, and shouting, and stamping the mud from their boots on the verandah, and shaking the water from their hats.

They watched the lowering skies, and groaned when the downpour slackened a moment, and yelled and cheered again when it increased and came sweeping in blinding sheets down the valley.

They flung off their wet boots and sat to tea, and listened to the water roaring on the iron roof, till they had to shout to make themselves heard; they kept jumping up to look out of the door, and came back grinning widely, with the assurance that it was coming down "Bonzer"; they hurried over their meal, and crowded out on the verandah to stand and watch the waterfall that cascaded down from the overflowed gutters.

Aleck Gault made them set his window wide as it would go, and haul his bed over beside it, so that he could lean over and stretch his hand out and feel the rain beat down on it. And he laughed when Steve swore at him for letting the water run down his arm and soak his shirt-sleeve, and threatened if they said much more to flop out of bed, leg and all, and crawl out into the rain.

Scottie caught his horse and rode down the hill track and out on to the plains, and came back with the water streaming from his hat and cloak, and told the men that "The flat was full o' water as a wet sponge, an' the billabong full an' rinnin' fast." And the men cheered the news as men cheer a stubborn fight and gallant victory. 259

They cheered again when the roof sprang a leak and a stream of water began to trickle down on the table; they cheered Blazes arranging pails and kerosene tins to catch the flood; they shouted with laughter and cheered again when Darby the Bull, running across the yard, slipped and fell, and picked himself up covered with mud. They were bubbling over with joy and good-humour, and flung jokes, and bandied words, and shouted roaring laughter at the feeblest of fun and clumsiest of wit. And when Darby, saying that now he was dirty and half wet he might as well have the pleasure of getting properly wet, went out grinning and took his stand under a spouting water pipe, they shed their clothes and flung them into the hut, and ran down and stood in the downpour. They slapped one another's naked backs and limbs, and came on the verandah and soaped themselves, and stood out in the rain and washed and lathered themselves, and held their arms wide and turned their faces to the sky, and let the clean, sweet water sluice their mother-naked limbs and bodies.

And when Whip Thompson and Jack Ever pranced round in imitation of a black fellows' corroboree and war dance, or Cocky Smith waddled across the yard and flapped his crook'd elbows and qua-a-ack-uack-uack-ed, or Darby held his hand out and looked up at the sky, and solemnly said he believed he felt a spot of rain, while the water ran in streams from him, they guffawed in gales of laughter, and yelled in an ecstasy of mirth. It was all very foolish and very childish, of course, but—well, the rain had come, plentiful, drenching, drowning rain; and let them and their folly be judged only by those who have known the rain come after a dry spell in the outside country, for no others can. 260

They were children for the time being, it is true—happy, boisterous children—but a few clipped sentences and a mouthful of speech was enough to turn them to men again.

A horseman splashed up out of the rain, and was met by a torrent of chaff and rough witticisms. "Did they come?" he asked, without heeding their banter. "Did they get through?"

A hush dropped on them at his anxious words. "Who?" someone asked. "Did who get through?" The horseman groaned. "Then they didn't," he said. "Dolly Grey started out to drive Miss Ess over here in the buggy this afternoon."

Scottie and Steve Knight had come running from the house when they saw the horseman, and they came in time to hear his words. "What's the billabong like?" said Scottie, quickly. "And how did you get here?" asked Steve.

"First billabong was runnin' hard," said the man, "and the second one was worse. I started after that heavy shower, and when word came in that the river was up and risin' fast, I came along the bank o' the river, an' had to swim the billabongs."

"Couldn't they have turned back?" said Jack Ever.

"No, the boss was out in his sulky," answered the man, "an' he scoured right along the edge o' the first billabong for miles. The tracks turned into the water, but it was too deep for him to ford it, so they couldn't have got back. I come along by the river bank where the ground's a few foot higher than the plains. An' the river was just near sloppin' over. You couldn't get back that way now." 261

"Dolly never reckoned on the higher ground along the bank," said Steve, "and he'd turned away from the river, thinking the ground must rise that way, or that he could round the end of the billabong. And now they're cut off on the high ground somewhere, and the water rising."

He turned, and "I'll bring the horses up," he shouted, as he ran across the yard.

The men leaped for their clothes, and dragged out oilskin coats and waterproofs, and were ready when Steve splashed back, driving the horses before him.

"I've been thinkin', Steve," said Scottie, "the only thing for't is tae mak the township an' the bridge an' ride up the ither bank till we can get a crossin', an' get a boat if the water's too deep for the horses."

"That means the Toss-Up Track," said Steve, quickly. "We all know what that is, but there's some of us should win through it."

Well the men knew what the Toss-Up meant, in that weather, and at night. It was the "Toss-Up" Track, because someone had once said it was a toss up whether a man came through or broke his neck riding it. It was rough and risky in ordinary weather and by day. None of them had tried it

under conditions like the present. But there was no dispute or discussion over it now—it was the quickest way, and speed counted for everything. Some might come down, but, as Steve said, some would surely come through and be able to attempt a rescue.

Ten minutes after Steve brought the horses in the men were mounted and splattering out of the yard, and heading for the hills. Steve and Scottie led the way, and set the pace at a stout canter for the first mile. The track here was rough, but fairly good—rock, stones, and boulders certainly, but the horses were used to that and made nothing of it.

“Now the fun begins,” said Steve, as he and Scottie rose the crest of the Black Hill and dived down into the winding path that dropped in long loops beneath them. The hill was soft earth, and the earth had turned to greasy, slippery mud, and the horses slipped, and floundered, and sprawled, and recovered and slipped again. Darby was the first to go down, but he flung himself cleverly clear of the falling horse, and in an instant was up and helping the struggling brute to its feet.

“Come up, Blunderbuss,” he shouted. “Wot the blazes d’yer want to lay down there for?”

He climbed hastily to the saddle, and slid off downhill after the others. They had shouted rough chaff as they passed, but they had not stopped—there was no time for stopping that night, and if a man went down it was understood he must pick himself up, unless he was too badly hurt to do so.

There were more falls before the foot of the hill was reached, but it was soft falling, and no one was hurt.

“All here?” shouted Steve, glancing back.

“All here,” came the response, and Steve turned and drove into the path that twisted through the thick bush. The path was a foot under water and slippery as glass, the twigs and branches whipped and slashed at their faces and bent heads, but they went through at a hard gallop, and swung out on to The Pillow—the long hill where the track curved up over the swelling roundness like a string of beads over a woman’s breast. It was soft earth again, and a slip over the edge of the track meant a sliding shoot down to the foot, with nothing to save or break the fall.

“Can we ride it?” said Scottie. “Safer to walk, maybe.”

“But quicker to ride,” said Steve, and spurred up at a trot. They reached the top with the horses panting and blowing, but they made no halt, and raised a gallop across the top of the hill. When the rain came down in a sudden and blinding torrent again, so that they could see nothing of the track before them, the men simply slacked the reins and left the horses to pick a way amongst the pitfalls of paddy-melon holes.

They bucketed downhill again in single file on the drop that led to the Clay Pit and the swamp water beyond, and Darby shot sliding almost on top of Jack Ever.

“Look where yer bargain’ to, you lop-eared ellerfant,” yelled Jack.

“Hi, some o’ you,” roared Darby. “There’s a midge ridin’ a moskeeter down the track ahead o’ me. Take ‘im away, someone, afore I treads on ‘im an’ flattens ‘im out.”

“Open out a bit there,” yelled Steve. “Take room to fall easy without bringing your mate down”; and the men opened the intervals between them, and one by one squattered down into the Clay Pit.

Whip Thompson rode a little wide of the narrow margin of rideable track, and splashed and floundered girth deep in the soft ground along the edge.

“Hammer ‘im out, Whip—hammer ‘im out,” shouted the others as they struggled past. “Gimme ‘is reins,” said Darby the Bull, pulling up and sliding down into the ankle-deep mess. Whip flung him the reins, and with a heave and a lift and a shout the horse was dragged out. They mounted and plunged on, and drove out into the swamp waters with the splash of a launching battleship.

“Where are ye all?” yelled Darby. “Are ye all drowned?”

“Come on behind,” came a faint shout from the darkness ahead. “Come on an’ have yer merry surf-bathin’. Oo-o-oo! Ain’t that a luvverly roller?”

They wallowed through, and on to the firmer ground, and the litter of rocks and logs that strewed the track. Falls up to now had been a thing to laugh at, for the ground was soft as porridge and a man could hardly hurt. But on the hard track and amongst the stones it was a different thing—a fall there might mean a broken bone, or at best a crippling bruise or sprain. But hard or soft, rock or mud, the men drove forward, galloping where they could, cantering where they could not gallop, and hardly slowing to a less pace than a trot.

“Hupp,” shouted Steve, lifting his horse in a cat-leap over a fallen log, and twisting in the saddle to look back at Scottie. “Can you take it? Jump if he will. The landing this side is good enough.”

Scottie came over with a rush, and one by one the men followed, jumping if the horse would jump, scrambling over anyhow if he would not.

“Gerrup there, Darby,” shouted Jack; “this ain’t a place to be playin’ at see-saw.”

Blunderbuss was sprawled over the log on his belly, swaying and kicking and scraping frantically, till he tilted over and slid on to his forefeet, and hunched his hindquarters over.

“See-saw yerself,” said Darby, scornfully, as Jack took the log with a leap. “You’d find it better’n comin’ your way,” he added, as Jack’s horse missed its footing and went rolling.

Jack dragged him up again, but cursed luridly as he saw the hanging foreleg and watched the dip-and-heave limp as he made him walk.

“Sprained ‘is shoulder,” shouted Jack. “Go on—I’m out of it.”

So they left him cursing there, and ten minutes later Whip Thompson fell out at the Trickle—and a wild joke the name of the Trickle was that night, as it foamed down fifty yards wide, and boiled about the horses’ knees. Whip’s horse stumbled and went to his knees in it, and staggered up and went down again, and up again and out the other side, with Whip wading beside him.

“Broke both ‘is knees,” said Whip to the next man to ride through. “I’ll get back an’ join Jack.”

At “The Ditch” Darby’s horse refused to take the three-foot drop to the water below the undercut bank, and the others had to leave him there, standing in the water up to his waist, his foot braced

against the bank, and his hands twisted in the wet leather of the reins, as he strained and hauled to pull his Blunderbuss in on top of him.

