

Storyteller.

COMRADES EVER.

CHAPTER I.

BEREAVED.

The lovely September afternoon was drawing to a close, when a lady quietly ascended the path leading to a summer house nestling among the trees at the upper corner of a garden. The small but well kept grounds surrounded a house of the modern bungalow type, which stood upon a gently sloping hillside overlooking the fair harbour of Wellington. The lady seated herself and gazed upon the panorama stretched out before her. The sun slowly sinking towards the west, bathed both sea and land in its glorious rays. The garden was beautiful with its wealth of Spring blooms; the golden glory of the daffodil, mingled with the paler yellow of the cowslip and primrose; hyacinth and anemone flaunted their rich and varied colours beneath her eye. Beyond sparkled the blue waters of the harbour, and across upon its northern side rose the steadfast hills.

A serious question was agitating the mind of our heroine, and according to her usual custom, she had come to think it out under the blue dome of heaven, with its free air fanning her warm cheek, and her spirit soothed by the quiet landscape spread out before her.

She lived in stirring times. The great war was just over, old customs and opinions had been cast into the melting-pot, and speculation was rife as to what would emerge from the furnace of suffering. Mrs Lewis, believing that "God's in His heaven, all's right with the world," held firmly to the conviction that all the turmoil and unrest was but the birth pangs of a new and better order. Just what the Master required of her in this time of national upheaval was the thing she wanted to know. The political situation in her own Dominion was disquieting. A general election was close at hand, and its result the boldest feared to prophesy. Three parties sought the suffrages of the electors. The Reform Party, led by Mr John Morton, consisted of the old Conservatives, reinforced with a few unprogressive Liberals. The Liberal Party had in Sir Robert Busch an old and experienced political leader. During the war he had united with the

Reform Leader to form a National Government, but the signing of the Peace Treaty had been the signal for the party strife to commence again. Sir Robert and his followers had resigned from the National Government, and he had issued a manifesto containing a most progressive policy, including State ownership of mines, colliers, and ferry steamers; electrification of suburban railways, proportional representation, and a few other items which it was hoped would attract to their ranks the less extreme wing of the Labour Party. The third element was the Labour Party, small, but extremely active, and with a well-defined policy. They were out to do away with the wages system altogether, for State-owned industries, with workers represented upon the Boards of Management, and with a share in the profits.

After enjoying the franchise for 26 years, at last the Government had given to the women of Zealandia the right to be elected as well as to elect. A deputation had that day waited upon Mrs Lewis and requested her to be a candidate in the Liberal interests. She was now seriously considering the pros and cons of the matter. As a member of the National Council of Women and a Dominion officer of the W.C.T.U., she had fought for this reform, and was earnestly desirous that suitable women should stand for election to Parliament. But she did not herself wish to stand; in fact, her bent was to the life of a student, and only the call of conscience had driven her forth into the arena of strife. Her husband, the local Magistrate, was indeed the one who had urged and assisted her in her work for temperance and social reform, and he wished her now to step out into larger opportunities for service. She loved the land of her birth with a great love, believed in its future, knew that there were troublous times ahead of it, and that clear brains, loyal hearts, and devout souls were needed to guide it through the darkness up to light. But like Moses of old, she doubted her own powers, and prayed that God would find one better fitted for the work. At length, calmed by communion with the Master, she rose from her seat, and murmuring "Lead me in a plain path," she sought the house.

The sun had already set, and across the harbour the hills glowed with wondrous purple and crimson lights. Husband and daughter had gone for a motor spin, and already the mother

was wondering at their long absence. She ascended the steps leading up to the broad verandah, and was crossing the wide, dim hall, when the tall soldierly figure of her brother, Major Carey, rose to meet her.

"Well, Jack, this is a pleasant surprise. I thought you were engaged this evening?"

"All engagements must give way to my lady's need," replied her brother, striving to speak lightly.

Alarmed at something unusual in his appearance, she asked: "What is wrong, Jack? Is it trouble for you or me?"

"For you, sweetheart," he murmured, tenderly taking her in his arms.

Instantly her thoughts flew to her absent ones, the two who were out motoring, and the son who was a medical student at the Otago Varsity. "Is it Ted?" she breathed, her very lips were white, but her eyes faced him with a steadfast look.

Jack Carey was a brave man, not long back from active service, but never had he needed his courage so much as now, when he had to break to this loved sister chum that one fell stroke had robbed her of husband and daughter.

At length the story was told, the old, old story of a drunken driver who had met them at a difficult corner, on his wrong side, had collided with them, and sent their car over the steep embankment. Both had been killed instantly.

As Gipsy Lewis listened to her brother's tale all the light went out of her eyes, and all the joy from her life. She was stunned by the magnitude of the blow, and stood like one frozen to death. The Major drew her lovingly to his side. "They did not suffer, dear," he said. He then went on to relate how Dr. Rowe had passed in his car, how he had secured help and taken the bodies from under the car.

"He 'phoned me to prepare you, and is now bringing them home."

His words pierced her numbness as a sword thrust; they who had gone forth in the fullness of health and strength were being "brought home."

For a brief space her grief had sway, then her thoughts went to the absent son and brother.

"Will," she whispered.

"Yes, my dear," her brother replied, "I have already sent a wire to Rev. Harris to break the news to him and to make arrangements to send him home at once."