THE SETTLER

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The Settler

THE SETTLER

BY
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"THE MYSTERY OF THE BARRANCA"
"THE PLANTER" ETC.

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Title page

TO
ALYSE

CONTENTS

CHAP.

THE SETTLER

I
THE PARK LANDS

The clip of a cutting axe flushed a heron from the bosom of a reedy lake and sent him soaring in slow spirals until, at the zenith of his flight, he overlooked a vast champaign. Far to the south a yellow streak marked the scorched prairies of southern Manitoba; eastward and north a spruce forest draped the land in a mantle of gloom; while to the west the woods were thrown with a scattering hand over a vast expanse of rolling prairie. These were the Park Lands of the Fertile Belt—a beautiful country, rich, fat-soiled, rank with flowers and herbage, once the hunting-ground of Cree and Ojibway, but now passed to the sterner race whose lonely farmsteads were strewn over the face of the land. These presented a deadly likeness. Each had its log-house, its huge tent of firewood upreared against next winter's drift, and the same yellow strawstacks dotted their fenceless fields. One other thing, too, they had in common—though this did not lie to the eye of the heron—a universal mortgage, legacy of the recent boom, covered all.

At the flap of the great bird's wing a man stepped from the timber and stood watching him soar. He was a tall fellow, lean as a greyhound, flat-flanked, in color neither dark nor fair. His eyes were deep-set and looked out from a face

that was burned to the color of a brick. His nose was straight and large, cheeks well hollowed; the face would have been stern but for the humor that lurked about the mouth. Taken together, the man was an excellent specimen of what he was—a young American of the settler type.

"Gone plumb out of sight," he muttered, rubbing his dazzled eyes. "An' he wasn't no spring chicken. Time to feed, I reckon."

A few steps carried him to his team, a rangy yoke of steers which were tied in the shade. Having fed them, he returned to his work and chopped steadily until, towards evening, his wagon was loaded with poplar rails. Then hitching, he mounted his load and "hawed" and "geed" his way through the forest. As he came out on the open prairie the metallic rattle of a mower travelled down the wind. Stopping, he listened, while a shadow deepened his tan.

"Comes from Morrill's big slough," he muttered, whipping up the oxen. "Who'll it be?"

Morrill, his near neighbor, was sick in bed, and the rattle could only mean that some one was trespassing on his hay rights—or rather the privilege which he claimed as such—for trespass such as he suspected was simply the outward sign of a change in the settlement's condition. In the beginning the first-comers had found an abundance of natural fodder growing in the sloughs, where, for lack of a water-shed, the spring thaws stored flood-waters. There was plenty then for all. But with thicker settlement anarchy ensued. New neighbors grabbed sloughs on unsettled lands, which old-timers had sealed to themselves, and so forced them to steal from one another. Morrill and the man on the wagon had "hayed" together for the last three seasons, which fact explained the significance he attached to the rattle of the alien mower.

"It's Hines!" he muttered when, five minutes later, he sighted the mower from the crown of a roll. "The son of a gun!"

The man was running the first swath around a mile-long slough which lay in the trough of two great rolls. It was a pretty piece of hay, thick, rank, and so long that one might have tied two spears together across a horse's back. Indeed, when the settler rattled down the bank and stopped his oxen they were hidden to the horns, which fact accounted for Hines not seeing them until his team brought against the load.

"Hullo!" he cried, startled. "Didn't expect to see you, Carter!"

"Don't reckon you did," the settler replied. The shadow was now gone from his face. Cool, cheerful, unconcerned, he sat in the mower's path, swinging an easy leg.

Hines gave him an uneasy glance. "Been cutting poles?" he asked, affecting nonchalance.

"Yes. Corral needed raising a couple of rails," Carter carelessly answered.

Encouraged, Hines made an observation about the crops which the other answered, and so the talk drifted on until Hines, feeling that he had established a footing, said, "Well, I must be moving." But as he backed his horses to drive around, the steers lurched forward and again blocked the way.

"Pretty cut of hay this." Carter ignored the other's savage glance. "Ought to turn Morrill thirty tons, don't you reckon?"

Hines shuffled uneasily in the mower seat. "I didn't allow," he growled, "as Morrill would want hay this year?"

"No?" The monosyllable was subtly sarcastic.

Hines flushed. "What kin a dead man do with hay?" he snarled.

"Is Morrill dead?"

"No! But Doc Ellis tol' me at Stinkin' Water as he couldn't live through winter." He almost yelled it; opposition was galling his savage temper.

"So you thought you'd beat the funeral?" Carter jeered. "Savin' man! Well—he ain't dead yet?"

The challenge was unmistakable. But though brutal, ferocious as a wolf, Hines shared the animal's preferences for an easy prey. Corner him and he would turn, snarling, but his was the temper which takes no chances with an equal force. Now he lived up to his tradition. Viciously setting his teeth, he awaited the other's action.

But Carter was in no hurry. Leaning back on his load, he sprawled at ease, turning his eyes to the fathomless vault above. Time crept on. The oxen ceased puffing and cropped the grass about them, the horses switched impatience of the flies. The sun dropped and hung like a split orange athwart the horizon, the hollows blued with shadows, which presently climbed the knolls and extinguished their golden lights. Soon the last red ray kindled the forest, silver specks dusted the darkening sky, only the west blushed with the afterglow.

Hines tired first. "Quitting-time," he growled, backing his horses.

"Took you a long time to find it out," Carter drawled, giving the words a significance the other had not intended. "But grace is always waiting for the sinner. So long! But say!" he called after the disappearing figure, "if you hear any one inquiring after this slough, you can tell them as Merrill's goin' to cut it to-morrow."

Whipping up his oxen, he swung up the bank and headed south on Merrill's hay trail. Fresh from their rest, the steers stepped out to a lively rattling of chains, and in a quarter of an hour stopped of their own volition before his cabin.

As Carter entered, the sick man leaned on his elbow and looked up at his magnificent inches: he loomed like a giant in the gloom of the cabin. There was envy in the glance but no spite. It was the look the sick bestow on the rudely healthy. For Carter's physique was a constant reminder to Morrill of his own

lost strength—he had been a college athlete, strong and well set-up, the kind of man to whom women render the homage of a second lingering glance. Three years ago, inherited lung trouble had driven him from the Eastern city in which he had laid the foundation of a pretty law practice, but the dry air and open life of the central plains had not checked the ravages of the disease. Still, though but the wraith of his former self, he had kept a brave face, and now he cheerfully answered Carter's greeting.

"Cast your eye over this," he said, holding out an open letter. "It's from my sister Helen."

Handling it as tenderly as though it were a feather from the wing of love, Carter held the letter to the lamp. It was written in a small, feminine hand which took all manner of flourishes unto itself as it ran along the lines. Carter regarded them with a look in which surprise struggled with respect. "Oh, shore!" he laughed at last. "Them curly cues is mighty pretty, Bert, but it would take too long for me to cipher 'em out. What's it all about?"

"She's coming out. Arrives in Lone Tree day after to-morrow."

"Phew!" Carter whistled. "Short notice."

He thoughtfully stroked his chin. Lone Tree lay sixty miles to the south and the Eastern mail-train came in at noon. But this was not the cause of his worry. His ponies could cover the distance within the time. But there was Hines. If he did not try the slough, others might. Morrill mistook his silence.

"I hate to ask you to go," he said, hesitatingly. "You've done so much for me."

"Done nothing," the big man laughed. "'Twasn't that. Jes' now I warned Hines off that big slough o' yours, an' I intended to begin cutting it to-morrow morning."

Morrill impulsively extended his hand. "You're a good fellow, Carter."

"Shucks!" the other laughed. "Ain't we two the only Yanks in these parts? But say! won't she find this a bit rough?"

Morrill glanced discontentedly at the log walls, the soap-boxes which served for seats, the home-made table, and the peg ladder that led to the loft above. Three years' hard work had rubbed the romance from his rough surroundings, but he remembered that it had once been there. "Oh, I don't know," he answered. "She'll like it. Has all the romantic notions about keeping home in a log-house, you see."

"Never had 'em," the other mused, "though mebbe that was on account of being born in one. What's bringing her out?"

"Well, now that father's dead I'm all the kin she's got. He didn't leave anything worth mentioning, so Helen has to choose between a place in a store and keeping house for me. But say! your team's moving! Don't tell her I'm sick,"

he called, as Carter rushed for the door. "She'd worry, and think I was worse than I am."

"Couldn't very well," Carter muttered, as he ran after his team. "No, she really couldn't," he repeated, as he caught up and climbed upon his load. "Poor chap!—An' poor little girl!"

II
A DEPUTATION

Fifty miles in a day is big travel in the East, yet a team of northern ponies will, if the load be light, run it on three legs. The fourth, unless cinched with a kicking-strap, is likely to be in the buck-board half the time; but if the driver is good at dodging he need not use a strap.

Starting next morning at sunrise, Carter ran through the settlements, fed at the mission in the valley of the Assiniboin at noon, then, climbing out, he rattled south through the arid plains which cumber the earth from the river to Beaver Creek. There Vickery, the keeper of the stopping-house, yelled to him to put in and feed. He had not seen a man for two weeks, and his wells of speech were full to overflowing. But Carter shook denial. Far off a dark smudge rose from under the edge of the world—the smoke of the express, he thought. One would have believed it within a dozen miles, yet when, an hour later, he rattled into Lone Tree, it seemed no nearer than when first it impinged on the quivering horizon. This appearance, however, was deceptive as the first, for he had scarcely unhitched at the livery before an engine and two toy cars stole out from under the smudge.

"General manager's private car," the station agent answered Carter's inquiry. "The old man lays over here to talk with a deputation. It's over at the hotel now, feeding and liquoring up."

"The old grievance?" Carter asked.

The agent nodded. "That and others. They say we're coming their flesh and blood. You should hear old man Cummings orate on that. And they accuse us of exacting forty bushels of wheat out of every hundred we tote out to the seaboard."

"Wheat at forty-five, freight to Montreal at twenty-seven?" Carter mused. "Don't that pretty near size it, Hooper?"

"Is that our fault?" the agent ruffled, like an irate gobbler. "Did we freeze their wheat? Sound grain is worth sixty-eight, and if they will farm at the north pole they must expect to get frozen."

"And if you will railroad at the north pole," Carter suggested, "you ought to—"

"Get all that's coming to us," the agent finished. "But we don't. Our line runs through fifteen hundred miles of country that don't pay for axle-grease. We must make running expenses, and ought to pay a reasonable interest to our stockholders, though we haven't yet. The settled lands have to bear hauling charges on the unsettled. But these fellows don't see our side of it. Where would they be without the line, anyway? Now answer me that, Carter."

"Back East, landless, homeless, choring for sixteen a month an' board," Carter slowly answered. "I'm not bucking your railroad, Hooper. But here's the point—your people and the government sent out all sorts of lying literature an' filled these fellows with the idea that they were going to get rich quick; whereas this is a poor man's country an' will be for a generation to come. Five generations of farmers couldn't have built this line which one generation must pay for. There's the point. They've clapped a mortgage an' a fifteen-hundred-mile handicap on their future, an' the interest is going to bear their noses hard down on the grindstone. They'll make a living, but they ain't going to have much of a time. Their children's children will reap the profit off their sweat."

"No," the agent profanely agreed, "they ain't going to have a hell of a time." Having spent his mature years in one continuous wrangle over freights and rates, it was positively disconcerting to find a farmer who could appreciate the necessities of railroad economics, and after a thoughtful pause the agent said, "You ain't so slow—for a farmer."

"Thank you," Carter gravely answered. "Some day, if I'm good, I may rise to the heights of railroading."

The agent grinned appreciatively. "Coming back to the deputation, these fellows might as well tackle a grizzly as the old man. There's not enough of you to supply grease for a freight-train's wheels."

"Oh, I don't know," Carter gently murmured.

Ten minutes ago the agent would have hotly proved his point; now he replied, quite mildly: "If you think different, tag on to the deputation. Here it comes, all het-up with wrongs and whiskey."

"There's Bill Cummings!" Carter indicated an elderly man, very white of beard, very red of face, and transparently innocent in expression.

"He's bell-wether," the agent said, grinning. Then, as the approaching locomotive blew two sharp blasts, he added, "Blamed if the old man won't make mutton of the entire flock if they don't clear out of the way!"

A quick scattering averted the catastrophe while increasing the heat of the deputation. Very much disrumpled, it filed into the car, with Carter tagging on behind.

The general manager, who was smoking by an open window, tossed out his cigar as he rose. Not a tall man, power yet expressed itself in every movement of his thick-set body; it lurked in his keen gray glance; was given off like electrical energy in his few crisp words of welcome. From the eyes, placed well apart in the massive head, to the strong jaw his every feature expressed his graduation in the mastership of men; told eloquently of his wonderful record, his triumphs over man and nature. Beginning a section hand, he had filled almost every position in the gift of his road, driving spikes in early days with the same expertness he now evidenced in directing its enormous affairs—the road which had sprung from his own fertile imagination; the road which, from nothing, he had called into being. Where others had only discerned mountains, gulfs, cañons, trackless forest, he had seen a great trunk line with a hundred feeders—mills, mines, factories, farms, and steamships plying to the Orient for trade. And because his was the faith that moves mountains, the magnificent dream had taken form in wood and iron.

Purblind to all but their own interests, the settlers saw only the proximate result of that mighty travail—the palace-car with its luxurious fittings.

"We pay for this," Carter's neighbor growled.

"My, but I'd like his job!" another whispered. "Nothing to do but sit there and dictate a few letters."

A third gave the figures of the manager's salary, while a fourth added that it was screwed out of the farmers. So they muttered their private envy while Cummings voiced their public grievance. When surveys were run for the trunk line, settlers had swarmed in, pre-empting land on either side of the right of way, and when, to avoid certain engineering problems, the surveys were shifted south, they found themselves from fifty to sixty miles from a market. A branch had been promised—

"When settlement and traffic justify it." The manager cut the oration short.

He had listened quietly while Cummings talked of rights, lawsuits, and government intervention; now he launched his ultimatum on the following silence: "Gentlemen, our road is not run for fun, but profit, and though we should very much like to accommodate you, it is impossible under the circumstances. I am pleased to have met you, and"—the corners of the firm mouth twitched ever so slightly—"and I shall be pleased to meet you again when you can advance something more to our advantage than costs and suits. I bid you good-day."

Business-like, terse, devoid of feeling, the laconic answer acted upon the deputation like a blow in the face. Cummings actually recoiled, and his expression of sheep-like surprise, baffled wonder, innocent anger set Carter chuckling.

He was still smiling as he shouldered forward.

"A minute, please."

The manager glanced at his watch. "I can't spare you much more."

"I won't need it," Carter answered, and so took up the case.

Humorously allowing that Cummings had stepped off with the wrong foot, that he and his fellows had no case in law, Carter went on, in short, crisp sentences, to give the number of settlers on the old survey, the acreage under cultivation and of newly broken ground, the lumbering outlook in the spruce forests north of the Park Lands, the number of tye-camps already there established, finishing with a brief description of the rich cattle country the proposed line would tap.

Ten minutes had added themselves to the first while he was talking, but the manager's gray glance had evinced no impatience. "Now," he commented, "we have something to go on. The settlements alone would not justify us in building, but with the lumber—and colonization prospects—" He mused a while, then, after expressing regrets for the haste that called him away, he said, "But if you will put all this and other information into writing, Mr. Carter, I'll see what we can do."

"He's big, the old man." Nodding at the black trail of smoke, the agent thus commented on his superior five minutes later. Then, indicating the deputation which was making its jubilant way back to the clapboard hotel, he said, "They ain't giving you all the credit, are they?"

Shrugging at the last remark, Carter answered the first. "He's a big man, shorely. But, bless you"—he flipped a thumb at the delegation—"they don't see it. Any of 'em is willing to allow that the manager has had chances that didn't fly by his particular roost—just as though the same opportunity hadn't been tweaking him by the nose this last twenty years. There it lay, loose, loose enough for people to break their shins on, till this particular man picked it up. He's big. Puts me in mind of them robber barons you read of in history. Big, powerful chaps, who trod down everything that came in their own way while dealing out a rough sort of justice. There's a crowd"—he looked at the agent interrogatively—"that haven't had what's coming to them. In their times moral suasion, as the parsons call it, hadn't been invented and folks were a heap blooded. A little bleeding once in a while kept down the temperature, and I've always allowed that the barons prevented a sight more murder than they did." Then, nailing his point, he finished: "The historians fixed a cold deck for them like the one they'll deal this general manager. But you can't stop the world. She waggles in spite of them, and it's the big men that make her go. But there! I must eat. What does your ticker say of the express?"

"Half an hour late. You'll just have nice time." And as he watched the tall figure swinging across the tracks, the agent gave words to a thought that was

even then in the general manager's mind—"There's a division superintendent going to seed on a farm."

Having made up ten minutes, however, the train rolled in while Carter was still at dinner, and as—for some motive too subtle for even his own definition—he had not mentioned her coming, Miss Helen Morrill had become a subject of bashful curiosity to assembled Lone Tree before he came dashing across the tracks. Apart from his size, sunburn, and certain intelligence of expression, there was really nothing to distinguish this particular young man from the people who, at home, were not on her visiting-list, and if polite the girl turned rather a cold ear to a magnificently evolved and smoothly told set of lies as he escorted her over to the hotel. Morrill was busy with the hay, and as he, Carter, had to come to town for a mower casting he had agreed to bring her out. Her brother was well! A bit delicate! He dare not raise her hopes too high. Oh, he'd pull through! This clear northern air—and so forth.

That clear northern air! Glowing with color, infinite, flat, the prairies basked under the afternoon sun. From the car windows the girl had seen them unfolding: the great screeds of God on which he had written his wonders. Now nothing interposed between her and their vast expanse. Swimming in lambent light they reached out through the quivering distance till merged with the turquoise sky. After she had dined, Carter showed her, from the hotel veranda, the train from which she had dismounted, no larger than a toy, puffing defiance at a receding horizon. Other things he told her—curious facts, strange happenings drawled forth easily with touches of humor that kept her interested and laughing. Not until the moon's magic translated the prairie's golden sheen to ashes, and she unconsciously offered her hand as she rose to retire, did she realize how completely she had cancelled her first impression.

It was then that Lone Tree closed in on Carter with invitations to drink and requests for verification of a theory that the northern settlement was spreading itself on educational lines. "She's a right smart-looking girl," said the store-keeper, its principal exponent, "and Silver Creek is surely going to turn out some scholars."

But he clucked his sympathy when he heard the truth. "An' you say he's having hemerrages? Shore, shore! Here, come over to the store. That girl don't look like she'd been raised on sow-belly, an' sick folks is mighty picky in their eating."

So, by moonlight, the buck-board was loaded up with jams, jellies, fruits, and meats, the best in stock and of fabulous value at frontier prices. While the evil deed was being perpetrated neither man looked at the other. The store-keeper cloaked his villany by learned discourse of freight rates, while Carter spoke indifferently of crops. Only the parting hand-shake revealed each conspirator to

the other.

III
THE TRAIL

"To make Flynn's for noon," Carter had said the preceding evening, "we shall have to be early on the trail." And there was approbation in his glance when he found Helen Morrill waiting upon the veranda.

"What pretty ponies!" she exclaimed, quickly adding, "Are they—tame?"

"Regular sheep," he reassured her.

However, she still dubiously eyed the "sheep," which were pawing the high heavens in beliance of their pacific character, until, catching the humorous twinkle in Carter's eye, she saw that he was gauging her courage. Then she stepped in. As they felt her weight the ponies plunged out and raced off down the trail; but Carter's arm eased her back to her seat, and when, flushed and just a little trembling, she was able to look back Lone Tree lay far behind, its grain-sheds looking for all the world like red Noah's arks on a yellow carpet. Over them, but beyond the horizon, hung a black smudge, mark of a distant freight-train. Wondering if one ever lost sight of things in this country of distances, she turned back to the ponies, which had now found a legitimate outlet for their energies, and were knocking off the miles at ten to the hour.

Carter drew a loose rein, but she noticed that even when talking he kept the team in the tail of his eye.

"Yes," he answered her question, "that Devil horse will bear watching, and Death, the mare, is just about as sudden. Why did I name her that?" He twinkled down upon her. "You mightn't feel complimented if I told."

"Well—if I must," he drawled when she pressed the question. "You see there's two things that can get away with a right smart man—death and woman. So, being a female—there! I told you that you wouldn't be complimented."

"Oh, I don't mind," she laughed. "Like curses, slights on my sex come home to roost, Mr. Carter. You are not dead yet."

"Nor married," he retorted.

This morning they had taken up their acquaintanceship where it was laid down the night before, but now something in his manner—it was not freedom; assurance would better describe it—caused a reversion to her first coldness.

"Doubtless," she said, with condescension, "some good girl will take pity on you."

He looked squarely in her eyes. "Mebbe—though the country isn't overstocked. Still, they've been coming in some of late."

The suddenness of it made her gasp. How dare he? Even if he had been a man of her own station! Turning, she looked off and away, giving him a cold, if pretty, shoulder, till instinct told her that he was making good use of his opportunities. But when she turned back he was discreetly eying the ponies, apparently lost in thought.

His preoccupation permitted minute study, and in five minutes she had memorized his every feature, from the clean profile to the strong chin and humorous mouth. A clean, wholesome face she thought it. She failed, however, to classify him for, despite his homely speech, he simply would not fit in with the butchers, bakers, and candle-stick makers of her limited experience. One thing she felt, and that very vividly: he was not to be snubbed or slighted. So—

"Do we follow the railroad much farther?" she asked.

"A smart mile," he answered. Then, with a sidelong glance at the space between them, he added, "I wouldn't sit on the rail."

"Thank you," she said, coldly. "I'm quite comfortable."

"Tastes differ," he genially commented. Then, stretching his whip, he added, "See that wolf!"

In a flash she abolished the space. "Oh, where? Will he—follow us?"

"Mebbe not," he said, adding, as he noticed a disposition on her part to edge out, "But he shorely looks hungry."

It was only a coyote, and afterwards she could never recall the episode without a blush, but the fact remains that while the grizzled apparition crowned a roll, she threw dignity overboard and clung to Carter. It was well, too, that she did, for more from deviltry than fear of the gray shadow the ponies just then bolted.

Ensued a minute of dust, wind, bumpings; then, without any attempt to check their speed, Carter got the mad little brutes back to the trail. Several furious miles had passed before, answering a gasping question as to whether he couldn't stop them, that imperturbable driver said:

"I ain't trying very hard. They're going our way, and we've got to hit this trail some licks to make Flynn's by noon. He's the first settler north of the valley."

They did hit it some "licks." One after another the yellow miles slid beneath the buck-board, deadly in their sameness. With the exception of that lone coyote, they saw no life. Right and left the tawny prairies reached out to the indefinite horizon; neither cabin nor farmstead broke their sweep; save where the dark growths of the Assiniboin Valley drew a dull line to the north, no spot of

color marred that great monochrome. Just before they came to the valley Carter dashed around the Red River cart of a Cree squaw. Shortly after they came on her lord driving industrious heels into the ribs of a ragged pony. Then the trail shot through a bluff—rugged, riven, buttressed with tall headlands to whose scarred sides dark woods clung, the mile-wide valley lay before them. Up from its depths rose the cry of a bell. Clear, silvery, resonant, it flowed with the stream, echoed in dark ravines, filled the air with its rippling music.

"Catholic mission," Carter said, and as he spoke the ponies plunged after the trail which fell at an angle of forty-five into a black ravine. The girl felt as though the earth had dropped from under, then, bump! the wheels struck and went slithering and ricochetting among the ruts and bowlders. A furious burst down the last slopes and they were galloping out on the bottom-lands.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, regaining breath. "What recklessness!"

"Now do you really call that reckless?" His mild surprise would have been convincing but for the wicked twinkle.

"Of course—I do," she said, choking with fright and indignation. "I believe—you did it on purpose."

"Well, well." He shook a sorrowful head. "And to think I shouldn't have knowed it! Look out!"

They had swung by the log mission with the black-robed priest in the door, circled the ruins of a Hudson Bay fort, and now the Assiniboin Ford had suddenly opened before them. Fed fat by mountain streams, the river poured, a yeasty flood, over the ford, a roaring terror of swift waters. While the girl caught her breath they were in to the hubs, the thills; then the green waters licked up through the buck-board staves. Half wading, half swimming, the ponies were held to the narrow passage by that master-hand. On either side smooth, sucking mouths drew down to dangerous currents, and, reaching, Carter flicked one with his whip.

"Cree Injun drowned there last flood."

A moment later he turned the ponies sharply upstream and told of two settlers who had lingered a second too long on that turn. Indeed, it seemed to Helen as though each race, every eddy, perpetuated the memory of some unfortunate. She sighed her relief when, with a rush, the ponies took them up the bank, out of the roar and swirl, into the shade of a ravine.

Glancing up, she caught Carter regarding her with serious admiration. "You'll do," he said. Then she realized that this man, whom she had been trying to classify with her city tradesmen, had been trying her out according to his standards. The thought brought sudden confusion. She blushed. But with ready tact he turned and kept up a rapid fire of comment on the country through which they were passing till she recovered her composure.

For they were now in the Park Lands, the antithesis of the arid plains on the other side of the river. Flower-bespangled, dotted with clump poplar, retaining in August a suggestion of spring's verdure, the prairies rolled off and away in long earth billows. Everywhere rank herbage bowed in sunlit waves under the wind. Nor was there lack of life. Here an elk sprang from behind a bluff. A band of jumping deer followed him over the horizon. There a covey of prairie-chickens rose on whirring wing; a fox grinned at them from the crest of a sand-hill. A rich country, the girl was remarking on the lack of settlers when Carter extended his whip.

"There's the first of them. That's Flynn's place."

Speeding through the enormous grain-fields west of Winnipeg, Helen had seen from the cars solitary cabins of frame or sod, pinned down, as it were, in the exact centre of a carpet of wheat, emphasizing with their loneliness that vastness about them. But this was different, more homelike, if quite as strange. Built of hewn logs and lime-washed, Flynn's house nestled with its stables and outbuildings under the wing of a poplar bluff. Around it, of course, stretched the wheat; but here it was merely an oasis, a bright shoal in the sea of brown that flowed on to a distant dark line, the spruce forests of the Riding Mountains.

Bathed in sunshine, with cattle wandering at will, knee-deep in pasture, it made a beautiful picture. The girl came under its spell. She felt the freedom, the witchery of those sun-washed spaces; their silences, whispers, cloud-shadows, the infinity which broods upon them.

"Is our place like this?" she asked.

"Prettier." Carter indicated the distant forest line. "We are close in to the bush and the country is broken up into woodland, lake, and rolling prairie."

"Then I can be happy," she sighed.

Quickly averting his eyes that their sympathy might not dampen her mood, he drew her attention to a man who was cutting green fodder on the far side of the wheat-field.

"There's Flynn."

IV
THE COYOTE SNAPS

A tall Irishman of the gaunt Tipperary breed, Flynn straightened as Carter reined

in, and thrust out a mighty paw. "Ye're welcome, ma'am; an' ye've come in season, for the woman's just called to dinner. Just drive on an' unhitch before the door."

"Yes, it's a fine stand of wheat."

Walking beside them, he replied to Carter's comment: "Too foine. It's a troifle rank to ripen before the frost." A wistful shade clouded his face, extinguished the mercurial twinkle in his eye. "It 'll freeze, shure." The accent on the last syllable was pitiable, for it told of long waiting, hope deferred, labor ill-requited. It was the voice of one who bolsters himself that the stroke of fate may not utterly kill, who slays expectation lest it betray him. Yet in its pessimism dead hope breathed. "Yes, it 'll freeze," Flynn assured the malicious fates.

At close range the house was not nearly so picturesque. A motley of implements strewed the yard: ploughs, harrows, rakes, a red-and-green binder, all resting hap-hazard among a litter of chips, half-hewn logs, and other debris. The stables were hidden by huge manure piles. The place lacked every element of the order one sees on an Eastern farm—rioted in the necessary disorder of newness. Flynn's generation were too busy making farms; tidiness would come with the next.

Not realizing this, Helen was drawing unfavorable parallels from the pervading squalor, when Mrs. Flynn, who was simply Flynn in petticoats, came bustling out with welcomes. Miss Morrill must come right in! It was that long since she, Mrs. Flynn, had set eyes on a woman's face that she had almost forgotten what they looked like!

"An' you that fond av your glass, mother?" Flynn teased.

"Glass, ye say?" Mrs. Flynn retorted. "Sure an' 'twas yerself that smashed it three months ago. It's the bottom av a milk-pan he's been shaving in ever since, my dear," she added.

Flynn winked. "An' let me advise you, Carter. If ivir ye marry, don't have a glass in the house an' ye'll be able to see ye'self in ivery tin."

Out at the stable the merriment died from his face, and facing Carter he asked: "Phwat's up between ye and Hines? I was taking dinner with Bender yesterday, an' while we was eating along came Hines.

"'There's a man,' he says, spaking to Bender av you. 'There's a man! big, impident, strong. Ye're no chicken, Bender, but ye couldn't put that fellow's shoulders to the ground.' I'm not needing to tell you the effect on Bender?" Flynn finished.

Carter nodded. He knew the man. Big, burly, brutal, Bender was a natural product of the lumber-camps in which he had lived a life that was little more than a calender of "scraps." Starting in at eighteen on the Mattawa, he had fought his way to the head of its many camps, then passed to the Michigan woods and at-

tained the kingship there. He *lived* rather than *loved* to fight. But, though in the northern settlements Carter was the only man who approximated the lumberman's difficult standard in courage and inches, so far fate had denied him cause of quarrel.

"The coyote!" Flynn exclaimed, when Carter had told of Hines's attempt on Morrill's hay-slough. "An' him sick in bed, poor man. I wouldn't wipe me feet on Hines's dirty rag av a soul. But he's made ye some mischief. 'Ye're a liar, Hines!' Bender growls. 'I can lick him er any other man betwixt this an' the Rockies.'

"Hines didn't like the lie, but he gulped it. 'Talk's cheap,' he snarls.

"'Carter's a good neighbor,' Bender answers. 'But if he gives me a cause—'

"'A *cause*?' Hines cackles, laughing. 'Why, him an' Morrill have grabbed all the best hay in Silver Creek an' defy anny man to touch it. Run your mower into their big slough an' ye'll have cause enough.'

"That made Bender hot. 'I'll do it!' he roars, 'this very day.' But," Flynn finished, "he had to run out to the blacksmith's to fix his mower sickle, so he won't get out till to-morrow morning."

"If ye need anny help—" he said, tentatively, as Carter pondered with frowning brow. Then, catching the other's eye, he hastily added: "Ye'll pardon me! But Bender's a terr'ble fighter!"

His alarm was so palpable that Carter laughed. "Don't bother," he said. "I'm not going to roll, bite, chew, or gouge with Bender."

"Look here!" Flynn interposed, with additional alarm. "Ye'll not be after making anny gun-plays? This is Canada, ye'll mind, where they hang folks mighty easy."

Carter laughed again. "There won't be any fight. Listen!"

And Flynn did listen. As he grasped the other's meaning, his face cleared and his hearty laugh carried to the house where Helen was making the acquaintance of the smaller Flynns. Six in number, bare-legged, and astonishingly regular in gradation, they scampered like mice on her entrance and hid behind the cotton partition that divided bedroom from kitchen. For a while they were quiet, then Helen became aware of a current of stealthy talk underflowing Mrs. Flynn's volubility.

"Ain't her waist small?"

"Bet you she wears stays the hull time."

"Like them mother puts on to meetin'?"

"Shore!"

"Git out; her face ain't red. Mother nearly busts when she hitches her'n."

"Ain't that yaller hair pretty?" This sounded like a girl, though it was hard to decide, for all wore a single sexless garment.

"Bet you it ain't all her'n. Dad says as them city gals is all took to pieces

when they go to bed." This was surely a boy, and, unfortunately for him, the remark sailed out on a pause in his mother's comment.

"James!" she exclaimed, raising shocked hands. "Come right here."

He came slowly, suspiciously, then, divining from his parent's look the enormity of his crime, he dived under her arm, shot out-doors, and was lost in the wheat. After him, a cataract of bare limbs, poured the others, all escaping but one small girl whom Helen caught, kissed, and held thereafter in willing bondage until, after dinner, Carter drove round to the door.

Though they had rested barely an hour after their forty-mile run, the ponies repeated the morning's performance, to the horror of Mrs. Flynn; then, as though realizing that they had done all that reputation required, they settled down to a steady jog—in which respect, colloquially, they were imitated by their human freight. A little tired, Helen was content to sit and take silent note of the homesteads which now occurred at regular intervals, while Carter was perfecting his plan for the discomfiture of the warlike Bender. Slough, lake, wood-land, farm passed in slow and silent procession. Once he roused to answer her comment as they rattled by some Indian graves that crowned a knoll.

"To keep the coyotes from robbing the resurrection," he explained the poplar poles that roofed in the graves.

He spoke again when the buck-board ran in among a score of curious mud pillars. About thrice the height of a man, inscriptionless, they loomed, weird guardians of that lonely land till he robbed their mystery.

"Them? Mud chimneys. You see, when a Cree Indian dies his folks burn down the cabin to keep his spirit from returning, and as mud won't burn the chimneys stand. Small-pox cleaned out this village." Then, with innocent gravity, he went on to tell of a stray scientist who had written a monograph on those very chimneys. "'Monoliths' he called 'em. Allowed that they were dedicated to a tribal god, and was used to burn prisoners captured in war. It was a beautiful theory and made a real nice article. Why did I let him? Well, now, 'twould have been a sin to enlighten him, he was that blamed happy poking round them chimneys, and the folks that read his article wouldn't know any better."

Chuckling at the remembrance, he relapsed again to his planning, and did not speak again till they had crossed the valley of Silver Creek from which the northern settlement took its name. Then, indicating a black dot far off on the trail, he said:

"There comes Molyneux."

"Two in the rig," he added, a few minutes later. "A man and a woman. That 'll be Mrs. Leslie."

Unaccustomed to the plainsman's vision, which senses rather than sees the difference of size, color, movement that mark cattle from horses, a single rig from

a double team, Helen was dubious till, swinging out from behind a poplar bluff, the team bore down upon them. Two persons were in the rig: a man of the blackly handsome type, and a stylish, pretty woman, who, as Carter turned out to drive by, waved him to stop.

"Monopolist!" she scolded, when the rigs ranged side by side. "Here I'm just dying to meet Miss Morrill and you would have whisked her by. Now do your duty."

"Captain Molyneux," she said, introducing her companion in turn. "A neighbor. We just heard this morning that you were coming and I was so glad; and I'm gladder now that I've seen you." Her glance travelled admiringly over Helen's face and figure. "You know there are so few women here, and they—" Her pretty nose tip-tilted. "Well, you'll see them. Soon I shall make my call; carry you off for a few days, if your brother will permit it. But there! I'm keeping you from him. Good-bye. Now you may go, Mr. Carter."

A touch of merry defiance in the permission caused Helen to glance up at her companion. Though Mrs. Leslie's glance was almost caressing whenever it touched him, he had stared straight ahead of him while she chatted.

"You don't like them?" the girl asked. "Why? She likes you."

His sternness vanished and he smiled down upon her. "Now, what made you think that?"

"I didn't think; I felt it."

"Funny things, feelings, ain't they? I mind one that took me fishing when I ought to have been keeping school. 'Twas a beautiful day. Indian-summer back East. You know 't: still, silent, broody, warm; first touch of gold in the leafage. I just *felt* that I had to go fishing. But when dad produced a peeled hickory switch that night he told me: 'Son, feelings is treacherous things. This will teach you the difference between thinking and knowing.' It did—for a while."

"But you don't like them?" she persisted, refusing to be side-tracked. Then she blushed under his look of grave surprise, realizing that she had broken one of the unwritten canons of frontier etiquette. "I beg your pardon," she said, hastily. "I didn't mean to—"

His smile wiped out the offence. Stretching his whip, he said, "There's your house."

Helen cried aloud. Nestling under the eaves of green forest, it faced on a lake that lay a scant quarter-mile to the south. North, west, and south, trim clump poplar dotted its rolling land and rose in the fields of grain. Here nature, greatest of landscape-gardeners, had planned her best, setting a watered garden within a fence of forest. Just for a second the house flashed out between two green bluffs, a neat log building, lime-washed in settler style, then it was snatched again from her shining eyes.

But Carter had seen a figure standing at the door. "Clear grit!" he mentally ejaculated. "Blamed if he ain't up and dressed to save her feelings." Then, aloud, he gave her necessary warnings. "Now you mustn't expect too much. He's doing fine, but no doubt pulled down a bit since you saw him."

Two hours later Carter stepped out from his own cabin. He and Morrill had "homesteaded" halves of the same section, and as he strode south the latter's lamp beamed a yellow welcome through the soft night. Already he had refused an invitation to supper, deeming that the brother and sister would prefer to spend their first evening alone together, and now ignoring the lamp's message, he entered Merrill's stable, saddled the latter's cattle pony in darkness thick as ink, led him out, and rode quietly away.

Now of all equines, your northern cross-bred pony is the most cunning. For three black miles Shyster behaved with propriety, then, sensing by the slack line that his rider was preoccupied, he achieved a vicious sideling buck. Well executed, it yet failed of its intent.

"You little devil!" Carter remonstrated, as he applied correctives in the form of quirt and spurs. "Rest don't suit your complaint. To-morrow you go on the mower."

"Hullo!" a voice cried from the darkness ahead. "Who's that cussing?"

It was Danvers, an English remittance-man, a typical specimen of the tribe of Ishmael which is maintained in colonial exile on "keep-away" allowances.

"Are you lost?" Carter asked.

"Lost? No!" There was an aggrieved note in Danvers' tone. "You fellows seem to think that I oughtn't to be out after dark. There's Jed Hines going about and telling people that I knocked at my own door one night to inquire my way."

"Tut, tut," Carter sympathized. "And Jed counted such a truthful man! You'll find it hard to live that down. But where might you be heading for now—if it's any of my darn business?"

"Morrill's. Heard his sister had arrived. I'm going to drop in and pay my respects."

"Humph! that's neighborly. They've had just two hours to exchange the news of three years; they'll shorely be through by this. Keep right on, son. In five-and-twenty minutes this trail will land you at Jed Hines's door."

"Oh, get out!" Danvers exclaimed.

"Sir, to you?" Carter assumed a wonderful stiffness. "I'll give you good-night."

"Oh, here!" the youth called after him. "I didn't mean to doubt you."

Carter rode on.

Ridden by a vivid memory of the jeering Hines, Danvers became desperate. "Oh, Carter! Say, don't get mad! Do tell a fellow! How shall I get there?"

Carter reined in. "Where? To Hines's? Keep right along."

"N-o! Morrill's?"

"Oh, let me see. One—two—three—take the third fork to the left and second to the right; that ought to bring you—to your own door," he finished, as he listened to the departing hoof-beats. "That is, if you follow directions, which ain't likely. Anyway," he philosophically concluded, "you ain't agoing to bother that girl much to-night."

Spurring Shyster, he galloped on, and in ten minutes caught Murchison, an Englishman of the yeoman class, out at his stables. Receiving a hearty affirmative, rounded out with full-mouthed English "damns," in answer to his question, he declined Murchison's invitation to "put in," and rode on—rode from homestead to homestead, asking always the same question, receiving always the same answer. Remittance-men, Scotch Canadians, Seebach, the solitary German settler, alike listened, laughed, and fell in with the plan as Flynn had done. He covered many miles and the moon caught him on trail before he permitted the last man to carry his cold legs back to bed. It was long past midnight when he unsaddled at Morrill's stable.

Softly closing the door on his tired beast, he stood gazing at the house. Far-off in the woods a night-owl hooted, a bittern boomed on the lake shore, the still air pulsed to the howl of a timber-wolf. Though born of the plains, its moods had never palled upon him. Usually he had been stirred. But now he had no ears for the night nor eyes for the lake chased in rippled silver. He listened, listened, as though his strained hearing would drag the girl's soft sleep breathing from the house's jealous embrace. Soon he leaned back against the door musing; and when, having inspected the cabin from one side, the moon sailed over and looked down on the other, he was still there.

As the first quivering flushes shot through the grays of dawn Bender came out of his cabin. He intended to be at work on Merrill's big slough at sunrise. But as he rammed home the sickle into its place in the mower-bar a projecting rivet caused it to buckle and break. That spelled another journey to the blacksmith's, and the sun stood at noon before the sickle was in place. Falling to oiling with savage earnestness, that an ancient Briton might have exhibited in greasing his scythe-armed war-chariot, Bender then stuffed bread and meat into his jumper, hitched, and drove off north, looking for all the world like a grisly pirate afloat on a yellow sea.

Half an hour's easy jogging would carry him to Merrill's big slough, but on

the way he had to pass two smaller ones. The first, which had a hundred-yard belt of six-foot hay ringing its sedgy centre, tempted him sorely, yet he refrained, having in mind a bigger prey. At the next he reined in, and stared at a dozen cut swaths and a mower with feeding horses tied to its wheels.

It was Molyneux's mower, and to Bender its presence could only mean that the settlement was rushing the sick man's sloughs. "Invasion of the British!" he yelled. "What 'll Carter say to this? Remember Yorktown!"

He was still laughing when a buck-board came rattling up the trail behind him. It was Hines.

"Cut that slough yet?" he asked.

"Just going there," Bender answered; then gave the reason of his delay, garnished with furious anathema on the maker of sickles. "But ain't that a joke?" he said, indicating Molyneux's mower.

Hines whinnied his satisfaction. "Didn't think it was in the Britisher. But my! won't that gall the long-geared son of a gun of a Yank? Drive on an' I'll follow up an' see you started—mebbe see some of the fun," he added to himself, "if Carter's there."

Quarter of an hour brought them to the big slough, which, on this side, was ringed so thickly with willow-scrub that neither could see it till they reined on its edge. Both stared blankly. When Hines went by that morning a mile of solid hay had bowed in sunlit waves before the breeze. Save a strip some twenty yards wide down the centre, it now lay in flat green swaths, while along the strip a dozen feeding teams were tied to as many mowers.

"A bee, by G—!" Bender swore.

"Hell!" Hines snarled even in his swearing. "Bilked, by the Almighty!"

For a moment they stood, staring from the slough to each other, the lumberman red, angry, foolish, Hines the personification of venomous chagrin. Presently his rage urged him to a great foolishness.

"You an' your casting!" he sneered. "Scairt, you was—plumb scairt!"

Astonishment, the astonishment with which a bull might regard the attack of an impertinent fly, obliterated for one moment all other expression from Bender's face. Then, roaring his furious anger, he sprang from his mower.

Realizing his mistake, Hines had already lashed his ponies, but even then they barely jerked the buck-board tail from under the huge, clutching fingers. Foaming with passion, Bender gave chase for a score of yards, then stopped and shook his great fist, pouring out invective.

"To-morrow," he roared, "I'll come over and cut on you."

"What's the matter? You seem all het up?" Carter's quiet voice gave Bender first notice of the buckboard that had come quietly upon him from the grassy prairie. With Carter were Flynn, Seebach, and two others. Not very far away a

wagon was bringing others back from dinner.

"We're all giving Morrill a day's cutting," Carter went on, with a quiet twinkle. "I called at your place this morning with a bid, but you was away. We're right glad to see you. Who told you?"

Gradually a grin wiped out Bender's choler. "You're damn smart," he rumbled. "Well—where shall I begin?"

V
JENNY

Thus did the bolt which Hines forged for Carter prove a boomerang and recoil upon himself. For next morning Bender started his mower on a particularly fine slough which Hines had left to the last because of its wetness. Moreover, Hines had ten tons of cut hay bleaching near by in the sun and dare not try to rake it.

It was oppressively hot the morning that Bender hitched to rake the stolen slough; fleecy thunder-heads were slowly heaving up from behind the swart spruce forest.

"'Twon't be worth cow-feed if it ain't raked to-day," the giant remarked, as he overlooked his enemy's hay. Then his satisfaction gave place to sudden anger—a rake was at work on Hines's hay less than a quarter-mile away.

"Hain't seen me, I reckon," Bender growled. Leaving his own rake, he crouched in a gully, skulked along the low land, gained a willow thicket, and sprang out just as the rake came clicking by.

"Now I've got you!" he roared. Then his hands dropped. He stood staring at a thin slip of a girl, who returned his gaze with dull, tired eyes. It was Jenny Hines, Jed's only child.

"Well," Bender growled, "what d' you reckon you're doing?"

"Raking." Her voice was listless as her look. Just eleven when her mother died, her small shoulders had borne the weight of Jed's housekeeping. Heavy choring had robbed her youth, and left her, at eighteen, nothing but a faded shadow of a possible prettiness.

Bender coughed, shuffled. "Where's your dad?"

"Up at the house. He allowed you wouldn't tech me. But," she added, dully, "I'd liefer you killed me than not."

Bender's anger had already passed. Rough pity now took its place. His

furious strength prevented him from realizing the killing drudgery, the lugging of heavy water-buckets, the milking, feeding of pigs, the hard labor which had killed her spirit and left this utter hopelessness; but he knew by experience that a young horse should not be put to a heavy draw, and here was a violation of the precept. Bender was puzzled. Had he come on a neighbor maltreating a horse, a curse backed by his heavy fist would have righted the wrong; but this frail creature's humanity placed her wrongs outside his rough remedial practice.

He whistled, swore softly, and, failing to invoke inspiration by these characteristic methods, he said, kindly: "Well, for onct Jed tol' the truth. Must have strained him some. Go ahead, I ain't agoing to bother you."

Having finished raking his own hay, he fell to work with the fork, stabbing huge bunches, throwing them right and left, striving to work off the pain at his heart. But pity grew with exertion, and, pausing midway of the morning, he saw that she also was plying a weary fork.

"You need a rest," he growled five minutes later. "Sit down."

She glanced up at the ominous sky. "Can't. Rain's coming right on."

Lifting her bodily, he placed her in a nest of hay. "Now you stay right there. I'm running this."

Picking up her fork, he put forth all his magnificent strength while she sat listlessly watching. It seemed as though nothing could banish her chronic weariness, her ineffable lassitude. Once, indeed, she remarked, "My, but you're strong!" but voice and words lacked animation. She added the remarkable climax, "Pa says you are a devil."

"Yes?" he questioned. "An' you bet he's right, gal. Keep a right smart distance from men like me."

"Oh, I don't know," she slowly answered. "I'd liefer be a devil. Angels is tiresome. Pa's always talking about them. He's a heap religious—in spells."

Pausing in his forking, Bender stared down on the small heretic. Vestigial traces of religious belief occupied a lower strata of his savage soul. Crude they were, anthropomorphic, barely higher than superstitions, yet they were there, and chief among them was an idea that has appealed to the most cultured of men—that woman is incomplete, nay, lost, without religion.

"Shore, child!" he protested. "Little gals shouldn't talk so. That ain't the way to get to heaven."

"D' you allow to go there?" she demanded, with disconcerting suddenness.

Bender grimaced, laughed at the ludicrousness of the question. "Don't allow as I'd be comfortable. Anyway, lumbermen go to t'other place. But that don't alter your case. Gals all go to heaven."

"Well!" For the first time she displayed some animation. "I ain't! Pa's talked me sick of it. I allow it's them golden streets he's after. He'd coin 'em into dollars."

Seeing that Hines had not hesitated in minting this, his flesh and blood, Bender thought it very likely, and feeling his inability to cope with such reasonable heresies he attacked the hay instead. Having small skill in women—the few of his intimate experience being as free of feminine complexities as they were of virtue—he was sorely puzzled. Looking backward, he remembered his own pious mother. Hines's wife had died whispering of religion's consolations; yet here was the daughter turning a determined back on the source of the mother's comfort. It was unnatural to his scheme of things, contrary to the law of his vestigial piety. He would try again! But when, the hay finished, he came back to her, he quailed before her pale hopelessness; it called God in question.

Limbering up her rake, he watched her drive away, a small, thin figure, woful speck of life under a vast gray sky. For twisting cloud masses had blotted out the sun, a chill wind snatched the tops from the hay-cocks as fast as Bender coiled them, blots of water splashed the dust before he finished his task.

Black care rode home with him; and as that night the thunder split over his cabin, he saw Jenny's eyes mirrored on the wet, black pane, and it was borne dimly upon him that something besides overwork was responsible for their haunting.

Bender had a friend, a man of his own ilk, with whom he had hit camp and log-drive for these last ten years. At birth it is supposable that the friend inherited a name, but in the camps he was known only as the "Cougar." A silent man, broad, deep-lunged, fierce-eyed, nature had laid his lines for great height, then bent him in a perpetual crouch. He always seemed gathering for a spring, which, combined with tigerish courage, had gained him his name. Inseparable, if Bender appeared on the Mattawa for the spring drive, it was known that the Cougar might be shortly expected. If the Cougar stole into a Rocky Mountain camp, a bunk was immediately reserved for his big affinity. Only a bottle of whiskey and two days' delay on the Cougar's part had prevented them from settling up the same section. However, though five miles lay between their respective homesteads, never a Sunday passed without one man riding over to see the other, and it was returning from such a visit that Bender next fell in with Jenny Hines.

It was night and late, but as Bender rode by the forks where Hines's private road joined on to the Lone Tree trail, a new moon gave sufficient light for him to see a whitish object lying in the grass. He judged it a grain-sack till a convulsion shook it and a sob rose to his ears.

"Good land, girl!" he ejaculated, when, a moment later, Jenny's pale face turned up to his, "what are you doing here?"

"He's turned me out."

"Who?"

"Jed." The absence of the parental title spoke volumes—of love killed by slow starvation, cold sternness, of youth enslaved to authority without mitigation of fatherly tenderness.

Without understanding, Bender felt. "What for?" he demanded.

Crowding against his stirrup, she remained silent, and the touch of her body against his leg, the mute appeal of the contact, sent a flame of righteous passion through Bender's big body. Indecision had never been among his faults. Stooping, he raised her to the saddle before him, and as she settled in against his broad breast a wave of tenderness flowed after the flame.

"No, no!" she begged, when he turned in on Jed's trail. "I won't go back!" And he felt her violently trembling as he soothed and coaxed. She tried to slip from his arms as they approached the cabin, and her terror filled him with such anger that his kick almost stove in the door.

"It's me!" he roared, answering Hines's challenge. "Bender! I came on your gal lying out on the prairies. Open an' take her in!"

In response the window raised an inch; the moonlight glinted on a rifle-barrel. "Kick the door ag'in!" Jed's voice snarled, "an' I'll bore you. Git! the pair of ye!"

"Come, come, Jed." For her sake Bender mastered his anger. "Come, this ain't right. Let her in an' we'll call it by-gones."

"No, no!" the girl protested.

Though she had whispered, Jed heard, and her protest touched off his furious wolfish passion. "Git! Won't you git!" he screeched, following the command with a stream of screamed imprecations, vile abuse.

If alone Bender would have beaten in the door, but there was no mistaking Hines's deadly intent. Warned by the click of a cocking hammer, he swung Jenny in front again, galloped out of range; then, uncertain what to do, he gave his beast its head, and half an hour later brought up at his own door.

"There, sis," he said, as he lit his lamp, "make yourself happy while I stable Billy. Then I'll cook up some grub, an' while we're eating we can talk over things."

She smiled wanly yet gratefully. But when he returned she was rocking back and forth and moaning.

"Don't take on so," he comforted. "To-night I'll sleep in the stable; at daybreak we'll hit south for Mother Flynn's." But the moans followed in quick succession, beaded sweat started on her brow, and as she swung forward he saw that which, two hours before, had turned Jed Hines into a foaming beast.

"Oh, my God!" The exclamation burst from him. "You pore little thing! you pore little child! Only a baby yourself!"

Stooping, he lifted her into his bed, tucked her in, then stood, doubtful,

troubled, looking down upon her. Two-thirds of the settlers in Silver Creek were of Scotch descent; were deeply dyed with the granite hardness, harsh malignancy, fervid bigotry which have caused the history of their race to be written in characters of blood. Fiercely moral, dogmatically religious, she could expect no mercy at their hands. Hard-featured women, whose angular unloveliness had efficiently safeguarded their own virtue, would hate her the more because her fault had been beyond their compass. Looking forward, Bender saw the poor little body a passive centre for a whorl of spite, jealousy, virulent spleen, and the rough heart of him was mightily troubled. In all Silver Creek, Mrs. Flynn was the only woman to whom he felt he might safely turn. But Flynn's farm lay eighteen miles to the south—too far; the child was in imminent labor. What should he do?

