



WISDOM

Ann
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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

"VISION" is the story of an Australian girl, of middle-class family, who to share in a fortune, marries an Englishman who is the owner of large impoverished estates in England. They hate each other cordially at the opening of the story, but six months' enforced companionship on a lonely station in Eastern Gippsland transforms their hatred into love. They discover a beautiful valley back in the hills which fires the imagination of Valmai who sees in it an ideal place for a settlement.

Then Richard's mother arrives from England accompanied by Cynthia to whom Dick has been practically engaged. Valmai forestalls the inevitable result by running away from the man and the home she loves; but Dick discovers after she has fled how much she means to him and he sets out to make her vision settlement come true. The rest of the story tells of his efforts to do this, of how he moves an entire village from England to Vision, of the failure of the settlement and of its re-birth.

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by Mrs. M. A. Murray



VISION

VISION

A Novel

By

ANNE PRAIZE

(Dorothy Blewett)

MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY

THE LOTHIAN PUBLISHING COMPANY PTY., LTD.

1931

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PART I

CHAPTER ONE

I

V ALMAI could suspend thought as she walked down town and stood at the corner waiting for the tram; there was nothing to bring her to earth as the tram bumped and rattled its three and a half miles between rows of closed shops—she was used to riding in cable trams. She could walk down Fletcher Street softly, wearily, so that the sound of her footsteps hardly disturbed the silence, without recording a single impression; she could even turn in at the gate of No. 16 with her mind as blank and colourless and nebulous as a mass of dull grey clouds. “The moratorium,” she called it.

But the moment she opened the front door where the key was obligingly left in the Yale lock, life came out to meet her; not Life with a capital “L” all colour and laughter and sheer rapture of living, but life with a very ordinary “l,” life that stretched ahead as coldly and uninvitingly as did the strip of linoleum down the hall, gleaming dully in the light from the dimmed gas-globe that hung between two colourless curtains midway between the front door and the dining-room. The

moment she opened the door, the moratorium was over and life came out to meet her on a wave of sound.

There was always the sound of dishes—life at No. 16 seemed to proceed to the accompaniment of the noise of crockery being washed—and always there were the voices.

Perhaps because Val had had a particularly hard day at the office, the voices sounded louder tonight. She listened, half subconsciously, then relaxed a trifle as Grace's high-pitched laugh rang out. Some nights, the voices were quarrelsome; on those nights, Valmai set her shoulders as she closed the front door, as though bracing herself for expected blows; other nights, the voices were querulous and then she would set her lips more firmly and withdraw all expression from her face.

There was no light in the front bedroom, but the light from the street lamp outside filtered through the curtains and filled the room with a ghostly kind of effulgence that intensified the darkness of the corners of the room. Mrs. Rutledge's bed, under the window from which every morning she sat up and watched the life of "the street," was dimly outlined in the gloom, but Val's bed was blotted out by the darkness.

Val groped her way across the room and threw her hat and coat on to her bed. Without troubling to smooth her hair, she slipped her handkerchief into the patch pocket of her skirt, then went out down the hall, across the dining-room where she

felt her way round the edge of the big oblong table and so into the breakfast-room.

The breakfast-room was the real stage whereon the whole drama of Val's life, up to date, had taken place. Her earliest memories were of it, every incident of importance in her life had happened there. Events in other places had significance only as they affected the life that was lived within the four walls of that shabby old room.

In the old rocking-chair, where she was now sitting, Anne Rutledge had rocked her two babies to sleep ; first Valmai and, eighteen months later, Jack.

Valmai herself had knelt on that windsor chair by the big square table one hot summer morning fifteen years ago, when she had read her own name high among the list of scholarship winners, and the table itself was ink-stained by the homework of their schooldays. In that arm-chair by the window, sinister chair that Val never voluntarily sat in, her grim old father had quietly died one evening while Val and Jack wrangled over the placings of flags in a war map and Mrs. Rutledge stared absently into the fire and dreaded the sailing of a certain troopship.

Here on the dingy brown walls hung photos of Jack in uniform ; here were snaps of him on a camel in front of the Pyramids, seated on his gun against a background of up-turned earth and twisted barbed wire (a smuggled one this), and Jack again, in a wheel-chair this time, with a pretty

V.A.D. seated on the arm of it. On the wall opposite hung two framed certificates: one indicated that John Stephen Rutledge had completed with satisfaction to the examiners the course of agriculture prescribed for Dookie College, the other that Valmai Anne Rutledge, having come Dux of her school had, along with all other prize-winners for the year 1916, given the money value of her prizes to the Red Cross Fund.

In the right-hand drawer of the bookcase were what Valmai called the "family archives"—photos of her mother and father at the time of their marriage, a tintype of her grandfather—the quondam proprietor of a "Select Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen." There were clippings from newspapers of events of all grades of importance, ranging from the announcement of Jack's birth to the announcement of his name among the wounded at Amiens in 1918.

Here, three years ago, Jack had stood a trifle defiantly, his back to the newly-installed gas fire, and announced his intention of marrying Grace Stone, the fluffy-haired, empty-headed girl who helped him in "the business," as the Rutledges and their neighbours euphonistically called the sweet and fruit shop on which the family subsisted.

Since then, in addition to being the council chamber, the breakfast-room had become the battleground. In the bedroom or the kitchen, feelings could be cloaked and some semblance of self-control retained—the shabby solidity of the breakfast-room

broke down the last barriers of repression and speech became the vehicle, not the shield, of one's thoughts. Lately, since the constant friction was playing havoc with the nerves of all of them and they had taken to recrimination, the breakfast-room saw much airing of soiled linen.

In this room, life seemed naked and real and everything that happened outside it became dream-like and misty with unreality.

II

For the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time, Valmai deplored aloud Jack's habit of starting work at his ledgers before the dishes were off the table.

He had piled the used plates and cutlery one on top of another, with forks and spoons sticking out in all directions and tilting the plates at precarious angles, turned back a portion of the cloth, and strewed his books everywhere.

"Good heavens, the table looks like a cat's breakfast," Valmai said, as she seated herself before a plate covered by another, which formed a kind of oasis in a desert of greasy crockery.

"What a dreadful expression, Val," her mother murmured. She never spoke decidedly to Val—you never knew how Val was going to take anything you said.

She sat down without another word to anyone and began her dinner.

“Stone cold, as per usual,” she commented, after the first couple of mouthfuls of uninviting boiled mutton and watery cabbage.

“You’re so late, Val,” her mother said. “It seems to me that when you’re supposed to knock off at half-past five, you ought to get home before seven.”

“Can’t knock off, as you so elegantly express it, at half-past five when there’s so much to do,” Val answered. “No need for the sarcasm,” she told herself savagely, but once start being sarcastic, particularly with those without the wit to answer back, and the habit becomes very hard to break. The remark was characteristic of Val nowadays, characteristic, too, of her mother’s lack of resentment.

The *Herald* was lying, badly folded, on one corner of the table. That was as good a screen as anything, and if you looked hard enough you might find something of sufficient interest to make you forget the slimy loathsomeness of the mutton and cabbage.

Rice pudding and prunes—again. Grace’s mind was a single-barrelled arrangement, without even the sense to vary the food she had to eat herself. Rice pudding finished, what next? Bread and butter and jam—Valmai looked around among the dishes. Jam dish and butter dish were there, both empty.

Funny what a wall of sound their voices made, buzzing backwards and forwards, just talk with nothing in it.

A chance sentence of Grace's, however, focused her mind suddenly. ". . . doesn't have her in-laws living with her like I do, though."

"Presumably doesn't live on her in-laws' money either." Val dipped her oar into the conversation.

"My God, there she goes again. I wish to heaven Jack could let you have your confounded money out of the business. Lot of good it'd do you anyhow—even you couldn't live on a thousand pounds for long," Grace retorted from the scullery, her words punctuated by clashes of pots.

"The interest on a thousand pounds would mean all the difference between living here and living in comfort," Val said.

"I don't know how you can talk so about your own home, Val"—her mother, this time, a little tearful.

"This isn't home ; it's pandemonium," Valmai retorted quietly enough.

"Well, all I can say is, just try a boarding-house. You wouldn't get everything done for you in a boarding-house for a pound a week." This from the scullery, where Grace still wrestled with the pots.

"Pardon my correcting you," said Val, elaborately polite. "Two pounds—kindly remember I draw no interest on the thousand pounds you despise so."

"Good God, Val, can't you stop throwing that up at me, for one day, at least. My God, anyone'd think I'd embezzled the money—well, what are you laughing at now," Jack broke off, for Valmai

was laughing quietly with a contemptuous twist of her lips.

"Nothing—only you and Grace keep your Maker pretty busy listening in to all your calls on Him," she answered.

"Well, I like that. Despising your home and slinging things up at your own brother and now blaspheming . . ." Grace appeared in the doorway, with an avenging glare to match her words. Her permanently waved shingle was stringy with the heat of wash-up water, one hand was on her hip, the other grasped a dingy grey dish-cloth streaked with black grease.

Val stared at her for a moment in silence. Then suddenly she laughed aloud—a delicious, delighted laugh as fresh as a child's.

"The Church militant," she said. "Thanks, Grace, that's the best laugh I've had for a week."

Jack threw down his pen angrily.

"Will you women never stop your everlasting clatter," he shouted.

Grace, affronted at Val's laugh, tossed her head and went back to her dishes.

"Can't you stop this eternal bickering, Val?" he said.

Val's face became obstinate and pugnacious.

"Blame me, of course—you know very well your charming wife starts it," she flashed back.

"I don't care a damn who starts it. The thing is, it's got to stop. Mother and Grace manage to go on all right during the day——"

“Mother hasn’t enough backbone to stand up for herself,” Val interjected, but the remark went unnoticed.

“It’s only when you come home that the confounded rowing begins. We’d all be better off if you were out of the house. You’d better get a place to board.”

There was a sudden electric silence. The noise of dishes in the scullery miraculously ceased, Mrs. Rutledge’s half-articulated protest died in her throat, and Jack sat silent, not looking at Val, half-frightened at his own temerity.

It seemed a full five minutes before that silence was broken. “Yes, I’ll get a place to board,” Val said. To herself, her voice sounded as though it came from a great distance. A long time afterwards, it seemed, she heard Jack speaking.

“. . . I’ll manage to pay you interest on your share somehow.”

Something tore at her throat, but to cry was unthinkable, showing the white flag.

“Oh, don’t talk such utter rot,” she said savagely, as she went out of the room.

III

There was plenty of time to think in the bare room, called by courtesy a “flat,” to which Valmai transferred herself and her clothes during the next

week. A flat, of the variety of this one, is much cheaper than boarding.

The room was furnished, after a fashion, with a bed, a table, and two chairs. A dressing-table flanked the fireplace on one side, while a structure with hanging curtains that served the purposes of a wardrobe, filled the other recess.

Lunch and dinner Valmai bought at cafeterias in the city; breakfast she prepared for herself in a dark cubby-hole on the ground floor of the house. The gas-stove was a community affair, and Val's boiled egg bubbled each morning side by side with the bacon and eggs of the law student on the first floor and the nameless but odoursome meal of a Semitic gentleman who was "on the road."

The day-time was too full of work to allow time for brooding, but in the evening, when her dinner over, she returned to the gloomy room with its flickering gas-light and cheerless grate, thought crowded down on her.

But though thought got free play, life itself seemed suspended. Valmai walked and ate, worked and slept, and all the time one half of her seemed to stand aside and watch the other half going about the ordinary business of life. This feeling of being two persons in one increased the unreality and impersonality of her life. She felt out of focus.

Once a week, however, things would get into focus for a few hours when she went home for tea on Sunday. Home along the three and a half

miles of rattling and bumping in the cable tram, home softly along Fletcher Street, home as she turned in at the gate of No. 16 and turned the key in the door. Home, for a moment unfamiliar as Grace would come out of her room, tidy as to hair and dress, much powdered and rouged as to face; Grace stiffly cordial, playing hostess in the rooms that seemed to be part of Val's own body.

Sunday afternoon—sitting more or less at ease in the saddle-bag arm-chairs in the dining-room with Grace and Mrs. Rutledge telling her the news of the street; then tea in the breakfast-room—the kind of tea Valmai could remember having eaten practically every Sunday evening of her life. There would be cold meat and lettuce salad, cake and scones—shop-made these, since Grace was no hand at cooking—followed by prune jelly and cream. There were no ledgers in evidence to-night.

After tea, more desultory talk, then, at nine o'clock, Jack would get his hat and overcoat and walk down to the tram with her. The sense of unreality would descend on her again then. So ridiculous for Jack to walk down to the tram with her, making conversation, keeping away from essentials all the time.

She tried to express it one night to him.

“This can't go on, you know, Jack. I don't seem to be living myself—like someone else using my body. It's too unreal, something will have to happen.”

“It never does happen, it has a way of just going on,” Jack said unexpectedly, a little bitterly.

“What has?” Val asked, but the tram came up then and Jack’s answer, if he made one, was lost in the grinding of the brakes.

“Something will *have* to happen,” Valmai told herself, as she undressed in the chilly flat, “but what?”

CHAPTER TWO

I

THE alarm clock wakened Valmai from a delicious dream. She forgot, the moment she woke, what it had been about, but the sense of warmth and colour remained with her.

She stretched out her arm and turned off the alarm. B-r-r-r! How beastly cold it was. Outside the window which was opened as wide as it would go, grey wreaths of fog floated. Val took in that much with a cautiously half-opened eye, then she closed her eye again. Ten minutes before there was really any need to get up and anyway, the law student was in the bathroom—his cheerful voice rang out above the noise of running water :

“My mother told me that she would buy me
A rubber dolly, a rubber dolly,
But when I told her, I loved a soldier,
She would not buy me my rubber dolly.”

Val joined in with him ; she knew the sound of running water drowned her voice.

There was the bang of the bathroom door—hurry now, before the little Yidd has time to make his greasy ablutions.

Twenty minutes later, clothed and as nearly in her right mind as any girl could be on a foggy June morning with the thermometer at thirty-five point nothing, Valmai tore downstairs with her egg in one hand and a little teapot in the other.

Ah, her kettle was on and, praise be, just on the boil. The Jewish gentleman, though greasy, had his good points.

"Thanks for putting my kettle on, Mr. Abronsen," she said, as he hovered in the doorway of the kitchen. Mr. Abronsen rolled his large brown eyes and twisted his too-red mouth into what he evidently imagined was a charming smile.

"No trouble at all, Miss Rutledge." He cleared his throat tentatively once or twice, then—"Care to do a show to-night? Pretty good picture on at the Capitol, I hear."

Valmai kept her eyes on her teapot and she made her tea before she answered.

"Sorry, Mr. Abronsen, but I have to work to-night."

It was years since a man had asked Val to go anywhere with him, which accounted for the unusual amount of warmth she put into her voice. Perhaps that encouraged him unduly, for he put his hand on her arm.

"Oh, come on, be a sport—nobody'd know." The last remark was Mr. Abronsen's error. Valmai summoned to her aid all the hauteur of which she was capable and looked him square in the eyes. "Your wife *might* hear about it." A sudden

contraction of the pupils of Mr. Abronsen's languishing eyes indicated the success of her chance shot.

"Of course, if you want to be nasty," he said and walked out with as much dignity as he could manage.

Val saw red for a moment. "Greasy, filthy, abominable reptile," she said savagely, as she banged her pot and kettle on the shelves under the sink. She murmured the same phrase again as she walked upstairs with a hot teapot in one hand and a very hot boiled egg balanced precariously on a plate in the other. "Greasy, filthy, abominable . . .," she said again, as she unnecessarily slammed the door and thumped a chair into place at the table.

Then suddenly, she laughed, a childish, thoroughly amused laugh.

"A married man—Val Rutledge, you're surely on the downward path."

With the laugh still lingering on her lips and, if she had known it, softening her face remarkably, she swung off down the street a few minutes later.

II

Valmai left the house at a brisk walk, for she was late, but a tram-fare would cost threepence and, in any case, the walk through the Fitzroy and Treasury

Gardens each morning was one of the chief delights of her day.

This morning, the gardens were veiled in grey fog. Leafless Lombardy poplars, remote, mysterious, wreathed in fog, lined each side of her path like silent sentinels. All sound was muffled and infinitely distant and died suddenly without echo. The roar of electric trains, the sound of trams and the rush of swiftly moving cars, the fall of countless feet, usually the theme of the city's song, were an undertone, an accompaniment to the drip of moisture from the naked branches.

Val's morning walk was usually her dreaming time. In imagination she could ignore the realities of life: she could be wealthy or famous or poor (romantically poor, be it said) or infamous, as the fancy took her. But dreams eluded her to-day. She was merely Valmai Rutledge, a typist on her way to work, in shabby grey costume and faded felt hat, with shoes that advertised their age though they still retained their shape, with mended gloves, with just ninepence in her purse because to-morrow was pay day—a woman, not a girl any longer, with her twenty-ninth birthday unpleasantly close—a woman of nature so unadaptable that her family were happier without her.

Men! A minus quantity as far as Valmai was concerned, unless one counted the traveller and his like, but even they were very few and far between. Of real men one could respect, Val could not number one among her acquaintances. For more

years than she cared to remember, no man had sought her company—yet, she acknowledged to herself, that she would like to marry. Much against her will, Nature forced her to recognize that fact. Fairly early in life, she had realized that she was without attraction for the opposite sex, but she knew herself to be a good housewife and mother wasted, as surely as she knew that the thwarting of those very impulses was the cause of her restlessness and discontent.

Generally she could manage to fill in time with things that crowded out thought; but in keeping with the grey day, her thoughts were grey. The future was as nebulous, as uninviting, as the fog-bound path ahead of her. Not a very good frame of mind in which to commence an arduous day's work, Val realized as she turned in at the office door. Things were sure to prick and annoy to-day and seem twice as wearisome, because there was no background of colour and warmth to brighten the fiddly little duties that had to be performed.

“Letter for you, Miss Rutledge, re-addressed from home,” the office boy called, scrutinizing the envelope closely.

The letter was short, concise, perfectly intelligible and absolutely bewildering. It merely requested Miss Valmai Anne Rutledge to call at the office of the Manager of the Guarantee Trust & Agency Co., Melbourne, on Wednesday, 23rd June—that was to-morrow—bringing with her, if possible, her mother's marriage certificate. The hour set was

11.30 a.m., and the letter was headed "re Estate of John Craig deceased."

John Craig—the name struck a chord of memory, but Valmai could not recall where she had heard it or with what it was connected. A voice broke in on her meditation.

"It is now seven minutes after nine, Miss Rutledge, and this firm cannot afford to have seven minutes of its time wasted." Mr. Spowers did not wait for her answer, but trotted off to perform like duties all through the office. Val could hear his acid voice in the ledger room, "It is now eight minutes after nine, gentlemen, . . ." With set lips and hands that trembled with cold, she seated herself and commenced work.

"Sparrow," as the boys called him, and indeed the name suited him admirably, was in a particularly jumpy mood; he was in and out of Valmai's little office at least twenty times during the morning and every time, he prefaced at least one remark with, "This firm cannot afford . . ." Valmai longed for the power to answer that she knew as well as he the firm's financial position and what it could and could not afford.

She hated to have to ask him for time off during the next morning, but it had to be done and late in the afternoon she summoned up courage enough to show him the letter and ask for the necessary leave.

"This firm cannot afford . . .," he began, but Valmai cut in wearily.

“I’ll take my lunch hour then, or perhaps it would be better to take half an hour off at half-past eleven and half an hour for lunch at one o’clock. Will that do?”

After much humming and ha-ing, he reluctantly consented. “It may be a legacy, Miss Rutledge,” he said as Val turned to leave the room. “If it should be, you know, of course, that this firm accepts deposits from clients and . . .”

“This firm could not afford to pay me the interest I’d want on a legacy,” Val said and slipped out before he could answer. She’d thought of a legacy herself, but old “Sparrow’s” words had taken all the joy out of the thought of it.

III

Consciously perverse, Valmai wore her ordinary office clothes that day. She regretted it the moment she left the house, but it was too late to go back and change them. Strange how sentimental her mother was—neither she nor Jack had inherited that trait, thank heaven. Valmai had gone home the night before to get her mother’s marriage certificate and had shown them the letter. Grace had been excited and more friendly than she had ever been before; Jack was sceptical, perhaps a little jealous, and Mrs. Rutledge had cried when she read the name.

“John Craig, deceased,” she said. “Why it

seems only the other day he begged me to marry him—and how cut up he was when I refused, poor John. He was a harsh man though, and I was afraid of him then.”

At twenty-past eleven, Valmai was feeling extremely angry with the parsimonious impulse that had made her wear old gloves and stockings to-day and, as she looked in the little mirror to powder her nose, she assured herself for the fortieth time that she *must* get a new every-day hat. Then she looked in at Mr. Spowers' door to reassure him that she would be in by twelve, and set out for the Trust Company's offices.

They were large and imposing, with much bevelled glass and highly polished fittings. The office boy, after the manner of his kind, was supercilious until she mentioned her name, which galvanized him into startling activity, so that he ushered her along to a nicely furnished and warm waiting-room.

A man was already seated there. Even seated, he looked large and he was also extremely good-looking, of which fact, Val decided, he was well aware. All the same, she could not help liking his clean-cut profile, his firm jaw and chin, the slightly tanned and healthy skin, the fair hair that was greying over his ears and showed a decided tendency to curl in spite of the efforts that had been made to keep it flat. Valmai could not see his eyes and his hands were gloved, so that the two points from which she generally read character

were hidden from her. His suit was beautifully made, so were his overcoat and spats, though they were certainly not new. She decided that she did not like hard black felt hats, because they looked affected in spite of the Prince wearing them—at which point in her scrutiny, a door opened and a middle-aged man invited her into the next room.

“Will you come in too, please, Captain Warrington?” she heard him ask, and the next moment the man in the waiting-room walked in too. “My name is McFarlane,” the manager said and he then proceeded to introduce Captain Warrington to Miss Rutledge. They all sat down and there was a moment’s silence, which was just long enough to enable Valmai to feel miserably gauche and more self-conscious, if possible, than usual.

“You have your mother’s marriage certificate, Miss Rutledge?” Mr. McFarlane asked. Val assented and gave him the certificate with fingers that trembled in spite of herself.

“Ah,” Mr. McFarlane said after he had read it through, “very satisfactory. We already have your birth certificate here. Just as a matter of form, however, for purposes of identification, of course, would you mind telling me when and where you were born and your parents’ names.” Valmai gave him the required information and felt Captain Warrington’s eyes on her as she gave the date of her birth. “That makes you twenty-nine this year,” Mr. McFarlane said. “A very sensible age, if I may say so—past the flapper stage and not old

enough to be set and selfish." He smiled at her as he spoke and Valmai realizing that he was trying to put her at her ease, did her best to smile back.

Captain Warrington's attention had wandered—he was looking with some interest at the Post Office clock, of which one obtained a fairly good view through the window.

"I obtained from you yesterday all the information I require about you, Captain," Mr. McFarlane said, "so now we'll get to business. These documents here," he held up several very legal documents tied with green tape—Valmai most irrelevantly wanted to ask why it was not red tape—"these documents here are the probate of the will of John Craig of Callemondah Station, deceased, a letter from him to his executor—that is, this Company—a list of his assets and various other things which I will show you as we require them. By the way, Miss Rutledge," he broke off, "I hope you are not compelled to leave at any set time—this matter is going to take a long time and I'm afraid it cannot be delayed. Would you like to ring up your office and tell them you won't be back for an hour or so?"

Valmai's face must have betrayed her dismay—she had asked for half an hour off, of which twenty minutes had already gone, and he talked of hours longer.

"I'll ring myself," Mr. McFarlane said, without waiting for her reply. She thanked him and

listened with inward rejoicing to the manner in which he disposed of finnick Mr. Spowers. "I shall now read to you Mr. Craig's will. If there is anything you do not understand, please stop me and I'll explain."

He cleared his throat, then commenced to read from the most-legal-looking document of them all :

"This is the last Will and Testament of me John Craig of Callemondah Station near Orbost in the State of Victoria Gentleman I appoint The Guarantee Trust and Agency Company Limited of Melbourne sole executor and trustee of this my Will

After payment of the specific and pecuniary legacies set out in a memorandum attached to this my Will and signed by me and the witnesses to this my will I devise and bequeath the residue of my real and personal estate unto my Trustee upon trust in equal shares but subject always to the compliance by them with the conditions set out hereunder for the eldest surviving unmarried son who shall at the time of my death be under no contract to marry of Jane Warrington formerly Jane McAlpin of Warrington Chase Surrey England (hereinafter referred to as "the said son") and Valmai Anne Rutledge only daughter of Anne Rutledge formerly Anne Rowe of Number 16 Fletcher Street Chester Park in the State of Victoria Provided always that the said son and the said Valmai Anne Rutledge shall marry and that they shall within one year of the date of my death complete six months continuous residence upon my property known as Callemondah Station And provided that during such residence as aforesaid they shall support themselves entirely and

solely by their own efforts by carrying on the business of a farmer and grazier carried on by me on such property And I declare that for the purpose of so supporting themselves the said son and the said Valmai Anne Rutledge may use and employ the live and dead stock plant implements and chattels and also the furniture and other household chattels in and about such Station at the time of my death and may use and employ such live and dead stock and chattels as aforesaid as absolute owners thereof But I declare that the said son and the said Valmai Anne Rutledge shall not be at liberty to employ any managers or servants or other employees for the purpose of carrying on such business as aforesaid it being my intention that the said son and the said Valmai Anne Rutledge shall prove to the satisfaction of my Trustee their ability to support themselves entirely on the products of my said business of a farmer and grazier And I declare that the decision of my Trustee as to the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the conditions hereinbefore set out shall be final conclusive and binding on all parties I direct that my Trustee shall upon the day of the marriage of the said son and the said Valmai Anne Rutledge hand to each of them the sum of Ten pounds but that my Trustee shall make no other payments to them or on their behalf whatsoever until the completion of the period of one year from the date of my death.

AND if either the said son or the said Valmai Anne Rutledge shall refuse or fail to comply with the conditions hereinbefore set forth then I bequeath to the other of them the sum of Ten thousand pounds absolutely And in the event of either or both of the said son and the said Valmai Anne Rutledge refusing or failing to comply with the conditions hereinbefore

set out to the satisfaction of my Trustee as my Trustee in its absolute and unfettered discretion may determine I bequeath the residue of my real and personal estate unto my Trustee upon trust for such charities for the benefit of children in the State of Victoria as my Trustee in its absolute discretion shall determine

I direct that the contents of this my Will shall not be published in any newspaper And I further direct that any beneficiary or legatee under this my will bringing any action or suit in any Court of Law against my Trustee in respect of this my Will shall forfeit all benefit of any kind whatsoever under this my Will

I revoke all Wills and other testamentary dispositions heretofore made by me and declare this my only to be last

In witness whereof I have———”

Mr. McFarlane's voice droned on to the very end—even the addresses and occupations of the witnesses to the will, not a word was omitted.

Valmai sat speechless, motionless, her eyes like those of a sleepwalker. She was, in fact, afraid to close them.

“And what exactly does all this mean?” asked “the eldest surviving unmarried son who was not under any contract to marry of Jane Warrington formerly Jane McAlpin.” His voice was tense, indignant.

“It simply means, Captain Warrington, that in order to share in the considerable estate left by Mr. Craig, you and Miss Rutledge must marry, live at Callemondah Station for six months, and

during that six months support yourselves entirely by your own work. The Station, I may say, is well stocked and there are crops already in and I think you should have no difficulty in carrying out that condition."

"Those conditions are preposterous, impossible," Richard Warrington said, his blue eyes like twin points of ice with the sun on them.

"I'm sorry you feel like that about it, Captain. Three hundred thousand pounds is quite a sum of money and," he added, smiling guilelessly, "I presume that even Warrington Chase is not without its mortgage these post-war days."

Richard Warrington had forgotten Valmai, or so it seemed to her. "The idea is ridiculous—to marry an unknown woman, to cut myself off from everything for six months, to live on next to nothing. The man must have been mad."

Mr. McFarlane shrugged his shoulders. "He was quite sane," he answered, "we made sure of that when he sent the will to us nearly two years ago. He had a reason for doing this which he explained in a letter to this Company. I will give you a copy of that letter and you will understand his motives from that. He was afraid you might not be worthy——"

Valmai had been listening to the conversation without comprehending it; suddenly she realized that it was she, herself, that the matter concerned.

"But to marry——" Captain Warrington started to say again, but Valmai broke in.

“It’s worse for me than it is for you, Captain Warrington. I’m to be pitchforked into matrimony with a man who may be a brute—” Richard Warrington’s eyes flashed—“I’m to work for him, keep house for him. I’m used to living on nothing, so that part doesn’t hurt, but to face six months of that loneliness with a man who may make heaven knows what demands of me—who may not even have the instincts of a gentleman.”

“You need not fear that,” Richard Warrington said in a voice that at any other time would have made Valmai quail.

“No?” she said, and the inflection of her voice was enough to rouse the temper of a more equable man than Richard Warrington, as she realized from the expression on Mr. McFarlane’s face.

Captain Warrington was speaking again: “There is a girl in England whom I had decided to ask to marry me. If we should enter into this contract, I can assure you I shall be ready to make any arrangements as to divorce that may be necessary at the expiration of the six months.”

How precisely he spoke and how cold his blue eyes looked! Valmai decided that she did not like Captain Richard Warrington. “I am sorry I cannot give you time to think this matter over. If six months’ residence is to be completed within a year of Mr. Craig’s death, you will have to be at Callemondah in three weeks from to-day. There is not time to give you even twenty-four hours in which to make up your minds, because any marriage

licence will have to applied for to-day, since you are not a Victorian, Captain, so I must ask you for your decision."

With set lips, Richard Warrington motioned courteously towards Valmai, but one sentence in John Craig's will had stuck in her mind—the person refusing got nothing, the other got ten thousand pounds. Her voice had a ring of independence as she answered.

"Ten thousand pounds is a considerable fortune to me—I leave it to Captain Warrington to refuse."

"I do not refuse," the man said.

For a minute they literally glared at one another, then Richard Warrington turned to Mr. McFarlane. "I accept those conditions," he said.

Valmai raised her chin and with a look that should have withered him on the spot, "I accept too," she said.

IV

Val slept that night in her own bed in the front bedroom at 16 Fletcher Street. Sleep was a long time coming, for the events of the day had been bewildering and fantastic as a dream.

Pieces of the letter John Craig had written to his trustees seemed to float before her eyes in the darkness.

"The two women I loved failed me. . . . Jane McAlpin refused to face poverty and exile with me—her son must face both. Anne Rowe feared the

bush and the loneliness and the obligations of married life—her daughter must overcome her mother's fear.”

Poor old man, seeking to avenge his own loneliness and disillusionment, even while he benefited indirectly the two women he still thought of with love and tenderness. Valmai felt desperately sorry for him ; then anger overwhelmed her pity. How dare he force her to sell herself ! What kind of baggage did John Craig take her for to expect her to marry a man she didn't know for money ! Then she laughed whimsically in the darkness—three hundred thousand pounds was quite a lot of money to pay for something no one else had wanted.

Three hundred thousand pounds—the figures were like flames in her brain—a magic three followed by an impossible number of noughts. It was so absurd, she expected to wake up at any minute and find it was all a silly kind of nightmare. Of the other victim of this impossible position, she thought very little until some words out of that letter of John Craig's flashed into mind once more. “The obligations of married life.” What would he demand of her, this man she was to marry ? She moved uneasily, and something Grace had said to her during the evening recurred to her. “What will you do if he gets too friendly ?” Grace had asked. She had shrugged her shoulders at the time and answered that she'd be able to cope with him, but thinking it over quietly she realized that this was indeed a problem.

Then the absurdity of worrying over such a thing made her laugh again, very softly so as not to disturb her mother. The thought of the bored, detached, exquisite Richard Warrington ever becoming "too friendly" with the person who had looked back at her from mirrors for twenty-eight years was far too ridiculous to require serious consideration.

How he had hated all the details of that long conference this afternoon—the only time he had looked really interested was when the Trust people had shown them a list of John Craig's assets. Val gasped every time she thought of the total at the foot of that list—stupendous figures, impossible to comprehend. Yes, he had been interested then, but the business of the marriage licence had bored him almost to death.

Valmai could not remember that he had looked straight at her more than once during the day.

Yet she managed to retain a clear picture of his cold, dark blue eyes—a man of strong feelings when he was roused, though, as the experiences of the morning showed.

The other woman rather intrigued her. What was she like, this woman that Richard Warrington had decided to marry? Did anyone ever call him "Dick," she wondered. Probably not, he did not lend himself to diminutives. Valmai decided that she didn't like the way he had spoken of the English girl, rather as though she were something he could take or leave at will. He did

not sound like a man in love, either ; his decision to marry was evidently the result of deliberation and not impulse. Yet, thought Val, remembering his eyes, he did not look cold.

Mrs. Rutledge's even breathing switched Val's thought in another direction. What was there in her mother that had inspired a love that had lasted a lifetime—Valmai could understand John Craig retaining his love for Jane McAlpin, "imperious Jane, with her flashing black eyes, her brilliance and her wit" he had said of her in his letter. John Craig had the gift of words and, as she read his letter, Valmai sensed something of the man's implacable determination. Val set her teeth in equal determination. She would carry out his conditions to the letter and then some of his money, that money which had mocked his loneliness, would make care-free the later years of the woman who had failed him.

His conditions had undoubtedly been intended to strike through their children at the women who had let him down. Poetic justice of a kind, she admitted. As far as Val was concerned, her mother's utter lack of appreciation of anything except the immensity of the sum involved heightened the grim humour of the situation.

He was good-looking, she thought irrelevantly, and John Craig was not in her thoughts—the kind of man who looks well in a wig and ruff, a fairy prince kind of man.

Val slept.

CHAPTER THREE

I

THE sun was well up over the mountains and already the mist had cleared away in the gullies. The frosty nip was still in the air, but the day gave promise of unusual beauty. August was coming in and already the cootamundras were loaded with pale golden bloom.

The kitchen at Callemondah was open to wind and sun. It was a pleasant room, rather narrow for its length, with a long range at one end. There was a long table in the centre of the room, and kitchen chairs, painted dark brown, stood back against the wall. The two windows were set in one wall, with a sink and draining-board under one. Under the other stood an old-fashioned rocking-chair with cushions made, evidently, from the same piece of material as the red cloth that covered the table. Shelves near the stove held pots and pans of various descriptions and crockery was arranged on a dresser opposite the windows.

The floor was covered with a dark linoleum from which all pattern had long since been worn, and, alas for Val's housewifely reputation, a trail

of muddy footsteps led from the backdoor to the door into the front part of the house.

“Confound that man,” Valmai ejaculated mentally as she caught sight of the muddy track across the floor. “If he doesn’t realize soon that I’m cook as well as housemaid, I’ll let him go without a couple of meals.”

As she stood at the sink washing the breakfast dishes, Val gazed out of the window at the mountains, near enough to look grey-green instead of blue, and listened, as a month ago she had listened to the city song, to the voice of the farm.

Have you ever heard it? As a matter of fact, a farm has a dozen voices, each one distinct, yet the whole blending inexplicably until it becomes one voice. There is the clop-cloop of the horses’ hoofs as they move round in the stable yard, the clucking of hens, the deep-toned grunting of pigs, the clatter of buckets and milk-pans, the crackle of box logs in the stove. And the smell of it! The sweet odour of cattle, the scent of grass, the warm smell of cooking from the kitchen, and, permeating everything, the scent of gum trees.

The glint of sunlight on her wedding-ring caught Val’s eye. What a travesty of a wedding it had been! She would never remember without a shudder the chill darkness of that suburban church on the morning a fortnight ago when she had married Richard Warrington. They had been married at half-past seven, so that they could catch the morning train to Callemondah. Mrs.

Rutledge, Jack, and Grace and a man from the Trust Company had been the witnesses.

Val had dressed by candle-light in her simple grey costume—for which Jack had most unexpectedly offered to pay—and had walked the few hundred yards to the church with the feeling of being a marionette. She had a mental picture of John Craig leaning out of heaven to pull the wires that ordered her movements. The sense of unreality had persisted right through the ceremony, even when Richard Warrington had taken her hand in his firm clasp, right until the minister had touched their heads with his hands—"I pronounce that you be man and wife together. Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder." He had rolled the words out sonorously. Val remembered with set lips her sudden feeling of being trapped; she wanted to cry out, to stop him, to be released from the awful feeling of irrevocability and responsibility.

How quietly and naturally Richard Warrington had moved and spoken—beside his air of perfect ease, Val's panic had seemed to herself common. Her lack of self-control had grated on her own nerves and she resented Richard's control of voice and manner. He had seemed aloof, detached—yet perfectly courteous, even when Grace wished him "every happiness" in her strident voice that jarred more than ever.

Valmai took herself to task often for her resentment against Richard—there was really no reason

for it, she admitted, yet it was very real. She resented most of all his being on earth at all, which certainly was unreasonable.

Val liked to think of herself as absolutely independent. She owned no one her superior, she formed her own opinions and stuck to them through thick and thin, she despised hypocrisy and affectation and considered herself above conforming to convention unless the reasonableness of it appealed to her—yet Richard Warrington, without saying a word, made her feel inferior. In his quiet presence, she felt crude and unpolished and she distrusted even her own reasoning powers. That was not his fault, she told herself, yet she resented it and added it on to her already formidable list of reasons for disliking him.