All the others kept the ranks till they came to the Axe-Cut and the Creek. The path down the Axe-Cut was running water like a young river, and the rock track under it was slippery as wet slates. They went down it in kicking, struggling heaps, the men dismounted, and the horses plunging and shooting down, partly on their four feet, partly on their gathered haunches, and partly anyhow.

As they picked themselves up at the foot of the Cut, they halted a few minutes to breathe the blowing horses and readjust the displaced saddle gear.

"I'm thinkin' it will be chancy wark at the Creek," shouted Scottie above the droning roar of the rain and the hiss of the water cascading down the Cut. "Seein' there's as much water in the ither burns, the Creek's like tae be runnin' a banker."

"Mean swimming, I expect," said Steve, tersely. "If it's been raining like this away up in the hills at the head waters of the river, Scottie, there won't be much ground above water on the Coolongolong flats."

"I'm wishin' it had been ony ither man than Dolly," said Scottie; "he's no used wi' this country, an' I misdoot he wadna ken whar tae strik for the highest groun'."

"He couldn't help but move back from the water as it rose," said Steve, "and that should bring him to the highest. And the river couldn't rise so quick as to flood out all the high ground surely."

It had not ceased to rain steadily, but now there came another of the pelting, driving downpours, and they stood a moment listening to the furious beat of the flooding sheets of water, till the Axe-Cut beside them spouted again, like a choked gutter.

"Longer we wait the worse the Creek gets," shouted Steve, and they climbed into the wet saddles again, with their hats pulled down over their eyes and the rain lashing down on their stooped shoulders.

When they came to the Creek, they pulled up and looked at it in dismay.

For twenty yards out from the edge it boiled and seethed in leaping, creaming foam, and, beyond the white glimmering edge of this milky swathe of angry turmoil, it ran smooth and still to the other edge, where they could just faintly see the glint of broken water fretting at the bank. The white water looked bad, but they all knew well that it was the centre strip that ran so smooth, and still, and swift that held the danger.

"They'll never mak it, Steve," shouted Scottie. He had to shout with his lips to Steve's ear, to make him hear through the noise of the storm and the rushing water. "We'll have to mak up stream tae the Prong, an' win ower above it."

The others were pressing close and shouting their opinions of the chances, and all seemed to think that no horse could wade and swim to the other side alive.

"It'll take all of two hours to ride round," shouted Steve. "I'll try it, and if I think it's good enough for you to try I'll coo-ee. If you don't hear me, don't try it."

"I'll try it wi' you, Steve," said Scottie. "Twa might be a help tae ane anither."

They arranged it so, but, just as they were preparing to ride in, there was a shout from the darkness, and Darby the Bull clattered up and halted abruptly, grinning wetly at sight of them.

"I beat 'im," he shouted. "I beat the silly cow. Turned 'im round so 'e couldn't see the water, an' smacked 'im about the chops wi' me 'at. An' he backed an' backed till 'is hind legs slipped over the bank, an' then I shoved 'im in. 'E couldn't climb back, so he come on over."

When he heard the plans just made, he announced his intention of taking it with the other two.

"Ol' Blunderbuss can make it if any 'orse can," he persisted. "You've no idea wot a wunner 'e is for water. Go on—I'm comin'."

So they rode down to the edge and let the horses sniff at it, and back away, and advance cautiously again, and wade slowly and carefully in.

Blunderbuss was loath to go, but Darby wrenched his head back every time he tried to turn, and flailed at his flanks with spurred heels. They came through the broken water and passed slowly into the smoother but stronger current beyond.

The horses went in a step at a time, snorting fearfully as they went, the riders leaving their heads free and sitting ready to slide off their backs if they were swept away and forced to swim. Steve's and Scottie's horses lost their footing almost at the same instant, and went shooting downstream with the men dragging behind, and striking out to lessen the drag. Darby's horse stood higher and his weight was greater, so he won a few paces further before he was carried down, and he made a straighter and faster line across, and won to the shallower water on the other side above the other two. But just as he found footing again a stick of floating timber shot out of the darkness and took the horse off his feet, and carried him away, rolling over and over as he went.

Steve and Scottie came to the firm ground just in time to see Darby come squattering ashore like a duck with a broken wing. "Rough luck," he sputtered ruefully, "after gettin' 'im so far; but serve the silly blighter right."

"You can walk the rest to the town," cried Steve. "We won't coo-ee to the others. It's bad enough, and we might lose more horses, or a man, and we'd lose time trying to help him. You'll be able to pick up another horse in the township, Darby. Come on, Scottie."

"Say," bellowed Darby, "d'you think that 'orse o' mine 'ad a presentiment that he was goin' to be drowned?" And the others pressed on and left him to ponder the problem.

They were winning near to the township now, and the "Fly-on-a-Wall" was the only desperately bad bit of the track left. They took it dismounted and with the greatest caution, but for all their caution Scottie's horse went.

The Fly-on-a-Wall is a narrow ledge winding along the face of the cliff that runs alongside the Creek, and the solid rock path was slimy wet and dangerous, and the horses went up with glancing

hoofs and sides pressed hard in to the rock wall, snorting and cowering back with glaring eyes from the plummet-drop over the edge to the rocks and the gleaming water below.

Scottie's horse slipped, and its feet shot from under it, and it came down with a thump and a crash, and lay kicking with its legs right over the edge.

Scottie yelled and braced himself, and lay back hauling on the reins, and Steve edged back past his horse to help.

The fallen horse struggled wildly, but it slipped further, and its haunches slid over till its hind legs were dangling clear. Even then it hung on its chest and forelegs on the path, and its hind legs hammering and scraping at the cliff face. It slid again, despite Scottie's efforts, and as Steve grabbed at the reins, it still slid slowly. They had to let go or go over with it, and the horse slid again, with starting eyeballs and quivering nostrils. Then it vanished with a blood-curdling scream, that shut off suddenly. The men heard the body crash on the stones below, and then silence except for the brawling of the river and the rush of the rain.

Steve dashed the rain from his eyes and ran back to his horse. "Follow on, Scottie," he called. "It isn't far."

When he rode off the Fly-on-a-Wall and out on to the crest of the last hill that overlooked the river and the township, he caught for the first time the full, deep, sullen roar of the flooded river. He halted and strained his eyes into the darkness, and then with an oath flung down the hillside, slithering, plunging, and spattering, till he came to the water, and realised with a sudden swirl of fear that it was right over the banks.

But he could see the gleam of the light on the end of the bridge, and drove desperately for that, and came through to it, this time without swimming, although the water rose to his saddle-flaps as he rode.

The bridge was built on trestles, and rested on high banks on both sides of the river, but the water was a bare six foot below the planks of the roadway, and, with a sinking heart, he knew that this meant that there would be little or none of the high ground left uncovered on the flats of Coolongolong.

For the first time that night he began to despair; but the game was not played out yet, he told himself grimly, and spurred a last gallop out of his staggering horse, and pounded up the rise of the bank and on to the hotel, to gather what news of the flood he might.

He found Dan the trooper there, and a little gathering of townfolk. The river was rising inches every hour they told him, and they were beginning to fear it would come over the higher bank on the township's side, as it had done on the other. The flats for twenty to thirty miles back from the river would be flooded on the Coolongolong side, but on the other bank the ground was higher, and none of it was covered yet.

"There's a man and a girl in a buggy somewhere out there on our flats," said Steve, "and I'm going to ride up the east bank and swim for it across to the highest ground on the other side. Who can let me have a horse?"

"Steve," said the trooper, "it's mad ye are surely. Ye'd have fifteen or twenty mile to swim before ever you struck ground. There's deep water for all that distance back, an' the river itsilf is comin' down boilin' like a potato pot an' runnin' strong as a steamer. Let be, lad, let be. Ye can do nothing."

"A boat," said Steve, eagerly. "Is there a boat to be had?"

"There's a boat or two belongin' to the township here," said Dan; "but there's no boat's crew that iver pulled a stroke could make head up against that current."

Steve knew that he was right, and he groaned. "I can't stand idle here while they drown," he said. "They'll be on the high ground, if any of it's uncovered, and the water creeping up on them. I'll ride up the bank and swim for it, as I thought first."

"There used to be a boat up at Battle Creek," said one of the townsmen. "You might ride to there and get it, and make over the river."

Steve turned to him eagerly. "Good," he said eagerly. "That's the best I've heard this night. Will there be oars in her?"

"She belongs to Seaman Dick West," said the man, "and he's sure to have everything for her. He's workin' up at the Creek, an' keeps the boat for crossin' or goin' after the duck."

"I'll be off," said Steve, "at once, if anyone can loan me a horse."

"Come up and have a bite an' a sup o' hot tay at the house, Steve," said the trooper. "Sure, the missus'll bate me black if I let ye go widout that."

"I can't, Dan," said Steve, earnestly. "While I'm eating, she might be drowning that very minute. The food would choke me."

"Ye can have my horse," said a man. "Come wi' me an' bring yer saddle. Ye can leave 'im at the Creek, for the flood will bring ye down back to hereabouts, I suppose, an' you'll not be gettin' back for im."

Steve went with him at once, and ten minutes later was cantering hard out of the town.

The road was soft, but level and fairly good, and he kept the horse at a hard canter, and sometimes at a gallop, almost all the way, only pulling him down to a walk to breathe him at long intervals. He was in a fever of impatience, and kept peering out into the darkness towards the river. The growling mutter of the waters came up to him, and the hiss and beat of the rain, but no other sound, and he struck the spurs in again and scurried on.

A light was burning in the house at Battle Creek Station, and at the sound of his horse's hoof-beats a door opened and a man stood framed in the light. Steve rode up to him and flung the reins over his horse's head and leaped down.

"You have a boat somewhere here?" he said. "I want to borrow it, please. There is a man and a

girl out on the Coolongolong flats and—

"God help them," said the man. "But take the boat an' welcome. I'm Dick West, an' I'll just let the boss know, an' come an' get the oars an' things. Put your saddle in the shed, and you'll find a feed for the horse in the box there. Then come over here an' I'll be ready."

Steve hurried off with the mud-splashed weary horse, and fed him, and was back in five minutes, and found Seaman Dick waiting for him with a suit of oilskins on, a coil of rope and pair of rough oars over his shoulder, and a puffing pipe in his mouth, with the bowl turned upside down.

"I thought you wouldn't wait for tea," he said. "You seemed sort o' drivin' 'er, or I'd 'ave asked you before."

"No, thanks, nothing," said Steve. "It may be touch and go with them every minute."

"Heave ahead then, mate—this way," said Dick, and led the way down to the Creek.