"Jenny," he said, "any women folk been to your house lately?"

When she answered that they had been without a visitor for three months, Bender nodded his satisfaction. "Lie still, child," he said. "I'll be back right smart."

He was not gone long—just long enough to drive over to and back from Carter's. "I'm not trusting any of the women hereabouts," he told Carter. "Though it ain't generally known, the Cougar was married once. The same Indians that did up Custer cleaned up his wife and family. An' as he always lived a thousand miles from a doctor, he knows all about sech things. So if you'll drive like all hell for him, I'll tend to the little gal."

And Carter drove. In one hour he brought the Cougar, but even in that short time a wonderful transformation was wrought in that rough cabin under Bender's sympathetic eyes. From the travail of the suffering girl was born a woman—but not a mother. For of the essence of life Jenny had not sufficient to endow the child of her labor. The spark flickered down in herself, sank, till the Cougar, roughest yet gentlest of nurses, sweated with apprehension.

"It's death or a doctor," he told Carter, hiding his emotion under a surly growl. "Now show what them ponies are good for."

And that night those small fiends did "show what they were good for";—made a record that stood for many a year. Roused from his beauty-sleep, Flynn caught the whir of hot wheels and wondered who was sick. It was yet black night when Carter called Father Francis, the silent mission priest, from his bed. By lantern-light they two, layman and priest, spelled each other with pick and shovel in the mission acre, and when the last spadeful dropped on the small grave, Carter flew on. At cock-crow he pulled into Lone Tree, sixty miles in six hours, without counting the stop at the mission.

"I doubt I've killed you," he murmured, as the ponies stood before the doctor's door, "but it just had to be done."

The doctor himself answered the knock. A heavy man, grizzled, gray-eyed, sun and wind had burned his face to leather, for his days and nights were spent

on trail, pursuing a practice that was only limited by the endurance of horseflesh. From the ranges incurably vicious broncos were sent to his stables, devils in brute form. He used seven teams; yet the toughest wore out in a year. Day or night, winter or summer, a hundred in the shade or sixty below, he might be seen pounding them along the trails. Even now he had just come in from the Pipe Stone, sixty miles southwest, but he instantly routed out his man.

"Hitch the buckskins, Bill," he said, "and let him run yours round to the stables, Carter. He'll turn 'em out prancing by the time we're back."

It took Bill, the doctor, and Carter to get the buckskins clear of town, but once out the doctor handed the lines to Carter. "Now let 'em run." Then he fell asleep.

He woke as they passed the mission, exchanged words with the priest, and dozed again till Carter reined in at Bender's door. Then, shedding sleep as a dog shakes off water, he entered, clear-eyed, into the battle with death.

It was night when he came out to Bender and Carter, sprawled on the hay in the stable.

"She'll live," he answered the lumberman's look, "but she must have woman's nursing. Who's to be? Mrs. Flynn?" He shook his head. "A good woman, but—she has her sex's weakness—damned long-tongued."

Bender looked troubled. "There ain't a soul knows it—yet."

The doctor nodded. "Yes, yes, but I doubt whether you can keep it, boys."

"I think," Carter said, slowly, "that if it was rightly put Miss Morrill might—"

"That sweet-faced girl?" The doctor's gray eyes lit with approval, and the cloud swept back from Bender's rugged face.

"If she only would!" the giant stammered, "I'd—" He cast about for a fitting recompense, and finding none worth, finished, "There ain't a damn thing I wouldn't do for her."

The doctor took doubt by the ears. "Well, hitch and let's see."

Realizing that the girl would probably have her fair share of the prejudice, he opened his case very gently an hour later. But he might have saved his diplomacy.

"Of course!" she exclaimed, as soon as she grasped the facts. "Poor little thing! I'll go right over with Mr. Bender.

"And remember," the doctor said, finishing his instructions, "she needs mothering more than medicine."

So, satisfied, he and Carter hit the back trail, but not till he had examined Morrill with stethoscope and tapping finger. "Must have some excuse for my trip," he said, "and you'll have to serve. So don't be scared if you happen to hear that you have had another hemorrhage. Good! Good!" he exclaimed at every tap, but once on trail he shook his head. "May go in a month; can't last six. Be

prepared."

A fiery sunset was staining the western sky when, on his way back from Lone Tree, Carter stopped at Bender's door. The glow tinged the furious cloud that rose from the Cougar's pipe.

"Doing well," he laconically answered. "Never saw a gal pull round better from a fainting spell."

Nodding comprehension, Carter mentioned a doubt that had nettled him on the trail. "Jed? Do you think he'll—"

Sudden ferocity flamed up in the Cougar's face. "I tended to him this morning," he said, slowly, ominously. "He's persuaded as he mistook the girl's symptoms. Anyway, he ain't agoing to foul his own nest so long as no one knows."

"Wants her back, I suppose?"

The Cougar nodded. "She's worth more to him than his best ox-team. But he ain't agoing to get her. Don't go! Miss Morrill's inside an' wants to run over home for some things. Fine gal that." The Cougar's set fierceness of face almost thawed as he delivered his opinion.

Driving homeward, Helen opened the subject just where the Cougar had left it. "She won't go back to her father," she said, "and I don't blame her. But she can't stay here."

However, Jenny's future was already provided. "You needn't to worry," Carter said. "The doctor's fixed things. He and his wife have neither chick nor child of their own; they'll take her in."

The girl exclaimed her surprised gladness. To her, indeed, the entire incident was a revelation. Here three rough frontiersmen had banded successfully together to protect a wronged child and keep her within their rough social pale. Through all they had exhibited a tact and delicacy not always found in finer social stratas, and the lesson went far in modifying certain caste ideas—would have gone farther could she have known the fulness of their delicacy.

Only once was the cause of Jenny's illness ever hinted at among the three; that when Carter and Bender lay waiting for the doctor in the stable.

"You don't happen to have made a guess at the man?" Carter had asked.

"She hain't mentioned him," the giant answered, a little stiffly.

But he thawed when Carter answered: "You'll pardon me. I was just wondering if a rope might help her case."

Bender had shaken his head. "Las' year, you'll remember, one of Molyneux's remittance-men uster drive her out while Jed had her hired out to Leslie's. But he's gone back to England."

Also Helen had learned to look beneath Bender's scarred surface. Every day, while Jenny lay in his shanty, he would slip in between loads of hay to see her. At first the presence of so much femininity embarrassed him. One petticoat

hanging on the wall while another floats over the floor is enough to upset any bachelor. Only when sitting with Jenny did he find his tongue; then, giant of the camps, he prattled like a school-boy, freeing thoughts and feelings that had been imprisoned through all his savage years. It was singularly strange, too, to see how Jenny reciprocated his feelings. She liked Helen, but all of her petting could not bring the smile that came for Bender, in whom she sensed a kindred shy simplicity.

Helen was to get yet one other light from these unpromising surfaces, a light bright as those of Scripture which are said to shine as lamps to the feet. A few days after Jenny's departure Bender rode up to the door where Carter sat talking with Morrill.

"Got any stock to sell?" he inquired. "Cows in calf?"

"Going in for butter-making?" Carter inquired, grinning.

"Nope!" The giant laughed. "'Tain't for myself I'm asking. I'm a lumberman born an' bred; the camps draw me like salt-licks pull the deer. I'd never have time to look after them. Farming's play with me. On'y I was thinking as it wouldn't be so bad if that little gal had a head or two of her own growing inter money. You kin let 'em run with your band summers, an' I'll put up winter hay for them an' the increase. How are you, miss?" He nodded as Helen came to the door.

It was her first experience in such free giving, and she was astonished to see how devoid his manner was of philanthropic consciousness. Plainly he regarded the whole affair as very ordinary business. Carter's answer accentuated the novel impression—"What's the matter with me contributing them heifers?"

"Da—beg pardon, miss." Bender blushed. "No you don't. This is my funeral. But I'm no hawg. Now if you wanter throw in a couple of calves—"

Thus, without deed, oath, or mortgage, but with a certainty that none of these forms could afford, did little Jenny Hines become a young lady of property. The matter disposed of, Bender called Carter off to the stable, where, after many mysterious fumblings, he produced from a package a gorgeous silk kerchief of rainbow hues.

"You'll give Miss Morrill this?"

But Carter balked, grinning. "Lordy, man; do your own courting."

"Say!" the giant ejaculated, shocked. "You don't reckon she'd take it that way?"

Carter judiciously considered the question, and after mature deliberation replied: "I've seen breach-of-promise suits swing on less. But I reckon you're safe enough—if you explain your motive."

The giant sighed his relief. "Did you ever give a gal anything, Carter?"

"Did I? Enough to stock a farm if 'twas collected."

"How'd you go about it?"

"Why, jes' give it to her. You're bigger'n she is; kain't hurt you."

"Oh, Lordy, I don't know." Bender sighed again. "It's surprising what them small things kin do to you. Say, there's a good feller. You take it in?"

But Carter sternly refused, and five minutes later Bender might have been seen, stern and rigid from the desperate nature of his enterprise, sitting on one of Helen's soap-boxes. In the hour he talked with Morrill, he never once relaxed a death-grip on his hat. His eye never once strayed towards Helen, and it was late that evening when she found the kerchief under his box.

It speaks well for her that she did not laugh at its gorgeous colors; and her smile as she scribbled a little note of thanks that was delivered by Carter was far too tender for ridicule. Truly she was learning.

VI
THE SHADOW

Down a half-mile furrow that gleamed wetly black against the dull brown of "broken" prairie, Carter followed his oxen. He was "back-setting," deep-ploughing the sod that had lain rotting through the summer. For October, it was hot; an acrid odor, ammoniacal from his sweating beasts, mingled with the tang of the soil and the strong hay scent of scorching prairies. Summer was making a desperate spurt from winter's chill advance, and, as though realizing it, bird, beast, insects, as well as men, went busily about their business. The warm air was freighted with the boom of bees, vibrated to the whir of darting prairie-chicken, the yells of distant ploughmen; for, stimulated by an answer from the railroad gods, the settlers were striving to add to their wheat acreage.

"In certain contingencies," the general manager answered the petition, "we will build through Silver Creek next summer."

Judging by a remark dropped to his third assistant, "uncertain" would have expressed his meaning more correctly. "A little hope won't hurt them, and ought to go a long way in settling up the country. By-the-way, who signed these statistics? Cummings? That wasn't the tall Yankee who spoke so well. He never would have sent in such a jumble."

Blissfully ignorant, however, of railroad methods, the settlers interpreted the guarded answer as an iron promise. Forgetting Carter's part in getting them a hearing, Cummings and his fellows plumed themselves upon their diplomacy,

took to themselves the credit—in which they evidenced the secret malevolence that a rural community holds against the man who rises above its intellectual level. Human imperfection is invariable through the ages. Plebeian Athens ostracised the just Aristides. Similarly, Silver Creek evidenced its petty jealousy against its best brains. "Oh, he's too damned smart!" it exclaimed, whenever Carter was mentioned for the council, school trustee, or other public office, nor paused to consider its logic.

Slowly, with heavy gaspings, the oxen stopped at the end of the furrow, and as he sat down on the plough while they rested, Carter blessed the happy chance that had caused him to "break" clear down to Morrill's boundary. Helen sat in the shade of her cabin, thus affording him delicious glimpses of a scarlet mouth, slightly pursed over her sewing, a loose curl that glowed like a golden bar amid the creamy shadows of her neck, the palpitant life of the feminine figure. Small wonder that he lingered on that turn.

"It's that warm," he hypocritically remarked, fanning himself, "those poor critters' tongues are hanging to their knees."

The girl bowed to hide her smile. "They always seem to tire at this end of the field."

"Discerning brutes," he answered, nowise nonplussed.

She broke a silence. "It is considered bad manners to stare."

"Yes?" he cheerfully inquired. "I'll make a note of that."

A few moments later she remarked, "You have a poor memory."

"Thank you for telling. In what way?"

"You were staring."

"N-o."

"You were."

"Beg your pardon. It takes two to make a stare. If I keep on looking you in the eye—that's staring. If I'm looking when you ain't supposed to know it—that's—that's—"

"Well?" she prompted.

"Mighty pleasant," he finished, rising.

As he moved off she looked curiously after. While he was talking, some fleeting expression, trick of speech had recalled him as she first saw him at Lone Tree—a young man, tall, sunburned, soft of speech, ungrammatical, and the picture had awakened her to a change in herself. In this her fourth month in the settlement she felt she had lost the keen freshness of the stranger's point of view. She now scarcely noticed his idiom, accent, grammatical lapses. Oddities of speech and manner that at first would have provoked surprise or laughter no longer challenged her attention. If the land's vast rawness still impressed, she was losing the clarity of first perceptions.

She was being absorbed; her individuality was slowly undergoing the inevitable process of addition and cancellation. How dim, indefinite the past already seemed. Some other girl might have lived it, gone through the round of parties, balls, associated with the well-groomed men, refined girls of her acquaintance. How vivid, concrete was the present! She contemplated her hands, roughened by dish-washing. Did it foretell her future? Would this equilibration with environment end by leaving her peer of the gaunt, labor-stricken women of the settlements? She shuddered. The thought stamped her mood so that, returning on the other round, Carter passed on, thinking her offended.

"Why so grave, sis?" Her brother smiled down upon her from the doorway. Since her arrival he had had many ups and downs, alternating between bed-fast and apparent convalescence. To-day the fires of life would flare high, to flicker down to-morrow like a guttering candle that wastes the quicker to its end. Not for the world would she increase his anxiety with her foreboding. Hiding the dejection with a quick smile, she turned his question with another.

"Bert, why does Mr. Carter dislike Captain Molyneux, the Leslies, and—"

"The English crowd in general?" he finished for her. "Does he? I never heard him say much against them."

"No, he's one of your silent men. But actions count more than words. When he drives me to or from Leslies' he invariably refuses the invitation to come in, pleading hurry."

"Well, he has been pretty busy."

Morrill stated a fact. Carter had spent the haying months in the forest sloughs, where they cut the bulk of their fodder. There, with the deep woods smothering every errant breeze, mercury at a hundred, the fat marsh sweating underfoot, he had moved, raked, or pitched while sand-flies took toll of his flesh by day and mosquitoes converted his homeward journey into a feast of blood. Eighty head of cattle, his and Merrill's, had to be provided for, and he alone to do it. And it was from these heavy labors that he had stolen time to drive Helen back and forth.

"But he repels their every attempt at friendliness!" she protested. "Positively snubbed Captain Molyneux the other day."

Morrill laughed. "Why do they persist in their overtures? Carter is flesh and blood of the frontier, which makes no bones over its likes and dislikes. With him a friend is a friend. He has no use for civilization which calls upon its votaries to spread their friendship in a thin veneer over a vast acquaintance. Having, courteously enough, intimated that he doesn't desire closer acquaintance, he expects them to heed the hint. Failing, they may expect to have it stated in stronger terms. Molyneux has lived long enough in the north to know that." His answer, however, simply completed the circle and brought them back to the starting-point.

She restated the issue. "But why doesn't he like them?"

Morrill answered her question with another. "Why do you like them?"

"They are nice."

"Mrs. Leslie?" he catechised.

"A trifle frivolous, perhaps, but—I like her."

"Leslie, Danvers, Poole, and the rest of them?"

"Impractical," she admitted, "thoroughly impractical, all but Captain Molyneux. His farm is a model. Yet—I like them."

She spoke musingly, as though examining her feelings for cause, analysis of which would have shown that the wide differences between herself and her new acquaintances had added to the glamour and sparkle which are given off by fresh personalities. She liked their refinement, courtesy, subtleties, and grace of conduct which shone the brighter in that rough setting. To her their very speech was charming, with its broad vowels, leisurely drawled, so much softer than the clipped American idiom.

They were, indeed, over-refined. Five centuries ago the welding of Celt, Saxon, Roman, Norman into one homogeneous whole was full and complete; since then that potent mixture of blood had undergone slow stagnation. Noble privilege and laws of entail had checked in the motherland those selective processes which sweep the foolish, wicked, and vicious from the face of the earth. Protected by the aristocratic system, the fool, the idler, the roué had handed their undesirableness down the generations, a heavy mortgage on posterity. Ripe fruit of a vicious system, decay had touched them at the core; last links of a chain once strong, they had lacked the hot hammering from grim circumstance that alone could make them fit to hold and bind.

Morrill laid his thin finger on the spot. "All right, Nell, they are harmless." He laughed as he used the scornful term which the Canadian settlers applied to their English neighbors. "You must have some company. I don't dislike them myself, and would probably like them better if it was not for their insufferable national conceit and blind caste feeling. They look with huge contempt on all persons and things which cannot claim origin in the narrow bit of English society from which they sprang. I'm not denying their country's greatness. But, like the Buddhist, lost in contemplation of his own navel, they have turned their eyes inward till they're blind to all else. On we Americans they are particularly hard, regarding us with the easy tolerance that one may extend to the imperfections of an anthropoid ape. Now don't fire up! They have always been nice to me. Still I can feel the superiority beneath the surface. With Carter it is different. Him they classify with the Canadian settlers, and you may fancy the effect on a man who, in skill of hands and brain, character, all the things that count in life, stands waist-high above them. He sees them cheated, cozened by every shyster. Men

in years, they are children in experience, and if help from home were withdrawn not one could stand on his own legs. They are the trimmings of their generation, encumbrances on the family estate or fortune, useless timber lopped off from the genealogical tree. Do you wonder that he despises them?"

"I think," she said, after a thoughtful pause, "that he is too stern in his judgments. Impracticability isn't a crime, Bert, and people ought not to be blamed for the conditions that made them."

"True, little wisehead."

"He ought," she went on, "to be more friendly. I'm sure Mrs. Leslie likes him."

Morrill smothered a laugh. "Carter's a mighty handsome man, young lady, and Mrs. Leslie is—a shade impressionable. But in social affairs women decide on women, men on men."

She nodded, puckering her brow. "Yes, but he behaved dreadfully to Captain Molyneux."

Her genuine distress prevented the laugh from escaping. "Tell me about it," he sympathized.

"It was the other evening when he came to drive me home. Despite his reserve, the younger boys all like him, and when Captain Molyneux brought me out he was telling Mr. Poole and Mr. Rhodes about a horse that Danvers had bought from Cummings. 'The critter,' Carter said, 'is blind, spavined, sweenied, and old enough to homestead.'

"'Well,' the captain added, 'Danvers has always needed a guardian, Mr. Carter.'"

"In his patronizing way?" Morrill commented.

"A little, perhaps," she admitted. "Then, looking straight at us, Carter answered, 'He could have picked a worse.' What did he mean, Bert? The captain reddened and the boys looked silly."

Morrill grinned. "Well—you see, Nell, Molyneux's income is mostly derived from the farming of pupils who are apprenticed to him by a firm of London lawyers while under the impression that colonial farming is a complex business that requires years of study. Having whacked up from five hundred to five thousand dollars premium, they find, on arrival, that they have simply paid for the privilege of doing ordinary farm work. You said Molyneux's place was a model. No wonder, when he draws pay where other men have to hire. No, the business isn't exactly dishonorable!" He anticipated her question. "He does teach them something, and prevents them from falling into the hands of Canuck shysters who would bleed them for hundreds when he takes fifties. But—well, it isn't a business I'd care to be in. But there! I've talked myself tired, and Molyneux is coming at three to drive you up to Leslie's. You have just half an hour to dress."

"But I won't go," she protested, "if you're not feeling well."

"Bosh!" he laughed. "I'm dying to be rid of you. Expect to get quiet sleep this afternoon."

But as, half an hour later, he watched her drive away, his face darkened, and he muttered: "This will never do. She can't settle down to this life. Just as soon—" A fit of coughing left him gasping; but, under the merciful hallucination that attends consumption, he finished, "I'll sell out as soon as I'm rid of this cough and go back to the law."

Carter also watched her go. As, dank with sweat, grimed with dust and labor, he "geed" his oxen around the "land," she went by, a flutter of billowy white, deliciously dainty, cool, and clean. The contrast emphasized the difference between them so strongly that a sudden feeling of bitter hopelessness caused him to return only a stern nod to her bow and smile. Surprised, she looked back, and gleaning, perhaps, an intuition of his feeling from the dogged set of his face and figure, she was swept with sudden pity.

For a mile she was quiet; but while the sun shines youth may not hobnob with care, and that was a perfect day. Autumn's crimsons mottled the tawny prairies; waves of sunshine chased one another over the brown grasses to the distant forest line; and as, with cheerful clatter of pole and harness, the buggy dipped, swallow-like, over the long earth rolls, her spirits rose. She laughed, chatted, within five miles was involved in a mild flirtation. That was wicked! Of course! Afterwards, in private, she mortified the strain of coquetry that made such shame possible. Yet it was very natural. Given a handsome man, a pretty maid, and isolation, what else should follow? Molyneux had travelled in far countries and talked well of them and their savage peoples. He knew London, the Mecca of womankind, like a book; abounded in anecdotes of people and places that had been awesome names to her. Also he was skilled in subtle flattery, never exceeding by a hair's-breadth the amount which her vanity—of which she had a pretty woman's rightful share—could easily assimilate. Small wonder if she forgot the grim figure at the ploughtail.

Forgetfulness, however, was not for Carter. As he followed the steady rhythm of his furrows in heat and dust, heavy thought now loosened, now tightened the corners of his mouth. But bitterness did not hold him long.

"Baby! You are going to get her. But that ain't the way to play the game," he said, as the buggy disappeared. And she saw only friendliness in his smile on her return that evening and the score of other occasions on which he watched her goings and comings.

He "played his game" like a man, and with a masterly hand. Never obtrusive, he was always kind, cheerful, hopefully sympathetic during Merrill's bad spells. At other times his dry humor kept her laughing. He was always helpful.

When the snows blanketed the prairies he instructed her in the shifts of winter housekeeping—how to keep the cabin snug when the blizzard walled it in fleecy cloud; how to keep the frost out of the cellar and from the small stock of fruits in the pantry. Together they "froze down" a supply of milk against the time when it would be cruel to keep cows milking. A night's frost transmuted her pans of milk into oval cakes, which he piled out-doors like cordwood. A milk pile! The snows soon covered it, and how she laughed when, drawing home wood from the forest, he mistook the pile for a drift and so upset his load.

Indeed, he wrought well! Kindliness, good temper, consideration, these are splendid bases for love. Not that he ever hinted his hope. He was far too shrewdly circumspect. It speaks for the quality of his wit that he recognized that, given differences in rank and station, love must steal upon her from ambush. Startled, she would fly behind ramparts that would be proof against the small god's sharpest arrows. So he was very careful, masking his feeling under a gentle imperturbability; sure that, if not alarmed, she must turn to him in the coming time of trouble.

For Morrill had steadily failed since winter set in. During the Christmas week he rallied, recovered voice and color, improved so much that Helen yielded to his wish for her to attend a New Year's party at Mrs. Leslie's; and as she kissed him good-bye there was nothing to indicate that this was but the last flash, the leaping flame which precedes the darkness.

A genuine frontier party, it was to be an all-day affair, and Carter drove her up in the morning. New Year had broken beautifully: clear, bright, almost warm; for the first time in a month the mercury had thawed long enough to register twenty-eight below. There had been no wind or drift for a week, so the trail was packed hard, and as the ponies swept its curves, balancing the cutter on one or the other runner, rapid motion joined with pleasurable anticipation to raise the girl's spirits to the point of repentance.

"Here I'm laughing and chatting," she said, soberly, "when I ought to be home with Bert."

"Nonsense!" Carter glanced approvingly upon the glow which the keen air had brought to her cheeks. "You haven't been out for a month, and you were getting that pale and peaked. I shall be with him. Now you just go in for a good time."

His generous solicitude for her happiness, for she was going among people he did not like, touched her. "I wish you were coming," she said. Then she added, "Won't you come in—just for a little while—if Mrs. Leslie asks you?"

He returned her coaxing smile. "I'll see." And as the men were all away, clearing a slough for skating, he stayed long enough to drink a toast with Mrs. Leslie.

That lady's eyes shone with soft approval as, standing by the table that was already spread with glass, silver, and white napery, he bowed. "To your continued health and beauty."

"Now wasn't that pretty?" she exclaimed, after he was gone. "Do you know, standing there in his furs, so tall and strong, he reminded me of one of those old Norsemen who sometimes strayed into degenerate southern courts. You are happy in your cavalier, my dear. If he asked me, I believe I'd run away with him." And there was a sigh in her laugh. For though a good fellow, Leslie was prodigiously chuckle-headed, and she had moods when his simple foolishness was as unbearable as her own frivolity—dangerous moods for a woman of her light timber.

"I wish," she added, a little later, "that we could have persuaded him to stay."

He knew better. Striding, a conqueror, into southern halls, the Norseman cut a mighty figure where he would have made but a poor appearance as an invited guest. A thought that was expressed in Carter's meditation on the homeward drive.

"She meant it, shorely! But, bless her! you ain't to be drawn into such a brace game. You'd look nice among those dudes."

He had left no fire in his cabin, but he was not surprised when, afar off, he saw his stove-pipe flinging a banner of smoke to the crystal air. As yet the northland had not achieved refinements in the shape of locks and bolts, and, coming in from a forty-mile drive from a Cree village, Father Francis, the priest of the Assiniboin mission, had put in and brewed a jug of tea.

Easy, courteous in bearing, upright despite his silvered years, the priest came to the door and welcomed Carter home. "Not much travel beyond the settlements," he said. "It was pretty heavy going and my ponies are tired. So I'll just accept the old invitation, son, and stay the night—that is"—his mellow laugh rang out—"if my presence won't make you anathema maranatha unto your neighbors."

Carter knew them, their rigid dogmatism, the bigotry which made them look askance at this man who, for thirty years, had fought the devil over the face of a parish as big as an Eastern State.

"I don't allow that they'll more than excommunicate me," he grinned, "and if they do I reckon that you'd drop the bars of your fold."

"Gladly!" the priest laughed. "They are always down, son." So, seated by the humming stove with the jug steaming between them, the two settled down to exchange the news of the neighborhood—an elastic term that stretched over territory enough to set an Old-World kingdom up in business.

It was strange gossip. To the north of them—and not very far at that; old Fort Pelly lay within twenty miles—the Hudson Bay Company, the oldest of chartered traders, still lorded it over the tribes. In dark woods, on open prairies stood

the forts with their storehouses, fur lofts waiting groups of Indians. There Factor, Clerk, the Bois Brulés still lived and loved in the primitive fashion, careless of the settlement, first wave of civilization that was lipping around their borders. So the talk ran on fur packs, mishaps by trail or river, sinister doings in the far north, where the aftermath of the Metis rebellion was still simmering. A wild budget! What between it and Carter's choring, dark was settling as he and the priest entered Morrill's cabin.

Both started at what they saw. Despite Carter's optimism in Helen's presence, he had been fully alive to Morrill's condition, yet—he now stood, shocked, grieved in the presence of the expected.

The sick man was wellnigh spent, yet the stroke of death brought only a spark from his iron courage. "Another hemorrhage!" he whispered. "Shortly after you left. No, don't go for Helen. She gets so little pleasure. It is all over. I'll be all right to-morrow."

But it was *not* all over—though it would be "right" on the morrow. The rising moon saw Carter's ponies scouring the ghostly snows.

It had been a jolly party, skating in the afternoon, music and dancing in the evening; then, as reserve thawed under the prolonged association, they had fallen to playing Christmas games. Forfeits were being "declared" as Carter reined in at the door, and Mrs. Leslie's merry tones fell like blasphemy upon his ear.

"Fine or superfine?"

"Superfine? Then that must be Helen! Captain Molyneux will—" The penalty was drowned in uproar, which also smothered his knock. Followed loud laughter, and the door quivered under the impact of struggling bodies.

"Don't—please!"

Now, under Christmas license no girl is particularly averse to being kissed, and had Molyneux gone a little more gently about it, Helen had probably offered no more than the conventional resistance. But when he forced her head back so that her lips would come up to his with all the abandon of lovers, she broke his grip, and when pinned again against the door, struggled madly.

"Don't!"

There was no mistaking her accent. A flame of anger, leaping, confusing, blinded Carter. His every muscle contorted. From his unconscious pressure, hasp and handle flew from the door; as Mrs. Leslie shrieked her surprise, his hand dropped on Helen's shoulder, and from that small leverage his elbow sent Molyneux staggering back to the wall.

The action cleared his brain, calmed the great muscles that quivered under his furs with primordial impulse to break and tear. The flush faded from his tan, the flash from his eye. The hasp lay on the floor with the handle he had forgotten to turn. He saw neither them nor the guests in their postures of uneasy

astonishment. Before his mental vision rose the scene he had just left, the priest kneeling in prayer beside a dying man.

The reaction of his shove had thrown Helen in against him, and her touch recalled his mission. "Your brother—" he began, then paused. He had meant to break it gently, but the confusion of conflicting emotions left him nothing but the fact. "Is—" he went on, then, appalled by a sudden sense of the ruthlessness of it, he stopped. But, reading the truth in his eyes, she collapsed on his arm.

To Carter, waiting outside in the moonlight for Helen, came Molyneux, and the door closing behind him shut in the hum of wonder and the sobbing that came from the bedroom where the women were putting on their wraps.

Molyneux was smoking, though, to give him his due, he did not require that invaluable aid to a cool bearing. Regarding the spirals, curling sharply blue in the moonlight, he remarked, "I don't quite understand your methods, my friend." The insolence of the "my friend" is indescribable. "It may be fashionable in Stump town to announce bad news by breaking down a gentleman's door, but with us—it savors of roughness."

"*Roughness?*" Carter scrutinized the dim horizon. "It wasn't all on one side of the door—*my friend*." His mimicry was perfect.

The captain hummed, cleared his throat. "A little Christmas foolery—perfectly allowable."

Carter's gaze shifted to the nimbus about the moon, a clear storm warning. "Foolery becomes roughness when it ain't agreeable to both parties."

"Who told you it wasn't?"

"My ear. If yours didn't—it needs training."

Molyneux smoked out a pause that perhaps covered a slight confusion. "Well, I don't care to accept you for a music-master. Under the distressing circumstances, I shall have to let it pass—for the present. But I shall not forget."

Carter smiled at the moon. "Looks like storm?"

VII

MR. FLYNN STEPS INTO THE BREACH

After putting forth a feeble straggle on the morning of the funeral, the pale

winter sun retired for good as the north wind began to herd the drift over vast white steppes. Though fire had been kept up all night in Merrill's cabin by Mrs. Flynn, who had come in to perform the last offices, a pail of water had frozen solid close to the stove. After a quarter of an hour in the oven, a loaf of bread yet showed frost crystals in its centre at breakfast; a drop of coffee congealed as it fell in the saucer.

It was, indeed, the hardest of weather. By noon a half-inch of ice levelled the window-panes with the sash; pouring through the key-hole a spume of fine drift laid a white finger across the floor. Outside, the spirit thermometer registered forty-five below. The very air was frozen, blanketing the snow with lurid frost clouds. Yet, though a pair of iridescent "sun-dogs" gave storm warnings, a score of Canadian settlers, men and women, assembled for the service in the cabin. Severe, silent, they sat around on boards and boxes, eying Mrs. Leslie and other English neighbors with great disfavor, inwardly critical of the funeral arrangements. For ceremony and service had been stripped of the lugubrious attributes which gave mournful satisfaction to the primitive mind. Helen herself, in her quiet grief, was a disappointment; and she wore no black or other grievous emblem. Worse! The casket-lid was screwed down, and, filched of their prerogative of "viewing the corpse," they turned gloomy faces to the theological student who had come out from Lone Tree.

Here was an additional disappointment. Afterwards, in the stable, it was held that he had not improved the occasion. Of Morrill, who had been so lax in his attendance at occasional preachings as to justify a suspicion of atheism, he could have made an edifying text, thrilling his hearers with doubts as to whether the man was altogether fallen short of grace. But there was none of this. Just a word on the brother's sunny nature and brave fight against wasting sickness, and he was passed without doubt of title to mansions in the skies.

"I don't call that no sermon," Hines growled, as he thrust a frosty bit into his pony's mouth. "Missed all the good points, he did."

"Never heerd the like," said Shinn, his neighbor, nearest in disposition as well as location. "Not a bit of crape for the pall-bearers. I know a person that ain't going to be missed much."

"I've heerd," another man said, "as he doubted the Scriptures. If that is so—Is it true as the Roman priest was with him at the last?"

Hines despondently nodded. "We'll hope for the best," he said, with an accent that murdered the hope.

Shinn, however, who never could compass the art of suggestion, gave plainer terms to his thought. "There ain't a doubt in my mind. It's a warning to turn from the paths he trod."

"You needn't be scairt." From the gloom of the far corner, where he was

harnessing the team that was to draw the burial sleigh, Bender's voice issued. "You needn't be scairt. There ain't a damn one of you travelling his trail."

Ensued a silence, then Hines snarled, "No, an' I ain't agoing to follow him on this. If you fellows want to tag after priests' leavings, you kin. I'm pulling my freight for home."

"You're what?"

Hines quailed as Bender's huge body and blue-scarred face materialized from the gloom. "I said as 'twas too cold to go to the grave."

"You did, eh? Well, you're going. Not that your presence is necessary, but just because you ain't to be allowed to show disrespect to a better man than yourself. Tie up that hoss. You're agoing to ride with me. An' if there's any other man as thinks his team ain't fit to buck the drifts"—his fierce eyes searched for opposition—"he'll find room in my sleigh."

So with Hines—albeit much against his will—heading the procession, a long line of sleighs sped through the mirk drift to the lonely acre which had been set apart for the *long* sleep. A few posts and a single wire marked it off from white wastes, and through these the drift flew with sibilant hiss, piling against the mounded grave which Flynn and Carter had thawed out and dug, inch by inch, with many fires, these last two days. And there was small ceremony. King Frost is no respecter of persons, freezes alike the quick and the dead. Removing his cap to offer a short prayer, the student's ears turned deathly white; while he rubbed them with snow, the mourners spelled one another with the shovels, working furiously in vain efforts to warm chilled blood. Roughly filled, the grave was left to be smoothed in warmer season; the living fled, leaving the dead with the drift, the frost, the wind, stern ministers of the illimitable.

No woman had dared the weather. Lying in the bottom of a sled, under hides and blankets, with hot stones at hands and feet, Helen had gone home with Mrs. Leslie. Coming back from the grave she formed the subject of conversation between Flynn and Carter, who rode together.

To Flynn's inquiry Carter replied that, as far as he was aware, she had no private means. Her father, a physician in good practice in a New England town, had lived up to every cent of his income, and the insurance he carried had been mortgaged to start the brother out West.

"Not having any special training," Carter finished, "she had to choose between a place in a store or keeping house for him."

"It's no snap in them sthores," Flynn sighed. "Shmall pay an' big temptations, they're telling me." Then, giving Carter the tail of his eye, he added, "But there'll be nothing else for it—now?"

"Oh, I don't know," Carter mused. "Flynn, are you and the other married folks around here going to let your families grow up in ignorance? Ain't it pretty

nigh time you was forming a school district?"

In the slit between his cap and scarf the Irishman's eyes twinkled like blue jewels. Affecting ignorance, however, he answered, "An' phwere would we be after getting a teacher in this frozen country?"

"Miss Morrill."

Flynn subdued his laugh out of respect to the occasion. "Jest what's in me own mind. An' there'll be no lack av children for the same school, me boy, when you—There, don't be looking mad! 'Tis after the order of nature; an' I'm not blaming ye, she's sweet as she's pretty. Putting you an' me out av the question, I'd do it for her. An' it shouldn't be so hard—if we can corral the bachelors. But lave thim to me."

And Flynn went about it with all the political sagacity inherent in his race. "We'll not be spreading the news much," he told the married men to whom he broached the subject. "Not a word till we get 'em in meeting, or they'll organize an' vote us down."

Accordingly the summons to gather in public meeting was issued without statement of purpose, a mystery that brought out every settler for twenty miles around. An hour before time, some fifty men, rough-looking fellows in furs, arctic socks, moose-skins, and moccasins, crowded into the post-office, which, as most centrally located, was chosen for the meeting.

The expected opposition developed as soon as the postmaster, who presided, mentioned "eddycation."

"More taxation!" a bachelor roared. "You're to marry the girls an' we're to eddycate the kids!"

"Right you are, Pete!" others chorused.

But Flynn was ready. "Is that you, Pete Ross?" He transfixed the speaker with his blue twinkle. "An' yerself coorting the Brown girl so desprit that she don't get time to comb her hair anny more?

"An' you, Bill MacCloud," he went on, as Peter, growling that he "wasn't married yet," carried his blushing face behind the stove, "you that's galloping your ponies so hard after the Baker girl. Twins it was, twice running, in her mother's family, an' well ye know it. A public school ain't good enough for you, Bill? Which is to be—a governess, or a young ladies' siminery?"

So, one after another, Flynn smote the bachelors. Had a man so much as winked at a girl, it made a text for a sermon that was witty as *risque*.

Yet he was so good-tempered about it that by the time he had finished grilling the last victim the first-cooked were joining their laughter to that of the married men.

Then Flynn turned his eloquence upon a common evil. Everywhere the best of the land had passed into the hands of non-resident speculators, who hin-

dered settlement and development by holding for high prices. "Was it a question of increased taxation?" Flynn asked. Then let the non-residents pay. Under the law they could expend eight hundred dollars on a building. Well, they would distribute the contracts among themselves—one man cut logs, another hew them, a third draw them, and so on! Every man should have a contract, an' who the divil would care if taxes were raised on the speculators.

It was his closing argument, however, that finished the bachelors. "Now me an' Jimmy have spotted a teacher, a right smart young woman—"

A howl of applause cut him short—the bachelors would call it settled!

Thus it came to pass that as, a week or so after the funeral, Carter was driving Helen from Leslie's back to her cabin, a deputation consisting of Mr. Flynn and Mr. Glaves was heading in the same direction.

All that week the cabin had stood, fireless, a mournful blot on the snowscape, but though she was only to be there for the hour required to pack her belongings, Carter had swept out the drift that morning and put on the fires. So the place was cosey and warm. Yet, with all its cheer, on entering, she relapsed into the first passionate grief. For nothing is so vividly alive as the things of a dead person, and everywhere her glance fell on objects her brother had used. Divining the cause, Carter left her to have her cry out on pretence of stable chores, and when he returned she was busily packing.

So while she worked he talked, explaining her affairs as related to himself through his partnership with Morrill. Their cattle were worth so much, but as it would require a summer's grazing to fit them for market, he would advance the money on her share. He did not mention the fact that he would have to borrow it himself at usurer's interest. As to the homestead: Land was unsalable since the bottom fell out of the boom, but in any case it was advisable to hold for the values that would accrue with the coming of the railroad. He would rent it, on settler's terms, paying roadwork and taxes for use of the broken land.

As, kindly thoughtful for her interests, he ran on, she rose from her packing, grasped his hand impulsively, squeezed his arm to her bosom.

"You have been so good!" The sunsets in her cheeks, the softness of her glance, her touch, almost upset his reason. But he resisted a mad impulse.

"Nonsense!" he said, when he could trust himself to speak. "I'm going to make money off you."

"Really?" she asked, smiling.

"Really," he smiled back.

"I—wish you could," she sighed. "But I am afraid you are saying that to please me. Well, you know best. Do as you please."

Had he done as he pleased, the question of their mutual interests would have been simply solved. But the time was not ripe. He was too shrewd to

mistake gratitude for love.

"Now," he said, resolutely thrusting away temptation, "if it's any of my darn business—what are your plans?"

"My plans?" Leaning on the table beside him, she gazed dreamily upon the frosted panes. The question forced in upon her the imminence of impending change and brought a feeling of strong revulsion. The ties that death forges are stronger than those of life. It was inexpressibly painful, just then, to think of leaving the land which held her recent dead.

"My plans!" she mused, knitting her brows. "I haven't any—yet. Of course I have relatives, back East. But as father did not like them, I hardly know more than their names. I shall have to do something, but Mrs. Leslie is so good. She won't hear of me leaving until spring. I have heaps of time to plan."

But having bucked trail all morning, the solution of her immediate future just then heralded its arrival by the groan of frosty runners.

"Me an' Jimmy," Mr. Flynn explained, after he had introduced his co-trustee, "is a depytation. Being as it's the only crop the frost won't nip, Silver Creek is going to raise a few legislators. We want the young lady to teach our school."

"But," Helen objected, when she had assimilated the startling news, "I never taught school."

"You'll nivir begin younger," Flynn comforted; to which he added, "An' it's the foinest training agin the time ye'll have a few av your own."

Mr. Glaves solemnly contemplated the blushing candidate. "You kin sum, ma'am—an' spell?"

"Oh yes," she assured him. "I graduated from high-school."

"You don't say!" Both trustees regarded her with intense admiration, and Glaves said, "We didn't expect to get that much for our money, so we'll jest have you go a bit easy at first, lest there'll be some sprained intellec's among the kiddies."

VIII
WHEN APRIL SMILED AGAIN

"We'll begin right soon on the building," Mr. Glaves had said at parting. So when the mercury began to take occasional flights above zero in the last days of February, a gang turned loose in the bush. For two weeks thereafter falling trees and

the bell-like tinkle of a broadaxe disturbed the forest silence. Then spring rode in on the back of a Chinook wind and caught them hauling. Ensued profanity. Thawing quickly, the loose snows slid away from the packed trails, causing the sleds to "cut off"; the bush road was mottled with overturned loads. Also the brilliant sun turned the snowscape into one huge reflector. Faces frizzled. Dark men took the colors of raw beefsteak, fair men peeled and cracked like overripe tomatoes. Yet they persisted, and one day in early April stood off to look on their finished work. "Chinked," sod-roofed, plastered, the log school-house gleamed yellow under the rays of the dying sun—education, the forerunner of civilization, had settled in the land.

As his cabin was nearest the school, the honor of boarding the teacher fell to the postmaster; and though her choice caused heart-burnings among others who had coveted the distinction, it was conceded wise. For not only did the Glaves's establishment boast the only partitioned room in the Canadian settlement, but his wife, a tall, gaunt woman, excelled in the concoction of carrot-jams, turnippies, choke-cherry jellies, and other devices by which skilled housewives eke out the resources of an inhospitable land.

In the middle of April school opened; a dozen small thirsters after knowledge arranged themselves in demure quiethood before authority that was possessed of its own misgivings. Teacher and scholars regarded one another with secret awe. But this soon wore off and they toiled amicably along the road which winds among arithmetical pitfalls and grammatical bogs to academic glories. It was milestoned by deputations, that road, said visitations generally consisting of one person—mostly unmarried and very red in the face—who inquired if the "kids was minding their book," then went off chuckling at his own hardihood. Also it seemed as though all the stray cattle for fifty miles around headed for the school. Helen grew quite expert in ringing variations on the fact that she "had not seen a strawberry steer with a white patch on the left flank." Her smile always accompanied the answer, and the owners of the hypothetical estrays would carry away a vision of a golden and glorified school-ma'am. What of these pleasant interests, and an unexpected liking which she had developed for the work itself, she became very happy in a quiet way as time dulled the edge of her sorrow.

But during the three months that preceded school opening the fates had not been idle. Attending strictly to their knitting, they had run a tangled woof in and out the warp of several lives.

"She's so good!" Helen had exclaimed, in her gratitude of Mrs. Leslie; but analysis of that lady's motives would have shown them not altogether disinterested.

Excluding a certain absence of principle that was organic, and therefore hardly chargeable against her till philosophers answer the question, "Can the

leopard change his spots or the Ethiop his skin?" Mrs. Leslie was not fundamentally vicious. Like the average of men and women, she would have preferred to have been good, and, given a husband whom she feared and loved, she might have developed into a small Puritan mightily jealous for their mutual prestige. Lacking this, however, she was as a straw in a corner, ready to rise at the first wind puff. If, so far, she had lived in the fear of Mrs. Grundy, her conformity inhered in two causes—no man in her own set had stirred her nature, and, till Helen came, the winds of Opportunity had blown away from Carter.

What drew her to him she herself could hardly have said; and if the cause is to be found outside of the peculiar texture of her own nature, it must be in the natural law which makes opposites attract. Nature wars incessantly against the stratification which precedes social decay. Whether of blood or water, she abhors stagnation. Her torrential floods cleanse the backwaters of languid streams; passionate impulses, such as Mrs. Leslie's, provide for the injection into worn-out strains of the rich corpuscles that bubble from the soil. Carter's virile masculinity, contrasting so strongly with the amiable effeminacy of her own set, therefore attracted Mrs. Leslie, and, having now lassoed Opportunity—in the shape of Helen—she hitched the willing beast and drove him tandem with inclination.

Either by intuition or knowledge subtly wormed from himself or others, she learned Carter's habits, and no matter the direction of the drives which she and Helen took together, it was pure accident if they did not come in touch with him. Also at intervals they called at his cabin, after one of which visits Mrs. Leslie put the house-cleaning idea into Helen's head, insinuating it so cleverly that the girl actually thought that it originated with herself.

"Did you *ever* see anything *so* untidy?" she exclaimed, as on that occasion they drove homeward. "Harness, cooking-pots, provisions, all in a tangle. Bachelors are such grubby creatures! But really, my dear, he deserves to be comfortable. Couldn't we do something?—hire some one to—"

If she had counted on the girl's grateful enthusiasm, it did not fail her. "Let's do it ourselves!" she exclaimed. "I'd love to!"

So, in Carter's absence, the two descended upon the cabin with soap, pails, and hot water. Mrs. Leslie, the delicate, white-armed woman who kept a girl to do her own work, rolled up her sleeves and fell to work like a charwoman; and it is doubtful if she were ever happier than while thus expending, in service, her reserve of illegal feeling. There was, indeed, something pitiful in her tender energy. When, the cleaning done, she sat demurely mending a rent in Carter's coat, she might have been the young wife of her imaginings.

Her sentimental expression moved Helen to laughter. "You look *so* domestic!" she tittered. "So soft and contemplative. One would think—"

Mrs. Leslie was too clever for transparent denial. "I don't care," she an-

swered. "I like him. He's awfully dear." And her expressed preference affected Helen—helped to break down the last barriers of caste feeling between herself and Carter. Till then she had always maintained a slight reserve towards him, but when, coming in unexpectedly, he caught them at their labors, she was as free and frank with him as she had ever been with a man of her old set. The change expressed itself in her hand-shake at parting, though it fell far short of Mrs. Leslie's lingering pressure.

In his surprise at the quantity and quality of the latter, Carter may have returned it, or Mrs. Leslie may have mistaken the reaction of her own grip for answer. Anyway, she thought he did, and on the way home plead weariness as an excuse to indulge luxurious contemplations. She fed on his every look, tone, accent, coloring them all with her own feeling, an indulgence for which she would pay later; indeed, she was even then paying, in that it was eating away her weak moral fibre as acid eats a metal, preparing her for greater licenses. At first, however, she was timorous—content with small touches, accidental contacts, the physical sense of nearness when, as often happened, they coaxed him to take them for a drive behind his famous ponies.

But such slight fare could not long suffice for her growing passion. Having observed, outwardly, the laws of social morality only because, so far, they had consorted with inclination; knowing, inwardly, no law but that of her own pleasure, it was only a question of time until she would become desperate enough to balance reputation against indulgence.

This came to pass a couple of months after Helen had opened up school, and would have happened sooner but that even a reputation cannot be given away without a bidder. Not that Carter was ignorant or indifferent to her feeling. Two thousand years have failed to make man completely monogamous and he is never displeased at a pretty woman's preference. A condition had interposed between the fire and the tow. In every man's life there comes a time when, for the moment, he is impervious to the call of illicit passion. A first pure love bucklers him like a shining ægis, and while certain pure eyes looked out upon Carter from earth, air, and sky, wherever his fancy strayed, he would not barter a sigh for the perishable commodity Elinor Leslie offered. Having, however, formed her judgments of men from the weak masculinity about her, she could not realize this. Imagining that he would come at the crook of her finger, she tried to recapture Opportunity.

"Mr. Carter was so kind and considerate of Helen that I think we ought to take him up," she said to her husband one day; and Leslie, whose good-natured stupidity lent itself to every suggestion, readily agreed.

Unfortunately for her scheme, Carter proved unfelicitously blind to his interest—as she saw it. Negatively, he refused to be "taken up," offering good-natured excuses to all of Leslie's invitations. So nothing was left but the oc-

casional opportunities afforded by Helen's week-end visits. And these did not always lend themselves to Mrs. Leslie's purpose. When Molyneux brought her up—as happened half the time—he made full use of his monopoly; while Carter, in his turn, often drove her down to see Jenny in Lone Tree.

To do the young lady justice, she held a fairly even balance between those, her two cavaliers. According to the canons of romance she ought to have fallen so deeply in love with one as to hate the other. Instead she found herself liking them both.

There was, of course, a difference in the quality of her feeling. Strange feminine paradox! she was drawn to Molyneux by the opposite of the qualities on which she based her feeling for Carter. At heart woman is a reformer, and once convinced of his sincerity towards herself, the fact that Molyneux was reputed something of a sinner increased rather than lessened her interest. She experienced the joys of driving the lion in leading-strings, ignoring the danger of the beast turning upon her with rending fangs. Feeling her power, she tried to exercise it for his good, and felt as virtuous over the business as if it were not a form of vanity, and a dangerous one at that. Anyway, she rode and drove with him so much that spring and summer that she practically annihilated Mrs. Leslie's chances of seeing Carter.

That lady could, however, and did observe him in secret. Riding from home while Leslie was busy seeding, she would make a wide détour, keeping the lowlands, and so bring up, unobserved, in a poplar clump that afforded a near view of Carter's fields.

One day will example a score of others. It was, as aforesaid, seeding-time. Stripped of her snowy bodice, the earth lay as some brown virgin, her bosom bared to man's wooing and the kisses of the sun and rain. From her covert Mrs. Leslie could see his ox-team slowly crawling upon the brown fields which, as yet, had known no bearing yoke. Those days love was suggested by everything in nature. The air quivered in passionate lines down the horizon. Warmth, light, love were omnipresent. By every slough the mallard brooded. Overhead the wild goose winged northward to bring forth her kind on the rim of polar seas. Prairie cocks primped and ruffled on every knoll before their admiring hens. To her it seemed that birds and beasts, flesh and fowl were happier than she in their matings. Passionately, with bursting sighs, she strained at her chains, wildly challenging the marriage institution which has slowly evolved from the travail of a thousand generations.

Hers was the old struggle between the flesh and the spirit, the struggle that gave the sexless desert its hermit population. With this difference: Ancestry had bequeathed to her no spirit. She had nothing to pit against the flesh but her own unruly inclination. For her the battle offered no meed of victory in the form of

chastity triumphant. The "dice of God were loaded"; she was striving against the record of foolish or vicious fathers. And she played so hard! At times, little heathen in spite of her culture, her eyes looked out upon him from the spring greenery with the tender longing of a mother deer; again they blazed with baffled fires; often she threw herself down in a passion of tears. So, feeding upon its very privations, her distemper waxed until, one June evening, it burst all bounds.

Returning through late gloaming with his weekly mail, Carter came on her holding her horse by the trail. Her voice, low yet vibrant, issued from the gloom.

"I'm afraid I shall have to trouble you for a ride, Mr. Carter; my saddle-girth has burst."

"Your hand is wet. It's blood!" he exclaimed, as he handed her in.

"I fell on a sharp stone. Will you please tie this handkerchief."

Bending to comply, he saw that the wound was clean-cut, and this may have caused him to examine the girth before he threw the saddle on behind. Then he knew—was certain as though he had seen her slash it with the penknife that lay in the scrub near by.

Picking up a stone, he pounded the severed edges on the wheel-tire; pounded them to a frazzle while she looked on, her pupils dilated in the half light, large, soft, black as velvet, intensifying a curious mixture of expectation and content. But if she read consent in the pains he was at with her excuse, alarmed surprise displaced expectation when, climbing in, he drove on without a word.

