

**THE**  
**Valley of Content**

By BLANCHE UPRIGHT

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## CHAPTER XXII



Elinor (Norma Shearer) attends a Bohemian party at the apartment of Templeton  
Druid (Ward Crane).  
(*"The Valley of Content"* screened as *"Pleasure Mad."*)

WITH LOVE AND DEVOTION  
I DEDICATE THESE PAGES

TO

**Marjorie Rambeau**  
MY BELOVED INSPIRER

# **THE VALLEY OF CONTENT**

## CHAPTER I

Over the immaculate, freshly ironed white cotton cloth on the little table set near the window in the kitchen-dining room of the Bentons' tiny bungalow, a paper-shaded lamp glowed rosily. From its tempered rays, the plated knives and forks and spoons, polished to a shine that forgave the nickel spots of usage, caught a pinkish tinge, and the bowl of wild roses from its place of state in the center of the table returned blush for blush.

But neither the rosy light, nor the roses themselves had anything to do with the bright flush that adorned Marjorie Benton's face as she arose from in front of the oven of her brightly shining kitchen stove. She felt of her burning cheek with the back of her hand. The twittering remonstrance of her canary in its cheap little brass cage, disturbed by the metallic clang of the closing oven door, turned her gaze in his direction. She shook her head ruefully.

"More cooking for women and there'd be less rouge, eh, Andy?" she asked, and an understanding "tweet-tweet" was her reply. Her glance wandered to the small alarm clock tick-ticking merrily from the shelf above her head.

"Another ten minutes," she murmured. The slowly moving hands of the time piece marked off seven minutes after six. "Hugh should be here then, and he does so like his roast just out of the oven. Hmm! So do I—" she went on, but a cross little look of dawning discontent crept into her eyes as she glanced

at the stove distastefully,—“except that I surely would like to have someone else take it out for me, for a change. Wonder if we’re ever going to have a maid, or if I’m just naturally to dry up and brown to a crisp bending over a stove all my life!”

Again she felt of her burning cheeks, as she turned toward the neatly set table. A mended spot in the table cloth caught her eye. She smoothed it over.

“Cotton!” she said, plaintively. “Just plain cotton! I can pretend it’s linen all I want to, but it don’t change the threads, nor—,” and she lifted a knife with its silver worn undisguisedly off the end and tried the effect of turning it over. She frowned at the poor pretense.

She turned back to the stove and picked up the dish cloth she had been using as a holder. Her hand went toward the kettle that simmered contentedly, a contrast to the simmering thoughts of the pretty woman who glanced at it.

“I wonder—” she began, half aloud.

She stopped, listening, the dish cloth dangling in her hand. With a hurried gesture she dropped it, and was across the room to the door that led into her hallway. Just a moment more she listened, her head with its fair curls pressed against the door. Then she opened it and tiptoed quietly through, closing it noiselessly behind her.

Before the closed nursery door she stopped once more. Unmistakable sounds from within proved that wee ones behind that portal were not spending their time in earned repose. Marjorie’s half frown was chased away by an indulgent

smile of mother love. Then she opened the door and entered the room.

“Children!” she cried, as sternly as she had ever brought herself to command. “Dear little people, what does this mean? Mother can’t have this, you know. It’s sleepy time.”

From one of the two white cribs surrounded by their halo of the last rays of the September sun came a little wail. Two-year old Elinor Benton distinctly disapproved of something—perhaps of going to bed at all while the sun still shone.

From the other crib another brown tousled head bobbed up. Its owner sat erect. Master Howard Benton was reasoning that if his little sister who was only two should be receiving attention, what then was his due at the mature age of four.

Marjorie Benton’s thoughts flew to the kitchen she had just quitted, the flush from her oven still on her face. Everything was all right there for a few minutes, she knew. She did not approve of taking babies from their beds once they were tucked in for the night, but surely this once she could not refuse. Her glance rested softly on Elinor’s curly head and her pleading eyes. Then she lifted her gently and sat down with her in the low rocker. Baby Elinor snuggled in the protecting arms and though she felt that she may not have been doing the prescribed thing, Marjorie Benton’s eyes were soft and her voice caressing as her hold tightened on her baby and she began softly to sing.

As she sang, the girl-mother’s eyes wandered about the room, resting on the dado of Mother Goose pictures where more than

one darkened spot proclaimed an interest and love for a particular story-book personage. What babies Howard and Elinor were! And they were hers! Hers! And Hugh's! Her hold tightened the least bit on the baby in her arms, who was drifting off to dreamland.

The reverberation of the front door closed cautiously brought the mother back from drifting. Hugh! She must hurry.