"There's a lamp an' matches in the locker aft," he said, when they came to the boat, and he had flung the oars aboard. "Light it while I unmoor 'er."

Steve lit the lamp, and shipped the straight-bladed oars, and took his seat waiting for the man to shove him off. Seaman Dick flung the boat's chain in the bow, stepped to the stern and shoved off, and stepped neatly aboard.

"You're not coming with me?" said Steve, in some surprise.

"I thought I was," said Seaman Dick, coolly. "Reckon a man that's used to a boat may be some use to you."

"More use than I am," said Steve, and thanked him warmly.

"I know there's a bit of risk about it," he said, "but I'll make it up to you if the boat's damaged, or for the use of her."

"You can buy me a drink when we get to the township," said Dick, lightly. "We'll need it if we get there. An' we won't need it if we don't, for we'll have had all the drinks we'll want—o' flood water. But you'd better let me take the oars across the current. I'm maybe more used to 'em than you, an' will make more headway."

They changed places, and Dick rowed steadily down the Creek until they came to the river.

"Now, stan' by," he said. "Don't move if anything bumps us. There'll be some wreckage runnin' down, but we'll dodge that. An' out we go."

He pulled lustily, and the boat shot out into the stream, twisted as the current caught her, and went forging slowly across and rapidly sweeping sideways downstream.

"The dawn," said Seaman Dick, and Steve turned in the seat astern and looked at the dim grey in the sky behind him.

"DOLLY, it won't be long now, will it?" said Ess, trying to hold her voice steady.

He tried to answer hopefully. "You never know. It might stop rising any minute, and start to drop five minutes after."

"Couldn't we tie the buggy to the tree?" she asked. "It would float, wouldn't it, and support us?"

"It might," he said doubtfully. "But, anyhow, we can try. But what are we—wait a minute," he jumped to his feet excitedly. "What an ass I was not to think of it! What did I do with the harness—yes, here it is."

He stooped and dragged out the tangled leather from under their feet. "And I left the reins tied to the wheel when I slipped the horses. We might manage to scale the tree yet."

He disentangled the traces, and leaned over and untied the reins and knotted them together, working with shaking fingers and in feverish haste.

He stood up in the buggy seat and whirled the looped coils of leather, and threw them high for the fork of the tree above them. He missed the first few times, or the coils caught and hung there till he jerked them back, but at last they curled over the fork and fell to the other side of the tree. Dolly jumped down and went wading round, and leaped and caught the end of the trace. "Hold that end, Miss Ess," he said, "and stand up and catch this one if you can."

He swung the end round to her, and she caught and held it while he climbed the buggy. He stood on the seat again and knotted the far end in a loop, and passed the other end through it and hauled taut till it jambed on the branch above, took a couple of turns of the free end round the wheel, and told Ess to hold on. "And up I go," he said. "And then I'll haul while you climb, and we'll lash ourselves to the mast and hang on till the flood goes where it jolly well pleases. *Hup*," and he sprang and commenced to climb hand over hand with his feet against the trunk.

"See how it's done," he called down breathlessly, when he reached the fork and sat astride it. "Easy as walking upstairs. Now untwist your end and pass it two or three times round your waist, and tie a firm knot—half-a-dozen knots. Have you done that?"

"Wait a minute," she called back. "Yes—all right."

"Now twist the loops round, so the knot comes fair to the front, and reach far up as you can and grab with both hands, and climb as much as you are able. Now—go."

She tried to imitate the way he had put his feet against the trunk, but they slipped, and she bumped into the tree, bruising her knuckles and forcing a cry. "Climb," shouted Dolly. She struggled, and Dolly strained and hauled, but the weight was too much, and he had to slack her down the two or three feet she had climbed.

"You are a lively weight, you know," he called down laughingly, but with a feeling of dismay.

"What will I do next?" she answered. "You can never lift me that height, I know, and I simply can't climb."

Dolly sat and racked his brains for a minute. "Well?" she called, and looking down he could just see her in the dim light standing with face upturned to him.

"Wait a bit," he said. "I'm coming down again. Untie yourself and hang on to your end."

He unfastened the knot beside him, and threw the end over a higher limb, and hauled up the slack from Ess, and dropped his own end, and came sliding down the double leathers.

"We'll have to try another dodge," he said. "You can use your own strength better to help me this way."

He knotted a loop in one end, and passed it over her head and down to form a seat for her.

"Now, you sit in that," he said, "and I'll haul my end down, and you keep taking a fresh grip of the same downhaul end and pull it down at the same time, and that hoists you up. Now—ready—heave. Hoo-ray. Heave again."

It was something of a struggle still, but this time it was successful, and Ess seated herself in the crotch of the tree.

Dolly tied one end to the seat of the buggy and lifted it from its place, and after Ess had made an end fast, swarmed up to her.

"We win," he exclaimed triumphantly. "Now for our house-furnishing"; and he hoisted up the buggy seat, and, when he had found a convenient branch and fork, hauled the seat to it, and jambed it there, and lashed it securely. "Walk into my parlour," he cried, and helped her to clamber to the seat, and when she was safely on it, showed her where to place her feet on a lower branch, and passed a turn of the rein round her and to the back of the seat. "Hoo-ray again," he said at last. "Now you can't fall out if you tried, and you can sit comfy or curl up on the seat, and have a snooze if you like."

She smiled at him, very faintly, for the climb had exhausted her and it made her giddy to look down. So Dolly climbed to the seat beside her, and they sat together and watched the light spread and spread till they could see to the horizon all round them. And all the horizon was water.

There was still a patch of ground a couple of hundred yards from the tree, and the two horses and a heaving, crawling mass of rabbits were on it, but even as they watched the horses one after the other waded into the water. They waded a long way—over a quarter of a mile—before the water reached to their flanks, but after that it deepened quickly, and they saw the horses sink and bob up again, and go swimming downstream.

Dolly waved his hat to them. "Good-bye, old Spot and Dot," he called, "and good luck to you."

The water was still rising, and the buggy lifted gently and floated slowly till the current caught it, and it went spinning away towards the river. The rabbits on the patch of ground were being constantly swept off and carried struggling past the tree, swimming frantically and even trying to

clamber and claw at the smooth trunk. Ess shuddered and put fingers to ears to shut out their squeals as the water carried them off; but soon the last of them went, and the water flowed over the last of the patch, with only a slight ripple and downward slide to mark where it had been.

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Wreckage of all sorts began to swirl down past them. The tree appeared to stand in some current, and they would see various objects appear far off, and slew round and come sliding swiftly down close to them. There were innumerable drowned sheep; a few cattle and, once, a bullock, with his head high out of the water and swimming strongly; a litter of planks and beams and rafters, which had once been some sort of hut, but was now no more than a jumble of timber; bushes, trees, with the leaved branches dipping and twisting, and heavy dead logs. Dolly pointed out a square table sailing down with its legs in the air, and then a rough home-made chair bobbing after it, and he joked about swimming after them and adding to the house furniture.

But even Dolly's spirits were almost dying out, although he still made desperate efforts to be cheerful and make light of their position. Ess sat leaning against him, and when Dolly felt her body sink gently to his, and looked down and saw her eyes closed, he slipped an arm about her to support her, and braced himself to sit steady while she slept. His eyes kept a ceaseless watch round the horizon for signs of rescue, although he was almost afraid to think whether they were even likely to have been missed. Nothing came in sight but the long procession of drowned animals and all the litter of the wreckage of the flood. A huge tree had caught its branches on the shallow patch above them, but it gradually twisted and worked free, and slid down to them, and wedged itself firmly with the trunk of their standing tree in its fork. It stuck there, held by the pressure of the water, and presently a long bare trunk sailed down, checked at the shallow, swung round, and slid over with a rush, struck the standing tree with a shock that made it quiver, and woke Ess with a startled cry, swung again, and lodged broadside against the tree. The tangled branches of the other tree helped to hold it, and object after object caught on the two and wedged there, with the water surging and tearing at them. Dolly watched the things pile up with a semi-detached sort of interest, till with a shock he woke to the danger they meant. The tree and the branches they were lodged in quivered under them like a tuning fork, gently at first, but, as the barrier grew and offered a larger resistance to the water, with stronger and stronger vibrations. Their tree tilted a little, and then cracked loud and ominously, and tilted again to a sharper angle.

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And then far off Dolly saw a boat.

He woke Ess, and the two of them coo-eed and waved, and Dolly climbed higher and pulled his shirt off, and broke a branch and made a flag, and waved it wildly, till a figure in the boat stood and waved back.

Dolly yelled triumphantly and clambered back to the seat, just as the tree cracked loudly again and canted still further.

"Just about the nick of time," remarked Dolly. "This old tree is gettin' a bit too shaky a perch for comfort."

"Why are they so slow?" said Ess, watching the boat labouring towards them.

"Look down and see the rate the current is running," said Dolly; "that'll tell you why. Lord, don't I pity them slogging against a stream like that? I dunno many more heart-breakin' jobs. Two men pulling an oar apiece, and the boat loaded deep too evidently."

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"Dolly, what are they doing—where are they going?" cried Ess, in sudden alarm, as the boat swung broadside to them and commenced pulling away. A figure in the stern waved again, and Dolly took comfort.

"Pullin' off somewhere to get out of the run of the current, I expect," he said. "They'll take a sweep round and drop down on us most likely."

That was evidently the plan, for they saw the boat curve round again a full mile off on its new course, and begin to struggle upstream again, and now it appeared to move faster. Dolly wished most fervently that the rescuers could realise the plight they were in, and gauged with some anxiety the angle they were heeling to.

It would be fully an hour, and perhaps two, before the boat could win to them, he calculated, and then set to work to cast off the lashing of reins round the seat, and made Ess move to a less comfortable but more safe position, and lowered his rope and swung down, and tried to push and pull some of the barrier away. He could move nothing but the very slightest and least of the obstacles, and several wettings were the only results of his labour.

He gave it up at last, and climbed back up the sloping trunk to wait with Ess and all the patience they could command for the slow approach of the rescue.

They saw the boat turn at last, and come shooting across and downstream to them, and, heart in mouth, waited to see whether it would reach them or be swept past. The men were pulling desperately, and the boat forged slowly across. They could see now that there was another lad and a woman and two children in the boat, and again Dolly murmured sympathy for the slog the rowers were having.

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The boat was almost abreast of them now, but fully a hundred yards out, when it spun round head to stream and edged slowly in, the rowers fighting hard to hold their position, and doing that and no more.