There had happened one incident that made her writhe with anger and humiliation every time she thought of it. They had watched one day the passing of a young girl who often walked across one corner of Callemondah orchard which seemed to be a short cut to the store. Valmai had admired the girl's lissom grace as she climbed through a fence and swung off down the hill.

"Graceful and vivid," Richard had said, his voice warmer and more animated than Val had ever heard it before. He admired and noticed beauty in a girl then.

"It's rather rough on you being married to a woman with as little pretention to good looks as I have," she had said—the nearest approach to

intimacy she had ever made. Richard Warrington had looked at her steadily as though appraising her points.

“Your unpretentiousness in that line is the only thing that makes this business possible. It is your protection—and mine,” he said quietly.

He may have intended to reassure her, Valmai decided, striving to be entirely fair, but the sting of his words and worse still his manner of delivering them remained and would not be forgotten.

II

Something sizzling on the stove recalled Valmai's attention and she dashed across the room just in time to prevent the whole morning's milk from rising up in an avalanche and flooding the whole place. She pulled the pan to the side, burning her fingers in the process and wished for the hundredth time that she knew how to work the separator in the dairy. The process of skimming the milk each day and making enough butter for their needs became more irksome each time she did it, particularly as she was so uncertain of what the result would be. There was a little churn in the dairy too. If she only knew someone in the district she could ask how to use the things, although she rebelled at the idea of exposing her ignorance.

Dick milked the three cows each morning and took more than an hour over the process. He

admitted having milked cows before in Scotland when he stayed there with his uncle while his cousins were away at the Boer War.

“Good heavens,” Valmai had said, “were you old enough to milk cows then?”

“I’ll be thirty-nine this year,” he had answered.

After the milking was finished, Dick would come in and have breakfast, generally a silent meal with Val trying to make conversation and Dick answering politely. After one or two attempts at leading the conversation into personal channels—with the laudable intention of waking Dick up to the fact that she was more or less interested in his opinions and likes and dislikes—Valmai had abandoned the effort, for Dick had on each occasion withdrawn himself into his cloak of impenetrable reserve. His uncommunicativeness and monosyllabic replies to her questions had infuriated Valmai and she had resolved never again to commence a conversation unless it was absolutely essential. All the same, it was hard to keep to her resolve; their isolation from the little town of Old Ford had prevented any neighbours from coming to see them up to date and Val viewed with dismay the prospect of six months spent in the atmosphere of reserve and resentment that seemed to exist between herself and Dick.

“We’re bad cockies,” Valmai had said at breakfast that morning, for the clock pointed to five to eleven while they were still at the table.

Dick had not even asked for the meaning of

the word which must have been new to him, but Val had felt constrained to explain. "They call farmers 'cockies' in Victoria because they get up so early. A corruption of 'Cockatoo,' I suppose, or perhaps 'cock-a-doodle-doo,'" she had said, laughing a little for the explanation of the derivation of the word was spontaneous—she had no idea how it had originated. There was no smile on Dick's face, however; he had merely raised his fine eyebrows and said in the impersonal voice he always used:

"Is that so?"

"No, my lad," Val communed with herself, "if you like to act like a dummy, there are two can play at that game. I'm hanged if I'll speak to you again, unless I'm spoken to." With which iron resolve, she bethought herself of the little calves waiting for their meal of skimmed milk.

She looked at the clock; just time to feed the calves and pigs before Dick would be in for lunch. Val rarely saw him between breakfast and lunch time; he evidently spent his time shooting or fishing, for almost every day he had brought in a rabbit or a fish or two. One day there had been a black duck. Valmai had expressed some doubt as to whether duck were not protected at the time of the year, but Dick had merely shrugged his shoulders. "Do game laws extend to this wilderness?" he said.

Valmai crossed the back yard to the dairy, and as she did so she saw coming through the orchard

the girl she and Dick had admired a few days before. The girl looked up towards Valmai with a beaming smile and Val waved back.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" the girl called, waving a hand to indicate the blue sky and the fresh green world.

"Glorious," answered Val, to whom the morning seemed suddenly fairer still, such is the power of a wide smile.

"I'm Doreen O'Donnell, your nearest neighbour as the crow flies," the girl said, as she came near enough to be heard. "Mother and I are calling on you officially this afternoon, but I couldn't resist speaking when I saw you."

Doreen O'Donnell was rather tall, very slim, and very charming. Honey-coloured hair hung in a thick plait down her back, and radiant eyes—Val couldn't decide in retrospect whether they were blue or grey—danced in an extremely freckled face. She looked about fifteen, but Valmai discovered later in the day that she had turned eighteen. They stood chatting for a few minutes, then Doreen said, "I've to get some things down at the store and then get the dinner on the table, so I'll get along. Anything you want down below?"

Valmai was feeling a little upset at the prospect of visitors; every cake she had made in the last two or three days had been a terrible failure and she could not depend on herself to make one nice enough to put in front of visitors for afternoon tea. A lifetime in a house with a gas-stove

doesn't teach one the first thing about wood-stoves.

"Oh, would you mind getting me some nice biscuits?" she asked a trifle diffidently, but at Doreen's ready assent, she ran inside to get some money. The ten-shilling note she took from her purse left a solitary one-pound note in it.

Can one live for five and a half months on one pound? Valmai decided without hesitation that one cannot. It seemed that she would have to speak to her husband without being spoken to, and the subject to be discussed would be "Finance."

III

Owing to Val's efforts to produce a respectable cake with the requisite convex and nicely-browned surface, lunch was a very late and very uninteresting meal. Valmai acknowledged after that it was not the best time to approach the subject of money just when Dick had with a pained expression refused a second helping of burnt and sodden pancake. Slender as was her knowledge of the sterner sex, she should have known that.

"Dick," she said—she always expected him to refuse to answer when she called him "Dick"; she was sure no one had ever called him anything but "Richard" before—"I'm down to my last pound, and we'll have to get more sugar and flour and kerosene, to say nothing of other groceries. I

don't know how much of your ten pounds is left, anyhow we'll have to get some money from somewhere."

Dick rose from the table and stood leaning against the doorpost looking out towards the mountains that towered close at hand. Val sat and waited for him to speak, expecting something vitriolic when he did. He did not answer for a long time, then he said quietly, "I suppose there is something we can sell."

"Well, I suppose some of the pigs could be sold and the two calves, though I hate to part with them, they're such dears. But, I've been wondering," she continued hesitatingly, "how we're going to show up when we have to produce our books and establish the fact that we have lived by the work of our own hands. Up to date, all I've put into that book is a list of things I've bought with the ten pounds the Trustees gave me and you haven't even entered that much. It doesn't seem a sporting proposition simply to sell everything that's on the place—that's not working."

"I imagine the Trustees won't object to our departing from the spirit of the conditions, as long as we keep to the letter of them," Dick answered.

"The Trustees mightn't object," Val rejoined sharply, "but I would. We've got to earn our right to that money and I for one am going to earn it as honestly as I can. I seem to have heard the expression 'British fair-play' somewhere, too," she added, with a slight intonation of contempt.

“What do you suggest we should do then?” Dick asked quietly, and Val’s anger at him became suddenly anger at her own warmth—oh, why couldn’t she remain as calm as he did? The outcome was always that she felt crude and uncontrolled; but nothing seemed to pierce the armour of Dick’s reserve. With difficulty, Valmai switched her mind back to the subject under discussion.

“I really don’t know anything about farming, but I should think we’d be able to sell the milk. I often see a big motor lorry going along the road filled with milk cans, so there must be a butter factory somewhere near. I’ll ask these people who are coming this afternoon.”

Mrs. O’Donnell and Doreen were most helpful when asked about the milk.

“Of course, you can send your milk to the factory. You get your husband to step down and speak to the manager right off. If you take Stebbing, the manager, the right way, he’ll likely let you have a can of butter-milk for your pigs, too, every day.”

“I was right giving milk to the pigs then,” Val said, “I wasn’t a bit sure, but they seemed to enjoy it.”

The O’Donnells, mother and daughter, looked at her wonderingly. “You’ve never lived on a farm before?” Mrs. O’Donnell asked.

“No,” Val shook her head. “My husband and I are both city people—and he’s English, you know,

which makes it harder still. We're grateful for any advice."

Mrs. O'Donnell held out her cup for more tea.

"I'll get father to step up and give Mr. Warrington a hand to get things going. Alan will be glad to help too when he gets home for the holidays. He's a fine lad, Mrs. Warrington. Only just twenty and doing his finals this year, you know."

"How should Mrs. Warrington know, mummie," Doreen put in laughing. "Alan is the be-all and end-all of mother's existence," she said to Val.

"Now, Doreen, you've no call to be talking that way. We're thinking of letting her go on to the concertorium herself next year to be trained, Mrs. Warrington," the lady said.

"Conservatorium, mum," Doreen put in quietly.

"Well, well," laughed comfortable Mrs. O'Donnell, not in the slightest embarrassed at being corrected, "I knew it was something connected with concerts."

Nice people, Valmai decided, simple people and she liked them very much.

Dick had not appeared for afternoon tea and Valmai hoped that they would not hear him moving around inside or, if they did hear, would not be offended at his absence. She was anxious to get them back to the subject of farm work. She and Dick had exactly three pounds, fourteen and sevenpence between them and starvation.

Mrs. O'Donnell kept the conversation going by herself and Val's attention wandered to the pressing

subject time after time. Some words of Mrs. O'Donnell's recalled her.

"There's no need of anyone to starve up here I always say to father."

"I think Callemondah must have been very poorly looked after then," Valmai said, "for there doesn't seem to be much here and the place is poorly stocked, too."

There was amazement and curiosity in the faces of both her guests. "Why, Callemondah's as well stocked as any place round about. Didn't the agents tell you the stock that was on the place when you bought it?"

Val decided swiftly that to satisfy Mrs. O'Donnell's curiosity would be to stop a great deal of gossip.

"Captain Warrington and I were left the place by Mr. Craig," she said. "We came straight away up here without stopping to think. You'll think we're very impulsive people, Mrs. O'Donnell," Valmai smiled deprecatingly, "but I was sick to death of the city, so we're trying this for six months. All the same, we want to make it pay, if we can, although we don't know how to set about it."

The half truth satisfied guileless Mrs. O'Donnell, whose mind switched back to the subject of the stock.

"Now I wonder, Doreen," she said turning to her daughter, "if that scamp of a Hawley hasn't been running some of the Callemondah stock into his place. It's him that has the filthy old house

just over the river that you can see from the bottom of your orchard, Mrs. Warrington," she said excitedly. "He's a disgrace to the place, is Hawley, and well pleased we'd all be to catch him out. We've never found him out, mind you, Mrs. Warrington, but I can tell you when a calf disappears here and a sheep there, it isn't always the mud holes that get them, and we've got our suspicions. The manager the lawyers had here, too, wasn't any better than he'd ought to be, either," she added darkly.

"Goodness, mum, how you do run on!" Doreen said. "The manager *did* get drunk one night at a dance, but that's really all we can hang on him," she said laughing.

"Well, I must get along, Mrs. Warrington, and your tea was very nice, dearie, though I can see you can't manage your stove yet," said Mrs. O'Donnell, rising to put her coat on.

"Mother," Doreen protested, but Val stopped her.

"Your mother's quite right, Miss O'Donnell," she said, "that oven's a perfect fiend."

"Well, I can see that you'll need your neighbours to be friends to you, my dear, and no one ever asked Martha O'Donnell for help in vain. If I hadn't my setting hens to see to and Doreen the poddies to feed, I'd start right now, but you come along down to our place to-morrow as soon as your dinner's off the table and I'll give you a wrinkle or two about ovens."

“A sure way into mother’s heart is to let her help you,” Doreen said, with her wide, friendly smile. Valmai’s heart was very warm towards both of them.

“I certainly will come down to-morrow, if you’re sure I won’t be a nuisance,” she said. She stood on the veranda and watched the gig start out on its two-mile homeward journey. “Crossings,” as O’Donnell’s home was called, was less than three-quarters of a mile away as the crow flies, but the river took two turns between the two houses, so that it was easier to drive around by road although it was over twice as far.

As the gig turned from the precipitous Callemondah track into the road, Doreen turned and waved. There were tears in Valmai’s eyes as she waved back.

IV

Down in the valley below, Val could see the blue smoke of “that scamp Hawley’s” chimney. “I wonder if he has any of our stock,” she said to herself. Then a sudden thought struck her and she ran inside.

“Dick,” she called excitedly, “have you got that list of things the Trustees gave us? I left mine at home.”

Dick came out of his room, a magazine in his hands. His eyes looked tired and Valmai felt a momentary pang of pity for him—he wasn’t so

used as she was to being alone and having next to no one to talk to.

“You know the list of assets or whatever they called it,” she said breathlessly.

“Yes, I think I’ve got it still,” Dick answered quietly, as he always spoke. His eyebrows, those mobile eyebrows, were raised slightly. Val realized that she was to understand that English girls, nice English girls, do not rush round houses, calling out at the tops of their voices.

A few minutes after, Dick produced the list. Valmai flicked the pages over quickly, reading a word here and there.

“Mortgages, bonds—oh here we are, stock—no, no, that’s stocks and shares. I want live stock—ah,” a sigh of satisfaction, “here it is. Four light horses, three draught—and there are only three altogether in our stable, Dick. Ten cows, *ten* cows, Dick,” Val’s voice rose in a crescendo, “and you’ve been milking a miserable three. Where are our other seven cows?” she asked rhetorically.

“Ask of the winds that far and wide with ashes strew the sea,” Dick answered. It was the longest speech Val had ever heard him make. “Thank God there are only three cows. They are three more than I can milk with comfort already.”

But Valmai took no notice of the interruption.

“Three hundred and forty seven cross-bred wethers—two-tooth; four hundred and fourteen wethers—three-tooth. Seventy-five ewes, merino,

and four rams (one aged)," she read on, skipping a line every here and there in her excitement. "Where I ask you, are our wethers with varying numbers of teeth. Where is our one aged ram and his three younger confreres? Dick, I'll tell you—'they're likely running on the property of that scamp Hawley—we have our suspicions, though there's nothing we can hang on him—yet,'" she said portentously. Dick looked at her in astonishment for a moment, then he laughed.

"I suppose these are excerpts from the conversation of your visitors this afternoon," he said, with a nearer approach to animation than Valmai had yet seen in him.

"To get down to brass tacks, Dick, it seems as though there should be plenty of stock on this place. The O'Donnell's say it was well-stocked, and they suspect the man in the valley of having more stock than he owns lawfully. Our stock would be branded, wouldn't it, so if it's there, all you've got to do is to go down and get it."

Dick drew on his pipe meditatively.

"Mrs. O'Donnell said she'd ask father to 'step up and give you a hand to get things going.' I think you'd better take advantage of his help; it isn't as though we were paying him to help. Otherwise, I can see us starving before Christmas. And my job's gone now," she said ruefully.

"We won't starve," Dick said positively. "And if that blighter in the valley has some of our stock, he'll return it."

“Mrs. O’Donnell has setting hens, too. I’m sure some of our hens are broody, they walk round the yard clucking to chickens that aren’t there and I thought they were imagining things. However, if they’re broody, I’ll have to try to set them. Then we’ll have chickens to sell and perhaps I won’t have to part with my little calves after all. It seems that their official name is ‘poddies,’ Dick,” Valmai added.

“Is that so?” Dick answered absently. He was studying the list of stock.

V

A few days later, Dick and Mr. O’Donnell—old Tom, as the community called him—set out to find the missing stock.

“We’ll go out after a few rabbits, and call in at Hawleys to see if he’s seen the cows,” old Tom said. “A gun in the right place is a good persuader when you’re dealing with men like Hawley.”

Valmai listened to his words in amazement.

“I thought things like this only happened in movies. Be careful of the bold, bad rustlers, won’t you, Dick?” she called laughingly.

“Duffers, we call them here, Mrs.,” old Tom said, “and there’s queerer things happen up these mountains than they ever put on them moving pictures.” And he spat contemptuously and

accurately into a little puddle the last shower had left in the yard.

Doreen had ridden across to spend the afternoon with Valmai. They were becoming good friends, and Val found the younger girl's freshness invigorating. Doreen had brought up a setting of special eggs from her mother.

"They're Rhode Island Reds," she explained. Valmai giggled. "Sounds like a football team, doesn't it?" she said.

"We'll make a nest for the hen, put the eggs in, then get the hen and set her on them. Then you've nothing to do but give her a little feed and a drink every day and see that she doesn't let the eggs get cold while she's feeding."

When they got to the yard, however, they found that a nest on which a motherly old barndoor fowl was sitting was quite suitable.

"You pick her up, Mrs. Warrington, and I'll slip the eggs under her," Doreen said.

"I'd rather lift a snake," Valmai said. Doreen made no reply and a few minutes after, when she saw Doreen lift the old hen off the nest, Val felt rather ashamed of herself. It looked so easy. Nevertheless, she put the eggs as quickly as she could into the nest and gave a sigh of relief as the hen gathered them under her wings and settled herself comfortably.

"Now how soon will there be chickens?" Valmai asked.

"Three weeks," Doreen answered, "but we

make a point of never tempting the gods by saying how many there'll be—it's positive suicide to count your chickens before they're hatched. In fact, you might almost call it chickie-cide."

Not a very funny conversation, nor a very witty one, but they both laughed helplessly. Valmai felt a year slip off her shoulders for every hour she spent with Doreen. Suddenly, consciously, she felt alive, in focus. The other Valmai Rutledge, all nerves and discontent, had been a masquerader using her body ; at last she was herself.

Five minutes after, she was nearly crying with vexation and disappointment as she surveyed the ruins of a cake she had left in the oven. She had disobeyed one of Mrs. O'Donnell's hard-and-fast rules—never make your fire up in the last half-hour of a cake, or it'll burn for sure. It had.

"What a pity," Doreen said. Valmai thought of her dwindling stock of sugar, flour, and other ingredients, and said black words inwardly.

"You'll look on a burnt cake as a good joke on yourself soon," Doreen was saying, "it's just as well to laugh when things go wrong, anyhow."

"You're too young to have so much philosophy, Doreen," Valmai said.

Doreen smiled a trifle wryly.

"If one thinks, one must be philosophical—or go under," she said.

"I call it using my sense of humour," Val answered, "but I suppose we mean the same thing. All the same, I'll try laughing—it sounds a workable

scheme ; but I'll live hilariously, for things always seem to be wrong with me somehow."

"It's wonderful how quickly they right themselves, though, if you laugh at them," Doreen replied.

"I wish I'd remembered to buy some jam," said Val, a few minutes after. Doreen laughed merrily.

"The châtelaine of Callemondah wants bought jam," she cried to the world at large, "when the shelves beneath her feet are groaning with it."

"What on earth do you mean?" Val asked

"Come hither, fair lady," said Doreen, leading the way to the pantry. She moved aside a big bread crock, disclosing a handle in the floor which Valmai had not noticed during her desultory sweeping of the room.

The raised trap-door revealed shelves covered with jars of jam, preserves of all kinds, sauces, chutney, and bottled fruits. Two hams hung from another shelf and a cut-down kerosene tin proved to be full of honey.

"Wonderful," Val said, clapping her hands and dancing with excitement like a child.

Doreen looked at her speculatively. "I don't suppose you've investigated the barn, either," she said at last.

"Why, there's only horse feed there, isn't there?" Val asked.

"Horse feed *and* pumpkins *and* potatoes *and* apples *and* onions. Probably some walnuts and

almonds too. They all grow here, you know. I didn't realize what an ignoramus you were."

Valmai smiled ruefully. "I'll bet I could give you points in town though, old lady," she said.

Doreen answered by a quick, affectionate squeeze of her arm. "I'm sure you could—and I'd be jolly glad of them, too," she said.

Shouts and the barking of dogs in the orchard attracted their attention. Coming along the track were Mr. O'Donnell and Dick, driving before them two horses and the missing cows.

"Our cows, our seven beautiful cows," Val exulted running down towards them.

"Look out, one of those cows is a bull," shouted Doreen. Valmai stopped dead, then shamelessly fled to the veranda, pursued by the laughter of the other three. Dick, even Dick, was laughing helplessly. "You'll have to learn to milk to help me with those bulls, Valmai," he said to her slyly a little later. Valmai looked at him reproachfully.

"You're mean to tease me—how was I to know there wasn't a bull among them?"

The afternoon's work, and perhaps the companionship of another man, had made a different man of Dick. He talked right through tea-time animatedly giving an account of the descent on Hawley. He even hung round the kitchen, lounging with his hands in his pockets while Val washed the dishes. Later on, he chuckled aloud as he read. Hearing him, Valmai looked up from her sewing. There were times when he seemed almost human, she decided.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

LOOKING back in after years on the first couple of months at Callemondah, it seemed to Valmai that certain events marked each one a separate stage of her relationship with Richard Warrington.

The afternoon when he had found the cows and some of their sheep at Hawley's had marked the beginning of a period of ease as far as money matters were concerned. They were fortunate enough to sell the little maize that was left in their cribs at what Dick said was an "amazing" price—a pun that left Valmai gasping for breath. They also sent a few bags of potatoes, dug with much labour on Dick's part, down to town with some of O'Donnell's and these had also brought an extremely good price.

When things were at their lowest ebb, Valmai determined one day to put her pride in her pocket and try to find a market for her eggs. In ready cash, they had something less than thirty shillings between them, and they had run out of sugar and kerosene, as well as other things which were not so necessary, but were certainly badly missed.

She had previously tried to sell eggs at Orbost

and knew there was no market for them there, so she made up her mind to try the boarding-houses at the Lakes. Doreen, to whom she mentioned the project, was not sanguine. "Most of the Lakes people have their own little farms and supply things of that description for their own houses," she said doubtfully. "All the same, try it if you like."

They set out before eight in the morning, in a doleful drizzle that damped Val's spirit as well as her coat in five minutes. Dick drove with set lips, and Valmai, balancing her precious basket of eggs and bottles of preserves and wild honey on her knees, stared straight ahead of her and thought what she would say. She had need to draw on her store of philosophy and her sense of humour that day, for most of the people she approached looked at her in amazement.

Most of the boarding-house keepers were brief. "Supply our own table," was the answer they gave her. With a sinking heart, without a remnant of her pride to support her, Val went from house to house, and from shop to shop. One shop-keeper bought a jar of preserves from her, but when Valmai mentioned that she had dozens more at home, if a regular sale could be found for them, the woman answered: "Oh, I don't sell things like that, I'm just buying it to help you."

"Thanks," Val managed to say, then walked out to the jinker, her hand clenched on the hardest shilling she had ever earned. She was very close to tears as she clambered over the wheel.

“Any luck?” Dick asked, although he expected none. For answer, Val held out the shilling. “She bought a jar to help me,” she said.

Dick did not answer, but his hand closed over hers and Valmai in her own bitter humiliation, sensed something of what he too was feeling. For the first time, they seemed to be in sympathy.

As though humiliation and disappointment had done their work, the very next house at which Val enquired was glad enough to get as many eggs as she could supply.

“This is a rest home really,” the lady of the house explained, “and many of my guests stay here year in, year out. I don’t keep many fowls and those I have have gone on strike—not an egg for a week. I’ve been desperate nearly, because I like to feed my old people on the best I can get for them. I don’t suppose you’ve any cream to spare?” she asked. Val joyfully said she had, and received a standing order for eggs and cream twice a week.

Dick did not look at her as she came out to the jinker.

“Damn them all, let’s go home, Valmai,” he said, but Valmai held up the empty basket.

“A regular order, Dick,” she said laughing, though tears were near the surface. “Dick, she wants a load of box logs too,” she added doubtfully. Dick whipped the mare unnecessarily and, as they turned along the road, with their backs to the Lakes, he answered through clenched teeth:

"I hope you told her I'd see her damned first," he said savagely.

"I told her you'd deliver them next Monday," Val answered. Then she began to laugh. Merrily, bubbling came her laughter.

"I'm afraid I see nothing to laugh at," Dick said tartly. Valmai continued to laugh.

"If I'd had bootlaces and soap and safety pins, I'd have been perfect," she said, but Dick, still smarting with humiliation, refused to see the funny side of it.

However, the addition to their slender store of money was very welcome. Two of their little piglets went the way of all pigs, and one of Val's dearly loved poddies was sacrificed on the altar of dress. It came about in this wise.

One Sunday, Valmai confessed her inability to ride and her fear of anything that looked like a horse.

"I'll teach you to ride after dinner," Dick said.

"I'm sorry, but I've nothing I could wear to ride in," Valmai answered.

"I can lend you a pair of riding breeches. They'll be too big, of course, but you'll be able to manage with them," Dick said in a matter-of-fact fashion. Valmai flushed and hated herself for it. Blushing was a silly habit which would have to be broken; it was utterly silly and school-girlish to blush just because a man she knew as little as she knew Dick talked about breeches. It dawned on her that Dick did not feel like a stranger, and anyway, he seemed more and more to take her for granted. Imper-

ceptibly they were becoming part of each other's life and, as such, to be taken as a matter of course.

Dick produced the breeches. They were not very much too large although Valmai's five feet nine was dwarfed by Dick's superior inches. Be it said in passing, that the community of Old Ford, of which Callemondah was the main constituent, called Dick and Val a "fine-looking pair, but reserved."

Valmai completed her riding costume with a silk jumper and a navy cardigan. Her one hat was too precious to risk in showery weather, so she bound her jetty hair with a red ribbon—the only piece of ribbon she could find.

Dick had the horses saddled and waiting and, the business of mounting having been explained and more or less satisfactorily accomplished, they set out down the track. Valmai clutched desperately at everything in clutching distance as the horse began to pick his way down the steep track to the river.

"Sit well back and keep your hands down," Dick called.

"I'll be down myself soon. Had I better describe a parabola over his head or slide gracefully down over the tail?" Valmai called back, endeavouring to keep a little quaver out of her voice. Dick gave a ringing laugh. "Just sit tight and leave it to the roan," he said.

They crossed the river at the old ford which gave the little township its name and Valmai got

quite a professional little thrill as the roan scrambled up the bank. "Well done," Dick said.

A few hundred yards farther on, they met Doreen and Alan O'Donnell, who was home for vacation, and with them Edna McNeil, a diminutive lady in whose brown hair Alan's heart was quite evidently tangled.

"We were just coming over to get invited to tea," Doreen announced as they drew rein.

Dick dismounted and acknowledged the introduction to Edna.

"You'll pardon my not dismounting, won't you? Valmai said, "but my steed gets rather restive if I get off him. I doubt whether I'd get on again anyhow," she added truthfully.

"You had better come on to our place to tea instead," Doreen suggested. "We're much nearer to Crossings than to Callemondah."

"Not in this regalia," Valmai said, "thanks all the same, Doreen. In any case, there are the kine that graze forbye the cabin door."

Doreen giggled appreciatively. Valmai found herself blossoming into quite a humorist when Doreen was around; her chuckles of appreciation were so spontaneous.

"You people go to Callemondah while I finish Val's riding lesson," Dick suggested.

A short canter, a shorter trot, and a very short gallop later and Valmai, rather white as to cheeks and strained around the eyes, was pleased to see the bulky outline of the homestead looming ahead.

Dick caught her as she slid from the horse and held her for a moment because of the trembling of her legs.

"My knees feel simply jelly," she said with a tiny break of strain in her voice.

"Keep walking for a while and you won't notice it. You're game, Val, and a jolly good pupil. You'll be riding to hounds next season," Dick answered, as their guests appeared on the veranda with the announcement that tea was almost ready. Valmai felt extremely light-hearted all that evening in spite of the soreness in divers places of her anatomy, but whether her light-heartedness was due to her mentor's praise or to the high spirits of the party that gathered round the tea-table, she did not trouble to analyse.

Dick was a most persistent teacher, and every day during the next week, despite rain and sleety wind, he insisted on a ride that grew longer each day. It proved effective and marked the commencement of a very pleasant companionship. Which also explains why the little calf went to the butcher's and a well-cut pair of riding breeches came out of the store at Orbost.

II

In spite of the rainy sky overhead and the mud underfoot and the never-ending round of work indoors and out, Valmai found herself enjoying life

consciously. She woke in the mornings with a feeling of something pleasurable ahead, she slept soundly and contentedly at night, and during the well-filled days there was little time for day-dreaming or self-analysis. She supposed there must have been days during the last few years that had been enjoyable, but looking back on them she could not remember a single day that stood out as being consciously happy.

The farm absorbed only a modicum of Dick's time, so that hardly a day went past that did not see the roan horse and the big grey mare saddled and standing at the back veranda. Valmai loved to explore and wanted to try every little track they saw. Most of the paths were only sheep tracks that led nowhere and ended in impenetrable scrub and many a time they would have been lost had not Dick used all the hunting knowledge he possessed. He had done a little big-game hunting in India before the war, he said.

"You were in France, weren't you, Dick?" Valmai asked him one day.

"For about three years, then I was badly gassed and something went wrong with my nerves and I was demobbed. It's only lately I have begun to feel myself at all," he added. "I hated to talk to people and loathed the sound of voices."

"I know," Valmai interjected softly. She could understand that kind of nerve sickness.

"There always seemed so many people talking—I just shut myself up in the study and read. It's

a bad habit and I would have found it hard to break myself of it, if John Craig hadn't jerked me out of it."

"He didn't jerk as far as you might think," Valmai said dryly, thinking of the many quiet evenings she had spent sewing, not daring to say a word, starting fearfully if she let her scissors fall, while Dick sat hunched before the fire, absorbed in his books. She determined immediately not to let him read too much, if she could stop him, and to make him talk if she could. She remembered reading somewhere—in one of Frankau's books she thought—that the main part of the cure of neurasthenia is to make the sufferer reveal what he fears.

Finance, however, was what stopped Dick reading in the evenings. Kerosene got so low and money was so much lower that many evenings they sat in the fireglow and talked. They discussed all kinds of subjects, and Valmai made a good many exaggerated statements for the pleasure of making Dick talk.

Her frank paganism shocked him.

"I don't believe that there is any hereafter," she said one evening.

"Well, what do you believe? If you don't admit a hereafter, what purpose do you think you serve in the world?" Dick asked.

"I don't know that I do serve any particular purpose, at least, I didn't when I was in town. The town doesn't fit me, nor do I fit it; but up

here I just click into place. Frankly, I don't believe that a deity rose up, took my soul and pitched it into the world and said: 'There's a certain piece of work for you to do, soul; go and do it.' I don't worry about the why of my coming into the world. I just happened along. But as far as having a purpose in life goes, I strive to live so that my own conscience acquits me of wrong-doing, and by wrong-doing I mean harming other people. I've never tried to put my feelings on religion into words before, Dick, so you'll forgive me if I don't make myself quite clear."

"I'm afraid you don't, Val," Dick answered. "That plan might work with you and with a good many other people, but what about the people who are born without a conscience. The only thing that restrains them from turning the world into chaos is fear of the law and the law is based fundamentally on the teachings of religion."

"Do you believe in God and the angels and a devil with horns and forked tail complete?" Valmai asked.

Dick smoked his pipe thoughtfully for a while, then he answered with a troubled little smile.

"I'm afraid I've just taken my religion as granted. It's as much part of me as my loyalty to the King and my belief in the British Empire."

"And founded on the same things," Valmai answered quickly. "They are born in you, Dick; you were taught them before you could understand, just as your manners are ingrained. You are never

consciously courteous, are you? You just do courteous things because you've always done them and they are as natural to you as breathing; your religion, your loyalty and your belief are the same."

"Well, didn't you have religion and loyalty ground into you when you were young, too?" Dick asked.

"I always was a rebel," Val said, and looking into the heart of the fire, she seemed to see herself at school, saluting the flag and watching the other children do likewise; repeating with them, "I love God, I honour the King," while all the time her active brain darted from one thought to another—how funny the headmaster looked trying to make his bowed legs meet at the knees as he drew himself up to the salute; how foolish a little Irish immigrant boy was to refuse to salute—he would only get strapped for his refusal. The King did not care whether one little Irish boy saluted the Union Jack or not, only the little Irish boy's hands would smart.

"I tried my hardest to be really religious when I was about fourteen," she said one evening. "I went to church twice every Sunday and wouldn't have missed Sunday School for anything. But somehow, I couldn't make it fit with my nature. I can remember an evangelist who came to the Church once; he wrestled with the souls of the crowd, mine among them; he wept like a man in agony. The people, one after another went to the penitent stool and knelt there with tears running down their faces, until at last there was only a

deaf old lady who couldn't hear a word he said, and I left. I'll never forget how I felt, kid as I was. I was absolutely unmoved, I felt a bit disgusted in fact. It seemed to me so unfair, to roll your burden off on to someone else's shoulders. I think I began to doubt religion that night and made up my mind that, whatever I might do or leave undone, I'd stand by my own sins of omission and commission and I'm so shaped that I'll make my own heaven and hell right here on earth."

There was a long, long silence after she had spoken. Dick's pipe had gone out and he made no attempt to refill it. Val herself broke the silence at last.

"Yet I want you to go church here, Dick," she said laughing at her own inconsistency. "We must get to know the people in the first place and, in the second, they won't understand people who don't go to Church."

"We'll see about that," Dick answered in the voice Valmai was beginning to call to herself his "obstinate" voice.

"Tell me about your people, Dick," Valmai asked another evening, when the fire was painting the mellow old living-room at Callemondah with a rosy glow. "I don't even know if you have any brothers or sisters. I only know your mother's name was Jane McAlpin. Do you remember that piece in John Craig's letter—'imperious Jane McAlpin, with her flashing black eyes, her brilliance and her wit'."

“Mother’s all that,” Dick answered with a flash of pride that was quickly followed by a flash of truth, “I think we’ve let her manage us rather much. As far as the family goes, there’s not much to tell. There are only Clive and I left now—Edward was killed on the Marne. That nearly broke my mother.”

There was a short silence; Dick was lost in memories of ten years ago.

“Was Edward married?” Valmai asked softly.

“No, Clive is the only one of us to marry. He married Cecily Goodrich. He is the youngest of us and there wasn’t much for him but to marry a wealthy woman. Her father was a banker, a wealthy man, but the War finished him, as it finished many a better man than he. Clive was unfortunate, but I’m not sorry for him. He married deliberately for money and was disappointed; serves him right I always say.”

Valmai laughed quietly to herself for a while, then her mirth overcame her.

“It’s to be hoped your venture in the same direction won’t turn out so badly, Dick,” she said at last through her laughter.

“My venture?” Dick repeated in a puzzled voice. Then Valmai’s laughter died on her lips at the dawning consciousness in his eyes.

He sat up straight in his chair.

“Do you know, Valmai, I’ve never till this minute thought of you as my wife!” he said.

“Well, you’ll oblige me by not doing so,” Val

rejoined with some asperity. "There's the girl in England you told the Trustees about, you know."

"Cynthia," Dick said. Valmai hated her—a silly little name anyhow—"Cynthia."

"What's the rest of her name and what is she like?" she asked—it was rather a good idea to have something on which to base one's mental pictures of people.

"Her full name is Cynthia Marian Caith. Her people have lived near Warrington all her life; her father was a Major of the Guards, a big raw-boned Irishman. Her mother was a Jewess. The Major committed the sin of marrying for money," Dick's eyes were twinkling this time, "and did not get let down. He let Cynthia down, however, for he squandered away pretty well every penny she had and left her with only Little Manor, as her home is called, and hundreds of worthless rubber shares. If Cynthia had had money instead of those rubber shares, or Warrington had carried one less mortgage when I came home from the front, mother would have had her way and Cynthia and I would have been married years ago. Which means that I would probably still have been sitting walled up by voices in my study." Dick's voice was very thoughtful.

"And what's she like?" Valmai asked after a while.

"That's hard to explain," Dick answered jerking himself back from thoughts of what might have been. "When you've seen a person pretty well

every day of your life, you don't take much notice of appearances."

"No?" The inflexion of Valmai's voice was satirical.

"She's small, just over five feet I should say," Dick continued. "I can't remember exactly the colour of her eyes, but I think they are hazel—yes, I've a most distinct impression that they're hazel. Her hair is golden—lighter than young Doreen's and without any red tinge in it—and it fits close to her head like a cap. She always looks very slim and neat and she smokes cigarettes in a long holder that matches the dress she has on. She loves admiration, although she isn't conceited, and she likes to get her own way; she has an imperious little manner that I think she caught from mother—she's a lot with mother since her own mother died—and she has a very bad temper when she is crossed. Is that sufficient description?"

Valmai did not answer; she was looking at her own dim reflection in the oval mirror that hung above the mantelpiece.

"Golden hair that fitted like a cap"—Val looked at her own wind-blown black mop coiled in great wheels over her ears. "Hazel eyes"—Val's were most uncompromisingly green. "Very slim and neat"—and Val's grey skirt had seen three winters, her jumper been knitted in the days when silk jumpers were fashionable.

She changed the subject hurriedly.

"Those returns from the butter factory are most

disappointing, Dick, not nearly so good as O'Donnell's. Doreen says our cows are the wrong breed for up here. I've been wondering if we couldn't sell those we've got, and some of the sheep too if necessary, and buy some good cows, even if we had fewer. It seems such waste effort to milk them and look after them and not to get good results."

"I'll ask the old chap about it when I see him," Dick answered, as he rammed some tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

Valmai laughed. "You'll be pure Australian yet, Dick," she said apropos of his language.

"God forbid," Dick said fervently. Valmai rose suddenly from her seat on the hearthrug, lit the lamp and attacked some darning with unnecessary energy.