This time the child made no protest as she was placed in her little crib and tucked in. But she stopped long enough to place a kiss on the hair of each baby before she lowered the shade and tiptoed out.

Her hands gave a quick pat to her own curls as she flew up the hallway to greet Hugh Benton. He had shuffled out of his light coat and turned from hanging it on the hall rack with his arms extended to his wife.

"H'lo sweetheart!" was his tender greeting, but there was all the fervor in the bear-like squeeze he gave her as she ran into his arms that there ever had been in the earlier days of their honeymoon. The Bentons were fond of remarking that their honeymoon was only extended.

Hugh Benton raised his head and looked over his wife's shoulder.

"Um! Dinner!" he exclaimed with a boyish grin. "Pie! Your dinners are always wonderful, dearest." And Hugh gave his shiny-haired wife another hug.

“Hugh! Please!” Marjorie struggled out of his arms. “You don’t know how strong you are. You almost hurt me—and do please be quiet—the kiddies are asleep.”

“Already?” Hugh Benton’s tone and eyes were full of disappointment. “No romp to-night? Seems like I never do get much of a chance for a frolic any more.”

So genuine was the young father’s disappointment, that Marjorie tempered the laugh she gave.

“Big baby!” she chided, lovingly. “It’s not hard to see who wants the romp most. But dinner will do you more good, just as sleep will do them. I can’t be having my family spoiled, you know.”

“Right, dear,—just as you always are. Be with you in a minute—some of the grime of an honest working man has to come off first.”

Marjorie Benton hurried to her dinner serving, and as she placed the roast on the white cloth, her eyes were tender as she heard the masculine splashing from the bath room and the soft-pedaled whistling that accompanied it.

She whispered again softly. “Who could help loving him. It’s enough to make me the happiest woman in the world to know——”

Her husband’s entry broke in on her reverie, and it filled her with all the pride of accomplishment to see the glance of delight with which he took in the simple tempting dinner. He leaned over to kiss her as he placed her in her chair—a small

attention he had not discarded since the first days of their marriage.

“Wonderful little woman!” he complimented softly. “More wonderful every day.”

She gave his hand a gentle pat, but tried to put a depth of dignified remonstrance in her chiding.

“Don’t forget you’re a married man of five years’ standing, Mr. Hugh Benton,” she urged, but the laughter in her eyes belied the dignity of her words.

“So long!” Hugh took up the carving knife and glanced along its sharpened edge. “You’ve a fine idea of time, Mrs. Marjorie Benton. Now I’d say five days—” His eyes twinkled suddenly as though at some sudden thought, and he nodded toward the bedroom. “Er—pardon me, my dear,—I forgot,—you have the proof on me——”

“Flatterer!” Marjorie beamed on her husband as she took the service he offered her.

“Anything new to-day?” Hugh was busy with his dinner.

“Plenty!” was Marjorie’s enthusiastic answer as she let her fork drop and leaned across the table. “Isn’t there always,—with such children as ours? Oh, Hugh, dear, there never were such babies,—now don’t you laugh at me!” as a little quirk in the corner of Hugh’s mouth betrayed he was not becomingly solemn. “You know I’m not like other mothers,—brag about my children just because they’re mine—and yours—but you also know they’re extraordinarily bright.”

Hugh nodded, but there was that in his satisfied expression before his wife had completed her résumé of the day's doings of her wonderful infants that quite persuaded her that he was of her opinion. As he laid aside his fork after his last bite of pie, his was the beatific expression of the inwardly satisfied male.

"Want help with the dishes?" he asked. Marjorie smiled at him.

"If I didn't already know you were the best man in the world," she complimented, "that would prove it. Don't I know how you hate dish wiping? No, dear, there are only a few,—I'll do them."

"Thereby proving your own wonder," was Hugh's praise. "Not another woman in this town would refuse such an offer."

Marjorie laughed and gave him a playful shove toward a chair as she handed him his paper.

"There!" she exclaimed. "Take that,—and read it. Maybe you'll find something in it to make you appreciate your own wife and babies. I'll be through in a minute, and there are lots of things we can do—interesting things—like sitting on the porch and looking at the moon or something. It's been splendid for the last few nights. Have you noticed?"

Hugh yawned contentedly. "Hasn't it always been whenever we've seen it together?"

It had been. Marjorie Benton was sure of that,—surer now than during any of those five years she had been married. Everything had been splendid. She could not help considering how much more they had of the worth while things in the world than any of the friends they had as her bright head bent

over her dish-washing and her glance darted through the steam of the hot water occasionally to where Hugh sat absorbed in his paper.