"It's Steve," said Dolly, suddenly, "good old Steve." He stood and waved his hat, and yelled cheers and encouragement to the boat.

"Go it then—all together—hup—hup. Well ro-o-owed. Get your hands away, bow—lift 'er—lift 'er." He was hopping with excitement. "They'll do it, Miss Ess. Look at 'em. Wish I had one of those oars." He stood and yelled again, and now they could see clearly the set faces and clenched teeth of the rowers, the dogged heave and strain, the panting recovery, and again the stubborn pull. They were in the full grip of the current now, and do all they could, the boat was dropping down and back. They saw Seaman Dick West look round and say something to Steve, the boat's nose slanted

in to them, and they swept fast downstream and past the tree again.

"They've missed us," gulped Ess. "Oh, Dolly." But almost as if he had heard the words Seaman Dick shouted to them, "We're coming," and bent his back to the oar again.

"Smart chap that," said Dolly, with shining eyes. "See the dodge—swing into the backwater this rubbish is making, and creep up in the lee of it." He shouted again, "Well ro-o-owed again. I'll steer you, boys. Pull as I say. Pull bow, easy stroke, easy, a couple together now, pull—pull, you tigers—hup again—easy stroke. Now you're right—all together—now you have it." 283

The boat was in the dead water behind the barrier now, and came on easily, although they could see that the rowers were nearly spent with their efforts. Seaman Dick shouted to them to stand by for the line, unshipped his oar and rowlocks, and slipped them together into place for Steve to pull on both oars, and, as Steve kept pulling, lifted his coil of rope, and flung it looping and untwisting into the tree. Dolly caught it and took a couple of swift turns, and shouted "Right," and the men dropped back in their seats with drooped shoulders.

Steve lifted his head. "You all right there?" he called weakly, and Dolly shouted cheerful reassurances.

"Take your time and get your wind," he called. "You must be dead beat. Don't I know what it is to be rowed out? Good men." He hauled on the rope, and pulled them right up to the driftwood and under the tree.

"Wait a minute," said Seaman Dick; "I'll slip up and give you a hand." He pulled the boat close in to the trunk, caught the reins that Dolly had left hanging, and swarmed nimbly up.

"You must be feelin' pretty bad, Miss," he said. "But you're all right now. We'll have you in warm blankets in a brace o' shakes. Let me loop this line about you."

"Thank you for coming," said Ess, jerkily. "It was such hard work too." She laughed a trifle hysterically, for the long exposure and the strain were telling now that the reaction had come. "And—and I thought you were running off and leaving us." 284

Seaman Dick looked keenly at her. "You're right as ninepence now, Miss," he said soothingly. "Don't worry any more."

"Right as ni-ninepence," said Ess. "No—don't touch me—I'm too wet to—to touch."

"Buck up, Miss Ess," said Dolly, "you've been such a brick, y' know. Stick it out now."

"Never mind being wet," said Seaman Dick, looping the rope about her dexterously. "We'll have you dry enough in no time."

"But I—I'm so wet," she repeated foolishly, "so wet."

She clung to the branch when they would have lifted and lowered her, till Dolly gripped her shoulder and spoke in her ear. "Miss Ess, be a sport. We're all pretty near used up, and you're making no end of trouble. Just one effort, and it's over. Now then."

She gulped once or twice and sat up. "All right, Dolly," she said. "I'm sorry; but I'm all right now. I'm ready."

But her nerves were badly shaken, and she had hard work to hold back a shriek as she dangled over the water and was dropped gently to the boat. Steve was waiting to catch and steady her, with love and pity and joy lighting his eyes.

"Ess," he said hoarsely, as she reached the boat, "Ess.... Thank God...."

"Don't touch me," she said weakly, "don't touch me...."

Steve drew back as if the words had been a blow in the face—drew back and flinched, as he had not drawn back from the blow of her whip; and Ess sank down in the boat and covered her face with her hands, and muttered to herself, "I'm so wet—don't touch me." 285

The other woman drew her down beside her, and patted her head and soothed her, while Dolly and Seaman Dick lowered themselves to the boat.

They pushed off, and Dolly insisted on taking an oar. It would warm him, he said, and he was longing to handle an oar again, anyway. Seaman Dick took the other, and they pulled out into the current, and went shooting downstream and making for the township and the bridge.

And Steve huddled up in the bows with smarting hands that were blistered and skinned with the unaccustomed work at the oars, and muscles that ached as if he had been beaten with clubs. He spoke to Dolly, and answered his questions and listened to his story of their adventures mechanically. He heard it all dully, as he heard the slow rhythmic roll and cluck of the oars in the rowlocks and the rippling hiss and lap of the water under the bows; but clearer than all during the long pull back he could hear Ess's words over and over again, "Don't touch me." He had finished a hard day's work only to saddle and ride through the night, and the dangers of the Toss-Up, and the weary road along the river bank; he had pulled and strained at the oars till his muscles cracked; he had kept up through it all, because it was for *her*, and because he lived on the hope that he might find her. He had listened with beating heart for the sound of her voice through that last bitter struggle to reach the tree, and he had waited with hope and love surging through him as she dropped to his arms. But.... "Don't touch me ... don't touch me...." 286

His hopes had sprung again warm and thrilling, after that letter to her uncle and the scene with Ned Gunliffe. She had not written him, or given word or sign that she had turned to him again, but he thought that after she had seen the sort of man Ned was, she might discount what he had told her and led her to believe before. Well, there was an end to all that. Even in her extremity—even when her relief at her rescue might have blotted out her bitterness—she remembered, and would not let him as much as lay a hand on her to help her.

She roused a little presently, and asked Steve how he came to be there and how they had heard at the Ridge of their being cut off, and she thanked him for coming and for what he had done. And Steve answered coldly and briefly, thinking she only spoke the words she did out of a sense of duty, and because she ought to thank him.

And Ess again misunderstood his curtness, and so the breach widened again that had been so near to closing; and they both sat there with hearts yearning to each other and the bare boat's length between them; only the boat's length, and that so easily passed. But not so easy to pass was the length and breadth of the misunderstanding that separated them, as misunderstandings separate so many others—a tiny stream perhaps, that runs from the spring of some small trifle, and rises and swells till it runs as wide and destructive as the floods did that day over the Coolongolong paddocks.

WITH its extra load the boat was perilously deep in the water; it had picked up the other people off a patch of high ground, where they had been cut off, and were being threatened by the still rising waters; but the current carried them towards the township with little more exertion than was required to keep the boat pointing the right direction and to dodge the flotsam that at times swept dangerously near their overloaded craft.

But they came at last to the bridge and swept past the end of it, and their line was caught by the watchers on the bridge, and they were hauled into safety and helped stumbling with weariness up the slope to the township, and hot food and drinks pressed on them, and the hospitality of the whole township flung wide to them.

Trooper Dan and Mrs. Dan were waiting with the others to see the landing, and Mrs. Dan ran to Steve. "Man alive, Steve," she said, "you're like a walkin' corpse. You're just fair beat. You must come to us and stay a day or two, Steve. There's a bed all ready for you."

Steve straightened his shoulders and laughed.

"I'm fit as a trout," he said jauntily; "nothing wrong with me. And there's Miss Ess there—Scottie's niece. It might be better if you took her than let her go to the hotel. Where's Scottie?"

"Off riding up and down the east bank in case you were carried in higher up," said Mrs. Dan. "Steve—is it *the* girl?"

"It's the girl we went to look for," he said, pretending to misunderstand her. "Miss Ess—Scottie's niece."

But Mrs. Dan laughed in his face and darted to her husband. "Dan, come an' help," she said hurriedly. "We must take the girl with us. Back me up now, and if we don't get her, I'll never forgive you—never."

"Niver's a long word, mavourneen," he said. "But come on an' we'll try."

"She's coming with us," said Mrs. Dan to the ones who were helping Ess up the bank. "We'll care for her till her uncle comes."

Ess, a little confused by all this bother and welcome, looked at her. "It's very good of you all," she faltered. "Couldn't I go—isn't there an hotel?"

"Ye can't," said Dan, promptly. "What am I to be after tellin' your uncle when he comes back, if I let ye go to a hotel? We've got everythin' ready, an' your uncle will be comin' straight there to look for you."

Mrs. Dan slipped a hand under her arm. "You don't know me, my dear, but that doesn't count these days. I know your uncle, and I'd like you to come. And I'm a friend of Steve's." She said the last words in the girl's ear, and at the hint of colour that drained in her pale face and the soft "Very well—I'll come," Mrs. Dan was flushed with a sense of coming victory.

So Ess went with Mrs. Dan and swallowed the food they gave her, and let Mrs. Dan help her to undress and bathe and to stumble into bed, with the sleep closing her eyes before she had lain down. She slept there for a solid twelve hours, and never even heard her uncle come in and stand looking at her with wet eyes, or felt the kiss he dropped lightly on her cheek.

Mrs. Dan woke her at last, and gave her food and warm soup, and made her lie down again, although she protested that she was all right now and had slept enough. And even as she protested her eyes closed drowsily, and she snuggled back in the warm blankets, and was asleep again in five minutes.

Mrs. Dan seized the chance thrown to her hand by Scottie's call, and proceeded to make the most of it and to extract some information to work on. But she could hardly have found a man so hard to fossick anything from. Scottie was not given to gossip or idle talk at any time, and the merest suspicion that he was being pumped was enough to re-double his native caution.

Mrs. Dan talked first about the flood and the damage it had caused, and the good the rain had done the country. She passed from that on to the narrow escape Ess and Dolly had had, and how thankful she was they had been found in time.

Scottie thanked her and thanked her again for her kindness in taking Ess in. Mrs. Dan seized the opening.

"I could never let a pretty young girl like that go to an hotel by herself," she said warmly, "and of course we didn't know when you'd be in again. But there's nothing to thank me for. It's glad I am to have her, and I took to her the first minute I set eyes on her." She laughed lightly. "But it's not me or you will have the keeping of her long, Mr. Mackellar—she's too pretty a face for that."

Scottie murmured something unintelligible into his teacup. (Mrs. Dan had made him wait to drink a cup of tea, and took care to give it to him scalding hot, so that he could not be too quick over it and go before she had pumped him dry).

"And didn't I hear some word of her being engaged already?" she asked. This was a pure shot in the dark, except for the half light she had from Steve's remarks about the girl he had lost being engaged.