III

Valmai's chance words about the quality of the stock on Callemondah were the forerunner of a very definite change in Dick's attitude towards the farm. He took the matter up with Mr. O'Donnell the very next day, and, as a result, the living-room at Callemondah was soon strewn with books and pamphlets of all descriptions. The relative merits of Jerseys, Guernseys, and Ayrshires were discussed from every angle.

One day Val felt that without a herd of

Guernseys starvation at an early date stared them in the face ; the next day she felt in her bones that the farm would be a dead loss without a dozen Jerseys in the cowshed. An hour afterwards, however, perusal of an article on Ayrshires would have swept away all preconceived notions and Ayrshires would be leading by a head.

“ This is a most fascinating discussion, you know, Dick,” Valmai said one day when the argument had been raging frenziedly for some days. “ We can’t possibly afford either Guernseys or Jerseys—they cost fifty guineas each at the very least, while as for the bulls—my mind refuses to comprehend the money we’d have to pay for a bull.”

“ One thing is certain, at any rate,” Dick answered “ and that is that you can’t run a place to advantage with inferior cattle, even if good animals do cost more to keep. I’m going to write to the Trustees and tell them so—it’s up to them to let us have a few beasts that aren’t doddering with age.”

“ I suppose you would call Daisy doddering,” Valmai said slyly.

“ Touché,” Dick said smiling ruefully. Daisy had led him a pretty dance round a very muddy section of the home paddock that very night ; she had finished by kicking over a half-filled milk bucket and breaking a leg off Dick’s already rickety milking stool. “ We’ll grant Daisy friskiness, if not youth,” he said.

The Trustees turned up trumps, to use Val’s expression. They wrote a long letter in which

they expressed their satisfaction at the interest Captain Warrington was taking in the stock. They could not promise a herd of Guernseys as asked for by Dick, at any rate, not for some time.

“The animals cannot be procured in Victoria at present,” they wrote, “and it may be some time before we can procure a suitable herd in New South Wales which is the only State at present selling. Cattle coming from New South Wales would probably have to be quarantined for anything from three months upwards before entering this State, particularly if coming from a tick-infested area. You will, of course, recognize the necessity for restrictions of this kind, as the introduction into Victoria of a pest such as the tick, would have very serious effects on the industry here.”

“I wish someone would print a farmers’ dictionary, Dick,” Valmai complained as she read the letter. “What, oh what, might a tick be?”

“Haven’t the vaguest.” Dick answered in the vernacular he was fast acquiring.

The Trustees, however, offered to have a number of good cows purchased in Bairnsdale and sent up, and they advised Dick to sell the cows at present on the farm locally. This was most satisfactory and the introduction of the new herd meant a period of lessened financial strain on them.

The cows were not the only part of the stock that received Dick’s new-found interest.

The Rhode Island Red chickens were growing larger every day and were the pride of Valmai’s

heart. Dick discovered in the little room John Craig had used as an office a pile of magazines entitled "Poultry for Money."

"That's us," Val said elegantly when she saw the books. Dick studied them diligently.

"I'm not sure that White Leghorns wouldn't pay better in the end," he said after reading one very eloquent article on the subject.

Valmai quivered with indignation. "Dick Warrington, if you have any other kind of fowl in my fowl-run but Rhode Island Reds, I'll refuse to feed them," she said.

"I'll put them in my half of the fowl-run," he said lazily.

"Anyway, they shouldn't be out in the open like they are. They ought to be in little closed yards facing the east—or it may be the west—I forget which. And have those patent kind of nests that you open from outside and just put your hand in and take the eggs."

"With Rhode Island, there wouldn't be many eggs to take," Dick said argumentatively.

Valmai looked at him across the lamp-lit table. "I believe you're teasing me again," she said.

"We'll see about the little covered-in fowl pens as soon as this beastly rain stops," Dick said, listening to the tattoo of rain on the iron roof.

"That beastly rain will make your crops grow, Mr. Cocky-farmer," Valmai answered. "Think of the maize we'll have on the river flats when the floods go down."

“We’ll be hundreds of miles from here when the maize crops are ready,” Dick rejoined lightly.

Something vital seemed suddenly to have gone out of the atmosphere ; Valmai discussed no more that night the merits of either Rhode Island Reds or White Leghorns.

IV

They were getting to know the people round about. One after another the neighbours far and near called in at Callemondah. The homestead stood almost on the main road from Old Ford to Orbost and everyone in the district went along the road at least once a fortnight, so Val had many visitors. Most of the people came in cars, and Dick was surprised at the number of cars Old Ford could muster. However, as August went its watery way, he was just as glad to put his faith in horses.

Some of her visitors, Valmai liked, others she found boring, but everyone was kindness itself to her and for that she was grateful. They kept her in a perpetual state of wonder at their hospitality. Valmai and Dick were inundated with invitations to tea and to spend the evening. Dick liked his own fireside best and it was only by dint of continued pressure that Val was able to move him from it at all. Even then she could only get him to visit the nearer homes. The more distant invitations

they refused, excusing their refusals by pleas of the distance and the mud.

To Valmai's annoyance, Dick was invariably stiff and silent in the homes of every one but the O'Donnell's.

She expressed her annoyance rather tartly one night as they jogged home in the jinker, with the thermometer somewhere in the vicinity of thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit, and the east wind in their faces.

"You certainly held the floor to-night, Dick," Valmai said through chattering teeth.

"I'm afraid I can't help it if I don't act up to schedule, Valmai," he answered in the voice Val had hoped was relegated to the days when they first came to Callemondah, "but I'm confounded if there's any pleasure for me in feeding—you can call it nothing else—with ten children. Things like butter knives may be unnecessary when you get down to fundamentals, but you must admit that they have their uses."

Valmai gave a little chuckle. "I certainly enjoyed grandpa's gymnastics with his saucer of hot tea," she said.

"It nauseated me," Dick answered grimly. It was borne upon Val's mind that the visit had not been an unqualified success.

"The old man's going to fix the dividing fence, though, so I suppose the obligation is on our side," Dick said grudgingly.

Church service, held in the schoolroom at Old

Ford, was a monthly affair. Valmai knew it would take some persuasion to induce Dick to go, so she opened the attack in Doreen's presence. It was Doreen who clinched the matter.

"You'll have all the old busy-bodies in the neighbourhood here next week to see why you weren't there," she said.

Dick went, under protest.

Valmai rather enjoyed it. The lady directly behind her sang all the hymns in a lusty voice on one note. Her husband sang bass—a bass of his own. The Knights, whom they had visited during the week, were there, accompanied by the whole ten children; each child had a penny for collection and each one dropped it at least twice during the service. Two overgrown lads in the back seat, where Valmai could see them out of the corner of her eye, played odds and evens for halfpennies, while three self-conscious girls, resplendent in Sunday dresses, ogled them over their shoulders from the seat in front.

The hymns were played on a wheezy harmonium by the school-teacher from Crick's Pass, twenty miles on in the mountains, and the congregation joined in with more zeal than effect.

After the simple little service the people stayed about the hall talking to each other. To some of them this was the only opportunity they had of speaking to persons outside their own family, and they made the most of it. The minister, a young, earnest man with the light of fanaticism in his pale

eyes, disrobed and came out to speak to the people ; he had a word for each of them. Val and Dick were standing a little apart from the others, waiting until some of the cars should move away so that they could get to the jinker. The minister saw them and came across with hand out-stretched to speak to them.

“It is a pleasure to see new people in our little community,” he said “every new face adds to the interest of our little gatherings, you know.” He stood talking to them for a few minutes, and as they stood Valmai realized what had never dawned on her before—that Dick was very shy. His self-possessed manner was a cloak he used to hide his natural diffidence. The minister left them hurriedly at last.

“I must speak to Miss McMinn before she goes. She does her best, poor lady, but that last hymn was really too bad,” he said.

“If I took any notice of the promptings of my conscience, I’d offer to play their rotten little organ, I suppose,” Dick said as they jogged along the road.

“Can you play, Dick?” Val asked excitedly, “and you’ve never touched the piano once and me starving for music.”

“I’ll play if you’d like me too, but it’s one of the things I haven’t wanted to do for years.”

“You’re altogether too moody, Dick. You shouldn’t let yourself be so easily depressed,” preached Valmai, whose own moods of nervous

depression seemed to have been left two hundred miles away in the city.

“When one’s vitality is so low that even living seems hard work, one hasn’t the strength, either mental or physical, to control things like that, Val.”

“But your vitality isn’t low now. You look amazingly well and fit, you spend hours every day in the open and eat like a horse and when you come in at night, you’re just pleasantly tired out, not knocked out. I should say you were quite strong enough to give yourself a little needed discipline, you he-man from the open spaces.”

“It seems to me there’s someone else who needs a little discipline—husbandly discipline, if I might say so,” Dick answered.

Valmai brushed her hair thoughtfully that night. Just exactly what did he mean by that? She hoped fervently that he wasn’t going to be what Grace would have termed “too friendly.” If he did, what would she do?

Val’s own feelings on the subject of Dick were undergoing radical changes. She realized that his lack of interest in things at first and the occasional fits of utter boredom that he still had were the result of his unfortunate nerve-malady. Returning vigour and health were transforming him into a different person. Under his reserve lay a whimsical sense of humour that flashed out in unexpected places, and Valmai appreciated to the full his pleasant, easy comradeship.

Would his renewed health bring renewed vigour of the mating instinct—and if it did, what would her reaction be? Valmai's knowledge of the relationships of men and women was practically non-existent. Sex problems had never interested her, literature on the subject had merely repelled her; her shyness had cut her off in her adolescence from the companionship of girls who would have enlightened her. She had regarded marriage as a natural phenomenon that either came or didn't come, and, until lately, the subject hadn't worried her actively. For the first time in her life she regretted her ignorance.

She smiled grimly as she braided her long hair. Life had seemed miserably unreal in town; here in the country, in the most unusual set of circumstances a woman had surely ever been placed in, life had become very real, its problems urgent.

But life, love and desire had no power to keep Valmai awake once her head touched the pillow, and with the morning sun streaming in the window next day, the fears of the night seemed to have fled with the darkness.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

JUST as the breakfast-room at her old home in Fletcher Street had seemed once to be the hub of her existence, the living-room at Callemondah had now become the most intimate place.

It was a large room, running across the whole width of the house. It had evidently at one time been two rooms, but the dividing wall had been removed except for a great beam in the ceiling and down each wall. There were two windows in each end of the room, with a great open fireplace built in between the windows at one end. Doors opened into the kitchen and a little back bed-room from one of the long sides and into the hall leading to the front of the house from the other. The furniture was old, but good in spite of its shabbiness. A piano stood cross-corners near one of the other windows and book-shelves filled up the wall-space of the opposite corner. It was a room that revealed the character of its owner—a sane room, built and furnished for comfort and utility.

Valmai loved it; she felt absolutely at home in it. It was the most natural thing in the world

to slip down on to the hearth-rug of undyed fox skins in front of a fire of great logs—old Tom had given Dick a few hints on which woods burnt best, with resultant benefit to their fires.

The rest of the world seemed very far away from the living-room at night, when the blinds were down and the lamp lit, with Dick reading and Valmai sewing or reading too. Sometimes she would sit just gazing into the fire and wonder whether she could really be the same girl who had lived in the awful "flat" in East Melbourne with a Jewish traveller on one side and an obstreperous law student on the other. Valmai suddenly remembered the traveller's invitation to go to a show and chuckled aloud.

"Joke please?" Dick asked from the other side of the hearth.

"You'd never believe it, Dick, but a married man, at least I *think* he was married, once asked me to go to a show with him. I refused with contumely. I think he must have felt very lonely."

"Confounded impudence some men have. What made him think you'd go?"

"I suppose," Valmai laughed, "he looked at me once and decided I'd be glad to accept any invitations."

Dick looked across at her without a smile.

"Joke over," he said in a fashion he'd caught from Doreen, "and I'm afraid I've missed the point."

“Well, you said yourself that my unpretentious looks were my protection—and yours,” Valmai answered dryly and some of the sting she still felt was in her tone.

“Did I say that?” answered Dick. “May I amend my statement now—you’ve lost your protection,” he added quietly, lazily, and his eyes returned to his book without meeting Val’s.

Val sat still as a mouse and wondered if Dick sensed the tumult his words had caused. She knew that sun and wind had whipped some colour into her cheeks, that her hair was glossier and springier, that her face and form were just full enough to be pleasant; but she hadn’t imagined for a moment that Dick had noticed it. She felt rather alarmed and very uncertain of herself.

If Dick started to make love to her—ridiculous thought—but, if he did, what would she do? Her mind would say “No” very definitely, that this was the result of propinquity and that, under the same circumstances, Dick would have desired a Hottentot. She, Valmai Anne Warrington, formerly Rutledge, had no use for a love that might have been given to any woman at all. No, she desired to be loved for herself alone and, if that kind of love didn’t come to her, she would rather be lonely for ever. That was, she decided the answer her mind would give; but bodies, Valmai discovered, were an entirely different thing. Even in imagination, the thrill of feeling Dick’s arms about her, of the pressure of his lips, sent the colour to her cheeks and

a new light to her eyes. Her conscience, a stern thing, drew her up with a start—was it Dick, himself, or just Dick, a man, who thrilled her; and where did passion end and real love begin? Did love come first and then passion, or was it the other way round?

“My education has been neglected,” Valmai announced.

“Apropos of what?” Dick asked, as he threw down the last copy of London Punch and stretched his long arms above his head.

“Of the fact that I can’t play the fashionable game of bridge. I desire to be taught.”

“Produce a card table and some cards and I’ll show you the thoroughly unsatisfactory game of double dummy then,” Dick said.

“Produce the card table yourself, my lord and master. You weren’t born to be waited on by women, you know,” Val retorted from her seat on the floor.

“I always have been, though,” Dick admitted, “I had to come fifteen thousand miles to learn man’s real place. The expression ‘lord and master’ is entirely without meaning in Australia,” he said. Valmai wondered whether she was reading more meaning into his words than he intended. She looked straight at him.

“Don’t spoil our jolly friendship, Dick,” she said firmly. Dick made no answer.

II

There was too much work to be done and play to be attended to to leave Valmai much time for brooding during August. Forty chickens, housed a hundred yards away across a sea of mud, took up quite a lot of time. "Beastly little wretches," she said a dozen times a day, "without a thought but squeaking till I give them more to eat."

"That 'damn Daisy'"—the expression was old Tom's but Dick had purloined it—"is exactly fifty times worse. She's been stuck in the mud four times this week. The next time she sticks, she stays till the mud dries," Dick said savagely one day.

"One cow, drowned in mud, would look well on the debit side of the ledger, wouldn't it?" Valmai teased.

Each morning, Val looked out of the windows to find the place still veiled in grey rain. The very gum trees seemed to look greyer than ever.

"It is dreary when it rains," she said one morning, as she stood at the back door watching the unceasing rain.

"It's fresh and it will make a wonderful difference to the crops," Dick answered.

Valmai laughed to herself. She remembered saying much the same thing less than a month ago.

"A lot we care about next year's crops," she said gaily and turned to attack the breakfast dishes without waiting to see how Dick took it. Val

found herself avoiding Dick's eyes as much as possible lately.

August went out in rain and the first of September arrived, a Sunday, in a pageant of blue and gold ; blue of the sky and hills, gold of the wattle. The course of river and creek were traced far into the hills by the yellow glory of the wattle, each valley was fragrant with it, each hill had its crown. The bush was carpeted with the soft yellow balls and the river, swollen with the melting snow in the hills, carried to the sea its burden of fallen flowers.

Valmai, working in the garden as she always did on Sunday mornings, gloried in the golden picture all round her. The keen breeze from the South seemed to carry with it the scent of the sea, seemed to her the very incarnation of spring, and Val bared her head to the wind and felt the fairy charm of the spring work its magic in her heart. She sang softly to herself for sheer joy in the beauty of the morning, as she transplanted some little stocks and pressed the moist earth around them.

With loving fingers she picked some velvety pansies to put in her room. Maiden-hair was, of course, the proper thing to go with them, and she remembered a beautiful clump of fine fern she had seen in the gully below the house.

Pushing her way through the thick lush grass still wet with dew, pausing here to lay her face against the softness of a branch of wattle, there to stoop and touch with soft fingers the pale faces of

wild violets and again to rest her face against the smooth white bole of a mountain ash, while bright-hued rosellas and green parakeets, little honey-eaters and grey fluffy kookaburras flitted from tree to tree across her path and the bell-birds rang their fairy chimes all round her—it was to Valmai all one with the fresh glory of the September morning.

She found her fern trailing its soft pale green beauty in the cold yellowy water of the flooded creek. She stayed for a while in the stillness of the gully, where the only sounds were the bell-birds and the deep soft undertone of the flowing water. Then she gathered the fern she needed and climbed the steep gully side, picking gum-tips as she went to place in the great beaten brass bowl between two windows at the end of the living-room. Then, with her arms full of the fragrant tips, bright red, frosted blue and delicate pale green, she swung up the track to the house.

When she reached the house she was surprised to see the horses standing ready saddled at the door.

“Too good to miss,” Dick said in answer to her glance of surprise. “Do up some lunch in a parcel and we’ll go for a long ride.”

Valmai dashed into the house, pushed her gum-tips into the brass bowl and scrambled into her riding clothes in double-quick time. Dick had unearthed two old water-proof rugs and had tied them to the saddles. Val sent him out to give the chickens an extra large supply of food, while she

hastily cut sandwiches and cakes and filled two bottles with milk.

It was a golden, golden day and the whole world was singing.

They took the track that led through their own land straight up the hill away from Old Ford.

“We’ll have our lunch on the very edge of our own domain,” Valmai said. “Do you remember the plan, Dick? Callemondah stretches right over to that right-angled turn in the river. Do you think we could get there?”

“We could try, but I don’t want to get too far away from the tracks. I’ve never been across here with Old Tom and I don’t know the land-marks a bit,” Dick answered.

The track was fairly well defined and looked as though it had been made for some definite purpose. Trees had been felled every here and there to keep the path straighter and on one tree, Valmai noticed a big “C” cut in the bark.

“I believe this track is blazed,” she said. “I’ll watch the trees on this side and you watch on the other. Look, there’s another one with ‘C’ on it.”

The bush was an enchanted place this morning with a hundred different scents, each one more heady than the last. Dick had to dismount a dozen times during the ride to pick dark red heath or mauve orchids or other strange flowers that caught Val’s eye.

“You’ve got eyes like a hawk,” he said once as he returned from the pursuit of an elusive piece

of heath that was "miles darker" than any other he'd been sent after. "You can chase the next piece yourself. I'm staying right here on this horse till lunch time."

Valmai pouted—a trick she had just learned.

"You're not a bit gallant," she objected.

"It's wasted—on one's wife," Dick retorted. Valmai hoped he didn't see her blush.

The track was very steep and Valmai wanted to dismount and walk. Dick teased her so much, however, that she determined to stick on at all costs, which was probably the effect he had intended. Ten minutes bad going and then the track ended suddenly on the brow of a hill in a natural clearing that disclosed a view which left Valmai gasping for breath.

More than three hundred feet almost directly below them spread thousands of acres of rich river flats. Precipitous cliffs swept out in a great circle on either side seeming to close almost together near at hand, leaving just enough space to permit the river to pass through on its way to Old Ford and the sea. As far as they could see from the bluff on which they stood, the flats spread up each side of the river, till they were lost in the foot-hills of the mountains. The roar of the flooded river rose up to them like a song.

"What a wonderland," Valmai said softly as she gazed on the magnificent panorama. Then excitedly, "Dick, most of those flats are on our side of the river; I wonder if they're our land.

What a place for a settlement ! I can just see those flats cleared and covered with maize crops, with tidy little homesteads here and there. Look at the timber too—that's messmate and yellow box, isn't it ? That means good land."

Valmai jumped from the roan and ran to the edge of the cliff. "You wonderful place," she cried in a voice that thrilled, " I wish I could cover you with houses and crops. Dick, can't you see it? There'd be a little school and the church and store on that rising ground up there ; there'd be a saw-mill back in the hills behind us to bring down the timber to build the houses ; there's firewood enough for ten years on the flats themselves. And the houses would have verandas all round them and cow-yards with cemented floors and little patent fowl-runs. And the butter factory would be just below us here, so as to be near the road. The road would run down the track we've come. The grade isn't bad if you skirt the hill instead of coming over the top as we did. And when you stood up here you'd be able to hear the barking of the sheep dogs and the lowing of the cows, and even the voices of the children playing." Her voice sank low and was full with tenderness, but still vibrant with enthusiasm. "It's just a vision, though," she added sadly with a twisted smile.

But Dick had caught her enthusiasm. He was looking towards the mountains.

"If the river comes down from the mountains there's power enough for lighting and domestic use

from the look of it. Let's ride along the ridge of the hills and investigate that bluff we can see ahead."

It was rough going, for they tried as much as possible to keep the river in sight. The bluff seemed to recede instead of come closer.

"It's farther than I thought," Dick said at last. "It's after two, what's more, and I'm hungry."

Valmai dragged herself with difficulty from visions of far-off things.

"All this couldn't possibly be our land, could it?" she asked rather wistfully.

"It might," Dick answered. "We'll have a look at that list of assets, wonderful list, when we get back and see how many thousand acres there are of Callemondah. I think the Trustee people said it wasn't very valuable because it's so far from the railway and isn't cleared; but it's possible that we're still on our own land. I don't think all of Callemondah is freehold, and this may be the land that is on lease from the Crown."

"Do you think it could possibly be settled, Dick?" Valmai asked after a while.

"It's feasible," Dick answered thoughtfully, "but it would want untold money spent on it first. There'd be the question of transport to be settled first; once that was got over I think it would be pretty plain sailing."

"Good-bye, dream town," Valmai said later, as she turned for a last look at the verdant place bathed in September sunshine. "I'll come here with an axe sometime and start to clear the way for you."

Dick laughed at her excitement, but Valmai noticed that he was always ready to play the "Vision town" game, as she called it to herself. Many rides led up that way in the weeks that followed, and Valmai, whose whole life had hitherto been coloured by make-believe, gloried in having someone to play the game with her. In fact, Dick, she found, was more expert at it than she—his mind soared over obstacles as though they did not exist. Val romanced endlessly, but her clear mind recognized every difficulty, but half the fun of make-believe is that obstructions simply don't exist when only imaginary bodies have to be moved.

It was Dick, however, who chose the site for the butter factory and the saw-mill. This latter was to be half-way up a hill about a mile from the river, where great gums towered.

"I don't know if you're valuable trees," he said one day, patting the trunk of a two hundred foot monster, "but you're big enough to suit me."

Then one day Doreen came with them. She admired the place whole-heartedly and listened to Val's excited description of their dream settlement.

"You two impractical babies," she said with the amused tolerance of an octogenarian, "it would cost half a million to turn this place into a settlement." She was rather contrite when she saw the pain in Valmai's eyes.

"I suppose we are visionaries," Val admitted, "but all the same, it gives one a feeling of unlimited power to plan even a vision city."

CHAPTER SIX

I

VALMAI was cooking. The odour of cake filled the air; it was really a wonder it was not the odour of burnt cake, for she was preoccupied. A lifetime ago, or so it seemed, she could simply have suspended thought, but she felt too much alive here to turn her mind into a nebulous mist, to shut out impression and prevent reaction. Life was a hundred times more enjoyable at Callemondah, there was no doubt of that, but to balance it one had to feel the hurtful things a hundred times as much too.

Jealous—she admitted it, before her harshest judge, her own conscience.

Doreen, passing on her way back from the store, had left a great parcel of English mail for Dick. There were letters too for Val from her mother and Grace, but the trifling little pieces of news about the new curtains and the half-year's balance sheet of the business, even the knowledge that the new girl at the shop had turned out to be nothing more nor less than a thief faded into insignificance beside the fact that Dick sat in the living-room reading letters she could not share. There had been several

in grey crested envelopes, too—the kind of envelopes you would expect from a girl who always looked neat. The writing on them was neat, too, and alluring.

Valmai felt intolerably humiliated by the knowledge that she loved her husband. Her love wasn't a thing of tenderness and softness either she found, but an emotion that shocked her by its fierceness and abandon.

She found herself going riding just because she knew that as she dismounted Dick would catch her and hold her in his arms for a moment. She longed for the touch of his hands, yet dreaded it; waited, with her senses on tiptoe, for him to slip his arm round her as he sometimes did, yet she avoided him.

At the back of her mind, unacknowledged almost to herself, she knew that Dick was waiting for the first sign of something more than friendship from her; but a conscience of the kind she possessed was a fairly effective barrier. "Only love can sanctify marriage," she had once heard a clergyman say. Valmai's ideas on religion were rather hazy, but the fact that she and Dick had been married in a church did not seem sufficient to permit them to live together as man and wife unless they could say in absolute truth to themselves, "We owe one another." People, of course, didn't always love with the same quality of love—but there was something in Valmai's spirit that forbade her giving herself in love where only passion was given in

exchange. That the feeling Dick had for her was love of the kind she wanted she could not persuade herself. Her hundred and one crudities, her lack of self-control—not so bad now as it used to be certainly—seemed to her absolutely to preclude the possibility of respect and reverence colouring his love for her. As far as she was able to see, it could be only passion. Where did love end and passion begin? The same old question time after time—thinking round in a vicious circle, getting nowhere. There was nothing else to do but to live each moment as it came.

“Laugh when things go wrong”—Doreen’s philosophy. She had need for laughter then, for a very special sponge cake had come out of the oven as flat as a biscuit. Valmai opened the stove and looked at the fire; in her preoccupation, she had forgotten to replenish it and only a few red embers remained.

“Damn,” she said loudly and fiercely.

“Fined sixpence for langwidge,” Dick said, coming out of the living-room at that instant.

“Well, just look at that cake,” Valmai said, still feeling very savage. Dick surveyed the ruins sympathetically.

“Couldn’t you ram it together with jam and put brown stuff and cocoanut all over it?” he asked. Valmai looked at him with dawning light in her eyes.

“Lamingtons,” she said, “Dick, you’re a genius.”

“What I came out to show you was this,” he

said, holding out a sheet of paper. Val took it from him with flourey hands. The "letter" was printed in pencil by very childish hands.

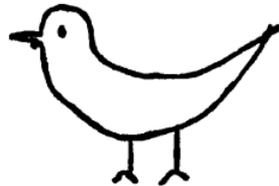
DeaR UnKEL RiChARD

THiZ iZ a zHiP



PLeaze cum Home
iN it to yOUR Luv-
iNG bOy Edward

A GiZ



"Dick, you've never told me you had a nephew? Is he Clive's boy?" she said excitedly.

“Didn’t I mention him? He’s a great youngster, just turned five.”

“The dear mite,” Valmai said, looking at the letter with soft eyes.

Dick slid his arm around her as she turned back to the pastry-board.

“Don’t, Dick,” she said sharply.

“Why not?” his voice, impudent, caressing, was close against her ear. “You’re a very obstinate wife, Valmai Anne,” he said, then for a brief moment, his lips rested on her neck. A few seconds after she heard him singing as he crossed the paddock to let the cows in.

Disconcerting things—men! Valmai tried to indue her thoughts with a little bit of contempt for them, but her mind kept flying back to the touch of Dick’s lips on her neck.

II

Valmai opened her eyes one morning with a thrill of pleasure to find the room bathed in golden light. For a moment she could not remember what there was to feel pleased about, then sleep left her suddenly and she leapt out. Why, it’s the picnic to-day, of course.

“Val Rutledge, I mean Warrington, you’re nine, not twenty-nine,” she said to the radiant-faced girl who looked back at her from the mirror. “Fancy getting excited about a picnic at your age.”

She heard Dick moving in his room across the hall.

“Are you excited, Dick?” she called, like the little girl she’d called herself.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’m excited,” he called back, but Val noticed that he viewed the day with satisfaction and that a smile wasn’t far from his lips.

“It’s going to be a wonderfu’ day and I’m so glad I learnt to ride,” she said as she put Dick’s cup of coffee beside him. Dick caught her arm.

“Don’t I get any thanks for teaching you?” he asked, his face dangerously close to hers. Val pulled away from him, still laughing but a little flushed.

“You may ride beside me—if there’s room, good sir my teacher,” she said.

The picnic was ostensibly given for the school children, but if truth be told their elders looked forward to it just as much as the children did. The favourite place was a spot up the river, where the creek joined it, leaving a large flat space sufficiently smooth to enable racing and sports to be held.

There had been a heavy frost in the morning, but the day warmed up quickly, and when they set off down the track a little before eleven, Valmai was glad enough that she had worn a wide shady hat. Other members of the party joined them where the various tracks joined, and Dick’s hearty laugh rang out as the Hawley girls appeared riding tandem, so to speak, on the broad flat back of a light draught horse.

Ina Hawley knew why he laughed and she laughed too. She was a friendly little soul, despite her parentage, with freckled face and tip-tilted nose.

“The whole four of us used to ride Bobby Burns to school,” she said, “but I’ve left now—I’m turned fifteen.”

Soon Doreen came flying along the road on Patchwork, her old horse. Patchwork’s sire had been a steeplechaser and, in spite of his age, Patchwork still took high logs and low fences like a bird. Doreen was as usual bubbling over with good spirits. A few minutes after, Alan joined them. His father and mother, he explained, had gone on in the spring-cart and many of the older people had gone by the road, which was longer but easier than the track the riding party were to take. The people in carts and jinkers had taken all the food with them.

So down the track they clattered, harum-scarum Doreen leading the way. Dick had thrown dull care well away to-day and forgotten to don his dignity and reserve, so much so that Brian Dougan, son of a small farmer back in the hills, volunteered the information that Mr. Warrington was growing into a “dinkum Aussie.” Valmai expected to see Dick frown, but his only answer was a laugh.

“England versus Australia,” he cried to Brian and pointed along a stretch of nearly level ground they had come to.

With a whoop of pure joy and defiance, Brian accepted the challenge, and the others pulled aside

as the two thundered past. Dick's horsemanship was superb, but he rode English fashion and the grey was not yet used to him. The English riding annoyed her, so that she did not do her best. Brian, however, had been born in the saddle and his mount was a fiery little animal who knew every pressure of her young master's knee.

"Australia wins," Brian's shrill young voice called back.

"You ride splendidly, Brian," Dick's praise was unstinted, "but I'll do my best to beat you next time." Alan who had caught up to them laughed.

"Brian's a Snowy River man, Dick, so don't be rash," he said. Dick looked puzzled, so Valmai explained.

"Snowy River is where all the hard riders came from," she said. "There is a poem, jolly decent too, called 'The Man from Snowy River,' you'll have to read it."

Kevin, Brian's twin brother, was looking with admiration and reverence at Dick.

"When you know the grey a little better, you'll find her a great mount, Mr. Warrington. She's a little bit worried now, you ride differently from what she's been used to, you know."

In deference to the others, Dick recognized that an expert was speaking. In fact, fifteen-year-old Kevin knew as much about horse-flesh as any man in the hills, even though his knowledge of English history was vague and, if Algebra had

been mentioned, it is likely as not he would have asked what race it won.

The track wound through practically virgin bush, now going steeply upwards, now sloping downwards precipitously, so that the horses scrambled almost on their haunches.

Presently they came to a grove of mountain-ash—beautiful, tall, white-boled trees, with the blackened dried bark hanging from them in long thin strips. There was very little undergrowth here, except for here and there a wattle-tree still covered in its wealth of yellow bloom. The birds that flitted like tiny shadows from one tree to another were silent, and no sound broke the perfect stillness except the dry crackle as a piece of bark fell from one or other of the trees.

“It’s like a wonderful cathedral,” Valmai said, as she tilted back her head to look at the chequer-work of dark-green leaves against a cloudless sky where the trees met over-head. Accustomed as they were to the bush, the beauty and silence of the quiet glade silenced the chatter and laughter and they rode through without speaking.

Doreen broke the silence. “You don’t like it much, Dick?”—the words were a question more than a statement.

“In a way, I do,” Dick answered, “but I must confess the bush hasn’t bewitched me as it so evidently has all of you.”

“It will, it will,” Doreen prophesied. “It will grow a part of yourself, as hard to tear out as your

heart. You may leave it, but some day it will call you and wherever you may be, in China or Siberia or farthest Greenland, you'll have to come—or die with longing."

The others all laughed, but both Dick and Valmai remained thoughtful. Would the bush ever call him back?

Suddenly they came to the river far below them in a rocky gorge.

"Does one aeroplane down or slide?" Valmai asked.

"Here's the track," called someone, and scrambling and slipping the horses went down the scarcely defined track to the river. On the other side, the cliffs stopped abruptly where a little creek entered the river. The triangular piece of ground between cliff, river, and creek was smooth and flat as a billiard table. Some old blackwoods spread welcome shade, and under one of these gleamed a fire where the men already had the billy on.

The carts and jinkers had contained a good supply of rugs and old mackintoshes, as well as the eatables, and on to these the riding party, hot from their scramble down the cliff opposite, were glad enough to fling themselves for a few minutes' rest before engaging in the serious task of getting dinner.

Dick joined the party round the camp fire, and most interestedly watched the making of the billy tea.

"Won't it smoke?" he asked, looking at the open billy and the blue smoke and calling to mind various failures of his own on the stove at home.

“It won’t while them green twigs are across the top,” one of the men explained. Dick looked at the twigs for a while.

“Evidently some bush witchcraft,” he said at last and gave up the problem.

The cloth was soon spread out under the trees and the cardboard plates and cups set around. Alan was set to carve delicious-looking pink ham, while others got busy on roast fowls, pressed tongues and the like. Valmai helped the other girls pile plates with brown scones and delightful cakes. She was rather surprised at the elaborate preparations that had been made, but she recognized it as the thoroughness with which bush folk do everything.

The billy was not quite boiling when the table was finished, so they sat around waiting for it. Doreen seated herself cross-legged before the fire and sang in the sweet soprano voice that was Old Ford’s pride, Georgette Peterson’s haunting little song :

In the blue smoke upward blowing
As we boil our billy tea,
All among the embers glowing
Wondrous pictures we can see.
Gum tree fairies small and sprightly
In a mad and merry throng,
Frolic with the fire elves lightly,
While the billy sings its song,
We shall long for warm December
Hear the billy singing low
See the fire-elves in the embers,
Wheresoever we may go——.

“Hurrah, the billy’s boiling,” she broke off abruptly. The tea was thrown into the boiling water, then the billy was lifted from the fire. Doreen tapped the sides with a spoon.

“Is that another charm you’re working, Dorn?” Dick asked.

“Good gracious, no,” Doreen answered practically, “that’s to make the leaves drop to the bottom quickly.”

“This is pure swank,” she said a minute later as she poured milk into the cups. “Billy tea should be drunk black—and kneeling.”

Dick tasted his. “I quite agree with you. At any rate, it should be drunk in some extraordinary position.”

“Don’t you like it?” Valmai asked.

Dick took another sip before he ventured an opinion.

“Yes, I think I do,” was his verdict.

“You’ll be a real bushman soon,” Mrs. O’Donnell said, with a motherly smile.

The ride in the beautiful sunshiny morning had sharpened their already good appetites and they all fell to with a will. After dinner, they rested for a while on the rugs.

“There is nothing so lovely as to lie on one’s back and look at the blue sky through gum-leaves,” Doreen announced, from her position of vantage with her head on Val’s knee.

“After dinner,” young Brian Dougan amended her statement.

"Brian's amendment carried with acclamation," Alan said amid the laughter that followed.

There were races in the afternoon for the children and, later on, for the older folk too. Spurred on by Doreen, Dick entered for the married men's race and won it in fine style.

"You're a fraud," Valmai said to him softly and meaningly, when he came over to her flushed with the run. She felt brave enough to tease him when other people were about, but she regretted the impulse when he said just as softly and meaningly, "We'll alter all that."

After the races some of the younger ones set out for a ramble along the creek bank. Valmai and Dick had already been some bush walks, but this one surpassed them all for roughness.

The way lay through a fern-gully with the little creek at the bottom of it. Great tree-ferns met across the water and their twisted trunks necessitated many a scramble. The ground was very soft from the recent floods, and time and again their feet sank ankle-deep in mud. But the beauty of the spot was so great that no one minded trifling inconveniences like that.

The sun was well up, and the light, filtering through the laced branches of musk, dogwood, and sassafras, made beautiful chequer work of green and gold. They walked now on a carpet of soft, green moss, now in beds of maiden hair and other delicate ferns, then again the ground would change in character, and stiff

coral ferns would threaten to trip them up with their interlacing fronds.

It was a delightful walk for all its roughness, and all too soon the leaders announced that they could get no farther, so they crossed the creek on slippery stones and went back along the other side.

Afternoon tea was ready for them when they reached the picnic ground, the billy was boiling, so they made tea at once and, in spite of the dinner they had eaten, soon made havoc of the cakes and scones that were left.

A little after four they packed up the baskets, put the rugs away, and set the party who were returning by the road off on their homeward journey. A little later the riding party set off home, for a good many of them had milking to do. Valmai was beginning to realize how everything in a dairy-farming community is arranged to fit in with milking-times.

So home, with the westerning sun making a golden haze that swam before their eyes. Doreen started to sing and one after another, they joined in, till the bush rang with their free young voices. It was a mad and merry time, full of laughter and goodwill and pure joy of living. They sang songs old and new, "Swanee River" and "Road to Gundagai", "Waltzing Matilda" and many old Scotch and Irish songs.

One by one they said good-bye and turned down their own tracks, till at last Dick and Valmai were

left riding alone with a mile more to go before they reached the homestead.

"It's been a lovely day," Valmai said. Dick did not speak for a minute, but when he did his voice was soft with feeling.

