BOYD CABLE

BY BLOW AND KISS

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Cable B.

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Содержание

Boyd Cable
By Blow and Kiss / The Love Story of a Man with a Bad Name. (Published serially / under the title Unstable as Water)

CHAPTER I

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 micht be better," said Scottie. "But then again, they micht 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 micht 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.

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."

"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."

"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.

"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."

CHAPTER II

"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 carcases, 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 craws 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 withoot 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 wheen 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.

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.

“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.”

CHAPTER III

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.

CHAPTER IV

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.

CHAPTER V

"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 necessaries, 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."

CHAPTER VI

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 carcases 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 nicht."

"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…"

CHAPTER VII

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.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.