"She was—she's not now," said Scottie, briefly. This did not help much, for she did not know if the engagement referred to was to Steve or the other man.

"That might be as good a thing as it might be a bad," she said. "There's only one thing worse for a girl than breaking her engagement, and that's keeping to it—if they're not likely to be well matched."

Scottie made no reply but to gaze absent-mindedly at her.

"Was it any secret who she was engaged to, or that she was engaged?" she asked.

"No," said Scottie, slowly, and applied him to his cup again.

Mrs. Dan fidgeted. She told Dan afterwards that she had never been so tantalized in her life, nor made so to feel that she was an inquisitive gossiping busybody. "Not a thing would the man tell me except what I asked him point-blank; and then he'd dodge it if he could." And Dan had laughed at her.

"Who was it, Mr. Mackellar? I'm not asking out of idle curiosity," said Mrs. Dan. "I'll be having a talk with her soon, and I might be able to help her. You know a woman can often tell and ask another woman things she can't or won't a man."

"It was Ned Gunliffe," said Scottie. Mrs. Dan mentally clapped her hands.

She dropped the subject as lightly as she could, so as to take a new line.

"He's a man I don't know much of—well or ill," she said, "but I've no doubt Miss Ess will have acted wisely."

"I'm glad ye're sure o' that," said Scottie, drily. Mrs. Dan felt uncomfortable. "But aren't you?" she asked.

"Me?" said Scottie, with a slight air of surprise. "I'm never sure what a woman is doin', right or wrong; or what she's thinkin'."

"Small blame to you," said Mrs. Dan. "For she often doesn't herself. Miss Ess has been living down in the cities most of her time, I hear?" Scottie made no reply. He was acting on the truism that "if no questions are asked, no lies need be told," and he improved on it by adding "and no truths."

"She'd find the men out here a thought rough after being used to folks with city ways," said Mrs. Dan, "although you've some real well-spoken an' well-educated men at Thunder Ridge—Ned himself is that, and so is Aleck Gault and Steve Knight. Though Steve's the best o' the bunch to my way of thinkin'. Don't you think so?"

"He's the best horseman we have," said Scottie.

"He's more. He's the best and the whitest man on the Ridge," cried Mrs. Dan. "You know I think a lot o' Steve. He once did something for Dan and me that I'll never forget. And I'd give a hand to help him."

Scottie said nothing, and laid his empty cup down carefully. Mrs. Dan saw her chance slipping away. "You like Steve yourself, don't you? You don't believe he's as bad as some make out?"

"I've kenned waur," said Scottie, non-committally.

"Would you have anything to say against it if you knew Steve was in love with Miss Ess, or she with him?"

"There's nae need tae answer that till I ken they are," said Scottie, smiling calmly.

"Do you think they are?" said Mrs. Dan, desperately.

"It hardly matters what I think—it's what they think themselves that counts," returned Scottie, imperturbably, and moved to the door.

When he had gone Mrs. Dan sat down and fanned herself with a weekly paper. "What a man," she said to herself. "Oh, what a man. He'd drive me mad in a night. I feel as if I'd been slapped and told to mind my own business. And what have I got for it all? She was engaged to Ned Gunliffe—and I could have had that for the asking from any man on Thunder Ridge to-day or, I suppose, anyone in the township in a week. And it's broken off. I'd have got that from Steve or from her presently, for a hint of a question. I could swear at myself."

So the attempt to pump Scottie dry failed—possibly because he was dry by nature.

Mrs. Dan had more success with Ess herself when the time came for a confidential chat.

"I believe I have to congratulate you on your engagement," she said brightly.

"No, oh no," cried Ess, hotly. "That—that's over—it's broken off."

Mrs. Dan looked at her gravely. "I'm sorry for that," she said, "the more by reason because Steve is a friend of mine."

"But it isn't—nobody knew—I mean I thought everybody knew it was Ned Gunliffe I was engaged to," said Ess, in confusion.

Mrs. Dan missed nothing of the confusion nor of the flurried words, and before Ess finished speaking had the whole plot of the story clear in her mind. "But it isn't"—Steve. "Nobody knew"—about the engagement to Steve. So—Steve and she were engaged secretly; they had quarrelled; the girl had immediately become engaged to Ned Gunliffe, and now that was broken off. The conversation she had had with Steve some time before helped her of course to piece the thing together. The next thing to do was to find if Ess were still in love with Steve—she was sure enough he was with her.

So she talked of all the odd things under the sun and dropped Steve's name casually, and led the conversation round to the rescue from the flood and the part Steve had played in it. And Ess told with sparkling eyes of the struggle of the boat against the current, and her overwhelming joy when it drew in to the tree.

"Ah, and I know Steve would have been just as glad to see you," said Mrs. Dan.

She saw the girl's face fall. "No," she said slowly, "I hardly remember getting into the boat or what he said; but he didn't say much afterwards. He scarcely spoke all the way back."

Under her breath Mrs. Dan made uncomplimentary remarks about the absent Steve.

"He'd have seen you were worn out and didn't want to talk," she said.

"No," said Ess, "it wasn't that, because I spoke and thanked him, and he just barely answered, and no more. And I was sorry for it because I wanted to be friends with him again. I—" her voice sank till Mrs. Dan could barely hear, "I was once unkind and rather cruel to him, and he hasn't forgiven it."

Ess was sitting on the sofa, and Mrs. Dan crossed the room to her, and sat beside her and laid a

hand on her knee.

"My dear," she said very kindly, "I know well how cruel a girl can be; and the more she loves, the more she's hurt, and the crueller she can be. But a man forgets the cruel parts if kindness follows."

"But if the man doesn't want the kindness—if he doesn't care?" said Ess, with her voice trembling.

"My dear, my dear, can you be so foolish?" said Mrs. Dan, tenderly. "Won't you tell me the whole story, dear? Maybe I could help you better. It won't pass my own lips again, not even to Dan. And maybe it will help you to the tellin' if I give you this first. Steve loves you, girl; worships the ground you tread. I've seen him myself start and change colour and tremble at the thought and the word of you, when I spoke it not knowin' who it was I spoke of, but the girl the heart of him was breakin' for. There, there now, my dear, tell me all about it an' let me help."

Ess was weeping quietly in her arms when she finished, but presently she sat up and dried her eyes, and steadied her voice and told the whole pitiful tale. She made no attempt to spare or excuse herself in any way. She told of her shame and anger at the proof she had found of his guilt, and of his refusal to clear himself, although he denied it. She told of the blow she had struck him—and Mrs. Dan's eyes looked down on her bowed head with a curious hardness at the telling of that—and of her promising herself to Ned there in his hearing because—because—she hardly knew why, except, perhaps, that she was so angry with him, and thought that it might hurt him. She told, too, how the engagement had fretted her, and how she had broken it off, and how she had longed to make it up again with Steve and be friends, even if he would have her for nothing more. And Mrs. Dan's eyes were soft and wet with tears when she finished, and she comforted her, and petted and mothered her as best she knew.

"It'll all come right, my dear," she said. "And now don't let's talk about it more for the minute. I want to think it over, and I've got little Danny to give his bath. Wait here while I do that—or would you like to help me?"

So Mrs. Dan went and fetched in little Danny from the office where he played while his father pretended to work, and did a deal more play than work himself; and enjoyed it more than the child, maybe.

And Mrs. Dan bathed him and made Ess help, and took care that she had the handling of his chubby three-year-old body. And Ess took him on her knee, and towelled him and wiped his soft skin as tenderly and carefully as if it were a delicate hand-painted china, and then hugged and squeezed him as if he were made of unbreakable india rubber. And when they had got him ready for his bed, and heard him say his prayers, and fondled him and petted him and kissed him to their heart's content, the two women put him to bed, and came back and sat down and looked at one another, and talked whispered baby-lore and mother-talk, with their heart-strings still thrilling under the touch of the baby fingers.

And Mrs. Dan told of the other children she had borne—and lost; and of the manner of their losing, and cried a little, softly, over the telling, while Ess strove, weeping herself, to comfort her.

"Four of them I've had," Mrs. Dan said, "and only little Danny left. One by one, and one by one, they went. The first was when Dan was selectin' out in the back country, and the sun and the prickly heat and the furnace air was too much for the baby, and I watched him wilt and crumple like a flower on a broken stem—till he died. And when the next one came, Dan scraped the money together, and I went down to the inside country a piece, and stayed there till he was nine months old, and as strong and sturdy as a little Turk. And I knew that Dan was fightin' to keep the place goin', and doin' without proper food and cookin', and I thought the child was strong enough to stand the weather and the heat, especially as the worst of the summer was over. So I went back. And then the bush fires came, and we had to saddle up and ride, and got away with our bare lives and what we stood in. And Dan carried the baby in his arms till we come to the lagoon; and we waded in to the water, and stayed there with the water to our lips and the heat of the fire blisterin' the cheeks of us, and Dan holdin' the poor mite with just his head above water and a hat fendin' off the heat. And he died of pneumonia, and no doctor to be had till all was over.... We gave up the selection then, and Dan joined the force and was doin' well when the third came. He was stationed in a mining township then, and because it was down nearer the coast and cooler, I thought the child would be all right when it came. But I was ill—terribly ill when she came; and I couldn't nurse her, and—you can think what I felt when they told me—there was no drop of fresh milk to be had for miles round, and the store had but one case of condensed milk, and when they opened it they found every tin of it was bad. And the baby never got over that first few days, and it went—the third of them. And now there's little Danny there ... and I can never have another. Can you understand how precious he is to me, and what I'd do or not do for the love of him? And now listen to this ... listen and remember it, for it may help you to understand something some day. Danny was took ill two year ago. Dan was away at the time—away for three days; and there was none of the women in the place could say what to do with him—one advised one thing and another another, and I didn't know myself, and I was near crazy. And a man rode for the doctor, rode down river after him, and got to where he'd been, and found he had crossed the river twelve hours before. And the river was running a banker, but this man rode in and tried to swim across at the Staked Crossing—and that means more than I can tell you, or more than you can understand that's never seen the Staked Crossing and the river in flood. A log struck his horse before he'd gone half-way, and it was drowned, and the man was washed back on the same bank a mile below. And they picked him up half drowned and brought him to, and as soon as he could stand he took another horse and tried again—"

"It was brave—brave," murmured Ess, listening with breathless interest.

"It was brave, for he was, and is, a brave man. And this time he won through, but, when he came where the doctor had been, he found him gone again. And he rode his horse to a standstill and

borrowed another, and rode till he found the doctor and brought him back at the gallop—and the doctor told us he was just in time. And so—well, I have the child, thanks be to the doctor—and the man that brought him.”