"A glorious day—one that stays in the memory forever."

They rode on in silence to the house. When they reached the yard Dick jumped down and came round to help Val dismount. He kept his hand under her elbow for a moment longer than was necessary and Val's heart trembled.

"You're a fraud yourself," Dick teased. "You told me you were twenty-eight, and you're not a day more than eighteen."

"Blarney," Valmai said as she freed herself and ran into the house. "If you could milk as well as you talk——"

Dick's voice singing "Waltzing Matilda," which had tickled his ear, was borne to her on the breeze as she set the table for tea.

III

"One, two, three, hop and turn—oh, Dick, you're simply hopeless." Doreen's voice was full of exasperation.

Dick stopped with one foot in the air.

"For heaven's sake tell me the next step, I can't stand on one foot for ever," he said in mock anguish,

but his instructress had subsided on a chair and was laughing helplessly.

“Like—an old—hen—taking a sleep—,” Valmai managed to gasp through her gusts of laughter. Doreen was helpless and speechless; but there was not a smile on Dick’s face. Looking a picture of injured dignity he retired into the living-room.

“He must have his little joke,” Doreen said. Valmai looked across at her with laughter-filled eyes.

“I think we’ll have to take the polka-mazurka as read, Dorn,” she said. “I shouldn’t wonder if Dick refused altogether to dance when we get there.”

“Not him,” Doreen answered with more confidence than grammar. “Another year or eighteen months here and he’ll be quite human. The man hasn’t had the advantages we have, you know,” she added.

“I’m afraid the polka-mazurka wasn’t included in my advantages,” Valmai said. “I’ll have to sit that out. I don’t believe I’ve been to a ball for ten years. You can’t count dancing class, where I went with Jack when he first came home from the front.”

“This one will make up for it then,” Doreen promised. “The orchestra is coming up from town, so are the cakes. A man from one of the hotels at Orbost is mixing the fruit cup and claret cup—Alan’s teetotal, so we’ll get home all right.

The floor's good and we all love to dance. So there you are, what more could you want?"

"I wish I were better at foxtrotting, though," Valmai said.

"Well, let's have another go at it. Wait till I get another record," Doreen answered. "You're an awfully good dancer, Valmai, you know, you just want practice, and I can see you having it too," she added as she wound up the little portable gramophone she had brought up to Callemondah for the purpose of giving Valmai some practice.

"I hope the results justify the time and energy spent in practising," Dick said that evening as he and Valmai sat down to a late and hastily prepared tea. She and Doreen had danced til Doreen had to fly off to get the tea ready at Crossings.

"I'm still a bit uncertain about that foxtrot," Valmai said seriously.

"Doreen left the gramophone, didn't she? We'll have a practice after the washing up is done, if you like," Dick suggested.

Valmai did not answer and hoped that he would forget about it later on. It had been bad enough feeling his arm round her and his strong hand holding hers during the afternoon when Doreen had been present to chaperone—but to dance with him there in the silence of the empty house! Dick, however, remembered. He wound the gramophone up and held out his hands to her.

"May I have the pleasure of this dance, Mrs. Warrington?" he said.

Val hesitated.

"I'm afraid I'm tired now, Dick," she parried. Dick looked at her quizzically.

"Tired—or frightened, Val?" he asked mockingly.

Val's chin went up in a gesture of defiance.

"Dick, you're horrid lately," she said, but Dick only laughed as he drew her into his arms. They danced together there in the old kitchen, with the light from the lamp, set out of harm's way on the mantelpiece, making queer shadows as their forms moved about, with the music of the tinny little gramophone filling the air. They danced, but they did not speak.

Dick broke the silence at last. "You are a splendid dancer, Valmai—or would be if you would submit yourself to your partner a little more. It does not do to be too independent when you dance." Valmai thought he was mocking her. She stood erect, defiant, where he had left her, and did not answer him.

Dick lounged against the edge of the table with folded arms.

"Don't make any mistake about it, Val, I admire your independence wholeheartedly, and I respect it so much, my wife, that when you come to me, you do so of your own free will."

"That will be never," Valmai answered roughly. Dick's voice as he answered was unexpectedly kind and tender.

"I wish you hadn't said that, Valmai, because

you may feel that you've got to live up to it—and I need you very much.”

Val covered her hot cheeks with her hands in the darkness of her bedroom a few minutes later—if only he had said, “I love you very much.”

IV

Valmai looked at herself once more in the glass. Her gold lamé dress—which she had worn eighteen months before at Grace and Jack's wedding—looked well enough in the lamp-light, although electric light would have exposed the numerous places where it was tarnishing. She was rather proud of her legs and feet. They looked nice, she decided—good of Grace to send up new stockings with her shoes and dress—probably done with an eye to future favours however. Then Valmai shook herself literally and metaphorically; it is so unnecessary to think the worst of everyone.

Dick's voice roused her. “Are you ready, Val? They're outside—I heard Alan toot the horn.”

“I'll have to put on old shoes to walk down to the car, won't I? I never thought of that,” she called back.

“Never mind. Slip on your coat and I'll carry you across the mud,” Dick said as he stood in the doorway of her room. Valmai gave a little gasp as she caught sight of him. She had never seen him in evening dress before; it suited him

wonderfully well, showing his massive shoulders and slim hips to perfection.

“I’ll have to move carefully ; I’ve put on weight since I came here and my coat is just about too tight across the shoulders. It isn’t wrinkling, is it ?” he asked anxiously as he turned his back for her to see.

Intimate little questions—the kind of questions a man asks his wife. They hurt a bit.

“No, it looks all right,” was all Val said. “All the same you’d better not try to carry me—I can easily change my shoes.”

“I’ll have the first two dances, the last two, two at supper, and we’ll see how many more when we get there,” Dick announced as he held her coat for her.

“Anything else you’d like ?” Val laughed at him over her shoulder as she buttoned the fur collar round her throat.

“Yes,” said Dick as he caught her hand. “I’d like to kiss my wife, who is very beautiful to-night.”

Standing there in her room, some of her clothes thrown on the bed, the scent of powder in the air—hard to resist him. Valmai warded him off.

“No, no, not now,” she said breathlessly, “I’ll get ruffled.”

Then she fled, hoping that he had not noticed the half-promise her words conveyed.

The Ball was in aid of a cottage hospital which the district sorely needed and was held at the hall

of a little township on towards Orbost. There was, as Doreen had promised, a good floor; the orchestra had been well entertained at dinner and, to quote Doreen again, were full of beans. The walls were a mass of greenery, while every hurricane lamp in the district had been commandeered and was transformed for the time being into a wrought-iron lantern that gleamed with dull orange eyes from masses of gum.

Valmai gave a little shiver of delight as she crossed the shining floor to the cloak-room. It was terribly crowded, and she and Doreen had difficulty in getting a look at each other's dresses. Doreen's frock was a bouffant affair of dull blue taffeta—an old-world gown in keeping with the thick golden plaits that were bound round her head.

"You're lovely, Dorn," Valmai whispered.

"And you're superb to-night," Doreen whispered back, and though they both laughed, they noticed that the men's eyes endorsed their comments when they joined the others in the ballroom.

Alan's quiet little Edna had come up from Sale for the ball, and she and Doreen between them seemed to know everyone there. On all sides, Valmai heard men saying, "Keep one for me, Doreen," or "Got the eighth, No? Good." Doreen's programme disappeared to be seen no more until it was returned to her quite full with various names written down the back against the words "Extra 1, Extra 2, etc."

Doreen took Valmai's programme as Dick handed it to her.

"Goodness, Dick, you can't have eight dances with your wife," she protested.

"Can't I?" Dick enquired blandly. "You watch me." He stood back and watched while Doreen flitted up to Valmai towing sheepish young men who bowed awkwardly and held out their hands for her programme without saying a word. Valmai hoped he wasn't comparing her manner with that of Cynthia on a similar occasion—but then, it's a far cry from a London ballroom to a little bush hall, so perhaps he would not notice that it was a similar occasion.

The orchestra started to play the first waltz. Valmai was just receiving her programme back from a rotund man of about sixty who to her amazement had put his name down opposite the word "Polka." As he moved away Dick came up to her and she slipped into his arms. "Could I possibly dance the polka with that fat old man?" Valmai asked him.

"We can run away and hide if you don't want to," Dick answered and Valmai knew that she was doomed to polka with a man two inches shorter and at least five stone heavier than herself.

The witchery of the music, the night, and the man, however, soon forced the thought of the polka out of her mind. Dick was a wonderful dancer, Valmai decided. She was dreadfully conscious of him to-night, conscious of his arms holding

her rather more closely than necessary, of his cheek against her forehead as they turned, of all his great virile body and of his compelling personality.

She was conscious, too, for the first time in her life of her power over a man. She wondered whether her hand in his was as electric to him as the touch of his was to her and, as though in answer to her thought, he pressed her hand more firmly in his.

She started to talk, quickly, feverishly, of anything that come into her mind. To think was madness, for Dick seemed to feel her every thought.

Some of the dances on the programme—the Canadian Barn Dance, the Maxina, and so on—were double dutch to Valmai, so she persuaded her partners to sit with her and watch the dancers. It was just the usual country crowd, but Valmai found them fascinating and she was never tired of watching the different types as they danced past her or sat, as she did, and watched.

There was Mrs. Carne, who had been married nearly five years and owned three small children, dancing gaily in her white satin wedding-dress. There were the Scott girls, lately returned from college; they wore modish frocks of velvet and brocade, their hair was shingled and their lips reddened. Valmai liked Mrs. Carne better.

Straight opposite her sat old Miss Smith, the postmistress. She had been in the district for fourteen years and had never missed a Ball; why

she came no one knew, for she could not dance and would not try. Perhaps she liked the young life round her and the exhilaration that invariably attends a country dance.

In the centre of the hall a bank-clerk foxtrotted sedately with the little milliner from the store. They both were "townies" as their bored expression indicated.

Dick joined Valmai as she sat watching.

"Not dancing?" he asked.

"Too strenuous," Val answered. "I was just watching everybody and deciding I liked the country people best; their enjoyment of everything is so naïve."

"They are an extremely mixed crowd," Dick answered. "I found myself just now swinging corners with the barmaid from the hotel."

Valmai shrugged her shoulders a trifle impatiently. "When will you understand, Dick, that there are no classes in Australia, particularly in the country. Everyone comes to a thing like this."

Dick laughed at her as he replied, "I wasn't complaining this time, Val, merely remarking. I'm quite willing to dance with anybody, even the mountainous lady in plaid silk over there, the one with the green velvet accessories; shall I?" Valmai laughed at his description which was apt.

"Yes, go ahead," she said.

"Did you enjoy it?" she asked, when Dick returned somewhat dishevelled from his dance. He laughed.

“She is as light as thistle-down,” he said admiringly, “and she milks her fourteen night and morning, so she managed to gasp out in between hops.”

A few minutes after they were dancing together again. That people were curious about them Val knew by the way the eyes of the lookers-on followed them.

Dick swung her into the dimmest corner of the room and, with himself between her and the light, quickly pressed his lips against her forehead.

“That wasn’t in the contract,” she tried to say in a matter-of-fact fashion, but she failed rather miserably.

“No?” Dick said, and, at the glow of his eyes, the pressure of his arm, Valmai knew he was wooing her wordlessly with all the strength of his personality.

It was delicious to be loved—or at any rate desired—wonderful to know his arms were waiting for her, his lips—the thought of them thrilled.

Dawn was not far off as Valmai and Doreen pushed their way through the crowds of people who were standing muffled up ready to go. At peril of life and limb they had rescued every doyley and spoon they had lent for the supper and stood at last, flushed, a little dishevelled, but triumphant and pleasantly tired out, while Alan brought the car up to the door.

“You sit in the front with Alan, Dick, and we three girls will curl up in the back and go to sleep,” Doreen suggested.

“Miss McNeil would never forgive me,” Dick said, “and in any case I’ll make quite a good cushion for you and Valmai.”

Val was not surprised when Dick gathered her up in his arm as soon as he got into the car—in fact she would have been a great deal disappointed if he had not; but she was not prepared for the quick warm kiss he pressed on her lips.

“Love-birds,” sniffed Doreen as she snuggled herself against Dick’s other shoulder.

The moon was nearly setting, a brilliant moon that silvered the road before them and clothed the world in ghostly, unreal radiance, when at last the black bulk of Callemondah loomed on the horizon. They got out sleepily, shivering in the cold air of very early morning, and wrapped Doreen up in the disturbed rugs.

A few minutes after Valmai held out her hands for her lamp as she and Dick stood in the hall outside her home.

“Good night, Dick,” she said. The lamp threw queer shadows on his face and she could not see his eyes. Dick set the lamps on the hall table.

“No, not good night, Val,” he said quietly.

Valmai leant against the doorpost, weariness in every line of her attitude.

“I’m so tired to-night, Dick,” she said softly and simply as a child—it was not what she had intended to say at all. For answer, Dick drew her close in his arms and kissed her again and again.

It seemed as though her heart stood still and in

the warmth of his mouth on hers she seemed to sense his abject need of her. Incongruously, a line of old Omar flashed across her mind—"Unborn to-morrow and dead yesterday, why fret about them if to-day be sweet?"

This ecstasy, this wild rapture was hers for now if she chose to take it. Thought became incoherent—nothing mattered but Dick—and herself. With a tired little sigh, she lifted her face to his and conscience became as nothing in the glory of his embrace.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

CLOTHES are a terrible problem! Valmai looked for the fourteenth time through her limited wardrobe for something that was

- (a) cool, very cool,
- (b) serviceable—all her clothes were that—and
- (c) pretty.

The first two qualifications were fairly easily satisfied, but Valmai was fast discovering that her eye for beauty must have been quite blind last summer. She stood, clad in her plain white fuji slip and contemplated the three dresses in front of her.

The striped fuji was not bad, but the hem wanted turning up; it was a relic of the days when dresses reached one's ankles. The navy silk was cool enough, but it was serviceable too, and looked it. That left the orange.

She slipped the frock over her head and, as she did so, thought suddenly of the clothes she would probably be wearing this time next year. In imagination the orange fuji became a crêpe de Chine of softest green, daintily hem-stitched, with panels of hand embroidery here and there. Stockings—they would be pure silk, with slender-pointed heels, not the

cotton affairs she had on now, all baggy round the ankles and at the knees, as though they had been made for a woman twice her size.

Shoes would be white buckskin, or perhaps of parchment kid, whatever that might be. She had read about it in a fashion book last night. Apron—but of course, she wouldn't need an apron. Women with assets (Valmai liked that word) in six figures did not wear them.

Strange that somehow, she could never visualize herself as having almost unlimited money to spend. She wondered what she would do with it—settle some on Jack and Grace and their children after them; provide for her mother—and what then?

In less than a month she and Dick would present themselves before the Board of Directors and give an account of themselves and their money. Valmai remembered with childish dismay how often the words, "Lollies—6d.," and even "Chocolates—1s." appeared in the store account. To buy sweets and pay for them without a feeling of guilt—that would be enjoying her wealth.

To think of the sixteenth of January was to picture herself and Dick walking hand in hand into a room peopled entirely by fearsome supermen wearing wigs and gowns and attended by numerous clerks with adding machines—machines that would tick up, as well as the pounds spent on flour and sugar and tea, the shillings spent on tennis balls and (whisper it softly) gramophone records. On one dreadful account, an item for two packs of cards

appeared cheek by jowl with another for "One pair of artificial silk stockings—4s. 11d.!" She could hear herself explaining that the stockings were reduced from 6s. 6d. and anyhow, she had to have them.

Valmai laughed at her own foolishness. What Alice-in-Wonderland pictures her imagination painted! And yet there was something frightening in the thought of the day on which they would render their account—like servants in the Bible. Well, whatever the result, one thing was irrevocable—her marriage.

Life had been more or less delirious since the night of the Hospital Ball—a merry, happy existence, made up of little silly jokes that really seemed quite clever because there was someone to laugh at them, of clinging hands and lips that were sometimes tender, sometimes passionate, of absurd discussions with Valmai carefully skirting the subjects on which they did not agree; serious argument between her and Dick generally ended in his giving her the last word, retiring into his reserve and leaving her with an empty victory and a feeling of resentment. So serious argument was taboo; thought was blotted out—one just lived.

Deep down in her heart Valmai knew that some time or other the issue between herself and Dick would have to be faced, and that it would have to be sometime before the sixteenth of January. She dreaded yet longed to hear Dick's real feeling for her put into words. He never said "I love you,"

always "I need you." That might have appealed to a woman with more of the maternal in her composition—not so with Valmai. She wanted reverence, respect, an acknowledgment of her physical and mental equality and her independence; an acknowledgement too that her surrender to him was something more vital than mere submission of her body to the demands of his.

Val laughed aloud; she could imagine Dick's face if she told him all this. But she knew that things could not go on as they were; she had come to another definite impasse. The sixteenth of January would bring an upheaval and what lay beyond she could not foresee. "Unborn tomorrow——, why fret about them if to-day be sweet?"

There was a tiny little breeze in the kitchen, enough to keep the window curtains swaying gently, but it was still terribly hot. December had come in gently with days of pure delight, so warm the sun, so cool and green the world. But each day seemed to get a little hotter, so that the farmers were predicting a long, dry spell and a real bush Christmas.

Valmai opened the stove and pushed another piece of wood in. As she did so, she gave a pitying little smile for the forlorn woman who had endeavoured to make that stove burn in July. The vagaries of a wood-fire stove were now an open book to her; her sponges could hold their own in a district of prodigiously good cooks and her fruit

cakes were "dreams of delight," according to Doreen, who spoke with the conviction of an epicure.

The screaming of jays drew her attention and she looked across at the orchard to find a cherry-tree laden with fruit covered with the chattering vandals. Bad luck to know that in a few minutes the tree would be stripped of its dark red harvest—yet what could one do. To drive the birds away, even if it were possible—which she doubted—would be to leave the fruit to rot on the tree, since it was impossible to use it all. She regretted once more that she had not taken advantage of Mrs. O'Donnell's offer of the loan of a bottling apparatus. She had carefully replaced every bottle of jam she had taken from the Callemondah shelves for the purpose of selling, but those which had been used for ordinary housekeeping she did not feel compelled to replace.

"There is plenty of preserved fruit at the house," she had replied to Mrs. O'Donnell's offer of the preserving set, "at least, quite enough to see us through." Then she had rushed on to another subject, not daring to answer the unspoken question in Mrs. O'Donnell's eyes. What would they think of her when they knew—for it was inconceivable that the Trust Company, powerful organization as it was, would be able to keep out of the newspapers a transaction involving over half a million pounds. How they would hate her deceit and despise her for marrying for money! She knew Doreen's views on that subject.

Butter and sugar—eggs—fruit and flour—mechanically they went into the basin, as her thoughts roamed to a dozen different subjects. To Dick, coming in for a drink, she answered absently.

“Lemon squash in the pantry,” she said.

“Lemon squash be blowed,” said Dick, “haven’t you lived long enough on a farm to know that tea’s the only drink worth having on a hot day.”

“You’re a nuisance, interrupting me in the execution of my duty,” Val answered, rubbing her floury hand across his forehead as she passed him.

On the still hot air the sound of a car was borne.

“Whose car is that?” Dick asked idly. Val looked out of the window at the little piece of the road that was visible.

“Never seen it before, it’s a little beauty—turning in here too. I wonder who it can be.”

Dick washed the dust from his hands at the kitchen sink and dried them on the towel which hung behind the door.

“I presume,” he said, “that I had better put on a coat—or do you think they’ll like the look of my brawny arms,” holding out his sunburnt arms covered with sun-bleached hair and his long hands with their broken nails.

“Your hands are dreadful, Dick—but you’d better go and see who they are first—they may have just missed the Old Ford road.”

As the car breasted the last sharp rise of the home track and came to a standstill, Dick crossed the front

veranda. Valmai was barely a yard behind him, so she was in time to see the look of blank incredulity that flashed across his face. Then, with a great shout, he cleared the intervening space in one bound.

“Mother,” she heard him say, as his arms enfolded the slender woman who stepped from the car.

Another woman got out too—a tiny woman, whose pale green dust-coat was smooth and unruffled, whose little white hat fitted closely over pale golden hair. Valmai could not see her clearly because of the red mist that floated before her eyes, but she saw Dick pick the woman up in his arms and kiss her hungrily, as though he could never be satisfied.

There was no coherent thought in Valmai’s mind, only a feeling of great disaster, a foreboding of injustice.

II

Centuries after, or so it seemed, she poured out tea for them in the living-room. Mrs. Warrington was she decided, still “imperious Jane McAlpin” for all her advancing years.

“The thought of your spending Christmas alone here was intolerable,” Mrs. Warrington was saying. “I made up my mind suddenly to come out to you and this dear girl just put aside all her own plans to come with me. I had to come, Richard,”

she patted her son's hand, "just to see this country I didn't come to so long ago."

Her black eyes were very splendid, and there was still the spirit of the coquette in her.

"I suppose I must call you Valmai," she said to Val a few minutes after as she took her cup. "We should have cabled, I know, but there was so little time, and I did so want to surprise Richard. Are two visitors too great a strain on your establishment?"

"There is plenty of room in the house." Valmai could not for the life of her prevent her voice from sounding churlish. "I am only wondering whether we can have visitors staying here. What do you think, Dick?" She stumbled a bit over the name—they called him "Richard."

"I can't turn my own mother away, Val. But if it will ease your mind I'll go down to the store and ring up the Trustees. With luck I'll get a call through this afternoon or first thing in the morning."

Cynthia laughed, a delicious little peal, the kind of laugh you read about but never hear. "You can communicate with the world then," she said.

"Don't bother this afternoon. We can put a call on first thing or wire to them in the morning," Valmai answered Dick without noticing the interruption.

"London was appalling this summer—nothing but rain, Richard, you were well out of it. We hardly saw the sun during June and July."

“ We had a monopoly of it over here—in July at any rate,” Dick answered.

Silly kind of conversation for people who have not seen each other for six or seven months—weather, London—nothing essential ; then Valmai realized it was because of her. As long as she stayed in the room they would talk of externals ; when she left it, their voices would sink lower, they would say to each other all the things that mattered, Dick and his mother—Dick and Cynthia.

“ If you’ll excuse me I’ll clear these things away,” she said.

There was no answer. Cynthia went on relating in her smooth, caressing voice a “ most amusing ” episode on shipboard. Valmai lifted the heavy tray, opened the door for herself and went out into the kitchen, and no one knew she had gone.

Miserable to stand there with the tears running down her face, stinging salt on her lips, her hands wet with washup water so that she could not dry her tears away—and any moment they might come out and find her there, tear-stained.

She tried to analyse Mrs. Warrington’s manner to her—not cordial certainly, yet not rude. The way she would treat a valued housekeeper perhaps.

As for Cynthia, Val cast round in her mind for a word that fitted her, then suddenly it came to her—“ svelte.” It described Cynthia exactly from the crown of her shining, pale-gold, shingled head to the tips of her slender buckskin shoes. Her

frock of pale green crêpe de Chine was the frock of Val's dreams, complete to the hem-stitching.

Valmai found suddenly that jealousy was a terrible flood of emotion that beat in her temples, that made her knees tremble and her lips harden, that sent the colour flushing her face and neck—that wanted to find vent in violent action and grim cruelty.

How long she stood there she did not know. The water grew cold around her hands and still she did not move. Dick came out suddenly, unexpectedly, and found her standing there.

"I'm going to milk, Val. Mother and Cynthia have gone to their rooms to unpack a bit and lie down. They're both very tired."

Then he saw her face. He patted her shoulder awkwardly, a little at a loss.

"Cheer up, my dear, the end of the world hasn't come." Then his mind flew back to the comfort of the visitors. "Better give them a hot dinner to-night—they are used to it, you know."

Valmai looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Cynthia shouldn't have come," she said in a hard, difficult voice from which all the life had gone. Dick turned away from her and looked out of the door.

"I suppose mother over-ruled her," he said, "Mother generally gets her own way." There was a little silence.

"She shouldn't have come," Val said again. There were no tears in her eyes now.

III

Valmai plodded wearily up the last hundred yards of the Callemondah track. The sun was nearing the west, but there was still a considerable amount of heat in it. She could feel the perspiration under her eyes and her head was hot and uncomfortable.

Several people had asked her during the afternoon whether she felt ill.

"There's a lot of sickness about and you want to be careful," Mrs. Knight had said.

"It's only the heat," Valmai had replied, since you can't explain that the visit of a mother-in-law and a family friend is quite sufficient to rob one's face of colour and one's body of vitality.

Mrs. O'Donnell had been quite worried. "You're over-doing things, Val," she said anxiously, "Rest up a little, my girl."

"Rest up"—Valmai's voice was very bitter—"with visitors in the house?"

"We'l, Dick's not the man I take him for if he lets visitors knock you up and drain the colour from your face," had been the reply.

Valmai wanted to cry out, "He doesn't know whether I'm white or red; he hasn't noticed my existence for four days, except to ask for something."

And while her clever fingers had been twisting paper flowers and making comical paper hats to fit childish heads she had gritted her teeth to

keep from tearing the bright pieces of paper to shreds.

The afternoon had been a most successful one, according to the members of the committee for the school Christmas party. Valmai had come to help partly because she had offered to, but more because she looked forward to the respite of getting among simple people for a while again. She had reckoned without the bush people's hospitality.

"You should have brought Dick's mother along with you," Mrs. O'Donnell had said. The thought of Mrs. Warrington tramping the mile from Callemondah to O'Donnell's through the bush, crossing the river on the stepping stones and sitting down at the "sitting-room" table with seven other women to make paper flowers made Valmai want to scream with hysterical laughter.

"The walk would have been too much for her and the horses are being used," she had replied.

The horses—that was another sore point. Twice in four days when she had wanted to use the roan Cynthia had taken it. The first time she had asked Valmai very sweetly if she minded her using the horse.

"I'm longing to see the real bush, Mrs. Richard. Would you mind if I used your horse this afternoon—not if you want it, of course."

There was a faint elusive intonation in her voice that Valmai did not like, what it was she could not tell. It would have been more than churlish to refuse her request.

Then this afternoon Cynthia had simply asked Dick to ride with her. "Take me somewhere where it's cool, Richard," she had asked.

"I'll take you up the track to Vision Valley," Dick had answered.

"No, not there," Valmai had said sharply, then added as they looked at her in surprise, "it will be very hot climbing up the big hill, Dick."

But what really hurt most was that Dick had gone off for the afternoon without even asking what she was going to do.

It was nearing five when she reached Callemondah. The afternoon tea she had left ready for Mrs. Warrington on a tray on the kitchen table had not been touched and the fire was black out. She found Mrs. Warrington lying half-asleep on the cane lounge on the veranda.

"You didn't have your tea," she said.

"I really didn't feel that I could go into the hot kitchen and get it," Mrs. Warrington answered as though she were in the last stage of exhaustion.

"I'll get it for you now," Valmai answered.

"That is good of you, my dear. I really shall appreciate it. This dreadful heat——," her voice trailed away and she closed her eyes.

The kettle was just boiling when the riders clattered into the yard. They were hot and dusty, but full of spirits. Cynthia was laughing, elfin in her pretty gaiety.

To Valmai's astonishment, Mrs. Warrington came out into the kitchen, bright-eyed, even sprightly.

“You poor, tired dears,” she said. “The tea is just ready for you. I haven’t had mine yet.”

“Not had your tea, and it’s half-past five. Where’s the cook been?” Dick asked, but he went on without waiting to be answered. “We went down to the picnic spot and up the gully,” he said. The heat did not seem to worry him at all and he had evidently enjoyed the ride. Val had no doubt that Cynthia could be very amusing and fascinating when she liked.

Valmai walked round to take Mrs. Warrington’s cup to refill it, she had not sat down herself nor had anything to drink; she felt that the first mouthful would choke her. As she took Mrs. Warrington’s cup she swayed and the cup fell to the floor. Dick jumped up in consternation and caught her.

“Valmai, what’s the matter?” he said. Even on the verge of fainting Valmai could have laughed at their concern. For the first time for days they noticed her existence. Voices again—like her mother’s and Grace’s—silly questions and sillier answers—like a wall of sound through which she could not penetrate. Dick’s voice and his mother’s.

“Went somewhere to O’Donnell’s she said.”

“Walked home from O’Donnell’s in all this heat,” Dick’s voice was really worried now. Valmai drank the water he held to her lips and felt much better.

“I’m all right now. It was just that I didn’t have any tea at Crossings. I hurried back to give your

mother hers ; I thought perhaps the fire would be out and she wouldn't know how to manage the Primus."

Dick poured out some tea and brought it to her.

"I hadn't the slightest idea you wanted a horse this afternoon," he said reproachfully. Like him, to put her in the wrong.

"You didn't ask me," was the only remark she made.

Dick returned to the subject later on.

"I'd never have gone out if I'd known you wanted to go to Crossings," he said, coming back into the kitchen when Cynthia and Mrs. Warrington had gone to change their frocks before dinner.

"If I had mentioned it, Cynthia at least would have thought I'd done it on purpose," Valmai answered. Dick lounged miserably against the end of the table.

"Oh, do go inside," Val said sharply, "I want to get on with the dinner."

"You've done enough to-day. Don't go to any trouble about dinner."

Dick was so contrite that Valmai jumped to the conclusion there was something on his conscience.

"I'm going to get a proper dinner," she said obstinately. Dick came over and put his arm across her shoulders.

"Don't be stubborn, Val," he said coaxingly. Val turned round quickly, her eyes flashing.

"Will you get out of this kitchen—or will I?" she said.

After a moment Dick went. "She's overwrought," she heard him say to his mother.

"Overwrought"—Val could have laughed if she hadn't been crying—"overwrought," when all she wanted was to be kissed.

She gave them cream of asparagus soup, cold chicken and salad, and little jam tartlets and cream for their dinner. After it was over Valmai stood up and began clearing the table.

"I know you won't mind helping me with the washing-up, Miss Caith," she said. Cynthia gave her little silvery peal of laughter that was beginning to get on Val's nerves.

"I've never washed up in my life," she said.

"Well, now's a good time to begin," Dick put in. "I'll help you and give Val a rest."

"Yes, do go and lie down for a while, Mrs. Richard," said Cynthia.

Valmai looked at her for a moment. "Please call me Valmai, Miss Caith. I don't quite like the intonation of your voice when you say 'Mrs. Richard'," she mocked Cynthia's voice to a nicety. "Dick and I really are married—I'll show you the certificate if you have any doubt about it."

"Valmai," Dick spoke firmly, "what has come over you to-day? Don't forget Cynthia is a guest."

"She invited herself, Dick." There was a little silence.

"I suppose I'd better go then," Cynthia said at last with a delicate little gesture of finality.

“Now you’re here, you may as well stay,” Valmai answered her before Dick had time to speak. “But just remember that this is my house as well as Dick’s, and I am not a convenient kind of upper servant. As long as you stay here, you can do your fair share of the house-work. Dick wonders what’s wrong with me, but if he knew the work I’ve had to do he’d be a bit more sympathetic.”

Cynthia came across to her and looked at her with big, beseeching eyes. “I didn’t realize we were so much trouble, Valmai,” she said, “Of course, I’ll do whatever you want me to. You do believe me, don’t you?”

“Now go and lie down, Valmai, and we’ll finish up here,” and Dick gently propelled her to a lounge on the veranda.

She could hear their voices as they washed up, with much soft laughter from Cynthia and many questions in her attractive voice. Other evenings she had worked about the kitchen and listening to their voices inside, felt cut off, alone—now, they worked in the kitchen, and Val was just as lonely. She heard one remark of Cynthia’s.

“She’s very impetuous, that wife of yours. She lacks that inestimable asset—poise.”

Valmai realized with burning face that she was eavesdropping. She moved away without waiting to hear Dick’s answer.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

THEY were spreading their lunch on the sand of the bar that separates Lake Tyers from the sea. Val stood looking out to sea, the beauty of the place stirring her as a great poem would have done.

In front of her the great green breakers curled and broke in white spray with resounding crash upon crash ; on either hand the yellow sand of Ninety Mile Beach curved faultlessly as far as the eye could see. Behind her stretched the blue waters of Tyers, queen of the Lakes, Tyers with her little bays, her silent bottomless pools, with the hundreds of water-fowl of all descriptions frolicking on her sparkling breast, with the virgin bush coming down to the very edge of the gently lapping water.

Cynthia had admired the magnificence of the breakers, had remarked on the exceedingly slimy condition of the lake bed, and then had sought a cool spot and begged Dick to fan the flies away. Doreen, who was no respecter of persons when they were within ten years of her own age, mocked her and tried to tease her into amiability, but Cynthia was in a perverse mood. So Dick sat and fanned her with his eyes wandering longingly to the others

who were playing like children in the sand. They called to Valmai to join them and they fell to with a will at making sand castles. Old Tom was called to judge them. Valmai had built hers on the damp sand and, just as old Tom came to look at it, a huge wave broke right over it and in a moment, her castle was gone.

"I built my house on sand and the sea washed it away," she said, as she threw herself on the sand beside the older ladies.

Mrs. Warrington looked at her with interest in her eyes.

"Don't build so close to the edge next time," she said. Valmai, catching an undercurrent in her tone, felt that in time she and her mother-in-law might really get to know one another.

The lunch was a sumptuous one, as befitted any Australian table on New Year's Day. There were cold turkey and ham, with delicious tomatoes and lettuce picked that morning before sunrise from the garden at Crossings. There were cakes so light and frothy that they melted in one's mouth, and cakes heavy with the spices of all Araby. There was shortbread with sprays of heather in icing on it, there were biscuits the recipe for which only one or two favoured persons had ever heard. There were fruit salad, trifle, jellies, and cream; there were dark red cherries, apricots flushed with pink, and luscious peaches straight from the tree.

"Can you ever remember a meal like it?" Dick asked his mother.

"Never," Mrs. Warrington said with the smile that had made her the beauty of a county twenty-five years before. Her praise when she gave it was always generous. "It was delightful from beginning to end. That fairy cake—wonderful."

"Yes, I will say Val's real good at that," Mrs. O'Donnell said.

"Val made it?" Cynthia's surprised comment this. "When you and Dick cease to be millionaires, you could make a fortune making cakes like that, Valmai."

"I well remember the first fairy cake Val ever made; it was quite half an inch thick and we thoroughly enjoyed it done up with brown icing and coco-nut. And what we didn't enjoy the pigs did," Dick said, his eyes dancing.

"You needn't throw that up at me, Dick," Valmai said lazily, enjoying the warmth of Dick's eyes as they rested on her.

"My dear lady, when have I *ever* thrown your cakes at you?" Dick asked.

"Too witty," said Bob Harrow, a friend of Alan's who was up for the holidays.

"Much too witty," echoed Alan as he rolled over in the sand towards Dick. "Let's scruff him."

They all piled on to Dick—Alan, Bob, and Doreen, with Valmai and Edna hovering round the outskirts of the scrimmage. Only Cynthia stayed aloof, smiling a little disdainfully, and when Val emerged from the rough and tumble, her hair awry and her

dress crumpled, she wished she had stayed out of it too.

They stayed for a while in the coolness of the spray at Tyers bar, then into the cars they crowded for the fifteen-mile run to Metung.

White sails against a blue, blue background—blue sky and bluer lake—the dull grey-green of ti-tree on the far shore. Close at hand, the little red-roofed town on a jutting point of land crowned by the revolving light that guides boats at night. Dozens of small craft, fishermen's boats, motor launches, all decked with flags—the great boats from Sale and Bairnsdale, brimful of laughing people. People in cars, people in jinkers, people on horseback and people on foot—people from the City and people from out back; white people and black people—Metung on Regatta Day.

Val's eyes, ever avid for new scenery to etch on her mind, were everywhere taking in every detail of the pretty animated scene.

Voices—lots of them—but different voices these, friendly and full of mirth, voices you wanted to answer.

The Old Ford party had taken up a strategical position just beneath the revolving light, where they had the advantage of being able to follow the yacht races down the Lake and could also see the sports in the water around the jetty. They had brought plenty of rugs and cushions and had ensconced Mrs. Warrington and Mrs. O'Donnell in a shady spot where they could see without being seen

too much and get the benefit of what little breeze there was.

Valmai had not seen much of the Lakes before, but she had pictured them often enough in her mind and she found the realization more than satisfying.

"People couldn't be petty if they looked at this with seeing eyes," she said to Doreen as they stood for a moment apart from the others.

Doreen found an opportunity to put a question that had evidently been troubling her.

"What did The Caith"—she did not like Cynthia and made no secret of the fact—"mean when she said you and Dick were millionaires?" she asked.

"I'll explain the whole thing to you soon, Doreen, but I can't for a week or so yet. We're by no means millionaires, but we do get a good bit of money from Mr. Craig's estate about the middle of this month," Val answered.

"And we've been telling you how to save half-pennies," Doreen's voice was a little bitter, disillusioned.

"Dorn, don't fail me," Val pleaded with a little catch of entreaty in her voice. "It was necessary, I can tell you. When you started to help us we had less than five pounds left."

Doreen looked across at Mrs. Warrington, watching the races through her tortoiseshell lorgnette, with jewels on two fingers of each hand. She opened her mouth to say something sharp, but at the expression in Val's eyes, she stopped.

"You're my friend, Val," she said simply.

They went round to the jetty after a while and watched the water sports. Doreen and Valmai laughed whole-heartedly at the efforts of two small native boys out to knock each other from a greased plank. By and by one of them tumbled head-long in, to emerge a few seconds later with the water shining on his black skin and laughter in his dark eyes. The next two competitors were white, much to Cynthia's astonishment.