She glanced up, tentatively, once, twice, a dozen times at the erect figure, but always he stared ahead. Again and again her scarlet lips trembled, but she choked; sound halted on its bitten thresholds. Once she touched his arm, but he drew sharply away and his hand rose and flung beaded sweat from his brow. So, for a tumultuous age it seemed to her, they whirled through the gathering night, rattled on until a slab of light burst through the darkness.

Followed Leslie's voice. "Hullo, Elinor! What's the matter?"

She stiffened—Carter felt her stiffen as in a mortal rigor—but she answered, in level tones: "Oh, nothing much. My saddle-girth burst and Mr. Carter kindly drove me home. Won't you come in? Well—I'm ever so much obliged. Good-night."

Whirling homeward through the soft dusk, the tumult which had confused Carter resolved into its elements, shame, chagrin, wonder, and disgust. Each swayed him in turn, then faded, leaving pity. Flaring up in his cabin, his match revealed only concern on his sunburned face. Taking a packet from under the pillow of his bunk, he unfolded it upon the table, exposing a glove, a ribbon, and some half-dozen hairs that gleamed, threads of gold, under the lamplight. One by one he had gleaned them, picking the first from the back of Helen's coat one

day coming out of Lone Tree.

As he leaned over the trove there was no mawkish sentimentality in his look, rather it expressed wonder, wonder at himself. For his life had not always jibed with the canons. To him in their appointed seasons had come the heats of youth; and if now they had merged in the deeper instinct which centres on a single mate, the change had been sub-conscious. The house he had built, the land he tilled, the herds he had gathered about him were all products of this instinct, provision against mating, for the one—when he should find her. Yet, though found, he wondered; wondered at the powerful grip which that small hand had wound into his heart-strings, that those golden threads should be able to bind with the strength of cables.

He did not puzzle long. Presently concern again darkened his countenance, and he murmured, "Poor little woman! poor little thing!"

Could he have seen her just then! Leslie was out talking horse with Molyneux at the stables, so no eye saw her when, in the privacy of her bedroom, she snatched the mask from her soul. At first stupefied, she stared dully at familiar objects until her glance touched a portrait of Helen on the dresser. That fired her passion, started the wheels of torture. Dashing it to the floor, she ground her heel into the smiling face, raving in passionate whispers; then flinging at length on the bed she writhed like a hurt snake, struck her clinched fists into the pillows, bit them, her own hands, soft arms. She agonized under the scorn that belittles hell's fury. Truly, out of her indulgences, her pleasant mental vices, the gods had twisted whips for her scourging!

But if whips, as claimed, are deterrents of physical crimes, they stimulate moral diseases; and whereas, previously, Mrs. Leslie had been merely good-naturedly frivolous, she came from under the lashes a dangerous woman—the more dangerous because there was no outward indication of the inward change. With Helen, whom Molyneux brought up at the next week-end, she was, if anything, kinder in manner, loving her with gentle pats that gave no suggestion of steel claws beneath the velvet. These, however, protruded, when the girl borrowed her horse to pay a visit to Carter.

Mrs. Leslie and Molyneux watched her away from the door. The lady had plead a headache in excuse for staying at home, but her eyes were devoid of weary languor. They had flashed as she averted them from the mended saddle-girth. They glittered as she now turned them on Molyneux.

"Calvert, you amuse me."

"Why?" he asked, flushing.

"Such devotion in that last lingering glance. It was worthy of a boy in a spasm of calf-love rather than the dashing cavalryman who has tried to add my reputation to the dozen that hang at his belt."

Molyneux shrugged denial. "That's not true, Elinor. I'm too good a hunter to stalk the unattainable."

She laughed, bowing. "Do I sit on such high peaks of virtue?"

"Or of indifference. It amounts to the same. Anyway, I saw that there was no chance for *me*."

Again she laughed. "What *significance*!"

"Well—I'm not blind, as—Leslie, for instance. I only wonder."

"At what?"

"Your taste."

She made a face at Helen's distant figure. "I might return your thought. After all, Calvert, from our viewpoint, you know, she's only a higher type of native—dreadfully anthropomorphic."

"Exactly," he answered. "And that's why I"—pausing, he substituted an adverb more in accordance with Mrs. Leslie's ironical mood—"like her. She's fresh, sound, and clean of body and mind. Clings to the ideals we chucked overboard a hundred years ago—lives up to them with all the vim and push of her race. She stirs me—"

"As a cocktail does a jaded palate," Mrs. Leslie interposed. "And a good enough reason; it will serve for us both, since you are so frank, Calvert. It is not your fancy I am laughing at, but your diffidence, the morbid respectability with which you wait till it pleases her to give that which you have been accustomed to command from others. It is quite touching.... But why this timidity? Why do you linger?"

"Because—" He paused, feeling it impossible to yield the real reason up to her mockery; to tell that the girl had touched a deeper chord of feeling than had ever been reached by a woman's hand; that she had broken the cynical crust which had been formed by years of association with the sophisticated women of the army set. He threw the onus back on her. "That's rich, Elinor. Here, for months, you have fenced her about; given her steady chaperonage; warned me to tone down to avoid giving offence. Now you ask why? Have you forgotten how you rated me for my violence in pressing her under the mistletoe?"

"Pish!" She contemplated him scornfully. "I only advised caution. And then—" She also paused; then, thrusting reserve to the winds, went on: "And then she hadn't come between me and—my wish. Now she has. And let me tell you, my friend"—she returned to her "cocktail" simile—"that while you linger, inhaling virginal aromas, a strong hand will slip in and drain the glass. Will you stand by and see her sweetness sipped by another? Now, don't strike me."

He looked angry enough to do it, but contented himself with throwing back her question, "Why do you linger?"

"Because I cannot drain my cup"—her lips quivered thirstily—"till yours is

out of the way. He has the bad taste to prefer her spotlessness to my—"

"Sophistication?" he supplied.

She nodded. "Thanks. And he will continue to do so until you take her out of the way. So—it is up to you, as the boys say. I think, too, that she suspects that my interest is not altogether platonic, and as a commodity enhances in value as it is desired by others, her liking may be spurred into love. At present she's balanced. Likes you, I know. Better strike while the iron is hot."

"I would if I thought—" he began, then went on, musingly: "But I've sized it up as slow-going. Didn't think she was the kind that can be rushed."

Mrs. Leslie snorted her disdain. "You? With all your experience! To set her on a pinnacle! How long before you men will learn that we would rather be taken down and be hugged. While the saint worships at the shrine the sinner steals the image. I warrant you my big American won't waste any time on his knees. However, I've warned—here comes Fred from the stables."

That was not the end of their talk. It recurred at every opportunity; and by the time Helen returned Molyneux was persuaded against his better judgment that he had gone too easily about his wooing.

"What thou doest, do quickly," she whispered, as he went out to hitch to take Helen home. And as they drove away she gazed long after them from the door.

What was she thinking? Given a woman of firmer texture, one whose acts flowed from steady impulses, in turn the effects of settled character, thought may be guessed. But Mrs. Leslie's light nature veered to every wind of passion. She could not even hate consistently. Was she swayed altogether by revenge, or, as hinted by her talk with Molyneux, was hope beginning to rise from the ashes of despair?

IX
THE DEVIL

If, as said, the devil can quote Scripture for his own purposes, it does not follow that said purposes are always fulfilled.

Molyneux had better have followed his intuition and "gone slowly." But if, in brains and capacity, he towered above the average of his remittance-fellows, the taint of his ancient blood yet showed in a pliability to suggestion, a childish

eagerness to snatch unripe fruit. Whereas, by a quiet apology, he had long ago repaired his error in the Christmas games, he must now commit greater foolishness.

Consciously and unconsciously, in varying degrees, Helen aided his blundering. She could not help looking her prettiest. But her delicacies of cream and rose, the tender mouth, the bosom heaving under its lace, did not require the accentuation of coquetry. It was the healthy coquetry of the young animal, to be sure, unconscious, as much as can be. She need not, however, have authorized his gallantries with laugh and smile—would not, had she realized his limitations, his confused morality, subordinance to passion, emotional irresponsibility.

Afterwards she had but a confused notion how the thing came to pass. They laughed, chatted, jested, while the tenderness in his manner bordered more and more on the familiar. He had been telling her of the strange marriage custom of an Afghan tribe and had asked how she would like such a forceful wooing.

"I think," she answered, "that a strain of the primitive inheres in our most cultured women. I'm sure I could never love a man who was not my master."

She spoke thoughtfully, considering the proposition in the abstract; but he, in his blind folly, interpreted concretely. In the sudden lighting of his face she read her mistake. But before she could put out a hand in protest, his arms were about her, his searching lips smothered her cry. She fought wildly, spent her strength in a desperate effort, then capitulated—lay, panting, while he fed on her face, neck, hair, her lips. And it was well she did. Prolonged resistance would only have provoked him to freer license. As it was, mistaking quiescence for acquiescence, he presently held her off that his hot eyes might share the spoil.

She now fully realized her danger. His expression, the glassy look of his eyes filled her with repulsion, but she summoned to her aid all the craft that centuries of dire need have bred in her race. She smiled up in his face, rather a pallid smile, but sufficient for his fooling. A playful hand held him back from another kiss.

"You are very rough," she whispered.

"Consider the provocation," he answered, dodging the hand.

She tried not to shrink. "You upset me," she murmured. "I am quite faint. Is there any water near by?"

She had noticed a slough ahead. Driving into it, he bent over and wet her handkerchief.

"Now if I could only drink."

He stepped ankle-deep into the water. "Out of my hands." But as he stooped, with concave palms, there came a rattle behind him.

Uttering an oath, he sprang—too late. As he waded to dry land she swung the ponies in a wide circle and reined in about fifty yards away. While he looked

sheepishly on, she wiped her face with the kerchief, rubbed and scrubbed till the skin shone red where his lips had touched, then tossed the kerchief towards him and drove on.

A prey to remorse, shame, he stood gazing after. All said, a man's ideals are formed by the people about him. A virtuous woman, a leal friend, raise his standard for the race; and just then Molyneux would have given his life to place himself in the friendly relation that obtained between them a half-hour ago.

But he could not. Nor could all of Helen's vigorous rubbing remove the memory of those shameful kisses. Her bitten lips were scarlet when, a quarter-hour later, she rattled up to Carter's shanty; her eyes were heavy with unshed tears.

Now here was a first-class opportunity for him to play the fool. An untimely question, a little idiotic sympathy would have put him in a worse case with her than Molyneux. But though inwardly perturbed, shaking with anxiety, he kept a grip on himself.

"Such reckless driving!" he exclaimed, harking back to her own words on that first drive from Lone Tree. Then solemnly surveying Molyneux's hat, which was perched funnily on the seat beside her, he went on, "Looks like you've lost a passenger."

His twinkle removed the tension. Looking down on the hat, she laughed; and if, a minute later, she cried, the tears that wet his shoulder were not cast against him.

"If you will return the ponies," she said, when her cry was out—she had already told him enough to explain the situation—"I'll stay here till you come back and then you may drive me home—if you will?"

"And I'll find him?" She laughed at his comical accent as he intended she should.

"About three miles back."

"Any message?"

She sensed the menace. "Oh no! If you quarrel, I'll never, never forgive you. Now, please!" She placed her hand on his arm.

"All right," he agreed, and, five minutes later drove off with the Devil pony in leash behind.

From afar Molyneux saw him coming and braced for the encounter, but Carter had gotten himself well in hand. "Miss Morrill," he said, "is real sorry she couldn't hold the ponies. But, Lordy, man, you oughtn't to have gone picking flowers."

"He's lying!" Molyneux thought, but followed the lead. "Yes, it was careless. But, you know, it is always the unexpected that happens."

"You're dead right there."

The significance caused Molyneux to redden; but he tried to carry it off easily. "And I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Carter. Can't I drive you home?"

Turning from cinching his saddle, Carter regarded him steadily. "Obliged to you, sir. I'm a bit particular in my choice of company."

The contempt stung Molyneux to retort: "You are plain-spoken, but I'm told the trait is common in Americans. Fortunately for us outsiders, your women are more complaisant."

It only led him deeper. Giving a last vicious tug at the cinch, Carter vaulted into the saddle. "Yes," he shot back, as he arranged his bridle, "they make a mistake now and then, but it don't take 'em long to find it out." And he galloped away with easy honors.

Reining in at his own door half an hour later, he regarded with astonishment a transformation which had occurred in his absence. Instead of the woman, beautiful in her angry tears, a demure girl came out to meet him. While he was gone she had bathed her red eyes, then, to relieve a headache, had let down her hair and braided it into a plait of solid gold. Thick as Carter's wrist, it hung so low that, obedient to his admiring suggestion, she easily knitted it about her waist.

"You look," he said, "more like school-girl than school-marm."

With that simple coiffure displaying the girlish line of her head and neck, she might, indeed, have easily passed for eighteen. It accentuated a wee tip-tilt of her pretty nose, a leaning to the *retroussé* that had been the greatest trial of her youth and still caused her occasional qualms. Could she have realized the piquancy it lent to features that, otherwise, had been too regular or have known the sensation it caused her companion as he looked down on it and her eyelashes fluttering up from eyes that were wide and grave with question.

One glance reassured her. His unruffled calm, the ironic humor of his mouth, all expressed his mastership of the late situation. Satisfied, she mounted beside him when he had hitched the ponies and settled in against him with a sigh of relief. Not that she had so easily forgotten her late trouble. The injured droop of her mouth, the serious face moved him to vast sympathy and anger. He longed to smooth the knit brow with kisses, to take her in his arms and soothe her as a little child. For a second time that day her mouth stood in hazard, but, bracing himself against temptation, he tried to wean her from her brooding by ways that were safer if less sweet.

"Any one," he said, twinkling down upon her, "would think you'd lost your best friend—"

"Instead of my worst," she anticipated.

"Glad you put it that way." He nodded his satisfaction. "And since you do, why waste regrets? Jest wipe him clean off your books."

"It is bitter to learn that you have been deceived," she answered. "More

bitter to feel yourself misread. Most bitter"—her voice dropped to a whisper—"to learn it in such a shameful way."

He did not say, "I warned you." Only his big brown hand closed on hers with a sympathetic squeeze that almost expelled the pain in her heart. She did not withdraw it; rather she drew in closer, and thus, hand in hand, they rattled south over the vast green prairies which now were all shotten with the iridescence of myriad flowers. The trail wound through seas of daisies, bluebells, white tuft. Slender golden-rod trembled in the breeze; dandelions and tiger-lilies flaunted their golden beauty under turquoise skies. It was, indeed, difficult to remain sad with such company in such surroundings; for not content with mute sympathy, he strove to divert her thought by talk of the animals or plants which they saw or passed, astonished her with his wide knowledge of curious traits in their nature or history. So, gliding from subject to subject, he weaned her from her trouble, and so, by easy stages, came to speaking of himself, modestly introducing the subject with a letter.

It was from the office of the traffic manager of the trunk line acknowledging a bid for tie and trestle contracts for the projected branch through Silver Creek. While Cummings, Hines, and their confrères were fulminating against the railroad pantheon, Carter had ridden over the spruce ranges of the Riding Mountains, had secured options on cutting permits from the provincial government, had driven down the old survey, and then submitted an estimate which caused the construction department of the railway to gasp its astonishment.

The chief engineer even carried the estimate to the traffic manager. "Ties and timbers, this fellow Carter comes within a few thousand feet of old Sawyer's estimate," he said. "Moreover, he is ready to deliver the goods. Gives references to the Bank of America, which is to finance his enterprise. Who is he?"

One would hardly expect the traffic manager to have remembered, but he had; and thus it came about that the postscript of the letter was in his own big sprawl. He regretted the fact that construction had been put off for another year, "but," he added, "I have placed your bid on my own files and shall see that it receives the earliest consideration when we are ready for construction."

Helen exclaimed her satisfaction. "I'm so glad. I never knew that—you could do this kind of work. Why didn't you tell me? I'm so interested. Will it be a large contract?"

Her eyes testified to her words, and as, obedient to her wish, he ran on giving details, they grew larger and more luminous. A touch of awe dwelt in their hazel depths. Feeling always the attraction of his fine physique, respecting his strength of will, clean character, he now commanded her admiration on another score. Was he not proving himself "fit" in the iron struggle of an economic age? And she, delicate bloom, crowning bud of the tree of evolution, being yet subject

to the law that, of old, governed the cave maiden in her choice of a mate, felt the full force of this last expression of his power.

As never before, she responded to his thought and feeling. When, after a sudden lurch, he left his supporting arm on the rail across her waist, she did not draw away; nay, she yielded to a luxurious sense of protection and power, leaning in against his shoulder. That day all things had conspired in his favor—even her pique at Molyneux—and now the rapid movement, caressing sweep of the wind, riot of color and sunlight, all helped to influence her judgment in a situation that was rapidly approaching.

It lay, the situation, in a deep pool, ten feet below the bank of Silver Creek. As before noted, Death and the Devil, those lively ponies, were, as Carter put it, "worth watching" any and all the time on the dead level, and the fact that he held a loose line on them running down trail into the valley proved how very, very far he had departed from his usual imperturbable mood. Small wonder, for the hazel glances he had sustained this last hour would have upset the coolest head. But if his condition was perfectly natural, so also was the innate deviltry that caused the ponies to bolt the trail and plunge over the aforesaid bank.

Helen could never tell just how it happened. After two seconds' furious bumping, she felt herself lifted bodily. Followed a crash as they fell. That was the impact of the buggy wheel with Carter's head. The arms loosened as she took the icy plunge, then came a half-minute's suffocating struggle while the current was carrying her out to the shallows. Wet, draggled, she stumbled shoreward; then, as the water cleared out of her eyes, she turned and plunged wildly back. Face downward, Carter was floating over a two-foot shallow and another second would have carried him into a longer and deeper pool.

As for him, returning consciousness brought him sensations of something soft under his splitting head—that was Helen's bosom; of arms about his neck; lips that wildly kissed his and which opened with a glad cry when he moved.

"Oh, I thought you were dead!"

For one blissful moment she allowed him to gaze in at the clear windows of her soul; then remembering the unusual but effective restorative she had used in the case, she flamed out in sudden colors, the banners of discovered love. Never was maid in such a predicament! Was it fair to expect that she would let fall a head that had been damaged in her cause? She could only wait until, having fed his eyes full on her sweet distress, he reached up and pulled her blushing face down upon his own. The sun, the wind, the rippling water alone witnessed her surrender. After a while a grizzled badger peered at them from his hole, pronounced them harmless, and so came forth upon his errands. A colony of gophers laid aside serious business to note, heads askew, loves that differed so little from their own. A robin cried shame upon them from a willow near by.

But they were not ashamed. An hour slid by without either thinking of such sub-lunary matters as damaged heads or wet clothing; at the end of which Death and the Devil, having accomplished the complete destruction of the buck-board, came back to look for their master—probably associating him with the evening feed of oats—and fell to cropping the grass along the creek.

Then she spoke, softly, blushing again. "You must think me shameless, but—I did—I really thought you were dead."

"Ain't you glad I'm not?" She never noticed the "ain't," this young lady who had originally sized him as an underbred person.

She did not answer, but he mightily appreciated the sudden tightening of her arms. "But what must you think of me?"

He told all—of his resolution the moment he saw her on the Lone Tree platform; of his hope, fears, dark despair, the hell he had suffered on Molyneux's account. A soft hand cut short this last revelation, and immediately they fell again into one of love's deep silences, an eloquent pause that endured until the westering sun threw long shadows across the creek. Then, rising, he caught the ponies and arranged saddles with blankets and straps from the broken harness, while she looked on with soft attention.

Mounted, they paused and looked back at the stream, ruby red under the dying sun, the clay bank, the bordering willows, then they kissed each other soberly and rode on. Dusk was blanketing the prairies when they drew up at Flynn's cabin, yet it was not too dark for Mrs. Flynn's sharp eyes to pick their secret.

"It's the new school-ma'am ye'll need to be looking for," she told Flynn. "Why? Man, didn't ye see him look at her, an' her that lovely red, her eyes pretty as a mother deer's, an' her voice soft an' cooing as a dove's. Flynn, Flynn! ye've forgotten your own courting."

One fine morning, two months later, Molyneux's drivers spun out of his stable enclosure and rattled south at a pace that did not keep up with their driver's impatience.

These two months had certainly been the unhappiest of his life. A man's opinions, philosophy, must, if they have vitality at all, be formed upon the actions of those about him, upon the phenomena which life presents to his reason. This, however, does not altogether annul the force of those ideals of conduct for himself and others which were learned at his mother's knee. Always they persist. Granted that loose life may smother the plant so that it produces neither fruit nor leafage, yet the germ is there—the assurety that beyond the rotten pale of fast society lies a fair land where purity, chastity, goodness, the virtues one

firmly incarnates in the person of mother, sister, or girl friend, do grow and flourish. Under the foulness of the most determined roué lies the ineradicable belief that had Lot sought righteousness among the women of Sodom that wicked city had never been destroyed. One clean, wholesome girl will shake a man's faith in baseness, torture him with a vivid sense of his own backslidings, and now that passion's scales were fallen from his eyes, Molyneux appreciated at their full worth the naïve mixture of innocence and womanly wisdom, the health, strength, and wholesomeness of character that set Helen apart from his light acquaintance.

"Fool! fool!" he had told himself again and again. "She is worthy of a king—if one could be found worthy of her. And you had a fair chance! Oh, you fool!"

Nor had he failed to write her a letter of apology. He had done that in the first agonies of repentance, six weeks ago, and, receiving no answer, had taken the ensuing weeks to screw his courage to the point of asking pardon in person. But now that it was there he was possessed of a wild exhilaration that took no thought of refusal. She could hardly fail to pardon a suppliant for crimes that were instigated by her own beauty, and one so becomingly repentant! Full of the consciousness of his own virtuous intention, it was quite easy for him to credit Helen with the magnanimity that would be its reciprocal feeling; and this once established, himself pardoned in thought, he passed to day-dreams. Her smile, the sweet tilt of her pretty nose, her glory of golden hair, her every physical and mental charm, passed in mental review, beguiling the tedium of the trail till the school-house thrust up over the horizon.

Then his mood changed. Its squat, obtrusive materiality thrust into his consciousness, shattering the filmy substance of his dreams, and as he noticed the closed windows, shut door, doubt replaced elation, depression, the black antithesis of his late mood, settled down upon him.

As he sat staring a voice hailed him. "Been riding ahint of you this half-hour, but you never looked back. Fine haying weather, ain't it?"

Startled, Molyneux turned to find Jed Hines surveying him with an irritating smile. His expression plainly revealed that not only did he know Molyneux's errand, but that he was viewing it under the light of humorous secret knowledge. Restraining an impulse to remodel the expression, he said, nonchalantly as he could: "What is the matter here? School closed?"

Hines nodded. He had all the Canadian's traditional hate of the remittance-man; Molyneux, in especial, he detested, because, perhaps by his superior shrewdness, he gave less cause for contempt than the race in general. That he had paused to speak was proof sufficient that he had unpleasant news. He would, however, take his own time in delivering it—prolong the torture to the limit.

"Midsummer holidays," he laconically answered.

Molyneux ignored his curtness. "Miss Morrill at Glaves's place, do you

know?"

Jed's grin widened. "You hain't heard, then?"

"Heard what?"

Jed gazed off and away over the prairies. "No, you won't find her at Glaves's."

How Molyneux longed to spoil the grin. But a deadly anxiety constrained him. "Where is she, then?"

"Nowheres around here."

"Do you know?"

"You bet!" The grin gave place to malignant satisfaction. "Yes, I know—that is, I kin guess, though I wouldn't if I thought it would do you any good. As it won't—Let me see—she was married a week ago by the Roman priest. Jedging by averages, I reckon as you orter find her in Carter's arms."

If he had expected his news to produce a disagreeable impression he was not disappointed, for its visible manifestation landed full in his face, and he dropped flat on his shoulders. Not lacking a certain wolf courage, primitive ferocity of the cornered rat, he sprang up, lunged at Molyneux, and went down a second time. Then he stayed, watching until the other had jumped into his buggy and driven away.

"I never saw the devil!" he muttered, shaking his fist, "but your face, jes' then, came mighty near the preacher's description."

X
FRICTION

Once upon a time a man wrote a book that proved how easily a cultured Eastern girl might fall in love with and marry a Western cow-boy. It was a beautiful story, about people who were beautiful or picturesque according as they were good or bad, but it ended just where, in real life, stories begin. After the manner of fairy tales, the author assured us that the girl and the cow-boy lived happily ever after. Now I wonder if they did?

A year later a big bull-fly thudded at the screen door of Carter's cabin in vain efforts to enter and take toll of Helen's white flesh. By the gentlemen who ordain the calendar, a year is given as a space of time between points that are fixed, immutable as the stars. Sensible folk know better. Years vary—are long

or short according to the number, breadth, and depth of the experiences their space covers. This year had marked Helen. She was fuller lipped, rounder, enveloped by the sensuous softness of young wifehood. Sitting at table with her white blouse tucked in at the neck for coolness, she had never looked prettier. But granting these attributes of her changed condition, a keen observer would have missed that gentle brooding, ripe fruit of content which exhales from the perfectly mated woman. As, time and again, her glance touched Carter, sitting opposite, she would sigh, ever so gently, yet sigh; the direction of her glance told also that her discontent was associated in some way with his shirt-sleeves, rolled to the elbow, and his original methods in the use of his knife and fork. Grasping these implements within an inch of their points, he certainly secured a mighty leverage, yet undoubtedly lost in grace what he secured in power, besides pre-empting more elbow-room than could be accorded to one person at a dinner-party.

"Tut! tut!" she observed, timidly, after tentative observation.

"Oh, shore! There I go again!" His quick answer and the celerity with which his hands crawfished back to the handles told of many corrections; yet five minutes later they had stolen out once more to the old familiar grip.

She sighed again. It was not that she had wished to hobble her frontiersman, to harness him to the conventions. Her feeling flowed from a larger source. Believing him big of brain and soul as of body, she would have had him perfect in small things as he was great in large, that her ideal should be so filled and rounded out as to leave no room for sighs. To this end she had, from the first, attempted small polishments, which he had received with whimsical good-humor that took no thought of how vital the matter was with her. Had he realized this he might have made a determined effort instead of a slack practice which flows from easy complaisance; but, not realizing it, he made no headway. In these last months she had gained insight into that philosophical axiom: It is easier to make over a dozen lovers than one husband. Unlike the girl in the aforesaid beautiful story, she had begun reconstruction at the wrong side of the knot.

Not that this unwelcome truth would or could, of itself, have affected her love in quality or quantity. At times she agonized remorsefully over her tendency to criticism, tutoring herself to look only for the large things of character. Again, when, of nights, she would slip to his arms for a delightful hour before retiring, she would wonder at herself: every last vestige of discontent evaporated with her murmured sigh of perfect happiness. These were great moments for both. Lying so, she would look up in his bronzed face and listen while, in his big way, he talked and planned, unrolling the scroll of their future—listen patiently until he became too absorbed, when she would interrupt with some kittenish trick to draw him back into the delightful present. Pretty little tricks, loving little tricks,

that one would never have dreamed lay hidden under the exterior of the staid young school-ma'am.

But these, after all, were moods, and there had been other and real cause of discontent. First, the railway gods had again broken faith with the settlers; and every cent that Carter could raise or borrow had been required to meet rents on his timber concessions. Though not in actual want, they had had to trim expenses, reduce their living to the settler scale. Having all of a pretty woman's natural love of finery, Helen could see no way of restoring her depleted wardrobe. Moreover, there was the choring, washing, milking of cows, feeding of calves, inseparable from pioneer settler life—a burden that was not a whit the less toilsome because self-assumed.

Carter would have spared her all that—was, indeed, angry when, coming in late one night, he caught her toiling at the milking. "I didn't know it was so hard," she pleaded, holding up her swollen wrists. "But I couldn't bear to see you come in, tired, at dark, then go on with the chores while I sat in the house."

He had made her promise not to do it again. But she did, and his protests, vigorous at first, slackened, until, finally, the choring had come to be regarded as hers as a matter of course.

Even the climate was against her, conspiring against her peace of body if not of mind. The previous winter had been the bitterest in a score of years, temperatures ranging from forty below zero, with a yard of snow on the level, fifty-foot drifts in the bluffs, and hundred-mile winds to drive cold and snow through the thickest of log walls. For days she had sat in her furs by the red-hot stove, while the blizzard roared about the cabin, walling it in fleecy snows—sat listening to the agonized shout of wind-blown trees, the squeal of poplar brake, the smash of rent branches, the thunderous storm voice that was spaced only by distant crashes as the lords of the forest went down to stiff ends. North, south, east, west had veered these terrible winds, freighting always their inexhaustible snows. The trails were blown from earth's face; solitary blotch, their cabin rose like a reef from an ocean of whiteness; and they, castaways, were practically divorced for days, and sometimes weeks, from all communication with their kind. Hardly less terrible had been the calms, the vast frozen silences as of interplanetary space that followed the blizzard, ruling the snowy steppes. They filled her with a terrifying sense of the illimitable, those silences, vivid as though she, a lonely soul, were travelling through vast voids of time and space. She shrank under them, afraid.

Followed a mosquito year in a mosquito country. Fattened by the heavy snows, stagnant sloughs held water till late in the summer and so bred the pests by myriads of myriads. Of nights the tortured air whined of them. By day their cattle hung about the corrals, cropping the grass down to the dust, or if they

did wander farther afield, came galloping madly back to the smudges. For two months any kind of travel had been impossible; clouds of the pests would settle on hands, face, neck quicker than one could wipe them off. Milking and choring had to be done under cover of a thick reek to an accompaniment of lashing tails, with frequent and irritating catastrophes in the way of overturned pails. The acrid odor of smoke clung to everything—hair, clothing, flesh; the cabin was little better than a smoke-house until the heat had mitigated the pests while adding its own discomforts.

It was a dull life enough for men whose tasks were broken by periodical trips to market; it was martyrdom for housefast women. Always around the shanty mourned the eternal winds of the plains. Wind! Wind! Wind in varying quantity, from a breeze to a blizzard, but always wind. Its melancholy dirge left a haunting in the eyes of men. Its ceaseless moan prepared many a plainswoman for the madhouse.

With bright hope at heart to gild the future, she might have endured both discomfort and drudgery, but the postponement of construction work on the branch line had killed immediate hope. With dismay she realized a certain coarsening of body and mind, a thickening of finger-joints, roughness of skin, an attenuation where milking had turned the plump flesh of her arms into gaunt muscle. And to her the thought of that far-off summer day recurred with increasing frequency—would this equilibration with environment end by leaving her peer to the scrawny, flat-chested women of the settlements? She who had excelled in the small arts—music, painting, modelling in wax and clay? Her past, in such seasons of depression, seemed now as that of some other girl—a girl who had worn pretty dresses and been admired and petted by father, brother, and friends. Of all her gifts, her voice, a sweet contralto, was only left her; and of late it had naturally attuned itself to her sadder moods. So she had felt her life shrink and grow narrow, until looking down the vista of frozen winters, baking summers, they seemed, those weary years, to draw to a dull, hard point, the wind-swept acre with its solitary grave. Conditions had certainly combined to produce in her a subconscious discontent that might develop into open revolt against her lot at the touch of obscure and apparently insignificant cause; they reinforced and made dangerous the irritation caused by his little gaucheries.

As aforesaid, her dark moods alternated with spasms of remorse—fits of melting tenderness in which she condemned herself for her secret criticism of him. Peeping through their bedroom window only the preceding night, the moon had caught her bending over his sleep. The tender light absorbed his tan, softened the strong features without taking from their mobility; deeply shading the hollows, it gave his whole face an air of clear-cut refinement. Its wonderful alchemy foreshadowed the possibilities of this life, lying so quiescent beneath her eyes.

For a long hour she held the vigil, while thought threw flitting shadows athwart her face; then, stooping, she softly kissed him under cover of her clouding hair.

It was a momentous caress, registering as it did her acceptance of a lowered ideal, marking her realization of the friction which follows all marriages and is inevitable to such as hers. Yet it had not removed the cause; that remained. It is easier far to overlook a great sin than a daily gaucherie, to rise to vast calamity than to brook the petty irritations which mar and make life ugly. The cause remained, surely! To see her quiet and pensive at table this day, who would have dreamed that the morrow would see the thin edge of the wedge driven in between them?

"There's to be a picnic in the grove by Flynn's lake to-morrow, Nell," he said, as he rose from dinner. "Let's take a day off?"

"All right!" she agreed; and the kiss with which she rewarded the prospect of even such a slight break in the dulness of life may easily be regarded as the first tap on the wedge.

How quickly personality responds to atmosphere! When, next morning, Helen climbed into the buck-board beside Carter, she was frankly happy as a woman can be in the knowledge that she is looking fit for the occasion. Cool, clean, and fresh in a billowy white dress of her own laundering, excitement and Carter's admiring glances intensified her naturally delicate color. As they rattled over the yellow miles, doubt and misgiving vanished under the spell of present happiness. She returned him eyes that were lovingly shy as those of their honeymoon; was subdued, sedate, sober, or burst out in small trills of song as the mood seized her. Not until she was actually upon the picnic-ground did she realize the real nature of this, her first appearance at a public function since her marriage.

A clear sky and a breeze that set yellow waves chasing one another over the far horizon had brought out the settlers in a fifty-mile circle—even the remittance-men, who had been wont to spell amusement in the red letters of the London alphabet, were there. Like most country picnics, it was pseudo-religious in character, with a humorous speech from the minister figuring as the greatest attraction. Amusements ran from baseball and children's games for youth to love-making in corners by shamefaced couples.

Leaving Carter to put up his team, Helen carried their basket over to where a crowd of officious matrons were arranging tables under the trees, and so gained first knowledge of what was in store for her. The latest bride, she was the centre of attraction, target for glances. Approaching a group of loutish youths, she felt their stares, flushed under the smothered laugh which greeted her sudden change of direction. Girls were just as unmannerly. Ceasing their own rough flirtations, they gathered in giggling groups to observe and comment on one who had already achieved that which they contemplated.

Nor was she more comfortable among the matrons. While she was teaching school, the halo of education had set her apart and above them, but now they wished her to understand that her marriage had brought her down to their level. They plied her with coarse congratulations, embarrassed her with jokes and prophecies that were broader than suggestive. Time and again she looked, for rescue, at Carter, but he was talking railroad politics in an interested group, did not join her till lunch was served, and afterwards was hauled away to play in a baseball game—married men *versus* single.

So she had but a small respite. With his departure the women renewed their onslaughts, as though determined to beat down her personal reserve and reave her nature of its inmost secrets. No subject was too sacred for their joking—herself, her husband, the intimacies of their lives. There was no satiating their burning curiosity; her timid cheeks, monosyllabic answers, served only to whet their sharp tongues. Shocked, weary, cheeks burning with shame, she sat on, not daring to go in search of Carter and so brave again the fire of eyes, until, midway of the afternoon, she looked up to see Molyneux and Mrs. Leslie approaching.

It was the crowning of her humiliation. With the exception of a duty-call on her return to Silver Creek, and which she had not returned, it was the first time that Helen had seen Mrs. Leslie for more than a year. "As you think best," Carter had said, when she had debated the advisability of renewing the friendship. "You wouldn't care to meet Molyneux again, would you? He's sure to be there." And, departing from his usual sane judgment, he made no further explanations, said nothing of his drive in the dusk with the love-sick woman, knowledge of which would surely have killed Helen's friendly feeling. Lacking that knowledge, she had pined for the one woman who could give her the social and intellectual companionship her nature craved, pined with an intensity of feeling that was only equalled by her present desire to avoid a meeting.

If they would *only* pass without seeing her, she prayed, bowing her head in shame. But Mrs. Leslie had been watching from afar. "Poor little thing!" she had exclaimed to Molyneux. "Alone among those harpies! Come, let's rescue her!" And whatever her motive, the kiss she bestowed on the blushing girl was warm and natural. "Why, Helen," she said, "whatever are you doing here? Come along with us."

"We are going to organize a race for three-year-old tots, Mrs. Carter," Molyneux explained. "We really need your assistance."

His deferential air as he stood bareheaded before her, the languid correctness of his manner, even the aristocratic English drawl, pierced that atmosphere of vulgarity like a breath of clean air. The easy insolence with which he ignored the settler women was as balm to her wounded pride. She recovered her poise; her drooping personality revived.

"I should like to—very much," she answered, adding, a little timidly, "But I was waiting for my husband."

"Dutiful child," Mrs. Leslie laughed. "Well, he is so busy running up the batting average for the Benedicts that he has forgotten you. Come along!"

"We might go round—" Helen began, tentatively,

She would have finished "his way," but, glancing over at the game, she saw that in his interest he really had forgotten her. "Very well!" she substituted; and, rising, she strolled off between the two, passing within a few yards of Carter. Busy with his game, he did not see her, nor would have known what company she was keeping but for Shinn, a near neighbor of Jed Hines and fellow of his kidney.

"Your wife," he remarked, "seems to be enjy-ing herself." His sneer caused a titter among both players and spectators, but before it subsided Carter came quickly back. Throwing a careless glance after Helen, "That's more'n I can say for yourn."

The titter swelled to a roar that caused Helen to look back. Mrs. Shinn, poor drudge, had not strayed twenty feet from her cook-stove in as many squalid years, as every one knew well. Grinning evilly, Shinn subsided, while, after carelessly waving his hand at Helen, Carter returned to his batting. If he disapproved of her escort, not a lift of a line betrayed the fact to curious eyes—not even when he drove around and found her still with Molyneux and Mrs. Leslie.

They were both silent on the homeward drive. In Helen's mind Carter was associated with the coarse and sickening humiliations of the day. As never before, she felt the enormous suction from below; she battled against the feeling with the desperation of the swimmer who feels the whirlpool clutching at his heels.

Her mood was defiant, and if, just then, he had taken her to task for her truancy, she would have flamed up in open revolt. But he did not.

"You are tired," he said, very gently, when the ponies had run them far out from the press of teams and rigs. She appreciated that; yet when he slipped an arm about her waist she moved restlessly within its circle.

The wedge was well entered.

XI

THE FROST

One noon, a week after the picnic, Carter stood and looked out over his hundred-acre field of wheat from his doorway. A golden carpet, sprigged with the dark green of willow bluffs, it ran back into a black, environing circle of distant woodland. As a vagrant zephyr touched it into life, Helen remarked, looking over his shoulder:

"The serrated ears in restless movement give it the exact appearance of woven gold. Isn't it beautiful!"

The dramatist loves to make great events follow in rapid sequence. It is the need of his art. But in life the tragic mixes with the commonplace. Even Lady Macbeth must have, on occasion, joked or talked scandal with her handmaidens. And as these two looked out over the wheat, there was naught to indicate the shadow which lay between them.

"Finest stand I ever saw," Carter answered. "Five-foot straw, well headed, plump in the grain; ought to grade Number One Extra Hard. We'll make on that wheat, little girl."

"Do you really think so?"

He turned quickly.

"Those women at the picnic—-" She explained her dubious tone. "They said you were foolish to put in so much wheat. 'What kind of a darn fool is your husband, anyway?' that Mrs. MacCloud asked me. 'He kain't never draw all that wheat to Lone Tree. Take him a month to make two trips. 'Tain't no use to raise grain without a railroad. We folks hain't put in more'n enough for bread an' seed.'"

He laughed, as much at her clever mimicry as at Mrs. MacCloud's frankness. "If they had put in more I wouldn't have sown any. Could have bought it cheaper from them. But as they didn't— Do you know that every man in this settlement makes at least one trip a month to Lone Tree during the winter? Well, they do, and they'll be glad to make expenses freighting in my wheat. With grain at seventy a bushel, a load will bring thirty dollars at the cars, and I can hire all the teams I want at three a trip."

"Why"—his foresight caused her a little gasp—"how clever! I should never have thought of that."

His eyes twinkled his appreciation of her wifely admiration, and, taking her chin between his hands, he looked down into her eyes. "What's more, when that wheat money comes in, you an' me 'll jest run down to Winnipeg an' turn loose on the dry-goods stores."

It was the first hint of his knowledge of the turning, dyeing, the shifts she had made with her wardrobe, and he made a winning. The knowledge that he had seen and understood caused the wedge to tremble and almost fall out.

"Can we—afford it?" she asked, willing now to go without a thing.

"Don't have to afford necessities. Breaks me up to see you going shy of things."

For the last three days he had bestowed the parting kiss. This morning he received it—a warm one at that—and as he strode off stableward, her burst of singing echoed his cheerful whistle. She was quite happy the next few days planning for their descent on the shops. She sang at her work—warbling that was natural as that of the little bird which prinks and plumes for its mate in the morning sunlight. Reflecting her happy mood, Carter was humorously cheerful—so pleased and satisfied that she stared when, one evening, he came in, gloomy and depressed.

His black mood had come out of the east with a moaning wind that now herded leaden clouds over dun prairies. For one day rain pelted down, then, veering north, the bitter wind blew hard for a second day. That evening it died, and a pale sun swung down a cloudless sky to a colorless horizon. Under its cold light the wheat stood erect, motionless, devoid of its usual sighing life. A hush, portentous of change, brooded over all.

From their doorway Helen heard Hines, three miles away, rating his dog. "Hain't no more gumption than an Englishman, durn you! Sick 'em, now!" followed the maligned animal's bark and the thunder of scurrying hoofs.

"How clear and calm it is!" she commented, as Carter came up from the stables.

He glanced at the thermometer beside the door. "Too clear. I'm afraid it is all off with the wheat."

"Why? What do you mean?"

He turned from her astonished eyes. "Frost."

"Frost? You are surely mistaken? See how sunny it is!"

Shaking his head, he laid a forefinger on the thermometer. "Six o'clock, and the silver is down to thirty-five."

At dusk it had lowered another degree, and throughout the northland a hundred thousand farmers were watching, with Carter, its slow recession. On the fertile wheat plains of southern Manitoba, through the vast gloom of the Dakotas, to the uttermost limits of Minnesota, the mercury focussed the interest of half a million trembling souls whose fire-fly lanterns dusted the continental gloom. Prayers, women's tears, men's agonized curses marked its decline, that, like an etching tool, graved deep lines on haggard faces in Chicago, Liverpool, and London far away.

At thirty-two Carter lit the smudges of wet straw, and simultaneously the vast spread of night flamed out in smoke and fire. "I don't go much on it," he told Helen. "But some believe in it, and I ain't agoing to miss a chance."

He was right. Pale thief, the frost stole in under the reek and breathed his

cold breath on the wheat. Holding his instrument, at ten o'clock, in the thickest smoke, Carter saw that it registered twenty-seven. Five degrees of frost and the cold of dawn still to come! Raising the glass, he dashed it to pieces at his feet.

It was done. Reverberating through the land, the smash of his glass typified the shattering of innumerable fortunes, the crash of business houses. The pistol-shot that wound up the affairs of some desperate gambler was but one echo. Surging wildly, the calamity would affect far more than the growers of wheat. Iron-workers, miners, operatives in a hundred branches of industry would shiver under the cold breath of the frost. For now the farmer would buy less cotton, the operative pay more for his flour, the miner earn a scantier wage.

True, the balance swings ever even. This year ryots of India, Argentine peons, Egyptian fellaheen would reap where they had not sown, gather where they had not strawed. Another year a Russian blight, Nile drouth, hot wind of Argentine would swing prices in favor of the northland. But in this was small comfort for the stricken people.

"All gone!" Carter exclaimed at midnight. "The feathers are frozen offen them bonnets."

Helen sensed the bitterness under his lightness. "Never mind, dear," she comforted. "I really don't care. You did your best."

He had done his best! To a strong man the phrase stabs, signifying the victory of conditions. He winced, as from an offered blow. It was the last drop in his cup, the signal of his defeat. It marked the destruction of this his last plan for her. He had not, in the beginning, intended that she should ever set her hand to drudgery. His love was to come between her and all that was sordid, squalid. If the railroad contract had materialized, she should have had a little home in Winnipeg where she might enjoy the advantages of her early life. He had planned for a servant—two, if she could use them—and all that he asked in return was that she should bring beauty into his life, adorn his home, sweeten his days with the aroma of her delicate presence. In this small castle of Spain he had installed his beauty of the sweet mouth, golden hair, pretty profile; and now, out of his own disappointment, he read reproach in the hazel eyes that looked out from the ruins.

Long after her sleep-breathing freighted the dusk of their bedroom, he lay gazing wide-eyed into the black future. A sudden light would have shown his eyes blank, expressionless, for his spirit was afar, questing for other material with which to rebuild his castle. In thought he was travelling Silver Creek, from its headwaters in the timber limits to its source where it flowed into the mighty Assiniboin. It was a small stream—too small to drive logs except for a month on the snow waters. But with a dam here—another there—a third on the flats—rough structures of logs with a stone and gravel filling, yet sufficient to conserve

the falling waters! The drive could then be sent down from dam to dam! During the night he travelled every yard of the stream, placing his dams, and at dawn rose, content in his eyes.

Slipping quietly from the house, he saddled the Devil and led him quietly by while Helen still slept, and an hour later rode up to Bender's cabin. The Cougar was also there, and from dubious head-waggings the two relapsed into thoughtful acquiescence as Carter unfolded his plans.

"She'll go down like an eel on ice!" Bender enthusiastically agreed. "All you want now is backing. Funny, ain't it, that nobody ever thought o' that before? Say"—he regarded Carter with open admiration—"you're particular hell when it comes to thinking. If I'd a headpiece like yourn—"

"You hain't," the Cougar coldly interrupted, "so don't waste no time telling us what you might ha' done. Get down to business. I know a man"—he thoughtfully surveyed Carter—"that financed half a dozen big lumbering contrac's on the Superior construction work. He'll sire anything that looks like ten per cent. an' this of yourn will sure turn fifty. Come inside an' I'll write you a letter."

What of the Cougar's inexperience with the pen, the morning was well on when Carter rode back to his cabin. If Helen had looked closely she might have seen the new resolution that inhered in his smile, but she had been concerned with her own reflections. Somehow, things had not appeared this morning as they did last night. Crude daylight shows events, like tired faces, in all their haggardness, and their complexion was not improved by the steam from her washtub. Time and again she had paused to survey her hands, creased and wrinkled by cooking in hot water. Her bare arms recalled her first party-dress, and set her again in the sweet past. Beside it the present seemed infinitely hopeless, squalid, dreary. As she rubbed and scrubbed on her wash-board, life resolved itself into an endless procession of wash-days, and tears had mingled with the sweat that fell from her face to her bosom.

Noting her red eyes, Carter was tempted to disclose his new hope, but remembered the failure of previous plans and refrained. As yet nothing was certain. He would not expose her to the risk of another disappointment. He rightly interpreted her sigh when he told her that he would have to go down to Winnipeg on business about the timber limits, and his heart smote him when, looking back, he saw her standing in the door. Dejection resided in the parting wave of her hand, utter hopelessness.

That lonely figure in the log doorway stuck in his consciousness throughout his negotiations, causing him to hustle matters in a way that simply scandalized the Cougar's man, a banker of the old school. Yet his hurry served rather than hurt his cause. While the very novelty of it made him gasp, the banker was impressed. In private he informed his moneyed partners that such a chance and

such a man rarely came together. "He's a hustler, and the profit is there," he said, in consultation. "A big profit. We can cut lumber ten per cent under the railroad price and yet clear twenty-five cents on the dollar."

That settled it. Half a day later Carter was on his homeward way, bearing with him the power to draw on Winnipeg or Montreal for moneys necessary for supplies, men, and teams. Running home from Lone Tree, he whiled away the miles with thoughts of Helen's joy. He pictured her, radiant, flushed, listening to his news, and, quickening to the thought, he raced, full gallop, the last mile up to his door.

His face burst into sunshine as, in response to his call, he heard her cross the floor. Then his smile died, and he stared at Mrs. Leslie. With the exception of an occasional glimpse as they met and passed on trail, it was the first he had seen of her since the soft summer evening when she laid illicit love at his feet. But no hint of that bitter memory inhered in her greeting.

"How are you, Mr. Carter?" she cried, in her old, gay way. "I think you are the meanest man in Silver Creek. Married a year, and neither you nor Helen have set foot in our house. You are a regular Blue beard. But you needn't think that you can hide from us forever. I just pocketed my pride, ignored your snub, and made my third call. Yes"—she emphatically nodded her pretty head—"the *third*, sir. But I forgive you; come in and have some tea. Helen is down at the stables hunting eggs to beat up a cake."

Covering his vexation with some light answer, he drove on to the stables, the life and light gone out of him, his face the heaviest that Helen had ever seen. "She called," she answered his abrupt question, "and I have to entertain her." Then, piqued by his coldness, she went on: "For matter of that, I do not see why you should try to cut me off from her companionship! She is the only woman I care for in the settlements!"

If he had only told her! But causes light as the falling of a leaf are sufficient to deflect the entire current of a life, and it was perfectly natural that, in his bitter disappointment, he also should give way to a feeling of pique. The reason trembled to his lips, and there paused, stayed by the resentment in her eyes.

"As you see fit," he answered. "Now I have to drive over to see Bender, on business."

"Won't you wait for some tea?"

"No. And don't wait supper. I may be late."

Hurt, she watched him drive away; then, as he suddenly reined in, she dashed the tears from her eyes. "Here's a letter for you," he called. "Got it from the office as I came by."

He nodded in answer to Mrs. Leslie's cheery wave as he rolled by the cabin. It was more than cold, yet, sitting chin on hands, that lady smiled cheerfully when

Helen came up from the stable. "Don't apologize, my dear," she laughed. "Men are *such* fools. Always doing something to hurt their own happiness. Just banish that rueful expression and read your letter."

"What's the matter?" The question was called forth by Helen's sudden cry of dismay. She glanced at the wedding-cards that Helen offered. "Hum! Old flame of yours, eh? These regrets will assail one."

However, she knit her straight brows over the enclosure. In part, it ran: "We were so pleased to hear of your wonderful marriage from your auntie Crandall. It was just like you to announce the bare fact, but she told us all about it. A railroad king! Just fancy! He must be nice or our delicate Helen would never consent to bury herself in the wilderness. Do you know I have been just *dying* to see him, and now I shall, for we are passing through your country on our way to the Orient. Which is your station?" Followed sixteen pages of questions, description of trousseau, and other feminine matters which Helen reserved for future consumption.

Could she have laid tongue, just then, on Auntie Crandall, that lady had surely regretted her enlargements on Helen's modest statement of her husband's prospects. Lacking that easement of feeling, she cried. This visit capped her misery, brought the long record of misfortune, discomfort, disaster to a fitting climax.

"Poor child!" Mrs. Leslie patted her shoulder. "But why did you tell her such crammers? It was the good auntie?" She tilted her nose. "For the honor of the family, we lie, eh? Heaven help us! Your friend—what's her name?—Mrs. Ravell—she's rich, of course? Thought so—couldn't be otherwise—trust the malignant fates for that. Well—" She glanced meditatively about the cabin. Instead of lime-washing the logs, settler fashion, Helen had left them to darken with age, ornamenting them with a pair of magnificent moose horns and other woodland trophies. Tanned bear-skins covered a big lounge that ran across one end; buffalo robes and other skins took the place of mats on the floor. Mrs. Leslie nodded approval. "Not bad. Quite wild-westy, in fact. You will simply have to live up to it. You have given up your town-house for the present and are rusticating while your hubby directs some of his splendid schemes for the regeneration of this section—"

"Oh!" Helen burst in. "I couldn't say that. It would be—"

"Lying? Nonsense, child! Have you a town-house? No! Well, what are you kicking about?" Mrs. Leslie's descent to the vernacular was as forcible as confusing. Before Helen had time to differentiate between the status involved by "not having a town-house" and giving one up her temptress ran on. "That is it. You are rusticating. Now, I can lend you some of my things—glass, china, and so on. When do they arrive?" She consulted the letter. "Hooray! Your husband will

be gone all next week, and they come—let me see: one, two, three—next Friday. Couldn't be better."

Helen blushed under her meaning glance. "No, no! It would be wicked."

"Why not?" Mrs. Leslie laughed merrily. "They just dropped in and there's no time to send for him. Quite simple."

"Do you think I'm ashamed of him?" Helen asked, flushing.