“How you must have thanked him,” said Ess, feelingly.

“Thanked him?” said Mrs. Dan. “He wouldn’t listen to my thanks—laughed at it, and made light and said it was a little thing for any man to do. And the same to Dan when he tried to say with words what our hearts was sayin’. But would you wonder if I’d want to do anything in my power for him; that there’s nothing, barrin’ my husband’s life and my boy’s, that I wouldn’t freely give him for the asking; that I’d put my life or my honour or everything I have or ever hope to have in his bare hands. And I’ll tell you the man’s name, and some day maybe you’ll remember and understand why I’m telling it and this story—the man was Steve Knight.”

“Steve Knight,” whispered Ess.

“Yes, Steve Knight—Fly-by-Night—careless, laughing, happy-go-lucky Steve Knight, that you’ll hear tales and love-stories of by the score, but that never did harm to man, woman or maid, that ever I heard of.”

They sat in silence, without move or stir, and each busy with her own thoughts, for long after that, and then Ess spoke:—

“Thank you for telling me, and thank you for listening to me, for of course you’ll blame me for thinking and acting as I did with Steve.”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Dan, “I’m older than you, and although you’ve lived in the cities where you see and learn a lot, I’ve lived in the out-back, where we don’t see so much, but learn our lessons deep and hard; and I’ve learned never to blame or praise anything that a man or a woman does, for love, or through love. If they’ve done right, they’re above my praise, and if they’ve done wrong, they’ll have their own punishment, without my blame. Don’t do wrong now, and have to bear the punishment for it all your days.”

“What can I do?” said Ess, meekly. “Tell me, and I’ll try to do it.”

“It’s easy to tell, though you may not find it so easy to do. See him and ask him to forget that blow you struck, and ask him to forgive you for ever doubting him. Don’t be sayin’ it as if it was from the teeth outwards, but from the very heart of you. Steve’s not the man I take him for if that doesn’t wipe it off his mind as a dog licks a plate. It’s not so long since I was telling Steve that if he wanted to make it up with a woman who had wronged him, to ask *her* to forgive *him*. But Steve has more pride than a man ought to have by rights, or than he’s likely to find of use to him, and I doubt if ever he’d take that easy way out.”

“I was wrong, and I know it now,” said Ess, submissively. “I’m sure he wouldn’t have lied to me. There was a mistake somewhere, and he wouldn’t show me I was wrong because he resented my not believing him. I’ll try to tell him so, Mrs. Dan.”

“And you’ll never regret it, whatever the result,” said Mrs. Dan.

But after Ess had gone to bed that night Dan gave a word to his wife that worried her more than she cared to confess.

“Steve’s down in the bar, and drinkin’ like hell’s bells a-ringin’,” said Dan. “I tried to get him to come up here for an hour, but not he—the devil a fut of him. And he’s done wi’ Thunder Ridge an’ Coolongolong an’ Connor’s Leap an’ all the likes he told me; an’ he’s booked his seat on the first coach out that goes when the roads is passable.”

“I think there’s that here, when he knows it, that’ll hold him longer than the bad roads,” said Mrs. Dan, complacently.

“The river’s droppin’ fast all day,” said Dan, looking at her, “an’ they’re thinkin’ that wi’ extra horses, maybe, they might be passable be mornin’.”

“By morning?” said Mrs. Dan, with a gasp of dismay. “He wouldn’t go in the morning, without bidding us good-bye.”

“He’d go this night widout biddin’ his own father an’ mother good-bye, the way he is now,” said Dan. “Tisn’t well he is at all, at all, wid the eyes shinin’ out av his head like lighted lamps an’ the two cheekbones of his white face wid a flush on them ye cud light yer pipe at. His chest wounds opened wi’ the rowin’ he tells me——”

“There’s deeper than his chest wounds opened I’m thinkin’, Dan,” she said. “But don’t take off your boots yet. Go out and see him, and make him promise to come an’ say good-bye at least.”

“I’ve done better than that,” said Dan, with calm satisfaction, as he pulled a boot off. “I’ve fixed it wid them at the stables to tell me the minute there’s word of the horses bein’ asked for.”

Mrs. Dan had to content herself with that, but as they were going to bed, she said quietly, “Dan, how was it you kept that back about Steve?”

Dan stared at her, and then his eyes flickered, and she knew that he understood.

“I never kept back aught about Steve,” he said firmly, “that he didn’t have my sacred word to keep to myself.”

“It’s all right now—only I wondered,” she said. “But, of course, a man’s word is his word, though hearts and the heavens break for it.”

“Mine is,” said Dan.

“Anyhow, I hope the flood’s over the roads another day,” said Mrs. Dan, inconsequently, and a shade uneasily.

THE roads were reported still impassable next day, and Steve set himself to kill time and thought for another twenty-four hours. He had Dolly Grey and Darby the Bull for company, for Scottie had gone back with the other men to Thunder Ridge, telling the two of them they could wait another day and give the Creek a chance to go down. "I'll be bringin' or sendin' a horse for Ess to ride back in a day or two," he said, "and I'll send horses for you both at the same time."

But an hour after he went the town's poundkeeper came to them in the bar of the hotel, and said to Darby, "I have that horse o' yours in the pound, Darby. Ye'll have to bail 'im out."

Darby stared at him. "Wot 'orse?" he demanded.

"Your 'orse, or the thing you calls one," said the man.

"You 'aven't got mine," said Darby. "You've made a mistake."

"Mistake!" said the poundkeeper, scornfully. "Think I could mistake that hammer-headed, herrin'-guttet brute o' yours? No mistake about 'im, old son."

"But my 'orse—old Blunderbuss—was washed down the Crick," said Darby, wonderingly. "You saw 'im, Steve?"

"I did so," laughed Steve. "And he was rolling over and over like a rock going down a hill; and he was waving a fond farewell with all four feet in the air, and hurrying to keep an appointment somewhere over the Falls, last I saw of him."

"Falls or no falls," said the poundkeeper, "there he is in the pound. They found him down the river a piece, trying to break in an' steal somebody's chaff."

"Let's see," said Darby, and marched off with the man.

He came back riding old Blunderbuss and grinning hugely.

"It's a ghost, Darby," cried Steve, from the hotel door. "Get off him. He's a ghost."

Darby raised himself in the stirrups and bumped back hard in the broken and dilapidated saddle. "Solid sort o' ghost," he said. "'E's able to carry my weight all right."

Blunderbuss reached round and bit at his rider's foot, and Darby kicked him in the mouth, rode cheerfully into the yard, and fed him lavishly.

"It's 'im, an' as good as ever," he announced to the other two, when he came back to the bar. "A little hole, not more'n six inch long, in 'is haunch, an' a scrape up his ribs, and a big bump on his head—"

"I'm sorry for the thing his head bumped, Darby," said Dolly Grey. "If it was a rock, I'll bet he bust it."

"He's a good 'orse, anyway," said Darby, proudly. "Not many 'orses could swim the Falls in flood an' come 'ome smilin' to brekfas'."

"He isn't a horse," said Dolly. "He's a submarine diver, or a fish."

"Drink up, boys," said Steve, impatiently. "You're as slow between drinks as a camel."

"What is it?" asked the barkeeper.

"Whisky," cried Steve. "No beer this time, boss. No need to irrigate just now."

So the whisky bottle was put on the bar, and Steve poured himself a stiff dose, and the others took moderate ones, for it was barely past breakfast time yet, and, as Darby put it, there was no need to get drunk in a hurry when they'd all day and night to it.

"Go on, go on," said Steve. "You can get drunk and sober and drunk again. It'll take me all my time to get once drunk. Hand us that bottle out again, boss," and he threw the silver on the bar.

So when Dan came along early in the forenoon, Darby and Dolly Grey were both in a highly convivial stage, while Steve was drinking huge doses of spirit, with his eyes glittering and his hand shaking, but his voice as coldly clear and his legs as firm as if he had drunk nothing but water.

"Come on, Dan, and have a drink," said Steve, gaily. "That bottle, boss. Here you are, Dan, though I'm sorry to say you won't find much bite in this stuff. It's like penny pop."

"So's sulphuric acid thin," said Dan, helping himself liberally to water. "Your health, boys.... An' now, Steve, I've a message for you from both the wimmin folk, to ask you to come up to the house."

"What's that?" said Steve, suspiciously. "Who sent the message?"

"Both the wife and the girl," said Dan, promptly. "And I was to be sure an' tell you it was from both."

Steve stood twisting his glass on the counter a moment, then threw his head back and laughed, but with a hard look in his narrowed eyes. "No, Dan," and again more emphatically, "no. Tell them I'm sorry I can't come; tell them I have a previous engagement; tell them I'm busy getting drunk if you like, or that I'm drunk already."

"They won't be likin' that, Steve, an' the little woman will have a word to say to ye whin she sees you."

"I could come and see Mrs. Dan, drunk or sober," said Steve, "and be sure of my welcome and an overlooking of my misdeeds. But I'm not fond o' eating dirt, Dan, and I've had about all of it I can stomach. No, I'll not come, thanks. Carry my compliments and condolences, or whatever fits in, and let it go at that. Have another before you go.—Hi, boss, drinks here."

Dan spent some more minutes trying to persuade him, but Steve was "stubborn as a dead mule," as he told Mrs. Dan, and refused to be coaxed.

Dan was back an hour later, and he beckoned Steve aside.

"Steve," he said earnestly, "the little woman was more upset than I liked to see when I gave your message. I tould her it was because the girl was in the house, but that didn't ease her. So she's walked down to the bridge, and asks me to bring you there. She said she asked it as a favour, Steve,

that you'd give her five minutes alone. Will ye come?"

Steve fidgeted restlessly while Dan spoke, but at the end "All right—I'll come," he said, and turned and told the others to wait for him, and he'd be back in ten minutes.

They walked down to the bridge together, and found Mrs. Dan and a few more of the townspeople watching the flood waters sluicing down under it. Dan left them together, and walked to the end of the bridge.

"Thank you for coming, Steve," said Mrs. Dan, quietly. "I asked you for five minutes, and I won't waste them. Steve, I want you to come up and see Miss Ess. You know I wouldn't ask you to do what I didn't think was for your own good and happiness. Will you?"

"No," said Steve, shortly. "You mean well, Mrs. Dan, but you don't know all, or you wouldn't ask it."