Perhaps the Benton romance had not been as spectacular as some, but Marjorie inwardly thanked the Providence that guided her that it was more *real*. Hugh was right, too. It did seem such a short time that they had been married. Then, anomalously came the thought that she could not seem to remember distinctly any time when she and Hugh had not been one. She had vague memories of the time she had been teaching school in this very town—that seemed so long ago. She had been used to hearing people say she was wasting her youth, her beauty and her brains in such an occupation, but it had in a way satisfied her. Then had come Hugh. He had come to Atwood to be cashier of the bank, and, though she did not know it then, he was as much alone in the world as she herself. All those nearest to them were gone. From the time of their first meeting at a dance, Marjorie remembered that life had taken on a different meaning to her. Her thoughts flew back to those beautiful days that followed. Her lips were tender in their smile of reminiscence as she thought of that time. There had been only Hugh and Marjorie. That was how it was to-day,—except that there were two young and tender Hughs and Marjories to bind them still closer together. Marjorie's smile grew more wistful as she thought, her mind far from the bright glasses she was burnishing as they came hot from their pan of scalding suds. Hugh's mention of the moon to-night—He remembered it, then—She, too, remembered how they so often sat under that big elm in the moonlight, and Hugh softly, huskily singing,—Poor Hugh! Wasn't it too bad he never could

keep to the same key for two consecutive bars. But he never noticed, and she knew she never cared. What was that he was always humming?

*"What's the matter with the moon to-night?"*

Again he was right. There never *had* been anything the matter with it where they were concerned. It had helped them tell their love, and so——

"Seems like the end of a story, instead of the beginning," whispered Marjorie Benton to her flowered salad bowl, "but——"

And so, in three months, they had been married. There hadn't been much money; there wasn't yet, but what did it matter? They had their bungalow; it was their own. What happiness they had had in planning all the details just as Marjorie had always planned them for herself when she put herself to sleep nights planning for that "sometime in the future."

"Money!" Marjorie Benton sniffed as she swirled her dish cloth about the pan, and with one damp hand flung back a recalcitrant bright curl that tickled her small nose. "Humph! I'm the richest woman in the world! What else——"

"Something to tell you, sweetheart, when you're through." Hugh looked up from his paper and broke in on his wife's reverie. "Something you'll like, maybe."

"Oh, Hugh, dear! Are they going to raise your salary again?" she asked eagerly.

Hugh laughed, but there was a rueful shrug to his shoulders.

“Nothing so exciting,” he declared. “Have you an idea that’s the Atwood Bank’s chief occupation? No, dear, but it’s just as long a chance. I got my patent from Washington to-day, and I believe I have some real people in New York interested in it.”

Casually as he spoke, there was in Hugh Benton’s manner that which would imply that he fully believed he was offering to his wife the equivalent of fur coats and jewels and estates so large that extra sized depot wagons would be required to transport the servants.

“Clever boy!” Marjorie flew to him excitedly. “Oh, I am so proud of you!”

“A bit early to be too proud yet, little one,” Hugh replied in the choppy way he bit off so many of his sentences. “Got to wait for results. But I’ll tell you this,” and his arm slipped around her waist as he bent for the kiss she offered, “if this thing does go through, it’ll go through big, and——”

“And I’ll be the wife of the great inventor!” Marjorie could not restrain her enthusiasm. Hugh smiled indulgently. But it was good to be appreciated,—to be so completely believed in by someone. It was the instinct of the woman who loves, though, that led her to add: “But if it doesn’t go through, dear, what of it? Won’t we still be the happiest people in the whole world? It couldn’t be any other way. Come on out on the porch and let the moon tell us so.” And she drew him by a coat sleeve out through the open door onto the small porch that the moon was beginning to silver with its pale vivid light.

Through the trees, themselves silvered and softened from their flaunting autumnal coloring of the day, came wafted to them the fragrance of new-mown hay. On the top step, they sat down, their faces upturned to the same old moon that is for lovers the world over. Softly Hugh Benton's arm slipped about the slender waist of his lithe young wife. As of its own accord, her cheek nestled into the curve of his coat sleeve. Out of the silvered darkness, a phonograph from one of the nearby unseen homes began to play. Through the stillness came to them the voice of John McCormack:

*"For this is the end of a perfect day."*

"A perfect day,—yes!" sighed Marjorie Benton as the singer's voice died out. "But isn't that the way with all our days? They end and *start*—perfectly."

Hugh Benton's dark head bent over his wife's bright one. His lips placed there his kiss of reverence and thanksgiving.

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