Mrs. Leslie trimmed her sails to the squall. "Certainly not. He's a dear. You know I always liked him. But—if your friends were to make a long stay it would be different. You couldn't hide his light under a bushel. But a two days' visit? What could they learn of him in that time? The real him? They would no more than gather his departures from the conventional. I wouldn't expose him to unfriendly criticism. Frankly, I wouldn't, dear, at the cost of a little fib!"

The flush faded, yet Helen shook her head.

"As you will." Rising, the little cynic shrugged as she drew on her riding-gloves. "But at least take a day to think it over."

"No!" Helen shook vigorous denial. "I shall tell him to-night."

She was perfectly sincere in her intention, and if Carter had returned his usual good-natured self she would certainly have told him. But Mrs. Leslie's presence had angered him and destroyed his native judgment. He remembered that this was the outcome of Helen's invitation to Mrs. Leslie at the picnic, and his heart swelled at the thought that she should, of her own volition, go back to friends whom she knew that he despised. He felt the folly of his brooding, even applied strong language to himself for being many kinds of a fool. But his reasonable intention to open his budget of good news on his return was never carried out because of the coldness of her reception. Nervous from her own news, piqued by his curt leave-taking, she served his supper in silence or answered his few remarks in monosyllables. Nothing was said that night, and he retired without offering the usual kiss.

There he offended greatly. Her woman's unreason would, for that, accept no excuse. So when, after working off his own mood next morning, he came in to breakfast, he found her still the same. Really offended, she served him, as at the previous meal, in silence, and as, afterwards, she went about her work, her lashes veiled her eyes, her lips pouting.

It was their first real quarrel, and the very strangeness, novelty of her mood made it charming. But when, under urge of sudden tenderness, he tried to encircle her waist, she drew away, and, afflicted with a sense of injustice, he did not try again. There again he made a mistake. Justice has no concern with love. It is empirical, knows no law but its own. She wanted to be taken and kissed in spite of herself, as have all women on similar occasions, from the cave maidens down.

It so happened that she was in the bedroom when he left the house, and she

did not see that he had taken with him the bundle she had packed the preceding night. She still intended to mention the letter. Indeed, as she heard his step on the threshold, she thought, "He'll stop at the door for his clothes."

But he did not; and hurrying out at the sound of scurrying hoofs, she was just in time to see him vanish behind a poplar bluff. She called, called, and called, then sat down and wept, the more miserable because of a secret, guilty feeling of relief.

XII
THE BREAK

For three days a brown smoke had hovered over the black line of distant spruce. It was far away, fifty miles at least. Yet anxious eyes turned constantly its way until, the evening of the fourth day, the omen faded. Then a sigh of relief passed over the settlements. "Back-fired itself out among the lakes," the settlers told one another. Then, being recovered from their scare, they invidiously reflected on the Indian agent who permitted his wards to start fires to scare out the deer. Nor did the fact that the agent was blameless in the matter take from the satisfaction accruing from their grumblings.

That evening five persons sat with Helen at supper, for she had invited the Leslies and Danvers, Molyneux's farm pupil, to meet her guests. For her this meal was the culmination of days of anxious planning. To set out the table she and Mrs. Leslie had ransacked their respective establishments, and she blushed when Kate Ravell enthused over the result.

"What beautiful china!" she exclaimed, picking up one of Mrs. Leslie's Wedgwood cups. "We have nothing like this." Then, glancing at the white napery, crystal, and silver, she said, "Who would think that we were two thousand miles from civilization?"

It was, indeed, hard to realize. Obedient to Mrs. Leslie's orders, her husband and Danvers had fished—albeit with reluctance—forgotten dress-suits from bottom deeps of leather portmanteaus. She herself looked her prettiest in a gown of rich black lace superimposed on some white material, and, carrying her imperative generosity to the limit, she had forced one of her own dinner-dresses upon Helen. Of a filmy, delicate blue, it brought out the young wife's golden beauty. From the low corsage her slender throat and delicate face rose like a pink lily

from a violet calyx. Usually she wore her redundant hair coiled in a thick braid around the crown of her head for comfort; but to-night it was done upon her neck in a loose figure of eight that revealed its mass and sheen. Looking from Mrs. Leslie to Helen, Kate Ravell had secretly congratulated herself upon having, despite her husband's protest, slipped one of her own pretty dresses into his valise.

His laugh, a wholesome peal that accorded with his good-humored face, followed her remark. "She didn't think that at Lone Tree," he said. "A lumber-wagon was the best the liveryman could do for us in the way of conveyance, and when Kate asked if he hadn't a carriage he looked astonished and scratched his head.

"'Ain't but one in town,' he answered, 'an' it belongs to Doc Ellis. 'Tain't been used sence he druv the small-pox case down to the Brandon pest-house. I 'low he'd let you have it.'"

His wife echoed his laugh. "It was a little rough, but this—it's great!" She pointed out through the open door over the wheat, golden under the setting sun, to the dark green and yellow of woods and prairies. "You are to be envied, Nell. Your house is so artistic. The life must be ideal—"

Inwardly, Mrs. Leslie snorted: "Humph! If she could see her milking, up to ankles in mud on rainy days—or feeding those filthy calves?" Aloud, she said, "Unfortunately, Helen isn't here very often—spends most of her time in Winnipeg." Ignoring Helen's pleading look, she ran on, "Did you store your things, my dear, or let the house furnished?"

Thus entrapped, Helen could only answer that her goods were stored, and her embarrassment deepened when Mrs. Leslie continued: "It is such a pity, Mrs. Ravell, that you could not have met Mr. Carter! He is such a dear fellow, so quiet and refined. Fred"—Leslie's grin faded under her frown—"what is the matter?"

"A crumb, my dear," he apologized. "Excuse me, please."

"We shall have to return you to the nursery." Her glance returned to Kate Ravell, and, oblivious of the entreaty in Helen's eyes, she ran on in praise of Carter. He was so reserved! The reserve of strength that goes with good-nature! Resourceful—and so she flowed on with her panegyrics. She was not altogether insincere. Helen caught herself blushing with pleasure whenever, leaving her fictions, Mrs. Leslie touched on some sterling quality. Twice she was startled to hear put into words subtilties that she herself had only felt, and on each occasion she narrowly watched Mrs. Leslie, an adumbration of suspicion forming in her mind. But each time it was removed by absurd praise of hypothetical qualities or virtues Carter did not possess. So Mrs. Leslie praised and teased.

What influenced her? It is hard to answer a question that inheres in the complexities of such a frivolous yet passionate nature. Naturally good-natured,

she would help Helen out in all things that did not cross her own purposes. The sequel proves that she had not yet got Carter out of her hot blood. Given which two things, her action, teasings, and panegyrics are at least understandable.

"We are very sorry," Kate Ravell said when Mrs. Leslie gave pause. "We did wish to see him. Do you suppose, Helen, that we might if we stayed another day?"

It was more than possible, but Ravell relieved Helen of a sudden deadly fear. "Can't do it, my dear. We are tied down by schedule. Should miss the Japan steamer and have to lay over in Vancouver two weeks."

Kate sighed. Newly married, she had all of a young wife's desire to see her girl friend happy as herself; nor would aught but ocular demonstration satisfy the longing. She was expressing the hope that Carter and Helen should some day visit them in their Eastern home, when she suddenly paused, staring outdoors. Following her glance, Mrs. Leslie saw a man, a big fellow in lumberman's shirt and overalls. The garments were burned in several places, so that blackened skin showed through. His eyes were bloodshot, his face sooty, which accounted for Mrs. Leslie's not recognizing him at once.

"Mr. Carter!" she exclaimed, after a second look.

Helen was pouring tea, but she sprang up at the name, spilling a cup of boiling tea over her wrist. She did not feel the scald. Breathless, she stood, a hand pressed against her bosom, until Mrs. Leslie, the always ready, burst into merry laughter.

"What a blackamoor! How you frightened us! Where *have* you been?"

Coming up from the stables, Carter had heard voices, laughter, the tinkle of teacups, and the sound had afflicted him with something of the feeling that assails the wanderer whose returning ears give him sounds of revelry in the old homestead. He had suffered, during his absence, remorse for his own obstinacy mingling in equal proportions with the pain of Helen's coldness. Absence had been rendered endurable by the thought that it would make reconciliation the easier; but now that he was returned, ready to give and ask forgiveness, to pour his good news into her sympathetic ear, he found her merrymaking.

His was a hard position. Between himself, rough, ragged, dirty, and these well-groomed men in evening dress, there could be no more startling contrast. He felt it. The table, with its snowy napery, gleaming appointments, was foreign to his sight as the *décolleté* dresses, the white arms and necks. Yet his natural imperturbability stood him bravely in place of sophistication.

"Been fighting fire," he answered, with his usual deliberation. "Suppose I do look pretty fierce."

His glance moved inquiringly from the Ravells to his wife.

But she still stood, eyes wide, breath issuing in light gasps from her parted

lips. For her also the moment was full of bitterness. There was no time for thought. She only felt—a composite feeling compounded of the misgiving, discontent, humiliation, disappointment, disillusionment of the last few months. It all culminated in that moment, and with it mixed deep shame, remorse for her conduct. Also she had regret on another score. If she *had* told him, he would at least have been prepared, have achieved a presentable appearance. Now she was taken in her sin! Foul with smoke, soot, the dirt and grime of labor, he was facing her guests.

Starting, she realized that they were waiting, puzzled, for introductions—that is, Kate was puzzled. Ravell was busily employed taking admiring note of Carter's splendid inches. Poor Helen! She might have been easier in her mind could she have sensed the friendly feeling that inhered in Ravell's cordial grip.

"We were just deploring the fact that we were not to meet you, Mr. Carter," he said. "We felt sure of finding you home after the notice we gave Mrs. Carter. We were really quite jealous of your affairs, but now we shall go away satisfied."

Given a duller man, the word "notice" supplied the possibilities of an unpleasant situation. But though he instantly remembered the letter, Carter gave no sign till he and Helen had passed into their bedroom. Even then he abstained from direct allusions.

"Friends of yourn?" he questioned, as she set out clean clothing.

"Kate is an old school-fellow. Wait; I'll get you clean towels." She bustled about, hiding her nervousness from his gray inquisition. "They are on their honey-moon. Going to the Orient—Japan, China, and the island countries. They stayed off a couple of days to see us."

"To see you," he corrected.

She colored. Her glance fluttered away from his grave eyes. She hurried again into speech. "Wait, dear! I'll get you some warm water."

He refused the service, he who had loved to take anything from her hands. "Thanks. I think the lake fits my case. Give me the towels and I'll change down there after my swim."

The meal was finished, and she, with the others, had carried her chair outside before he came swinging back from the lake. He was wearing the store clothes of her misgivings, but the ugly cut could not hide the magnificent sweep of his limbs. She thrilled despite her misery. As she rose to get his dinner, Mrs. Leslie also jumped up.

"Poor man, you must be famished!" she exclaimed. "No, Helen, you are tired. Stay here and entertain the men. Mrs. Ravell and I will wait on Mr. Carter. And you, Mr. Danvers, may act as cookee."

Thus saved from an uncomfortable téte-à-téte, Helen suffered a greater misery than his accusing presence. While chatting with Ned Ravell, her ears

were strained to catch the conversation going on inside. She listened for Carter's homely locutions, shivering as she pictured his primitive table manners. As a burst of laughter followed his murmured bass, she wondered whether they were laughing *with* or *at* him.

She might have been easy, for the laugh was on Danvers. As yet that young gentleman was still in the throes of the sporting fever which invariably assails Englishmen new to the frontier. Any day he might be seen wriggling snakelike on the flat of his belly through mud towards some wary duck, and an enthusiastic eulogium on the shooting qualities of a new Greener gun had drawn from Carter the story of Danvers' first kill.

"Prairie chicken's mighty good eating an' easy shooting," he remarked, with a sly look at Kate Ravell. "But nothing would satisfy his soaring ambitions but duck. Duck for his, sirree! an' he blazed away till the firmament hereabouts was powder-marked and riddled. Burned up at least three tons of powder before he got my duck."

"*Your duck?*" Danvers protested. "Just hear him, Mrs. Leslie. It was a wild duck that I shot down here by the lake."

Carter chuckled and went on with his teasing. "I came near being called as a witness to that cruel murder, for I was back-setting the thirty acres down by the lake when I heard a shot an' a yell. I read it that he'd got himself, an' was jes' going after the remains, when up he comes on a hungry lope, gun in one hand and a mallard in the other. The bird was that mussed up its own mother couldn't have told it from a cocoanut door-mat. Looked like it had made foolish faces at a Gatling; yet he tells me that he gets the unfortunate animal at eighty yards on the wing."

"You know how close that old gun of mine used to shoot," Danvers interrupted. "It was choke-bored, Mrs. Ravell. At eighty-yards it would put every shot inside of a three-foot circle."

"The feather marking looked sort of familiar to me," Carter went calmly on. "An' he admits, on cross-examination, that he murders this bird in front of my cabin."

"What of it?" Danvers eagerly put in. "Wild ducks light any old place."

"But it jes' happens that the confiding critter has raised her brood in the sedges there, being encouraged an' incited thereto by my wife, who throws it bread an' other pickings. Taking Danvers' gun-barrel for some new kind of worm, when he pokes it through the sedge she sails right up and is examining the boring thereof, when, bang! she's blown into a railroad disaster."

"Don't believe him, Mrs. Ravell," Danvers pleaded. "It was a wild duck, and I shot it flying."

"So if the new gun's what you say it is," the tormentor finished, "you'd

better to practise on prairie chicken an' don't be misled by Mrs. Leslie's hens."

"As though I couldn't tell a hen from a prairie chicken!"

Carter joined in the laugh which Danvers' indignant remonstrance drew from the women, yet under the laugh, beneath his humorous indifference, lay a sad heart. "She knew they were coming! She didn't tell me!" Down by the lake he had reasoned the situation out to its cruel conclusion—"She's ashamed of me!" How it hurt! Yet the flick on the raw served him well in that it set him on his mettle, nerved him to carry off the situation.

He did not try to transcend his limitations, to clog himself with unfamiliar restrictions of speech or manners. But within those limitations he did his best, and did it so well that neither woman was conscious of social difference. He showed none of the bashfulness which might be expected from a frontiersman sitting for the first time at table with fashionable women in dinner-gowns. On the contrary, he admired the pretty dresses, the white arms, the hands that handled the teacups so gracefully; and when he spoke the matter so eclipsed the manner that it is doubtful whether Kate Ravell noticed a single locution. His shrewd common-sense, quaint humor, the quickness with which he grasped a new point of view, and the freshness of his own impressed her with his strong personality. Pleased and amused, she had no time to notice grammatical lapses or small table gaucheries that had irritated Helen by constant repetition.

"He's delightful," she told her husband, in a conjugal aside.

In the conversation which ensued after they joined the others outside, Carter also took no mean part. Of things he knew, and these ranged over subjects that were the more interesting because unfamiliar to the town-bred folks, he spoke entertainingly; and on those foreign to his experience he preserved silence. On every common topic his opinion was sound, wholesome. His keen wit punctured several fallacies. The quaint respect of his manner to the women served him as well with the men.

"Big brain," Ravell told his wife in that conference which all married folk have held since the first pair retired to their bedroom under the stars at the forks of the Euphrates. "That fellow will go far."

"So gentle and kind," Kate added. "I think Helen is lucky. Those English people are nice," she went on, musingly; "but if I were Helen I'd keep an eye on Mrs. Leslie."

"Yes," she answered his surprised look, nodding vigorously. "She is in love with Mr. Carter. How do I know?" She sniffed. "Didn't I see her eyes—the opportunities she made to touch him while handing him things at supper? Helen is safe, though, so long as she treats him properly. He doesn't care for Mrs. Leslie."

He shook his head reprovingly. "You shouldn't make snap judgments, Kate."

Had he witnessed a little scene that occurred just before the Leslies drove away! Good-byes had been said, and Helen had gone in-doors with her guests. Danvers, who was riding, had galloped away. Then, at the last moment, Leslie remembered that he had left his halters at the stable. While he ran back Carter stood beside the rig. Brilliant northern moonlight showed him Mrs. Leslie's eyes, dark, dilated, but he ignored their knowledge till she spoke.

"*I* wouldn't have done it."

"Done what?"

His stoicism could not hide the sudden flash of pain. She saw it writhe over his face like the quivering of molten lead ere his features set in stern immobility.

"It is very chivalrous of you." She smiled bitterly. "But why wear a mask with me?"

"You have the advantage of me, ma'am," he stiffly answered, and moved round to the ponies' heads.

Leslie was now returning, but she spoke again, quickly, eagerly, with the concentration of passion. "It is always the way! The more we spurn you the hotter your love, and—" She paused, then, hearing her husband's foot-fall, whispered: "Vice versa. Remember! *I* wouldn't have done it!"

After their departing rattle had died, Carter threw himself on the grass before the house and lay, head on clasped hands, staring up at the moon; and Helen, who was using unnecessary time making a temporary bed, paused and looked out from the open door. The dark figure loomed stern and still as the marble effigy of some crusader. There was something awful in his silence; the soft moonlight quivered around and about him, seemed a sorrowful emanation. Frightened, remorseful, she sat locking and unlocking her fingers. What was he thinking?

Part of his thought was easy to divine. It would be common to any man in his situation—the hurt pride, jealous pain, misgiving, unhappiness, but beyond these was an unknown quantity, the product of his own peculiar individuality. His keen intellect had already analyzed the cause of her shame. He was rough, crude, unpolished! Any man might also have reached that conclusion. It was in the synthesis, the upbuilding of thought from that conclusion, that he branched from the common. He was humble enough in acknowledging his defects. Yet his natural wit showed him that humility would not serve in these premises. Forgiveness for the crime against his personality would not remove the cause of the offence. Far-sighted, he saw down the vista of years his and her love slowly dying of the same similar offences and causes. That, at least, should never be! He had reached a decision before she came creeping out in her night-dress.

"Aren't you coming to bed, dear?"

He sensed the remorse, sorrow, pity in her voice, but these were not the

feelings to move his resolution. Pity! It is the anodyne, the peaceful end of love. Rising, he stretched his great arms and turned towards the stables.

"Where are you going?" she called, sharply, under the urge of sudden fear.

"To turn in on the hay."

She ran and caught his arm, and turned her pale face up to his. "Why? I have made our bed on the couch. Won't you come in?"

"No!"

"Why?" she reiterated. "Oh, why?"

"Because it is shame to live together when love has fled."

She clasped his arm with both hands. "Oh, don't say that! How *can* you say it? Who says I do not love you?"

"Yourself." His weary, hopeless tone brought her tears. "In love there is no shame, an' you was ashamed of me."

"I did mean to tell you." Desperate, she caught his neck. How valuable this love was becoming, now she felt it slipping from her! "I did! But you went away without saying good-bye."

"There was opportunity, plenty. You could have sent for me."

His sternness set her trembling. "Then—I thought—I thought—they were only to be here for one day. Such a short visit. I thought they might misjudge—I didn't want to expose you to hostile criticism."

"You've said it. Love knows no fear. Good-night."

"Oh!—please—*don't*!" she called after him, as he strode away. Pity, woman's weakness, the conservative instinct that makes against broken ties, these were all behind her cry, and his keen sensibility instantly detected them. He closed the stable door.

According to the canons of romance, it would have been very proper for that jarring echo to have unstoppered the fountains of her love and all things would have come to a proper ending. But, somehow, it did not. After a burst of crying into her lonely pillow, she lay and permitted her mind to hark back over her married life. Hardship, squalor, suffering, misfortune passed in review till she gained back to the days when Molyneux had also paid her court. What share had anger and pique in affecting her decision? Angry pride was, just then, ready to yield them the larger proportion. Later came softer memories. She was troubled as she thought of his generous kindness. Under the thought affection, if not love, revived, and conscience permitted no sleep until she promised to beg forgiveness.

However, circumstance robbed her of the opportunity. Before the Ravells retired, Carter had said good-bye, as he intended to start back for the woods before sunrise. "You needn't to get up, either," he had told her. "I'll take breakfast with Bender." But now she promised herself that she would rise, get him a hot

meal, and then make her peace. But at dawn she was awakened by his wheels, and, running to the door, she was just in time to see him go by. She would have called only, as the cry trembled to her lips, his words of the night before recurred to memory—"Marriage without love is shame!" Suddenly conscious of her night-gear, she shrank as a young girl would from the eye of a stranger, and the chance was gone.

"I'll tell him when he returns," she murmured, blushing.

But he did not return; and two days later Bender and Jenny Hines drove up to the door.

In the neatly dressed girl, with hair done on top of her head, it was difficult, indeed, to recognize the forlorn creature whom Bender had picked up on that night trail. Though she was still small—a legacy from her drudging years—she had filled and rounded out into a becoming plumpness. Her pale eyes had deepened, were full of sparkle and color. Two years ago she would have been deemed incapable of the smile she turned on Helen.

"I'm so glad to see you, Mrs. Carter; an' I'm to stay with you all winter while your husband's up at the camp. The doctor didn't want to let me go," she said, not noting Helen's surprise, "an' he wouldn't to any one but you."

"The camp? What camp?"

It was Jenny's turn to stare. As for Bender, he gaped, while his colors rivalled those of a cooked beet. Sweating under her questions, he looked off and away to escape the spectacle of her white misery as he explained Carter's new enterprise and its glorious possibilities. He finished with an attempt at comfort.

"I ain't surprised that he didn't tell you. I allow he was going to spring it on you all hatched and full-fledged. Me an' Jenny here was real stupid to give it away. Might just as well have said as she'd come on a little visit. I allow he'll be hopping mad at the pair of us. An' now I'll have to be going after the Cougar. He'll do the chores till we kin get you a hired man."

If the fiction eased the situation, it deceived neither her nor them. Having, a week later, delivered the new hired man, a strong young Swede, Bender delivered his real opinion with dubious head-shakings while carting the Cougar away. "Don't it beat hell, Cougar? Him that straight an' good, her that sweet an' purty, yet they don't hitch. It's discouraging."

"Well," the cynic grunted, "take warning."

Bender eyed him wrathfully. "Now what in hell do you mean?"

But he blushed under the Cougar's meaning glance.

"I reckon he'll drop in on his way up," Bender had assured Helen. But he did not. She yet allowed herself to hope—hoped on while the weeks drew into

months, each of which brought a check for household expenses. Soon the snows blanketed the prairies; heavy frost vied with the cold at her heart; and he had not come. Jenny's reticence kept the truth from leaking out; but such things may not be hid, and about Christmas-time it was whispered through the settlements that Carter had left his wife.

XIII
THE CAMP

That was a hard winter. From five feet of snow the settlements thrust up, grim, ugly blotches on the whiteness. And it was very cold. Once the spirit dropped down, down, down to seventy-two below zero—one hundred and four degrees of frost. Fifty was normal, forty, rather warm. Also it stormed, and when the blizzard cut loose, earth, air, or sky was not merged in blanched chaos.

Nestling snugly in the heart of the spruce, Carter's camp, however, was free of the blizzard. Let the forest heave to upper air-currents, tossing skeleton branches with eerie creakings, yet the gangs worked in comfort, cutting and hauling logs, while outside a hundred-mile wind might be herding the drifts.

By New Year's his work was well in hand. Eight million feet of logs lay on the ice, filling Silver Creek bankful like a black flood for a long half-mile. Not that this had been accomplished without friction. Such jettison of humanity as drifts to a lumber-camp does not shake down to work in a day. From earth's four corners a gallows crew of Swedes, French, Russians, Irish, Canadians, Yankees drifted in, and for one month thereafter internecine war raged in the bunkhouses. Then, having bit, gouged, and kicked itself into some sort of a social status, the camp concentrated upon the boss.

The choppers, strangers to him, soon took his measure. A swift answer to a mutinous glance, an order quietly drawled, and the relation was duly fixed. But it was different with the teamsters. They, with their teams, were all drawn from the settlements and knew him personally or by report. Even Hines had condescended to accept three dollars a day and board at the hand of his enemy. But than this no man can greater offend against his neighbors—to rise superior in the common struggle for existence. From them he obtained no credit for the initiative which had conjured the camp out of nothing. Now that it was in full swing, each man felt that he could have done the trick himself. A man may have

no honor in his own country; so, as always was, always will be, they, the weak, snarled at him, the strong carrying their envious spite to the length of trying to kill the goose which was laying the golden egg. Though the money earned this winter would make an easy summer, they struck at the source of supply—wasted his fodder, tipped over his sleds, cast logs off to lighten their loads, manifested their jealousy in a hundred mean ways.

The matter of the fodder he easily corrected. Discovering the teams one evening bedded to their bellies with his choicest hay, he sent for Bender, who expressed himself profanely over the waste.

"If this keeps up we'll be out of hay an' a job in another month," Carter said. "What's got into them?"

"Search me," the giant foreman answered. "They know a heap better. Pure malice, I reckon."

"Got a good man in your gang?"

"Big Hans, the loader. He's licked every man in his outfit."

"Well, put him in charge of the stables, with fifty cents a day raise."

"Don't need the raise," Bender suggested. "He'd sooner fight than eat."

"Oh, give it to him."

Events justified the expenditure. At the end of a week it were, indeed, difficult to locate a feature of Big Hans's face—to distinguish nose from cheek or discover his mouth. But beyond this uncertainty of visage there was nothing undecided about Hans. He had worked steadily through the teamsters and come out on top. The waste stopped.

The derelict logs and loads were not so easily settled. Once, sometimes twice, a month business called Carter to Winnipeg, and, though Bender ruled the camp with an iron fist, one pair of eyes cannot keep tab on fifty teamsters. Driving in one evening, Carter counted fifteen cast-off loads between the dumps and the skidways. The last lay within three hundred yards of the skids, where a halloo would have brought the Cougar—loading boss—and a dozen men to the teamster's aid.

That was the last straw. Through gray obscurity of snowy dusk Carter stared at the dark mass as though it incarnated the mulish obstinacy which dogged his enterprise. Perhaps it did, to him, for he muttered: "I'm real sorry for you. Must have troubled you some to make back to the stables. Guess you wasn't late for supper."

Vexed, indignant, he drove slowly by the skidways, where the sleds stood loaded for the morning trip. Enormous affairs, built on his own plans, fourteen feet across the bunks, they were loaded squarely with four tiers of logs, then ran up to a single log. In the gloom they loomed like hay-stacks, and a stranger to the woods would have sworn that no single team could start one. But they

ran on rounded runners over iced tracks, and Carter knew that they were not overloaded.

"No kick there," he muttered.

Farther on a rise in the trail gave him a view of the camp across a wide slough: a jumble of log buildings that shouldered one another over the inequalities of a narrow, open strip between slough and forest. Under the rising moon the sod roofs, flat and snow-clad, gleamed faintly. Patches of yellow, frosted windows blotched the mass of the walls. Beyond, dark spruce towered against the sky-line. It spread, that gloomy mantle of spruce, illimitable as night itself, northward to the frozen circle, its vast expanse unbroken by other centre of warmth and light. Solitary splash of life, the camp emphasized the profundities of enviroming space, accentuated their loneliness.

Reining in, Carter gazed thoughtfully at this, the work of his hands. The clear air gave him many voices. He could hear Big Hans swearing quaintly in the stables. A teamster sang on his way to the cook-house. An oblong of brighter yellow flashed out of a mass. That was the cook-house door opening to admit the singer. Came a murmur and clatter of dishes; then light and sound vanished. Suddenly, far off, a long howl troubled the silence. Wild, mournful, tremulous, it was emblematic of his problem. Here, a hundred miles beyond the stretch of the law's longest finger, the law of the wolf pack still obtained—only the strong hand could rule.

The howl also signalled his arrival at a conclusion. "They're at supper," he muttered. "I'll tackle them there an' now."

First he went to the office, a rough log-hut which he shared with Bender. The giant lay, smoking, in his bunk, but he sprang up at Carter's news. "An' I busted the head of the Russian on'y yesterday for pitching off a load! Who's at the bottom of it? Now you've got me. Michigan Red's as mean as any. Jes' this morning he busted two whiffle-trees running, an' I happened along jes' in time to save the third. Of course, his runners was froze down hard, an' him snapping his heavy team like all get out.

"'From your looks,' I says to him, 'I'd have allowed you'd sense enough to loosen your bobs!' He on'y grinned. 'Clean forgotten, boss. Kick that hinter bunker, will you?' That man," Bender finished, "has gall enough to fix out a right smart tannery."

Carter frowned. The man, a red-haired, red-bearded fellow, with a greenishly pale face and cold, bleak eyes, had come in from the wheat settlements about the Prairie Portage, driving a huge team of blacks. The one, a stallion, rose sixteen and a half hands to the crest of his swelling shoulder. Reputed a man-killer, he wore an iron muzzle in stable or out. His mate, a rat-tailed mare, equally big, differed only in the insignia of wickedness, wearing a kicking-strap in harness,

a log-chain in the stable. Man and team were well mated.

"If he'd make his pick on me!" Bender growled on, "'twould have been pie-easy. I'd have smashed him one, an' you could have handed out his walking-papers. But no! It's you he's laying for. 'Your boss ain't big enough to do it,' he says, when I tell him that there'll be other things than busted whiffle-trees if he don't look out. 'You're a privileged character till I'm through with him.' An' that's just the way of it. He'll swallow all I kin give him while waiting for you."

Carter's nod confirmed Bender's reasoning. No one else could play his hand in this game of men. The giant had deferred to that unwritten law of the woods which reads that every man must win his own battles. "Know anything of him?" he asked.

"Cougar ran acrost him once in Michigan. Don't lay no stress on his character, but says he's mighty good with his hands."

"Well, come along to the cook-house."

As they opened the cook-house door a hundred men looked up from the three tables which ran the length of the long log-hut. These bristled with tinware, and between them and the stove three cookees ran back and forth with smoking platters of potatoes, beans, and bacon. At the upper end a reflector lamp shed a bright light over the cook and his pots; but tables were dimly lighted by candles stuck upright at intervals in their own grease. Their feeble flicker threw red shirts and dark, hairy faces into Rembrandt shadow. Hot, oily, flushed from fast and heavy eating, intensely animal, they peered through the reek of steaming food at Carter.

'"I won't keep you a minute," he answered the resentment which his interruption had called to all the faces. "I jes' want to say that too many logs have been dumped by the trail of late. Now if any teamster thinks that the loaders are stacking it on him, he can report to the foreman, who'll see him righted. But if, after this—"

"More beans!" A laugh followed the harsh interruption. The faces turned to Michigan Red. When the others paused he had continued eating, and now, his greenish face aglow with insolence, he was holding an empty platter out to the nearest cookee.

It was a difficult situation. There was no mistaking his intent, yet the interruption was timed so cunningly as to leave no actual cause of offence. Behind Carter, Bender bristled with rage, ready to sweep casuistical distinctions aside with his fist. Malignantly curious, the faces turned back to Carter.

He waited quietly till the red teamster was served; paused even then, for, as the latter fell to his eating, shovelling beans into his mouth with knife loaded the length of the blade, Carter experienced an uncomfortable twinge of memory. The squared elbows, nimble knife, bent head grossly caricatured himself in the first

days of his marriage, and vividly recalled Helen's gentle tutelage. For a second he saw himself with her eyes, then pride thrust away the vision.

"After this"—he began where he had left off—"any teamster who dumps a load without permission or good cause will be docked time and charged for his board."

"More pork!" It was the red teamster again. Resting an elbow on the table while he held out the plate behind him, he permitted his bleak glance to wander along the grins till it brought up on Carter.

Choking with anger, Bender stepped, but Carter laid a hand on his arm while he spoke to the cook. "This man has a tape-worm. Send him the pot."

Blunt and to the point, the answer exactly suited lumberman primitive humor. As the door closed behind them Bender's chuckles echoed the men's roaring laugh. "Fixed him that time," he commented. "But he come back right smart."

"Can't come too soon. It all helps to fill in."

Bender sensed the sadness in his tone, and the big heart of him was troubled. These months past he had seen Carter pile task on task, seeking an anodyne for unhappiness in ceaseless toil. Every night the office lights burned unholy hours. Waking this particular night, long after twelve, Bender saw that Carter was still at his desk.

"Time you hired a book-keeper," he remonstrated. "Trail you are travelling ends in the 'sylum."

"Book-keeper couldn't do this work."

"No?" Bender sat up. "What's the brand?"

"Figuring—grading contrac's, bridges, trestles, timbering."

"For what?"

"A railroad."

Bender snorted. "Shore! You ain't surely calculating on the C.P.'s building the branch?"

"No."

The monosyllable discouraged further questioning, but Bender stuck to his main objection. "Well, if you keep this gait you'll railroad yourself into the graveyard. It is two now; at five you'll be out with the loaders."

"Correct."

The giant straightened up in his bunk. "Good God, man! Don't you never sleep?"

"I'll sleep to-morrow night. Now, shut up!"

Growling, Bender subsided, and long after he had slid again into the land of dreams, Carter stared at the opposite wall with eyes that gave him neither the bales, boxes, ranged along its length, nor the shirts, socks, overalls, and other lumbermen's supplies on the rough shelving. He saw only Helen's flower face

blossoming out of the blackness of the far corner.

The replica of himself that he had seen that night in Michigan Red was but the climax of similar, if milder, experiences. Naturally enough, his Winnipeg trips had brought him in contact with people of more or less refinement. He met them at hotels, or in the parlors of his business acquaintances when, as sometimes happened, they invited him to dinner. Such circumstances had simply forced him to set a guard on his speech and manners—to imitate those about him. There had been nothing slavish in his imitation—no subtraction from the force of his personality. It was rather the grafting of the strong, wild plant with the fruit of hot-house culture. It inhered in a dawning realization that manners, courtesy, social customs were based on consideration for others' happiness, besides being pleasant of themselves.

Not that he was ready to admit the fact as sufficient excuse for Helen's treatment of himself. Hurt pride forbade. "She didn't give me a chance," he murmured. "I'd have come to it—in time. She was ashamed."

Yet each concession to social custom became an argument for her, and was turned against him in the nightly conflict between pride, passion, love, and reason. Often love would nearly win. While her face smiled from the corner, love would whisper: "She is yours. Six hours' ride will take you to her."

But pride always answered, "Wait till she sends for you." And he would turn again to his figuring.

For pride had enlisted ambition in its aid. Long ago his clear sight had shown him the need of a competing railroad, and gradually a scheme had grown upon him. What man had done, man could do. If a great trunk road could develop from the imagination of one man, a transverse line that should strike south and find an outlet on the American border could hatch from the brain of another. He would build it himself. Already he had broached the matter to his financial backers, and they had given it favorable consideration—more, were interesting other capitalists in the project. So, in camp, on trail, his every spare moment was given to the working out of construction estimates.

Only once was his resolution shaken. From Lone Tree the camp "tote" trail slid due northeast, passing the settlements a half-dozen miles to the east. Save on this one occasion, when the need of men and teams caused him to take the other, he always used the "tote" trail. And even this time he did not dally in the settlements. Having advertised his need at the Assiniboin mission, Flynn's, and the post-office, he headed up for the camp as dusk blanketed the prairies. Dark brought him to his own forks, where, reining in, he gazed long at a yellow blotch on the night, his own kitchen light. A five-minute trot would put him with her! Love urged go! Pride said nay! And while they battled his ponies shivered in the bitter wind. He waited, waited, waited. Which would have won out will never be

known, for presently a cutter dashed out of the gloom, swung round on his trail, and, as he turned out to let it by, he caught voices, Helen's and Mrs. Leslie's, in lively chatter.

Leaning over, he lashed his ponies, raced them into the camp.

After that he turned with renewed assiduity to his figures. Still, they are dry things, matters of intellect, useless for the alleviation of feeling. One emotion requires another for its cure, and the trouble with Michigan Red promised more forgetfulness than could be obtained from the most intricate calculations. That is why he had said, "He can't come back too soon."

He quickened at the thought of the coming struggle. In himself the red teamster embodied the envy, spite, disaffection which, from the first, had clogged Carter's enterprise. He materialized the vexatious forces, impalpable things that Carter had been fighting, and he felt the relief which comes to the man who at last drives a mysterious enemy out to the open.

XIV
THE RED TEAMSTER

As Bender prophesied, Michigan Red came back "right smartly."

The following Sunday was one of those rare winter days when the mercury crawls out of its ball sufficiently to register a point or two. At noon the silver column indicated only four below zero, and, accustomed to sterner temperatures, the men lolled about the camp bare-headed and shirt-sleeved. One hardy group was running a poker game on a blanket under the sunny lea of a bunkhouse; the younger men, choppers and teamsters, skylarked about the camp essaying feats of strength: some tossed the caber, others put the shot, a third squad startled the forest with the platoon fire of a whip-cracking contest. Standing in his doorway, the cook, autocrat of the camp, remarked patronizingly on the latter performance.

"Pretty fair," he judicially observed, as one young fellow raised the echoes—"pretty fair, Carrots, but Sliver there has you beat. Needn't to look so cocky, though, Sliver," he qualified his praise, "or I'll call up Michigan to teach you how to crack a whip."

"Oh, shucks! I ain't scared o' him," Sliver grinned. Then, rising to his slim height, he writhed body and arm and let forth a veritable *feu de joie*.

"You would, would you?" the cook warned. "Here, Red!" he called to the

gamblers. "Get up an' give this kid a lesson."

"You go plumb to—" The location was drowned by Sliver's second volley.

"Oh, come, Red!" the cook urged. "This kid makes me tired."

The red teamster went on playing, and would, no doubt, have indefinitely continued the game but that, looking up to curse the importunate cook, he saw the stable roustabout interestedly watching the whip-crackers. A man in years, the latter was a child in intellect, simple to the point of half-wittedness. Picking him up, starving, in Winnipeg, Carter had brought him up to the camp early in the winter, and ever since he had served as a butt for the camp's jokes.

Michigan rose. "Lend me your whip, Carrots!"

"Now you'll see!" the cook confidently affirmed, as the long lash writhed about Michigan's head. Exploding, it sent a trail of echoes coursing through the forest. As is the pop of a pistol to the roar of a cannon, so was his volley compared to that of Sliver. Then, to prove himself in accuracy, Michigan snapped a fly from the cook's bare arm.

"A trifle close," he exclaimed, rubbing the spot. "Do it ag'in, Red, an' I cut out your Sunday pudding."

Grinning, Michigan swung again, turned, as the lash writhed in mid-air, and cracked it explosively within an inch of the roustabout's ear. "Stan' still, you son of a gun!" he swore, as the poor simpleton flinched. "Keep him in, boys. Stan' still, or I'll take it clean off nex' crack.... Now we'll play you've a fly on the tip of your nose."

The play was too realistic, drawing a spot of blood. Yelling with pain, the roustabout swore, begged, pleaded piteously to be let alone. But a circle of grinning teamsters hedged him in on all sides save where the red teamster stood with his whip. Man, in the aggregate, is always cruel. Let a few hundred blameless citizens, fathers of families, husbands, brothers, be gathered together and flicked with passion's whip, and you have a mob equal to the barbarities of Caligula. And these men were raw, wild as the woods. Shoving the simpleton back whenever he tried to break, they stood grinning while Michigan cut cracking circles about his head. Sometimes his hair moved under the wind of the lash; sometimes it grazed his nose. There was no telling where it would explode. He could not dodge it. Trying, the whip drew blood from his neck.

"Stan' still, then!" the red teamster answered his yell of pain. "I ain't responsible for your cavortings."

"Spoiling Red's aim!" the cook admonished, severely. "I never seed your like!"

"Now open your mouth wide," the tormentor went on. "I'm agoin' to put the tip in your mouth without techin' your lips—if you don't move. Open wide!"

But the man's small wits were now completely gone. He opened his mouth

obediently, then, uttering a scream, a raucous, animal cry, he sprang at his tormentor. But a dozen hands seized and dragged him back.

"Hold him, boys! I'll skin the tip of his nose for that."

As Michigan swung his whip the roustabout sent forth scream on scream. Foam gathered on his lips. Terror had driven him insane.

"No, no!" the cook remonstrated. "That's enough, Red—that's enough!"

Unheeding, the teamster took aim, swung, then—another lash tangled in his. Yelling with the sudden pain of a twisted wrist, he swung round on Carter. Unobserved, he had run across from his office, snatched up Sliver's whip, tangled Michigan's lash, and jerked it over his shoulder.

"Boys"—he now faced the flushed crowd—"I don't allow to mix up with your fun, but what do you call this?"

One glance at the bloody weal on the roustabout's neck and the brutal mob resolved into its individual components, each a unit of sorrow for its share in the torture.

"Jest a poor fool at that." Carter laid his hand on the simpleton's shoulder.

"Shore, shore! Yes!" the cook agreed. "It's too bad. We didn't go to do that. No. We jest calculated to have a little fun, an' carried it a leetle too far."

"That's so! That's so!" Carrots, Smith, and Sliver all seconded the cook, all voicing repentant public opinion.

"No, Red didn't go to do that," the cook continued. "He moved. Red didn't mean it; did you, Red?"

After that one yell of pain the red teamster's eyes had glued to a handspike which lay near by. But the useless wrist checked the impulse, and he stood, sullenly noting changed opinion.

"Is this a Sunday-school?" he answered, sneering. "Or mebbe a Young Folks' Christian Endeavor? Sliver, what's the golden text?"

"Oh, shore, Red!" Sliver remonstrated.

"It's this." Carter looked round the group. "Any man who lays a hand on this poor lad again gets his time." His glance fixed on Michigan Red.

The red teamster shrugged. His chance had gone by, and he was acute enough to recognize the fact. Not that he lacked courage or strength to try it out, man for man—bite, gouge, kick, in the brutal fashion of the lumber woods. Taken by surprise, he had lost his vantage, and now saw that his adversary had cleverly ranged against him an adverse opinion.

"It's not him I'm laying for," he growled. "Some other day!"

The "other day" came a week later. Entering the stables at noon in search of Brady, the water-hauler, Carter saw the red teamster perched on the top rail of

the black stallion's stall, in his hand the iron muzzle which he had unstrapped that the brute might feed with ease. As the beast snapped, rather than ate, his oats, he cast vicious, uneasy glances from the tail of his eye at Red; but, indifferent to the brute's mood and the anxious glances of his fellows, the teamster calmly chewed his tobacco.

It was by just such tricks that he had gained ascendency over his fellows. Whereas it was worth another man's life to step into their stall, the blacks would stand and sweat in rage and fear while Michigan slapped and poked their ribs. The devil in the beasts seemed to recognize a superior in the pale-green fiend in the man.

"Brady here?" Carter asked. "Oh, there you are!"

He stood immediately behind the stallion, and as he spoke Michigan brought the iron muzzle down with a thwack an the brute's ribs. Snorting, it lashed out, just missing Carter. One huge, steel-shod heel, indeed, passed on either side of his head. Under such circumstances a start was a little more than justifiable; yet after that tribute to surprise Carter stepped quietly beyond range and went on talking to Brady.

"This afternoon you can hitch to the water-cart an' ice the track in to them new skidways."

Then, turning, he eyed Michigan Red. "That's a techy beast of yourn, friend."

"Techy?" Michigan sneered. "There ain't another man in this camp as kin put the leathers on him!"

"No?"

"No!" Swinging his heels against the stall, Michigan added, "Not a damned man."

Picking up a spear of hay, Carter chewed it while he looked over the beast, now foaming with rage. It was a dare. He knew it—saw also the amused interest in the on-lookers. They felt Michigan had him in the door. "The leathers," he remarked, "are on him."

It was a skilful move, throwing the initiative back to the teamster. Not one whit fazed, however, he exclaimed, in mock surprise, "Why, damme, so they are!" Sliding down, he laid a hand on the stallion's crest. Instantly the brute ceased his plunging, uneasy stepping, and while the man stripped off the harness only long, slow shivers told of smothered fury.

"There you are!" He threw collar and harness at Carter's feet.

"Look here, boss!" Brady remonstrated, as Carter picked them up. "I wouldn't go to do it. Shure I wouldn't. The baste is a man-killer be Red's own word. Luk at him for the proof."

Ears laid flat to his neck, glossy hide shivering, the whites of his eyes show-

ing viciously, chisel teeth protruding through grinning lips, the stallion's appearance bore out his reputation.

"I wouldn't!" a dozen teamsters chorused.

Unheeding, Carter entered the stall. As he ranged alongside, the stallion tried to rear, but was snapped back by his halter-chain. So foiled, he humped his shoulders, dropping his head between his knees; then, just when the teamsters expected to see the sixteen hundred pounds of him grind Carter against the stall, he suddenly straightened and stood still as before, save for the slow shivers.

"Mother of God!" Brady exclaimed. "What 'll that mane?"

Carter's hand rested on the beast's crest. What did it mean? Only the red teamster knew. But whether the animal shook to the memory of some torture, or merely mistook the firm hand for that of his master, he moved but once while Carter adjusted and buckled the harness. That was at the cinching of the bellyband; but he quickly quieted. The click of the breeching-snaps sounded like breaking sticks through the stable, and as he stepped out from the stall a score of breaths issued in one huge sigh.

"Now hurry, Brady," he said. "The job will keep you humping till sundown."

Respectful glances followed him away from the stable. He had touched his men in a vulnerable spot, and though, hereafter, they might growl and grumble—the lumberman's sole relaxation—he could count on a fair amount of obedience from all but such malingerers as Shinn and Hines, or a natural anarchist like Michigan Red. The latter took on the yoke of authority only to defy it; and though even his bleak face lit up as sunlight struggles through frost of a winter's morning, he soon found cause for further trouble.

Dropping into the smith's shop a few days later, Carter found Seebach, the German smith, ruefully contemplating a half-dozen disabled sleds. "Herr Gott!" he exclaimed. "In one half-day these haf come in. Alretty yet I works like t'ree tefils, an' this iss the leedle games they play on me. It is that you gifs me a helper or I quit—eh?"

Too surprised to laugh over the other's ludicrous anger, Carter puzzled over the breakage. As aforesaid, the sleds had been built on his own plans to carry enormous loads. To four-by-six runners, shod with an inch of steel, hardwood bunkers a foot square were fastened with solid iron knees braced with inch iron. Every bolt and pin was on the same massive plan. The best of a dozen patterns of as many logging-camps had gone into the making of those sleds. Yet, though they ought to have been good for twenty tons oh the roughest kind of a road, they were racked, split, or twisted, bunkers torn off, ironwork on all badly sprung.

Carter whistled. "How did they do it?"

"Brady, he says it vas the new roat into the pridge timbers. In one place it goes like hell over a pank down to a lake, with a quick turn at the pottom. 'The

Pig Glide,' Brady calls it."

"I'll go out an' look at it."

A half-hour's walk brought him to the hill. Debouching from heavy timber, the trail inclined for two hundred yards, then sheered down at an angle of forty-five degrees to a lake below. As the smith had said, an abrupt turn at the bottom added to the trail's difficulties. Too steep for ice-sledding, hay had been spread over the face of the hill, and with this to ease the descent Carter could see no reason for the broken sleds.

A man had been told off to respread the hay after each passage, and he grinned at Carter's question. "Bust 'em here? You bet! How? Well, they come down on a gallop. Teams is coming now, so if you set down in the scrub there you'll see 'em do it."

It was as he said. One after the other the teams emerged from the forest, gathered speed on the incline, and came flying down the hill, the great sleds cracking and groaning under the strain of enormous loads as they skidded around the bottom turn. Michigan Red came last, and Carter's anger could not altogether drown a thrill as he watched the red teamster take the hill. Whooping, whip-cracking, blacks stretched on the gallop, he tore down that plumb hill-side and skidded round the turn, load balanced on one runner. It split, with a pistol report, but the steel shoe held and he passed safely on and down the lake.

"He was the first to cut loose," the trackman explained. "T'others followed his dare."

"Well, they'll have to quit it. Warn each man, Joe, an' report all to me that disobey."

When, that evening, Joe reported that all but Michigan Red had obeyed the order, he sensed hot anger under the boss's calm. Expecting an explosion, he was the more surprised when, after a thoughtful pause, Carter dismissed him with an order to take a couple of hand-rakes out on the job the following morning. To the Cougar he gave orders that the red teamster was to load last. Obedient, the Cougar sent Michigan Red to break track into a new skidway; thus all of his fellows had passed on down the glide while Michigan was still loading.

"Load him light—dry logs, an' not too many," Carter had ordered. But, incensed at the delay, the teamster indulged in such sarcastic allusions to the frailty of the loaders' female ancestors that the ribald crew piled the logs on till his load bulked like a hay-stack. None other than the blacks could have started the sled out from the skids; and while, with jerks and sudden snatches, the fierce brutes worked it out of deep snow to the iced tracks, the loaders looked admiringly on. It was a triumph in driving. Man and team worked like a clock, and, returning blasphemous answers to the loaders' compliments, Michigan slid off down the trail.

To make up for his lost time, he urged the blacks to a trot, and so came swinging down the incline at twice his usual speed. Not till he reached the very edge did he see that the hay had been raked off the face of the hill. A mask of ice, it glittered in the sun.

Half-way down Carter stood with Joe. Looking up, they saw Michigan poised on the top log, a red, sinister figure against the sky. He seemed to pause, throw back on his lines—a quick, involuntary movement. Then, craning forward, he glanced down that glittering stretch—a comprehensive look that took in Carter, Joe, and their plan.

"Give him a forkful under the runners as he goes by," Carter whispered. "Otherwise we'll kill his team."

A second, as aforesaid, the red teamster paused; then, loosing his lines, he leaned over and lashed the stallion under the soft of the belly.

"My God!" Joe cried.

He saw the black brute rear, snorting—saw the blacksnake bite the mare's flank—saw the pair plunge over the grade; then water bathed his eyes. He heard, however—heard the rush and roar, a thunder of hoofs as the long, steel calkings cut through the ice and struck fire from the face of the hill. He felt the wind as the sled passed, and waited for the crash—which did not come.

A voice, cold, deliberate, restored his vision. "I didn't think it was in horseflesh." Carter was gazing after team and sled, now a black patch on the snow of the lake. "Beat us this time, Joe," he continued; "but we'll fix him to-morrow."

That evening, however, the red teamster enjoyed the fruits of his exploit. It seasoned the beans at supper, sweetened the stable choring. Opinion agreed that it was now "up" to the boss, but split on his probable action, one-half the stable agreeing with Hines that Michigan surely earned his discharge, the other half holding that settlement by battle would be the certain ending. Neither event, however, had come to pass by bedtime, and the mystery was intensified by the chucklings of the road gang, which came in from work long after the teamsters retired. Next morning, too, the loaders—evidently in the secret—added to the suspense by asking the teamsters if they intended to toboggan down the glide that trip.

"Bet you don't!" they yelled after Michigan Red.

Though not exactly nervous, the mystery yet affected the red teamster. As his load slid through the forest uneasiness manifested itself in thoughtful whistlings, broken song snatches, unnecessary talk to his horses. Not that he was a whit afraid. The half-dozen or so men whom he expected would try to enforce the new order could not have prevented him from at least sending his team at the grade. The fierce soul of him thrilled at the thought of opposition, and, coming out of the forest, he set a pace that would have ridden down opposition.

But he reined in at the hill. Instead of the force of his imaginings, only Joe Legault stood at the foot of the glide. The hay had been respread on its face, but—the road gang had built a rough bridge over a deep gully, and now the glide led, straight as an arrow, out to the lake. The racking curve was utterly abolished.

Grinning, Joe said: "The boss allows that it's your privilege to kill your own horses. So go it if you wanter. Hain't going to hurt his sleds none."

Michigan walked his horses.

Carter had won out. Moreover, he had done it without the loss of prestige that would have ensued by the usual brutal methods in vogue in lumber-camps. Law, of a man or people, cannot endure, of course, without force behind it. Yet behind his imperturbability, quiet taciturnity, the men felt the power to enforce his commands. So his authority was no more called in question. Not that envious spite ceased to dog him. Hines, Shinn, and their coterie stood always ready to stir up discontent, foment trouble.

It was their sympathy that caused the cook to maintain one can of poor baking-powder to be valid excuse for leaving. But Carter disposed of minor troubles with the same easy good-humor that he had given to big ones.

"I reckon you've been scandalously mistreated," he told the cook. "I'm right sorry to lose you. Must you go?"

Mollified, the cook stayed.

Then Baldy, chief of the "tote"-trail teamsters, rose to the point that "thirty hun'red was load enough for drifted trails."