"But I do know all," said Mrs. Dan. "That's why I ask."

He stared at her. "You do know—how and what?" he said.

"All that's happened between you as far as the girl can tell it. Steve, I asked her, and I wanted to help. I—she has no woman to speak to, Steve, and you wouldn't grudge a girl the consolation of havin' another woman to talk to, and her shoulder to cry on."

"There's nothing I mind you knowing about me, old friend," said Steve, "and I'm glad if it eased her to tell you. But, knowing the story, I don't see what you want me to do, or what more you expect. Everything's finished between us."

"Look me full in the eyes, Steve, and tell me straight, in so many words, you don't love her, and say you don't *want* to see her again—and I'll have no more to say. Will you give me your word of honour on that?"

"No, for it would be a lie," said Steve, steadily. "But that is beside the point, and it's perhaps because of that I won't see her. I could laugh and smile to myself at another girl saying her cruellest—but I can't with her."

"Steve, you know that what you're saying to me will never be repeated, and you wouldn't think more of me if I told you all the girl said to me, so I can say nothing. But surely you know I wouldn't ask you to do anything that is going to be to the hurt of you. Can't you take my word for it and come and see her?"

Steve looked at her keenly. "You say she has told you all; and I know you'd sooner stab yourself than pin-prick me. The two things don't run together. There's things she has left out, or softened down, I'm thinking, and you don't understand yet."

"She told me all," repeated Mrs. Dan, "and I could have struck her myself at some of the telling. But in face of it all, Steve, I ask you to come."

"Did she tell you what she said when I went to take her in the boat?" blazed Steve.

Mrs. Dan looked startled and a little puzzled. "She said nothing much about the boat," she admitted. "But I don't think she remembered much of it, Steve. She was half dazed and bewildered, I think, and I don't wonder at it. Look what she'd been through."

Steve laughed harshly. "Dazed," he said scornfully; "aye, maybe she was dazed. But even when she hadn't all her sense about her, the words came of themselves; her mind wasn't working free enough to hold back the thoughts that were deep in her mind. I'll not repeat what she said—it makes me run hot and cold now to think of it, and all it meant to me. And if she didn't tell it of her free will, please don't ask her for it. And I'd been beginning to hope again—I thought ... but what good is the talk of it? It's finished. I'm done," and he threw out his hands with a little gesture of finality.

Mrs. Dan looked long and sorrowfully at his set face, with the gripped teeth and the bitter eyes, and sighed heavily.

"Very well, Stevie lad; I'll say no more. They tell me you're going. Will ye see me and say good-bye before you go?"

"If I'm sober enough," said Steve, recklessly, "but I'm doing my best to get drunk to-day. I might as well make a finish in keeping with my character."

"I can't say good-bye here, Steve," she said. "And if you come to the house to say it, I'll promise you'll see or be seen by nobody but myself. So come."

"I'll come then," he said abruptly, and they turned and walked to join Dan, and came up off the bridge together, and parted at the door of the hotel.

Steve found the other two men sleeping, for they had had a late and wild night of it; and Steve went and flung himself into a chair and sat moodily alone, not even drinking, for the savour had gone out of the drink and the talk; and the thoughts raised by the talk with Mrs. Dan burned in his brain as bad as the fevered wounds in his breast.

He would not see her—not he. He had been flouted and scorned and whipped with thoughts and words and looks enough to last him his life. He cursed himself for a fool for taking the thing so much to heart, and wondered fiercely why ever he had hoped again after that night. And, almost without knowing it, he began to imagine and picture the interview with her, if, after all, he went to Mrs. Dan's and asked to see her. She would be polite, of course, and thank him again for saving her, but cold politeness would cut him keener than open anger, and he would only be tempted to flaunting and taunting. And what was the good of all that? And if she met him kindly and spoke softly and held out her hands to him.... He roused himself and sneered at his thoughts, and bound himself with new oaths to be done with her—to see no more of her—to suffer, if so be he had to suffer, without her looking on the suffering.

But a chance sentence of Dolly Grey's cut his oaths and cast aside the promises he had laid on himself.

Dolly had wakened fresh and unshaken from his sleep, and had slid the after-effects of the drink

from his healthy body as lightly as he had from his mind—as only the young and responsibility-free can. And he had found Steve, and, because he wanted to eat, made Steve eat with him. He talked gaily throughout the meal, and announced his intention of going along to see Miss Ess presently, and from that went into a hymn of praise of the girl's pluck and fortitude. And in the gay chatter a sentence caught Steve and wrenched his straying thoughts back to what the lad was saying.

"Funny thing the way she collapsed at the finish, y' know," said Dolly. "Kept up like a Briton all through, and laughed and joked at all the discomfort, and was as cool and plucky as you like even when we couldn't find a way of climbing that tree, and the water was crawling up on us. Then when it's all over, and you get the boat alongside, and Seaman Dick shins up—pouf, away goes all her pluck, and she's as scared at being dropped out of the tree as a kid. Hysteria, I s'pose, 'cos she was half crying and half tittering, sort of. Funny thing, too—what d'you think she said when Dick went to put the rope round her? 'Don't touch me—I'm too wet to touch.' And she said that two or three times—"

Steve dropped knife and fork with a clatter.

"What did she say?" he asked sharply.

"Don't touch me," she said. "Don't touch me—I'm too wet to touch...." Dash funny notion, wasn't it? Couldn't help grinnin', seeing we were both wringin' wet ourselves—I'd just been soused in the river five minutes before. Hardly know what she was thinking of ... that we would wet ourselves touching her wet things, perhaps ... but it was dash funny, now, wasn't it?"

"You're sure that's what she said?" asked Steve, slowly. "Those very words—'Don't touch me.'"

"I'm sure enough," said Dolly, looking at him in some surprise. "Said it over and over two or three times, and Dick What's-his-Name'll tell you the same thing. 'Course it was only reaction and hysteria, and she didn't know what she was saying. I'm not surprised.... But you mustn't think she wasn't a good plucked 'un for all that' y' know. I wouldn't like you to get that notion from me. She's pluck to her boot heels," he went on warmly, while Steve sat, with his thoughts whirling, hardly heeding the words.

"Don't touch me".... So she didn't mean what he had taken the meaning to be ... she'd said the same thing to Seaman Dick West and Dolly up there....

He broke in on Dolly's talk. "Dolly, I'm going to see Miss Ess before you do, if you don't mind."

"Right-o," said Dolly, cheerfully. "Or why not go together?"

"No, no," said Steve, hastily. "I—she'll be saying thank-you things, and that's sort of embarrassing for both of us."

"Oh, I see," said Dolly. "Yes, I suppose that's right. Beastly thing bein' thanked. Glad it isn't me, y'know, that has to have 'em."

"P'raps you'll get a share," said Steve.

"G' Lord—me—what for?" said Dolly, in a panic. Then he grinned sheepishly. "I see. You're pullin' my leg."

"Well, you'll get some thanks from me when I come back," said Steve, "—or a broken head," he added grimly.

Dolly looked at him in some doubt. "All right, old chap. But—er—I say, Steve—you think you're all right—eh? Don't mind me mentionin' it, I hope, but—er—well, you've been tankin' up all mornin', y' know. You're all right, eh?"

Steve laughed at him. "I'm going out now to put my head in the trough and freshen up generally," he said, "though I feel all right, and then I'll let you see me stand on one leg and walk a chalk line, and give me tongue-twister sentences to say, or undergo any test of sobriety you like."

"Oh, you look all right," said Dolly, consolingly, "only I didn't quite follow that broken-head remark."

"You wouldn't, and I wouldn't expect you to," said Steve, and went and washed and soused his head as he had said.

"You look toppin'," said Dolly, when he was ready to go. "Sort of got your shoulders back, and your chin up, and a spark in your eye. Feel all right? Can you say toorilooral—I mean toolitrooral—toolri—I say," he broke off in dismay, "I'm afraid I'm not as all right myself as I thought. Tru—ly—ru—ral. Got 'im."

"Truly rural. Got 'im," said Steve, solemnly, but with his eyes twinkling, and marched off.

Mrs. Dan was rather a long time coming to answer his knock, but her welcome made up for that when she did let him in.

"Steve boy, it's glad I am to see you. Come along in—and just sit a minute; I'm doing something, and won't be a jiff."

She went close and looked keenly at him when she came back to the room. "So ye kept sober after all, then. I'm glad, for I'm sorry enough to be losing you, and would have been sorrier if you hadn't had sense to understand my good-bye."

"I remembered that I'd be kissing you good-bye if Dan's not looking," said Steve, "and I couldn't get the full pleasure of that if I wasn't full sober."

"When does the coach go?"

"They're expecting one in from the north in two or three hours, and if it comes they'll take the mails and go right on from here. But I didn't quite come to say good-bye—yet. Whether I say it at all depends."

Mrs. Dan jumped to her feet. "Steve, don't tell me you've thought better and come to see her," she said delightedly.

"I heard a chance word that made me think maybe I'd been wrong," said Steve, gravely, "and I came to take a last chance, and maybe a last bitter speech to take with me—"

Mrs. Dan dropped back in her chair. "And the fool I was," she said despairingly. "Ah, well, you

must just wait till she comes back."

"Back?" said Steve, slowly. "Where from? I can't wait. I've got to get this over, and know the best or the worst that is in it. Where is she?"

Mrs. Dan groaned. "I sent her out. I arranged for her to go if you came, and Dan saddled a horse for her and his own, and had them waiting in the stable; and she slipped out the back way and round, and I heard them ride by before I well spoke to you."

"I'll get my horse and go after them," said Steve, rising hurriedly to his feet. "I'd just as soon say what I have to say outside in the open, and I'll send Dan home to you."

"But I don't know where they've gone," said Mrs. Dan.

"I'll find that out, and I'll come back and see you, with her—or alone. I'm still doubtful which, you see."

"But I'm not," said Mrs. Dan, as he strode from the door, "though, Heaven above knows, they both seem to mess things up that bad I'd believe anything might happen."

Steve as he passed glanced at the tracks coming from Dan's yard, and saw that they turned towards the hotel and bridge, and, when he had got his horse and saddled it, he asked a man standing about if he had seen the trooper and Miss Lincoln.

"Rode past and down over the bridge," said the man, and Steve cantered off and across the bridge.

The water had dropped so that the road on the far side was uncovered, and Steve saw the tracks clear in the mud, and went off after them at a smart canter.

When he could no longer follow the tracks in the gathering dusk, he rode back to the bridge and sat down to wait for them, knowing they must return that way.