"Surely you don't let the natives compete with the white people," she said in her clear voice. Valmai looked round about them in consternation. Among the people pressing close to their sides were several native women, resplendent in their best attire, watching their boys with just as much pride in their eyes as ever white women had in theirs.

"There are blacks all round us, Cynthia," Valmai said softly, "so don't speak too loudly."

"You're not afraid of them touching us, are you?" Cynthia asked with narrowed eyes. Valmai laughed.

"Good heavens, no; but there is no necessity to hurt their feelings."

Cynthia was all disdain. "Oh, is that all? I didn't realize the susceptibilities of the natives were of paramount importance," she said.

Doreen looked at her with curling lips.

"Neither are they, for that matter," she said. "What is of paramount importance to us is that we should conduct ourselves like ladies even in the presence of those whom we consider our intellectual

inferiors," she said in cutting imitation of Cynthia's tone.

A few minutes after, Cynthia was looking up beseechingly into Dick's eyes. "Doreen thinks I'm not well-bred because I talked about natives where they could hear," she said. She was laughing now, gaily mocking Doreen.

"The only black races Cynthia has been amongst up to date are the Arabs," Dick explained, "and they don't count much in Cairo." For some unaccountable reason, Valmai felt furious with him for excusing Cynthia.

Late in the afternoon, a friend of Alan's met them and offered to take some of them out in his launch. There was not room for them all in the little craft and Cynthia without hesitation said she would rather not go. Dick stood uncertainly on the jetty, looking down at Val already in the boat and then at Cynthia, standing quite evidently waiting for him to come back with her. His uncertainty showed in his eyes and, suddenly, Valmai felt the ridiculous humour of his position—with two women just about fighting over him. Fighting with words and glances—in another walk of life, it would have been with blows and hair-pulling and shrill screaming voices. She laughed helplessly.

"You'd better stay with Cynthia, Dick," she called to him through her laughter, "she looks so forlorn." With a gesture that might have been relief or regret, Valmai couldn't decide which, Dick turned back along the little jetty.

Valmai sat in the prow of the boat, among the ropes and leant over the side, watching with eyes that strove to record faithfully the colourful scene before her. They skirted round a little island, all golden-brown and green in the light of the hot sun, then ran across Bancroft Bay and down Gardiner's Creek as far as the boat could go. The scene of the cool creek, its greeny water and thickly wooded shores, was one of unusual beauty that tied Val's tongue, she could only look and think.

Since her brain storm of a couple of weeks ago, things had been much easier. Cynthia certainly did not shirk her part of the work, although she went about things in Val's presence with a tiny smile, a peculiar little smile, about her lips. Only when Dick was present, she did things cheerfully, laughing gaily at her mistakes and calling Dick's attention to them.

"My poor little hands," she had said ruefully to Dick only the night before, "Val's been busy all day, and they're just trembling with tiredness with peeling potatoes and washing up." She did not trouble to explain that Valmai had been busy cooking all day for the picnic the next, and Val had only laughed when Dick had said to her, "Cynthia's not strong, Val."

Poor Dick, Val's mind flew back to the picture he had presented standing on the jetty, not knowing which way to go. What a ludicrous position for a man as transparent as he! Tied to one woman, absorbed in another—or was he absorbed in her?

Valmai couldn't decide whether he was really so interested in Cynthia or whether he was always at her beck and call simply because she was a guest in his house, a girl he had known all her life and whom he had contemplated marrying. Did he still contemplate marrying her? That was the question Val could not decide for herself. The sixteenth of January was coming very close now—would Dick want the divorce he had spoken so calmly of six months ago or would their intimacy of the last three months bind him to her?

Had they been alone, Valmai felt she could have discussed the matter of Cynthia with Dick, but they were so seldom alone together for any length of time. There was so much to be done, both inside the house and outside, that there was little opportunity for private conversation.

Darkness was falling when at last they got into the cars for the homeward run. Doreen had high-handedly banished Dick to the back-seat of Cynthia's car.

"I'll sit in front with Cynthia to show her the road. You're worse than useless for that, Dick," she said. Valmai remarked with an inward smile the bad grace with which Cynthia accepted the alteration in director.

Dick sat between his mother and her in the back seat. Mrs. Warrington had enjoyed the day immensely.

"This is a wonderful country—the colour of it, and the richness," she said.

"We must take mother to Vision Valley and show her the dream town, eh, Val?" Dick suggested.

Mrs. Warrington laughed softly. "Still at your dreams, Richard. You'll never learn that life is made up of realities," she said. "You know, Valmai, when he was a child he used absolutely to live in his dreams. He only tolerated us as part of a world he was forced to live in, but which didn't really concern him at all. His father used to call him 'Dream-a-day'."

"Dream-a-day," Valmai repeated the name softly to herself. "I like that. I'm a dreamer too, I'm afraid—at least I used to be. You get too close to nature at Callemondah to let life pass by you, though."

The motion of the car was very soothing. Mrs. Warrington's head nodded against her big son's shoulder. Presently Val's drooped too. In a moment Dick's arm was round her; she waited for his kiss, but it did not come.

II

A chance remark of Dick's destroyed for ever the feeling of permanency at Callemondah.

One moment it seemed as though there could be no other sphere of existence but this one, that lay between the living-room, the kitchen, the farm-yard, and the bedroom, no other round of duties, but the routine of preparing meals, sweeping,

dusting, bed-making, planning the next day's meals.

"In exactly one week I'll be free to order a new suit and some decent cigars," Dick said. Not a very weighty remark, yet enough to revolutionize Valmai's world.

At one moment she was the mistress of her comfortable house ; the next instant she was homeless. Restlessness possessed her ; nothing mattered but to endure somehow the hours that lay between now and the sixteenth of January. She tried to reconstruct the attitude of mind with which she had viewed the momentous day three months ago ; she could not remember distinctly that she had at any time said to herself, this will I do and that will I not do. True to her resolve of the night of the Hospital Ball, she had lived in the present, taken each moment and each day as it came and heeded nothing of the unborn to-morrows. She could not recall having ever visualized herself and Dick together ; they had never spoken much of what lay beyond the end of their probation ; they had certainly never deliberately planned a life together.

Valmai wondered what was in Dick's mind, to find with a thrill of dismay that Dick's mind was a closed book to her. She would have given a great deal to retrace her steps a month, to have just one of those golden opportunities for discussing things with Dick. She realized her own cowardice was to blame for her present uncertainty, she had dreaded having to make a definite decision with

regard to her husband, having to accept irrevocably or to reject the affection he offered her, no matter what its quality.

Of one thing she was certain and that was that Dick would never of his own accord leave her; she knew enough of him to know his innate chivalry. No matter how great his regret, how bitter his renunciation, he would stand by her as long as she wanted him. If she called him to her side, he would not fail her; but in her heart, she knew that to hold him now to the spirit of their marriage bond would be to confess her weakness and Cynthia's strength.

Valmai realized with a heavy heart that the decision lay with her; their two lives—perhaps Cynthia's too lay in the hollow of her hand.

She longed unceasingly for an opportunity to talk with Dick. Such an opportunity would have to happen naturally; Dick would be on his guard if she were to force a discussion. No opportunity came, however, and the days passed on feet that one moment seemed leaden and the next moment winged.

Her decision, when it came, was instantaneous.

They had ridden up to Vision Valley—Cynthia, Doreen, Alan, Dick, and Valmai. Cynthia was to-day riding the beautiful mare that was the pride of "old Tom's" heart.

They rested, the five of them, on the grass at the clearing that overlooked the Valley. It was cool in the shelter of the great trees and the westering

sun cast enormous shadows across the flats beneath them.

“Vision Valley,” Valmai said. “Look at it for a moment, then close your eyes and you see it again in your mind’s eye, cleared and settled. The maize crops would be five or six feet high now and hanging out their tassels. And some of the settlers would have grown sunflowers on the hill opposite where the sun shines all day long. That would be a blaze of gold. It would be school holidays, so the children would be out-of-doors playing. The boys, I know, would be down at the swimming hole. Dick,” she broke off suddenly, “we forgot to provide our ideal settlement with means of amusement. There’d be a hall, you know, with a decent moving picture apparatus. We’d have to censor the films though, we don’t want our young Australians’ minds to be filled with a lot of tosh about America. The cows would be coming in now and if you listen hard enough, you’ll hear the men calling them into the bail. And all the time you’d be able to smell the hot gum trees and the scent of the dogwood and sassafras, and the smoke from the houses would rise straight up to your nostrils and carry the scent of burning gum-leaves.”

“I wonder if it will ever come true,” Doreen said.

“If I had brains to match my imagination, it would,” Val answered. “There’d be so much work that one’s brain refuses to comprehend it; there’d be heart-break and disappointment. It would take a man with the great heart of a lion

and the tenacity of a bull-dog—but he'd be some man and I'd give my hope of peace in the world to come to see my Valley blossom like the rose."

There was a long thoughtful silence; Valmai, coming back from the far land where her thoughts had been travelling, was suddenly dismayed to find she had revealed so much of her heart.

Cynthia started speaking. "This is January here. January at home—it makes you tingle even in imagination. We would be hunting to-day, if we were home, wouldn't we, Dick? It's the Dancourt meet to-day and we'd be galloping along with the frosty wind in our faces, with the sky like lead overhead and the snow lying in drifts under the hedges."

Dick took up the tale. "The fox would be breaking cover over by Dancourt coppice and the hounds would be streaming across the home pasture. And Johnny would be leading the way with his hair on end and his eyes like saucers——," he broke off suddenly, "good old Johnny—to see him again, Cynthy, to pound his back and see his silly monocle drop when he looks surprised."

There was a world of longing in his voice and Valmai knew that Dick must go free.

It was strange how little distress she felt once her decision was made. Perhaps she would realize more later on what it meant, or perhaps in the back of her mind she had known all along that there could be no other decision.

How to accomplish it was her main worry. She could not tell Dick. If he thought for a moment that her love for him was so deep, nothing would induce him to let her go, cost him what it might. Therefore, he must not know and Valmai distrusted her power to dissemble to him. There seemed nothing left but flight.

She would leave Callemondah suddenly, before they had time to realize that the fateful sixteenth of January had been and gone, and before they had time to begin any preparations for departure. She could hurry through whatever the Trust Company wanted her to do—perhaps enlist their aid by telling them she did not want to meet Dick again—and then go right away, right out of Australia, somewhere where Dick would have heaps of time to think before he could reach her. Then she would write to him and offer him his freedom. She did not know how one set about getting a divorce, but there were plenty of solicitors who could advise her the best scheme to adopt.

And if Dick came after her—she could not even in imagination formulate any plan of action in that case ; but of one thing she was very sure, that she would be quite certain that it was love and not chivalry and pity that he offered her.

It was hard to be natural when every moment meant a farewell to some well-loved object, and Valmai would not have accomplished it had she not stolen away for an hour and ridden up to Vision Valley again.

All that the Valley meant to her swept over her in a storm of awful emotion. She threw herself face downwards on the grass at the cliff-edge and gazed as though her eyes could never be satisfied. The warm earth cradled her body and in the exaltation of her farewell to the place that held her greatest dreams, something of what love of the land meant came to her.

This valley was Australia—lovely, bounteous in promise, virgin, it waited the hand of man to bring order from chaos, to wrest from nature the promised bounty. Nature, so temptingly beautiful, would be harsh to the man who tried to tame this valley; she would fret him with flood and fire, bird and beast would war on him; but to the man who persevered, whose courage stood the strain, she would give of her plenty with both hands; a country made for men, not weaklings.

Val's exaltation remained all the evening of the fateful sixteenth of January and even the next morning, when she boarded the milk waggon and persuaded the driver to take her to the little station. As she sat waiting for the little motor-train to rattle up, she tried to persuade herself that she was going only for a little while—a few days would see her back, climbing the steep track between the laden fruit trees.

She flagged the train and climbed in. The river flashed beneath a little bridge like a silver ribbon, the hills closed in.

Callemondah was behind her.

PART II

CHAPTER I

I

THE Valley slumbered. There was no sound, but the never-ceasing murmur of the river, so deep here that its voice was soft, although it chattered loudly enough over the rapids at the valley's head.

The darkness seemed suddenly less opaque. A tiny twitter from a sleepy honey-eater to his mate, another and another. A kookaburra awoke and from his seat on the topmost bough of an old gum, when the light was just commencing to break, he sent forth his glorious challenge to the world. He was answered from the other side of the valley. From ever so far in the distance one fairy bell rang, slowly at first and then more rapidly as though the bell-ringers were getting into their swing, another and another chime came faintly, so faintly from the distant gully that you wondered whether it really was the sound of bell-birds or whether the elfin folk were ringing their breakfast bells.

Near at hand a very sleepy mopoke settled himself to rest close to the trunk of a gnarled old mess-mate, and as he blinked his topaz eyes he talked to the world at large. "Mopoke" he said, but

his voice was so muffled with sleep that not even Reynard the fox, slinking down to the river, heard him.

The clouds were pink and gold now and the white mist that filled the valley was tinged with rose. There was a whirr of wings from the reeds that fringed the billabong as three black duck winged their way straight into the glory of the rising sun. Emus padding their quiet way through the bush appeared on the water's edge, suddenly taking shape, like phantoms, from nothingness. They preened themselves and bent their long necks to see their own reflections in the rose-tinted water. A regular thud-thud through the scrub announced the coming of kangaroos—a great old man with a female carrying her joey in her pouch.

Another day was born and all the life in the valley was awake.

The burning sun of early autumn was painting the leaves of the willow that lined the river's edge with deep gold and turning to red and yellow glory the leaves of the blackberry brambles that twined about the willow roots.

The sun rose higher still and glowed with greater heat so that the great gums hung their leaves to present only the thinnest edge to the sun's over-warm caress. The honey-eaters sought the shady spots where the trees grew thickest, the emus stretched their long necks and drank deeply of the cool water. The fox lay in the shadows, and only the kookaburra, seated on the leafless gum,

challenged the burning world again with his infectious laugh.

The clop-clop of horses' hooves broke the stillness of mid-afternoon, and Reynard pressed more closely into his shadow, the emus melted into the bush as though they had never been, the kangaroo stood motionless with frightened eyes. Only the black swan on the billabong and the impudent kookaburra in the gum-tree remained fearlessly in sight.

Two horses came over the brow of the hill and the man on the first horse kept looking back anxiously. He was dismounted ready to lift the tired rider from the back of the second one.

"You're a game old lady, and I'm proud to be your son," he said.

"Just hold me for a moment, Richard, till I get some feeling in my knees again. It's ten years since I was on a horse."

"So this is Vision Valley," she said at last as she stood a few minutes later on the very spot where six weeks before a girl had lain, dry-eyed and agonized. For a long, long time she stood there without a word, gazing as the girl had done, as though her eyes could never be satisfied.

"It is very beautiful," she said at last as she turned away, and her eyes were tired, "but I'm going to hate it if it takes my son from me. Your mind is quite made up, Richard?" she asked a trifle wistfully.

"Quite," was the firm answer. He stood

looking out across the Valley for a while, then he turned to his mother.

“Let me make you comfortable here in the shade, mother, and give you a drink of tea from the thermos. Then I’ll tell you why I decided to stay here.”

Words came with difficulty at first.

“I hated Valmai when we first came here. It had been such a disappointment to travel all this way to be offered a fortune on such outrageous conditions. Then she defied me and left me to refuse to comply with the conditions. In those circumstances she would have received ten thousand pounds and I would have received nothing. She forced me to act like a cad and I resented it.”

His mother said nothing. Her eyes were following the kookaburra who was seeking an effective perch from which to send forth his next cachination.

“The first days up here were horrible, lonely beyond anything I have ever endured. I felt more thoroughly alien here than I did even in Africa when my bearers were the only people I had to talk to. Valmai’s brusque manner and her evident unfriendliness made me curl up in my shell. I could think of nothing to say to her—we had no common plane to stand on, and the result was that we spent our days in miserable silence. I knew less than nothing about farming here, and the place seemed to be badly stocked and I was on the verge of despair. Then, one day, I discovered that Valmai had a sense of

humour and, about the same time we learnt that some of our stock had been commandeered by Hawley, who lives in the Valley below the homestead, and it seemed that there was a sporting chance of our being able to stay the full six months without starving. I think I began to be interested in the venture then."

They were silent so long that Reynard the fox took the opportunity of slipping across to the river's edge for a drink.

"I suppose only a woman would realize the hell Val went through. She was a city girl who had never been for longer than a week at a time in the country before; she didn't seem to mind the loneliness, for I think she was always lonely in Melbourne. What she found hardest was keeping up appearances. I was stupid and unsympathetic, and it was quite a long time before I realized how proud she is and, when I did, I played up to her. After a while I found that I didn't dislike the people so much as I thought I did. Under their roughness I found they were very much like our own friends at home, with just as much respect for their neighbours, just as much independence. They are very fair-minded, intelligent and thoughtful and were always ready with help and advice for me—and heaven knows I needed it, new-chum as I was. I don't think anyone in the place realized that ours was not an ordinary marriage, but the praise for that was Valmai's, not mine."

The kookaburra had found a likely perch and from just above Dick's head, he gave peal after peal of delighted laughter.

"Laugh, you old jackass," Dick said, "I know the laugh's on me. I wish I could describe Valmai to you when she first come up here, mother, but you know I'm no good at that kind of thing. She was terribly thin and angular, her face was always colourless and sallow, her hair invariably untidy. Her eyes were her only beauty then, but as they were always filled with resentment and something approaching disgust when she looked at me, I confess I didn't notice their beauty. Her movements were never awkward, but they were always abrupt, and everything she did she attacked with a nervous, jerky energy that set my nerves on edge. I don't think the nerve trouble I had after the Wat was so well cured as we thought—anyhow, we were a bright pair, I can tell you," he laughed a little bitterly.

His mother did not answer; she seemed loath to break the thread of his thoughts.

"I suppose I grated on her nerves just as much as she did on mine, and there were some brisk little wordy wars that worried me, so that I would keep silent instead of answering her back, and that increased her resentment. Then I suppose the healthy life and wonderful air began to have their effect on us."

"It has made a new man of you, my dear," his mother commented.

“I found little traits in Val’s character that I could not help but admire—she was game as they’re made, she had a fine courage that showed most when big things went wrong—there was one period when we had less than a pound between us and Valmai went down to Lakes’ Entrance and peddled eggs and jam at the boarding-houses. I touched rock-bottom in humiliation that day, and I think she did too, but she treated it as a great joke, something to try her philosophy on. These Australians,” he commented, “are an amazing people—more individual than any race I’ve struck before. They are philosophical, and their philosophy consists of equal parts of independence and sense of humour.”

He paused for a while and the kookaburra came a branch lower down to see what there was to see with his bright little eyes.

“I found Val had an eye for beauty of scenery—in fact, scenery moves her to something bordering on exaltation. Then, one day, we discovered this valley. Valmai stood on the edge of the cliff there and talked. I think she was inspired that day, for she caught me up in her enthusiasm, and for the first time I felt the strength of her spirit.”

Dick was talking to himself now. He had forgotten the presence of his mother and the bright-eyed listener on the bough above—forgotten everything but the girl who had stood on the cliff edge and carried his spirit with hers into the world where dreams are made.

There was a long, long silence. The shadows

lengthened in the valley, the kookaburra grew impatient at last and transferred himself again to the other side of the river. The emus appeared and mirrored themselves in the still water of the billabong.

“I never realized until lately, mother, how much I have taken from women without a thought. All my life you have made your wishes subservient to mine. Cynthia is about the only girl I knew intimately, and I can never remember giving in to her on any thing that mattered or that she has acted contrary to my wishes on a single occasion—except when she had her hair shingled. The girls I met in London were just as bad for me as you and Cynthia. I felt, sub-consciously of course, that I was on a different plane from them; if I bowed to their decisions on anything, that was my condescension, my tribute to their weakness, not their victory. I’m not boring you, mother,” he asked quickly, a little anxiously because she was so still.

“No, no, my dear,” she answered.

“I want you to understand, mother, because it means so much to you—and I want to understand myself too,” he added, as much to himself as to her.

“That kind of training handicapped me right from the beginning with a girl whose main characteristic then was an almost aggressive independence. You know, mother, the life I’ve lived since the War has been most unnatural, the life of an anchorite. Before the War I used to play round a bit in London; women of various kinds, good as well

as bad, offered themselves for my pleasure. Sometimes I left them—sometimes took them—not a very nice confession to make to one's mother," he added.

"I wouldn't have you more or less than human, Richard," his mother answered. Dick did not speak for a while—it was as though he was trying to arrange his thoughts in proper sequence.

"I've always loved Cynthia with the kind of love I would have had for a sister—much as I love young Doreen now. I don't know why I made up my mind to marry her—I think because she fits so wonderfully into the background of the Chase—but she has never disturbed me. I can't remember when I first began to feel Val's presence disturbing physically. For a couple of months we could scarcely leave the house because of the rain and the bad roads. We used to play double-dummy bridge in the evenings and, when money got very low, we'd sit in the firelight instead—firewood is free, you know—and have absurd discussions on every subject under the sun. She looked very desirable always then, for the life here suited her down to the ground and, after the few lonely weeks at first, she was always happy. She was elusive, too, would talk on every subject under the sun but ourselves, and I think that made me keener than ever. Val kept me at arm's length literally till almost the end of October. Then, one night, we went to a dance about ten miles away. You would have enjoyed that dance, mother, everyone was alive and abso-

lutely natural. Valmai was like a flame and that night, she came to me." His voice sank so low that his mother scarcely caught it.

She stretched out her hand and touched his.

"Oh, Richard Dream-a-day," she said with a catch in her voice. They sat hand in hand for a few minutes, then Dick went on.

"Val was more elusive than ever then—she was always gay, always laughing, she seemed to dance the days through while I followed like a lumbering bear. She had been ready enough to talk before, but I could never get her to stay still long enough, mentally, to talk about things in general and ourselves in particular. I think talking must be one of the most important parts of marriage, mother."

"It's a pity more men don't realize that," his mother agreed.

"Whether she really loved me or not, I don't know. Then Cynthia came and Val resented her coming terribly. I don't think a man was ever in such a merciless position, mother. You can't go to a girl you've loved tenderly all your life, a girl who has come fifteen thousand miles to see you, and say 'I love someone much better.' I thought that Cynthia would realize that circumstances had altered, I tried to be gentle with her, but I reckoned without Cynthia's imperious nature and Val's independence. I know now how terribly unfair, I was to Val—even Doreen has reproached me for it. In any case, I didn't realize how much she meant to me till we found she had gone. I thought

I would go mad at first—to live in the very rooms that seemed filled with her presence, even to see her frocks and aprons hanging in her room ; it was plain hell, because I knew it was my own fault. Then to get her poor little letter, offering me freedom. You know, I cabled to her—put my heart on paper for office boys to read—and the letter I got the other day is her reply.”

The long story was nearly done. The shadows had covered the valley in darkness and were creeping up the hill opposite.

“She says that she appreciates with all her heart the sacrifice I want to make for her and that she wouldn't be a woman if she didn't love me for it, but that she knows it is prompted by my regard for her and my chivalry. She says that she has seen a solicitor in Dunedin and he tells her it will be three years before we can get a divorce, so that there is plenty of time for us to make up our minds absolutely. She says that she cannot believe my love for her is anything but the result of the hard times we have been through together, but that time will tell. She sends her love to you and says to tell you that the little unmarked jars on the pantry shelf are pickled walnuts.”

Dick's voice broke and in a moment, Mrs. Warrington had gathered him into her arms much as she had done thirty-five years before. He was himself again in a few minutes. He rose and went to the edge of the bluff and a moment after turned round to his mother, his whimsical smile,

with its undercurrent of sadness, wreathing his lips.

“Mother, there’s only one thing to do with a girl like that, and that’s to show her. Her dearest dream was to settle this Valley, and settled it will be. I’m going down to the Trustees to-morrow, and from then on things will hum. You’ll come, won’t you, and we’ll set little Cynthia on her homeward journey. I feel very humble, mother,” he said thoughtfully, “when I think of the love those two girls have given me—Cynthia and Valmai. I wish they had liked each other. And now I’ve got to let one of them down, horribly—it seems only fair that I should do a bit of the suffering too. That’s why I’m not going after Valmai at once to bring her back—I think I could persuade her to come back, you know. But she predicted work of colossal dimensions, disappointment, disillusionment and heart-break for the man who undertook to people Vision Valley—if I can go through with it, perhaps she’ll believe my love for her is real.”

“Come to the edge and I’ll show you, mother,” he said, his voice tinged with the enthusiasm of his dreams.

“I’m going to shift the whole of Little Warrington and plant it there.” He pointed down the long valley, ringed in with its wooded hills. His mother fairly gasped.

“But, Dick——,” she started. Dick interrupted her.

“I’ve got at least a hundred thousand pounds to

play with, mother, after I've cleared Warrington of all its mortgages. Clive does nothing but grouse in his letters about the poverty of the land at Little Warrington, the unsanitary conditions of the village and the small farms. He said in his last letter that Little Warrington could be wiped off the face of the earth and England be better for it. That's my village, Mother. He says the farmers on the home farms and even on the Greater Warrington farms are having a terrible time, that labour is so scarce in the country that women are working in the fields—and this valley is here."

They stood together, mother and son from fifteen thousand miles across the sea, and the Valley smiled up at them.

"Come along then, Richard; if we're to take the road to Melbourne to-morrow, we must be up betimes. See the sun is almost gone behind the hills. I'm getting quite to like these mountains, but I'll need some stronger shoes to tramp them in."

Dick looked at his mother with an incredulous light in his eyes.

"Mother, I'm not asking you to stay," he cried with the ring of great joy in his voice.

"Wild horses wouldn't drag me away. I want to see my son come out on top, as the excellent Mrs. O'Donnell would put it."

They mounted their horses and turned them down the track.

The kookaburra's wild laugh followed them down the steep path, the black swans passed overhead on

their way back to the billabong. The old man kangaroo bounded back from his afternoon's wander, the mother kangaroo held her baby's mouth to the cool river. The Valley was wrapt in shadows. Gradually the shade crept up the hill till only the tip of it was left stained orange in the light from the setting sun. Suddenly, it too was dark with shadows. The bells in the distant gully chimed less frequently now, till at last they stopped; the kookaburra ceased his laughter and the little honey-eaters twittered softly to each other, softer, softer still, then ceased. Reynard the fox crept silently out on his way to the fowl-yards at Old Ford. Only the mopoke kept watch.

The Valley slept.

II

Rain was swishing down softly the day the men came. Reynard, in his glossy new pelt that was thickening before the cold days set in, slunk into the shadows beneath a thick lilly-pilly and watched them with his red eyes. The river was singing a new note, for much water was coming down from the hills to swell the burden it carried to the sea, and all the bush was alive with the whisper of the raindrops as they pattered down.

The men were four in number and carried instruments which they set up in queer places, so that the fox had to take cover hastily beneath the black-

berries and the little white-fudded rabbits had to scatter in all directions; even the stately black swans were disturbed from their refuge among the reeds, for the men waded in and tested the river's depths.

"It's a wonderful place, all right," was the comment of Mitchell, the head engineer, "and it looks as if the Captain has a sporting chance of winning out on it, if he brings over the right type."

They had brought tents, which they erected on the clearing, and then for a few days the life of the Valley saw strange things. The mopoke, calling his mournful warning every few moments after sunset, saw grotesque shadows thrown against the canvas walls, so that he kept very close in the shadow of the trees. He saw the red glow of the fire's eye all night long. The kookaburra took up the watch when the light got so strong that the poor old mopoke's eyes were useless. *He* saw stranger things still—blue smoke rising from a pan which one of the men held over the fire and carrying with it such scents as the kookaburra had never smelt before; wonderful smells that brought Reynard with his red eyes close to the fire as he could get without leaving the shelter of the shadows.

Then, one morning, the men folded up their tent and tied it to the saddles, then sat round the clearing and waited. Presently the sound of horses' hooves came up the silent Valley and Dick appeared.

The chief engineer had been down to the homestead before to make his report, but Dick was eager to hear the other men's opinions of the Valley. They sat and talked while all the time the sun rose higher and the kookaburra jumped lower and lower down the branches to inspect them with his bright eyes.

"Well, if you're ready, Captain," Mitchell said at last, "we'll get along. We'll just about get to the head of the Valley by dinner-time and we can pick a place for our camp while the boys get the dinner."

"I'm ready right now," Dick said as he mounted, and in a few minutes there was nothing left on the clearing but the blackened ashes of the camp-fire and the kookaburra searching about the ground for scraps.

The scrub was not so thick as they had expected, for the timber was mostly tall here with very little under-growth. They kept the river in sight as much as possible, and before very long the bluffs that marked the head of the valley were in sight.

Dick's mouth was a straight, thin line. On the engineer's decision as to the possibility of building a weir across the river at the head of the valley depended much of the success of the scheme that occupied all his waking thoughts and some of his sleeping. He had been up here once before and knew that beyond the head of Vision Valley lay a gully of much the same construction, but very

much smaller. The smaller gully was practically hill-locked, for the river entered it over a fall of about twenty-five to thirty feet. The flow of water from the fall was what had given Dick the idea of harnessing the river to supply the little settlement with power and also as a means of water storage against the times when drought threatened.

As the riders approached the bluff the sound of the bell-birds, like dozens of silver bells, was borne to them on the breeze. Mitchell, a man of Scotch parentage who had spent the last twenty years in Australia, halted the little party and listened for a moment.

"I can never hear bell-birds without a thrill of wonder," he said.

"You would find a kindred spirit in my wife," Dick said, "Bell-birds are her idea of perfection of sound. Personally, they fret my nerves after a while, and it's only occasionally that I can hear any likeness to a bell in their notes."

"Well, if you're ever lost in the bush and feel thirsty, listen for them and as sure as God made little fishes they'll lead you to water. They always stay in the same place, you know, and you'll hear them all day long, year in, year out, within a radius of a hundred yards of the one spot."

All the rest of the day and for a couple of days after the men worked in the little gully.

"It's banal, I know," Mitchell said one evening as they sat cross-legged round the fire, "but this gully will be known as Bellbird Gully all the rest

of its life, so I'm calling it Bellbird Gully in my report."

The mention of the word report drew Dick up, all ears.

"You think there's a chance of my scheme being feasible?" he asked.

Mitchell knocked the ashes from his pipe and replaced it between his teeth before he spoke.

"There's a good big chance, Captain. The thing that's worrying me is that nobody seems to know the habits of the upper reaches of this river. It rises somewhere in the Australian Alps over towards the New South Wales border, but if you look on a decent map, you'll see that from its source to within twenty miles of here they indicate it by a row of dotted lines, which means that the line they show is its probable course, but they're not sure of it. To estimate definitely whether a weir's going to hold a river or not you want to be furnished with a good many statistics that aren't forthcoming about this little stream. It doesn't look much of a river now, when she's in flood she's liable to spread some. However, the pond we're going to make of Bellbird Gully will be a fair sized one and from the statistics I have about the Tambo, Nicholson, and Snowy and the other rivers in the district I think it's reasonably safe. All the rivers round here, the Cann and the Buchan, as well as those I've mentioned and a good many others, are much the same type and none of them have ever brought down enough water to break my weir. You'll

have my report and plans within a week or so, and we could be starting work within a month from then if you needed us so soon."

"If your report is what I hope it will be, there's no reason why you shouldn't start work as soon as you can get the necessary material. I'll only make one condition, Mitchell, and that is, that as the men I am bringing out of England arrive they will be taken on at the work. I don't want any of them to be idle, and they can't all be set clearing the valley," Dick answered.

"How are you proposing to work things below?" Mitchell said, nodding his head in the direction of Vision Valley, "that is, of course, if you feel disposed to tell us."

"The whole scheme is not worked out in detail yet," Dick answered, his voice warming with his determination as he went on.

"You see, I am hampered considerably by my lack of technical knowledge of farming, etc., but I am learning as fast as I can."

"Why not employ experts, as you're employing Mr. Mitchell, here?" Cody, the surveyor, asked.

"I must do this thing myself," Dick answered with a grim determination that silenced the other.

"Briefly, my scheme is this. Little Warrington, a village on my land in England, is a farming community, made up practically entirely of small farmers who rent their land from me, as their fathers did before them. Hundreds of years of farming have

impoverished the land until they scrape the barest living from it—and half the time their rents remain unpaid, because if they pay, they starve. It is impossible to get farm labourers at a wage which makes it practicable to employ them. It is the same practically all over England—Little Warrington is not unique in that. It seems ridiculous that the little community should starve and work hopelessly over there, while a valley like this lies here untouched. I'm just going to transplant the whole village, except for the very old people who will be happier in new cottages at Greater Warrington. The only shops in the village are the store and the blacksmith's and both of those are needed just as much in the valley. There's an inn at the village, too, but the inn-keeper will probably refuse to come, because he is on the main road and does a good trade. But in any case, we can do without an inn in the Valley. I'll give each man a farm proportionate to the one he has at home and provide for him and his family until their farms begin to earn, which won't be long. The land will remain mine until each man has paid me a nominal sum as purchase price and then it will be transferred to him. I'm going to build a school, a church, and a hall, and make them the property of the people themselves. The State Government will, I think, provide a teacher for the school and I'll be glad of that, for I'd like the children turned into good Australians right off. There'll be a butter factory, of course, since this will be a dairying settlement, and I hope

to evolve some scheme by which that will be a co-operative affair, so that the farmers will receive back any profit the factory makes."

There was a little silence after he had finished. Then one of the younger men asked the question that was uppermost in all their minds.

"And what do you get out of it?" he asked.

Dick rose and stood above them, his face in the shadows above the glow of the fire.

"The satisfaction of a job well done—and that's the most any of us can wish for," he said and ended the discussion by turning into his tent with a gruff good-night.

The little group sat motionless round the fire for a while, then Cody spoke.

"He's either seen visions or he's ready for the rat-house."

Mitchell drew at his pipe thoughtfully before he answered.

"He strikes me as a man making a 'beau geste,' if you get me. His scheme may act, although I can see loopholes in it. Well, town to-morrow," he said putting his pipe in his pocket. "I've enjoyed this sojourn in the Back of Beyond, with kangaroos watching my morning bath and that darn kooka following us like a shadow."

As though he knew his name, the kookaburra resettled himself on his branch and said a sleepy "kook-kook," before his eyes closed again.

Below in Bellbird Gully, two magpies carolled their sweet song in the moonlit night, and back in

the bush two staccato barks betrayed the fact that the yellow dingoes were about.

The camp fire died down till it became only a red eye, then that too was blackened out. The moon rode her silver way across the sky, then her light was blotted out too and only the great Southern Cross hung upside down in the night of starry glory

III

The Valley was seeing strange sights these days, and Reynard had been forced to move his lair because the old one lay right beside the track that the coming and going of many people had made down into the Valley. The kangaroos came down to the river's edge less openly nowadays, and the mother watched with fear-filled eyes while her baby quenched his thirst at the billabong. Only the black swans in among the reeds and the little water hens with their red-rimmed eyes that saw everything remained undisturbed.

The kookaburra was gone—he had followed the men far from the gully and hung about the homestead yard watching for the scraps of meat he loved.

The man—the Valley recognized him as its own special man—had come one bright frosty morning, with a new axe in his hand and with him had come Doreen of the shining hair. She it was who had struck the first axe-blow the hills had ever heard,

and she handed the axe back to Dick with a little sigh of regret.

“Valmai should have done that,” she said.

“Val is a few thousand miles from here, my dear,” he answered.

Doreen stood looking across the valley with troubled eyes for a while, then with quick decision she had turned to him.

“Did you two quarrel, Dick?” she asked.

Dick was a long time answering, and Doreen was sorry she had spoken. Then he spoke, “No, we didn’t quarrel. Valmai went because she thought it right. There’s one thing she won’t do, you know, and that is to offend against her own conscience. If she had stayed here she would have been doing just that. I understand and respect her motives for going, but I want to make it so that she can feel it right to come back. This thing lies just between the two of us, Dorn, and I can’t explain it even to you; but you’ll help me to silence the gossip, won’t you? I’ve been saying that Valmai has taken her mother for a trip abroad, which is perfectly true, and if we both tell the same tale we’ll put a stop to the tongue-wagging.”

“Of course I will,” Doreen said touching his arm affectionately.

“But I think Val might write to me,” she added with a little catch in her voice so that Dick looked at her quickly in fear that she was going to cry.

“You write to her instead. She’s in Honolulu

now—I'll give you her exact address when we get back to the homestead. She wrote to mother a few days ago and said that they are both enjoying it immensely and that it is wonderfully romantic and she is learning to play the ukelele."

"That doesn't sound as though she's longing for letters from here, Dick," Doreen said miserably, for she missed Valmai abominably.

"I'm sure she is, though. But, Doreen, when you write, please don't mention anything about the Valley."

"You know, Dick," Doreen said a few minutes later as they climbed the steep track out of the Valley, "I simply can't imagine Val loaded down with all that oppressive money—or you either for that matter. I suppose Valmai will begin disbursing hers to the indigent before she's gone far, just as you're doing. That's the worst of being high-souled," she said.

"My motives aren't high-souled," Dick admitted, "and anyhow, I'm not disbursing my money to the indigent, I'm paying portion of the debt to those people which I consider my family owes them. At the same time I'm staking everything on this Valley, Doreen; I'm depending on it to bring Valmai back to me. She wanted this Valley peopled, and peopled it will be; she wanted crops on it, and crops will grow. The Valley will have its church, its school, and its hall, just as Val wanted them. And when it's all ready, I'll write and ask her to come back to it; until I've made her vision come

true, just as she saw it, I must possess my soul in patience."

