

[CHAPTER I.]

"SO these," said Gwen, turning to look about her, "are what our journalists call the great open spaces."

From her tone, it was clear that she didn't think much of them.

"Nothing particularly open about them," retorted Stephen Bryce as he slipped his knapsack from his shoulders and began to fill his pipe.

They were, in fact, well surrounded by hills at the moment. Below, forest hid the plains from their view. The narrow clay road twisted up and up; they had passed no house for nearly five miles and the top of the ridge seemed as far away as ever.

"I vote for a spell," said David Armstrong, squatting on the ground beside his sister. "Anyway, why the hurry? Exams. are over; we're four carefree students—in theory, anyway; and we're walking for the fun of it—in theory also."

The fourth member of the little party smiled as she lit a cigarette, but said nothing. Judith Anson was rather a silent person at any time; the College Common Room had nicknamed her the Mona Lisa, but had found her few words usually to the point and her silences very comfortable.

"This time next year," David began presently, "We'll be scattered to the four winds. Stephen will be the rising young lawyer; I'll be looking vainly for patients who are willing to trust their insides to me; Gwen will be at home doing the social daughter, and Judith will be the most unscrupulous reporter on one of our large dailies."

"Horrible prospect," said Stephen. "Meantime, let's make the best of this peace, perfect peace."

With one accord they turned and looked again at the hills that rose, bush-clad and very silent, to the purple distance. There was no sound, except for an occasional bird-call in the green depths.

"The Garden of Eden," said Gwen softly, "It's good to be away from the town, out in the clean, innocent country."

Judith spoke slowly. "Wasn't it Sherlock Holmes who said that the smiling countryside covered more crime and ugliness than the busy town? Perhaps this Garden of Eden has a serpent, too."

THEY cried her down, but her words had broken the spell and they rose reluctantly to their feet and resumed their climb. It was cooler now, for the forest trees shaded the clay road closely; dry and dusty to-day, this track would be a quagmire after heavy rain.

"Beautiful, perhaps, but what a place to live!" said Gwen presently. "No car could get down this road in winter."

"Some have gone up it to-day," retorted her brother, pointing to tyre tracks in the dust; "Horses as well; wonder where on earth they can be making for."

"Going over the ridge to the settlement down the other side, like us," said Stephen practically. "There's certainly nothing nearer than that to attract travellers."



But the next moment proved him wrong. Turning a corner in the eternally twisting road, they came suddenly upon a rough clearing in the bush; three or four wretched paddocks, log strewn and scantily grassed, at one side a little shanty. A poor and derelict place from whose large iron chimney not even a wisp of smoke trailed. But before it, amazingly enough, three or four cars were drawn up and half-a-dozen horses were tethered to a broken-down fence.

"What on earth!" exclaimed David; "Why all the traffic?"

"Perhaps they're giving a garden party," Gwen suggested. "Well, I admire their spirit."

"It's a funeral," said Stephen. "I can hear the parson in the distance."

"Idiots," remarked Judith mildly. "That's an auctioneer; haven't you ever heard of a stock sale?"

"A backblocks sale," cried Gwen, "Oh, let's go and watch it. Judith, you ought to like this. You'll get an article out of it—stark, earthy, primitive stuff, a bankrupt farmer parting passionately with his last pig."

They went across and stood at the rails watching. It was a poor little sale and soon over. The surprise was that it had attracted even the score of men who stood around. The four students were disappointed.

"No sad-eyed women or little barefoot bairns," mocked Stephen as they turned away. "There's no copy here. Not even Judith could write sob-stuff about that ugly little blighter who's selling his mongrel cattle."

"And not even a spot of lunch," sighed David. "I always understood that beer flowed free at clearing sales. This is a real wash-out."

"You wouldn't have liked to go into that hovel, David—not even after beer," said his sister. "I never saw such a nastily looking little wretch of a man."

"Well, I'm going to ask one of these drovers if there's any short-cut over the hill," said Stephen; "That road winds like a corkscrew, and we must get to the settlement at the bottom of the ridge by dark."

The others waited for him, idly watching the small mob of sheep and drafts of rough cattle being driven out of the yards. The auctioneer climbed back into his car and the buyers were soon gone, leaving the stock to be driven away by drovers. For ten minutes there was noise, dust, the barking of dogs and galloping of horses, then peace and profound silence. Judith stood watching with curious interest till the last drover had turned the corner, then turned once more to stare at the little house. It stood in a neglected garden, a clump of native bush only fifty yards in the rear, a poor ill-kept shanty with a sagging roof, the iron unpainted and rusty. A sordid, depressing spot; she was glad when Stephen's voice broke in on her reverie.

"There's quite a good short-cut up that spur. The track's clear enough. You go on as far as that dead rimu and then strike into the bush. Carry straight on and it brings you out on the road on the far side of the ridge. The chap said it was mere child's play."

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FOUR hours later the travellers came to a standstill and looked grimly about them. It was late afternoon; the bush lay in profound shadow, only the tree-tops glowing golden in the sunlight. But the students had no eye for scenery. They had been wandering in infuriated circles for hours and were tired, hungry and cross.

"Well, if that's child's play, I take off my hat to the little prodigies of the

backblocks," growled David. His cheek was bleeding where a vicious "lawyer" had scratched it.

"A clear track," groaned Stephen. "That drover was a fool."

"What about trying over there?" suggested Judith, "the trees look thinner."

They were, for the very good reason that the travellers had come out once more into the clearing from which they had started. In the distance they could see the iron whare, its chimney still smokeless, no sign of life about it. Meantime the sun had disappeared and in the half-light the gaunt skeletons of dead trees flung despairing arms to a sky that had grown leaden and overcast. In the west storm clouds were piled blackly against threatening hills and from the bush behind them a night-owl wailed drearily.

Gwen shuddered. "What a horrible looking place. What on earth shall we do?"

Judith was white with weariness; her face was dirty and the brown dust from the punga fronds was brown in her black hair, but she seemed little perturbed and entirely practical.

"I think there's a storm coming up. We'd better ask that man to put us up for the night."

"In that horrible whare? Oh no," protested her friend.

"I'm afraid it's any port in a storm," said Stephen. "Sorry, girls. The short-cut was my idiot idea. Come along, Gwen. Let's beat the rain to that shanty. It's down hill, thank heaven."

But the storm won. It broke as they crossed the last piece of clearing. The house was dark and quiet, but as they lifted the latch of the gate a loud clamour broke out. There was the rattle of a chain and a dog strained excitedly towards them.

"Come on," shouted David. "He's chained and he can't reach you."

The rain was pouring down now, solid as a sheet, wiping out the ghosts of dead trees, hemming them in in a dreadful isolation. With a whimper of weariness and fear, Gwen ran across the garden where a few starved cabbages were struggling, and reached the shelter of the tiny porch. The others followed her and stood listening. The dog was silent, too, as if waiting for a voice it knew. Stephen knocked loudly on the door but only the drumming of the rain answered.

"Gone to stay with a neighbour for the night," he said presently.

"He didn't look that sort," objected Stephen. "And the neighbours didn't seem too keen on him, either. He'll be about somewhere," and he knocked again.

The rain was lashing in across the narrow porch and David rattled the handle impatiently. The dog growled uneasily and Gwen leant nervously back against the door. The next moment it had burst open and she stumbled into the dim interior. It was the last straw and she gave a little scream.

"Don't be silly," said her brother kindly enough, "the door's as rotten as the rest of the house and your fairy weight was more than it could bear. Let's have a light, anyway. Lucky my matches are dry."

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