

"Women are privileged to change their minds," she said carelessly. "Didn't you know that?"

"Some women may, but not one woman—not you, Molly."

The confident boy-lover was gone, but this new stern manner of the man was harder—far harder, to meet. Molly felt the difference acutely, and tapped her foot nervously on the piece of hoop-iron that did duty for a door scraper.

"And why not I?" she asked, with a poor attempt at defiance. "Surely I've a right to my opinion as well as other folk?"

"Oh, certainly," he retorted, stiffly; "but," and then his voice broke, "I love you, Molly—I can't tell you how much. Couldn't you try to love me just a little, dear?"

There was silence over the hot plain for several minutes. The little mother was girding on her armour afresh. Then the horse, feeding amongst the tussocks with loose reins hanging over his neck, threw back his head with an accompanying jingle of steel, scaring an enterprising chicken which was warily watching him with an eye to the contents of a chance nose-bag. It squawked dismally as it fluttered away with outstretched wings and neck, and the little mother put her hands behind her head, and leaned back against the paint-blistered wall with a queer little smile.

The bitterest heart breaks often lie beneath the lightest smiles, and the greatest crises in a life seldom occupy more than a few minutes.

"I think I've changed my mind, Len," she said, looking steadily at the strong hand grasping the riding whip, for she dared not meet the trouble in his eyes. "I—I shouldn't care to spend all my life on the Canterbury Plains. Maybe I'll get a place in town when the children are a bit bigger."

A gleam of relief and comprehension lit up the brown face.

"The children, Molly, is that it? Is that why you won't say yes?"

The little mother glanced into the room behind her, then she spoke scornfully.

"You think a deal of yourself, Len Harvey! I never said that I cared for you."

"No," he said slowly. "no, you never said so, but somehow, I thought you meant it. You were never one for carrying on like other girls, Molly, and—and I thought—well, I suppose I have made a mistake, that's all. It's good-bye for always now, Molly. I'll not trouble you again," and without looking up, she heard the clank of the stirrup-iron, and the impatient jerk of the horse's head as he gathered up the reins.



When she lifted her head, the quivering heat was blurring the dark figure in the distance, and there was an expression in her eyes that Con would not have recognised. She was not his little mother just then. She had won her battle, she had acted her part, but the reward would be long in coming.

The fowls scratched and clucked round the cottage door, and the wind-mill shadow stretched longer and longer until it seemed as if chasing the far-off figure across the tussocks.

Then the noisy, hungry children came trooping home from the school-house in the