It was full dark when he heard the plop-plop of the horses' feet on the soft ground, and when they came close to him he moved forward a few paces and lit a match, holding it so that the light fell on his face.

He heard the creak of leather and scuffle of the horses pulled up abruptly; he heard Ess's voice in a gasping cry—"Steve"—and his heart jumped at the ring of joy in the tones.

WHEN he had helped her to dismount, and Dan had ridden on with the horses, they stood in silence for a full minute listening to the growl and mutter of the river along its banks, and its gurgle and chuckle amongst the piles below them.

"Ess," he said at last, "I'm afraid I misunderstood something you said lately, and I wanted first to say I'm sorry."

"I said—lately?" she said, wonderingly.

"In the boat. But I know now you didn't mean it, and I was wrong to have thought you did. I—"

"Please," she said earnestly, "please say no more of it. I said nothing knowingly then that could have—hurt you. But I have said things—that night—that I have been very, very sorry for, and I'm glad you've given me this chance of telling you."

"We can let all that pass," he said. "We were both to blame that night, perhaps, but if one can afford to forgive, surely the other can."

"I should be so—so glad to be friends again," said Ess, with a catch in her voice.

"I want it to be something more, although I'll be grateful if it can never be less, than friend," he said gravely. "Ess, I want you to wipe out all that has gone between. Can we do that and go back to that moment when I lifted you to my saddle and kissed you good-bye?" He leaned towards her in the darkness, and his voice shook. "Can we do that, Ess?" Her mind and her body were quivering and thrilling at the tone in his voice and the light touch of his hand on hers as it lay on the bridge-rail, and a longing swept over her to only say "Yes," and be within the rest and shelter of his arms; but she forced herself to stand motionless and to speak evenly.

"Before we can do that, Steve," she said, "I have to—I want to tell you that I know I was wrong that night—no, please let me say it. It was only after I knew what Ned Gunliffe was capable of thinking of myself that I realised how—that I should never have listened to him. Now, if you say you will forgive me for believing him and refusing your word...."

"Stop a moment, Ess," he said firmly. "We've had some misunderstandings between us, and I don't wish to have another or let an old one live. Ned believed he was right, and he had reason enough to think he was right. Don't blame him altogether."

"I don't," she said quickly. "But even if he did, I should never have thought it. But it is enough that I don't believe it now, and that I know you did nothing I would blame you for."

"And is it enough," he asked, "if I tell you this? That Ned was right so far—there was a woman who had left me at daybreak, as he saw, who came to me night after night when she could."

Silence fell between them, and the rush and wash of the river ran unbroken for long seconds. Steve moved his hand from hers, and his hand gripped the rail till the knuckles cracked. And, more than the chill of the night struck on her hand when he moved his warm fingers, the chill of his words struck on her heart. Was she to lose him then after all? Was he making it impossible for her....

His voice, very soft and gentle, cut her thoughts.

"Ess, will you tell me—it fits here, though you may not see it—why did you break with Ned?"

"Why?" she said dully. "Because he wrote me a letter—because he believed me capable of doing things behind his back—not perhaps because it would have been a wrong thing, but because he did not trust me."

"Ah—because he did not trust you," said Steve, in full, deep tones, and again,—"he did not ... trust you."

"No," she said wearily, as if the thing were distasteful to her, "and no matter what proof—"

Swiftly his hand fell again on hers and cut short her words. "No matter what proof ..." he repeated after her again, stooping to peer at her face in the darkness.

Again the song of the river ran unbroken, till she turned to him with a quick movement and her voice trembling.

"Steve, I see it now. I must have trust, and I must give it, and there can be no happiness between or without. And I give it now—oh, believe me I give it, full and free, as I know it is given to me. Who or what the woman was I neither know nor care. You had a right and a reason, and none that you would be ashamed to tell, for her being there."

He slipped an arm about her shoulders and a hand beneath her chin, and gently tilted her face until he could look down into her eyes.

"No reason," he said, "that I cannot tell my promised wife, but can tell only to her. Have I the promise, Ess?"

He saw her eyes slowly close, and heard, and no more than heard, the soft whispered "Yes," that was light as the sigh of a leaf lifting in the breeze, or the kiss of a wave on the lake shore; and he pressed his kiss warm upon her lips, and felt her answering kiss and the clinging of her arms. "I'll say it in few words and quick," he said, "for then I have other, and better, and sweeter things to say. They were good friends to me, and when they heard of my plight they came to me—a man and his wife—and brought me food, and tended my wounds, in turns as the chance offered. And they came by night because I was hunted, and we—they as much as I, and now, as it happens, more than I—risked much by their coming. If you had come alone that night I could have told you, but I dared not let the man be seen or known by another man who I felt was my enemy. The man was there then, and I made him promise to tell nothing even to his wife of what passed...."

In the dim light he could see a faint smile flickering on her lips. "Go on," she said softly; "and why was the man not to tell his wife?"

"Because I was afraid she would think she ought to make it known who she was, to clear me. She

would have done that, because once I was able to do a little thing for her——”

“A little thing?” said Ess, and thought of the Staked Crossing and the naked child in its bath. “Mrs. Dan doesn’t call it a little thing.”

“Mrs. Dan ...” he said, and drew a deep breath. “Did you know? Did she tell you?”

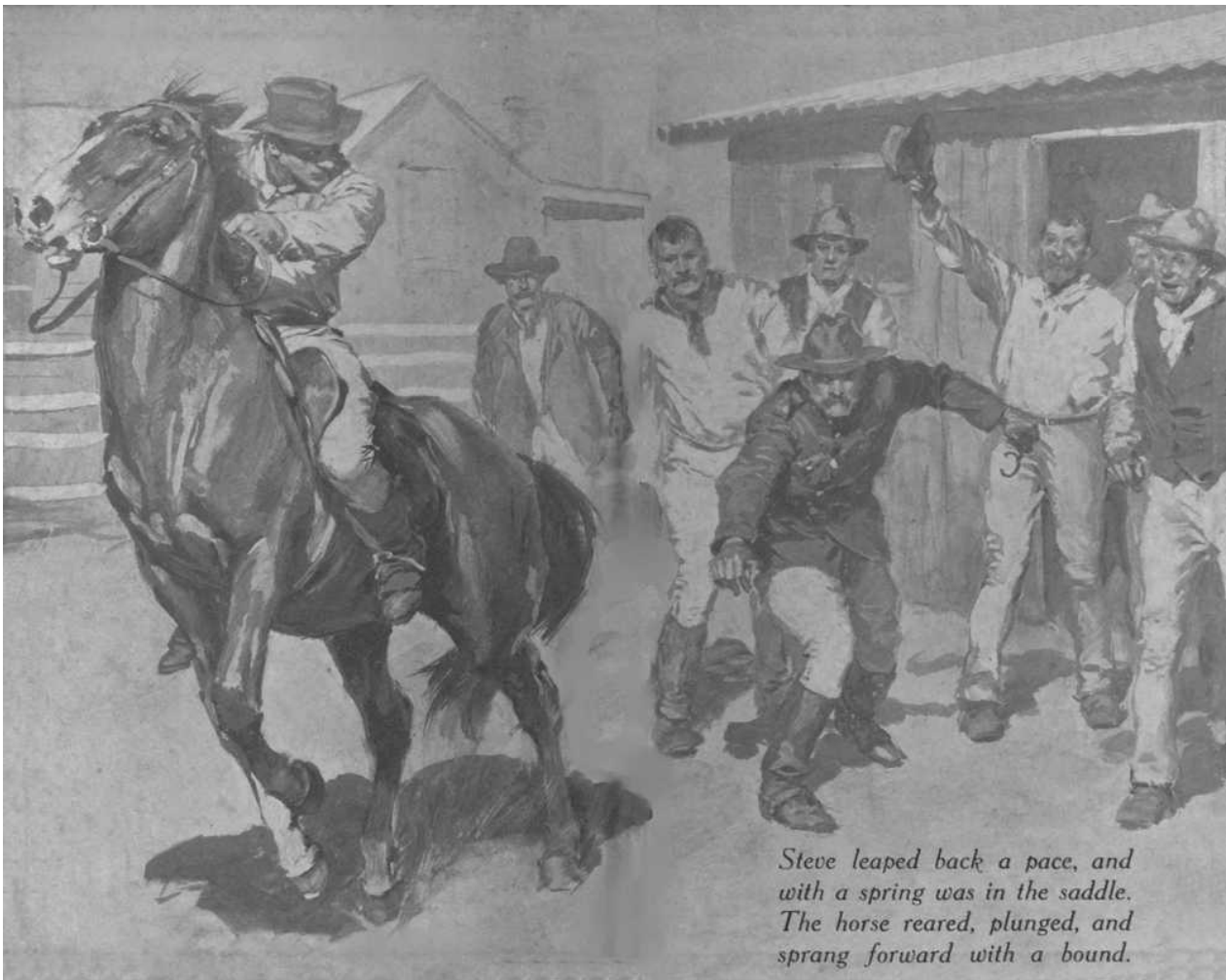
“She told me nothing,” and Ess opened her eyes full and looked up at him. “And now I know why, Steve, and I’m glad, dear. It was because she knew I ought to trust you without knowing, as I came to do. And because she knew the knowledge would be dearer to me after—this....”

And thereafter the river had its song to itself, long and unheeded, till presently she spoke again.

“Have you quite finished, Stevie dear? Because I’m waiting to hear the other—and sweeter—things you have to say. There’s nothing else matters now.” She nestled her head back on his shoulder and went on dreamily, “And once—oh, ever so long ago, in another world it must have been, where men toil and fight and the country is a field of battle—someone told me that a blow was never struck that could not be wiped out by a kiss, given and taken. It was a wise and gentle old man who told me, dear, and—was he right?”

“He was right, dear heart; he was right,” said Steve.

And “He was right, he was right,” gurgled and chuckled the river, running swift through the piles and swinging ashore, to press caresses and kisses on the land it had but lately smitten, even as another and warmer kiss was being given and taken.



*Steve leaped back a pace, and
with a spring was in the saddle.
The horse reared, plunged, and
sprang forward with a bound.*

Steve leaped back a pace, and with a spring was in the saddle. The horse reared, plunged, and sprang forward with a bound.

Silently corrected typographical errors and inconsistencies; retained non-standard spelling.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BY BLOW AND KISS: THE LOVE STORY OF A
MAN WITH A BAD NAME ***

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