Doreen gasped at his words. "You're a quixotic dreamer, Richard Warrington. To do all this because a girl saw visions and dreamed dreams—it's unrealizable," she said, coining words in her wonder. "All the same, Dick," she added seriously, "I'm a little disappointed. I thought it was the land itself you had fallen in love with."

Dick made no answer. He was standing on the clearing looking down into the Valley and listening to a noise below like the sound of a giant stick cracking. Down in the Valley a great gum tree wavered then crashed to the earth.

"Look," he said as Doreen ran over and stood beside him, excited and eager. "The first tree down; in a few weeks, there'll be a house down there."

Doreen shivered; there was something repellent about the idea of this colossal upheaval for a whole village full of people, just because an imaginative woman had day-dreamed.

"Dick, if you should fail," she said. His whole body stiffened.

"It can't fail, Doreen. I've staked everything on the Valley."

CHAPTER TWO

I

ALL day long the valley rang with the sound of Axes and echoed to the rattle of harness and chains as the great logs were dragged here and there.

A track appeared from the bluff to the end of Bellbird Gully as though a giant had drawn his finger across the earth and left nothing in its train. All day long there was coming and going along the track. Miraculously drays appeared stacked with bags of material ; great motor-lorries ground their way up from Melbourne to discharge their loads at the homestead since they could get no farther. Horse-drawn vehicles took the material on from there.

Dick watched it come and watched it go, fretting with impatience if a moment seemed to him to be lost. There was a stupendous amount of detailed work to be got through ; but his capacity for work seemed unlimited. One thing he demanded—speed, and he would brook no delay. He spent money like water, engaging men in Melbourne to watch his interests there and to fight his battles for him when it appeared likely that he would have difficulty

in getting title to some of the land round Bellbird Gully which was essential to his plans.

The newspapers had begun to notice the activities of this big Englishman. There were articles on his project in the leading dailies who mostly praised his enterprise, but deplored his methods. His correspondence assumed the proportions of that of a movie actor. People wrote to him from all parts of the country, some in idle mischief and some with a genuine desire to help.

His name was mentioned in Parliament—with adverse comment on his action in, as the Honorable Member put it, pouring good gold into a bottomless pit. There were, of course, hundreds of people who believed in his scheme and thousands watched it with interest. The Warrington Settlement Scheme became a household word.

“This,” said Dick to his mother, pointing to a caricature of himself in a Sydney paper, “is true fame.” Then he added irrelevantly, “I wonder if these papers ever reach as far as home.”

His mother turned a page of her paper before she answered him without looking at him.

“I read somewhere that all Australian papers are available at Australia House for the benefit of visitors to England.”

Dick laughed a trifle shamefacedly and pressed her shoulder.

“Telepathetic old thing, aren't you?”

“I don't mind some of your Australianisms,

Richard," she said, "but I do object to being called 'old thing.'"

Dick laughed, "Would you prefer 'old hoss' then—that's supposed to be American."

Mrs. Warrington raised her hands in horror. "The saints forbid," she said.

Dick had been forced to employ a secretary—he chose an ex-officer with an artificial foot, a thoroughly efficient man whom town life was slowly killing. William Attley Simmons, Bill for short, was nearing thirty-five, a cheery, sane man, with a passion for detail and a love of card-systems that amounted almost to worship. His little typewriter ran day and night, and bit by bit order came out of the chaos which Dick's haphazard methods had caused. He carried on the involved correspondence with Clive Warrington that was necessitated by the decision to move the village in relays, so that each of the various departments of the scheme would be put in order gradually; he took on the work of checking the orders for supplies, etc., for the men working on the weir construction; he kept a careful eye on the expenditure in every direction and was, in fact, worth his weight in gold, as Dick told his mother.

Mrs. Warrington had taken a great liking instantaneously to the breezy man, who was not above settling down to a quiet game of bezique with an old lady who had never had really enjoyed bridge.

"Playing bezique is the only really plebian thing my mother has ever done," Dick said to him one

evening, as they sat in the living-room at Callemondah.

“Since when it has become entirely aristocratic,” Bill Simmons rejoined.

Mrs. Warrington leant across the card table and patted his hand reprovingly.

“You turn a compliment as prettily as men did when I was young,” she said. “As for plebian things—what about dish washing? I often imagine Powe’s face if he could see me,” and she laughed delightedly at the thought of the butler at the Chase confronted with the spectacle of a Warrington washing pots.

The advent of Bill Simmons and his efficiency left Dick much more freedom to follow the progress of the work in the the Valley. It was a very mild winter, with little rain—too little, the farmers said with anxious faces—and very little snow in the mountains. The river rose a little in September, but not to an appreciable extent and Mitchell expressed himself satisfied with the strength of the proposed weir.

The actual building of the weir was, he said, very simple, the gully being already a practically perfect dam. The channelling of the river through Vision Valley presented more difficulty, but that was surmounted in time. The reticulation of the ground for the purpose of irrigation had to wait until the land was more cleared.

It was nearing October before Dick could send word to his brother to set the first contingent of

ten families on their way. They comprised six farming families, the family of the village carpenter and two families who had worked as farm labourers and domestic servants. The tenth family was a war widow with her two sons, aged nineteen and seventeen and a girl of fourteen—forty-nine people in all.

The news of their coming was broadcast all over the Eastern States. They were interviewed and photographed and generally made a fuss of. They were met at Port Melbourne by a representative of a Melbourne daily, who took them round the city in cars and entertained the children of the party at the Zoological Gardens.

Dick was delighted with the attention paid to his protégés and expressed his gratitude; but Bill Simmons shook his head.

“I think it’s a pity; those people are coming into a wilder country than the town people dream exists. I don’t doubt that the newspaper people meant well and intended to show the villagers that they are welcome—so I’ll write your letter of thanks with the best heart in the world. All the same, I hope our little band of pioneers haven’t had their heads turned; the success of a venture like this depends greatly on the contentment of the people.”

“It’s our business to see they remain content,” Dick answered.

“Hm,” said Bill Simmons expressively, “as long as you don’t spoon-feed them till they need props to stand them upright.”

“Not much fear of that,” put in Mrs. Warrington who had been listening with interest to the discussion. “These pioneers are Englishmen.”

“That’s true,” Bill answered, “but the Russian virus is in a good many English veins nowadays.”

II

The settlers came up by train and the whole population of Old Ford turned out to meet them.

The little station—nothing more than a shed set up beside the railway line, with a lamp with which to signal the train—had never presented a more festive appearance. Cars sufficient to carry the new-comers to Old Ford had been willingly lent, and provision made for them to sleep the night at Old Ford and go on to the Valley the next day.

Dick had been tremendously excited, a mass of nervous energy, when news of their arrival in Melbourne had been received, but as the time for the arrival of the train drew near he became perfectly calm—very much the “grand seigneur,” as Doreen put it.

It took an enormous amount of time to get the whole forty-nine and their baggage off the train at the station, and then each one of the forty-nine, except one three-year old mite who was fast asleep, had to shake hands with Dick and Mrs. Warrington. They were a silent and rather embarrassed crowd,

evidently overwhelmed by the hospitality that met them.

Bill, working efficiently in the background as always, finally got them all into the cars and presently they were seated before a good dinner—an Australian dinner—and after that Dick spoke to them.

He felt much more embarrassed by the presence of his neighbours than at the position in which he found himself in relation to his tenants. His speech was short and very much to the point.

“People of Little Warrington, you have come across fifteen thousand miles of water at my invitation to settle on land which is as much mine as is the land at Little Warrington. I have made your new homes ready for you as far as I am able without your help and now, as they say here, it is up to you. Work, and not easy work, lies before you, but it is work with the promise of bounteous reward. We have known each other all our lives, each of you and I, and you know that I would not have brought you so far from your homes and kindred had it not been for your own good. I hope you will credit me with that when things go wrong, as I suppose they inevitably will at some times, for Nature here is untamed and the land absolutely virgin. But I honestly believe there is a great future before the Valley, to which I will take you early to-morrow morning and, as it will be early when we start out, I will not keep you longer from your rest. You will need strong arms and stout

hearts and faith in yourselves and this new land in the days that are before you. I want you to look on me as your friend, always ready with help and advice, and the help of every person in Old Ford is at your service. Isn't that so?" he asked looking round the hall at the faces of the Old Ford folk.

The response was hearty. "That's so," rang out from half a hundred lusty throats.

"And now I'll say no more. But before we go, I'd just like the Rev. Mr. Carter to say a few words to you."

There was much cheering and hand-clapping that died away as the minister rose.

"My friends from a far country," he said, "There isn't much I can add to what Captain Warrington has said. This community prays that the blessing of God will rest on the work in your new homes, that it may bring forth fruit according to your labour. I will pronounce the benediction. May the blessing of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost rest and remain with the settlement of Vision and with us all for ever more. Amen."

Doreen dashed the tears from her eyes as the people raised their heads. She thought of the Pilgrim Fathers kneeling to pray on the virgin shores of America—there was something just as inspiring in this. And Valmai was at the other side of the world.

She bit her lip to keep it from quivering, then suddenly her hand was taken in a warm close grasp and a broad-shouldered form hid her from view

long enough to let her wipe away her tears and blow her nose.

“Bill, you’re a most efficient person,” she said lightly a minute after.

“I wanted to cry myself,” Bill answered.

III

A man had come up on horse-back long before the valley stirred and the first touch of light discovered him sitting on the grass of the bluff, just above the bare uprights that marked the beginning of the butter factory. He had watched the mists creep away like a woman drawing her veils behind her; he had watched the first ray of the rising sun touch with orange the tips of the mountains. He had seen the whole world bathed in glorious light that become stronger and stronger still until he could see each detail of the valley below.

Long before the camp at the weir was astir, the kookaburra had preened himself on the topmost branch of the dead gum-tree and had sent out his laughing challenge to the world. Reynard the fox had prowled once more round the strange structures that had been built up in the valley over which he had hitherto reigned supreme; he recognized them as structures similar to those in Old Ford where he had obtained many a succulent chicken for his supper.

The honey-eaters were already busy at their never-

ending tasks ; the emus had finished their morning bath and stood sunning themselves on the water's edge, the thousand little voices of the valley were rising in a hymn of praise of the glory of the morning. The bush was alive with the scent of gum and late wattle. Wild-flowers—green corinella, pink and yellow ever-lastings, fringed lilies, blue-bells, a dozen varieties of orchid—made the ground bright and varied with colour.

From where Dick sat he could see six of the seven houses that had already been built. He knew that round each house was sufficient to support the farmer in comfort—and not a third of the valley had yet been touched. The houses were only rough shells as yet, containing bare necessities in the way of furniture, for most of the families had elected to sell up their furniture and start off in the new home with new things. There was plenty of work there for the village carpenter and for the widow's two sons who would be his chief assistants for the time being.

There was another cottage up at the saw-mill and the ninth family were to be accommodated with a canvas home until theirs could be built. The widow was to stay at the homestead to give Mrs. Warrington the assistance in the house which Dick had decided she sorely needed, while her sons would live for the present with the carpenter's family.

Dick went over each detail time after time—nothing had been forgotten, thanks to the indefatigable

Bill. Since the road was now passable by car as far as the foot of the bluff, a car would run up from the store every day bringing bread and supplies. Seven herds of cows were housed at the homestead for the time being, but as soon as sufficient land was cleared and fences erected, they would be brought up. Later in the day, one cow would be driven up for the immediate use of the families—at this time to-morrow one would be able to hear the lowing of the cattle, perhaps even the voices of the children—and Valmai was not here.

The end of the long strain of preparation found Dick near to breaking-point. He felt hopelessly weary and hungry for the sound of Valmai's voice. To have felt her hand in his, to have heard her say, "Your work is good" . . . Dick dropped his face in his hands.

Up the track there were horses coming; he could hear the creak of the carts, the excited laughter of many people. Over the brow of the hill they came, these settlers from a far country, their children about them, their lares and penates beside them, over the brow of the hill with high hope on their faces and courage in their eyes. On the bluff they paused and looked as the Israelites had looked at the promised land. In that moment of realization even the children's voices were stilled. One woman sat and gazed with tears streaming down her cheeks and the men breathed deeply, like men who had run a long way. Then the

carts swung down the valley. Dick mounted the grey and rode beside the foremost cart.

A farmer and his five children stopped at the door of the first cottage. His eldest daughter, a bonny lass of twenty years, lifted the children down from the cart and mothered them—for her mother they had left behind in the churchyard at Little Warrington. The tiniest child, a little girl who had just turned five, looked at the house in its nakedness, at the wild scrub that grew almost up to the door.

“Is this home, Nessie?” she asked.

“Yes, this is home, baby,” her sister answered.

Vision was born.

CHAPTER THREE

I

THE voice of the valley sang a different song nowadays.

Mr. Kookaburra and his friends still made the world ring with their gay laughter at dawn, midday and evening, but their laughter was the accompaniment of the sound of children's voices. Reynard the fox kept well in the shadows these days, because of the dogs that, smelling his scent, rushed barking madly after him and the sad-eyed kangaroos kept fearful watch as they moved about.

The honey-eaters, unafraid, still twittered among the flowers, but the clucking of hens overshadowed their sweet sound. The valley rang, day in and day out, with the sound of chopping and the falling of trees; there was the noise of hammering from the houses too, and the neighing of horses and lowing of cattle.

The scents of the valley were different too. Mingling with the scent of gums and hazel, the indefinable scent of the bush, was the sweet odour of cattle and the smell of burning gum logs.

Dick spent most of his time in the valley, riding from one farm to another, and giving of

his meagre store of knowledge the best advice he could.

Old Tom O'Donnell who had scoffed unmercifully when the scheme was first mooted was, of all the Ford people, most ready with his advice. His old skewbald mare became as well known a figure in the valley as Dick's grey, and the farmers, recognizing the superiority of his experience, listened carefully to what he told them.

They were queer little homes, these unpainted weatherboard houses set in little spaces hacked from the primeval bush. With their flagrantly new tanks beside them, they looked as alien to the bush as the bush itself looked to the newcomers.

Each house had four rooms with a passage through the centre, and verandas at both back and front. Off the back veranda, the kitchen and bathrooms were built. The cow-yards were to be built a fair distance away from the houses and the floors to be cemented. There was provision too for pigsties farther away still. These were to have cement floors as well. Each house was provided with three tanks that fortunately for the settlers were practically full, as much rain had fallen during September.

Old Tom had chuckled in unholy mirth, when he first saw those houses.

"Mollycoddlin' them, that's what you're doing, Captain," he said. "You should have let them live in tents and build their own huts from the timber

they cut themselves. Then they'd know what comfort was."

But to the eyes of the people from overseas the houses looked entirely comfortless and desolate. The bush hemmed them in on all sides—the bush that held they knew not what terrors. Only the path that led up to each door seemed to join them to the outer world and the path, albeit it was called by courtesy "The Road," was only a track cleared roughly and threatening to become nothing more nor less than a bog when the rainy weather set in. All day long the sound of axes rang through the valley, and bit by bit the encroaching bush was pushed back from round each little homestead. Fences were erected as fast as the men could work. The cow-sheds with their concrete floors replaced the hastily erected shelters under which the cows had been housed pending the building of the proper sheds, and one by one the herds were driven up from the homestead pastures. Arrangements had been made for the milk from the settlement to be taken on to the factory that Old Ford supplied until Vision factory should be ready to start work.

Dick was kept busy drawing little plans for the fowl-houses with faces looking east—or perhaps west—that Valmai had loved so. He worked unceasingly to make the farms models of efficiency; but he was up against a quality he had not realized the people possessed—that of inadaptability. Shut in their little valley, cut off by distance from communication with other settlements, the settlers were

entirely dependent on the people who came into the valley for advice and help. But they did not always take the advice that was given them. "Those pig-headed pommies" as old Tom invariably called them, were very loath to try out methods that were devised to fit the climate; they clung persistently to the modes they had used in England.

However, bit by bit, they became converted to new ways, although Dick realized that the sight of the maize crops at Callemondah did more to convince them of the possibilities of the country than all the talking he could do. It was, of course, understandable that every farmer did not make the same progress, and Dick became very impatient of the jealousy that was scarcely hidden between some of the families.

"Can we do anything to prevent it?" he asked Bill one evening as they sat on the veranda at Callemondah watching the setting sun sink behind the mountains.

"You want the ideal, I'm afraid, Captain," Bill answered a trifle sadly. "Wherever men are there will be jealousy, until all human beings are turned out exactly similar. Some people are born to lead, others to follow; the best you can do is to leave them to work out their own salvation; let them learn to stand on their own feet—don't molly-coddle them, as old Tom puts it."

"Yes, I can see his point of view, but I feel somewhat different about this. I have brought these people out here and I am responsible for

their well-being and prosperity—if Vision fails it is my failure, and to know that there is bad feeling in the settlement is to know that I've fallen short somewhere.”

Bill laughed. “Too much idealism won't work in a scheme of this sort, Captain,” he said. “However, don't let us cross our bridges before we come to them, and talking of bridges, that reminds me—those estimates for the bridge over the river arrived by the afternoon mail. They seem to me pretty hot, and if we only had more men in Vision I'd suggest employing an engineer to direct the work and employing our own labour; what do you think?”

Which led to an extremely involved conversation.

II

Meantime, the second contingent of settlers was nearing Victorian waters, and preparations were being made to receive them. Dick was compelled to take the men already at work on their farms and set them helping to cut in tracks to the new houses and roughly fence paddocks for the newcomers' live-stock. His move in this direction was not relished by some of the men, and although Dick remained serenely unconscious of their grumbling, Bill heard it and viewed with some misgiving the prospect of arrival of one Angus Tobin about whom he and Dick had nearly parted.

Clive Warrington reported that this young man was a firebrand with political leanings, but that he seemed genuinely interested in the Settlement Scheme and offered to pay part of his passage out.

"Turn him down, Captain," Bill had advised. "A firebrand with political leanings doesn't sound the right sort of man for Vision. One man of that kidney would be enough to set the whole valley by the ears, and it's essential to keep the people quite content during the construction period."

"I know Angus Tobin, Bill," Dick had answered. "He is a firebrand because he uses his brains and sees the reforms that are needed. Unless he's altered in the last year he's not a trouble-maker."

"Your brother seems to feel doubtful about him," Bill said hesitatingly.

"I made this invitation to the village as a whole. I don't see that I've got the right to withdraw it in the case of this young man just because he says what he thinks. I should have thought that quality would appeal to you, as an Australian."

"You've got your duty to do to the other people you are bringing out," Bill answered, rather more sharply than one should speak to an employer. "Your refusal to let him come here would do no harm in England and it would be fatal to bring a man here who was imbued with extravagant ideas about labour and capital."

"Nevertheless," said Dick, whom opposition in this case seemed to have made more determined than ever, "Tobin comes."

“If Tobin comes, I go,” Bill said steadfastly.

There was a silence of perhaps ten minutes. Then Dick crossed the office and put his hand on Bill's shoulder.

“Bill, I feel very deeply about this. Tobin is the son of a man who was born and died at Warrington. Angus went to the Front in my company and was badly gassed when I was. I was given six months' leave, Tobin went back to the lines in two. He hadn't been there half an hour when he was shot through the shoulder and, because he was not properly recovered from his previous illness, he went through a very bad time. Since then his left arm has been practically paralysed. Because it is only practically paralysed, not quite, he receives a pension of I think five shillings per week from the Crown. He was a farm labourer before the War, but farm work is, of course, out of the question now. A position that would have suited him is out of the question in post-war England—for every clerkship that is advertised there are hundred of applicants, men of good education, even graduates among them. What chance has a man like Tobin? We want a tally clerk for the saw-mill. Angus's bitterness will have nothing to feed on when he has decent work, plenty of food, and the prospect of both continuing. Tobin comes, Bill, and you don't go. I can't do without you.”

Bill did not reply for quite a while.

“I suppose you know your man, Captain,” he said at last. “At the same time I'll give Mr.

Tobin the honour of my close attention for a while.”

So Angus Tobin came.

III

The third and last party of settlers were to arrive in June, just nine months after the arrival of the first contingent. At Bill's urgent persuasion, Dick had consented to have their homes made ready for them before the second contingent were allowed to get on with their own work.

Bill had expected open rebellion at this, but to his surprise nothing was said. He talked the matter over with Doreen one evening, as he lounged in the kitchen at Crossings, while Doreen washed up—it was becoming increasingly evident to everyone that Bill found Crossings a singularly attractive place.

“They're too quiet—even the ones who generally talk. I suspect that Tobin,” he said. “He's a clever man and one clever man can make fools of ten men like most of those blockheads in the valley.”

“They're not all blockheads, Bill,” Doreen said, “the Chappell's are nice people, so are Pipers. Old Chester's a bit of a snag, I'll admit, but I think the decent ones just about balance the others. You know, the whole fact of the matter is this—I've been talking to the women, so I know whereof I

speak—the men don't know where they stand. The agreement they signed before they came out conveyed nothing to them and it is only now, when they're up against the real thing that they realize what they are in for. Can't you get Dick to get them together and tell them plainly their position? They'd appreciate it, I'm sure, and it may save trouble. Men who are uncertain of themselves are good ground for the stuff Angus Tobin talks. He's rather a fascinating man, isn't he?" she added irrelevantly.

"You can't make me jealous, old lady," Bill grinned.

"No, Mr. Cocksure?" Doreen said, with her head on one side, which led to a skirmish during which Bill just escaped being drowned in washing-up water. Discussions between Bill and Doreen were apt to end in much the same manner always; but what she said had left a germ of an idea in Bill's mind and he determined to suggest to Dick at the first opportunity such a meeting as Doreen had spoken of.

Meantime, things were happening at Vision which Dick could not help but notice; and there were times when he took himself off for long rides in the bush in absolute weariness of spirit. The thought of getting the Valley into order so that he could write and ask Valmai to come back was ever present in his mind, and each little incident that put back the time when he could do this galled him intolerably. It was the climax of a period

of unusual conditions when he had been jerked right out of his normal state of mind. The longing for Val became almost physical agony at times and his present health and abounding virility after years of passivity emphasised his need of her.

Much against his will, Dick had to acknowledge that a great deal of the present difficulty might have been avoided had he taken proper advice before formulating his scheme. In his eagerness, and partly because of the money at his command, he had acted without due thought. Nevertheless they were his mistakes and he would take the consequences of them, he told himself, setting his mouth firmly and bracing his great shoulders.

His mother's confidence in him was unbounded, but even her faith was a little shaken by the incidents, small in themselves, but in the whole a formidable collection, that showed the rocks on which the venture might be wrecked.

The first incident Dick had scarcely noticed, because it had seemed so entirely reasonable.

Chester, the carpenter, had come to him one day and complained with many apologies for mentioning the matter, that while he was fixing cupboards in the various houses and hanging gates and such like, the other men were getting their land cleared and their fences up, while his little block remained almost untouched.

"Emily and the girls do the best they can, Mr. Richard," the man said respectfully, "But their hands is full with the cows and the house and having

to carry water and chop wood for the fire and all that kind of thing."

Dick admitted to himself the justice of the man's complaint and so sent him away with a promise to see what he could do. Doreen, in whose presence he related the incident to his mother and Bill, suggested that the other men should each do a little work on Chester's land to repay him for the time he was spending on theirs.

"Have a working bee," she said and went on to explain the working of it.

Short of getting a man into the settlement to do the necessary carpentering work, this seemed the only feasible solution and so Dick rode round Vision one day and explained what was desired to the men.

The idea appealed to them and they turned out with a will, one day, and cleared a good proportion of Chester's land. All would have been well had not Chester suggested suavely, as they were leaving that they might drop in on Saturday afternoon and help him stack the felled timber. There was something so impudent in the man's expression that Bill with difficulty restrained himself from knocking him down. Dick did what was probably the most prudent thing and entirely ignored the man's remark.

"Air makes a difference, Bill," he said laughing as they rode side by side down the broad road to the homestead. "In Little Warrington, Chester would hardly have addressed me without being

spoken to first. Cheeky old devil," he added, "it won't take him long to acquire Australian disregard of class distinction."

"It'll take him a darn long time to acquire Australian independence, though," Bill answered. "Beastly old sponger—did you notice how he stopped Mrs. and the girls from offering the men more tea?"

"It's hard for them to get used to giving freely, Bill, they've had so little to give before."

Then, one day, as they rode home from Vision, they passed the widow Clements talking to a middle-aged bachelor from Old Ford. The widow was looking as coy as a twelve-stone woman can look, but her expression changed to embarrassment as her employer and his secretary passed.

"Looks like wedding bells, doesn't it?" said Bill, who was incurably romantic. "By the way, Captain, how would she," jerking his head backwards towards the woman they had just passed, "stand if she wanted to leave the settlement—or any of the others for that matter?"

"They are all as free as air to go, if they wish. The agreement I made with each of them was that I paid their fares out, third class of course, brought them up here and allotted them a certain specified amount of land. If any time within three years from the date of arrival here they pay me a certain sum, a nominal sum ranging from ten shillings to fifteen shillings an acre for their land, the land will be transferred to them. If they fail

to pay it, they can stay on the land as tenants or go just as they please. The stock on the farms remains mine until the end of the three years, after which they presumably are to pay for it. As a matter of fact, quite confidentially, I intend to hand over to each man purchasing his land from me the stock he has on hand at the time."

Bill gazed at his employer in silent astonishment for some time.

"And exactly what do you get out of it?" he asked at last.

Dick smiled. "Another man asked me that once, and I told him 'the satisfaction of a good job well done,' but my profits will really be more tangible than that. The butter factory and the saw-mill are mine, and I will take a fair percentage of interest on the money I have put into them before the profits are divided among the community. Then the weir is mine, too, and when the men get on their feet a bit they will be charged a small fee for water rights for irrigation purposes."

"You'll pardon me if I say I don't think you'll be making an excessive income," Bill rejoined drily. "You seem to me to be cornering the generosity market."

"Perhaps so," said Dick, "but if I am not generous to these people, to whom should I be? They are for the most part descendants of people who have lived, worked, and died on my family's land, of whose labour my people reaped the profit. For

generations they have been tenants, dependent on the favour of their landlord, and in poor times living on his charity. The land round Warrington is terribly poor, and these are the people who suffered for it; it seemed fate that just when things had come to such an impasse in England this land should be left to me by a man I never knew, so there is no sentiment to prevent my giving it away if I wish. I have simply moved my village from Warrington to Vision, but seeing this is a country where every man's right to own his own plot of land is unquestioned, I determined to turn each man into his own landlord. I chose that part of the Station to settle because my wife, who worships this land as she worships nothing else on earth, or in heaven either I'm afraid, wanted to see it settled. She is an Australian," he added with his winning smile.

Bill looked down at his horse's ears in embarrassment.

"Eh—Doreen told me something about her," he admitted.

Dick chuckled wickedly. "Just fancy that," he said in excellent imitation of Doreen's mother.

Bill's prediction as to the widow Clements was correct. Dick, to whom she announced one morning in the office her intention of being joined in holy matrimony to Ludwig Haegen from Old Ford, shook hands with her and expressed himself as entirely delighted.

"You won't take it hard me leaving your mother

then, Mr. Richard ? ” she said, keeping to the name by which she had called him all his life.

“ I brought you out here because I wanted to give you a chance of happiness and prosperity, Emmie,” Dick said, “ so I’d be very inconsistent if I objected to your taking your chance, wouldn’t I ? ”

If Emmie had her doubts about “ inconsistent,” she didn’t voice them.

“ She should pay a proportion of her fare, Captain,” Bill said when Dick communicated the glad tidings to him. “ There’s no reason why you should provide wives with more than legs in their stockings for every old widower and bachelor in the neighbourhood.”

“ I’ll bring one out for one bachelor, if you like,” Dick teased him.

Bill’s eyes were a little embarrassed, but he grinned impudently at Dick.

“ An Aussie girl for mine, old feller,” he said.

The position became more acute still, and even Dick was forced to realize the loopholes in the agreement he had made with the settlers. This became evident when Mrs. Clements looked in at the office door one morning to announce that she and Mr. Haegen were to be married the following Saturday week, down at the Church at Lake’s Entrance.

“ Mr. Haegen wants to stay down at one of the the boarding-houses over the week-end,” she said with a coquettish glance at Dick, who was hard

put to it to keep from laughing aloud. "I told him we was both too old to go honey-mooning, but yer Ma has promised to see to Marjorie for the couple o' days. And Mr. Haegen and I'll pick her up on our way back on the Monday. Of course, the boys'll be coming down to Old Ford along with me," she said, looking at him sidelong, but her glance was not coquettish now, it was openly shrewd. "Mr. Haegen'll be able to keep them going well and plenty down at his place."

Dick dismissed her a few minutes after, and was smoking very thoughtfully when Bill entered a little later.

"The old schemer," Bill said embellishing his remark with several adjectives which Dick was too downcast to notice. "So old Haegen gets a good housekeeper and two strapping labourers and you foot the bill for four fares—third class. This will have to be stopped."

"But how?" Dick made a little gesture of impotence. "The last lot are on their way and every one of them has signed the same sort of agreement. When this business gets around, they'll all realize the fact that I've given my promise to look after them, but that they aren't bound at all."

His discouragement hurt Bill, who had conceived a steady regard for his quixotic chief.

"There'll be a fair percentage of them decent enough to realize what they owe you—and we'll bank on them," he said cheerily.

IV

The departure of the two Clements boys was the subject of much discussion and it was followed almost immediately by the departure of another young man and one of the girls from the Settlement, with their faces turned to the city.

The drift of the settlers—even such young and flighty ones—had seemed to take some of the heart out of Dick, and another incident occurred just after the opening of the school, for which the State Government had agreed to provide a teacher. The school had been built where Valmai had pictured it, on the hills at the Callemondah end of the valley, and this was the subject of the first open grumbling that had reached Dick's ears.

“It don't seem fair, Captain,” one farmer's wife said to him one day, “that my children should have to walk all that long way to school when Jenkins' have only to cross the field. The school should oughter've been built right fair in the middle of the place so we'd all have the same show. Two miles night and morning is too far for them children to tramp, so you'll excuse me if I don't send them when it's so wet and muddy.”

“The children must go to school, Mrs. Little,” Dick said firmly, “or you'll be fined for not sending them. That's not my doing,” he added hastily, as her mouth opened for a protest, “the Government of Victoria made that law, and as we're

Victorians now we must abide by it. I'll see what I can do," he promised.

"I suppose I'll have to get a pony for the little blighters," he said to Bill later on.

"The whole valley will want ponies for their kids then," Bill objected "Anyway, those Little boys are the greatest young rips in the place and as hard as nails. Walking'll do them a world of good, or let their father get them a horse."

"I promised their mother I'd see what I could do," Dick said, then, as a sudden distrust of his plans overtook him, "Do you think the school is in the wrong place, Bill?" he asked.

Bill thought about it for a while before he answered.

"No, I think it's as well there as it could be. The ground is not particularly good, so nothing is being wasted by having it there. It's on the best slope of the hill from a health point of view, and if the river should ever overflow the flats—although it shouldn't now the weir is nearly finished—the school would be high and dry and make a natural rendez-vous in the case of such a disaster."

"I don't like to think of bad floods in the valley," Dick answered. "But to return to the subject of the Little children, I'll lend them a horse to ride on the distinct understanding that it remains mine."

Bill smiled discreetly to himself. Dick's philanthropy was unconsciously taking a practical turn.

June saw the butter factory in working order. It was a beautiful little building, designed by experts

and furnished with the most up-to-date machinery. An experienced manager and a tester had been engaged in Melbourne, but the other positions were to be filled by Vision people.

The scheme worked well, because the blacksmith had a nineteen-year-old son with a bent for mechanics and one of the older farmers had a family large enough to carry on the farm without his assistance. Bill Simmons added the keeping of the factory books to his manifold duties, and Dick insisted on the factory paying him a small salary for his work in this direction.

The sound of the machinery was music to Dick's ears. It was a very busy day that did not find him at some time wandering round the little building with its white floor and shining machinery. His face flamed with pride on the first day that the motor-lorry started off down the road to Bairnsdale, loaded with boxes bearing the label, "Vision Brand."

"I'd like to ride on that lorry myself; I'd like to sit in the van beside those boxes right down to Melbourne and see them slung up on to the boat. Export butter—do you realize it, old chap?" he said in a voice ringing with enthusiasm.

"For a member of the landed aristocracy, you've got a very commercial turn of mind," Bill said as he rubbed his shoulder where Dick had clapped him affectionately. "Hope the bally butter doesn't stink to heaven before it reaches England."

"That's something extra special in the way of

butter, let me tell you," interjected Doreen perched on her beloved Patchwork.

Their enthusiasm was dampened somewhat by a communication which reached them later on in the week that, on testing, the butter was found unsuitable for export, but that it had sold at a satisfactory price on the local market.

The imminence of the arrival of the last contingent of settlers, however, took their minds off butter returns for the time being. The Vision people were planning a welcome to take place in the school-room, and Mrs. Warrington had undertaken to see that a good dinner was supplied to them there.

Bill Simmons, riding through Vision on various business matters during the days before the "Welcome," as the meeting was called, was conscious of a feeling of unrest in the Valley. The men talked freely enough to him and answered his enquiries civilly, but he missed a certain friendliness from their demeanour. Bill was a thoughtful man as he went from place to place. The month had been very wet and the tracks about the valley were practically impassable except on horseback. Bill docketed in his mind the need for a scheme of proper road construction—he was an efficient man, was Bill, with eyes that saw everything and a brain that recorded what he saw.

He had occasion to cross the river one day to the farms on the farther side and noted with interest the progress of the bridge. For all the rain, the river was not yet very swollen, and the outlying

farmers could reach the store quite comfortably by fording the river at a shallow place half-way down the Valley about a mile from the weir.

Looking up towards Bellbird Gully, Bill could see the scars in the surface of the hills which marked the position of the weir. This was nearing completion, for Mitchell and his men were working at high speed to get it finished before the big rains in September and October. There were high hopes of storing sufficient water to enable a scheme of irrigation to be carried on in the valley that would make the surrounding hills more profitably cultivable.

Yet for all the promising signs of progress, Bill was worried and he would have given the little he possessed to have seen the last of Angus Tobin.

V

The long-talked of "Welcome" came at last. The tired but eager travellers were conveyed to the schoolroom for dinner and during the afternoon were to be taken to their new homes.

In spite of himself, Dick was despondent and could not help recognizing the fact that, though the welcome to their fellow-villagers was hearty, there was an undercurrent of determination in the men's manner to him. There was something furtive in the atmosphere. Nevertheless, he spoke to the new-comers in much the same strain as he had

welcomed the first party, and one of their number, a man who had been a gardener at the Chase, thanked him with real gratitude that was balm to Dick's wounded spirit.

After Wallace had resumed his seat there was a pause that was fraught with presentiment. Bill almost unconsciously drew nearer to his chief and looked at the faces of the earlier settlers. One and all their eyes were turned on Corrie, the blacksmith; on some of their faces was expectation, on some frank pleasure, on others disapproval in differing degrees. Corrie was on most occasions the village spokesman, and he now stood up and, in a manner full of determination and not quite so respectful as it should have been, he spoke.

"The settlers of Vision have been wanting to talk to you for a long time, Captain," he said, "and this seems as good a time as any. We thank you for all you've done for us, although there's some as say it was no more than you should have, seeing as how us and our fathers before us have worked for your people for a hundred years and more."

There were dissenting voices to this, but they did not come from the majority. Corrie, however, held his ground and Dick did not speak, so the man continued.

"We've come to the conclusion, at least a good number of us have, that we're no better off here than we were at home—we still depend on what you like to do for us for our bread and butter, and we want to know how we stand. We know we're

to get our land when we've paid a certain amount of money for it, but we'd like to be sure we're not paying more than it's worth." His eye at this stage encountered Doreen's, which were flaming with indignation and he went on hurriedly. "We want to know how we stand about the butter factory and the weir. They're the two most important things in the settlement, and the majority of us settlers think that they should belong absolutely to the people, and should not be owned by someone who hasn't a stake in the place."

He ceased abruptly and sat down. The silence that followed was long and electric. Dick's eyes had not moved during the whole of Corrie's speech, and now something seemed to snap in his brain. His anger flamed in his face and Bill, standing beside him, felt rather than saw the tensing of his great body. Dick's face seemed ten years older—he looked a middle-aged man as he stood up and faced the people, and his voice rang through the little building.

"This," he said, "is the greatest disappointment of my life. I brought you all out here in good faith and have provided for you to the best of my ability. I thought that in a new country you might acquire the independence many of you so pitiably lack; how much I have failed Corrie's remarks have indicated. I have endeavoured to treat you with generosity, but now I will treat you with absolute justice and nothing more. To Corrie's questions, I have this to answer. You may appoint

any man you please to value your land—I will pay his expenses—and you will pay me for it what he values it at or what you have agreed to pay me, whichever is the smaller amount. The stock on your farms, which is mine, may be returned to the homestead at any time you wish if you desire to purchase stock for yourselves elsewhere. The weir is mine and the butter factory is mine and both remain mine until you can pay me a fair price for both. From now on, Vision will be worked on a strictly business basis. Those of you who work on the saw-mill will be paid exactly what you are worth and not what will keep your families in comfort. You have lived dependently long enough—from now on, you learn to stand on your own. I have finished.”

Chappel, one of the farmers from the far side of the river, was on his feet almost before Dick had finished speaking.