"Thirty it is, Baldy," Carter cheerfully answered, and Baldy yanked forty and forty-five hundred all winter over the worst of trails.

He had proved himself in the mastership of men just at the time that opportunity was holding out her hand, and proof and fruit of his winning came the very day that saw the last load delivered at the dumps. "It is a go!" The wire which announced, with this bit of slang, the successful financing of his railroad projects was brought in by Baldy from Lone Tree, and with it buttoned against his heart Carter made his way to the stables where the teamsters were, as they thought, bedding up for the last time.

"We have feed for three months left," he said, "and I can promise work through the summer. At what?" He turned, smiling, on Brady. "Never mind; all those that want it kin have it till freeze-up. In the mean time I'll feed an' care for your teams till the log-drive is down."

Grumblers from the cradle, kickers born, teamsters and choppers had looked forward to this last day in camp, swearing all that ten dollars a day would not hire them for an hour longer. No, sirree—not an hour! Now they looked their doubt.

"What's the pay?" Brady asked.

"Half a dollar a day more'n you're getting."

"That beats farming in these parts. You kin sign me, boss."

And me—me—me! The answers floated in from all over the stable. Only a few of the older men elected to return to their farms, and after all had spoken Carter turned to Michigan Red, who occupied his old perch on the stallion's stall.

"Well, Red?"

"Didn't s'pose you'd need me."

Carter went on writing. He could afford to be generous. He had beaten the man at every point; to retain him where another would have discharged him was, indeed, the crowning of his victory, and Michigan knew it. Had he doubted, he had but to read it in the countenances of his fellows. A good gambler, however, he hid resentment, and where a poor loser would have taken his discharge he accepted re-employment.

His red beard split in a sneering grin. "Oh, guess I'll trouble you for a little longer."

The day was eventful for another reason. Coming up from a short visit to the settlements, Bender handed Carter a letter that evening, the superscription of which sent the dark blood flooding over his neck, for it was the first he had seen of Helen's writing these months. Was this the answer of his longing? Had she sent—at last? His fingers trembled as he tore the wrapping, then he paused, staring. It was his last check, returned without an explanatory scrap.

"She's hired to teach her old school again." Bender answered his blank look.

XV
TRAVAIL

If the white months seemed to lag with Carter up at the camp, they dragged wearily with Helen down in the settlements. Christmas had been particularly dreary, for it did not require a woman's marvellous memory for anniversaries for her to live over again every incident and experience of last Yuletide. In their living-room Carter had built a chimney and fireplace of mud, Cree style, and on Christmas Eve she had cuddled in against his broad breast and talked of a sweet possibility. They had the usual pretty quarrel over sex and names—has the tongue one good enough for the first-born? Then he had hung her stocking, and none other would suit him, forsooth, but the one she was wearing. He had

laughed away her blushing protestations, and had kissed the white foot and toes that squirmed in his big hand. Sitting alone this Christmas, she had blushed at the memory; then a gush of tears had cooled her hot cheeks, tears of mingled sorrow and thankfulness that their pretty dream had not taken form in flesh.

One January morning she sat, chin in hands, and stared across the humming stove at the white drift outside. Nels, the Swedish hired man, had killed three pigs for winter meat the day before, and with a touch of humor that was foreign to his bleached complacency had set them on all-fours in the snow. Stiff, frozen—so hard, indeed, that the house-dog retired disconsolately after a fruitless tug at an iron ear—they poked marble shoulders out of a drift. The eye of one was closed in a cunning wink. His neighbor achieved a grin. The mouth of the third was open and thrown back, as though defying death with derisive laughter.

Steeped in thought, Helen did not see the grim grotesques. These months she had undergone three distinct changes of feeling. First she was becomingly repentant. Viewed under the softening perspectives of time and distance, Carter's crudities waned, while his strength and virtues waxed. The insignificant sloughed away from his personality, leaving only the strong, the virile. During this stage she formed small plans towards reconciliation, and bided patiently at home, ceasing her visits to Mrs. Leslie. Not that she felt them wrong, but, besides the shame natural to her position, she liked to feel that she was gratifying what she deemed her husband's prejudice; she experienced the satisfaction which accrues from a penance self-imposed.

When, however, he did not return, she relapsed into hurt silence—would not speak of him to Jenny, nor listen when Bender dropped in on one of his periodical visits with news from the camp. Lastly came cold resentment, anger at the grass-widowhood that was being thrust upon her, a feeling that was the more unbearable because she secretly admired his boldness in cutting the knot of their difficulties. She recognized the wisdom of the act. Had he not taken the initiative, the process of disenchantment would have continued till she herself might have taken the first step to end their misery. But the knowledge did not mitigate the sting. He had forced the separation! The thought rankled and grew more bitter day by day.

This morning she was in a particularly dangerous mood. Conscious of her original good intention, knowing that her fault had been the product of conditions as much as her own weakness, she was ripe for revolt against the entire scheme of things that had forced the lot of crabbed age upon her flushed youth, compelling her to sit by a lonely fire. And as she sat and brooded a clash of bells broke up her meditations; the door opened, letting in a bitter blast that froze the warm interior air into chilly fog, from the centre of which Mrs. Leslie emerged, heavily furred and voluble as ever.

"Anchorite!" she screamed. "Or is it anchoress? Three, four—no, six visits you owe me. Explain! Bad weather? Hum!" She tilted her pretty nose. "If I couldn't fib more artistically, Helen, I'd adhere to the painful truth. You were afraid—of hubby."

"I—I wasn't!"

Mrs. Leslie surveyed the girl's flushed anger with sarcastic pity. "Tut! tut! More fibs. Huddled over that stove, you make the loveliest study of despair. You have been crying, too."

"I—I haven't!" The lines of Huddled Despair flowed into Radiant Anger.

"Your eyes are red?"

"Well, if they are—if I did—it was through anger."

Mrs. Leslie accepted the modified admission. "That's right, my dear. He—no man is worth the compliment of regretful tears. They are all foolish, selfish, fickle as children. They cry for love like a child for the moon, throw it away when the toy wearies, howl if another tries to pick it up. They only value the unattainable. Bah!"

The ejaculation was comical in its feigned disgust, but just then Helen had ears only for the serious or sympathetic—preferably the latter. "Tell me, Elinor," she asked, "do you really think I have deserved this at his hands?"

"No." For once in her life Mrs. Leslie dealt in undiluted truth—because, perhaps, lying would not serve her purpose. "One could understand his pique—" With incredible hardihood, considering the part she herself had played, she commented: "Really, my dear, you ought not to have done it. But he has been altogether too severe—unforgiving. I don't see how you stand it. I should freeze these cold nights without some one to warm my feet on."

"To think"—speech was such a relief after months of bitter silence, and Helen never even noticed the other's funny climax—"to think that this should be dealt to me by a man of whose very existence I was unconscious a short two years ago! Is he a god to exercise such power—to command me to eat the bread-and-water of affliction during his pleasure? Why, I was twenty-two before I ever saw him! Doesn't it seem ridiculous—silly as though one pebble on a beach were to establish limits for another? They roll and rub where and with whom they list, and why shouldn't I?" Ignoring the fact that monogamy was her sex's greatest achievement, and that the first woman who bartered love for protection, cookery for maintenance, had not driven such a bad bargain, she finished: "Wouldn't it be funny if pebbles were condemned to rub and roll in definite pairs till winds and waves had buried one or other affinity deep in the sands. Why—"

"In other words," Mrs. Leslie interrupted, "why should vertical distances count for more than horizontal—death for more than distance—seven feet under the sod carry advantages and opportunities that do not go with seventy miles

above? There isn't any reason. It is just so."

"Well, I won't stand it!" Rebellion inhered in Helen's stamp. "I won't! I won't! I won't!"

Mrs. Leslie shrugged her hopelessness. "Thousands of women have to. What *can* you do, my dear?"

"Do?" the girl answered, hotly. "I have already done it—applied for and secured my old school. Unfortunately, I must remain here till the spring term opens."

Now to accuse Mrs. Leslie of trailing a definite purpose were to reveal lamentable ignorance of her ruling traits. She was no fell adventuress of romance, stealthy of plot, remorseless in pursuit. Persistence was foreign to her light character. Unstable as water, she veered like a shuttlecock under the breath of emotion, yet, withal, grasped speedily at such straws as the winds of opportunity brought within reach. If she lacked force to plot Carter's capture, or to revenge herself for his slight through Helen, she was willing enough now that the wind served.

"In the mean time," she said, "you will stay with me?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that!" Oh, complex feminine nature! Helen balked at the freedom of her agonizings. The quick earnestness of her answer told of the hope that still glowed in the ashes of despair.

But Mrs. Leslie turned hope against her. "Oh yes," she mocked. "You were not afraid of him; certainly not. But that is not the way to get him back, my dear. If you would regain your recreant, give him a rival."

Now, though this piece of worldly wisdom was strictly in line with Helen's crooked parable of the pebbles, the idea sounded grossly common in plain words. Hastily she said, "You don't suppose that I would—"

"No! no!" Mrs. Leslie skilfully retrieved her error. "I only meant that it would be as well to keep him on the anxious seat. Never let a man feel too sure of you—it isn't healthy, for him or you. I wouldn't wait here till it pleased him to extend magnificent forgiveness for so small a fault. Go out—visit—let him see that you can be happy without him—that you have still attractions for others."

"But I don't care. Why do you persist, Elinor, in hinting that I still love him? I don't."

"Then you'll come with me?"

"I'd like to, but I can't leave Jenny alone with Nels."

Mrs. Leslie might have replied that this was exactly what she would have to do when school opened; instead, she contemplated the love which masqueraded behind this unparalleled obstinacy from sphinxlike eyes. "Jenny must be dying to see her friends in Lone Tree," she suggested. "Let her take a vacation. As for Nels—he can bach it."

Helen looked troubled. It was really astonishing to see how she ran from liberty. But she had, perforce, to make some show of living up to her professions, so she called Jenny and anxiously inquired if she *didn't* want to visit her friends. Unfortunately, Jennie had been oppressed these many days with a longing to see the good doctor, and the expression of her wish carried the day for Mrs. Leslie.

"Oh, well," she sighed; and Mrs. Leslie prudently confined her laugh within her own hollow sepultures.

Accepting the invitation with misgivings, she was astonished, on her return home, to find how thoroughly she had enjoyed her two weeks' visit. Yet it was only natural. Besides the change, Mrs. Leslie had been at pains to amuse and entertain her. There were cosey chats over the teacups on matters dear to the feminine heart, and daily sleigh-rides—mad dashes over hard-packed trails to music of jingling bells. Once the drive was extended as far as Regis barracks, twenty miles to the west, and Helen was introduced to captains of the mounted police in scarlet splashed with gold, their ladies, the agents and clerks of the government land office—pleasant people at first sight, of whom she was to learn more. Of nights, Molyneux and other remittance-bachelors would drop in, and, with drawn curtains excluding the vast arctic night, there would be music, songs, games. Small wonder that she enjoyed herself, or that, the ice thus broken, she gravitated between home and the Leslies' during the remainder of that winter.

Speaking of Molyneux, a greater surprise inhered in the fact that she had been able to meet him without embarrassment, a condition that was due to the tact and real consideration which he displayed. At their first meeting he paused only for a pleasant greeting; next, he ventured a chat; and these lengthened until he felt safe in staying out an evening.

He marked his greatest gain the day that—Leslie being under the weather with a cold—she allowed him to drive her home. By those gentlemen, the romanticists, this fact would not have been accorded a tender implication. They paint love in colors fast as patent dyes: good girls love once; or, if a second passion be grudgingly allowed, it is only after the first is safely bestowed in cold storage underground. In face of the fact that the little god occasionally shoots a double arrow, that the sigh of many a wife would be unwelcome if intelligible to her husband, that many a maid has slipped into spinsterhood between two passions, they lay down as the basic principle of ethical romance the canon that neither wife nor maid can entertain two loves other than in sequence.

Now Helen may not have been in this case, and if she had it goes without saying that she would never have admitted the preference even to herself. For she had been raised in the very shadow of the aforesaid canon. Yet he had certainly won on her—for good reason. In person he was above the average of good looks; his manners touched standard. In that he, alone of the English set, had been able

to wring a living from the stern northland without the aid of a fat allowance, he commanded her respect. Also she thought that he was trying to sink his past—he entertained the same illusion—and as every good girl loves to imagine herself as an "influence," the thought gave her satisfaction. Molyneux had no cause of complaint.

To do him justice, he tried, in a slovenly fashion, yet still tried, to live up to this, the one pure love of his life—purity must be interpreted as applying to his intention rather than motive. Of all the remittance-men who frequented Mrs. Leslie's house, he, at this time, showed the least moral taint. Often he thrust in between Helen and things offensive. Though, during Helen's visits, Mrs. Leslie made some attempt to put her house in order, she could not always bridle her male guests, who smoked Leslie's imported tobacco and offered herself veiled love. But Molyneux sterilized most of their blackguardism, nipping entendre with a chilly stare, destroying double meanings by instant and literal interpretation—did it so effectually that she never noticed the pervading sensualism. Indeed, he did it so much as to draw Mrs. Leslie's fire. "Virtuous boy," she said, teasing him one day. "You almost convert me to the true-love theory."

His grimace gauged the depth of his reformation. To him as to Mrs. Leslie the text could be fitted: "Can the leopard change his spots or the Ethiop his skin?" Really he had not changed in quality or purpose; it was the same Molyneux in pursuit of the same end. His tactics were merely altered to suit his game. He would, of course, have denied this—probably with the warmth of honest conviction. At times his reflections on the subject attained highly moral altitudes. He had known from the first that Helen could never live with Carter! Duty certainly called him to end her bondage! Yes, he believed himself honest, and would continue to so believe until some unexpected check loosed the Old Adam again. This was proved by the flashes of passion at the very thought of failure. It would have been much more natural for him to have attempted a raid on Carter's Eden. But, warned by previous experience, he waited, waited, waited, and watched as the snake may have watched the maiden Eve over the threshold of Adam's garden. Now that time seemed to have verified his prediction, that, albeit with hesitant steps, Helen was approaching the gate of her own accord, he held back the hot hand that fain would have plucked her forth lest he should startle her into flight.

There were many watchers of the girl's progression during the winter months: Mrs. Leslie, who might be said to await the moment when a shove might throw the girl off her balance headlong into Molyneux's arms; the settlers, who anticipated such a denouement with scandalous tongues; the remittance-men, who betted on the result, basing odds on her lonely condition. To these there could be but one end. Always the human soul reaches for happiness, and the fact that she had once mistaken Dead Sea fruit for love's golden apples would

not prevent her from tiptoeing to pluck again. Would she pluck?

Molyneux, for one, was sure that she would, and, having the courage of his conviction, put his hope into speech, choosing an opportune time. Nels always drove her over to Leslie's, and at first brought her home. But by the middle of February the latter part of the task fell by consent of all to Molyneux, and he spoke while driving her home one afternoon.

"Read this," he said, handing her a telegram that called him to his father's death-bed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, impulsively.

"For what," he questioned, "his sickness or my absence?"

"Both," she frankly answered. "You have been—very nice to me. I shall miss you."

Now this was all very proper, but when he stated that he should be gone at least seven weeks she ought to have veiled her concern. But she did not, and the regret that swam in the hazel eyes strengthened his purpose. "Before I go I must say something. How long is our present relation to last?"

The raise of her eyebrows might have meant anything. He took it as encouragement, and ran on, "You know that I love—have always loved you."

Here, according to the canons, she ought to have withered him. Instead she gave him the truth. "I am not blind."

"Thanks for your candor. Now, a step further—do you intend to remain his bondwoman?"

This was harder, yet her answer correctly interpreted her feeling. "I—I—really don't know."

The doubt spurred him. "You do not love him. You could not—after the way he has treated you. You must have love. A glance at your face would tell a dullard that it is as necessary to your existence as air or water. You cannot be happy without it. It is life to you; more than sustenance. You must be wrapped in it, touch it at every point, feel it everywhere around you. Your being cries out for a passion all-absorbing; you will take nothing less. I would—"

"Give me such love?" She had thrilled under his truthful analysis of her nature, and now she cried out the passion of her sex, the eternal desire for a love everlasting as that of a mother. "Is such possible?—a love that never stales, that endures after the hot blood cools and beauty fades? Could you love me through old age? No, no! A woman can, but never a man!"

"I can! By God! I can!" he cried, blazing in response to her passion. "I'll prove it, for sooner or later you are going to love me."

She laughed a little wearily. "There spake the bold man. Well—you have my good wishes."

"Your—good—wishes?"

"Don't flatter yourself." Her staying hand checked his enthusiasm. "You said just now that I didn't love—my husband. Perhaps you are right. I don't know. I have no standard by which to judge, and only love could supply one. So far—you have failed to do so. I like you—very much; but—if I ever love again, the man must lift me out of myself, make me forget—him, myself, the whole world."

"I'll do it!" he confidently exclaimed; then, sobering, added: "I want you to promise one thing. It isn't much—simply to give serious thought to your position while I am away—to remember what I have just told you and to forget that first foolish mistake that cost me so much. Now will you?"

"Surely," she honestly answered.

"And—if possible—give me an answer?"

She nodded, and he was content to leave it there. They were now on the last mile, and they made it in silence, he plunged in delicious reverie, she very thoughtful. Looking up as the cutter rolled and bumped over the frozen stable-yard, he caught her looking at him with soft compassion.

"Well?"

She smiled. "Did you really—suffer?"

"Hell!"

Grasping her hand, he had almost kissed it when she jerked it suddenly away. "There's Karl—and Jenny—standing in the door." Noting his sudden discomposure, she added: "Never mind, she didn't see you. Won't you come in?"

"Can't—put me late for the choring."

This was only one of a dozen times that he had refused the invitation. A little surprised, she watched him turn and drive away, then she saw Nels coming up from the stable, and the thought was lost in wonder as to whether or no he had seen Molyneux take her hand.

Now, as a matter of fact, Nels had; moreover, he mentioned it to Jenny as he helped her wipe the supper dishes, and thereby earned much trouble. "I tank," he observed, "something is doings. Cappan he taken the mistress hand. Pratty soon the boss no have womans."

His chuckle died under her wrathful stare. "Mention that to any one, Nels, an' Mr. Bender 'll break every bone in your body."

It was not so easy to dispose of her own misgivings. As, that evening, she arranged the dishes in the homemade plate-rack, she turned sombre eyes on Helen, musing by the stove. Often her lips opened, but sound trembled on its thresholds. She kept her own counsel till Bender dropped in on his next visit.

It was perfectly natural for her to turn to him for counsel. Coming to her as he did, in the moment of her sore trouble, her girl's heart had opened and vented on him the love that had been prisoned since the death of her mother; and ever since a perfect understanding of kindred natures had obtained between them.

"They're talking about her in the settlements something scan'lous," she told him. "Tongues is clacking from here to Lone Tree. Why *don't* Mr. Carter come home? Kain't you persuade him?"

But Bender shook his head. "No, he's stiffer'n all he— Beg your pardon! I mean he's dreadful sot in his mind. I wouldn't envy the one that went to advise him."

Before going away Bender touched on a matter that was now old history in their intercourse. "Changed your mind yet, little girl?"

It was now Jenny's turn to sorrowfully shake her head. "It would be my an' pleasure to be wife to a big, good man like you. But I just kain't bring myself to put you where any man could cast my shame in your face."

"Oh, shore!" he protested. "You was that little—a teeny bit of a thing, jes' seventeen—on'y a baby. Who'd be holding it agin you? Besides—he's in England."

"Yes—he's in England," Jenny slowly repeated. "But—"

He did not see the queer look she sent after him as he rode away.

XVI

A HOUSE-PARTY

One morning, some three weeks after Molyneux's departure, Helen sat in her doorway reading, as certain an indication of coming spring as the honk of the wild geese speeding northward on the back of the amorous south wind. As yet the prairie sloughs wore mail of ice, but from dizzy heights those keen-eyed voyagers discerned tricklings and wee pools under sheltered forest banks, sufficient till the laggard sun should smite the snows and fill the air with tinklings and gurglings, loose the strange sound of running waters on the frozen silence. Another month would do it. Already the drifts were packing, and the hard trails traversed the sinking snows like mountain chains on a relief map. In Helen's door-yard stratas of yellow chips, debris of the winter's furious firing, were beginning to appear; with them, lost articles; indeed, Nels was gobbling joyously over the retrieval of an axe, when Leslie's team and cutter came swinging into the yard.

Mrs. Leslie was driving, and, seeing Helen, she screamed from a hundred yards: "They are coming! All of 'em!"

"Who?" Helen asked, when the ponies stopped at the door.

"Why, Edith Newton, Mrs. Jack Charters, Sinclair Rhodes—you remember?

I told you that I should give a house-party for the Regis folks when the frosts let up. Hurry and pack up your war-paint! They'll be here to-morrow, and I need your help. No refusal! Fred is going in to Lone Tree to-morrow and Jenny can go down with him. Nels will cook for himself, won't you, Nels?"

"I tank I can cook, yes." Nels ceased his jubilations over the axe long enough to season his assent with a bleached grin.

"There! It's all fixed." Bustling inside, she talked volubly while assisting in Helen's selections. "Yes, take that; you look your sweetest in it; and I imported Captain Chapman especially for you. That also; you'll need it evenings. No, Captain Charters isn't coming. Some Indian trouble called him west. Oh, Mrs. Jack won't care—I'm the loser, for he was always my cavalier."

Driving home, she rattled steadily, entertaining Helen with descriptions of her expected guests, giving their pedigrees, aristocratic connections, while she spiced her discourse with malicious fact. Sinclair Rhodes had secured his appointment as land agent at Regis through distant cousinship to the governor-general. And why not? The offices ought to go to well-bred people! He had money, must have, for his salary and expenses were out of all proportion—so much so as to cause comment by malicious people, envious souls! What if he did make a little, as they said, on the side? The government could afford it; and every one knew what Canadians were in office! People who live in glass houses, and so forth! It was simply racial envy! She was also becomingly indignant over the action of certain Canadians who had made trouble for Captain Chapman in the matter of mounted-police supplies. What figure did a few tons of provisions cut in a gentleman's accounts? These commercial intellects, with their mathematical exactness, were horrid. Newton? He was an appointee of Rhodes. No, no relation. She waived further description of the Newtons, omitted the pregnant fact that Charles Newton's presence cut as little figure in his wife's social calculations as Captain Charters' absence did in those of Mrs. Jack.

Caution, doubtless, counselled the omission. The quail is not flushed till the net be spread. Yet the reservation was hardly necessary in the light of Helen's condition. Judgment of another's action is colored by one's own mental state, and she was not so likely to be shocked by one who had defied the conventions against which she herself was in open mutiny. Anyway, she liked Mrs. Jack at first sight, despite the scandalous manner in which she flirted with Charles Newton the first night at table. Big, tall, and fair, large eyes expressed her saving grace, an unparalleled frankness that seemed to sterilize her flirtations and rob them of impropriety. Twice during the meal she retailed Newton's tender asides to his wife, asking, laughingly, if she recognized the vintage.

However, being as yet in happy ignorance of many things that would soon cause her serious disquiet, Helen thoroughly enjoyed that first evening. The well-

appointed table, with its sparkling glass, silver, snowy napery; the well-groomed people and their correct speech alike fed her starved æsthetic senses while they aroused dormant social qualities. She laughed, chattered, capped Mrs. Jack's sallies, displaying animation and wit that simply astonished Mrs. Leslie. Her wonder, indeed, caused Edith Newton to whisper in Mrs. Jack's ear:

"Elinor looks as though she had imported a swan in mistake for a duckling. Look at Sinclair—positively smitten. Giving her all his attention, though he took Elinor in. The girl seems to like him, too."

Mrs. Jack's big eyes turned to the laughing face that was raised up to Rhodes. "Don't believe a word he says, my dear," she suddenly called across the table. "And look out for him. He's dangerous."

Though she laughed, Rhodes must have sensed a serious motive, for he glanced up in quick annoyance. "Do I look it?" he asked, turning again to Helen.

Nature does not lie. His narrowly spaced eyes, salient facial angles, dull skin, heavy lips carried her certificate of degeneracy. A physiognomist would have pronounced him dangerous to innocence as a wild beast on less evidence, but to Helen's inexperience he appeared as a man unusually handsome, profile or front face. The significant angles did not alter the good modelling of his nose and chin or affect the regularity of his features. Tall, slim, irreproachable in manner and dress, there was no scratch to reveal the base metal beneath his electroplate refinement.

"You certainly don't," she answered, laughing.

"Then," he said, with mock gravity, "I can patiently suffer the sting of calumny."

"Calumny?" Mrs. Jack echoed, teasingly. "*Calumny*? What's that?"

"Synonyme for conscience," Edith Newton put in, with a spice of malice. For though the conquest of Rhodes—to which Regis gossip wickedly laid Newton's presence in the land office—was now stale with age and tiresome to herself, she was selfish enough to resent his defection.

"Sinclair found it while rummaging Fred's coat for matches," her husband added. Leslie's simplicity was as much of a joke to them as it was with the Canadian settlers, and, under cover of the laugh, Chapman—a big blond of that cavalry, mustached type which wins England's cricket matches while losing all her wars—leaned over and whispered in Newton's ear: "Leslie will lose more than his conscience if he doesn't look out. La belle Elinor is madly smitten." Aloud, he said, "Sinclair would hardly know what to do with it, Mrs. Newton."

"Hearken not to the tongue of envy, Mrs. Carter," Rhodes retaliated upon his tormentors. "I'm a very responsible person, I assure you."

She laughed at his mock seriousness, and, believing it all fooling, gave him so much of her attention that evening as to cause more than one comment.

"Rhodes is making heavy running," Newton remarked once to Chapman, who replied, conceitedly stroking his mustache, "Wait till I get in my innings."

"After me," Newton answered. "I come next at the bat."

Ignorant of this and other by-play, however, Helen thoroughly enjoyed the first days of the party. On the frontier, amusement is a home-made product, and shares the superiority of domestic jams, jellies, and pickles over the article of commerce. They caught the fickle damsel Pleasure coming and going, reaping the satisfaction of both spectator and entertainer. By day they skated, drove, or curled on a rink which the male guests laid out; nights, they sang, danced, played games, and romped like children.

Apart from a certain freedom in their intercourse, which she attributed to long acquaintance, Helen found nothing objectionable in the demeanor of her new friends during those first few days. On the contrary, she thought them a trifle dull. Their preglacial and ponderous humor excited her risibility; she laughed as often at as with them. At other times she could not but feel that they regarded her as alien, a pretty pagan without their social pale, and she would revolt against their enormous egotism, insolent national conceit. She broke many a lance on that impregnable shield.

"You English," she flashed back when, one evening, Newton reflected on American pronunciation of certain English family names—"you English remind me of the Jews, with their sibboleth and shibboleth. Is your aristocracy so doubtful of its own identity that it is compelled to hedge itself against intrusion by the use of passwords. You may call 'Cholmondeley' 'Chumley,' if you choose, but we commit no crime in pronouncing it as spelled."

Again, when Edith Newton rallied her on some crude custom which she maintained was peculiarly American, Helen delivered a sharp *riposte*. "No, I never saw it done at home; but I have heard that it is quite common among English emigrants on transatlantic liners." Such tiffs were, however, rare; and, to do them justice, men and women hastened to sacrifice national conceit on the altars of her wounded susceptibilities.

Offence came later, and on quite another score. At first she liked the attentions paid her; the gallantry of the men put her on better terms with herself, renewed the confidence which had diminished to the vanishing-point during her months of loneliness. But when constant association thawed the reserve natural to first acquaintance, and freedom evolved into familiarity, her instincts took alarm. Distressed, she observed the other women to see if she had been singled out. But no, they seemed quite comfortable under similar attentions, and they rallied her when she unfolded her misgivings at afternoon tea.

"You shouldn't be so pretty, my dear," Mrs. Jack said, laughing. "What can the poor men do?" Then they made fun of her scruples, satirizing conventions and

institutions which she had always regarded as necessary, if not God-ordained.

"Marriage," Edith Newton once cynically exclaimed, "is merely a badge of respectability, useful as a shield from the slings and arrows." Then, from the depths of her own degeneracy, she evolved the utterance: "Men are all beasts beneath the skin. Wise women use them for pleasure or profit."

Helen revolted at that; it transcended her mutiny. But few people are made of martyr stuff—perhaps fortunately so; martyrs are uncomfortable folk, and, wise in her eternal generation, nature sprinkles them lightly over the mass of common clay. The average person easily takes the color of environment, so why not Helen? Thinking that perhaps she was a little prudish, she stifled her fears, tried to imitate the nonchalance of the others. She even made a few tentative attempts at daring. Alas! as well expect a rabbit to ruffle it with wolves. Such immediate and unwelcome results followed that she retired precipitously behind ramparts of blushing reserve. But the damage was done. Thereafter Chapman, Newton, Rhodes, one or another, was constantly at her elbow; she was unpleasantly conscious that, having let down her fences, they looked upon her as free game.

The thought stirred her to fight. Chapman she disposed of with a single rebuff that sent him back to Mrs. Jack's side. But Newton proved unmanageable. Impervious to snubs, his manner conveyed his idea that her modesty was simply a blind for the others. His familiarities bordered on license. A good singer, he always asked her to play his accompaniments of evenings, and she would sicken as he used the pretence of turning a leaf to lean heavily upon her shoulder. At other times he made occasion to touch her—would pick threads from her jacket; lean across her to speak to her neighbor at table.

By such tactics he brought her, one morning, to great confusion. A Cree Indian had driven in from the Assiniboin reserve with bead-work, moccasins, and badger-skin mittens which he wished to trade for flour or bacon. With the other women Helen was bending over to examine his wares, when Newton entered the kitchen. Stepping quietly up from behind, he laid a hand on Helen's hair. Taking him for one of the other women, she suffered his fondling till Mrs. Leslie, who knew he was there, asked his opinion on a tobacco-pouch. Then, before she could move, speak, cast off his hand, he pressed her head against his wife's dark curls.

"Just look at the contrast!" he admiringly exclaimed, and so robbed her anger.

Yet so evident was the intent behind the excuse that even the Cree detected the sham. From Helen his dark glance travelled to Newton and back again. "He your man?" he asked.

Vexed to the point of tears, she shook her head and bent over the bead-

work to hide her embarrassment. But the Cree's rude notions of etiquette had been jarred. "He touch your hair!"

So simple, his comment yet pierced to the heart of the matter. Newton had fondled her hair, crown and symbol of her womanhood, a privilege of marriage. In an Indian tribe the offence would have loosed the slipping knife; a settler would have resented it with knarled fist. But here the women tittered, while Chapman, who just then sauntered in, laughed.

Emboldened, perhaps, by immunity, the man's offensiveness developed into actual insult the evening of that same day. They had all been pulling taffy in the kitchen, and, passing through a dark passage to the living-room, Helen felt an arm slip about her waist. Newton's face was still tingling from a vigorous slap when she confronted him before them all in the living-room. Even his hardihood quailed before her flushed and contemptuous anger; he was not quite so ready with his excuse.

"I *beg* your *pardon*, Mrs. Carter! Really, I mistook you for my wife."

It was a lie on the face of it, and, barbed with stinging truth, her retort drew a peal of laughter from the others. "Indeed? Your excuse is more remarkable than your mistake."

Offended as much by the laugh as the insult, she seated herself on a lounge by Leslie, the one man with whom she always felt safe. In him the stigma of degeneracy took another form; the tired blood expressed itself in a prodigious simplicity. He lacked even the elements of vice. As his wife put it, "Fred is too stupid to be wicked." Yet, withal, he was very much of a man as far as his chuckleheadedness permitted, and now he offered real sympathy.

"It was a caddish trick, Mrs. Carter, and I mean to tell him so."

"Oh no!" she pleaded. "It wouldn't improve matters to make a scene, and he's not likely to offend again. Please don't? Stay here—with me."

"But I'm your host. Really, he deserves a thrashing."

"No, no! Stay here! I don't feel equal to the others."

"I never do." Sitting again, he turned on her a look of beaming fellowship. "The girls all yawn and look terribly bored when I try to amuse them—except you. They don't seem to care for horses and dogs, the things that interest me."

If, as a conversationalist, he did not shine, he at least brought her the first easy moments she had known that day, and she turned a sympathetic ear to some of his prattle. Indicating Rhodes, who was leaning over Mrs. Leslie, he said: "You know I don't like that sort of thing. Elinor says I'm old-fashioned, and I suppose she knows. Of course she wouldn't do anything that wasn't proper, but a fellow has his feelings, and it doesn't take a crime to hurt them, does it? She's up on the conventions; but it does seem to me that if a fellow has anything to say to another fellow's wife he ought to say it aloud."

Astonished that his dulness should have sensed the pervading sensualism, she studied him while he watched his wife, in his eyes something of that pitiful pleading one sees in those of a beaten dog. His words banished her doubts as to whether her own misgivings did not root in hypercritical standards—restored her viewpoint. All week the atmosphere had thickened, as constant association banished reserve, and to-day freedom had attained its meridian. It was not the matter but the manner of conversation that filled her with a great uneasiness—the whispers, asides, smiling stares, conscious laughter. The vitiated atmosphere caused her a feeling of suffocation, and in the midst of her sick revulsion Leslie dropped a remark that came to her like a breath of ozone.

"I was awfully sorry to hear of the trouble between you and Carter. I always thought him *such* a fine fellow. He hadn't much use for me—any of us—still I liked him. He was a bit on the rough, of course; but, I tell you, character counts more than culture, strength than refinement."

Character counts more than culture, strength than refinement? To his simplicity had been vouched wisdom worthy of a philosopher. The phrase stabbed her. Before her rose a vision of her husband as she had seen him that last miserable night, cold, stern, inexorable, in the loom of the moonlight. In view of that colossal memory, the Englishmen about her dwarfed to effeminate insignificance. Vividly her own doubting recurred. And she had traded him—for this! The thought brought wretchedness too great for concealment. Her uneasiness was so manifest as to form the theme of a bedroom conversation.

Though comfortable—the one frame house in the settlements, a palace to Canadian eyes—Leslie's house boasted only two bedrooms; so while the men made shift on shake-downs, Helen shared Mrs. Leslie's rooms, Edith Newton and Mrs. Jack the other.

As she braided her hair for the night, the latter lady opened the conversation. "Did you notice how uncomfortable little Carter was this evening? She is a nice little thing, but she doesn't mix. I don't see why Elinor invited her."

"You don't, eh?" Edith Newton mumbled a mouthful of pins. "You are slow, Maud."

"No—only lazy. Why should I puzzle over things when you are here? I'll bet you have pumped everybody dry long ago. Now—dispense!"

"I don't go round with my eyes shut," the other calmly answered. "To begin: Calvert Molyneux is completely gone on little Carter, whose husband, it seems, left her because of some slight."

"Hum!" Mrs. Jack elevated her straight brows. "Foolish man to leave her to Calvert. So that is why he went home! Exits till the tarnished pearl be regulped by the conjugal oyster? Clever!"

"On the contrary"—she curled a full red lip—"he contemplates *honorable*

marriage—dalliance, Dakota, divorce, everything that begins with D, down to eventual desertion, if I know anything of Calvert. But fancy—HE!"

"'The devil in love, the devil a husband would be,'" Mrs. Jack misquoted.

"'The devil married, the devil a husband was he,'" Edith Newton finished. "But he is not married yet. She holds him off—foolishly. For you know Calvert, good in streaks, but ruled by his emotions and ruthless when they command. If she turns him down—"

"She'll need to keep him at longer distance than this house affords. But Elinor?—this doesn't explain her. She's beastly selfish under her jolly little skin. Why is she posing as aid and advocate of love?"

"In love with Carter hubby—or was would be more correct, in view of her carryings-on with Sinclair. But the Carter attack, I understand, was very severe while it lasted. Think of it, Maud, Elinor to fall in love with a settler!"

Mrs. Jack elevated naked shoulders. "Not at all surprising. Just the itch of her rotten blood for a few sound corpuscles. I've felt it myself at times. Don't look so shocked—you know we are rotten."

"Maud! Maud!"

Humming a bar of "La Boheme," Mrs. Jack regarded her companion through narrowed lids. "I believe, Edith, you keep up appearances with yourself. Why not be natural for a change? But, as you say, Elinor seems to have made a complete convalescence. Did you *ever* see a woman make *such* a projectile of herself? Positively hurls herself at Sinclair. But tell me more about the Carter man. How did he treat her rabies?"

"Cold-water cure. Turned her down—flat."

"So in revenge she's trying to besmirch the wife? The little devil! I call that pretty raw, Edith."

The other shrugged. "Oh, well, it is her pie, and if she prefers it uncooked it is none of our business. Better keep your fingers out of it, Maud. Struggle with your good intentions."

Mrs. Jack smiled sweetly. "My dear, am I in the habit of messing alien pies?"

"Not unless you covet the meat."

"Well, I'm not hankering after either Calvert or Carter hubby, though I must say that I like his specifications. Showed awfully good taste both in selecting his wife and rejecting Elinor. Fancy! a virtuous man—in this day!"

By this time Edith Newton was disposed in bed. A sleepy answer came from under the clothing. "Proves he hadn't the honor of your acquaintance."

"Nor yours," Mrs. Jack retorted.

Her flippancy masked a disquiet so grave as to drive away the desire for sleep. Clad only in her bed-gown, she drew a chair up to the stove, which re-

turned her thoughtful gaze through two red monocles of isinglass. In her fair-play was associated with its companion virtue frankness, and in no wise could she read a mite of the former quality into Elinor Leslie's intent towards Helen. After many uneasy shruggings, she rose, took the lamp, and walked into the other bedroom.

"Misplaced my comb," she answered Mrs. Leslie's sleepy inquiry. "Lend me yours." Then she paused at the foot of the bed.

Helen had coiled her hair for the night, but its unruly masses had loosened and ran, a perfect cataract of gold, over her pillow. Against that auriferous background lay her head and face, with its delicate creams and pinks sinking into the plumpness of one white arm. The other was folded over the softness of her bosom. Mrs. Jack thought her asleep till her eyes opened, then, returning the girl's smile, she tiptoed back to her fire.

"It's a damned shame," she told herself, profanely, but truly, and with such vigor that Edith Newton sleepily asked: "What's the matter? Aren't you ever coming to bed, Maud?"

"Saying my prayers. Go to sleep."

"Put in a word for me," the other murmured.

"The Lord knows that you need it." Mrs. Jack glanced at the bed, then returned to her musings. "Of course she's a little fool. If she goes back to her husband she will have to settle down to the humdrum of settler life—raise calves, chickens, pigs, and children in the fear of the Lord, with only a church picnic or some such wild dissipation to break the deadly monotony. A pleasing prospect, I must say. But if it suits her—well, I'm not going to see her delivered, bound and bleating, into the hands of the devil, *alias* Calvert Molyneux. It seems a shame, either way, but she undoubtedly loves her settler hubby, and she's just the kind to eat her heart out through remorse and shame. And here is Elinor blackening her reputation with the pig settlers to whom she must look for a living, making reconciliation impossible! Well, I'm going to speak to the little fool to-morrow."

This she did, making her opportunity by carrying Helen off to her bedroom, where, having disposed her victim in a comfortable chair, she herself snuggled down upon the bed and went with customary frankness straight to the heart of her subject. "I want to know, Helen Carter, why you are here?"

Puzzled, Helen stared; then, interpreting by the smile, she answered, "I—really, I—don't know."

"A—pretty—poor—reason!" She shook her finger in affected anger. "Don't you *know* that you don't belong? Now don't flare up! If I were Edith Newton, or Elinor, the cat, you might suspect a reflection. It isn't that you are below grade—just the opposite. Frankly, my dear, we are a rotten lot. A sweet girl, with conscience and morality has no business among us. We couldn't scrape up

enough of either article to outfit a respectable cat. Don't blush. I'm not envying you your conscience. It is a most uncomfortable asset, and, given choice of two evils, I'd take a harelip. But, as you have one—well, you'd better mizzle—go home, you know."

Having eased herself by this delivery, Mrs. Jack sighed, sat up, rolled herself a cigarette, and went on, after a contented puff: "Don't tell on me, my dear. Not that I care a whoop—that's American, isn't it? I love your slang; it is so expressive and comfortable to the feelings. But, you see, rakishness has no attractions for the fool male of our species. He resents any infringement of his monopoly. Even such a degenerate ass as Charles Newton prefers school-girl simplicity. So one must needs simulate virgin innocence, however painful. That's more of your delightful slang. Now—when are you going?"

The question anticipated the conclusion of Helen's midnight tossings; but, if unchanged in substance, this had nevertheless been modified by cooler morning reflections. She stated the qualifications—Jenny was visiting in Lone Tree, and would not return till Saturday. Only two more days! Her visit would then come to a natural end, so why offend by abrupt departure?

Mrs. Jack laughed. "I don't think Elinor would be so very dreadfully offended. Why? Well, it is ungracious to criticise one's hostess, but—you have trapped her rabbit."

"Her—rabbit?"

"Yes—Sinclair Rhodes."

"Why, he paid me less attention than any of the others; was less—you'll pardon me—offensive. I even thought he tried to keep them away."

"As the lion drives the jackals. Avoid him, my dear. Well, I suppose that a couple more days won't hurt. We are to stay a week longer, and if Elinor asks you—which she won't—you *must* refuse. Now let us go out before they begin to suspect a conspiracy."

"But first let me thank you. I have been so miserable, and you have done me *so* much good."

Mrs. Jack gently patted the hand that caught her arm, an action totally at variance with her answer. "Self-interest, I assure you. Elinor is not the only sufferer. You have depleted the entire preserve. Not a man has looked at me the last three days. There, there! You needn't believe it if you don't want to."

Could Mrs. Jack's frank eyes have pierced the immediate future, she would have made her warning against Rhodes more specific. On Thursday of that week Leslie drove his heavy team and bobs into Lone Tree for supplies, and, what of the thawing trails, could not possibly be back till all hours Saturday night. Not knowing this, Mrs. Jack made no objection when, Saturday morning, Danvers drove over with Molyneux's double cutter and carried off herself and the Newtons

to visit a friend west of the Assiniboin.

"You'll be here till after supper," she said to Helen, leaving. "So I won't say good-bye."

But she miscalculated both the warmth of the friend's welcome and the heavy sledding. When she returned, long after dark, she found Mrs. Leslie reading a novel by her bedroom stove. In a loose wrapper, crossed feet comfortably propped on the plated stove-rail, a plate of red apples at her elbow, and the light comfortably adjusted on the table behind her, she was the picture of comfort. "Having a jolly good time all by myself," she explained. "Fred's not home yet, and Captain Chapman went over to win a little from Ernest Poole at poker. Helen? Just gone. She waited and waited and waited, but you were so late that we both thought you had concluded to stay the night. Didn't you pass her at the Forks—or hear the bells? That double string of Fred's can be heard to heaven on a still night."

"Oh, was that she? Hired man came for her, I suppose?" Mrs. Jack indifferently inquired, as she laid off her furs.

"No. Sinclair drove her with our ponies. What's the matter?"

Eyes dark and dilated with fear, Mrs. Jack faced her. "Do you mean to tell me—" Breaking hastily off, she ran through bed and living rooms, almost upsetting Newton on her way to the outer door. "Mr. Danvers! Oh, Mr. Danvers! Mr. Danvers! Mr.—Danvers!" she called.

But the night returned only the clash of his bells.

Sweeping back in, she faced Mrs. Leslie, flushed with the one righteous emotion of her fast life. "You let her go out—alone—with that—" Choking, she ran into her own room and slammed the door, leaving the other two women staring.

Edith Newton answered the lift of the other's eyebrows. "Another of Maud's raves."

XVII
—AND ITS FINALE

But for the bells and groan of runners, which drowned sound for them even as it did for Danvers, Helen and Rhodes were near enough to have heard Mrs. Jack's call. Interpreting the latter's warning morally, Helen had accepted Rhodes's es-

cort as the lesser of two evils, or, if she had speculated on tentative attempts at flirtation, had not doubted her own ability to snub them.

A sudden frost, winter's last desperate clutch at the throat of spring, had hardened the sun-rotted trails; and as the cutter sped swiftly over the first mile, she chatted freely, without thought of danger. Of the three male guests, Rhodes had, as aforeseen, pestered her least, so, ignorant of the pitiless brutality masked by his reserve, she was paralyzed—almost fainted—when his arm suddenly dropped from the cutter-rail to her waist.

Recovering, she spoke sharply, "Take it away!"

Instead, he drew her tighter. She could not see his face; but as she struck, madly, blindly, at its dim whiteness, his laugh, heartless, cynical, came out of the dusk, "Kick, bite, scratch all you want, my little beauty," he said, forcing his face against hers, "your struggles are sweet as caresses."

Yet, withal his boast, he found it difficult to hold her. Twice she broke his grip and almost leaped from the sleigh; and as she fought his face away, her hand suddenly touched the reins that were looped over his arm.

In the black confusion he was unable to specify just what happened thereafter. He knew that, alarmed by the scuffling, the ponies had burst into a gallop; but, though he felt her relax, he could not see her throw all of her weight into a sudden jerk on the left rein. Ensued a heaving, tumultuous moment. Pulled from the trail, the ponies plunged into deep drift. The cutter bucked like a live thing, and as it dropped from the high trail a runner cracked with a pistol report. Simultaneously they were thrown out into deep, cold snow.

They fell clear of each other, and Helen heard Rhodes swearing as he ran to the ponies' heads. The sound spurred her to action. She could only count on a minute, and, rising, she ran, stumbling, falling headlong into drifts to rise and plunge on, in her heart the terror of the hunted thing. Each second she expected to hear his pursuing foot. But he had to tie the ponies to a prairie poplar, and by that time she had gained a bluff two hundred yards away, and was crouched like a chased hare in its heart.

That poor covert would not have sufficed against a frontiersman. Tracking by the fainter whiteness of broken snow, he would soon have flushed the trembling game, but it was ample protection from Rhodes's inefficiency. Alarmed when he saw that she was gone, he ran back and forth, shouting, coupling her name with promises of good behavior. As her line of flight had angled but slightly from the trail, she heard him plainly.

"My God! You'll freeze! Mrs. Carter! Oh, Mrs. Carter! Do come out! I was only joking!"

She did not require his assurance as to the freezing. Already her limbs were numb, her teeth chattered so loudly she was afraid he would hear. But

she preferred the frost's mercy to his, and so lay, shivering, until, in despair, he got the ponies back to the trail and drove rapidly away. Then she came out and headed homeward like a bolting rabbit. Twice she was scared back into the snow: once when Rhodes turned about and dashed down and back the trail; again just before she picked Leslie's voice from passing bells. He was merely talking to his horses, but never before had his voice fallen so sweetly on pretty ears.

As at some wan ghost, he stared at the dim, draggled figure that came up to him out of the snows; indeed, half frozen and wholly frightened, she was little more than the ghost of herself. "The cad!" he stormed, hearing her story. "I'll punch his head to-morrow!" And he maintained that rude intention up to the moment that he dropped her at her own door.

"Don't!" she called after him. "Elinor won't like it." But the caution was for his own good, and she was not so very much cast down when he persisted.

"Then she can lump it!" he shouted back.

The proverb gives the trampled worm rather more than due credit when one remembers that a barrel-hoop can outturn the very fiercest worm, but it should be remembered in Leslie's favor that he mutinied in the cause of another. Having all of the obstinacy of his dulness, he went straighter to his end because it was allied with that narrow, bull-dog vision which excludes all but one object from the field of sight. Meeting Rhodes, Chapman, and Newton, with lanterns, at the point where the sleigh had capsized, he rushed the former and was living in the strict letter of his intention when the others pulled him away. They could not, however, dam his indignant speech. On that vast, dark stage, with the lanterns shedding a golden aureole about Rhodes and his bleeding mouth, he gave them the undiluted truth, as it is said to flow from the mouths of babes and sucklings.

Arrived home, moreover, he staggered his wife by his stubborn opposition. "It is no use talking, Elinor," he said, closing a bitter argument. "To-morrow I go to the bush for a load of wood, and if that cad is here when I return I'll break a whip on his back." Then, ignoring her bitten lips, clinched hands, the bitter fury that was to produce such woful consequences, he went quietly off to bed.

Of all this, however, Helen remained in ignorance until after the denouement that came a few days later along with a scattering of new snow. Those were days of misery for her—of remorseful brooding, self-reproach, hot shame that set her at bitter introspection that she might find and root out the germs of wickedness that had brought these successive insults. As hundreds of good girls before her, as thousands will after her, she wondered if she were really the possessor of some unsuspected sensuousness. Comparisons, too, were forced upon her. Revolting from the rough settler life, she had turned to the English set only to find that their polished ease was but the veneer of their degeneracy, analogous to the phosphorescence given off in the dark by a poisoned fish, and equally indicative

of decay. She could not fail to contrast her husband's sterling worth with their moral and intellectual leprosy.

The nights were still more trying. She would sit, evenings, and stare at the lamp as though it were the veritable flame of life, while her spirit quested after the cause of things and the root of many enigmas. Why, for instance, is it that pitilessness, ferocity, ruth, which were good in the youth of the world, should cause such evil in its old age? For what reason the cause of the lily willed also its blight? Why conditions make fish of one woman, flesh of another, and fowl of a third, and wherefore any one of them should be damned for doing what she couldn't help in following the dictates of her nature? In fact, from the duration of her reveries, she may have entertained all of the hundred and odd questions with which the atom pelts the infinite, and, judging from her dissatisfaction, she received the usual answer—Why? It is nature's wont to deliver her lessons in parables, from which each must extract his or her own meanings; and a momentous page was turned in Helen's lesson the day that she rode over to Leslie's to verify a rumor which Nels had brought from the post-office.

As sleighing was practically over and wheeling not yet begun, she went horseback. As aforesaid, a scattering of new snow covered the prairies, and she rode through a bitter prospect. Everywhere yellow grass tussocks or tall brown weeds thrust through the scant whiteness to wave in the chill wind. Under the sky's enormous gray, scrub and bluff and blackened drifts stood out, harsh studies in black and white. Nature was in the blues, and all sentient things shared her dull humor. Winging north, in V or harrow formations, the wild ducks quacked their discontent. Peevish snipe cursed the weather as they dipped from slough to slough. A lone coyote complained that the season transcended his experience, then broke off his plaint to chase a rabbit, of whose red death Helen was shuddering witness.

The settlement was even less cheerful. Such houses as she passed rose like dirty smudges from the frozen mud of their dooryards. Moreover, the looks of the few settlers she met were not conducive of better spirits. MacCloud, a bigoted Presbyterian of the old Scotch-Canadian school, gave her a malignant grin in exchange for her nod. Three Shinn boys, big louts, burst into a loud guffaw as their wagon rattled by her at the forks of Leslie's trail. Their comment, "Guess she hain't heard!" increased her apprehension.

She could now see the house, smokeless, apparently lifeless, frowning down from a snow-clad ridge. But when, a minute later, she knocked, Leslie answered, and she entered. The living-room, with its associations of gayety, was dank, cold, cheerless. Ash littered the fireless stove; the floor was unswept; the air gave back her breath in a steamy cloud. Through the bedroom door she saw drawers and boxes wide open, their contents tossed and tumbled as though some

one had rummaged them for valuable contents. And amid these ruins of a home Leslie sat, head bowed in his hands.

"You poor man!" she cried. "You poor, poor man!"

He turned up his face, and its sick misery reminded her of a worm raising its mangled head from under a passing wheel as though questing a reason for its sudden taking off. His words strengthened the impression: "I couldn't seem to satisfy her, and she was angry because I took your part against him. Of course she isn't so much to blame. I did as well as I could, but I'm neither clever nor ornamental, like Rhodes. But I tried to treat her well, didn't I? You shall judge."

"You did—of course you did, poor man!" she sobbed.

"Then why did she leave me?"

Somehow his blind questioning raised the prairie tragedy in her mind. The rabbit's death-scream was equally sincere in its protest against inscrutable fate in the coyote's green eyes. Its innocence was blameless as this. Yet—how could she answer problems as unsolvable as her own?

"I have been a fool," he went on; and his next words helped to lessen the astonishment, though not the pain, which his calamity had brought her. "A blind fool! When we used to drive out to Regis last summer it was going on—I can see it now. They did their billing and cooing under my very eyes. Yet they were not so clever, after all, were they? I trusted her—with my honor, expecting her to protect it as I would have defended her virtue. Was I at fault? If a man can't trust his wife, what can he do? Surely not lock her up. What could I do?"

