



THE LOVE STORY OF A
MAN WITH A BAD NAME

B. CABLE

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CHAPTER I.

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

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

"Scottie" Mackellar, slow and deliberate in eating as in most things, was the last to finish and light his pipe. He had been down to the station that day, just returning as supper was served, and although the men waited expectantly for news or orders, they waited without questions, knowing Scottie and his ways, and that questions were more likely to delay than hasten his words.

"Whip" Thompson tried gently for a rise.

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

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

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

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

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

"What would he be saying?" countered Scottie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If you never want to know—just ask him," grunted Darby. Scottie approached with the broom under his arm. "I'll be wantin' three o' ye to go down to the station to-morrow," he said. "You, Aleck, an' Ned an' Jack."

"Wot to do?" said Jack Ever.

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

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

some sport."

"You an' Darby'll stop an' gie me a hand," said Scottie. "I'll be puttin' the little hut in some sort o' shape. And, Steve Knight, ye micht tak' a turn up by Split-the-Wind, and push back ony o' the cattle beasties ye see intae the hills a bit." Steve Knight looked up from the stockwhip he was plaiting. "Stay out or get back at night?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"As he tole you?" Blazes demanded, coming over to them.

"As he tole you 'e's bringin' them blighted sheep up 'ere?"

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

"Cook for the sheep, you mutton-'ead" retorted Blazes.

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

"Wot's Scottie doin' wi' the old hut?" put in Whip

Thompson.

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

"Perhaps the boss is goin' to move in here while the sheep are up," suggested Steve Knight.

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

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

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

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

"Isn't a niece the same as a nephry?" said Darby the Bull, hesitatingly. "Only a woman instead o' a man?"

"He said niece, didn't he?" said Aleck Gault.

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

"Wonder what she's like," said Whip Thompson; "young or old, pretty or ugly."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hush, children," said Aleck Gault, reprov-ingly. "I'm afraid, Steve, our Happy Home is to be broken with strife and dissension. Just the bare word of a woman, you see, and the quarrels break out."

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

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

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

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

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

"Couldn't ye choose a middlin' one?" said Whip Thompson, banteringly.

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

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

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

"I asked 'er to marry me—I was half drunk at the time—an' she said if I meant it I was a fool, an' if I didn't I was a

rogue, and either ways she was better without me. I allus remembered that though I never knew just what she meant."

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

"I did," said Darby, solemnly.

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

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

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

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

"Most of them are," said Steve.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If you were like me," said Steve, laughingly, rising and stretching himself, "you'd run many miles—to meet her. Be

glad you're not like me."

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

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

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

CHAPTER II.

"Are ye tired, lass?" said Scottie.

Ess Lincoln straightened her bent shoulders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What a cruel business," said Ess.

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

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

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

"There's some o' the sheep," said Scottie, pointing with the whip to a string of tiny dots on the horizon. "And there's all that's left o' some more," as they drove past a dozen skins

hung over the fence and the huddled red heaps that lay on the ground beyond. A score of crows were busy rending and tearing at the carcasses, and they rose, cawing hoarsely, and flapping heavily away a few yards as the buggy passed. "It's horrible—horrible," the girl said, averting her face as the birds flopped back to their feast with harsh croaks of satisfaction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aye, aye, whiles I wunner mysel'," agreed Scottie. "But the breed o' men ye get here's hardened tae't. It's a hard life, but they're hard men. Ye'll meet some o' them up at the Ridge. Ye'll find them rough an' ready mebbe, you bein'

used wi' city folk. But they're good lads at heart maistly, though they hae their faults mebbe."

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

"Na, na," said Scottie, hastily. "A man micht lat slip an oath mebbe withoot thinkin'—I micht dae the same mysel'—but ye'll hae to lat that pass by an' no hear like. They think a lot o' a lassie oot here, an' ane like yersel' they'll be like tae let ye use them for a doormat tae yer feet."

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

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

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

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

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

"I've painted ma picture wrong if it gie's ye that notion. He's as tough as fencin' wire, an' can out-fight, out-drink, an' out-devil the wildest o' the gang. He puts himself out to

please nobody but himsel', but I never knew the man or maid, horse or dog, that didn't like him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Naething wonderful," said Scottie, calmly. "There's no a man on the Ridge here but could do the same within a second or two. But yon's the man I was speakin' o'. The

best horseman and the worst character on Coolongolong station—Steve Knight.”

CHAPTER III.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm goin' to break in a 'orse for 'er," said Whip Thompson.

"None of 'em would stand a skirt on 'is back, I s'pose."

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

"He's quiet, but he's an ugly brute," claimed Ned Gunliffe.

"You want a nicer-looking crock for her."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

kangaroo hide. She's a beauty from the tip o' 'er shoe-string to the button on 'er 'at. When she's speakin' to you, you feels you wants to go to church, an' give your money to the poor. Th' only thing as beats me," he finished reflectively, "is 'ow she come to 'ave Scottie Mackellar for a uncle."

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

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

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

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

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

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

There were grunts of acquiescence from some of them.

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

"Shut it, you fools," said Aleck Gault from his bunk.

"There's nobody here that doesn't know how to treat a decent girl decent when he meets her."

"I should think Scottie Mackellar knows enough to look out for his niece, if she doesn't herself," said Steve Knight,

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

He blew out the light and flung himself angrily on his bunk. Next morning, when the men were saddling up in the paddock after breakfast, Ess Lincoln came out to wish them good morning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The others found Steve waiting for them at the dingo fence of the back paddock. He was sitting smoking, and as the others came near he opened the gate to let them through, closed it behind them, and joined them without any remark. He rode beside Aleck Gault as they jogged along across the dusty flat, and when he pulled up to light his pipe again Gault pulled up and waited for him.

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

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

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

"It was those cursed fools talking last night that upset me," said Steve, "although I'm a fool to let it. I know I'm no stained-glass-window saint, Aleck, but I don't quite see that everyone should jump to the conclusion that I can't behave as anything but a blackguard to a girl. What sort of girl is she really?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Steve threw back his head and laughed out. "Sounds funny, doesn't it, Aleck, lad? Fly-by-Night running away from a girl he's never seen. There's some men I know—and girls