“I want you to know, Captain, that I’m on your side every time. I’m grateful for what you’ve done for me and mine—and I don’t take it as a right, but as a favour. And there’s many of us feel the same. It’s only the ones that have been talking bolshevik rubbish that’s growling.” He sat down to a chorus of “That’s so”—“I’m with you, Captain,” and so on from a small group who had gravitated together.

Dick’s eyes softened a little as he looked at them.

“I shall not forget,” he said. Then he turned to Bill, “Get the new people fixed up, Bill,” he

said in a voice from which all vitality had gone. The next minute he had gone.

The schoolroom buzzed with the sound of voices a moment after. Bill went round and collected the new-comers together and there were many hostile looks. Angus Tobin's impudent glance caught his as a challenge Bill could not resist.

"It would give me the greatest pleasure in life to give you what you deserve, Tobin," he said, and something in his voice caused Tobin's glance to waver and fall, "but I've work to attend to. You'll get what's coming to you in time—there isn't room here for scum like you."

Then he left the room, followed by the unfortunate new-comers whose faces were full of apprehension, and as he went he saw the people standing in two distinct groups—the settlement of Vision was divided against itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

IT was unfortunate that a threatened law-suit over water rights connected with the weir should have drawn the attention of the newspapers once more to Vision. A reporter, coming up with the two-fold intention of having his annual holiday and also scouting round to find out the real position of things in Vision, was soon made cognisant of the recent happenings in the Valley. He was a man of lively imagination as well as some literary ability, and during July and August Dick's name was once more prominent in the public eye. The desertion of two families—that of Corrie and one of the saw-mill hands—made fine groundwork for newspaper reports, which painted in the worst possible light conditions at the settlement.

A caricature, which six months ago would merely have amused Dick, was sufficient to complete the breaking of his spirit. It depicted him riding backwards on a donkey labelled "Vision." The sketch was remarkably clever and his attitude of straining every nerve to go the opposite way to that in which the donkey was clearly going was produced with a maximum of effect. Across his shoulder the artist

had drawn a rod from which dangled a money-bag which the donkey was swallowing in one gulp. It hurt abominably, and Doreen cried in hopeless rage when she saw it.

Doreen these days was a creature of moods. Her affection for Valmai and Dick was so deep that her conscience reproached her when she found herself being riotously happy. Her happy times coincided generally with the visits of Mr. William Attley Simmons to Crossings or with the long rides they took together.

With Bill Doreen did not feel it was disloyal to discuss Dick and the absent Valmai, and it was he who suggested one day that she should write the fullest possible description of the conditions at Vision to Valmai. Doreen wrote constantly, but at Dick's request, she had told Valmai only the barest details of the settlement. "There is a report of Dick's wonderful scheme in the papers here," Valmai answered in one letter from London, "please tell me all the details. The reports here are extremely funny, if they were not so misleading—one paper says that 'a large portion of Victoria' is the area to be settled. I feel quite proud, Dorn, to think the scheme originated in imagination, and I am praying for its success. Will you tell Dick that when next you see him? By the way, are Mrs. Warrington and Cynthia still at Callemondah? You never tell me any real news. Who's Bill, anyhow? You mention him now and then."

"I'd like to know the ins and outs of the whole

affair," Doreen confessed to Bill one day, "I suspect and so does mother, that they married to get old Mr. Craig's money and it seems that Dick has fallen in love with Valmai, but that she hasn't with him. Yet, I'd have staked my life she just worshipped the ground he walked on. I couldn't have gone away."

"I wouldn't have let you," rejoined Mr. Simmons.

Doreen smiled with conscious superiority. "You or any other man couldn't have stopped me, if I was offending my conscience by staying," she said.

Bill's thoughts hopped back to Dick and Valmai. "Good heavens," he said, "was her conscience reproaching her? Pity help Dick, then," Doreen flared up in indignation. "You're thinking entirely wrong things, Bill Simmons. If Val went, because she couldn't stay, it was Dick's fault and not hers. If you knew her, you'd know that too. She is absolutely the straightest woman on earth," she said hotly.

"She married for money, you say," was Bill's dry answer.

"Yes, and so would you if you were a typist earning two pounds fifteen a week. John Craig left over half a million."

Bill whistled expressively. "Well, there's only a quarter of a million left now, I'll warrant. This business has cost Captain close on a hundred thousand if it's cost him a penny, and I doubt whether he'll get a thousand pounds of it back. Those damned blighters of settlers are absolutely insatiable and the poor old chief has just lost heart."

Doreen looked into the distance thoughtfully.

"I promised Dick I wouldn't tell Val about the settlement—he wants to do that himself when it's in working order. He couldn't bear her to see it in the mess it's in now, and I'm quite certain if she knew the truth she'd be over like a shot. Poor Dick, it seems rotten to be so happy when he's in the depths of despair," she said.

"You are happy—with me, aren't you, Dorn?" Bill asked softly.

"Well, one must have someone to ride round with, you know," Doreen answered serenely, which dashed Bill's spirits completely for a while. But a few minutes later their horses were very close together and a small sunburnt hand snuggled into his, so Bill went home content.

II

August was a month of almost incessant rain. Mitchell, although his work was finished, had not yet left the weir and he went about with an anxious face. Dick was constantly at Bellbird Gully, and the two men were drawn close together in the worrying weeks while the dam rose inches every day. The water over the weir was a torrent for a few days, and the people in the farms near the river watched ceaselessly.

Dick had ridden through the valley one day and gone to each farm in turn. At each house he had

given explicit instructions as to what to do when the river rose beyond a certain point. He saw that every house was supplied with plenty of food in case they should be cut off from the little township. The farms on the far side of the river were the ones that would suffer most in this case, but only if it became impossible to get to the bridge, for the new structure held splendidly against the muddy torrent that had replaced the placid river. These farms were, however, in no danger from the river itself, for they had been built on rising ground well out of its reach.

For the farms on the flats, however, the danger was very real, and Dick realized with considerable dismay that these houses could almost as profitably been built farther back into the hills. On every hand new errors of judgment cropped up, so unmistakable that Dick wondered how he could possibly have made them. He wished he could have gone back and started over again, but he knew it was impossible to alter things now.

He smiled grimly as he realized that until the factory and mill began to pay, he would have to depend entirely on Callemondah, for he had settled the income of Warrington on his mother and Clive for their lives. The situation was not without humour, he acknowledged to himself, for he had made a game of living on the farm when he had done so to fulfil the conditions of John Craig's will. Now he had denuded himself of practically all that John Craig had left him and nothing remained for

him but to support himself on the products of the homestead.

To Mitchell one evening as they sat beside their camp-fire he disclosed the fact that he was going to work Callemondah as it should be worked. He had already sent instructions for the purchase of suitable stock and he was looking forward to a cessation of the rain so that he could start work.

"And what about the settlement?" Mitchell asked.

"The settlement doesn't need me," Dick answered grimly.

Mitchell laughed. "Dear man," he said, "it needs you abominably. You put the fear of God into the hearts of the settlers at the flare-up, and if only Tobin and that fool Smith would take it into their heads to get out the settlement would have a fair chance of succeeding. You'll notice that Tobin and Smith only egg the others on to clear out; they stick tight themselves. Smith's just a weak ass with a good flow of language, but Tobin's a clever man. He seems to have a kink in his mind."

"Tobin will get what he's asking for from Bill one of these days. I think there's more than professional dislike between those two; Doreen's playing with fire trying to convert Tobin to reason and he only talks to her to inflame Bill. I cautioned the young lady about it the other day and she said she was determined to turn Tobin into a good citizen. He'd be a good citizen of Russia, but of

nowhere else. I was a sentimental fool to let him come out—another mistake.” He spoke with such grim fatalism that Mitchell, who was a deeply religious man, felt a pang of regret that this big, lovable man should be so sunk in despair that there seemed no hope for him anywhere. They stared into the fire for a long time, each busy with his pipe and his thoughts. Then suddenly, Dick looked up overhead. Blazing in a rift in the clouds was the Southern Cross.

“Look, the rain’s over, Mitchell,” he said, for the sight of that starry cross had put a new heart into him.

His shoulders were squared and his lips firm when he rode down the Valley the next day, between the scrub still dripping with rain, but with a smiling August sky overhead.

III

Dick was talking to Chappell one day in October, the subject being the respective merits of two different varieties of peas. Chappell’s farm ran from the river back into the hills and quite a large area of this was suitable for the cultivation of leguminous crops, such as peas and beans. The idea of sowing peas had appealed to the hard-working old man, and Dick had advanced him enough money to get the seed.

The boy from the weir felt a little diffident about

disturbing the Captain, but his message was urgent, so he cut in.

“Captain, Mr. Mitchell told me to tell you the dam’s risen eighteen inches since sunrise. He says the hot sun must have melted the snow in the mountains and it’s coming down. He said will you ride through the Valley and tell the people to be ready to go the moment they hear him fire six shots in succession. He’s afraid, sir,” the boy said, white-lipped.

Dick looked up towards the mountains. They looked very blue and very close this morning, but he remembered that for the last few days, they had been veiled in mists—probably heavy rains had fallen and now the water was coming down the river.

Even while he looked, the mountains were blotted out, the sky became overcast and a few drops of rain fell.

“Dear God,” said Chappell.

“You’re all right here, Chappell,” Dick said hurriedly, a swift plan forming in his mind. “Drive all your stock up behind the house and secure them in your hill paddock and they’ll be safe there. But first ride to the other farms on this side of the river and warn them to do the same. Tell them not to be panic-stricken, for you’re all quite safe here. It’s the poor devils on the other side”—his voice was lost in the sound of the grey’s hoofs as she thundered on her wild ride.

The boy from the weir had warned the farmers

whose farms he passed on his way to Dick, and as he crossed the bridge, Dick could see a cart leaving one of the farms and come galloping along the track. Smith and his wife sat on the seat, while their three children crouched behind them. The man's face was a picture of awful terror.

Dick rode along the track to meet them.

"Go back, you fool, and get your stock out. There's no danger till Mitchell gives you the signal, you've time enough then to reach the school. Get your stock out, you coward."

Smith raised his whip as though he would strike him.

"We'll not stop to be drowned like rats to save your stock for you," he cried in a voice that Dick scarcely recognized, so torn was it with his terror. The children were crying, infected by their father's madness.

Dick drew the grey aside and the cart lurched on, swaying from side to side as it sank into the ruts.

There was no time to think. Dick rode on wildly, shouting his instructions to the men who came running out to meet him. The rain was pouring down by now and Dick was soaked to the skin. Still he rode on, his mind on the poor animals on Smith's farm. On his way back he passed Davis driving his cattle before him.

"Run them into the hills," he called. "I'm going back for Smith's."

Davis handed his stock-whip to his wife.

“Drive them on up the sawmill track, girl,” he said, then he turned and galloped back beside Dick.

Smith’s farm was the closest to the weir and in the most low-lying ground. The previous rains had soaked the earth and the grey showed the strain of that long ride as she plodded on through the oozy ground.

Smith’s cows were in the cow-yard, one of them still in the bail, the milk bucket standing by her patient side.

With a curse for the weakness of the man, Dick released the beast and, separating now, they drove the animals out of the paddock up the hill into the scrub.

Dick turned to ride back to the road, but Davis waved him back. There was a new undertone to the sound of the rain, a note like the pedal notes of an organ. Suddenly six shots rang through the Valley. They turned to look from the eminence on which they stood at the weir.

With a roar the flood was on it—a dreadful brown tide, rushing, swirling, foaming, carrying fallen boughs and uprooted trees with it, a picture to strike terror to the stoutest heart.

Dick looked down towards Smith’s house—only a part of the roof showed above the torrent. With a cry that in its horror haunted Davis all the days of his life, Dick shut out the sight with his arm.

“My Valley, my people,” he groaned.

Davis had stood beside Corrie that day in June that seemed a life time ago, but now he crossed the space that separated them and put his hand on Dick's shoulder in silent sympathy.

IV

Smith and his family were gone. Dick had set them out on their journey to a share-farming position in another part of Gippsland with instructions to keep in touch with him. He had pressed a cheque for fifty pounds into Mrs. Smith's hands and had shaken hands with both of them. The man's slack mouth had seemed incapable of forming any words of thanks, but Mrs. Smith had volubly filled in the omission for him.

In his heart Dick knew that the Valley was better off without them, but it was hard to see them go.

The floods had gone now and the sun, gaining strength as the month went on, was fast drying the muddy tracks. The paddocks were green with new grass and the beauty of spring was in the air.

Dick rode to Vision to superintend the pulling down of the wreck of the bridge which had gone down like a hayrick before the onslaught of the flood. The defection of the Smiths' was a great disappointment, but he could not resist the feeling of fresh hope inspired by the exhilarating air.

Newspaper reports said that there had never been such floods in Gippsland in all the history of

the place—and the weir had held. Dick read the reports of awful losses in stock from other parts of the country—of loss of life in a couple of cases—and thanked God from the bottom of his heart that Vision had suffered so little. A good bit of stock had been lost, the bridge had gone, and two houses would have to be rebuilt. There was lots of fencing down, but that was not such a large item to replace.

But what was so frightfully discouraging to Dick was the apathy of the settlers. The terror of the flood had bitten very deeply into the souls of some of them, particularly the new-comers, who could not accustom themselves to the vastness of the place. The children looked at the river, now reduced to its ordinary size, with horror in their eyes, and one sensitive mite from the far side could not be induced to cross it under any circumstances. The heart seemed to have gone out of the people, and Dick was hoping that the coming of spring would work its magic in them.

Bill and Mrs. Warrington, living so close to Dick, could not account for the lack of energy in the settlement, but Doreen, whose clear eyes missed very little, knew that the fault lay with Dick.

The last contingent of settlers had arrived just at the time when the Valley was split into two factions, and when Dick had withdrawn his close interest from all except those who solicited it. They had been deprived of the stimulus of his enthusiasm, and the settlement suffered because of it.

Several times lately Doreen had started letters to Valmai telling her the true condition of affairs—somehow Doreen knew that only Valmai could renew Dick's courage. But her promise not to write stayed her hand.

She noticed too that Valmai had ceased asking for news of Dick—Doreen turned hurriedly through her last few letters to see if there was any mention of any other man. Yes, here was a Mr. Bruerton, an Englishman—he had vanished into the limbo of forgotten things in the next letter. A Russian count with soulful eyes appeared in the next one, but faded out on page eight when he found that Valmai's husband was still alive.

“The age of chivalry has gone,” Val wrote. “I expected Count Neffovski to offer to run across to Callemondah and deal with Dick. Instead he transferred his attention to the fat little American I told you about, who tells everyone the tale of her divorce in the first five minutes.”

In one letter, Valmai mentioned with concern that Mrs. Rutledge did not appear to be well. “I think I'll take her back to the Riviera. It's so sunny there and the wattle—mimosa they call it—reminds us of home. Do you know that I am the proud possessor of a nephew? Grace writes that he is a beautiful baby, and mother would like very much to see him, so it's on the cards that we'll be turning our faces homeward soon. These last eighteen months seem to have flown, and yet each day has dragged. Don't mention this piece at Callemondah;

but I motored down to Warrington last week. The Chase is a superb place and I had the cheek to go in and ask if I could look round. The butler—do you remember Mrs. Warrington mentioning Powe?—was very courteous, probably on account of my opulent little car (which is one of the things that resigns me to being wealthy), but he would have turned me out if Clive Warrington hadn't happened to turn up. He's fascinating, Doreen, a slim dark edition of Dick, and he looks frightfully brainy. He showed me the drawing-rooms and the hall with its big oak staircase and the bedroom where Queen Elizabeth slept—every old house in England has one of those. The Chase isn't as large as I imagined, but it has an air. When I think of the contrast between it and me——. I went on down to Little Warrington—such a sad little place, Dorn, deserted except for about four cottages. They are going to pull the old houses down the little old woman in the post office told me. She told me about the villagers leaving for Australia—her son is one of the men on Dick's settlement; her description of it made me want to cry. 'It's adventure for the young and memories for the old,' she said, 'but it's a poor life here, and Mr. Richard will do well by the men, so they'll be better off out there with the blacks, though it do seem a long way,' she added with her poor old lips trembling. I felt a perfect beast not telling her who I was, Dorn, much guiltier than at leaving Clive Warrington in ignorance. If I'd

told him though, they'd probably have insisted on entertaining us and, in spite of the veneer travelling is putting on me, I still feel beastly uncertain of myself at times, and I'm much too proud to take lessons in deportment."

Pride, Doreen decided, watching Dick directing operations at the bridge, was the curse of them both. That chance sentence in Valmai's letter had opened up a new train of thought. Was Val suffering from an inferiority complex in her relation with Dick—and was that why she had left him?

Doreen noted with concern the new lines that had been traced about Dick's mouth since the flood. He looked like a man who struggled as much against his own despair as against the elements that warred with him. Valmai's presence would have made all the difference here Doreen knew, her enthusiasm would have turned the tide at this critical moment, yet Dick's pride would not let him call her back until he had made good his failure.

She looked round at the faces of the settlers who had come in to watch the operation of removing the superstructure from the piles of the old bridge. They lacked vitality, no one seemed to have any faith in the future—the heart was gone out of the venture, and only a grim determination to hang on remained.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

DOREEN stood with the letter in her hand and tears streaming down her face. There was so much heartbreak in it and life lately had seemed sad.

“I don’t know how to write,” Valmai’s letter said, “to tell you this dreadful news, Dorn. I told you in one of my letters that mother was not well. I took her down to Biarritz and for a while she seemed much better and I did not feel so worried. One day, last week, I went out for a motor run with some American friends I have made and when I got back I found her in her room, a piece of wattle in her hand, quite dead. It has frozen me up, Doreen, to think of my poor little homesick mother sitting there with her life ebbing out. Somehow my pride seems a very miserable thing to keep her here with me away from the things she loved best. The money I paid for so dearly seems very useless in the face of big things like that and, when the first thrill of knowing I could spend as much as I wanted to had worn off, I don’t think it has brought me a real day’s happiness yet.

“I buried her here in the little English Cemetery,

where the sun that is nearly as warm as our sun will shine on her all the time. I'm going to put a little statue above her grave—I chose it to-day, a dear chubby little cherub, like the grandchild she never saw but loved so passionately. Am I getting sentimental, Doreen, I who despised sentimentality so much, or am I just realizing that it's the little soft things of life that count as much as the big things?"

"Show that letter to Dick, Doreen," her mother said after she had read it, but Doreen shook her head.

"No, mother, I won't. Dick is too proud to write and ask Valmai to come back, and it won't hurt him to suffer as much as she is."

"He is suffering as surely as man ever suffered, and in his pride too. He was so proud of his Valley and his wonderful scheme—do you remember him showing us that drawing of himself and saying, 'That's true fame,' and then the things that were in the paper about the settlement recently, and those empty houses in the Valley, don't you think they hurt a man whose life has always gone just the way he wanted it?"

"Right-oh, I'll show it to him sometime," Doreen said when she had thought the matter over, "but I'll have to choose my time to broach the subject—you know he never talks about Val now."

"He's other things than women to occupy his mind, poor lad," Mrs. O'Donnell said.

“Val’s not ‘women’ mother, she’s the woman,” Doreen answered.

Things seemed to conspire to prevent Doreen showing Valmai’s letter to Dick. The letter had reached her just before Christmas after Dick and Mrs. Warrington had set off to spend the holidays at Portsea.

Dick returned from his holiday—the first one of any length he had taken since the settlement was begun—with more hope in his face. The change of scenery had taken off his mind his worries, and both he and Mrs. Warrington had enjoyed their weeks of sunshine at the gay little resort.

In spite of the unusual heat the Valley looked well as Dick rode through it on the day after his return from Portsea. It was late in the afternoon when he went, so that the butter-factory was quiet. He looked in at the door, however, and noticed with impatient disgust that the floor was not as clean as it should have been. There was, in fact, an air of neglect about the place ; he felt he had been away too long.

The butter factory, although it earned its keep, had not yet proved very profitable for Dick, and he was just realizing that the Valley needed more settlers to make the factory pay. Galling as the thought was, he decided that he would probably have to throw the Valley open to all comers ; it was a sore blow and a decision he was loath to make, and he decided to put off the evil day as long as possible. He would write to Clive instead and see if any of

the Greater Warrington farmers cared to undertake the venture.

Flies buzzed about Dick's face as he rode, but he kept them away with a switch of gum. The air was very still in Vision, so still that he could hear the barking of dogs at the other end of the Valley. The voice of the river was soft these days, and the cattle kept in the shadow of the trees along the water's edge. From some of the farms as he passed Dick could hear the rattle of milk-buckets and the voices of the people calling to their cows. Some of the houses stood silent and deserted and those he passed with averted eyes. He could never accustom himself to the sight of those blind-eyed houses—they were silent monuments of his failure.

A further blow awaited him as he crossed the river across the bridge that had replaced the one swept away by the flood. The nearest farm to the bridge had been Dalton's, whom Dick had always regarded as one of his strongest supporters. The place seemed strangely silent and Dick rode over and went round the house. There was no doubt that they were gone. The house was empty and so were the paddocks.

With tightened lips Dick rode on to Chappell's. Old Chappell was in the cow-shed, but came out from his work when Dick called him.

"It's glad I am to see you back and looking so well, Mr. Richard," he said, as they shook hands.

“Chappell, Dalton’s gone,” Dick said. Chappell looked away. “Yes, he’s gone, sir, the dirty swine; gone and taken your horse with him. The cows and pigs he had the grace to drive in here.”

“Where’s he gone?” Dick asked in an ominously quiet voice.

“Smith got him a sharefarming job down the same place as he is. Dalton seemed to think it’d pay better and he said there’d be no risk there,” the old man answered.

“And do you think it will pay better?” Dick asked. Chappell tilted his disreputable old hat over his eyes and scratched the back of his head thoughtfully.

“Well, sir and that I couldn’t say; but there’s this about it—here if the crop goes wrong, it’s our crop and our seed gone; on a sharefarming job, it’s the boss’s crop and he pays for the seed. Of course, I don’t say as how this Valley wouldn’t pay better if the cows was better. You can’t make much out of a herd of forty like I’ve got here if they don’t give the cream, sir, and that’s a fact.”

Memories of discussions on Guernseys, Jerseys, and other breeds crossed Dick’s mind. He could almost hear Valmai’s voice saying, “This is a most fascinating discussion, Dick, we’ll never be able to pay for either one Jersey or one Guernsey.”

“I’ll think about that, Chappell, and if I can see my way to improving the herds, you may be sure I’ll do it.”

“Thank you for that, Mr Richard,” the old man said, as Dick swung himself on to his horse.

“By the way,” Dick said, “Tobin still hangs round at the mill, I suppose.”

Chappell chuckled grimly. “He’ll do that, Mr. Richard, as long as you like to waste good money on him, ’Tisn’t every man as’ll take on a man with a withered arm and a twisted brain. Tobin knows which side his bread’s buttered,” he said.

“His arm withered and his brain got twisted in the service of his country, Chappell—that is what I try to think of when he riles me, as he frequently does.”

“He likes too much to dangle round Miss O’Donnell, sir,” the old man added.

“What?” said Dick in a voice of thunder.

“Now, don’t you worry, Mr Richard, Mr Simmons will deal with him in good time. Tobin says that every man’s as good as the next out here and he’s as much right to talk to Miss Doreen as Mr. Simmons has, but I told him that for all his wooden foot, Mr. Simmons is a damn-side better man than he is.”

“I suppose I can leave Bill to fight his own battles,” Dick admitted, “but just let Tobin annoy Doreen once, and I’ll thrash him well and throw him out of the Valley myself, twisted and wounded though he may be. Well, so long,” he said, as he wheeled his horse round and left the farm.

II

"Not going down to Crossings to-night, Bill," Dick asked that evening as they smoked their pipes on the veranda at Callemondah. Bill had arrived back that afternoon from his holidays, and Dick had fully expected him to go as soon as tea was over.

"Not to-night," Bill answered, and something hard in his voice made Dick look across at him in the dim light

"Nothing wrong, Bill," he said.

There was no answer. The light faded quickly and soon all that Dick could see was the glow of Bill's pipe and the momentary gleam of light on his face as he lit a match.

"Doreen talked once too often to Tobin," Bill said grimly at last. "I told her she'd have to choose between us and she told me not to be a fool. That was the night before I went down for my holiday. She didn't write to me once the whole fortnight," he added miserably.

"And I suppose you wrote two letters a day," tartly interjected Mrs. Warrington, who had stolen out to her favourite deck-chair.

"It was her place to write first—she'd done the quarrelling, I hadn't," Bill said.

Mrs. Warrington and Dick laughed.

"You two silly children," Mrs. Warrington said. "She'll be sitting up in her green voile dress waiting

for you this very minute, and here you are sitting here, dressed up in your best flannels too proud to go down to her. Get out, Bill Simmons." Mrs. Warrington spoke spiritedly, but although Bill laughed, he still stayed there.

"Don't be stiff-necked, Bill," Dick said after a while. "I'd be a happier man this minute if my pride had let me write to my wife a year ago. You've never heard the truth about Valmai and me, Bill, and you're friend enough of mine to hear it and this is it."

Bill sat so still you could have heard a pin drop during the minutes when Dick's voice was the only sound that broke the silence. It was a long narrative, for all it was fairly sketchy in places, but it was the kind of narrative one man could only tell another while the sheltering arms of darkness were about them.

"My pride broke to-day as I rode up the valley with its empty houses—only ten out of fifteen inhabited now, Bill. I've written the truth to Val, and it goes by to-morrow's mail. She is somewhere in England, I don't know exactly where, but I'm sending the letter down to the Trustees and they'll send it on. It's a pill telling them I don't know my wife's address, but my pride's in ruins now, and I'm glad of it," Dick finished.

"It's too late to go down to Crossings to-night, but I'll dash down first thing in the morning if you don't mind, Captain," Bill said after a little silence.

They sat there quietly for a while, the three of them busy with their thoughts.

It was Dick who saw the girl coming up through the orchard—a gleam of light from one of the windows fell on her dress and he saw that it was green. Doreen could see only Dick, for Mrs. Warrington and Bill both sat in the shadows.

“Hullo, Dick,” she called, “didn’t Bill come up to-night?” she asked bravely, but her voice trembled.

“Yes, Dorn,” Dick answered in the tenderly affectionate voice he seemed to use for Doreen alone.

“Well, he didn’t come down when I expected him, so I came up to him, Dick,” she spoke as simply as a child. “It doesn’t do to be too proud, Dick, does it?”

Before Dick could answer a long white figure had risen from the shadows.

“You blessed little girl,” Bill said in a choky kind of voice and, in spite of the onlookers, he drew her into his arms.

“It doesn’t do to be proud,” Doreen repeated, but Bill’s lips on hers silenced any other remark she might have made.

“Would you care for a game of bezique, mother?” Captain Warrington asked of his mother.

“Nothing would please me better,” answered the slim old lady. And they passed together into the comfortable old living-room and left the radiant night to the two outside.

III

It was Doreen who first put the fear of fire into Dick's heart. He and Bill had driven Dick's new car over to Crossings directly after tea, with the idea of taking Doreen and Alan for a run to Lakes Entrance where there always seemed to be a little breeze, no matter how hot it was back here in the hills.

But Doreen had refused to go.

"Too many fires, Bill. It isn't that I'm frightened of the fires, but there are so many fallen trees across the tracks, it's dangerous at night."

Instead, therefore, they sat on the veranda at Crossings and said rude words about the mosquitoes and about the heat. The veranda at Crossings faced across the river almost in a direct line with the line of Vision Valley. A visitor from Old Ford was the first one to notice the glow.

"Look at the moon rising. Isn't it a queer colour?" she said.

"The moon doesn't rise in the north-west," Doreen said as she sat bolt upright and looked in the direction indicated. As she watched, the glow became more pronounced.

"That's fire and I don't like it."

Doreen's words galvanized the little group into action. Dick set off to get the car out immediately. Old Tom, called from his well-earned slumber, came and looked.

“It’s a long way away,” he said at last, “but there’s nothing between it and Vision but plenty of good dry wood. If the wind springs up there’s no saying what’ll happen.”

Dick was white to the lips.

“May I bring my mother down here, Mrs. O’Donnell,” he asked quickly.

“Surely, Dick, but all the same I don’t think the homestead’s in any danger. It’s well cleared all round and the river would shelter it a lot,” she answered.

“What can we do?” Dick asked as they started on their homeward journey. In the face of this new threatened disaster his inexperience was more than ever apparent.

Mr. O’Donnell had come along too.

“Burn a fire break along the edge of the ridge from the weir round to the factory. It looks to be on that side of the river, so the other will be pretty safe. You’ll have to turn out the Valley and work like hell—fire travels fast up here. But if you burn a fair break right round, you’re safe, unless a north wind springs up.”

The ringing of the school bell was sufficient to turn the Valley out, and right through the nightmare hours they worked, while a brilliant blood-red moon swung across the heavens in a mist of grey smoke.

There were only twenty-three of them altogether, and to burn a sufficient break nearly four miles in length seemed an impossible task. The work was

arduous in the extreme, but they worked like automatons, lighting their fires and beating them forward till the ridge presented a line of blackened timber.

The burning of the break itself was dangerous, for sparks flew backwards and the men had all the time to keep a sharp lookout behind them for little fires that started here and there and had to be beaten out before they could get out of hand.

Once towards dawn, Dick met old Tom. The old man sheltered his eyes with one blackened hand from the glare of the fire-break fires and looked towards the ominous glow on the horizon. It was noticeably nearer and Dick was sure he could see flames.

“No, it’s five or six miles off still, I reckon,” said old Tom, “and of course there’s a chance that it may burn itself out or the wind may rise and blow it back. But it’s a big fire, and it’s better to be sure than sorry.”

“Do you think we’ll make it?” Dick asked.

“Have to let the saw-mill go, I’m afraid, Captain,” he said, “we can’t make a break round it. All the people down from there?” he asked.

Dick nodded with a tight throat—the saw-mill with its singing saws was very dear to him. Then as they stood there, the coolness of early morning striking their perspiring bodies with chill touch, they felt a warm breath on their cheeks.

“That’s wind,” Dick said in a voice that he could make no louder than a whisper.

“ Good God,” the old man said, “ it’s from the north, Dick ; send some of the men back at once to take the women and children up to the homestead, we’ll go on with the break. Tell them not to bother about the stock till the women and kids are safe.”

A gust of wind heavy with ashes and acrid smoke stung Dick’s eyes. In a moment the orders were passed. All single men stayed at their posts, the married ones were sent post-haste to take their families to the shelter of the homestead. The ominous words, “ Don’t bother about the stock ” struck fear to more than one stout heart. In a few minutes the wind was on them, and almost instantly it seemed the air was filled with sound.

The magnificence of the sight there in the dark hours before the dawn only increased its horror.

Ridge after ridge of the mountains became etched in fiery splendour against the black sky, the smoke rolled over in great billows of dreadful lurid yellow. Thought was impossible, one could only do and feel.

Dawn broke imperceptibly, and in the growing light the fire lost something of its magnificence, but the light of day increased its terror.

Dick noted suddenly that the leaves of the trees round him were shrivelling with the heat, perspiration was streaming from him and his clothes were a mass of burns and stains. His eyes seemed starting from his head, but it was agony to close them and his parched lips were drawn back from his teeth. Still he worked on, mechanically beating out each little fire,

It was after eight o'clock in the morning, only ten hours since they had left Crossings, but they had lived a lifetime in those hours. Chappell's son, a sturdy youth of about eighteen, came up and said something, but Dick could not hear for the noise that seemed suddenly all about them.

"Come away, sir, the fire's right on us," the boy shouted.

Dick looked where he pointed—like the advancing hosts of a pitiless army, on came the fire. Great trees crashed in a shower of sparks every few minutes and from where he stood he could see the undergrowth wilting, turning grey and shrivelling up before the fire's dreadful breath.

"Come away," urged the boy again and still Dick stood, rooted to the spot. Then far down the Valley he saw the outline of a house burning redly in the white morning light.

Broken, utterly defeated, Dick rode out of Vision, with the fire at his heels.

IV

All that day and far into the next the fire raged. It was a day of black despair. Dick counted the people time after time to make sure that the whole fifty-seven inhabitants of the Valley were there.

He groaned aloud as he thought of the stock left to perish in that awful holocaust, but it became apparent that Callemondah was in peril, and there

was no time for thoughts as they formed a cordon from creek to river for the purpose of putting out small fires as they started. So strong was the wind that it seemed practically impossible to burn a break, although they risked it in one spot where the thick scrub came right up to the orchard.

Then, when things were at their worst, on the afternoon of the second day of the fire, when it seemed that nothing could save the homestead from utter destruction, and Dick was preparing to give the order to run for their lives to Old Ford, the wind changed.

They stood together that evening, Dick and his mother, and watched the fire burning itself out on the slopes of the hills opposite right to the very foot of their own hill.

“It’s a wonderful, terrifying sight, Richard. I don’t think anything has ever awed me so much—not because of the danger, but because of the awful ruthlessness of it, the omnipotence. It was horrible, heart-breaking—yet it fascinated me.”

“Yes, I felt that too, but I hated it. It has made me a poor man, mother. I’ve nothing left but Callemondah and that bare ground out there. My factory, the mill, the beautiful cattle with their patient eyes—oh, God.” It was the cry of a man tried to the limit of his endurance. “All my hopes and dreams, all I had to offer my beloved woman——.”

For a long, long time they stood there, the mother and her son from over the sea, and watched the

weird splendour of the red moon in the grey sky, as it looked down on the still burning bush.

Then someone came up behind them.

“Captain, the men want to know whether it’s safe to leave the orchard yet.” It was Tobin, and at the ring of respect in his voice Dick’s shoulders straightened. With his chin up, his jaws set, he turned and faced the new problems.

Whatever else Richard Warrington had lost, he had regained the absolute confidence of his people. Once more he was their leader, and no one questioned his leadership.

And they were queer problems indeed that Dick faced during the next two days. There was the problem of housing and feeding the Vision people. The old homestead was large, but not large enough to provide half the accommodation needed. The barn was cleared out and the men spread their bedding there, while the women and children filled the rooms at the house and overflowed on to the verandas.

Thunder-storms, accompanied by tropical downpours of rain, increased the discomfort, but they put out the last of the fires, and the weary men were able to get some much-needed rest.

The people waited for Dick to give them a lead ; but he, crippled for money as he knew he would be now, knew not what to say to them. Their dependence on him touched him deeply, and he did not want to fail them. He cast round in his mind for some possible solution—it was impossible to employ

more than one or two families on the Station, and he was on the point of writing to the Trustees to ask if they had any useful suggestions to make. It was acknowledging absolutely his failure and that went very much against the grain, but Dick regretted more poignantly the fact that he would be letting down the settlers who had rallied round him.

He went, on the afternoon of the fourth day after the fire, to the Valley.

A scene of black desolation met his eyes as he dismounted on the bluff on which, eighteen months before, he had awaited the arrival of the first settlers. Here Val had stood, her slight figure tense with the strength of her feeling, as she carried him with her in her enthusiastic and idealistic plans.

He had for love of her, in a magnificent gesture to prove his worthiness of her, endeavoured to make her dreams come true, and this blackened ruin was the result.

The dependence of the little band of settlers, all that remained of his ambitious plan, moved him tremendously, and as he sat there amid the charred grass and trees the impossibility of failing them became unquestionable, and, with the simplicity of a knight taking his first vow, he resolved to shoulder his responsibility.

He stood up and looked across the Valley, his eyes, bright with hard tears, picking out first one land-mark and then another.

There the road had run ; those blackened timbers just below were all that was left of the little store.

Closer still a tangled mass of iron marked the place where the factory had been. Far off he could see half of one of the houses which by some miracle still stood—almost beneath his feet was the blackened carcass of a cow. The pitiful remains of the unfortunate beast brought full realization to Dick, and with throbbing heart he understood at last the power of his feeling for the Valley.

It was the Valley itself he loved—not only because it held all Valmai's dreams, but because it was the Valley. Standing there with the fresh breeze in his face, he yearned to stretch out his hands and sooth the Valley's wounds; every hill was dear to him, every turn of the river.

He took a handful of earth in his hands and looked at it. This earth was Australia—Australia that had given him satisfying manhood and something more; Australia of fire and flood, of bewitching tenderness and beauty. As surely as he stood there, Dick knew that he belonged to the bush and it belonged to him; out of his agony of mind and spirit had risen a glorious life and hope.

Down in the Valley, a kookaburra settled himself on the charred limb of an old gum-tree. He lifted his head and laughed his hearty, ringing challenge to the whole world.

Up on the bluff, Dick Warrington threw back his head and laughed with him. Then he stretched out his hands once more to the Valley and the earth he held in them fell on the charred remains of the cow.

“You’re mine, Valley of Vision, mine—do you hear? Every black stump of you, every burnt acre, mine, nothing shall take you from me. You’re going to live again, Vision, in richness and plenty of wonderful crops and healthy, sleek herds, you’re going to be planned and kept in sanity and knowledge—and all because I love you, Valley.”

The kookaburra laughed again, not a challenging laugh this time, but a tender little laugh, a laugh that caressed.

PART III

CHAPTER ONE

I

VALMAI shivered and drew her furs more closely round her throat.

“A green Christmas, Ma’am,” the waiter had said to her at lunch with a shake of his old head. Val wondered if a white Christmas could possibly have been any colder.

Her car stopped every few yards, and when it did go ahead it went so slowly that it would have been much quicker to walk. She was tempted to get out and walk some warmth into her feet, but one glance at the murky yellow fog that pressed against the car window was sufficient to deter her.