Puzzled, she stood and looked down upon him. But under its delicate complexities the feminine mind is ever practical, and her attention quickly turned to his physical welfare. He must be taken away—weaned from his sick brooding, blind questioning. "Have you eaten to-day?" she asked. "Not for *three* days! Go out and harness your ponies at once, and come home with me to supper." Anticipating objection, she added, "Really, you must, for I am too tired to ride back again."

Her little fiction was hardly necessary, he found it so easy to let her do his thinking. He obeyed as one in a trance; and not till they drove away, leading her pony behind, did action dissipate his lethargy. Then he began to display some signs of animation.

It was a silent and uncomfortable drive. Instead of the usual lively jingle, pole and harness rattled dully, the light snow hushed the merry song of the wheels to a slushy dirge. The raw air, bleak sky, slaty grays of the dull prospect were eminently oppressive. Nature had shed her illusions and, fronting her cold materialism, there was no dodging issues. Facts thrust themselves too rudely upon consciousness. Leslie spoke but once, and the remark proved that the chill realities had set him again at the riddle of life.

"I shall sell out," he said, as the ponies swung in on Carter's trail. "Go to South Africa. My brother is a mining superintendent on the Rand."

She sighed. "I can't go to South Africa."

Rousing from his own trouble, he looked at her. "You don't need to. You'll see. Carter will come home one of these days." And during the few days that he stayed with her he extended such brotherly sympathy that she felt sincerely sorry when, having placed the sale of his farm and effects in the hands of Danvers, he followed his faithless wife out of her life and this story.

XVIII
THE PERSISTENCE OF THE ESTABLISHED

Save for a few dirty drifts in the shadows of the bluffs, the snow was all gone when, one morning a week or so after Leslie's departure, Helen went south under convoy of Jimmy Glaves to open school. The day was beautiful. Once more the prairies wore the burned browns of autumn, but to eyes that had grown to the vast snowscape during a half-year of winter the huge monochrome rioted in color. In fact it had its values. There a passing cloud threw a patch of black. Bowing to the soft breeze, last year's grass sent sunlit waves chasing one another down to the far horizon. Here and there a green stain on the edge of cropped hay-sloughs bespoke the miracle of resurrection, eternal wonder of spring, the young life bubbling forth from the decay and death of parent plants. Also the prospect was checkered with the chocolate of ploughed fields. On these slow ox-teams crawled, and the shouts of the drivers, the snapping crack of long whips, alternated as they drove along with the cheep of running gophers, the "pee-wee" of snipe, song of small birds. Noise was luxury after the months of frozen silence. The warm, damp air, the feel of balmy spring, the sunlight on the grasses were delightfully relaxing. Helen gave herself up to it—permitted sensation to rule and banish for the moment her tire and trouble. She chatted quite happily with the trustee, who, however, seemed gloomy and preoccupied.

A philosopher coined a phrase—"the persistence of the established"—to explain the survival of phenomena after the original cause lies dead in the past. It admirably defines the trustee's mental condition, which was a product of causes set up by Helen in these last months. Ignorant of the change in her feeling towards her English friends, he was vividly aware of the prejudice which her deal-

ings with them had aroused in the settlers. In the beginning he and Flynn had earned severe criticism by giving her the school. Since the Leslie scandal he doubted their ability to keep her in it. At meeting, "bees," on trail, her name was being coupled with grins or gloomy reprobation according to the years and character of the critics. The women had plucked her character clean as a chicken, and were scattering their findings to the four winds. Just now, of course, the heavy work of seeding sadly interfered with these activities and diversions, but Jimmy looked for trouble in the slack season. If, in the mean time, she could be weaned from her liking for the English Ishmael, they might be able to weather the prejudice. To which end he steered the conversation to the greenness, credulity, and execrable agriculture of the remittance-people.

"I kain't see," he said, among other things, "what a fine gal like you kin see in 'em. They're dying stock, an' one o' these days the fool-killer will come along an' brain the hull biling. Brain, did I say? The Lord forgive me! Kedn't scratch up the makings of one outen the hull bunch."

Had she known his mind she might easily have laid his misgivings. Instead, she tried to modify his bitter opinion. "They are certainly inefficient as farmers. But as regards their credulity, don't you think it is largely due to a higher standard of business honor? Now when a Canadian trades horses he expects to be cheated, while they are only looking for a fair exchange."

Jimmy's face wrinkled in contemptuous disparagement. "Hain't that jes' what I said? A man that expects to get his own outen a hoss-trade kain't be killed too quick. It's tempting Providence to leave him loose. As well expect a nigger to leave a fat rooster as a Canadian to keep his hands off sech easy meat. 'Tain't human natur'. As for their honor—" He sniffed. "Pity it didn't extend to their morals."

"It is, indeed."

Afterwards they had many a tilt on this same subject. Smoking in his doorway of evenings, Jimmy would emit sarcasms from the midst of furious clouds, while she, as much for fun as from natural feminine perversity, took the opposite side. And neither knew the other's mind—until too late. But placated by her low answer, he now let the subject rest.

Three feet of green water was slipping over the river ice when they forded Silver Creek, and they had to dodge odd logs, the vanguard of Carter's drive. "Another week," the trustee remarked, "an' we couldn't have crossed."

He was right. That week a warm rain ran the last of the snows off several thousand square miles of watershed, feeding the stream till it waxed fat and kicked like the scriptural ox against the load Carter had saddled upon it. Snarling viciously, it would whirl a timber across a bend, then rush on with mad roar, leaving a mile of logs backed up behind. But such triumph never endured. With axe,

pevees, cant-hooks, Bender and his men broke the jams; whereupon, as though peevish at its failure, the river swept out over the level bottoms and stranded timbers in backwaters among dense scrub.

To see this, the first log-drive on Silver Creek, the children who lived near the valley scuttled every day from school, and they would gaze, wide-eyed, at Michigan Red riding a log that spun like a top under his nimble feet, or watch the Cougar, shoulder-deep in snow-water, shoving logs at some ticklish point. Then they would hang about the cook's tent, while that functionary juggled with beans and bacon or made lumberman's cake by the cubic yard. Also there were peeps into the sleeping-tents, where men lay and snored in boots and wet red shirts, just as they had come out of the river. Of all of which they would prattle to Helen next day at school, reciting many tales, chief among them the Homeric narrative of the cutting of a jam—in which she had a special interest, and which proved, among other things, that Michigan Red was again at his old tricks.

It was Susie Flynn who brought this tale. Dipping down, one end of a bridge timber had stuck at an acute angle into the river-bed. A second timber swung broadside on against its end, then, in a trice, the logs had backed up, grinding bark to pulp under their enormous pressure. "Mr. Bender," Susie said, "he was for throwing a rope across from bank to bank so's they ked cut it from above. But one wasn't handy, an' while they was waiting a big red man comes up an' hands Mr. Carter the dare.

"'If you're scairt, gimme the axe an' I'll show you how we trim a jam in Michigan.'

"But Mr. Carter wouldn't give it. 'No,' he says, awful quiet, yet sorter funny, for all the men laughed—'no. They'll need you to show 'em again.' Then he walks out on the jam an' goes to chopping, with Mr. Bender calling for him to come back an' not make a damn fool of himself."

The scene had so impressed the child that she reproduced every detail for her pale audience of one—Carter astride of the key-log; his men, bating their breath with the "huh" of his stroke; Bender's distress; the cynical grin of Michigan Red. Once, she said, a floating chip deflected the axe, and he swore, easily, naturally, turning a smile of annoyance up to the bank. It drew no response from eyes that were glued to the log, now quivering under tons of pressure. A huge baulk, it broke with a thunderous report when cut a quarter through, and loosed a mile of grinding death upon the chopper.

Then came his progress through the welter. As the jam bore down-stream, timbers would dip, somersault, and thrash down on a log that still quivered under the spurn of his leap. Young trees raised on end and swept like battering-rams along the log he rode. Yet, jumping from log to log, he came up from death out of the turmoil in safety to the bank.

"Brought his axe erlong, too!" Susan triumphantly finished. "An' you should have jes' seen that red man—he looked that sick an' green through his wishy-washy smiling. But Mr. Carter! Ain't he a brave one? You must be awful proud of him, ain't you, Miss Helen?"

What could she answer but "Yes," though the trembling admission covered only a small portion of her psychology? Misery, fear, regret made up the rest. The remainder of that day dragged wearily by to a distant drone of lessons. She, who had tried to eject her husband from her life, shuddered as she thought how nearly her wish had come to accomplishment. Death's cold breath chilled resentment, expunged the memory of her months of weary waiting. It would return, but in the mean time she could think of nothing but his danger. Hurrying home, she asked Glaves to saddle her a horse, saying that she would try to gallop off a headache.

Heartache would have been more correct; but she certainly galloped, rode westward, then swung around north on a wide circle that brought her, at dusk of the short spring day, out on a bald headland that sheered down to the river. Beneath her lay the camp, with its cooking-fires flickering like wind-blown roses athwart the velvet pall of dusk, and in either direction from that effulgent bouquet a crimson garland of sentinel fires laid its miles of length along the valley.

Men moved about the nearer fires, appearing to her distant eyes as dim, dark shapes. But what sight refused hearing supplied. She heard the cook cursing his kettles with a volubility that would have brought shame on the witches in Macbeth—the imprecations of some lumber-jack at war with a threatened jam. Above all rose the voice of a violin, quivering its infinite travail, expressing the throbbing pain of the world; then, from far up the valley, a lonely tenor floated down the night.

"He went to cut a key-log an' the jam he went below,
He was the damnedest man that ever I did know."

Some lumberman was relieving his watch by chanting the deeds of a hero of the camps, and as, like a dove of night, the voice floated high over the river's growl through a score of verses, it helped to drive home upon Helen a sense of the imminent jeopardy Carter had passed through that day. While her beast pawed its impatience, she sat for an hour trying to pick his voice from the hum of the camp. It was easy to distinguish Bender's. His bass growl formed the substratum of sound. She caught, once, the Cougar's strident tones. Then, just as she was beginning to despair, a command, stern and clear, rose from the void.

"Lay on there with that pevee! Quick! or you'll have 'em piled to heaven! Here!—Bender, Cougar!—lend a hand! this fellow's letting them jam on him!"

She started as under a lash. All that day she had lived in a whirl of feeling, and, just as a resolvent precipitates a chemical mixture, the stern voice reduced her feeling to thought. Unfortunately, the tone was not in harmony with her soft misery. If it had been—well, it was not. Rather it recalled his contempt under the moonlight, her own solitary shame. Whirling her bronco, she cut him over the flank and galloped, at imminent risk of her neck, over the dark prairies in vain attempt to escape the galling recurrence of injured pride, the stings of disappointment.

"He doesn't care for me! He doesn't care for me!" It rang in her brain. Then, when she was able to think, she added, in obedience to the sex instinct which will not admit Love's mortality, "He never did, otherwise he couldn't have left me!" Her conclusion, delivered that night into a wet pillow, revealed the secret hope at the root of her disappointment. "I won't ride that way again."

But she did, and her changed purpose is best explained by a conversation between Carter and Bender as they stood drying themselves at the cook's fire after averting the threatened jam.

Carter began: "I reckon you can get along well enough without me. Of course I'd have liked to seen the drive down to the Assiniboin, but in another week the frost will be out enough to start prairie grading. I'll have to go. Let me see.... One week more on the creek, two on the Assiniboin—three weeks will put the last timber into Brandon. In less than a month you'll join me at the Prairie Portage."

Turning to bring another area of soaked clothing next to the fire, his face came under strong light. These seven months of thought and calculation had left their mark upon it—thinned and refined its lines, tooled the features into an almost intellectual cast. His mouth, perhaps, evidenced the greatest change, showing less humor, because, perhaps, self-repression and the habit of command had drawn the lips in tighter lines. Deeper set, his eyes seemed darker, while a straight look into their depths revealed an underlying sadness. Sternness and sadness, indeed, governed the face, without, however, banishing a certain grave courtesy that found expression in pleasant thanks when, presently, the cook brought them a steaming jug of coffee. Lastly, determination stamped it so positively that only its lively intelligence saved it from obstinacy. One glance explained Bender's answer to Jenny: "He's stiffer'n all hell!"—his attitude to Helen. In him will dominated the emotions. Summed, the face, with its power, dogged resolution, imperturbable confidence, mirrored his past struggles, gave earnest for his future battles.

A hint of these last inhered in a remark that Bender slid in between two gulps of coffee. "They're saying as the C.P. will never let you cross their tracks?"

Carter smiled. "Yes? Who's saying it?"

"Oh, everybody. An' the Winnipeg paper said yesterday as 'Old Brass-Bowels'"—he gave the traffic manager his sobriquet—"will enjoin you an' carry the case through the Dominion courts to the British privy council. The newspaper sharp allows that would take about two years, during which the monopoly would either buy out or bust your crowd by building a competing line."

This time Carter laughed heartily, the confident laugh of one sure of himself. "So that's what the paper said? Well, well, well! That scribe person must be something of a psychic. What's that? Oh, a fellow who tells you a whole lot of things he don't know himself. Now, listen." (In view of what occurred six months later, his words are worth remembering.)

"Courts or no courts, privy council to the contrary, we'll run trains across 'Brass-Bowel's' tracks before next freeze-up."

"Hope you do," Bender grinned. "But the old man ain't so very slow."

They talked more of construction—tools, supplies, engineering difficulties, the hundred problems inherent in railroad-building. Midnight still found them by the fire, that twinkled, a lone red star, under the enormous vault of night.

But, though interesting and important, in that the success of the enterprise involved the economic freedom of a province, the conversation—with one exception—is not germane to this story, which goes on from the moment that, two days later, a Pengelly boy carried the news of Carter's departure to Helen at school.

The exception was delivered by the mouth of Bender, as he rose, stretching with a mighty yawn, to go to his tent. "Of course it's none of my damn business, but do you allow to call at the school as you go down to-morrow?"

Carter's brows drew into swift lines, but resentment faded before the big fellow's concern. "I didn't reckon to," he said, gently; yet added the hint, "—since you're so pressing."

But Bender would not down. "Oh, shore!" he pleaded. "Shore! shore!"

Carter looked his impatience, yet yielded another point to the other's distress. "If Mrs. Carter wished to see me, I allow she'd send."

"Then she never will! she never will!" Bender cried, hitting the crux of their problem. "For she's jes' as proud as you."

With that he plunged into the environing darkness, leaving Carter still at the fire. From its glow his face presently raised to the valley's rim, dim and ghostly under a new moon, ridged with shadowy trees. It was only six miles to Glaves's place, a hop, skip, and jump in that country of distances. For some minutes he stood like a stag on gaze; then, with a slow shake of the head, he followed Bender.

"An' he ain't coming back till winter," the small boy informed Helen. "He'll be that busy with his railroading."

After two days of embittered brooding, Helen had come to consider herself as being in the self-same mood that had ruled her the January morning when Mrs. Leslie broke in on her months of loneliness. But this startling news explained certain contradictions in her psychology—for instance, her startings and flushings whenever her north window had shown a moving dot on the valley trail these last two days. Moreover, her pallor was hardly consistent with the assertion, thrice repeated within the hour, that even if he did come she would never, never, *never* forgive him *now*! Not that she conceded said contradictions. On the contrary, she put up a gorgeous bluff with herself, affected indifference, and—borrowed Jimmy's pony that evening and rode down to the ford.

Bender had built a rough bridge to serve traffic till the drive should clear the ford. Reining in at the nearer end, Helen looked down on the pool, the famous pool wherein her betrothal had received baptism by total immersion—at least she looked on the place where the pool had been, for shallows and sand-bar were merged in one swirl of yellow water. But the clay bank with its bordering willows was still there, and shone ruddily under the westering sun just as on that memorable evening. Here, on the straight reach, the logs floated under care of an occasional patrol. A rough fellow in blue jeans and red jerkin gave her a curious stare as he passed, whereafter there was no witness to her wet eyes, her rain of tears, convulsive sobbing, the break-up of her indifference—that is, none but her pony. Reaching curiously around, the beast investigated the grief huddled upon his neck with soft muzzle, rubbing and sniffing "cheer up," and she had just straightened to return his mute sympathy when a voice broke in on the bitter and sweet of her reverie.

"Well met, fair lady!"

Turning, startled, she came face to face with Molyneux. The heavy mud of the bottoms had silenced his wheels, and now he sat smiling at the sudden fires that dried up and hid her tears. "Not there yet," he answered her question as to his return home. "Do you imagine I could go by without calling? The school was closed, but a kid—a Flynn, by his upper lip—told me that you had ridden this way; and as it was Friday evening I judged you were going north to Leslie's, and so drove like Jehu on the trail of Ahab. Better turn your horse loose and get in with me. He'll go home all right. Why not?"

Again she shook her head. "Didn't Mr. Danvers write you—?" Remembering that a letter would have crossed him on the Atlantic, she stopped.

"What's the matter? No one dead? Worse?" He laughed in her serious face when she had told. "Oh, well, that's not so bad. After all, Leslie was an awful chump. If a man isn't strong enough to hold a woman's love he shouldn't expect

to keep her."

He was yet, of course, in ignorance of all that had transpired in his absence—the house-party and the complete revulsion it had wrought in Helen's feelings. He knew nothing of her shame, vivid remorse, passion of thankfulness for her escape. To him she was still the woman, desperate in her loneliness, who had challenged his love two short months ago. Withal, what possessed him to afford that glimpse of his old nature? It coupled him instantly in her mind with her late unpleasant experience.

Not understanding her silence, he ran gayly on: "I can now testify to the truth of the saying, 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder.' How is it with you? Have I lost or gained?"

Laughing nervously, she answered: "Neither. We are still the same good friends."

He shook his head, frowning. "Not enough. I want love—must, *will* have it."

Any lingering misapprehension of the state of her feelings which she may have entertained now instantly vanished. How she regretted the weakness which entitled him to speak thus! She knew now. Never, under any conditions, could she have married him, but, warned by dearly boughten experience, she dared not so inform him. Frightened, she fenced and parried, calling to her aid those shifts for men's fooling that centuries of helplessness have bred in woman's bone.

"Well, well!" she laughed. "I thought you more gallant. I on horseback, you in a buggy. Love at such long distance! I wouldn't have believed it of you!"

It was a bad lead, drawing him on instead of away. "That is easily remedied. Get in with me—or, I'll tie up to that poplar."

She checked his eagerness with a quick invention. "No, no! I was only joking. No, I say! There's a man, a river-driver, just behind that bluff." How she wished there were! Praying that some one might come and so afford her safe escape, she switched the conversation to his journey, and when that subject wore out enthused over the sunset. How beautiful was the sky—the shadows that fell like a pall over the bottoms—the lights slow crawling up the headlands!

Preferring her delicate coloring to the blushes of the west, he feasted on her profile, delicately outlined against a golden cloud, until she turned. Then he brought her back to the point. "Well—have you forgotten?"

"What?" She knew too well, but the question killed a moment.

"The answer you promised me?"

She would dearly have loved to give it, to cry aloud: "I love! I love! I love—him, not you!" Ay, she would have flaunted it in all the proud cruelty of love—had she dared. Instead, she answered: "You forget! I am a married woman."

"No, I don't," he urged. "That is easily settled. Three months' residence

across the line, in Dakota, and you are free of him."

"But not of myself."

"What do you mean?"

Alarmed by the sudden suffusion of venous blood on his face and neck, the reddish glow of his eye, she forged hasty excuses. "You see, I never thought of it—in that way. I must have time to get used to the idea. Won't you give me a week?" Her winning smile conquered. He had stepped his ponies alongside, and, snatching her hand, he covered it with kisses.

"By God, Helen, you must say yes! I'm mad—mad with love of you. If you refuse—"

"Hush!" She snatched away her hand as a man came in sight from behind a bluff, coming up-stream. "It is Mr. Bender!" she exclaimed—so thankfully. Then, mindful of her part, she added: "What a nuisance! I wonder if he—saw you?"

"Oh, he'll go by."

"No, no! Leave me the shreds of my character. You must go. *Must!* I said, sir."

"Very well. But remember—one week." Nodding significantly, he drove off, leaving her struggling with mixed feelings of relief and apprehension. She wondered if Bender had seen Molyneux kiss her hand.

Though in a few minutes of shy conversation Bender showed no knowledge of the cause that had set her to rubbing the back of her hand against her skirt, it nevertheless formed the subject of a rough scrawl that Baldy, the tote-trail teamster, delivered to Jenny in Lone Tree two days later. "You said I was to tell if I saw or heard anything more. Well, he is back, and—" Followed the kisses, and the scrawl ended, "If you kin do anything like you thought you ked, do it quick, else I shall have to tell the boss and give him a chance to look after his own."

Jenny did "do it quick," and thereby initiated a sequence of cause and event that was to entirely change the complexion of a dozen lives. An extract from her letter to Helen explains itself: "'Twas on the tip of my tongue to tell it to you every time he druv you home last winter, but 'twas so much easier for me to have you all believing as it was the man that went back to England. But 'twasn't, Miss Helen; 'twas him—Capen Molyneux."

Poor Jenny! She alone knew the magnitude of the man's offence against her weak innocence, but, small stoic, she had hugged the knowledge to her soul while waiting in dull patience for the punishment she never doubted. Immunity would have challenged the existence of the God on whom, despite small heresies of speech, she devoutly leaned. She read his sentence in that most tremendous curse of the oppressor, the One Hundredth and Ninth Psalm, the bitter cry of David: "For he hath rewarded me evil ... hatred for my love. When he shall be judged, let him be condemned; and his prayer become sin.... Let his children be

continually vagabonds, seek their bread in desolate places. Let the extortioner catch all that he hath; the stranger despoil his labor. Let there be none to extend mercy to him.... Let his posterity be cut off and his generation blotted out ... that He may cut off the memory of them from the earth." Ay, she had believed that it would come to pass in some way—by lightning-flash, sudden sickness, a weary death. But she had never imagined herself as the instrument which this letter was to make her. What the confession cost her! Tears, shameful agonizings! Small wonder that, in her trembling confusion, she mis-shuffled notes and slid Helen's into Bender's envelope.

XIX
THE WAGES OF SIN

On the afternoon following Baldy's delivery of the shuffled notes, the May sun diffused a tempered warmth upon Molyneux's veranda, thereby intensifying certain comfortable reflections which accompanied his after-dinner pipe. He had material cause of satisfaction. To begin, his father's death placed him in possession of a sum which—a mere pittance in England—loomed large as a fortune in the thrifty settlements. Next, Messrs. Coxhead & Boxhead, exploiters of the Younger Son, and his London solicitors, had forwarded through that morning's mail indentures of apprenticeship to colonial farming of three more innocents at one thousand dollars a head per annum. This more than made up for the defection of Danvers, who, having learned how little there was to be learned in the business, was adventuring farming for himself. It also permitted the retention of the bucolic Englishman and wife, who respectively managed Molyneux's farm and house.

With their service assured, the life was more than tolerable, infinitely superior to that which he would have led at home. There he would have been condemned to the celibate lot of the younger son—to be a "filler" at dinners and dances, useful as the waiters, ineligible and innocuous to the plainest of his girl partners as an Eastern eunuch; or, accepting the alternative, trade, vulgar trade, his pampered wits would have come into competition with abilities that had been whetted to a fine edge through centuries on time's hard stone. Like a leaden plummet, he would have plunged through the social strata to his natural place in the scheme of things. Here, however, he was of some importance, a magnate on

means that would hardly have kept up his clothes and clubs at home. A landed proprietor, moreover, he escaped the stigma of trade, and the resultant prejudice, should he ever return to live in England.

Then the life glowed with the colors of romance. His farm occurred on the extreme western edge of that vast forest which blackens the Atlantic seaboard, and so marches west and north over a thousand rugged miles to the limit of trees on the verge of the Barren Lands. Within gunshot the old ferocious struggle for life continued as of yore. Through timbered glades the wolf pursued and made his kill; echo answered the clash of horns as big elk fought for a doe; over lonely woodland lakes, black with water-fowl, the hoo-haugh crane spread ten feet of snowy pinion; across dark waters the loon's weird lament replied to the owl's midnight questioning. In winter the moose came down from their yards to feed at his prairie hay-stacks; any night he could come out on the veranda and thrill to a long howl or the scream of a lynx.

Opening before him now, the view was pleasantly beautiful. His house, a comfortable frame building, and big barn and corrals, all sat within the embrace of a half-moon that prairie-fires had bitten out from the heart of a poplar bluff. Southward his tilled fields ran like strips of brown carpet over the green earth rolls. Beyond them spread the Park Lands, with his cattle feeding knee-deep in the rank pasture between clump poplar. Further still, his horses scented the wind from the crest of a knoll, forming a dull blotch against the soft blue sky. These were growing into money while he smoked, and what of free grazing, free hay, and labor that reversed the natural order of things and paid for the privilege of working, he could see himself comfortably wealthy in not too many seasons. He would still be young enough for a run through Maiden Lane, London's Mecca for the stage and *demi-mondaine*. However, he put that thought behind him as being inconsistent with contemplation of the last thing necessary for perfect happiness—a pretty wife. Through the haze of sunlit tobacco reek, he saw himself in possession of even that golden asset, and thereafter his reflections took the exact color of those of the rich man before death came in the night: "Soul, soul! Thou hast much goods laid up in store! Eat, drink, take thine ease, and be merry!"

"It is really time that I settled," he murmured. "Thirty-four, my next birthday. By Jove! six more years and I shall be forty!"

The thought deflected his meditation into channels highly becoming to a person of the age he was contemplating, and from virtuous altitudes he looked back with something of the reproving tolerance that kindly age accords to youthful indiscretion. He maintained the "you-were-a-sad-dog" point of view till a sudden thought stung his virtuous complacency through to the quick. "Oh, well"—he ousted reproach with exculpatory murmur—"if the girl had only let me, I would

have got her away from here and have done something handsome for her afterwards. But it was just as well—seeing that it passed off so quietly. I wonder how she managed it? Nobody seems to know." Then, ignoring the fact that every seeding brings its harvest, not knowing that the measure of that cruel sowing was even then coming home to him on a fast trot, he smothered conviction under the trite reflection, "A fellow must sow his wild oats."

Still the thought had marred his reverie, and, tapping his pipe on the chair-rung, he rose. He intended a visit to the barn, where his man was dipping seed wheat in bluestone solution to kill the smut; but just then a wagon, which had been rattling along the Lone Tree trail, turned into his private lane.

"It is Glaves," he muttered. "And his wife. What can they want? Must have a message—from her; otherwise they would never come here."

His thought did not malign the trustee, who had positively refused the commission till assured that its performance would sever Helen's relations with his natural foes. Yet he did not like it, and though retribution might have presented herself in more tragic guise, she could not have assumed a more forbidding face than that which he now turned down to Molyneux.

Than they two there have been no more violent contrast. Beak-nosed, hollow-eyed, the hoar of fifty winters environed the trustee's face, which wind and weather had warped, seamed, and wrinkled into the semblance of a scorched hide. He was true to the frontier type; and beside his bronzed ruggedness, the Englishman, though much the larger man, seemed, with his soft hands, smooth skin, and polished manner, to be small and effeminate.

As might be expected, the trustee refused Molyneux's invitation to put in and feed. "No; me an' the wife is going up to see her brother, north of Assissippii, an' we have thirty miles to make afore sundown."

He did, however, return curt answers to a few questions, though it would be a mistake to set his scant conversational efforts to the account of politeness. Rather they were the meed of malignance, for, while talking, he secretly exulted over the thought of Molyneux's coming disappointment. They would be gone a week, he said. The mails? Mrs. Carter would attend to sech letters as straggled in. She'd be there alone? Yes. Lonesome? Mebbe, but she was that well-plucked she'd laughed at the idea of spending her nights at Flynn's. A fine girl, sirree! Having accorded five minutes to Helen's perfections, the trustee drove off, but turned, as he rattled out of the yard, and nudged his wife, grinning, to look at Molyneux.

Stark and still as one of his own veranda-posts, the man stood and stared down at Jenny's pitiful letter. Across the top Helen had written, "This explains itself," and that scrap of writing represented three letters now torn up and consigned to the flames. The first antedated her receipt of Jenny's letter, and had

run: "I want you to believe me innocent of coquetry, and you must pardon me if I have, by speech or action, seemed to sanction the hope you expressed the other day. I now perceive that it was my desperate loneliness that caused me to lean so heavily upon your friendship. I might have told you this personally but for certain experiences which have made me timid." There was more—regret, pleasant hope that the future might bring with it friendly relations, wishes for his happiness. This letter she had withdrawn from the mail to burn, along with one that was full of reproach, and a third that sizzled with indignation.

Suffused with dark, venous blood, Molyneux faced discovered sin. If ever, this was the accepted time for his attempts at reconstruction to bring forth fruit. He had pictured himself remorseful, but now that the wage of sin was demanded, he flinched like a selfish child, reneged in the game he had played with the gods. It was not in him to play a losing hand to the logical end. Instead of remorse, anger possessed him, for, tearing the letter, he cried in a gust of passion:

"She sha'n't throw me a second time! By God, she sha'n't!"

Needs not to follow his turbulent thought as he hurried out to the barn—his flushes, the paroxysms that set his face in the colors of apoplexy. Sufficient that flooding passion swept clean the superstructure of false morality, sophistical idealism, that he had erected on the rotten foundation of his vicious heredity. A minute of action explains a volume of psychology. Hitching his ponies, he drove madly southward, one idea standing clearly out in his whirl of thought—she would be alone that night.

Just about the time that Molyneux swung out on the Lone Tree trail, Helen arrived home from school with the eldest Flynn boy, who had volunteered to help her with the chores, her undertaking of which had made possible Mrs. Glaves's rare holiday. Under distress of their bursting udders, the cows had come in of their own accord from the fat, rank pastures, and now called for easement, with low, persistent "mooing," while she changed her dress. When she finally came out, with sleeves rolled above elbows that had regained their plump whiteness, they even fought for precedence, horning each other aside until the bell-cow made good her prerogative as leader; then frothing streams soon drew tinkling music from her pail. For his part, the boy fed pigs and calves, carried in the milk, then departed, leaving her to skim and strain, and wash pans and pails, itself no light task in view of Mrs. Glaves's difficult standards of cleanliness. That done and her supper eaten, she placed a lamp on the table and sat down to think over the events of the day.

A little fatigued, she leaned a smooth cheek on her hand, staring at the lamp, whose golden light toned while it revealed the changes these distressful

months had wrought in her appearance. Her eyes were weary, her face tired; but if she was paler than of yore, the pallor was becoming, in that it was altogether a mental product and accorded well with her plump, well-nourished body. Her mouth, if wofully pouted in agreement with her sad thought, was scarlet and pretty as ever. In every way she was good as new.

At first she had found it extremely difficult to realize the full meaning of the letter which the Cougar had brought in from the camp early that morning. For Bender would trust it in no other hand; whereby he discovered not only his wisdom, but also an unexpected fund of tact in his rough messenger. Anticipating some display of emotion, the Cougar discharged his office in the privacy of Helen's own room; and if her red eyes afterwards excited Jimmy Glaves's insatiable curiosity, only the Cougar witnessed her breakdown—sorrowful tremblings, blushes, tearful anger. Not that she had doubted the girl's word. Only it had seemed monstrous, incredible, impossible, until, through the day, jots and tittles of evidence had filtered out of the past. She had connected Jenny's gloomings on the occasions that Molyneux drove her (Helen) home with his refusals to enter and warm himself after their cold drives. Even from the far days of the child's trouble, small significances had come to piece out the solid proof. So now nothing was left for her but bitter self-communion.

These days it did seem as though the fates were bent on squeezing the last acrid drop into her cup; for to the consciousness of error was now added knowledge of the utter worthlessness of her tempter. She burned as she recalled their solitary rides; writhed slim fingers in a passion of thankfulness as she thought of her several escapes; was taxing herself for her folly when a sudden furious baying outside brought her, startled, to her feet.

It was merely the house-dog exchanging defiances with a lone coyote; but—after she had satisfied herself of the fact—it yet brought home upon her a vivid sense of her lonely position. Sorry now that she had not gone home with the Flynn boy, she glanced nervously about the room, which, if small, was yet large enough to own shadowy corners. On top of the pigeon-holed mailing-desk, moreover, a few books were piled in such a way as to cast a shadow, the silhouette of a man's profile, upon the wall. Lean, hard, indescribably cruel, its thin lips split in a merciless grin as she moved the lamp, then suddenly lengthened into the semblance of a hand and pointing finger. Then she laughed, nervously, yet laughed because it indicated one of the hundred summonses, writs of execution, and findings in judgment that were pasted up on the walls.

"By these summons," Victoria Regina called upon her subject, James Glaves, to pay the moneys and taxed costs herein set forth under pain of confiscation of his goods and chattels. Usually recording debt and disaster, the instruments certified, in Jimmy's case, to numerous victories over implement trusts, cordage

monopolies, local or foreign Shylocks. "Execution proof," in that his wife owned their real property in her own right, he could sit and smoke at home, the cynosure of the country-side, in seasons when the sheriff travelled with the thresher and took in all the grain. To each document he could append a story, the memory of such a one having caused Helen's laugh.

Indicating this particular specimen with his pipe-stem one evening, he had remarked: "Yon jest tickled the jedge to death. 'Mr. Glaves,' he says, when he handed it down, 'they've beat you on the jedgment, now it's up to you to fool 'em on the execution.' An' you bet I did."

Reassured, Helen returned to her musings, only to start up, a minute later, with a nervous glance over her shoulder at the window. Is there anything in thought transference? At that moment Molyneux was rattling down into the dark valley, and is it possible that his heated imaginings bridged the miles and impressed themselves upon her nervous mental surfaces? Or was it merely a coincidence of thought that caused her to see his face pressed against the black pane. Be this as it may, she could not regain her composure. Taking the lamp, she locked herself in her bedroom; then she sought that last refuge of frightened femininity, the invulnerable shield of the bedclothes.

XX
—IS DEATH

Though Silver Creek still ran fat and full, its sources were now nearly drained of flood-waters; any day might see it suddenly shrink to its usual summer trickle. Anticipating the event, Bender went miles down-stream that morning to superintend the building of the first dam, and so did not see the Cougar till that worthy came into camp at night from his own place at the tail of the drive.

This, the hour for changing shifts, was the liveliest of camp life—the social hour, one might term it, replete with a certain rough comfort. With them, from up and down river, the reliefs poured in, a stream of red shirts, drowning with oaths, song, and laughter the rattle of tin-ware in the cook-tent. Spread over fifteen miles of river, the arrival was equally irregular, and those who had already eaten were grouped about a huge camp-fire, the red glow of which enriched weathered skins and softened the corrugations of iron faces. After the cold and wet of the day, its warmth spelled luxury in capitals—luxury such as no

millionaire may command from his palatial clubs, for pleasure may only be measured in degrees of health with accompanying intensity of sensation. As they moved and turned like huge red capons on an old-style spit, bringing fresh areas of soaked clothing under the blaze, they smoked and revamped the day's haps, its dips, jams, duckings, while the river—the river that yielded their hard bread in exchange for annual toll of a life or two—rebuked with angry growl their jokes and jestings.

A candle in Bender's tent showed the giant squatted upon his blankets, chin on hands, big torso hunched between knees and elbows. A night and day of heavy brooding had sunk his eyes; despair had cross-ploughed and deepened the furrows across his blue, scarred face. The attitude bespoke deepest dejection, and his look, when the Cougar entered, caused the latter's weird fierceness to flux in vast sympathy.

"Well?" Bender inquired.

The Cougar pulled a paper out of his shirt-bosom. "Here's your letter that she got by mistake."

It was only a scrap to say that she would do her best—she had done it, too, poor girl!—that and an admonition to be careful in drying his clothes at nights. Usually the warning would have dissolved Bender's grimness, but it caused no relaxation of his gravity.

"How did she take it?"

"Hard. Cried an' said as 'twas more'n she deserved at the little gal's hands. Blamed herself—dreadful cut up. Seems, too, as 'twasn't necessary, as she'd already mailed Mr. Man his walking-papers."

"Too late—now. It's done."

The Cougar looked awkwardly down upon him. Pity had been foreign to their rough comradeship; it was, indeed, nearest of kin to shame; the words of sympathy choked in his throat. "Come, come!" he presently growled. "Chipper up! 'Tain't any worse than it was."

A convulsion seized and shook the big body. "You don't know, Cougar. You don't know what it is—" He stopped, aghast at the sudden appalling change in the other. He had straightened from his crouch, and his eyes flared like blue, alcohol flames in his livid face. As at the touch of a secret spring, the man's fierce taciturnity raised, exposing the tortured soul behind.

"I—don't?" The whisper issued like a dry wind from drawn lips. "Me?—that saw my wife an' baby—" Though frontiersmen tell, shivering, of the horror he mentioned, no pen has been found callous enough to set it forth on paper. "God, man!" His arms snapped outward and his head fell forward in the attitude of the crucifixion.

"Cougar!" Bender grasped his shoulder. "Cougar! Cougar, man! I'd forgot-

ten."

But as one in a trance the man went on: "It's always with me—through these years—day an' night. I'd have killed myself—long ago—on'y whenever I'd think of that, she'd come—sweet an' smiling—with a shake of her pretty head. She wouldn't let me do it." The thought of her smile seemed to calm him, and he continued, more quietly: "I never could make out why 'twas done to her. A sky-pilot tol' me onct as 'twas the will o' God, but I shocked him clean out of his boots.

"'I'll know on the Jedgment Day, will I?' I asks him. 'Shorely,' he answers, pat. 'An' I'll be close in to the great white throne you was talking about?' He nods. 'Then do you know what I'll do?' I asks him again. 'If I find out as how that God o' yourn ordered that done to my little gal, I'll stick a knife into Him an' turn it round.'

"At that he turned green an' tried to saddle the dirty business onto the devil. But, Lordy, he didn't know. She does, though, else she wouldn't come smiling. She knows; so I've allus reckoned as if she could bear her pain I can worry through to the end. There! there! I'm all right again. You didn't go to do it. An', after all, I don't know but that you are right. For while my gal's at peace, yourn has to live out her pain. It's puzzling—all of it. Now there's *him*. Where does he come in? What about him?"

"What about him?" Bender's bulk seemed to swell in the dim light to huge, amorphous proportions. "That's simple. He's got to marry her."

What the conclusion had cost him!—the suffering, self-sacrifice. To the sophisticated, both sacrifice and conclusion may seem absurd, provoking the question as to just how wrong may be righted by the marriage of a clean girl with an impure man; yet it was strictly in accord with backwoods philosophy. As yet the scepticism of modernity had not infected the plains, nor had the leprosy of free thought rotted their creeds and institutions. To Bender's simplicity, marriage appealed as the one cure for such ills as Jenny's, while both he and the Cougar had seen the dose administered with aid of a Colt's forty-five. So, absurd or not, the conclusion earned the latter's instant approval.

There was something pathetic, too, in the serious way in which, after discussing ways and means, they spoke of Jenny's future. "She'll be a lady," the Cougar commented. "Too big to look at you an' me."

Bender's nod incarnated self-effacement, but he bristled when the Cougar suggested that Molyneux might not treat her rightly, and his scowl augured a quick widowhood in such premises. "We'll go up for him to-morrow."

"An' after it's all over?"

"Oregon for you an' me—the camps an' the big timber."

The big timber! The Cougar's bleak face lit up with sudden warmth. Giant

pines of Oregon woods; rose-brown shade of cathedral redwoods; the roaring unrest of lacy cataracts; peace of great rivers that float the rafts and drives from snow-capped Rockies down to the blue Pacific; these, and the screaming sawmills that spew their product over the meridians, the pomp of that great piracy; the sights, sounds, resinous odors that the Cougar would never experience again were vividly projected into his consciousness.

"Man!" He drew a deep breath. "It can't come too quick for me. I'm sick of these plains, where a man throws a shadow clean to the horizon. I'm hungry for the loom of the mountains." After a pause, he added, "Coming back to yourself—have you eaten to-day?"

The language he accorded to Bender's negative would shake the type from a respectable printer's fingers, yet, in essence, was exactly equivalent to the "You poor dear!" of an anxious wife or mother. Striding off, he quickly returned with coffee and food, which Bender was ordered to eat under pain of instant loss of his liver, lights, and sundry other useful organs. Then, being besotted in his belief in action as a remedy for mental disorders, he suggested a visit to the turn above the bridge where the logs had jammed twice that afternoon.

Another day would put the last log under the bridge and see the temporary structure dismantled and afloat; but though only the tail of the drive remained above, the jams had backed it up for a couple of miles, so that the logs now filled the river from bank to bank. They floated silently, or nearly so, for the soft thud of collisions, mutter of grinding bark, merged with the low roar of the stream. But a brilliant northern moon lit the serried array; when the men crossed they could pick the yellow sawed ends from the black of the mass.

Under urge of the same thought, they paused on the other side and looked back along the northern trail. With the exception of the cook, whose pots proclaimed his labors with shrill tintinnabulation, the camp now slept, its big watchfire burning red and low. Beneath that bright moon scrub, bluff, scour, ravine, and headland stood out, lacking only the colors of day, and they could see the trail's twin ruts writhing like black snakes across the ashen bottoms into the gorge by which it gained the prairies.

The Cougar's quick eye first discerned a moving blot, but Bender gave it identity. "That's shore Molyneux's rig. He'd a loose spoke when he went by t'other day. Hear it rattle."

It was clear and sharp as the clatter of a boy's stick along a wooden paling, and the Cougar whispered: "It's sure him. Where kin he be going? Do you reckon—"

The same thought was in Bender's mind. "An' she there alone. No one ever starts out for Lone Tree this time o' night." After a grim pause, he added, "But that's where he's going."

A strident chuckle told that the Cougar had caught his meaning. "That's right. Saved us trouble, hain't he? Kind of him. Jes' step into the shadow till he's fairly on the bridge."

If they had remained in the moonlight he would never have seen them. Dusk had brought no surcease of his mad thought; rather its peace stimulated his excitement by shutting him out from the visible world. What were his thoughts? It takes a strong man to face his contemplated villanies. From immemorial time your scoundrel has been able to justify his acts by some sort of crooked reasoning, and Molyneux was no exception to the rule. "Why do you muddy the water when I am drinking?" the wolf asked of the lamb. "How could I, sir, seeing that the stream flows from you to me?" the lamb filed in exception. "None of your insolence!" the wolf roared as he made his kill.

In the same way Molyneux excluded from thought everything that conflicted with his intention—the first rudeness that lost him Helen's maiden confidence, his insidious attempts to wean her from her husband, her undoubted right to reject his advances. He twisted his own crime to her demerit. "She didn't know about that when she was drawing me on!" he exclaimed, whenever Jenny's letter thrust into his meditation. "Why should it cut any ice now? It is just an excuse to throw me a second time. But she sha'n't do it, by God! no, she sha'n't, she sha'n't! She's a coquette!—a damned coquette! I'll—" Then a red rage, a heaving, tumultuous passion, would drown articulate thought so that his intention never took form in words. But one thing is certain—he was thoroughly dangerous. In that mood Helen would have fared as illy at his hands as the lamb at the paws of the wolf.

The sudden stoppage of his ponies, midway of the bridge, broke up his reverie. As the moon struck full in his own face, he saw the two men only as shadows; but there was no mistaking Bender's bulk, and, after a single startled glance, Molyneux hailed him. "Is that you, Mr. Bender?"

"It's me, all right. Where might *you* be heading for?"

It was the usual trail greeting, preliminary to conversation, but Molyneux sensed a difference of tone, savor of command, menace of authority, that galled his haughty spirit. Vexed by the impossibility of explanation, his disdain of the settler tribe in general would not permit him to lie; from which conflict of feeling his stiff answer was born.

"I don't see that it is any of your business."

"You don't?" Equally stiff, the reply issued from the huge, dim shape. "Well, I'll make it mine. You're going to Lone Tree."

Puzzled, Molyneux glanced from Bender's indefiniteness to the Cougar's dim crouch. He was not afraid. In him the courage of his vices was reinforced by enormous racial and family pride—the combination that made the British fool the

finest of officers until mathematics and quick-firing artillery replaced the sword and mêlée. Mistaking the situation, he attempted to carry it off with a laugh.

"What have you chaps been drinking? Here; pass the bottle."

"Not till we wet your wedding," the Cougar interjected, dryly.

Astonished now, as well as puzzled, Molyneux yet rejected a sudden suspicion as impossible. Out of patience, galled by this mysterious opposition, he said, testily: "Are you crazy? I do not intend—"

"—To go to Lone Tree," Bender interrupted. "Yes, we know. You was heading up for Glaves's place."

Seriously disconcerted, Molyneux hid it under an ironical laugh. "I must say that I marvel at your intimate knowledge of my affairs. And since you are so well posted, perhaps you can tell me why I am going to Lone Tree?"

"I kin that." The huge, dim figure, with its crouched, attendant shadow, moved a pace nearer, then the man's stern bass launched on the quivering moonlight, reciting to an accompaniment of rushing waters this oldest of woodland sagas. Beginning at the night he picked Jenny up on the trail, he told all—Jed Hines's cruel fury; birth and burial of his, Molyneux's child; the outcast girl's subsequent illness; Helen's kindness; the doctor's philanthropy; the kindly conspiracy that protected her from social infamy. "An' us that saw her through her trouble," he finished, "are bound to see her righted."

If the lime-lights of history and fiction were thrown more often upon motives and psychology, and less on deeds and action, characters would not appear in such hard colors of black and white. It were false to paint Molyneux irredeemably black. "*Your child!*" He winced at the phrase, and, perhaps for the first time, an inkling of the enormity of his offence was borne in upon him. *His* child? It was the flesh of his own loins that had suffered midnight burial at the hands of Carter and the kindly priest! The thought struck with enormous force—then faded. For back of him was that vicious generation whose most cultured exponent wrote to his own son that a seduction or two was necessary to the education of a gentleman. Through pride of family, the dead hands of haughty and licentious forebears reached to throttle remorse.

Was he to be called to account by common settlers, the *savages* of the scornful English phrase? Anger colored his next remark: "Waited till you were good and ready, didn't you? Your diligence falls short of your zeal, my friends, or—"

"Don't flatter yourself," Bender sternly interrupted. "You kin thank her for the delay. If we'd known, you'd long ago have been either dead or married. But she kep' her own counsel till she thought as some one else's welfare called her to speak. 'Twasn't needed. T'other'd already found you out for herself."

Molyneux blinked under the savage contempt, but answered, stiffly enough: "Now listen. I deny nothing, though she received attentions from one

of my pupils, and it might very well have been—"

"You lie!"

The lie never comes so unpleasantly as when asserting a truth; so, though he knew that he had lied, Molyneux's eyes glinted wickedly, his hand tightened on his whip. A glance right and left showed him the river, only a light hand-rail between him and dark waters. There was not room to turn; the giant blocked the way. Under constraint, he spoke quietly: "Neither do I profess sorrow. What is done is done. If the girl had taken me into her confidence—"

"Likely, wasn't it?"

A line of Jenny's letter, a damnable fact, flashed into Molyneux's mind, but he went on: "—I'd have taken care of her—am willing to do so yet, in a certain way. Marriage, of course, is out of the question. We are unfitted for each other—"

"No one's denying that."

He ignored the sarcasm. "—could not be happy together."

"Who said anything about your living together?"

The interruptions were most disconcerting, but he continued: "Now if you, as her representatives, self-appointed or otherwise"—he could not refrain from the sarcasm—"if you will name a sum—"

"*What?*"

Twenty rods away the camp now slept, steeped in the drug of labor—all but the cook, who came running out of his tent and was thus witness of the event. Looking up-stream, he saw them blackly silhouetted against the moonlit sky, a shadow show, play of marionettes upon the bridge.

"Out of my way! Let go!"

Followed the swish and crack of Molyneux's whip, as he lashed Bender over the face, then fell to flogging his horses. But stinging pain freed in the giant those bulldog passions that had made him king of the camps in other years. He hung on, while the plunging beasts drowned the river's roar in thunder of iron hoofs. Unable to break his grip, they reared—their smooth, elongated bodies conveying to the cook an odd impression of slugs reaching upward through moonlit dew—then, stooping quickly under the nigh beast, the mad giant took its full weight on his shoulder and with a mighty heave sent team and rig crashing sideways off the bridge.

A quick leap saved Molyneux—for the moment. All through the action had moved with kinetoscopic quickness, and it accelerated so that the cook could scarcely establish its sequence. Like an angry bull, Bender shook the hair from his eyes; then, as he rushed, came a report; a puff of smoke curled bluely up from Molyneux's hand; the giant thudded at length on the bridge. Followed a yell, a piercing cry suitable to the animal after which the Cougar was named. As Bender fell, he rushed. The pistol spoke again. While the cook was running twenty yards,

a black, furious tangle writhed over the bridge, and as he came darting out from behind a bunch of willow scrub he saw that it was gone. Bender lay alone under the moonlight.

Now this was the cook of a lumber-camp, equivalent to saying that he was a man of parts. He had cooked on B Contract, Superior Construction Division of the Trunk Line, and so had seen a liberal sprinkling of his grumblers go into the dump—a grisly foundation for track, surely yet what better could the builders of the road desire than to be cradled under the ties and sleep, sleep, sleep, to the thundering lullaby of the fast express? Which intimacy with the pale terror is responsible for his prompt action in these unusual premises. Molyneux's bullet had merely grazed Bender's temple. He rose, staggering, as the cook made the bridge, and, seeing that he was too sick and dizzy to handle the situation, the latter took it into his own able hands.

As before mentioned, a drive camp sleeps in its boots, and the shots had brought a score out from their sleep on a hunt for causes. "Man drove offen the bridge!" he yelled. "An' Cougar went after him! They're both under the drive! Scatter down-stream an' skin your eyes for bubbles!"

Thus, on the spur of the moment, the cook wrote history—as accurately, perhaps, as the run of historians; for after the drive once closed serried ranks over the struggling men, they were never seen again, so none could rise with an opposing theory. When, a few days later, the water was drawn off at the first dam, the horses floated out on the shallows. But the men—? The river carried them to its secret places; buried them in some scour or pothole, free at last, one of his passions—the incubus of his generations—the other from his pain. That night, if such things be, the Cougar was joined, after his years of suffering, in perfect knowledge with his "little girl."

XXI
PERSECUTION

Yes, the cook made history, for though the event furnished gossip for the ninety days which, on the lonely frontier, corresponds with the world's nine days' wonder, his story was never questioned. The truth lay buried between him and Ben-

der, and if either visited her grave, it was never in company with the other. Up to the time that delirium tremens removed the cook from the snows of a Rocky Mountain camp to a sphere where pots are said to boil with or without watching, Bender never knew just how much or little he really knew.

To others the event appeared under varying complexions. Helen and Jenny were shocked at Molyneux's death, the latter without astonishment, though her firm belief that sin had at last received its full wage was without trace of malignance; both were sorrier than they had any right to be; and both mourned the Cougar. As for the settlers, they regarded the affair rather in the light of a special dispensation of Providence. Flocking to the auction of Molyneux's effects a month later, they caballed against high bidding, paid for chattels they bought at ridiculous prices in long-time notes, for that was the "Black Year," and throughout Manitoba nothing could be sold for cash.

Poverty, sociologists tell us, is the mother of crime, and as those hard times subsequently influenced the settlers in their attitude towards Helen, they are surely worthy of mention. To begin, the country was practically bankrupt. The frost of the preceding fall had left the wheat useless, and but for the fact that the provincial government had imported and distributed free seed, not an acre of grain would have been sown that year. The seriousness of the crisis may be gauged by the legislature's further action in enacting an exemption law that practically excluded all of a farmer's goods and chattels from legal execution. This was good, but in that it was not, nor could be made retroactive, it benefited only the new-comers and left the pioneers, who had spent their little all opening up the country, still liable to foreclosure and execution.

On the northern settlers times had borne particularly hard. During boom years all had assumed loan indebtedness, and whereas creditors had bided patiently successive lean seasons on the chance of a branch railroad and bumper crop, now that the country's credit, its very future was trembling in the balance; implement-men and store-keepers raced with twenty-per-cent. Shylocks to grab what they could from the wreck. That spring the sheriff of Brandon was the busiest man in the country-side. He and his deputies sowed summonses, executions, foreclosures broadcast over the land. Wolves of the law, they harried the farmers till the optimism of the brilliant emigration pamphlets was swamped, submerged beneath inky pessimism. Small wonder that—coupled with idleness, breeder of mischief, in the slack season that Glaves feared between seeding and haying—small wonder that some of the rancor bred by hard conditions should be vented upon Helen.

She may be said to have stood in an uncomfortable position as lightning conductor between this cloud of spleen and the earth, upon which it should have properly been discharged. And looking back, one may see the storm gathering

over her fair head, observing in its approach all of the natural phenomena: first the cold wind, social disfavor, the whispers; next, heavy drops thudding in the dust, the snubs and slights; lastly, thunder, lightning, rain, downright persecution.

The whispers, of course, she did not hear, but she could not overlook the difference in trail greetings, which were either far too warm or much too cool, according to the years and disposition of the greeter. Coldness was endurable, but the rude stares, conscious laughter of the younger boors often caused her to fly the hot colors of angry shame. Yet even this hurt less than the sudden, shy suspicion of her pupils. Whereas they were wont to hang upon her skirts, they now held aloof in play hours, and ran straight home from school.

"Mother says I'm not to walk with you any more," one tot explained her haste. How that stung! Having only the faintest of ideas, little more than a suspicion of the strength and nature of this uncomfortable prejudice, she resented it as bitter injustice, and held a proud head until a thing happened that almost broke her spirit.

Of all the settler women, Ruth Murchison was the one girl with whom Helen had been, or could be, on anything like terms of intimacy. Quiet and thoughtful, Ruth had gone through the English common schools, and had taken the Junior Oxford Examination, to which passable education a taste for good reading had formed a further bond. Wherefore Helen was delighted when, one day, news drifted into the post-office that Ruth was to be married to the Probationer, the young minister who preached Merrill's funeral sermon.

Borrowing a beast from Glaves, she rode north one evening to offer congratulations, and as the Murchisons lived several miles north of Silver Creek Valley, night fell while she still lacked half a mile of the homestead. From that distance the windows' yellow blaze advised of fuss and busy preparation. Drawing nearer, voices, laughter, the whir of an egg-beater, clatter of cooking-gear came down the trail merrily freighting the dusk. Infected by the cheer, she gave a shrill halloa, spurred to a gallop, and drew in at the door with a clatter of hoofs.

"Ruth! Oh, Ruth!" she called. "Ruth-y!"

Instantly the voices hushed, then, after an uncomfortable pause, she heard Mrs. Murchison say, in thin, constrained tones, "Mrs. Carter is out there, father."

Followed a shuffling, and the door opened revealing Murchison framed in yellow light. Stout, robust, ruddy, with that mottled-beef English complexion, he came of that stout yeoman stock whose twanging long-bows sounded France's knell at Crecy and Poitiers, of that rich blood the slow drainage of which to her colonies has left England flabby, ensemic, flaccid. He had not wished to leave, but the motherland had become industrial without further place for her yeoman. Over fields that were enriched by the tilth of thirty Murchison generations, a

thousand factories were depositing soot and blighting acids. American wheat and beeves had wiped out profits, while enormous rents ate up the farmer's substance. So Murchison, England's best, had become partner in exile with the remittance-men, her worst. Undoubtedly, there was no symptom of remittance weakness in the scowl he turned on Helen.

Behind him Helen could see Ruth, red and embarrassed, hanging her head over the egg-beater. A half-dozen girls and neighboring women, who had come in to help in the baking and brewing, were exchanging meaning glances across the table.

"Ruth? She's well," Murchison answered her question.

She knew what to expect now, but nerved herself to face the situation. "Can't I see her?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because she don't run with your kind."

"Oh, Mr. Murchison!"

He felt the heart sickness, yet glowered relentlessly, for it had been the habit of his forebears to thrash their women into good behavior. He itched to do it now for the good of her soul, but, lacking the power, he growled:

"If you don't like it—keep better company."

If he had been alone, she would undoubtedly have challenged his reproach and, while clearing herself in his eyes, have turned away future trouble. But a titter from within fired her pride. "Very well, please give her my congratulations." And turning she rode away.

Good-hearted as rough, Murchison stared after, stricken with sudden compunction. He knew that she must have intended to stay the night, and here she was a timorous woman riding out into the darkness. "Here!" he shouted. "Come back!"

But she held on, eyes snapping, cheeks aflame, throat convulsed under the strain of suppressing imminent hysteria. Beyond earshot she broke down, venting her injured loneliness in broken speech between bursts of sobbing. "They hate—me. Condemn me—because—my husband left me. It wasn't my—fault—that is, altogether." She hastily corrected herself. "Of course—I failed him. But I was—sorry—would have done better—if he had—given me a chance. He's so stern—and stiff—" She would not even let this undoubted truth pass unmodified. "But then—he thought I didn't—love him. Perhaps I didn't—then. I was a little fool. But I do! I do!" She stretched wild arms to the darkness. "I do! I do! I do!" But the velvet night returned nothing to her embrace and she collapsed, sobbing, upon the pony's neck. Still the cry did her good, tided over hysteria, composed and quieted her so that she was able to meet the trustee's glance of spectacled

inquiry as she entered the cabin.

Kindliness as well as curiosity inhered in his glance, for, besides the cash and educational prestige which she had brought to his cabin, Jimmy had come to like her for herself. The frost and grizzle of fifty winters thawed under his smile as he threw a Winnipeg paper across the table. "Catch! Just kem in. Yes, there's a story 'bout him. Now, don't eat it."

Metaphorically, she did, indeed, devour the article, and while she read the trustee watched with something of puzzled astonishment the lovely tide that flowed out from the lace at her neck, and drowned her pale creams to the roots of her hair. He had ample opportunity for study as the article was long. Just then Carter's line, with its promise of competition, focussed the interest of the entire province, and some enterprising scribe had risen to the opportunity afforded by a visit west of the general manager of the trunk line, to interview him upon the probable action of his road in proceedings to condemn a crossing of its right of way. Time, however, had not abated one iota of the manager's sphinx like quality. While affable, he had declined to discuss railroad politics, remarking that his company did not "cross bridges before they were built." Interviewed in his turn upon the significance of the aforesaid remark, Carter had ventured the opinion that the trunk-line people would not oppose the crossing, and thereby had provoked a flaming editorial upon his artlessness.

"If the people behind Mr. Carter imagine that the greediest monopoly in history will loose its grip on this province till the law's crowbar pries off its fingers one by one, they are mightily mistaken," the editor hotly declared. "Forewarned is forearmed, and we hereby present them, gratis, with this piece of information—while they are running their grades in peaceful confidence that will be most appropriate in the innocent age when lion and lamb lie down together, the monopoly is gathering men and means, preparing to crush their enterprise by force should the crooked enginery of the law fail its purpose. Why else have five hundred extra men been distributed among the sections on either side of the proposed crossing? Why does a gravel-train stand there permanently across the proposed right of way? Soon Mr. Carter will receive unmistakable answer to these questions."

"He's dead right there, that editor man," the trustee said when, all rosy red, Helen looked up from her reading. "Old Brass-Bowels was born with a nateral insight into the nater of a dead cinch."

"But won't the law support my"—she paused, then proudly finished—"my husband? Can't he compel a crossing?"

"The law?" Sniffing, Jimmy indicated the legal patchwork on the wall with a comprehensive sweep of his pipe. "The law said as I was to pay them, but did I? Humph!"

"But they'll hardly dare to fly in the face of the province? Public opinion is a great moral force." She quoted a sentence from the editorial with gusto.

"Yes, but 'tain't much of a club. Did you ever see one of my hawgs stan' aside, even when he was full, to let another have a go at the trough? Not till I hit him on the snout. Well, they ain't agoin' to cross the trunk line these two years, an' for my part I don't care if they never cross."

"Why?" Her eyes dilated widely. "Wouldn't a competing line benefit you—all of the province?"

Nodding, he regarded her from half-shut eyes. "Oh, I ain't expecting to walk on gold this side o' the pearly gates. As for my reasons, they ain't a mile away from here. I'm not wishing too much success for a man that deserts his wife."

Touched and very much flushed as to the face by his genuine, if crabbed sympathy, the Reasons yet shook her head and spoke up for the recreant husband stoutly as she had defended him against herself. She made, however, small headway against his obduracy.

"Well, that's the way I see it. By-the-way," he added, heading off a disposition for further argument, "did you see the evangelist? Pitched his tent over by Flynn's. You want to go. Beats a three-ring circus when old man Cummings hits up to his gait."

"Jimmy! Jimmy!" His wife looked up from her ironing; then daunted, perhaps, by his twinkle, she addressed Helen. "He hadn't orter talk that away, my dear. If Mr. Cummings does go on the rampage a bit when he gets het up, at least he's sincere. As for him—" She turned a severe eye on her husband. "We'll get him yet."

"Yes, I see myself. Her idea of heaven"—he shrugged at the ironing-board—"is an eternal class-meeting with everybody giving their experience—love-feast she calls it. I like something solider. Give me plenty to eat, a pipe by a warm fire, an' something to read, an' I'll sign away my harp an' crown." Ignoring his better-half's remark that he would not lack the fire, he finished: "She's going. Wouldn't miss a meeting. Kedn't keep her away with a club. So if you'd alike to see some fun—"

"If 'twas jes' out of curiosity I'd ask her to stay at home," his wife interrupted. "But she's not that kind, an' I'll be glad to take her."

"If you will?" Helen assented, and so, returning to the analogy, placed her-

self directly beneath the leaden belly of the lowering storm.

XXII
DENUNCIATION

A molten sun was smouldering in the ashes of day when, the following evening, Helen with Mrs. Glaves, drove up to the gospel-tent. It still lacked half an hour of meeting-time, so, while her companion joined the early arrivals who were passing time by holding a service of song inside, Helen remained in the buckboard and watched the sunset, observed herself by a group of remittance-men and a scattering of settler youths who sprawled near by on the grass.

Enthralled, she scarcely saw them; had eyes only for the ruby sun that stained the prairies with amber incandescences, the ribbed glories of the fiery cloud pillars that seemed to uphold the darkling vault above. As the orb slid into his blankets of rose and gold, shy stars peeped down at the violet shadows that crawled slowly up the slopes and knolls; over all fell the hush of evening.

It was one of the moments when the Riddle of Infinity, Puzzles of Time, Space, Eternity appear as concrete though unthinkable realities; weigh down and oppress the soul with a sense of its insignificance. Against the black-blue vault the stars loomed as worlds; she could see beyond, around them. Through vast voids planets were rushing on their courses; suns with attendant systems swung on measured arcs obedient to—what? ... A thin minor, querulous plaint stole out on the hush:

> "Poor crawling Worm of Earth,
> A Child of Sin am I—"

It was an honest attempt at the riddle, but its incongruity, futile insufficiency caused her to shrug with sudden annoyance. She wondered if, somewhere in planetary space, other "pinches of sentient dust" were equally afflicted with a sense of their central importance in the scheme of things. The apologetic whine spoiled the sunset; she impatiently turned to watch the arrivals—the wagons, buck-boards, horsemen—that were streaming in on every trail.

"How are you, Mrs. Carter?"

It was Danvers, Molyneux's old pupil. An honest lad and merry, she always liked him, and now made him welcome to the seat beside her, and laughed at his fire of chaff. Indicating Cummings, whose ovine expression had sustained no diminution since the day he bearded the general manager, he remarked: "He's great, Mrs. Carter; puts it all over Henry Irving. And there's the sky pilot! What a Jovelike port!"

There was, of course, little wit and less humor in his chaff, but his intentions were honorable, so, ignoring the sour looks of the arriving settlers, she gave him smiling attention up to the moment they entered the tent together, and so prepared the way for what followed. For though, going in, she left levity without, her modest and devout bearing could not mitigate her offence in allying herself with the English Ishmael. It was aggravated, moreover, by her remaining with him in close proximity to the remittance crowd on the back benches. Thereafter nothing could save her; she remained a target for sour glances throughout the service.

This was on the usual pattern—rousing hymns, prayer, testimony, and exhortation—then when groans and ejaculations testified to the spiritual temperature, the evangelist, a stout man of bull-like build, proceeded to cut off yards of the "undying worm," and to measure bushels of the "fire that quencheth not" for the portion of such as refused to view the problems of Infinity through aught but his own wildly gleaming spectacles. His discourse, indeed, bristled with those cant terms which, while entirely devoid of meaning, are still eminently conducive of religious hysteria, and his efforts were the more successful because of the absence of the Probationer, a thoughtful young fellow whose rare common-sense could be depended upon to prevent religious emotion from degenerating into epilepsy.

Lacking his wholesome presence, the evangelist paced the platform under the yellow lantern-light, stretching long, black arms, hovering over the people like some huge, dark bird as he pleaded, threatened, thundered, launching his fiery periods on a groaning wave of "amens" and "hallelujahs." As he went on, painting heaven and hell into his lurid scheme of things, sighs and exclamations grew in volume, flooding feeling pulsed through the audience, wild settler youths, who had come to scoff, exchanged uneasy glances on the back benches, sure sign of a coming stampede.

This was the psychological moment, and, skilled in his trade, the revivalist pounced upon it. Stilling the groaning chorus with upheld hand, he solemnly invited all who were not *against* the Lord Jesus to stand, an old revival trick and one which now, as always, turned. For, as before said, the plains were not yet infected with the leprosy of agnosticism, and, Episcopalians to a man, even the Englishmen were not willing to pose as the open enemies of God.

Once standing and pilloried in the public eye, it was but a question of minutes until the back benches began to yield up penitents. One by one the settler youths were gathered into the mourning bench, until at last Helen stood alone with the Englishmen.

"Come ye! Come ye to the Lord!" The preacher pleaded, but, haughty and coldly constrained, the remittance-men ignored the invitation; and so, for the space of a thunderous hymn of praise, gnostic civilization and the fervid frontier faced each other across the middle benches. From that dramatic setting anything might come. Moment, feeling, atmosphere, all pointed to the event that came to pass as the hymn died.

Leaping upon a bench, and so adding its height to unusual tallness, a woman pointed a warning hand at the unbelievers. Thin, family-worn, and naturally cadaverously yellow, she was now flushed with the fever of delirium. "In that day," she screeched, "the Tares shall be separated from the Wheat and cast with the grass into the oven!" Then, while her finger indicated man after man, she raised the grewsome hymn:

"'I heard the Sinners Wailing, Wailing, Wailing,
I heard the Sinners Wailing on that Great Day!'"

Travelling around the benches, her skinny finger finally fastened on Helen,

and, as the lugubrious refrain came to an end, she burst forth in tremendous paraphrase: "Beware ye of the Scarlet Woman! Avoid ye, for her portals lead down to Death; her feet take hold of Hell!"

The silence of paralysis followed. So still it was that a mosquito's thin whine sounded through the tent, the tinkle of a cow-bell came in from far pastures, a dog could be heard barking a long way off. Swinging from the tent-pole, a circle of lanterns lit dark, flushed faces, and thus, for the space of a long breath, Helen faced the virago, the one glowering, malignant, the other pale with astonishment, mutely indignant. She was not confused. On the contrary, thought and vision were surprisingly clear; she noted Mrs. Glaves's shocked look, the vindictive settler faces, the Englishmen's blank expressions.

"We had better go. May I drive home, Mrs. Carter?" Danvers, the witless, the foolish, rose to the situation.

Low-pitched, his voice yet carried to every ear, as did her clear reply:

"After the service is over."

It was defiance as well as answer, and as she threw it in the lowering face of the congregation, her glance fixed on the evangelist who, till then, had stood, mouth open, hand arrested midway of a gesture, a bearded, spectacled effigy of

ridiculous surprise. Starting under her pale scorn, he flushed, looked for a second through shining, bewildered glasses, then strode forward and seized the virago's arm.

"Sister, sister! Judge not that ye be not judged!" Then, himself again, he swept a pudgy hand over the benches. "Sit down, all! Brother Cummings will lead in prayer."

It mercifully happens that sudden calamity carries its own anæsthetic in that it blinds, confuses, destroys feeling, numbs the faculties that ought to register its importance. Under Helen's unnatural calmness she was dimly conscious of a sick excitement, but this was unrelated with her thought. She saw and sensed as usual; was aware of curious backward glances, the sympathy of the Englishmen at her side; heard every word of Cummings's sputtering prayer, the following hymn and benediction; only her mind refused commerce with these things. Divorced from the present, it juggled the terms of an equation in that day's lesson up to the moment that the remittance-men came crowding about Danvers' rig after the meeting.

Aside from their looseness and general inefficiency, the lads were brave enough, and though some of them had won or lost bets on her reputation, winners were no more eager than losers to avenge the insult that had been provoked by her association with themselves.

"Just say the word, Mrs. Carter," Danvers pleaded, "and we'll lick the crowd."

"And put a head on the preacher," young Poole added, sinfully licking his chops.

From the darkness that enveloped the press of rigs and wagons rose jeering voices, sneers, laughter, the conscious cackle of scandal. Several times she heard her own name. There was provocation and to spare, but though a word would have started a racial riot, she desired only solitude, to flutter home like a wounded bird to its nest.

"No, no!" she answered them. "Take me home! Only take me home!"

Arrived there, she flew to her own room leaving Danvers to enlighten the trustee. Lying face down on her bed, she heard the rumble of their conversation, Jimmy's violent reflections upon revivals particular and general, his wife's whimpering protests when she returned. His growl extended far into the night, and when it was finally extinguished by a robust snoring, the girl was afflicted with a sense of lost companionship; thereafter she had to suffer it out by herself.

There would be more pain than profit in describing her reflections, agonizings. Sufficient to know that a knife in the breast hurts a woman less than a stab at her reputation, and her thought was none the sweeter for the knowledge that she had drawn the blow by giving way to her pique. Her resolve as expressed

next morning to Jimmy Glaves is of more concern.

She had turned impatiently from Mrs. Glaves's tearful apologies, but when the old trustee laid a kindly hand on her shoulder, as she passed him in the garden on her way to school, she gave him honest eyes.

"Now, you ain't to bother. 'Twas on'y Betsy Rodd, the old harridan. Nobody minds her."

But she shook her head in accordance with her resolution to face truth. "She was expressing what was in everybody's minds. I know it, and though I didn't intend it, I'm partly to blame, for their suspicion." Her mouth drew thin and firm as she finished. "I shall live it down."

"Course you will!" he heartily agreed. "That's my brave girl!" But his face darkened after she had passed on, and he slowly wagged a grave head as he plied his hoe in the garden.

For he knew the difficulty, impossibility of the task she had marked out for herself. Of Scotch descent, dogmatic, wedded to convention, intense clannishness reinforced in the settlers bitter morality, racial hatred, the condemnation of sin. With them the offence of the fathers was visited upon the children to the fourth generation. It was remembered, for instance, against Donald Ross that his great-grandfather had died a drunkard, and the fact had limited his choice of a wife; the daughters of Hector MacCloud took inferior husbands because their grandmother had been born on the easy side of the knot. Handing such cold charity around among themselves, what mercy were they likely to extend to the suspected stranger within their gates? Jimmy was still wagging his head when, half an hour later, the Probationer reined in at the end of the garden.

Hearing of the scandal on the Lone Tree trail, the young man had turned aside to express his sorrow, and now listened patiently while the trustee drew invidious parallels between the religious movement then proceeding and his own misfit horticulture. "You see them?" Removing his pipe from between his teeth, he waved it at some half-dozen straggling apple-shoots. "Hardiest variety of Siberian crabs. Professor at the gove'nment experimental station warranted 'em to grow at the north pole. Remind me of your revival, they do."

"Why? Don't they grow?" The Probationer smiled.

"Grow? I should swan! four feet every summer, an' freeze off to the roots every winter—jes' like your converts. Get all het up at meetings, blossom with grace, then comes the backsliding, the frost, an' nips the leafage. Where's the sense of it?"

Now the Probationer had his own doubts. Having turned a prentice hand at revival work, he was painfully familiar with its characteristic phenomena—first, hot enthusiasm, slow cooling, obstinate adherence to the form after the spirit has fled, finally the reaction which would leave his people less charitable,

not quite so kindly, a little poorer in the things which make for the kingdom of Christ on earth. He had tried to be a real shepherd to his flock—to upraise by precept, example, counsel, and admonition. Avoiding dogma, he had brought them together irrespective of cult and creed on the broad basis of love and a common humanity, and just when he was beginning to expect fruit from that liberal sowing, this bitter theologian, the revivalist, had been loosed upon him. And this was first fruit of his work!

Jimmy's illustration coincided exactly with his own experience, yet fealty to his Church demanded some sort of defence. "Isn't an annual growth better than none?" he asked. "The green shoots certainly improve the appearance of your garden."

Jimmy blew a derisive cloud over the few cabbages, two sickly cauliflowers, a bed of onions, salvage from worms and spring frost of half an acre's planting. "But you don't get results. One sound cabbage is worth an acre of sick saplings; a cheerful sinner discounts a hundred puckered saints. I'm scairt as the black knot has got inter that orchard o' yourn, sir?"

"I'm afraid so," the young fellow sadly agreed. "Well, I must try and prune it out."

"I'd advise the axe," Jimmy grimly commented. "An' begin with Betsy Rodd."

Sorrowing, the Probationer drove on to the school, where a very cold young lady answered his call at the door. A slant of sunshine struck in under the porch twining an aureole about her golden head, creating an auriferous nimbus for her shapely figure. Standing there, so cold and pale, she might have passed for a statue of purity, and the Probationer, being young and still impressionable albeit engaged, wondered that any should have dared to doubt her. Thawing when he mentioned Ruth, she froze again as soon as he touched, apologetically, upon the event of the night before.

"If religion strips them of common charity, they would be better without it," she answered his apology, and turned but a cold ear to his plea for his people.

"They were altogether subject to emotion, incapable of a reasoned rule of life," he said. "With the fear of God removed from their hearts, they would drop to unmentionable levels, to say nothing of the hope and consolation religion brought to sweeten their hard lives."

But he made little headway. "I don't doubt they are not quite so bad as they would like to be. But there, let us drop the subject. Won't you come in and examine the children?"

From this conversation it will be seen that her resolve to "live it down" was not exactly founded upon grounds that would appeal to a professor of ethics; yet her attitude was very natural, and not so deplorable as would at first appear. Was

she so much to blame? Hardness breeds hardness, opposition its like. Fire flies from the impact of rock and iron. Always like begets like, heredity applies to mental forces. Moreover, injured pride has stiffened more weak spines and given better results than the command to turn the other cheek; the desire to "show people" lies at the root of many a bravery. Lastly, once rehabilitated socially, softness comes later to the injured member, increasing in ratio to the respect of his or her community. And so it would have been with Helen—with a different people.

XXIII
THE CHARIVARI

Straddling a log in his dooryard, the trustee whistled softly while he whittled and shaped a pair of birch crooks into the ox-collars that, with trace-chains, are preferred in the northland to the old-fashioned bows and yoke. The revival was over. After passing from house to house like measles, mumps, or other dark disease, infecting men on trail, by fireside, at the plough-tail with the prejudice he styled religion, the evangelist had reported so many head of "saved" to his superiors, and so had swooped like a plague upon other settlements, leaving the Probationer to repair, as best he might, his ravages in this. Now, two weeks later, symptoms in Silver Creek indicated a quick recovery; extra meetings had altogether ceased, bi-weekly prayer-meetings languished, remarks at the plough-tail showed signs of former vigor; the sweat and labor of haying would undoubtedly bring complete convalescence and, with it, danger for Helen. For while the religious excitement had served her by excluding all else from the settler mind, tongues would be the sharper, prejudice the keener for the rest. It was but a lull in the storm, the hush that follows the first flash and crash of thunder.

It was knowledge of this fact that inspired the trustee's thoughtful whistling. Already he smelled trouble on the wind, the impression being formed on many small significances—looks, nods, winks, and whispered asides at "bees" and "raisings." More important: his cabin, which, as post-office, had been a social focus, centre of news and gossip, a place to linger and chat, had of late been almost deserted. Calling for their mail, his neighbors departed with the shortest of salutations. So, having had a gray eye on trouble through all, he was not surprised when she presently appeared between Shinn and Hines in the latter's

buck-board. Indeed, his comment while they were still a hundred yards away signified profound distrust. "Gummed if the coyotes ain't running in packs this weather." His beetling brows, moreover, drew a grizzled line across his hawk nose when the two reined in opposite; he glared suspiciously while Hines glibly discoursed on crops, weather, the ox-collars; nor hesitated to interrupt and reach for trouble's forelock.

"Crops is fair to middling, nothing wrong with the hay, the crooks is for Flynn—now, what is it?"

Hines blinked and looked silly, but the check worked oppositely on Shinn. Of that gaunt, raw-boned, backwoods type produced by generations of ineffable hardship and slavish labor, he stood over six feet, and combined great strength with mean ferocity and uncontrollable passion. His huge mouth twitched feverishly as he answered, "Sence you're so pressing—it's the talk through the settlement that we orter have a new teacher."

"Umph!" Grunt could not convey greater contempt. "Hain't you got a teacher?"

"Yes, but it's agreed that she ain't quite the sort to put over innercent children."

This time the trustee snorted, "Might infect them brats o' yourn with her sweet manners, eh?"

Shinn flushed dully under his yellow skin. "That or something else. Anyway, every one's agreed that she's gotter go."

"Who's everybody?"

"Meeting, held at my place." Recovering, Hines backed up his partner.

"Yes? First I heard of it. Was Flynn there? Thought not; he ain't much of a mixer. Didn't ask me, did you?"

Hines shuffled uneasily. "'Twas held after a prayer-meeting—you might ha' been there."

"Prayer-meeting, eh? Real Christian, wasn't it, to try and take the bread out of a good girl's mouth?"

"*Good?*"

At Hines's sneer the trustee rose, hand gripping hard on a heavy crook, eyes one gray glare under ragged brows, temple veins ridged and swollen. "I said 'good.'"

On the frontier a man must usually furnish material proof of courage, but there are exceptions from whom imminent fearlessness distils as an exhalation affecting all who come within its atmosphere. Carter was such a one; Glaves another. Though neither had found it necessary to "make good" physically during the settlement's short history, their ability to do so was never at question. Behind the reserve of one, crabbed sarcasm of the other, danger lay so close to the

surface that it was always felt, could never be quite forgotten. Indeed, as regards Glaves, the feeling took form in the opinion often delivered when the qualities of men were under discussion—"If the old man ever gets started, some one will earn a quick funeral." Now Hines quailed, and even the truculent Shinn observed silence.

Glaring on the shrinking Hines, the trustee went on: "Never forgot how Carter bluffed you out on that hay business, did you? An' as you wasn't man enough to get back at him, you 'lowed to take it out of his wife? Well, you ain't going to. You kin go back an' tell them that sent you that so long as Flynn an' me sit on the board she'll teach this school."

"That," Shinn retorted, "would be till nex' election, but she won't stay that long. Sence you're so stiff about it, Glaves, let me tell you that you kain't fly in the face of this settlement. You may be big wolf, but there's others in the pack. If she's here at the end of the month—there'll be something doing." Nodding evilly, he drove on, leaving the trustee to puzzle over his meaning as he shaped and polished the crooks.

"Bluffing, I reckon," he concluded, and that, also, was the opinion of Flynn, to whom he carried his doubts that evening.

"There'll be no way for thim spalpeens to fire us av the boord?" Flynn queried. "No? Phwat about an opposhition school?"

"Agin the law to build one in this township."

"Thin 'tis all out av the big mouth av Shinn. Thalk, an' nothing more."

Both were confirmed in their opinion when the month drew to a peaceful, if hot, end. Tricked out in various green, woods and prairies slumbered or sighed restlessly under torrid heat that extracted their essential essences, weighting the heavy air with intense odors of curing grasses. There was nothing to indicate that the virulent tide of spleen was ready to burst its banks. Knowing that another week would bring on haying, with its attendant wars to provide an outlet for feeling, neither trustee anticipated the event which occurred at the full of the moon.

Though the storm broke around Glaves's cabin, Flynn received immediate notice. In pleasant weather he and his wife would sit on their doorstep after the children were in bed, to enjoy the quiet hour while the peace and cool charmed away the cares of the day; and this night was particularly beautiful. Over dewlit plains the moon emptied a flood of silver and polished the slough beyond the dooryard till it shone like burnished steel. Rolling off and away under that tender light, the huge earth waves seemed to heave, swell, sigh as a lover's bosom under the sweet eyes of his mistress, while from the corrals near by issued the heavy breathing of contented kine. Always music in the ears of a farmer, it stimulated Flynn, set him planning for the future; but he had hardly touched on next year's

increase before Mrs. Flynn seized his arm.

"Phwat's that?"

At first Flynn thought that Glaves was "dogging" stray cattle away from his grain-fields, but when the iron note of beaten pans, gunshots, metallic thundering were added to the first clash of cow-bells, he sprang up. "A charivari! At Glaves's! A spite charivari!"

"Oh, my God, Flynn!" his wife exclaimed. "That poor girl!" She knew what that orgy of sound portended. A jest at weddings, the charivari was sometimes used as a sinister weapon to express communal dislike or punish suspicion of sin. The most terrible memory of her girlhood was associated with a party of fiercely moral backwoodsmen that flogged a man at her father's wagon-tail and dragged a woman, who had offended public morals, naked and screaming through a field of thistles. In Silver Creek were men who had participated in that cruelty, forced to emigrate to escape the law. Small wonder that she agonized under the thought. "Flynn! Flynn, man! Hurry, get your horse!"

Holding the light for him to saddle, she called after as he rode away: "Go round be Misther Danvers'! 'Tis on'y a mile out av your way! Going by here at noon, himself told me that he was to have a sthag-party the night! They'll jump at the chance, an' fight none the worse for a smhell av the whiskey!"

A cold, with complications in the shape of rheumatic pains, sent the trustee early to bed that evening, and Helen was sewing by the fire with Mrs. Glaves when the charivari turned loose outside. As, jumping up, they stood staring at one another, he shouted for them to bolt the door; and as, after complying, Helen returned to the fire he came limping out, bent, warped, and twisted by sciatica, half dressed, but grimly resolute.

"Danger?" he rasped, swinging round on his wife as the house trembled under sudden thunder of scurrying hoofs outside. "Listen!" And when pained bellows followed dropping shots, he added: "Peppering the cattle. Scairt? Then go an' stick your fool head under a pillow. How is it with you?"

As a matter of fact, Helen's face was as white as the fluffy shawl from which her golden head rose like a yellow crocus above soft spring snows; but, noting the thin, scarlet line of her mouth, the trustee nodded his satisfaction. "You'll do. Swing round that lounge—here, where I can train a gun on the door. Good!" He eased his length along it with a groan of relief. "Now hand me the gun—no, the other." Rehanging his own long duck-gun upon its wooden pegs, she brought him the famous double-barrelled Greener which, having disarranged the lock action in trying to clean it, Danvers had left with the trustee for repairs. "There, put out the light an' take a look out at the window."

Pulling the curtain aside, she got full benefit of the brazen clamor while learning something of its genesis, for, while easily recognizable, the din of beaten

pans, cow-bells, gunshots, and yells formed only a minor accompaniment to a barbarous metallic roll, louder than a corps of beaten drums, and a discordant screech that discounted the torment of a thousand tortured fiddles. Now she saw two men rapidly vibrating long cross-cut saws back and forth against the house, while others drew a rosined plank to and fro across a log, concentrating the discords of the world into a single excruciating note. Closing her ears, she took further note of the score of dark figures that came and went in the moonlight, leaping, shouting, gesticulating strangely, as though crazed by the frenzy of noise. Weird, sinister shapes, they moved, massed, and melted to units again as in some mad carnival or distorted madman's dream.

The trustee pulled her skirt. "Come away! They might shoot at the window."

Obeying, she knelt beside him—fortunately with her back to the pane that, a few minutes later, shivered and flew in fine rain. "Drunk!" Glaves commented; and as a piercing cry, clever imitation of a cougar, rang high over a slight lull, he said, "That's sure Bill MacCloud." He grimly added—for, besides being dissolute, the man was a scoffer and leader against religion: "Gosh! but the saints are keeping queer company. Bill ain't more'n a mile 'way from his bottle."

After that one lull the tumult increased in loudness and volume, and for a long half-hour Helen listened as some soft maid of Rome may have hearkened to the din of Goth or ravaging Hun in the sacred streets of the imperial city. To her, brought up under the shadow of law, with its material manifestation—a policeman—always within call, the brutal elemental passion behind that huge, amorphous voice was very terrible. Almost equally fearful was the sudden cessation that set the silence singing in her ears, the voiceless darkness, thick night of that black room.

Touching the trustee, more for the comfort of his presence than to draw his attention, she whispered, "What now?"

Just then the door rattled under a heavy kick; a strident voice answered her question: "Open, Glaves, an' send out that —— baggage" (it was a viler word) "or we'll burn the house over your ears!"

"You will—" the trustee began, but was interrupted by a wail from his wife in the bedroom.

"Jimmy! Oh, Jimmy, don't let 'em have her. They'll duck her in the slough—mebbe drown her like they did Jenny Ross back in Huron."

"Will you shet up!" he roared, but the man outside had heard.

"You bet we will. She needs a little cooling."

"That's surely Mr. Shinn that's talking so fierce!" the trustee taunted. "Man, but you're gaining a heap wolfish, though it did take you some time to work up to the p'int of speech. Why didn't you take the shortcut through Bill's bottle?"

His tone suddenly altered from banter to such stern command that they distinctly heard Shinn shuffle back a step from the door. "Burn this house? Get, or I'll blow the black heart out of you!"

A derisive yell rose outside, then silence fell again, a hush so complete that Helen distinctly heard the tick of the clock, her own breathing, the chirrup of a hearth cricket. Pulling the trustee's sleeve, she whispered, "I've brought *such* trouble upon you!"

"Rubbish!" he snapped. "Say that ag'in an' I'll spank you!" But he gently patted her hand.

A minute slid by without further speech; a second, third, fourth, then she whispered, "Surely they must have gone."

Before he could reply came a rapid beat of running feet, a splintering crash, an oblong of moonlight flashed out of the darkness at the end of the room, and quiet reigned again. Only the battering ram, a long log, poked its blunt nose over the doorsill.

"Stand clear there!" the trustee sharply warned. Then, as a dim, crouched figure appeared between the jambs, he shouted, "Fair warning!" and fired; but as the figure fell back and out, a chuckling laugh drifted through the smoke, Shinn's coarse voice yelled: "His gun's single barrel! In, afore he kin reload!" and a black, surging mass trampled over the dummy and filled the doorway. As aforeseen, the conclusion was justified—the trustee's long gun was familiar as his face in the settlement—and the click of Danvers' left trigger was drowned by a second harsh command—"Fair warning!"

The report, thunderous, ear-splitting in the confined space, certified to Shinn's mistake. His writhing mouth, Hines's wintry visage, the press of men in the door showed redly under the flash, then sulphurous darkness wiped out all. To Helen, its smothering pall seemed to pulse with thick life, to extend clutching fingers, horrors that were intensified by Mrs. Glaves's sudden burst of hysterical screaming. Crouched behind Glaves, she listened in agony to the swearing, sharp oaths, as men tripped and stumbled over the furniture and one another. There was no escape. They were feeling for her all over the room, and through a sick horror she heard Shinn's triumphant yell—

"I've got her!"

A choked gurgle, snarl of rage, as Glaves fastened onto his throat, explained his mistake. "Hell! has no one a match?" His strangled voice issued from a dark whorl, crash of splintering furniture, as they swung and staggered in that pit of gloom. The struggle could have but one ending. Healthy, Glaves would have been no match for Shinn, and, as a match scratched, came the soft thud of his body as he was thrown with brutal force against the wall.

Flaring up, the flame revealed Helen, white, trembling, sick with that paral-

ysis of fear that a mouse must feel in the claws of a cat. From the bedroom came the hysterical whooping, terrible in its sameness. Wide-eyed, she stared, fascinated, at Shinn, but he also was staring at a body spread-eagled before the door, its face turned down in a black, viscid, spreading pool. The match went out.

"My God!" a man cried. "It's Hines!"

But Helen did not hear that or a cry from outside warning of approaching hoofs. Throughout the frenzy of noise, horror of darkness, suspense, the attack, she had carried herself bravely; but this swift death, following on all, broke her shaken nerves, deprived her of consciousness.

The trustee, however, heard and saw the house vomit its black life, the dark figures streaming under the moonlight out to the bluff where the horses were tied, panic-stricken by sudden death and uneasy memories of outraged law. Leaning in his doorway, bent and bruised, he saw also Flynn and Danvers thunder by with a score of remittance-men, a wild cavalcade hard on their heels. In the Irishman's hand a neck-yoke swung with ominous rattle of iron rings; Danvers carried a cavalry sabre he had snatched from his wall; the others brandished clubs. Looming an instant in the steam of their sweating beasts, they shot on with a glad hurrah.

"Yoicks! Tally-ho!" young Poole shrilled as he passed. "Sic 'em, Flynn!"

"A Flynn! A Flynn!" Danvers squeaked as Shinn crumpled under the neck-yoke.

Wild lads, under wilder leadership, they fought—as Mrs. Flynn had predicted—none the worse for a smell at the whiskey. Those of the enemy who made a slow mounting were ridden down, fell under the clubs, or achieved uncomfortable leaps into briers and scrub, to be afterwards caught and drubbed, while such as escaped were run down and brought to bay by twos and threes. In a running fight over miles of moonlit prairie the grudges of years were settled; jeers, gibes, many a cheating received payment in full, with arrears of interest. Thus Cummings received from Danvers the "boot" due on the mare that Carter once described as being "blind, spavined, sweenied, an' old enough to homestead," payment being slapped down upon the spot where most pain may be inflicted with least structural damage. In like manner Poole settled with Peter Rodd for a cannibalistic sow; Perceval with MacCloud, arrears *not* due on a quarter-section of scrub; Gray with Seebach for forty bushels of heated seed wheat. Leaving them to their rough auditing, the story returns with Flynn to the cabin after the dropping of Shinn.

After relighting the lamp, Glaves had carried his sore bones back to the lounge, and when Flynn entered he found the terrible old fellow glowering upon the dead. His wife's hysteria had slackened to a strained sobbing, and, answering Flynn's question, he tartly replied: "No, 'tain't Mrs. Carter. Had her fainting-

spell an' kem to without any fuss, like a sensible girl. She's in there tending to that old fool." Then, beetling again on the dead, he forecast the verdict of the sheriff's jury. "Ye'll bear witness, Flynn, that this man kem to his death through running into a charge of buckshot after my winder 'd been shot in an' door battered down."

XXIV
WITHOUT THE PALE

"I really believe that I *ought* to resign!"

When, one morning a week later, Helen delivered herself of certain secret misgivings at breakfast, the trustee looked up, startled, from his eggs and mush, then proceeded to fish for motives.

"Scairt? You needn't to be. We've got this settlement by the short hairs at last."

His rude metaphor roughly set forth the truth. Without ties, the bachelors of the charivari party had scattered west through the territories, while Shinn, MacCloud, and other married men had gone into such close hiding that the sheriff had been unable to subpoena one for the inquest. But though she neither feared nor anticipated further violence, Helen now knew that she never would be able to live down the settlers' prejudice; and without the children's love, parents' confidence, her day of usefulness was past.

Glaves snorted at this altruistic reason. "Love? Confidence? What's their market value? You kedn't hope to compete with a dollar note for the first; as for the second— Danvers hit it off exactly when he stuck that sign on his stable door—'No more trading here!' Now, from my p'int of view, it isn't a question of love or confidence, but one of faith."

"Faith?" she echoed.

Nodding, he went on. "Me and Flynn backed you up—stood by you through all, didn't we?"

"Indeed you did!" She grew rosily red under warmth of feeling. "I shall never—"

"An' now you allow to throw us down? For Shinn and MacCloud will shorely tell how that they scared you an' beat us out."

It was bad argument, poor ethics—a bald statement of his grim intention of bending the stubborn settlers to his inflexible purpose. She felt, however, that it

would be still poorer ethics for her to desert and disappoint these, her champions, defenders. It was one of these peculiar situations where any course seems wrong, and if she chose that which seemed most human, she did it with a mental reservation. She would resign just as soon as she could persuade him to look at things her way.

"Of course I'll stay—to please you. But—"

"No 'buts,'" he interrupted. "Haying begins Monday, an' by fall it'll all be ol' hist'ry."

But Monday brought justification of her doubt, proving that, if cowed, the settlers were by no means conquered. Only the young Flynns attended school, and the array of empty benches loomed in her troubled vision like a huge face, vacant, mulishly obstinate as a blank wall, vividly eloquent of the invincible determination that would have none of her. Her heart sank, and when the week passed without further attendance she gave up, handed her resignation to Flynn and Glaves in council at the latter's cabin.

Both, as might be expected, registered strenuous objections. "'Tain't your fault if they cut off their nose to spite their face," Glaves argued. And when she replied that the children would suffer, he rasped: "What of it? 'The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children to the fourth generation.' Ye have Scripter for that."

"But not the sin of the stranger," she gently objected. "I have myself to blame for the prejudice."

Now, though neither trustee would admit her confession, both were afflicted with a sneaking consciousness of its truth. For not only had she offended by consorting with that public enemy, the remittance-man, but the cause of Carter's desertion had escaped from Elinor Leslie's indiscreet tongue. Every man, woman, and child in the country-side was informed as to the events which led up to and followed the Ravells' visit. Their denials, therefore, were negated by that profuseness of expression which accentuates the truth it seeks to conceal.

"You know it," she answered them, and opposed further argument with that soft feminine obstinacy which wears out masculine strength.

"But what else kin you do?" Glaves cried at last, in despair.

"Go to Winnipeg and take a place in an office or store."

Though she affected brightness, she could not altogether hide the dejection, homesickness that inhered in the thought. Now that she was to leave it, that rude cabin, with its log walls, legal patchwork, home-made furniture, glowed with the glamours of home. Even Mrs. Glaves's gaunt ugliness became suddenly dear in the light of an indefinite future among strangers.

Detecting her underlying sadness, Flynn exclaimed: "Phwat? Wurrk in a sthore? Sell pins, naydles, an' such truck while I've a roof over me head? Ye'd

die in thim lonesome hotels. Ye 'll just come right home wid me."

"Likely, ain't it?" Glaves broke in, jealous for his prerogative. "In the first place, if she goes, she ain't agoing to stop at no hotel, but with my own sister that keeps a boarding-house on Main Street. An' if she stays, it'll be right here, with me—eh, old woman?"

His wife's warm assent brought Helen to tears without, however, affecting her resolution. For the settlement would be by the ears, she said, just as long as she stayed in it.

"Humph!" Glaves growled. "It'll have itself be the throat afore long. Yesterday Poole an' Danvers ran their mowers into Shinn's five-acre swamp, an' if that don't bring that big Injin a-kiting from the tall timber, I'm Dutch."

She was not, however, to be moved, and after an embarrassed pause Flynn said, hesitatingly: "Thim cities, now, is mighty ixpinsive. A lone girl without money—ye'll let me—"

Digging a shabby bill-book from the bottom depths of his overalls, he precipitated a second kindly quarrel. Glaring at it, Glaves snorted, "When she knows she kin draw on me for the vally of my last head of stock down to the dog!"

Having means for some months, this storm was more easily laid than that which burst when Flynn offered to drive her in to Lone Tree.

"An' her living with me?" Glaves stormed.

"'Tis meself that knowed her longest," Flynn argued.

"Humph!" Glaves sneered—"three days. Thursday she stopped at your house coming out from Lone Tree. Sunday I saw her at meeting—went a-purpose an' never tended sence. No, she goes with me."

"Anyway, I knowed her longest," Flynn persisted. "But 'tis herself shall say. Which shall it be, ma'am?"

"Both," she laughed; and so, with a grizzled champion on either hand, she rattled southward the following day.

By one of those strange coincidences of ironical fate, this, the day of her departure, occurred on the third anniversary of her first drive out with Carter, and all things, season, sight, sound, conspired to vividly recall that memorable occasion. Rank growths in uncut sloughs bowed under warm winds that freighted a distant metallic rattle of many mowers; beyond the settlements the Park Lands stretched to the Assiniboin with only the chimneys of the burned Cree village to break their spangled undulations. As before, they came suddenly upon the valley, rugged, riven, with its bald, buttressing headlands, timbered ravines; the river, writhing in giant convolutions along the level bottoms. As before, they dropped with jolts, jerks, skidding of wheels to the ford that now tuned its hoarse voice to a melancholy dirge in harmony with her mood; and from the door of the log mission Father Francis bowed his silver head in courtly farewell.

After the valley came the "Dry Lands," the tawny plains, barren of trees, cabin, or farmstead; finally Lone Tree impinged in that huge monochrome, its grain-sheds reminding her, as before, of red Noah's arks on a yellow carpet. To her the hour of departure restored the fresh, clear vision of the stranger. The town appeared as on that first occasion—its one scanty street of clapboard hotels and stores with false fronts fencing the railway tracks that came spinning out of the western horizon to flash on over the east; the wise ox-teams rolling along the street; the squaws with ragged ponies hitched in big-wheeled Red River carts; the cows pasturing amid tomato-cans that strewed vacant lots; the loafers, omnipresent riffraff of the small frontier, holding down nail-kegs and cracker-boxes under store verandas.

It was a trying drive. Every turn of the trail brought its reminiscences; mud chimneys, the Indian graveyard, a lone coyote, recalled the beginnings of her love, and now that she was leaving she vividly realized how she had grown to this land of white silences, grave winds, vast, sunwashed spaces. But if she had need of the heavy veil that she pinned on that morning, that marvellous feminine restraint enabled her to turn a composed face to the doctor and Jenny, who came to the station to see her off.

As she passed up street, the riffraff exchanged nods and winks, but Lone Tree furnished still other champions. The store-keeper, he who had loaded Carter's buck-board with jams and jellies, came hurrying across the tracks with good wishes and protestations.

"Shinn, MacCloud, Cummings—the hull gang—go off my books," he swore to Glaves. "Not another cent's credit to keep 'em from starving."

"They can rot in their beds for me," the doctor added. "I strike Silver Creek from my practice." And though the train was even then whistling for the station, Hooper, the agent, stole time for friendly greetings.

If roughly expressed, their sympathy was at least genuine; it eased the parting so that she was able to lean out and give them a last smile as the train rolled by the water-tank with long, easy clickings, carrying her away beyond their tough pale. Good enough as a farewell, it was not, however, a success as a smile, and the woe behind its wanness formed the subject of an indignant caucus that convened as soon as Jenny left the platform.

"I can't figure out jes' what Carter means," the storekeeper fretfully exclaimed. "Granted that she throwed him that onct—the charivari?—that business at the revival? If it had been my wife, I'd been smelling round for—"

"Blood!" the agent interjected; and though he had intended "trouble," the store-keeper accepted the amendment.

"What's the man looking for?" the doctor roared. "She has beauty, amiability, intelligence, almost every quality that a man can desire in a wife, yet he

goes off in a pout because she falls short of the angels. He's a damned fool. He ought to be—"

"Aisy, aisy wid ye." Flynn stemmed the tide of wrath. "'Tis no throuble at all to condimn whin a purty girl's at t'other ind of the argymint. She's sweet, an' I'll break the face av the man as says she isn't good. But—give the man toime. Let be till we know that he's heard av the rhuctions. Thin, if he does nothing—"

"Well," the doctor interrupted, "he'll hear, all right—from me, this very night."

"Me, too," the store-keeper added.

"An' don't forget to give him partickler h—l!" the agent called after as they strolled away.

Nor did they. Dipping his pen in scorn, the doctor opened his epistle with a timely question as to the exact number and kinds of fool that Carter considered himself, and finished with a spirit that transcended even Glaves's difficult requirements. Equally thorough in his beginnings, a rush of business prevented the store-keeper from making an end that evening; but his default had its advantages in that he was thus enabled to deliver the remainder, *viva voce*, to Carter himself, when he stepped off the train next morning. Served hot, with good frontier adjectives sizzling among the nouns and articles, his opinion gained the admiring attention of Hooper, the agent, who stood ready to offer advice and assistance.

For his part, Carter listened quietly until the storekeeper paused for breath. Then he turned to the agent. "If you'd like five minutes with my character and attainments, don't be bashful! I've got it coming. After that please oblige with a little information on this charivari? I only heard yesterday morning of that revival through Bender's coming into camp."

As he listened, his natural sternness deepened to dark austerity, then fluxed in sad pity as the store-keeper told of Helen's departure. Murmuring "Poor thing!—poor little thing!" he asked for her address.

His face fell when the store-keeper answered: "You'll have to go to Glaves for that. The doc' might have it, but him an' Miss Jenny went north this morning to settle up her father's affairs." Noting Carter's disappointment, he kindly added: "You kin drive my sorrels. They're a third faster than the livery teams. On'y, remember they're fresh off the grass."

"I'll *try* not to misuse them," Carter answered, brightening, a remark that plentifully illustrates his impatient feeling.

Agent and store-keeper helped him hitch; and as he headed the sorrels out on the Silver Creek trail—the trail that for him, as for Helen, was one long heartache—the agent drew a deduction from his sombre sternness.

"I heard that MacCloud an' Cummings were back. Je-hosh-a-phat! There'll

be something doing if they cross his track."

Stepping out of his stable, after feeding the noon oats next day, Glaves "lifted up his eyes," in biblical phrase, and saw Carter "a long way off." A hot morning at the hay, and the loss of two sections of his mower-sickle by impact with a willow snag, did not tend to alleviate his natural crustiness. As he recognized the tall figure behind the sorrels, the hoar of his fifty winters seemed to settle in the lines of his weathered visage; his eye took the steely sparkle of river ice; his nod, when Carter reined in opposite, was curt as his answer.

"Your wife's address? Yes, I know it."

Forewarned by the store-keeper of the old man's bitterness, Carter was not surprised. "Meaning that you won't give it to me?"

"Not till I know as she wants you to have it."

Tone and manner were superlatively irritating, but the man had taken blood on his soul in Helen's defence, and Carter spoke quietly. "Don't you allow that she's a right to decide for herself?"

"Now, ain't that exac'ly what I said?"

It was not, but contradiction would merely inflame his obstinacy. At a loss how to proceed, Carter switched the heads, one by one, from a patch of tall brown pig-weeds, using his left hand, for the right was roughly tied up in his handkerchief. On his part Glaves looked steadily past him.

It was a beautiful day—sensuous, soft, one of the golden days when warm winds flirt among rustling grasses breathing the incense of smiling flowers. Heat hung in quivering waves along the horizon like an emanation from the hot, prolific earth over whose bosom birds, bumblebees, the little beasts of the prairies, came and went on errands of love and business with songs and twitterings. And there, in the midst of this joy of life, the grim old man bent frowning brows on Carter, who was lost in bitter meditation.

He was laboring under an unhappy sense of error, for his contumacy, determined absence, was not altogether a product of hurt pride. As he himself had dissolved their relations, it was Helen's privilege to renew them, and he had waited, yearning for her word. But now that he was dragged under the harrows of remorse, in an agony of pity for her, he stood before Glaves as in the presence of Nemesis, convicted of a huge mistake.

The initiative, after all, had lain with him. If he had owned to his fault, had apologized for his summary desertion, she could have been trusted to do the rest. Now he doubted that he was too late, for it was but reasonable to suppose that the trustee's determined opposition had origin with her. He squared his big shoulders to this burden of his own packing.

"Will you forward a letter?"

Frowning, Glaves answered without looking at him, "You kin leave your address."'

"But you will forward it?"

"If she wants it."

Carter flushed, but checked a sharp answer. "You ain't extending too much grace to a sinner."

"Any less than you extended her? What d' you expect of me that saw her name dragged in the mud, herself insulted—that took a life to save her body from violence? G—d d— you!" His pent-up feelings exploded, and for three minutes thereafter hot speech bubbled like vitriol through his clinched teeth in scathing denunciation of Carter's remissness.

"Part of what you say being true, we'll pass the rest," the latter said, when the trustee had drained his phials of wrath. "Now—without conceding your right to withhold her address—will you forward some money?"