The car stopped, jerked forward, stopped again, jerked a yard or so once more, then stopped, and Valmai saw that they were at the theatre entrance.

“Sweet thing, how wonderful to see you again,” her little hostess exclaimed as she joined the rest of the party in the foyer. “I’m glad you came, Valmai, it will do you good to talk to other people for a while. And if you must go back to that wild home of yours, you must see *Aida* first. That fascinating Brownlee man is singing to-night—

he's an Australian, too, so you'll be able to feel proud of your country to-night."

"Supporting home industries," Valmai said smiling.

Van Birtles, long, thin, languid, the very antithesis of what Val had imagined a successful American business man would be, took her cloak as she seated herself in their box.

The one thing that made Val feel conscious of the wealth at her command was to sit in a European theatre watching the gay, be-jewelled crowd and know herself to be as well-dressed as most of the women present. She could not accustom herself to the idea of being wealthy and had had many an inward struggle before she brought herself to having a personal maid; indeed, she would never have done so had she not been so frankly scared at the idea of finding her way unaided about foreign hotels.

The middle-aged English woman she had chosen for the position was so exactly the opposite of everything Val had pictured in a lady's maid, that Alice, the maid, was frequently hard put to it to explain the smile that played round her mistress's lips. She was, however, efficient as the pert little French girls one reads about, and Valmai found her knowledge of what to wear and when of inestimable value.

Little Mrs. Cornwell was very careful to keep her husband's attention well occupied during the couple of minutes before the orchestra started, to give her

tall brother his chance. She had not elicited much information about her family from Valmai, but she did know that Val and her husband had parted.

Coming from a circle of society where divorce was more or less an everyday affair (although, of course, it didn't happen in one's own family), the idea of her brother falling seriously in love with a married woman did not worry her.

And Van seemed to be doing just that. There was something more than admiration for a strikingly handsome woman in his eyes when he looked at Valmai, and Val, feeling the warmth of his gaze, was conscious anew of the beautiful lines of her black frock, so short that her knees were just hidden at front and back, but drooping in bewildering flounces to her ankles at the sides. Her jetty hair, into which Alice had induced the tiniest suspicion of a wave was knotted low on her neck, leaving bare her ears, where tiny pearls gleamed softly. The glow of health which weeks of holidaying in the south of France had painted on her cheeks still remained and, as the first notes of the great opera filled the theatre, a smile of perfect enjoyment parted her lips.

"Celeste Aïda" was a dream of delight that set Val dreaming.

"Wonderful, isn't he?" Van Birtles said.

"Glorious—he sang the heart right out of my body," Valmai answered, then as she caught the light in his eyes, almost without her own volition, she leant over and touched his hand softly.

"Van, I like you very much—but I love my husband, and I'm going back to him, next week, if he wants me."

Van patted her hand, but was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was lazy as always and his eyes serene.

"Wal, if that's how things are, honey, there's no more to be said. But if he doesn't want you?"

Valmai lifted her chin. "He'll be made to," she said, "unless——"

"Unless what, Valmai?" he asked.

"Don't chatter, I want to listen to this," Maidie Cornwell put in quite unconscious that her brother could have strangled her for her interruption.

"Look, Mrs. Warrington, here comes your Australian now," her husband said.

"Proud?" Van asked as Valmai clapped wildly at the end of the act.

"Well, he is wonderful, isn't he?" Valmai answered, taking their assents as personal compliments.

There was no opportunity to finish their broken conversation until they started on the homeward journey to Val's hotel.

"Won't you finish what you started to say, Valmai," Van asked, as the car started.

"It's a long story, Van, of misunderstanding that might have been avoided if Dick and I had talked more freely to each other of ourselves. People get so into the habit of not saying the things that matter most—of taking it for granted that

others understand ; that's why I spoke to you as I did to-night. Wasted love seems to be so pitifully unnecessary, when a word at the right time could prevent it. I married my husband without knowing him at all to fulfil the conditions of an old man's will. We just about hated each other at first, but after a while I fell in love with him—not easily, Van, I fought against it as long as I could, but it was too strong for me.” Val's voice was soft with memory. “I think he was sorry for me when he first discovered it, but after a while he seemed to need me too. Our marriage was wonderful for a while, then I began to question the quality of his love for me. You see, Van, I was terrible then—you've only seen me since living among the 'idle rich' has put a veneer of culture over my ruggedness—but if you'd seen me two years ago ! I was bad-tempered, nervy and abominably self-conscious and resented Dick's superiority and self-possession. I suspected the whole world of wanting to make fun of me. I hadn't the slightest idea how to dress and knew less than nothing about the genus man. It's true,” she added in contradiction of his dissenting gesture.

“Van, do you mind being made a safety-valve for what's been in my mind for over eighteen months ?” she asked.

“I am here to serve you, Valmai,” he said.

“I don't deserve that, Van,” she said simply, “but I treasure it all the same.”

“Go on,” the man said, “I want to hear the rest.”

“ In spite of being so impossible, Van, I was incurably romantic—I’ve more sense now. But I’d lived all my life in a world of my own imagining and I expected love to come to me in a blaze of glory. I don’t think,” she said naïvely, “ that I actually expected Dick to go down on his knees and declare his love in iambic pentameters, but in my arrogance I demanded a recognition of my independence and perfect equality that Dick would never have comprehended. Then, the girl he had been practically engaged to in England came out and stayed at the Station. Looking back, I can’t remember that he treated her with anything more than ordinary courtesy with a little interest added because he had known her all her life ; but at the time I was insanely jealous. I knew that under ordinary circumstances Dick would never have looked twice at me, that it was only our living alone so far from everything and everybody he knew that was the cause of his wanting me at all. There were times, Van, when I felt like a street woman in his arms, and I felt the degradation for him as much as for myself. I made up my mind quite suddenly to cut and run. I went the next day, before I had had time to think. And when I was well away, I wrote and offered Dick his freedom. He replied in a cable it must have crucified his pride to send, because he was so terribly reserved. I wrote back a perfect pig of a letter, saying that time would tell and we would wait and see how things went. From that day to this I haven’t heard a word from him,

although his mother writes very occasionally letters that tell me nothing and friends of mine from the farm next door write too—and they tell me nothing. I know he has stayed at Callemondah and brought into being a dream settlement we used to romance about. All the time I've longed to go back to him, but my beastly stiff-necked pride wouldn't let me. I refused to climb down, although I was prepared to let Dick humble himself to the ground for my sake. Mother's death seemed to put things into perspective—I'm going back to Callemondah, and if Dick needs me, even the tiniest little bit, I'll just thank the powers that be from the bottom of my heart. I've not a shred of pride left, Van—all I want to do is to give him just exactly what he wants, no matter what it might be. And if he does not want me at all, if I find that he still loves Cynthia—well, there's still the whole wide world to roam in, so I'll stick up my chin and roam."

"Your flag of pride still seems to be pretty firmly nailed to the mast, my dear," Van said apropos of her last remark. "I can't say how much I honour your confidence, Valmai, and I'm glad you told me, because it kind of justifies my falling for you so. You see, I've never been much interested in women—it was your independent spirit that attracted me right through. However, all that's behind us now—unless, Val, you start to roam the world once more. If you do, will you promise here and now—to roam straight to Louisville, Kentucky?"

There was something so big, so steadfast in the man's voice that for a while Valmai could not speak. She just laid her hand in his.

"Van, there's nothing so wonderful ever come to me as your friendship," she said at last.

II

Alone in her room that night, Valmai went sadly over the conversation in her mind. She felt terribly depressed, because she had to acknowledge to herself that, at first, she had deliberately led Van Birtles on. She had met him at a time when her longing for Dick had turned to bitterness and she had accepted Van's homage as a salve to her wounded spirit. The thing which Dick despised was coveted by other men, and she hugged the knowledge to herself.

Van's simple friendship and his steadfastness had made her bitterly ashamed of herself. Her mother's death had shaken her more than she realized for in the wandering months when they had been so much together she had at last come to understand the gentle, passive nature of the woman who had made her own desires and needs subservient first to those of her husband and later to those of Valmai and Jack.

As she sat there before the dying fire, Valmai saw herself more clearly than she had ever seen herself before. All her pride in her vaunted

independence of thought and spirit was brought desperately low by the realization that for months she had been doing that very thing she despised above all others—offending against her own conscience.

She had read avidly every word she could find in English and Australian papers about the settlement—deep in her heart she knew that Dick had planned the whole scheme to bring her back to him. She had waited longingly for each mail, expecting that every letter handed to her would be from him, laying his project at her feet, his tribute to her womanhood. Then she had read of the partial failure of the settlement, of the awful horrors of the floods. She had known then that he would never write. She could only vaguely comprehend the bitterness of his failure, but she had realized then that she must go to him. Still her pride had kept her away, the decision to give in was a hard one to make. Day by day she pigeon-holed it in the back of her mind, refused to acknowledge its importance. Week by week she had sped on her wilful way, trailing her bitterly homesick little mother with her.

Then, that terrible day when she had returned to find the dead woman sitting with a little spray of wattle clasped in her fast-stiffening fingers.

That was six weeks ago, but the decision had been made there beside the body of her mother. The settling up of her mother's affairs, arranging for the attention to her grave, the thousand and one

little things that have to be done, each one had fretted her in turn, for she was impatient to be gone. Another disappointment had awaited her in England, for she had been unable to get a berth until the sailing of the *Orviato* on the first of January. Her mood of humiliation and self-knowledge recurred frequently during the last week in England, but once on board the *Orviato*, she felt freer of care and worry than she had done for months. The uncertainty of what awaited her at the end of her long journey seemed to have no power to destroy her pleasure in being at last on her homeward way. The decision had been a hard one to make, but once made she wasted no time repining.

Clothes, Valmai told herself, are the greatest possible asset if one wants to be a social success. She enjoyed the friendliness of the people on board and realized with delight that they found her interesting, but she knew that without her charming wardrobe to provoke their attention people would never have got to know her well enough to find her interesting.

With that thought at the back of her mind, she waited long enough in Melbourne to go through her trunks and choose the prettiest of her suitable frocks to pack in the suit-case which Jack stowed in the boot of her little car one morning during the second week of February.

Grace stood on the veranda with her little son in her arms to watch Valmai start off on her two hundred mile run.

Valmai's eyes were worried. The news of the terrible bush-fires that had destroyed Vision, as well as a dozen other little towns, was one of the first things that greeted her ears as she stepped off the boat. She had been more impatient than ever to start off for Callemondah and had only been deterred from starting immediately by Jack's evident need of her. The fact of his mother's death seemed only to be brought home to him when Valmai came home alone. He was anxious to hear all about the last weeks of his mother's life and had cried with his head on Val's shoulder when she told him about the little marble cherub that guarded Mrs. Rutledge's last resting-place.

Grace seemed to have softened too—or perhaps it was that the absence of money worry had smoothed off some of her corners. Valmai found to her surprise that she and Grace had much in common, and, in any case, the chubby little gentleman that ruled the house would have brought them closer together. In the face of their pleasure in her presence, Val could not dash away to Callemondah as she ached to do.

She had not written to Doreen since that heart-broken letter written just after her mother's death. Now that she was so close, after years of absence, it seemed unnecessary to write—much better to go straight up. Crossings would welcome her, no matter what lay in store for her at Callemondah.

“I may be back in a week, Grace,” Val said as she drew on her driving gloves. “If I'm not needed

at Callemondah," in spite of herself her lips trembled, "I'll just stay for a couple of days with Doreen and then come back. You won't mind if I plant myself on you again."

"I should say not—anyway, apart from liking to have you here Val, everything we've got has come from you. We'd be weeds if we grudged you house-room."

"If I thought you only had me from gratitude, Grace," Val started to say—smiling, because she knew it was not so; but Grace interrupted her.

"If we were still in Chester Park, keeping a shop, Val, I'd be just as glad to have you. I've altered since those days."

"And heaven knows, so have I," Val answered. Then she kissed her nephew softly, lingeringly on his roseleaf cheek, said good-bye to Grace and Jack, and climbed into the car.

A moment later the car—the opulent little car that had so impressed the butler at the Chase—shot forward on the last stage of her journey home.

CHAPTER TWO

I

DOREEN had set the table for tea, had cut a deliciously cool salad, and had set some stewed fruit in the ice-chest to cool. Dick, Bill, and Mrs. Warrington were coming down for tea, and Doreen had everything ready in heaps of time, so that she would not be rushing round doing things in a hurry when she might be talking to Bill. Callemondah was still unpleasantly full of settlers from Vision, although they were being provided with tents as quickly as possible; so that the Callemondah people were even readier than usual to accept invitations to a less crowded meal at Crossings.

Doreen pulled a deck-chair into the shade of the roses that crept up the front of the veranda and sat down to dream away the few minutes before her guests should arrive. The days since the fires had been very crowded ones, crowded with plans for provisioning the homeless settlers, with attending to the hurts of those who had been burnt—nearly every man in the settlement would retain a scar as a result of the terrible two days of the fire. Doreen hoped that Mrs. Warrington had insisted on Dick having his hands dressed again; they

had been badly burnt, but the worst scars were the result of his continuing to beat at the fires when the skin had long since been torn away.

Doreen had no reason to complain of Dick's lack of enthusiasm now. The fire seemed to have marked a distinct turning point in his attitude. Almost before the ashes were cold, he had started to plan the rebuilding of the settlement. He had called the settlers together one night and had explained to them that all his ready money had gone and all that he possessed which he could use for the purpose of re-building was Callemondah itself. He proposed to mortgage Callemondah, he told them, for as much as he possibly could and the money would be used in rebuilding the settlement. He was in communication with his solicitors and was arranging for the settlers who had deserted formally to relinquish their claims to the land in the Valley and this he intended to turn into share-farms. The men who had stayed by him were still, of course, under the agreement he made with them before they left England, and to the limit of his financial ability, he would stand by them.

"Vision, a new Vision, will rise from the ashes of the old," he had said, "and for the building of this Vision we will use the best knowledge and advice that is available. Nature has tried us by flood and fire and we've stood up to it like men, I hope, and it seems to me that we have a chance now of winning through. There is no question of master and man now, we stand together, and

if we fail, we fail together—but we're not going to fail."

His enthusiasm had infected the men, and already, with renewed hope in their faces, they were busy in the Valley. Once more the hills resounded to the sound of axes and of voices.

Doreen sprang up as she heard a car turn in from the road. The sun was in her eyes so that she could not see the face of the person driving; but she knew it was no car that she had seen before. It was a long low one, painted navy, a solid little car that somehow looked—opulent. The word came to Doreen in a flash of realization.

"Val, Val," she shouted and was across the garden before the car had stopped.

After the first few words, they were strangely silent. There was so much to say that thoughts stumbled over one another and all that was said were the ordinary questions and answers they might have made if Val had just returned from a week in town.

"You will stay here," Doreen said, as Val washed the dust of her long journey from her face and hands.

The question, that was more a statement of fact, unloosed Val's tongue.

"Until I know whether I'm wanted at Callemondah, yes," she said. "Am I wanted, Doreen?"

Doreen did not answer for a moment; she wanted desperately to answer absolutely truthfully, and it was hard to do so in a few words.

"If you'd asked me that a fortnight ago, Val," she said at last, "I'd have said, 'Yes, badly,' but

things seem to have altered since the fire. Dick and Mrs. Warrington and Bill Simmons, Dick's secretary, will be here in a few minutes; you'll want to talk with Dick, I know—this is going to be very difficult, Val," she said with worried eyes.

There was a sound of a car outside and they could hear people talking.

"There they are now," Doreen said, "I'll have to tell them you're here, Valmai, and just let things happen naturally." In a moment she was gone, leaving a very crestfallen woman behind her.

The possibility of Dick not needing her had not really entered Val's calculations—she had always thought of him as being as glad to have her back as she was to come. At the thought of being unwanted, she felt suddenly as though the earth was cut from beneath her feet. "Let things happen naturally," Doreen had said—as though anything could happen naturally when the whole air would be charged with emotion. The feeling of emptiness was horrible, unnerving—then she heard the sound of Dick's voice outside. He was laughing.

She dashed the tears from her eyes, set her lips, and threw back her head with her old defiant gesture. She powdered her face carefully and smoothed her hair. Her linen frock of dull orange had come from a little French shop in Bond Street, and she felt very sure of herself in it, sure enough to face the husband she had fled from two years ago.

II

Doreen felt tongue-tied and panic-stricken as the visitors crossed the garden. For once Bill did not get her first smile—there was no smile at all on her face as she came over to them.

“Dick, Val’s here,” she said bluntly. It seemed as though Dick froze. “She’s only just arrived about half an hour ago—I couldn’t let you know,” she added miserably.

For a moment longer Dick stood silent, motionless, then he patted Doreen’s shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Dorn,” he said, and there was no trace of embarrassment in either his manner or Val’s as they greeted each other a few minutes later.

It seemed to Val that there were only the two of them in the room—Mrs. Warrington she was conscious of and that was all. The others were shadows.

And yet they greeted each other gaily.

“Your poor hands,” Val said as he held out two bandaged bundles as an excuse for not shaking hands with her.

“It’s wonderful to see you again,” Dick said—his eyes were friendly, nothing more.

They talked late that night and Valmai listened. Between them they told her the whole history of the settlement and she saw the great ill-fated venture through the eyes first of one, then of another of them. The fires were too close to be spoken of

except in scrappy little sentences that conveyed nothing and after a while they fell silent.

"It doesn't seem as though it could possibly be Vision Valley," Val said at last shakily. "I feel as though I could get on my horse now and go up to the bluff and see the Valley still smiling up at me, green and untouched."

"Would you like to come up with me to-morrow morning, Val?" Dick asked. His voice was friendly, just friendly, Val told herself wearily, not even as tender as when he spoke to Doreen.

"Thanks, Dick, I would like to, if it isn't troubling you too much," Val answered. She tried to make her voice sound as cordial as his, but it sounded merely polite.

Strange how they could keep their conversation to unessentials, as though there was nothing between them that had to be discussed. Val laughed at herself as they rode up the road to the Valley next morning—only yesterday morning she had driven hour after hour through the burning day, planning the things she would say to this man and the things he would say to her. She had come from the other side of the world, flushed with eagerness to humble herself to him, to wrap him round with her sympathy and help—and he discussed acre-feet of water and irrigation systems.

Suddenly, in the middle of one of Dick's sentences, Valmai laughed aloud. Dick left the sentence suspended in mid-air and looked at her in astonishment.

“I’m just having a good laugh at my own expense, Dick,” Val said in answer to his look. “I couldn’t get here quickly enough when I heard about the fires, to offer you help, financial and otherwise, and cheer you on to re-build—and here I find you filled with energy and enthusiasm and quite capable of getting along without my assistance. It’s really rather a good joke.”

“You came to offer help,” Dick said softly, with more feeling in his voice than he had yet shown. Ah, that touched him then!

They did not speak much more after that, but rode on up the broad road, bordered each side with burnt scrub, until at last they reached the clearing.

Val sat for minutes without stirring looking down on the black horror beneath her. It was incomprehensible, impossible. Why, she had only to close her eyes and the Valley in all its verdant, untouched beauty was before her. With a sob she shut the sight out with her hands. Something touched her shoulder, but she did not move.

Hours after, it seemed, Dick spoke.

“Val, won’t you look and let me tell you what I plan to do. It’s horrible, I know—I can’t get used to the sight of it myself; but in a week or so the fresh green will begin to show through and soon there’ll be nothing but a memory of the fire. It seems hard to say it, but in a way, I’m glad of the fire. It wiped out all my mistakes, and this time I’m going to build on a solid foundation of

knowledge and understanding. It won't hurt you now to know that I built the Valley before because of you—this time I'm going to build because of the Valley itself. It's grown right into me, Val, part of my flesh and blood; for its own sake I'm going to turn it into the bountiful place it was meant to be. As soon as my hands are well enough I'm going down there with the men, not to direct operations, but to work alongside them. I'm going to fell timber, build fences, plough and cultivate my land side by side with the men who stuck to me through all my muddling and floundering. I'm going to get a man who knows what he's doing to manage things, and I'll take my orders along with the rest of them. I don't say I'm not going to enjoy it, Val—I'm ready and waiting for the opportunity of turning my first sod in the Valley. We're going to have our butter factory and our saw-mill again, our school and our church. I don't know where the money's coming from, but I'm going to help earn it this time."

Each word was a separate blow to Val, and her heart sank lower and lower—this determined man filled with his great ambition was not the man she had left behind. She was a little afraid of him—he was absolutely self-sufficient and contented.

"I know where the money you need is coming from, Dick—that is, if you'll take it from me. I'd like to have a stake in the Valley, so you will let me help, won't you? I promise you I'll demand full interest—my middle name is Shylock, you know."

Dick smiled and turned to her light-heartedly.

"Of course you can help, and I'll be only too glad to accept it. If you hadn't dreamed the Valley, you know it would never have been—it's always been half yours."

"You'll let me advance enough money to build your butter factory and saw-mill then. Will you have them where they were before, Dick—or have you found a better place for them? Have you enough men left to start them straight away?" Val asked eagerly.

"Not so quickly, if you don't mind," Dick said. "This Valley was settled in too much hurry before. We do everything deliberately nowadays. We'll have to discuss this well before we start anything. The work the men are doing clearing away the burnt scrub is the most necessary, so nothing will be lost by taking our time. With your permission, we'll go into the matter—after lunch."

III

The conference that afternoon at Callemondah was the first of many. There were conferences at which only the three of them were present, Dick, Bill and Val. There were conferences at which the whole Valley attended and Dick listened with interest and sympathy to the views put forward by each of the men.

It was Dick who suggested that they should

first of all engage a competent man, a man of brains and initiative, to manage the farming of the Valley and, when this was agreed to, they got in touch with the Trustees of John Craig's estate and asked them to undertake the finding of a suitable man. It was Valmai who suggested that Callemondah itself should be turned into a stud farm to supply the farms in the Valley with pedigreed stock which would, in the end, give the best results. The expense of establishing the farm was so great that for a while Dick demurred, but Val was so set on it that after a while he gave in. Valmai made one stipulation and that was that Dick himself should take charge of the stud farm.

"I know less than nothing about it, Val," he protested:

"Well you'll learn, and the stud is going to be one of the most important parts of the whole settlement, and it's only right that you should direct it. Anyway, Dick, I want to make one more stipulation about the Valley, and that is that when you go to put share-farmers in on the other farms, you give Australian boys a chance. For every Englishman here, I'd like to see one Victorian man—for preference young boys from the city who want to make a start on the land and don't know how. There are hundreds of them in Melbourne, and if they could start in a place like this, where everyone is learning as they go, it would be a wonderful thing for them. Frankly, I don't see why Australia should bring out people from other countries and

help them in every way possible while our own boys find it impossible to get a start. I suppose you were unlucky striking so many weeds among your settlers, but I don't think Australians would have let you down so badly."

"Perhaps not," Dick replied thoughtfully. "In any case I'm quite willing to promise that, Valmai. When all's said and done, we are all of the same race, and there's no sense in bringing out Englishmen when there are Australians ready and waiting for the chance."

Bit by bit, order was restored in Vision. The new manager, an ex-A.I.F. man and a graduate in Agriculture of the Melbourne University, proved an excellent institution. The men had the utmost confidence in him for they soon discovered that he knew whereof he spoke. He had spent the first eighteen years of his life on a Gippsland farm, so that his training was not all theoretical. Valmai found in him an unexpected ally in a dozen little projects she had in mind, chief among them being the immediate building of a hall where, beside church services on Sundays and picture shows on Saturdays, lectures were given on various matters of interest. At Val's suggestion, lecturers from the Better Farming Train were pressed into service, and also women who lectured on subjects dear to the hearts of the settlers' women-folk.

To Valmai's intense delight, one of the first persons to apply for a farm under the new scheme was her own brother. In a letter to her, Jack said,

“Don’t think I’m ungrateful for all you’ve done for us, Val, but I do want to get to work. I’d like to take up a farm under your scheme for a few years and when I’m sure of myself, I’m going to ask your permission to use some of the money you’ve settled on us in purchasing a farm or, if it can be done, a small station. Grace quite agrees with the idea, and I’m hoping you’ll endorse it too.”

Gradually the farms in the Valley took shape and, under the direction of Willis, the manager, and Mitchell, whom Dick had again pressed into service, each house and its out-buildings were carefully placed in the best possible position. By the end of April, when the first rains had covered the whole Valley in a coat of tender young green grass, the homestead was empty again of all its visitors.

“The Chappells moved into their house to-day.” Mrs. O’Donnell said to Valmai and Doreen one evening, “so Callemondah’s empty again.”

There was so much meaning in her voice that Val looked across at her.

“Anxious to get rid of me, Donny dear?” she asked. Mrs. O’Donnell chuckled comfortably.

“You know Crossings is your home as long as you like to stay, Val, but what is that husband of yours going to say if you stay on here and your room at Callemondah’s empty?”

Valmai wandered the length of the room and back before she answered and when she spoke, her voice was full of pain.

“He’s never even suggested that I should come back, Donny.”

“Well, there’ll be talk, Val, you know—in fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if there isn’t talk now,” Mrs. O’Donnell answered.

“I know,” Valmai answered miserably. “I suppose I’ll have to go back to Melbourne—and I don’t want to go, I’m so happy up here, watching the Valley grow.”

“If that’s all that makes you happy here, you’ll be just as well off in town,” her hostess said tartly, as she jabbed her darning needle into a pin cushion and closed the stocking basket. “It’s my opinion both you and Dick need a good spanking.”

CHAPTER THREE

I

THEY had been talking about England, Valmai, Dick and Mrs. Warrington and in the course of conversation, Valmai had let slip a reference to her visit to the Chase.

“Did Clive look well?” Mrs. Warrington had asked eagerly, and had listened with the attention of the very home-sick while Valmai had described minutely everything she could remember of the conversation she had had with Clive.

“Your mother is home-sick, Dick,” she said, when a little later Mrs. Warrington left the room.

“Yes, I know she is and it worries me. I can’t leave here just at present, and I doubt whether mother would leave me in any case. She fusses over me like a hen with one chicken, you know.”

“Dick, have you ever thought how the very things have happened to our two mothers that they refused to bear for old John Craig. My mother followed me across the world, away from all her friends and the things she loved best. She must have been abominably lonely at times, because she found it hard to make friends—she was as lonely in a crowd as she would have been outback

in the bush. Then to die—home-sick—as she did. Then your mother has endured here exile and roughness and discomfort, even danger from flood and fire.”

They were quiet with their thoughts for a while, then Dick said :

“I’m going to try to persuade mother to go home anyhow, but I doubt whether she will. If I had a reliable house-keeper here she’d feel easier in her mind perhaps and would not mind leaving me so.”

Valmai sat very still—“a reliable house-keeper”—it did not sound as though Dick expected her to come back to Callemondah.

“In any case, I hardly like to let her go all that way alone,” Dick went on.

Valmai suddenly flamed with anger. How dare he calmly take it for granted that she would not defend any divorce suit he brought! He would have to sue for divorce, she knew, because the solicitors had made it very plain to her that she was deserting her husband. He might at least have asked her if she wanted to come back to Callemondah. A desire to hurt him, if she could, overtook her.

“I may be returning to England myself before long,” she said. “I am thinking of visiting some friends in Louisville, Kentucky.”

Dick did not answer for so long that Valmai was on the point of repeating her remark—it was the kind of remark he was not to be permitted to ignore.

"I suppose you made numbers of friends in America," was all he said.

"Not so very many," Val admitted truthfully, "but these are rather special. There was Maidie Cornwell and her husband Jim, and her brother Van Birtles. Van is a fascinating man, Dick—he prefaced practically every sentence with 'Wal' and he always used to call me 'Honey'—it sounded so beautifully American, I loved it."

She was watching him narrowly, with a sinking heart despite the bouyancy she infused into her voice. He didn't care, he didn't care. Valmai wanted desperately to run away, to hide herself somewhere in the bush, somewhere where she could sob out her love for Dick, and no one would hear her and no one know.

"I wrote a letter to you in January, Valmai—did you ever get it?" Dick was asking. Valmai wrenched her thoughts back to the present.

"In January, no, I never received it, Dick. Did you send it to England? Then I must have passed it on my way."

Dick was filling his pipe, with his eyes on the distant mountains. He seemed to be only mildly interested in what they were saying.

"If it ever follows you up, will you oblige me by burning it—unread?" he asked; then as Valmai did not answer, he went on. "I did not know when I wrote that there was any Mr. Van Birtles."

"I can't understand why poor Van should have

any effect on a letter you wrote me, Dick," she answered, "but when your letter arrives, I shall have the greatest pleasure in life in—reading it."

She walked away as she spoke, so Dick did not see the look of incredulous joy that was in her eyes, nor did she see the light of determination dawn in his.

II

The bush each side of the road was green again although the blackened boles of the trees still showed the ravages of the fire. As they rode up the road towards Callemondah, a flight of black swans passed overhead inland from the sea. They watched the precision of their flight with admiring eyes.

"I wonder if they're the swans from the bill-along, Bill," Dick said. "I suppose it's too much to expect them back. Although the bellbirds are back already in the Gully. I heard them quite distinctly to-day from Davis'."

Bill was watching the black swans over towards the horizon.

"I can't believe it's you talking when you mention bellbirds and things like that, Dick," Val said.

"The Captain takes quite an intelligent interest in the flora and fauna of this part of the world, Mrs. Warrington," Bill said laughing. "He used

to try to kid me he did it because you were so keen, but I soon fell to it. He's had a sneaking affection for them all along, but his pride wouldn't let him admit virtue in anything less than a nightingale."

Val hoped Dick didn't see the light of pleasure dawn in her eyes at Bill's words. She mustn't let him know too soon how much she cared. It would do him good to wait—after keeping her at arm's length for three months with his disinterested kind of friendliness—she'd show him.

She rode up the track to the homestead with a little secret smile on her lips—that morning she had read a letter which had travelled across the world and back again to find her. She hugged the thought of that letter to her breast.

"You'll excuse me if I dash straight off, won't you?" Bill said as they came to the homestead door. "I promised Dorn I'd run her down to the Entrance to-night—she wants to see some rotten picture that's on down there."

Valmai walked into the kitchen at Callemondah just in front of Dick. The house seemed somehow quiet and empty. The tea was set on the kitchen table and in front of the sugar basin a note was perched.

"Valmai dear," it read, "please give Dick his tea, I am having mine at Crossings this evening, but will be home in good time. J.W."

“Your mother has gone to Crossings to tea and wants me to give you yours,” Val said as Dick came in.

“Can you manage it, or have you forgotten how?” Dick asked.

The clock seemed to have been put back years that evening. Valmai had all she could do to keep herself from singing as she made the tea and smelt her scones browning in the oven. Hot scones were a delicacy Dick was addicted to—it wouldn’t hurt his digestion to indulge him this once.

They talked of irrelevant things through the meal and avoided each other’s eyes. When Dick’s hand inadvertently touched hers as he handed her his cup, Valmai very nearly dropped the cup and conversation thereafter was more desultory still. Valmai cleared the table and washed the dishes, with an apron of Mrs. Warrington’s over the well-cut dark green riding outfit she had bought in Paris.

“You haven’t altered things much here,” she said to Dick as she put back soap and dish towels in the places where she had always kept them. “I thought you would have had servants here and have made it quite different.”

“Mother did have maids at various times,” Dick said, “but she always has liked house-keeping, so it was no hardship for her to do the work. There has always been someone to do the heavy work for her, you know, and Doreen has been like a daughter to her. It’s like putting back the clock to see you here, Val,” he added.

Valmai glanced nervously at the clock.

“It’s not going back, Dick, but going on. What time will your mother be home?”

“In good time, she said. I suppose that means when she feels ready to come. Let’s have a game of double-dummy bridge—or would you rather sit in the fire-light and talk?”

Valmai’s face was hidden from him, so she could permit herself a smile at his transparency—deliberately trying to reproduce the atmosphere of three years ago. She’d make it as hard for him as she could.

“I’d rather have you play for me a little, if your hands aren’t too sore,” she said.

So they went into the living-room and while Valmai sat in front of the fire, Dick played and sang a little very softly in his fine baritone. So intimate, so sweet—Valmai hated to disturb it. Yet there was nothing else for it. This time, she and Dick Warrington were going to understand each other absolutely.

“I think I’d better go without waiting for your mother to come home, Dick,” she said as the clock on the mantelpiece struck nine. “You can tell her I waited for a while, can’t you?”

“Mother’s not coming back to-night—she’s sleeping at Crossings,” Dick said bluntly.

Valmai rose, a picture of indignation.

“You might have told me at once, Dick, instead of keeping me waiting here uselessly.”

“I thought you might be enjoying yourself,”

Dick said with a mock humility that the light in his eyes belied.

"Do you mind getting my horse saddled for me?" Valmai said imperiously.

"There's no need for you to ride all the way to Crossings by yourself. Why not stay the night here?" he suggested mildly.

"You know perfectly well, Dick, that if we spend a single night under the same roof, it's good-bye to hope of getting a divorce for another three years. The ride down to Crossings won't hurt me."

Dick did not answer. "Well," said Val, tapping her foot impatiently.

"It may interest you to know," Dick said grimly, "that you are not going back to Crossings to-night. Bill is staying down there and so is my mother—and your suitcase is in your own room here."

Valmai was silent, only her foot tapping impatiently broke the silence. Then Dick started playing again, softly, tenderly—exasperatingly.

"Oh, stop that beastly noise," Val said sharply after a while. The sound of the piano ceased immediately, and Dick transferred himself to an arm-chair.

Time passed. The clock chimed the half-hour, and still that impatient tapping went on. It struck ten o'clock—the tapping had stopped now and except for the crackle of Dick's paper as he turned it, there was silence at Callemondah.

Suddenly, Dick's paper was snatched out of his hands and thrown down.

“ Dick Warrington, you darn fool.” Val’s voice was choked. She had turned back to the fire and her shoulders were heaving.

Dick was suddenly very afraid. He touched her gently on the shoulder.

“ Valmai, my dear,” he said softly, but Valmai whirled round on him, her eyes dancing, her lips soft with laughter.

“ Dick, you absurd man—if you love me, why don’t you tell me so ? ”

Somehow he was on his knees on the rug beside her, his arms tight round her, his face pressed against her waist. Valmai smoothed his hair for a moment, then she turned his face up so that she could look into his eyes.

“ You do love me really, don’t you, Dick ? ”

“ Love you—good lord, woman, I worship you,” Dick was on his feet now, and his arms were drawing her closer and yet closer to him, “ I love you with every bit of my body, soul, and brain. There hasn’t been a day that I haven’t wanted you, not an hour that I didn’t think of you. I tried to put you out of my heart when you came back and I thought you’d come in pity—you were so self-possessed, Valmai.”

“ And I thought you didn’t want me, Dick, you were so absorbed in the Valley, you didn’t seem to need me. I thought you’d given all your love to Vision.”

“ So I had, but Vision was you, Val—every bit of work I put into the settlement was my homage

to you. Vision always has meant you," he broke off for a moment, then looked into her eyes again. "Val, there's going to be nothing but absolute truth between us from now on. At first, Vision did mean you and nothing else, but after the fire I realized that I loved the Valley for itself alone. It's as much part of me now, Val, as you are—it's my work and I'm going to do it. Besides which, I'm never going to let you go again, my girl," he said and as Valmai turned her lips to his, his arms enfolded her as though he would indeed never let her go again.

EPILOGUE

THE kookaburra seated himself in the boughs of a dead gum-tree. It was the only gum-tree left standing for quite a long way, so the kookaburra hadn't much choice. He settled himself and just as the sun appeared above the horizon he threw up his head and laughed his welcome to old Sol. Reynard the fox slinking home to his lair in the hills heard him and knew that the sun had risen.

Down in the Valley the cows heard him too and lazily wended their way towards the slip-panels. Inside the houses the people heard him and roused themselves to another day of work and play. The black swan at the billabong heard him and called her cygnets to her for their morning meal.

The bellbirds in the gully were awake and their fairy chimes were ringing; the dogs in the Valley were awake and barked their welcome as the people came out from the farmhouse doors. Blue smoke rose from the chimneys and carried the scent of burning gum-leaves to mingle with the odour of sassafras, musk, and hazel.

The sun rose higher and higher still till the whole Valley was filled with golden radiance. With the sound of the bellbirds was mingled the voices of children, the barking of dogs, the clucking of hens,

and the lowing of cattle—a pleasant voice, the voice of the Valley.

As the afternoon wore on, there was a sound on the road to Vision, for a settler was coming in.

There was no one escorting this settler and he came in an old Ford truck, with his household goods piled up behind him and his wife by his side.

He stopped the car as it breasted the rise to the bluff and for a while they sat and looked across the Valley, beautiful in the afternoon sunshine, with its cosy farm-houses, its tidy paddocks and healthy crops. Down on the river flats the maize stood four or five feet high, and in places it was beginning to hang out its tassels. On the opposite hill a crop of sunflowers turned their golden faces for the sun's caress. From the billabong came the sound of boys' voices.

“That's our place on the far side of the river where the scrub comes right down. My axe'll bite deep into that scrub to-morrow, I'll promise you that. Well, old lady, do we go on, or do we boil the billy here before we tackle the last bit?”

“Let's go on, Bert, I'd just as soon.”

“Dinkum?” the settler asked.

“Dinkum,” his wife answered.

With a grinding of brakes that re-echoed through the Valley, with a rattle and a wheeze, the car started. The settler entered Vision.