Glaves stared. He had expected a blow, a violent quarrel, at least; nay, had lusted for it. But he was too much of a man himself to mistake a just imperturbability for fear, while the mention of money checked his anger by switching his ideas. Jealous for her honor, he looked his suspicion. "Whose money?" But if accent and tone declared against the acceptance of favors, he took the proffered greenbacks after Carter explained that they covered her share of the cattle he and Morrill had owned in common—took them, that is, with a proviso.

"Let me see," he mused, counting five of ten bills of one-hundred-dollar denomination. "You'd forty head of stock when Morrill died. Five hundred covers her share. Take these back." And to further argument he sternly answered, "I don't allow that she's looking for any presents from you."

"No, I don't allow that she is."

Sadness of look and tone caused Glaves to glance up quickly, but he did not relax in his grimness up to the moment that, having left his address, Carter drove away. Then a shade of doubt crept into his steel eyes. "If it had been myself—" he muttered; then as Helen's parting smile recurred in memory, he added: "No, damn him! Let him suffer!" But this was not the end. Pausing in his doorway as he went in to dinner, he saw the buckboard, small as a fly, crawl over a distant knoll, and by some association of ideas remembered Carter's hand and wondered why it was bandaged. And when he learned from Poole and Danvers, who called round for their mail that evening, his first small doubt was raised almost to the dimension of regret.

Since the charivari, Glaves's opinion of the remittance-man—as a fighting animal, at least—had risen above zero, and he lent first an indulgent, then a rapt ear to the boys' story. As he himself had prophesied, the piracy of the five-acre

swamp brought Shinn out from his hiding, but the latter's evil fate arranged matters so that as he descended upon the remittance buccaneers from one end of the swamp, Carter appeared on the Lone Tree trail which cat-a-cornered the other. The result bubbled forth from the mouth of first one boy, then the other, in eager interruptions.

"Shade of my granny!" Danvers swore. "You never saw such a fight!"

"No preliminaries," Poole declared. "Carter just leaped from his buggy and went for him like a cat after a mouse."

"And little good it did him. He might have been a gopher in the paws of a grizzly."

"Lay like a dead man for a long half-hour—"

"And looked like a snake that had mixed with a streak of lightning."

"Blind, battered, bruised, we carried him home on his shield—that is, on our hay-rake—"

"And that poor squalid wife of his looked rather disgusted when she found that he wasn't dead."

While they thus poured the tale of Shinn's discomfiture into Glaves's thirsty ears, Carter rattled steadily on towards Lone Tree. Passing Flynn's, he had been tempted to put in, but remembered that the Irishman would be out at the hay, and so ran on and by the one person who could have furnished an approximation of Helen's address. For she had merely promised to write Jenny as soon as she was settled, as he had learned when he met the doctor, back-trailing alone, early that morning.

"But you'll surely find her at one of the hotels!" the agent called to him, on the platform of the freight-train that carried him away at midnight.

But Helen had gone straight to the trustee's sister. And having wasted two days scanning hotel registers, wandering the streets, he concluded that perhaps she had changed her mind and gone straight through to her friends back East. Charging his friends and financial backers to keep on with the search, however, he returned to his labors in that unenviable condition of mind which romanticist writers describe as "broken-hearted."

In a city of twenty thousand it ought not to be so very difficult to locate a young lady whose style and beauty drew the eyes of the street. But if the search failed, the cause inhered in other reasons than lack of diligence—in a reason that largely accounted for Glaves's reluctance to give her address. Sick at heart, hopeless for the future, she had sunk her surname with the bitter past; resumed her maiden name while keeping the married title. Even with Glaves's sister, a big,

good-natured woman, she passed as a widow.

XXV
THE SUNKEN GRADE

The "Ragged Lands!" Seamed, rugged, broken, gloomy with dark spruce, sterile as a barren woman, they cumber the earth from Lake Nipissing a thousand miles westward to the edge of the prairies, and in all their weary length no stretch of meadow-land occurs. Pock-marked with sloughs, muskegs, black morasses, peppered with sand-hills that rise suddenly like eruptive boils in the sparse beard of its dwarf-growths, it is a wicked country, and was held accursed by trappers and Jesuit fathers who, of old, *portaged* or paddled upon its borders. Yet in construction days men poured into its dark environs; one may still see Carter's camps, moss-grown, roofless, rotting by the right of way, for his line split a fifty-mile breadth from the western verge of that mighty forest.

On the day after Carter's return from Winnipeg the westering sun gilded a long scar, brown with the sere of felled trees, that shore thirty miles of forest. Ten more miles and this, his right of way, would debouch on the Park Lands, a day's drive southward from Silver Creek; at its other end fifty miles of prairie grading would carry it down to the American border. Northerly, the cut was masked in rolling smoke of burning brush; but where, farther south, the spruce mantle had been torn from the bosom of mother earth, it gaped yellow as a gangrened wound. Over this earth-sore men and teams swarmed with the buzz and movement of flies, coming and going about a steam-digger that bit hungry mouthfuls from the bowels of a sand-hill and spat them, with hoarse coughing, upon a train of flat-cars. Beyond them a pile-driver sputtered nervously upon a lean trestle; and still farther south a track gang laid and spiked rails with furious energy, adding their quota of noise to the roar that combined with heat and dust to produce a miniature inferno.

Dipping still lower, the sun poked a golden finger down a thin survey-line that slit the forest at the head of the right of way, and touched into flame the yellow head of a young man who sat on a log near Carter. There slim poplar-brake enclosed a mossy dell, into which the frenzy of work and noise came faintly as the hum of a passing bee. It was, indeed, so cool and pleasant that the surveyor shrugged unwillingly when the advancing shadows emphasized Carter's remark

that it was "time to be moving."

"What a demon of unrest!" he laughed. "Can't keep still for five minutes."

His mock disgust drew Carter's smile. "That's all very well—for you. When your transit is cased, you're done. I have a few hundred men to look after."

"Oh, confound them!" the other said. "I'll never make a philosopher of you." And as, shouldering his transit, he followed, he commented humorously on Carter's tiresome energy, affirming that he was reminded of a steam-engine that had slipped its governors. "Couldn't be more grovellingly industrious if you were qualifying for a headline on a child's copy-book. Early to bed, early to rise, makes your boss healthy, wealthy, and wise," he misquoted. And as, a few minutes later, they came out upon wood-choppers who were driving the right of way into the forest, he grimaced, "More misguided zeal."

For all his sarcasm, his eyes betrayed his appreciation, and as, pausing, they looked on, his face lit up with professional pride. Following the choppers, sawyers were cutting sizable timber into logs, piling small trees with the brush; behind them a stumping outfit practised rough dentistry upon the road-bed. All were putting in the last "licks" of a good day's work; the air whistled of falling trees, hummed to the ringing saws; the woods echoed laughter, shouts, cheery curses.

"Good boys," Carter murmured. "Regular whales. Jest eat it up, don't they?"

"Peculiar idiosyncrasy." The surveyor resumed his chaffing. "They ought to have eased up while you were away. Can't account for it, unless—yes, it's beans! Beans, sir! You feed them beans and they work or—die. Query: What effect would a bean diet have on a philosopher? Ugh! I must avoid them."

"No"—Carter indicated a figure, gigantic in the loom of the smoke, "it's not beans; it's Bender. Without him we'd have plenty converts to your theory."

"And now tired nature pities them."

In their coincidence, the last red ray might have signalled Bender's shrill whistle, or *vice versa*. Anyway, sudden silence fell like a mantle over the clearing. While choppers and sawyers cached tools under brush away from rusting dews, teamsters dropped bows and yokes, and all followed the patient ox-teams down the right of way.

"Joking aside," the surveyor said, as they fell in behind, "what has life for these fellows? Ill-fed, worse clothed, only an occasional spree breaks the monotony of grinding toil."

Carter's nod was non-committal. "They work hard—yes, but then work is only terrible to the young and shiftless; your grown man loves it."

"If congenial."

"Generally is. You see, there's always something that a fellow thinks he can do a bit better than any one else—Bill, there, planes his stumps; Ole, that big

Swede, is chain lightning on a cant-hook; Michigan Red rides a log down a rapid like a ballet-dancer, and has Jehu beat out on the reins; Big Hans lifts more'n any other man in camp. Summing it, from whip-cracking to stable-cleaning every job has its professor, who gets a heap of fun out of proving his title. Looking a bit closer, these chaps get more sunshine, fresh air, and sleep than your city workers, and if the grub is rough they ain't bothered none with indigestion. Hans finds a flavor in his beans that your big financial gun doesn't get out of his canvas-back. As for amusement, the regular lumber-jack does blow a year's salary on a week's bust, as you say; but most of these are farmers, some of 'em neighbors of mine. If they're rushed in summer they have time to burn in winter, and what of socials, dances, picnics, they strike a fair balance with pleasure."

"But what is ahead of them?"

Carter shrugged. "Death, of course; in the mean time, hard work, harder living, a family, and a mortgage to keep 'em from oversleep. But they'll breathe clean and live clean, work in the sun and outlive two generations of city people. Barring accidents, they'll average fourscore years, and so, when the last word is said, I don't know but that happiness lies down instead of up the ladder."

The surveyor curiously studied his thoughtful face. "You are climbing?"

But Carter was equal to the contradiction. "We was talking of averages—"

"*Were*," the other interrupted.

Grimacing, Carter repeated: "*Were* talking of averages. The exception gets his fun climbing, and don't find out how much of a fool he is till he looks down from the top."

"*Doesn't*," the other put in, and Carter resaid the word.

The corrections sprang from a compact that was now as old as their acquaintance. A graduate in engineering, the young fellow was widely read and cultured far beyond the needs of his profession, and as they talked, smoking, in their office-tent of evenings, his allusions to and illustrations from the realms of science, literature, art had given Carter glimpses of Helen's world, a universe in which touch, taste, smell, sight, and other things gave place to feeling, memory, perception. And so he had been stimulated to conscious attempts at improvement.

"I feel like a two-year-old!" he had exclaimed one evening early in their acquaintance. "I 'd like to know more of that. D' you suppose I could get that book in town? An' say, if you catch me straddling the traces—manners, speech, an' so forth—I wish you'd lam me one. Of course I'm pretty set, but if I could just tone down a bit on a few of the big things, the little ones might slip by unnoticed."

In the nature of things a construction-camp is bound to suffer a chronic drouth of news, and in default of other subjects Carter's marital troubles had received exhaustive and analytical treatment at the hands of the Silver Creek men

and others. Filtering through many strata, enough of the gossip had reached the surveyor to inform him of the motive under this rough appeal, and he readily consented. So, in their talks thereafter, he had trimmed out the wilder growths of Carter's speech, giving rule and reason, for, as he laughingly assured him, his big pupil had an uncanny appetite for underlying law.

"Now 'tain't reasonable to suppose that you have to learn all the individual cases," he would say, when the surveyor tripped him on some expression; "what's the law of it?" And he would offer humorous opinions on the eccentricities of the tongue. "The darn language seems to have grown from wild seed, an' though Lindley Murray—ain't that his name?—lopped a bit here an' pruned a bit there, he couldn't straighten the knarls and twists in the trunks. An' I don't know but that it's as well that way Leave them grammarians alone, an' they'd clip an' trim the language till it was tame as the cypress hedges that my old aunt uster shape into crowing roosters, gillypots, an' pilaster pillars at home back East." In saying which he touched a profound etymological truth that is altogether ignored by the scientific inventors of universal languages.

One who had not seen him for some months—Helen, for instance—could not have failed, this evening, to notice how his faithful delving in that wild orchard had begun to bring forth fruit in his speech. Evincing fewer "aint's," it had more "ings," and even attained, on occasion, to correct usage in "number" of verbs. Equally forcible, as full of curt figures, its epigrammatic quality had gained rather than lost by better expression.

The silence which had fallen between them endured till they came in sight of the camp, a string of tents and log-cabins under the eaves of the forest. Then the surveyor pointed out a girl who was watching the tired stream from the door of the nearest tent.

"Why, there's Dorothy! She threatened to make the chief bring her down, but I didn't think she'd make it. Come along and I'll introduce you."

As, however, he mended his pace, Carter fell behind, and the sadness which had become habitual to his face deepened. He had heard the young fellow speak of this girl, his *fiancée*; and though in color and appearance she was the opposite of Helen, the swish of her skirts as she came to meet them, suggestion of perfume, the hundred elusive delicacies that make up a well-bred girl's personality, recalled his wife and oppressed him with a vivid sense of loss.

Her voice, rich and low in its tones as Helen's, strengthened the impression. "Dad said 'No,'" she laughed, after the introduction. "But—"

"Wilful woman will have her way," a voice declared from the interior of the tent; then the chief engineer, a hale man of fifty, appeared in the doorway. "Mosquitoes, alkali water, nothing would scare her." He was going on with inquiries of the health of a bridge that had developed rheumatic tendencies in its

feet, when she laughingly interrupted:

"Come, dad, no business till after supper. I have already scraped acquaintance with the cook, and he says we are to come at once. So run along, little boys, and get ready."

"Wash our dirty faces, to put it plainly," the surveyor echoed her happy laugh. "Be it known unto you, fair lady, that ablutions are held to be effeminate, unnecessary, if not immoral, in construction work. However, in view of your hypersensitiveness, we will do violence to our inclinations. Come on, Carter—we for the tub."

But from a dozen yards she called him back. "This is the man you wrote me of? I knew him at once. What a splendid fellow!"

"Gorgeous!" he returned her whisper. "His wife must be a queer sort."

"Not necessarily." She added, with thoughtful intuition: "The possibilities are so many. Your friend is handsome and has a good face, but we girls are more complex than our mothers. While they were satisfied with good temper and good provision, we demand sympathy of taste and habit; that we touch without friction at a hundred points of contact. Tall as Mr. Carter is, he may fall short of such a standard."

Bending, her lover gazed admiringly into her earnest eyes. "Such a little wisehead! And did I pass in this difficult examination?"

Carter's back was turned, the cook-house door had just closed on the last teamster, her father had gone back to his calculations, so her answer was sweet as satisfactory.

When, half an hour later, the four entered the cook-house, two cookees were laying the table under one eagle eye of the cook, the other being on a roast that he was liberally basting. "Hain't you got no nose?" he answered Carter's question; but he smiled as, sniffing its rich odor, Dorothy said: "It's venison! And I'm so hungry!"

"Sure!" he corroborated. "Cree hunter brought in a quarter of moose this afternoon."

Pleased with her discernment, he seated her at the head of a table which he himself had scoured with sand to a snowy whiteness while the cookees were grinding a summer's tarnish from iron knives and spoons. Her tin plate reflected a smile that he would willingly have paid for in turkey and truffles, but lacking these, he served baked potatoes with the venison, hot biscuit, cake a hand's-breadth thick, and with a flourish set the crowning delicacy of camp life, a can of condensed cream, beside her tin coffee-cup. Then he packed the cookees outside to peel the morrow's potatoes that her appetite might not suffer from their admiring glances, an act which they classified as tyranny and ascribed to evil motives.

"She's a right smart gal," he added, after imparting a few privacies anent their birth and breeding from the door-step. "None a' your picking sort. Knows good cooking when she sees it, she does." Then he left them to digest a last piece of information that the evolution of their ancestors had been arrested in a low and bestial stage.

That supper figured as an epoch in Carter's life, because it marked a definite conscious change in his feeling towards his wife. With all men thought is more or less chaotic. Filtering slowly from feeling under pressure of experience, it remains fluid, turgid, until some specific act—it may be of a very ordinary nature—clears and precipitates it into the moulds of fixed opinion. So, though material of a sounder, more reasonable judgment of Helen had been gathering in his mind these months, injured pride had held it in abeyance—in suspension, as it were—until now that recent disappointment had left him peculiarly susceptible to impression, a resolvent was added; that occurred which precipitated his thought.

It took form in Michigan Red, who entered with another teamster and sat down at the opposite table. The task that delayed them had sharpened appetite, and their attack on the food the cook set before them was positively wolfish. Using fingers as much or more than forks, they shovelled greasy beans into their mouths with knives, as stokers feed a furnace; and as they bolted masses of pork, washed whole biscuits down with gulps of coffee, Carter's glance wandered between them and the delicate girl at his side. Here, indeed, was one of the "points of contact" of her intuitive wisdom. Once before he had seen, realized it. But whereas he had thrust the thought away the night that he watched Michigan Red eat in the lumber-camp, he now gave it free admittance, mentally writhed as he realized how this and other gaucheries must have ground on Helen's sensitive mental surfaces. Fascinated by their gluttony, he watched until dulled eyes and heavy, stertorous breathing signalled repletion and the close of their meal.

On her part, Dorothy was quietly observing him. Given such knowledge as the Silver Creek teamsters had sown through the camp, it would have been easy for her to guess the rest—if his conduct had borne out her surmise. But he had learned so much and so quickly under the stings of injured pride that observation failed to reveal any wide departures from the conventional. She had to give it up—for the present.

"What a strange man!"

Her whisper dissipated his painful reflections, and, looking up, he saw that, after lighting his pipe with a coal from the stove, Michigan Red was surveying them with cool effrontery through the tobacco smoke. His fiery beard split in a sneer as Carter asked if he had finished supper. But he did not take the hint nor move when ordered to call Bender.

"*Mister* Bender"—he spat at the title—"is down at the grading-camp."

"I said for you to call him." Carter's tone, in its very gentleness, caused the girl to look quickly so she caught his queer expression. Compounded of curiosity, interest, expectation, his glance seemed to flicker above, below, around the red teamster, to enfold, wrap him with its subtle questioning. Impressed more than she could have been by threat or command, she waited—she knew not for what—oppressed by the loom of imminent danger.

But it was not in the teamster's book to disobey—just then. Lingering to pick another coal, he sauntered down the room under flow of that curious, flickering glance, and closed the door behind him with a bang. Sharp as the crack of a gun, Dorothy half expected to see smoke curling up to the massive roof-logs. But though her father and lover looked their surprise, Carter resumed his eating, and there was no comment until he excused himself a few minutes later.

Tugging his gray beard, the chief engineer then turned to the surveyor. "Why doesn't he fire that fellow?"

Shrugging, the young fellow passed the question up to the cook. "You've known them longest."

Thus tapped, the cook turned on a flow of information, appending his own theory of Carter's patience to a short and unflattering history of Michigan Red. "You see, Red thought he was the better man from the beginning, an' it was just up to the boss to give him fair chance to prove it. As for him, he likes the excitement. You've seen a cat play with a mouse? Well—an' when the cat does jump—"

"Good-bye mouse," the surveyor finished.

The cook's significant nod filled Dorothy with astonishment. From the social heights upon which the accident of birth had placed her, she had looked down upon the laboring-classes, deeming them rude, simple, unsophisticated. Yet here she found complex moods, a vendetta conducted with Machiavellian subtlety, a drastic code that compelled a man to cherish his enemy till he had had opportunity to strike.

The knowledge helped her to a conclusion which she stated as they walked back to her father's tent. "Such pride! I understand now why he left *her*. Just fancy his keeping on that man?"

"Damned nonsense, I call it," her father growled. "That fellow will make trouble for him yet."

The prediction amounted to prophecy in view of a conversation then proceeding in the bunk-house. As Michigan's table-mate had fully reported the scene at supper, the teamsters were ready with a fire of chaff when he stumbled over the dark threshold after delivering Carter's message.

"Been dinin' in fash'n'ble sassiety, Red?" a man questioned.

"Nope!" another laughed. "Voylent colors ain't considered tasty any more, so the boss fired him out 'cause his hair turned the chief's gal sick."

Hoarse chuckling accompanied the teamster's answering profanity, but when, after roundly cursing themselves, Carter, the surveyor, chief engineer, he began on Dorothy, laughter ceased and Big Hans called a stop.

"That's right." A voice seconded Hans's objection. "We ain't stuck on the boss any more'n you are, Red; but this gal isn't no kin of his'n. Leave her alone."

"Sure!" the first man chimed in. "An' if he's feeling his oats jes' now, he'll be hit the harder when we spring our deadfall. Did you sound the graders to-day? Will they—"

"Shet up!" Michigan hissed. "That big mouth o' yourn spits clean across the camp to the office." And thereafter the conversation continued in sinister whispers that soon merged in heavy snoring. Silence and darkness wrapped the camp.

Awaking while it was still dark, the camp rubbed sleepy eyes and looked out, shivering, on smouldering smudges. Outside, the air whined of mosquitoes. At the long hay-racks horses snorted and pawed frantically under the winged torture; patient oxen uttered mained lowings. Growling and grumbling, the camp distributed itself—teamsters to feed and rebuild smudges, choppers and sawyers to the grindstone and filing-benches. It was a cold, dank world. Pessimism prevailed to the extent that a man needed to walk straitly, minding his own business, if he would avoid quarrel. But optimism came with dawn—teamsters hissed cheerfully over their currying, saw-filers and grinders indulged in snatches of song—reaching a climax with the breakfast-call. When, half an hour later, Dorothy appeared in the cook-house doorway, the camp had spilled its freight of men and teams into the forest.

Warned by the shadow, the cook looked up and saw her in Stetson hat, short skirt, high-laced shoes, a sunlit vision with the freshness of the morning upon its cheeks. "God bless you! Come right in," he exclaimed. "Your daddy an' Mr. Hart hev' gone down line. Devil's Muskeg got hungry las' night an' swallered ten thousand yards of gradin'."

As yet she knew nothing of those treacherous sinks that gulp grades, trestles, and the reputations of their builders as a frog swallows flies, and he went on, answering her puzzled look: "Morass, you know, swamp with quicksand foundation that goes clean down to China. Nope, 'tain't Mr. Carter's loss. He ain't such a fool as to go an' load a muskeg down with clay and rock. An Easterner had it on a sub-contract, an' though Mr. Carter warned him, he reckoned he could make it bear a grade on brush hurdles. Crowed like a Shanghai rooster because

it carried trains for a week.

"Oh, I don't know," he commented upon her pity for the luckless contractor. "You kain't do nothin' with them Easterners. He was warned. Besides," he vengefully added, "he shedn't ha' come crowing over us. More coffee, miss?"

Leaving the cook-house, a shadow fell between her and the sun, and Carter gave her good-morning. "Breaks the poor devil," he supplemented the cook's information, "and bothers us. Cuts off our communications. We shall have to move the outfits back to prairie grading till they are re-established. I'm going down there—now, if you'd like a hand-car ride?"

Would she? In five minutes she was speeding along under urge of ten strong arms, over high trestles which gave her sudden livid gleams of water far below, through yellow cuts, across hollow-sounding bridges, always between serried ranks of sombre spruce. Sometimes the car rolled in between long lines of men who were tamping gravel under the ties. Rough fellows at the best, they had herded for months in straw and dirt, seeing nothing daintier than their unlovely selves, and as they were not the kind that mortifies the flesh, the girl was much embarrassed by the fire of eyes. Apart from that, she hugely enjoyed the ride. With feet almost touching the road-bed, she got all there was of the motion, besides most of the wind that blew her hair into a dark cloud and set wild roses blooming in her cheeks.

She gained, too, a new view-point of Carter, who chatted gayly, pointing, explaining, as though they were merely out for pleasure and another had not been just added to the heavy cares that burdened his broad shoulders. She learned more of the life, its hardship, comedy, tragedy, in half an hour's conversation, than she could have obtained for herself in a year's experience.

These different elements sometimes mixed—as when he indicated a blackened excavation. "See that? A man was sitting on the stump that was blasted out there. Reckon he got sort of tired of the world," he replied to her horrified question, "and wanted a good start for the next." Then, easily philosophical, quietly discursive, he wandered along, touching the suicide's motives. There had been different theories—drink, religion, a girl—but he himself inclined to aggravated unsociability. The sombre forest, with its immensity of sad, environing space, had translated mere moroseness into confirmed hypochondria. He had so bored the stumping outfit, to which he belonged, with pessimistic remarks on things in general that, in self-defence, they threw something at him whenever he opened his mouth; and so, bottled up, his gloom accumulated until, in an unusually dismal moment, he placed a full box of dynamite under a stump and sat down to await results.

"Why didn't some one pull him off?" she cried.

His answer was pregnant. "Short fuse. Anyway, the boys didn't feel any

call to mix in his experiments—especially as he swore a blue streak at them till the stump lifted."

"Horrible!" she breathed.

"Just what they said." He solemnly misunderstood her. "They never heard such language. 'Twas dreadfully out of place at a funeral."

"Oh—I didn't mean that!" Then, considering his serious gravity, "Was—was there—"

"Pretty clean." He relieved her of the remainder of the question. "Mostly translated."

Incredulous, she glanced from him to his men and received grisly confirmation, for one thrust out a grimy finger to show a horseshoe ring. "I picked it up on the track, miss, forty rod from the—obseq'ses. Didn't allow he'd want it again."

Shuddering, she turned back to Carter, but before she could make further comment the car rolled from a cut out on the edge of the Devil's Muskeg.

She thought him cold-blooded until, that evening, she learned from her friend, the cook, that he had been caught on the edge of the blast as he rushed to save the man and had been thrown a hundred feet. A little disappointed by his apparent callousness, she joined her father and lover, who, with the contractor, stood looking out over the muskeg. Sterile, flat, white with alkali save where black slime oozed from the sunken grade, it stretched a long mile on either side of the right of way. Around its edges skeleton trees thrust blanched limbs upward through the mud, and beyond this charnel forest loomed the omnipresent spruce. In spring-time its quaking depths would have opened under a fox's light padding, but the summer's sun had dried the surface until it carried a team—which fact had lured the contractor to his financial doom. A fat, gross man, he stood mopping his brow and wildly gesticulating towards the half-mile of rails that, with their ties, lay like the backbone of some primeval lizard along the mud, calling heaven and the chief engineer to witness that this calamity was beyond the prevision of man.

"'Jedgment of God,' it's termed in government contrac's," he exclaimed to the chief, who, however, shrugged at such blackening of Providence.

"Well, Mr. Buckle," he answered, as Carter came up, "the judgment was delivered against you, not us."

"Yes, yes!" the man grovellingly assented. "I know—mine's the loss. But you gentlemen orter give me a chance to make it up building round this cursed mud-hole?"

"Round what?"

He turned scowlingly upon Carter. "This mud-hole, I said." With a greasy sneer, he added: "But mebbe you kin build across it?"

"I can."

"What?" he screamed his angry surprise. "Why, hell! Wasn't it you that tol' me it wouldn't carry a grade?"

"I said it wouldn't carry yours."

His quiet assurance gave the contractor pause, while engineer and surveyor looked their surprise. "Going to drive piles down to China?" The contractor grew hysterically sarcastic. "You'll need a permit from Li Hung Chang. What do you know about grades, anyway? I was building this railroad while you was wearing long clothes."

"Likely." Carter's easy drawl set the others a-grin and caused Dorothy to hide her smile in her handkerchief. "But you ain't out of yours yet. A yearling baby wouldn't try to stack rock on top of mud. But that isn't the question. D' you allow to finish the contract?"

"Think I'm a fool?" the man rasped.

"'Tain't always polite to state one's thoughts. But—do you?" And when the other tendered a surly negative, he turned to the engineer. "You hear, sir? And now I file my bid."

The chief, however, looked his doubt. As yet engineering science offered no solution for the muskeg problem, and this was not the first grade he had seen sacrificed to a theory. "Are you serious?"

"As a Methodist sermon," Carter answered his grave question. Then, drawing him aside, he pulled a paper from his pocket—an estimate for the work. It was dated two weeks back, prevision that caused the chief to grimly remark: "Pretty much like measuring a living man for his coffin, wasn't it? But look here, Carter! I'd hate to see you go broke on this hole. I doubt—and your figure is far too low. What's your plan?"

"I'm going to make a sawdust fill with waste from the Portage Mills."

Whistling, the chief looked his admiration, then grinned, the idea was so ludicrous in its simplicity. For, all said, the problem resolved itself into terms of specific gravity—iron sinks and wood floats in water; and the muskeg which swallowed clay would easily carry a sawdust bank. Moreover, the idea was thoroughly practicable. Situated five miles from Winnipeg, the Portage Mills were the largest in the province and their owners would willingly part with the refuse that cumbered their yards.

"You've got it!" he cried, slapping his thigh.

"That's not all. If old Brass Bowels—" Noticing that the contractor was looking their way, he finished in a whisper, the significance of which caused the chief's grizzled brows to rise till lost in the roots of his hair.

"You'll break camp—?" he questioned.

"To-morrow. Build a spur into the mills, then start prairie grading at the

American line and run north. Ought to make a junction about the time the sink is filled."

And this he did. The few miles of spur-track being quickly built, a yellow tide of sawdust was soon flowing out to the Devil's Muskeg, where Bender's wood gang directed its flow. At first there was great argument about this new material, some holding that one might as well try to build a road-bed with feathers. But it proved itself. Tamping hard as clay, it had greater resilience, and soon the twisted track rose like a mained serpent from the slimy clutch of the devil. Yes, miles of flat-cars, boarded up till they loomed big as houses, moved between mill and slough through that summer, and no one dreamed of their slow procession having other significance up to the moment that Helen heard newsboys crying a special in the hot streets—

"Monopoly refuses new line a crossing. Section gangs tear up Carter's diamond."

XXVI
WINNIPEG

By that time Helen had shaken down to a life that was new as strange—though not without travail; shaking is always uncomfortable.

Coming in to the city, a natural nervousness—that indefinite apprehension which assails the stoutest under the frown of new adventures—had been accentuated by heart-sickness from her late experiences, and was justified by some to come. She viewed its distant spires very much as an outlaw might contemplate far-off hostile towers. Entering from the west, as she did, one sees taller buildings poke, one by one, from under the flat horizon. For the city sits by the Red River—smoothest, most treacherous of streams—in the midst of vast alluvial plains, its back to the "Ragged Lands," facing the setting sun. North, south, east, and west of it they stretch, these great flat plains. Vividly emerald in spring-time, June shoots their velvet with chameleon florescences that glow and blaze with the seasons, fix in universal gold, then fade to purest white. Dark, dirty, the city stands out on the soft snow-curtain like a sable blot on an ermine mantle. Withal it is a clean city, for if the black muck of its unpaved streets cakes laboring wagons and Red River carts to the hubs after spring thaws, the dirt is all underfoot. No manufactures foul the winds that sweep in from boreal seas with the garnered essences

of an empire of flowers.

Purely agricultural, then, in its functions, the bulk of its burgesses were, as might be expected, store-keepers, implement men, bankers, lawyers, land agents, all who serve or prey upon the farmer; for there, also, lurked the usurers, the twenty-per-cent. Shylocks, fat spiders whose strangling webs enmeshed every township from the Rockies to the Red. Spring, fall, or winter, grist failed not in their dark mills, which ground finer and faster than those of the gods. Scattering their evil seed on the dark days, it was their habit to reap in the sunshine, competing for the last straw with their fellows, the business men, in their single season of profit—Harvest. For in summer the city drowsed amid green wheat seas that curved with the degrees over the western world; it slept, nodding, till the wheat, its life-blood, came in huge arterial gushes to gorge its deflated veins.

Thus Helen found it—asleep under the midsummer sun. Walking to her destination, she met few people; after the hotel 'buses rattled by, the streets were deserted save for an occasional buck-board or slow ox-team chewing the peaceful cud at the wooden sidewalk. When, later, she walked those hot streets on that most wearisome of occupations, the search for an occupation, she became familiar with the city's more intimate topography—the huge concrete foundations, vacant, gaping as though at the folly which planned them and their superstructures, the aërial castles that blew up with the boom; the occasional brick blocks that raised hot red heads proudly above surrounding buildings, the river, with its treacherous peace; old Fort Garry, which she repeopled with governors, commissioners, factors, and trappers of the Hudson Bay Company.

Also she grew sensitive to its varied life, easily distinguishing between emigrants, who were injected by daily spurts into the streets, the city's veins, from the old-timers—remittance-men, in yellow cords and putties; trappers from Keewatin, Athabasca, the Great Slave Lake, in fringed moose-skins; plethoric English farmers, or gaunt Canadian settlers from the rich valley round-about; Indians of many tribes—Cree, Sioux, Ojibway; the heterogeneous mixture that yet lacked a drop of the Yankee or continental blood which would flow, ten years later, in a broad river over the American border. But this was after she had fallen into her place in the household of Glaves's big sister among a scattering of teachers, up for the Normal course, a brace of lawyers, three store-keepers, and a Scotch surgeon.

Just what or where that place was would be hard to say, seeing that it varied with the view-point of each lodger, nor remained the same in the opinion of any specific one. Thus did she shine, for one whole week, the particular star in the heaven of an English teacher, a mercurial lad of twenty; then having rejected his heart with a pecuniary attachment of thirty-five dollars per mensem, she fell like a shooting-star and became a mere receptacle for his succeeding passions,

which averaged three a month. His fellow-teachers swung on an opposite arc. Canadians, and mostly recruited from the country, the soil still clung to their heavy boots. The profession, its aims and objects, formed their staple of conversation. Deeply imbued with the sense of the central importance of pedagogy in the scheme of things, they wore an air of owlish wisdom that was incompatible with the contemplation of such sublunary things as girls. Having wives, it was not to be expected that the store-keepers could notice a young person whose attractions so far exceeded her known acquaintance, and though the surgeon, a young man prodigiously bony as to the leg and neck, really worshipped her from behind the far folds of his breakfast newspaper, thought transference still lay in the womb of future humbuggery and she catalogued him as injuriously cold.

From this conglomerate of humanity she gained one friend, the young wife of a lawyer who had lately come West. Prettily dark as Helen was delicately fair, each made a foil for the other, which necessary base for feminine friendships being established, their relations were further cemented by an equal loneliness, and made more interesting by the expectation of an event. As it was not yet fashionable to shoo the stork away from the roof-tree, behold the pair fussing and sewing certain small garments with much tucking, trimming, insertioning, regulating said processes by the needs of some future mystery dight "shortening"—all of which brought Helen mixed feelings. The young husband's part in said operations was particularly trying. Supposedly immersed in his paper of evenings, he would watch them over the tip with a delighted sagacity akin to the knowing look which a bull-dog bestows on a crawling kitten. At times, too, he would descend upon the work and lay wee undervests out on his big palm, tie ridiculously small caps over his shut fist, ask absurd questions, and generally display the manly ignorance so sweet to the wifely soul; while Helen sat, a silent spectator of their happiness. It is a question which the acquaintance brought her most, pain or pleasure.

The tale of the boarders would not be complete without mention of Jean Glaves, a buxom woman, fair of hair, whose strong, broad face seemed to incarnate the very spirit of motherhood. With her Helen's place was never in doubt. Opening her big heart, she took the lonely girl right in, and proved a veritable fount of energy in her disheartening search for work.

In this her first experience conformed to that usual with a working-girl—she shivered under icy stares, shrank from the rude rebuffs of busy men, and blushed under smiles of idle ones; sustained the inevitable insult at the hands of a rascally commission broker at the end of one day's employment. His quick, appraising glance, following a first refusal, would have warned a sophisticated business woman, but the innocence which betrayed Helen later proved her best protection. The horror in her eyes, childlike look of hurt surprise, set the dull

reds of shame in the fellow's cheeks, but she was out in the street with hat and jacket while he was still muttering his apology. Yet his grossness fell short of the vile circumspection of her next employer. A smug pillar of society and something in a church, caution would not permit him to stake reputation against possible pleasure on a single throw, yet she labored under no illusions as to the motive behind her second discharge.

"Oh, I can't bear it! I just can't try again!" she cried that night to Jean Glaves.

"You won't have to, dearie," the big woman comforted, and having tucked her comfortably upon her own lounge with a wet cloth upon her aching head, she went straight to the Scotch surgeon's room.

Her choice of confidant may have been due either to intuition or knowledge of what was going on behind the ramparts of the young man's breakfast paper. The event proved it wise, for his giraffe neck lengthened under his angry gulps, his bony hands and nodding head emphasized and attested Jean's scathing deliverence upon men in general. "The scoundrel!" he exclaimed, when she paused for lack of breath. "The scoundrel! I'd flog him mysel' but for the scandal. But see you he'll no' go unpunished. He's a bid in for the hospital supplies, and I'll be having a word with the head doctor." And thus, later, was the smug villain hit to the tune of some hundreds in his tenderest place, the pocket.

Not content with future revenge, the Scotchman's sympathy expressed itself in practical suggestion. "If ye'd think, Mistress Glaves"—he always accorded Jean the quaint title, and it fell gracefully from his stiff lips—"now if ye'd suppose the young leddy would like to try her hand at nursing, there's a vacancy in the hospital."

While he hesitated, Jean literally grabbed opportunity by the collar. "You come along with me."

Introduced a few seconds thereafter to man and subject, Helen exclaimed that she would love the work; nor were her thanks less sincere for being couched in stereotyped form. How *could* she thank him? Being sincere to the point of pain, after the fashion of his nation, the young man had almost answered that the obligation lay with him in that his studies behind the newspaper would be furthered and facilitated. He replied, instead, that the pay would be small, the work hard.

Not to be discouraged, she was thus launched upon what, in her condition, was the best of possible careers. For the mental suffering which, lacking an outlet, burns inwardly till naught is left of feeling but slag and cinders, becomes the strongest of motor forces when expended in service for others. Throwing herself body and soul into the new work, she forgot the suspicion, scandal that had lately embittered her days, and had such surcease of loneliness that in one month the

lines of pain disappeared from around her eyes, her drooping mouth drew again into the old firm tenderness.

Besides content, the month brought her other satisfactions. Owing to lack of accommodation at the hospital, she still slept at the boarding-house, and dropping into Jean Glaves's room for a chat one evening, she found her conversing with a girl of her own age. She would have retired but that Jean called her back. "Don't go! We were talking of you. This is Miss Dorothy Chester, who used to board with me. Miss Chester—Mrs. Morrill."

There was, of course, nothing in the names to convey the significance of the introduction to either. After that period of secret study which is covered by the feminine amenities, each decided that she liked the other. Helen gladly accepted Dorothy's invitation to call, and in this ordinary fashion began a momentous acquaintance that soon developed through natural affinity into one of those rare and softly beautiful friendships which are occasionally seen between women. And as friendship means association in a city that has no theatre and few amusements, it soon happened that any evening might see Dorothy in Helen's room, or Helen on the way to her friend's hotel. Naturally Helen quickly learned that her friend's father and lover were head engineers on Carter's road, and that she had visited them in camp; and as Dorothy was as willing to talk of her novel experience as Helen to listen, imagine the pair in the former's cosey bedroom, one snugged up on a lounge, the other coiled in some mysterious feminine fashion on pillows at her side, fair girl hanging on dark girl's lips as she prattled of Carter, or joining in speculations as to what kind of a woman his wife might be.

She positively jumped when Dorothy declared one evening: "I'm sure he still loves her. Ernest says that he scoured the city for her; only gave up when he felt sure that she had gone East to her friends. When the road is finished, he is going back to look for her."

He had searched for her! *Still loved her*! It rhymed with her deft fingers rolling bandages; tuned her feet as she bore medicine-trays from ward to ward; ousted the dry anatomical terms of the daily lecture from their proper place in her mind. The thought illumined her face so that maimed men twisted on their cots to watch her down the ward. Meeting her on the main stairs, one day, Carruthers, the Scotch surgeon, almost mistook her for the Virgin Mother in the stained window above the landing. *He searched for me! is going back East to look for me*! The days spun by to that magical refrain.

Why, in view of all this, did she not confide in Dorothy? Though its roots grip deep down in woman nature, the strange, contradictory, inconsequential, yet wise woman nature, the reason lies close to the surface. Physically akin to the impulse which urges a shy doe to fly from its forest mate, her feeling flowed,

mentally, from injured wifehood. For all her natural sweetness and joy over the thought of reunion, she was not ready to purchase happiness with unconditional surrender; to make overtures directly, or through Dorothy, that might be construed as a bid for executive clemency. As he had deserted her, so he must return; and that prideful resolution was strengthened and justified by the suffering which had immeasurably exceeded her fault. Yes, first he must return, then—would she instantly forgive him? Any lover can answer the question; if not, let him consult his sweetheart. "I'd make him suffer!" she will cry, gritting pretty teeth. So Helen. *Very* unchristian, wicked, but natural.

No, she did not confide in Dorothy, went quietly about her business, hugging her sweet secret to her own soul, until— But this summary of her thought and feeling would not be complete without mention of a last, perhaps greatest, satisfaction—her joy in reading newspaper accounts of Carter's progress. Editorials, politics, reports, she read all, day by day, glowing over red-hot denunciations of the monopoly while she thought what good men the editors must be, and how intelligent to so clearly discern her husband's merits. She was mightily troubled by the insatiate appetite of the Devil's Muskeg, studying its rapacious dietary as though it were a diabetes patient. She triumphed when Carter successfully treated its ineffable hunger with vegetarian diet of sawdust; shivered when he was refused a crossing of the trunk line; thrilled over the battle when Bender and the woodmen beat back the monopoly's levies while the trackmen laid the "diamond," and grew sick with fear, as before mentioned, when she heard the newsboys crying out Carter's final repulse as she was walking home to her room about eight o'clock one evening.

Though very tired, she immediately turned in her agitation, and, undeterred by the continent of blue-print uniform that spread below her brown ulster, she hurried to Dorothy's hotel, an old caravansary that had survived two rebellions and the bursting of the boom. Once chief of the city's hostelries, the old house still attracted people who preferred its solid comfort to the gilt, lacquer, garish splendors of more modern rivals. The parlor in which she waited while her name was taken up to Dorothy, was panelled with sombre woods; her feet literally sank in a pile carpet, thick, green, and dark as forest moss. Walls were upholstered in hammered leather; chairs, heavy table, massive furnishings, all were of black oak. The portraits of governors, high commissioners, and chief factors of the Hudson Bay Company, soldiers and traders or both, seemed ready to step down from their frames to engage in wise council and issue fiats that would set a hundred tribes in motion. Time stood still in that solid atmosphere. Heavy odors of leather and wood, the pervading feeling of peaceful age combined to soothe her fretted nerves, and she had just relaxed her tired body within the embrace of a mighty chair when passing footsteps and a voice brought her up,

tense and rigid.

Returning just then, the bell-boy repeated her question: "Gentlemen who just passed, Miss? Mr. Greer and Mr. Smythe, people that are financing the new line, and Mr. Carter, their head contractor. They are dining here with the general manager of the trunk line. If you'd like to see them," he added, interpreting her interest as curiosity, "just step this way. They've all gone in, and you can peep through the glass doors. It's that dark in the passage no one will see you."

As she tiptoed after him down the dark hallway he whispered further—"Reminds me of them old Romans, the general manager; them fellows that used to invite a man to a poisoned dinner. He's got those chaps shooed up into a corner, and now he's going to kill their financial goose over the cigars and wine. Sure, Miss, everybody knows that Greer's on his last legs. Bit off more than he could chew when he went to railroading; but old Brass Bowels will treat his indigestion. That's him, stout gent with his back this way. Greer and Smythe's either side of him. That's Mr. Carter opposite. T'other gentleman, Mr. Sparks, is general superintendent of the western division."

Slipping by the others her glance glued—the term is eschewed by purists, who ironically inquire if the adhesive used was of the carpenter variety, but it exactly describes her steadfast gaze—her glance glued to Carter's face. From above an arc lamp streamed white light down upon him, darkening the hollows under his eyes, raising his strong features in bold relief. This, be it remembered, was the first she had seen of him since he broke in upon the Ravell dinner-party, black, sooty, smelling evilly of sweat and smoke. And now he sat with a waiter behind his chair, at meat with the greatest man in the north, at a table that was spread with plate, cut-glass, linen, all of a costly elegance that transcended her own experience. The champagne bucket, at his elbow, of solid silver, with gold-crusted bottles thrusting sloping shoulders out of cracked ice, the last accessory of luxurious living, took on wonderful significance in that it accentuated to the last degree their changed positions. For surely the gods had turned the tables by bringing her in print hospital uniform and shabby ulster to witness this crowning of his development.

Be sure she felt the contrast. How could she do otherwise? Yet her feeling lacked the slightest touch of humiliation. Above such snobbishness, she was filled by joy and pride in his achievement, joined with tremulous fear, for the bell-boy's remarks had quickened her apprehension. That distinguished company, costly appointments, perfect service, impressed her as little as it did Carter, which is saying a good deal, for the pomp of civilization counts more with women than men, and he was bearing himself with the easiness of one who has conquered social circumstance. He chose the right fork for his salad, knife for his butter; broke his bread delicately, trifled with green olives as if born to the taste—though this

edible presented itself as a new and bitter experience—small things and foolish if made an end in themselves, yet important in that, with improper usage, they become as barbed thorns in the side of self-respect. Significant things in Carter's case because they showed that he had applied to his social relations the same shrewdness, common-sense, keen sight that was making him successful in large undertakings.

Of course she noted his improvement? That he no longer used knife for spoon, squared elbows over his head, sopped bread in gravy? On the contrary, she saw only his face, dark and stern save when a smile brought the old humor back to his mouth. Her hungry eyes traced its every line, marking the minutest changes wrought by thought, care, sorrow, time's graving tools. Hands pressing her breast, she struggled for his voice with thick oak and heavy plate-glass, and so stood, wrapped up in him and their past, till the bell-boy spoke.

"Miss Chester said you was to go right up, Miss."

She jumped, and her tremulous fear took form in words. "You are sure the general manager will—"

"—Do things to 'em?" he finished, as he led her upstairs. "They're dead ones, Miss."

XXVII

THE NATURE OF THE CINCH

The bell-boy was not alone in his opinion. Through that summer twenty thousand settler farmers had kept suspicious tab on the monopoly, and now that it felt the clutch reclosing on its throat, the entire province had flamed up in wrath and fear. Press, legislature, and pulpit denounced the refusal of a crossing that was without shadow of a claim in equity, and was plainly intended to kill competition by tedious and costly litigation. In town, village, on trail, at meeting, wherever two settlers were gathered together, the general manager's action was damned in no uncertain terms. Indignation flowed like a tidal-wave over the plains. Skimming low with the north wind, an aeronaut would have heard the hum of speech rise from the face of the land, angry and continuous as the buzz of swarming bees. It had pealed out in clarion triumph, that huge *vox humana*, when the "diamond" was laid after desperate fighting; it swelled in furious discordance when, the previous day, Carter's men were forced back by sheer weight of the levies

that the general manager had gathered and brought in from the sections along three thousand miles of track.

It was one of those situations which require only a touch of demagoguery to wreak great harm. Insurrection hung thick in the air. Secession and coalescence with the United States were openly advocated by men who later read with astonishment their own words in the papers of that stormy time. Thousands of armed settlers waited only for the word to fall upon the monopoly's levies, but in face of united public opinion, backed by an inflamed press, Carter and his people remained quiescent—supinely quiescent, according to certain editorials.

A morning paper recalled its prediction of months ago: "We warned Mr. Carter not to be deceived by the monopoly's complaisance in bringing his construction outfit and supplies out from the East over its tracks. The concession was merely bait for the trap, analogous to the handing of a rope to a fool wherewith to hang himself. We are loath to quote the old proverb against Mr. Carter, yet were it not for the fact that the monopoly snaps its fingers in the face of this province through him, we should be tempted to show satisfaction at the plight to which his fatuous self-confidence has brought him."

The article closed with a vivid word picture of the general manager chuckling *à la* Mephistopheles in the privacy of his luxurious office; which, perhaps, approximated the reality more closely than that in the minds of the laity. For a composite of the popular impression would have shown the entire railroad pantheon, general manager, department heads, with their clerks, sub-heads, assistants, and deputy assistants, all very lofty of brow and solemn of face, in session over the crisis.

The reality was much more prosaic. Indifferent to the newsboys, who were crying his crimes on the streets, the general manager sat in the office of the division superintendent that morning, chair tilted back, feet on the table, thumbs comfortably bestowed in the arm-holes of his vest. It has remained for a practical business age to clothe itself in the quintessence of ugliness. Imagine Julius Cæsar in a tuxedo, Hamlet wearing a stove-pipe hat! His black coat, check trousers would have pleased a grocer's fancy in Sunday wear, and it were difficult to realize that their commonplace ugliness clothed a power greater than Cæsar's—the ability to create and people provinces, to annihilate and build up towns, to move cities like checkers over the map; harder still to listen to his curt speech, issuing from blue tobacco smoke, and believe that an empire larger than ancient Rome paid him tribute, that the blood and sweat of a generation had gone to grease his juggernautal wheels. Yet the speech itself certified to the power.

"We made a mistake, Sparks; but who could foresee this fellow Carter? Here's the N.P. lusting for a chance to cut in over the border. Give them that crossing and old Jim Ball will place their bonds for any amount in exchange for

reciprocal running arrangements. So we've got to make a quick killing. Buy 'em out, lock, stock, and barrel, while the fear of God's in their hearts. They must sell—look at this Bradstreet report on old Greer's assets. Just about at the end of his string. So I want you to write and invite them to dinner to-night—Greer, Smythe, and Carter—though the order ought to be reversed; he's the brains of the business. Draw it mild—conference with a view to amicable arrangement of points at issue, and so forth. But when we once get them there—" His nod was brutal in its significance.

Equally wide of popular conception was the scene in the banking office of Greer & Smythe when the invitation was delivered. Carter, who swung an easy leg from his favorite perch on the table, seemed to have thrived on defeat; the most elastic imagination would have failed to invest him with the weight of a people's cares. Indeed, he laughed when the senior partner handed him the general manager's note.

"Hum! 'Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly!' What do I make of it? That's easy. Has us going—or thinks he has—and is aching to deliver the knock-out. A million to a minute he wants to buy us out."

"Well, he never will!" Red and plethoric, the senior partner sprang up. An elderly man, his clear eyes, honest face, framed in white side-whiskers of the Dundreary style, all stamped him as belonging to the old-fashioned school of finance which aimed always to advance the civic interest while turning an honest penny. "No, sir!" he reiterated. "We'll break first; and goodness knows that is not so far away. Yesterday I approached Murray, of the North American Bank, but he answered me in his broad Scotch: 'Hoots, mon! get your crossing first. Get your crossing an' we'll talk.' And so with Butler, Smith, and others who promised support."

"Cold feet, eh?" Carter commented. "They'll warm them presently chasing themselves for a chance to come in."

The old gentleman ran on in his indignation. "Yes, we are about at the end of our financial string, but we would rather dangle there than yield to these pirates. Am I right, sir?"

Smythe, a younger man, lean, laconic, and dark as the other was stout, florid, nodded, and his vigorous answer was untainted by a suspicion of compromise. "Surely, sir! But if Mr. Carter's plan fails—" His shrug supplied the hiatus.

Carter answered the shrug. "It won't fail." He held up the invitation. "But, say! Fancy—to-day, of all days?"

"Of course we won't go," Smythe frowned.

"Of course we* will*," Carter grinned. "Think what it means? Besides blinding them to the trap, we shall be there when it springs, and I wouldn't miss Brass

Bowels' face for a thousand, cash. Let me see; the bid is for eight-thirty. Western flyer is due at Portage station nine-fifteen. He'll hardly broach business before the coffee, and with any kind of luck we ought to serve him up a beautiful case of indigestion."

"With luck?" the senior partner echoed.

"With or without. Everything is planned beyond possibility of failure. Mr. Chester goes with Mr. Hart on the construction-train, while Bender keeps things humming at the crossing. By-the-way, he's in the outer office now, with Hart, waiting for last orders, and if you don't mind I'll have them in. I wouldn't take a chance even on your clerks."

In view of just such a contingency, Bender had invested his bulk with store clothes of that indescribable pattern and cut which fulfils lumberman ideals. From his mighty shoulders a quarter-acre of black coat fell half-way down worsted pantaloons that were displaying an unconquerable desire to use the wrinkles of high boots as a step-ladder to his knees. As collars did not come in sizes for his red throat, he had compromised on a kerchief of gorgeous silk, and a soft hat, flat and black, completed a costume that was at once his pride and penance. In the luxurious office, with its rich fittings in mahogany and leather, he loomed larger than ever; was foreign as a bear in a lady's boudoir. Uncomfortably aware of the fact, he took the chair which the senior partner offered with a sigh of relief, and was fairly comfortable till the position discovered its own disadvantages—while his coat announced every movement with miniature *feux de joie* from bursting seams, his trousers ascended his boots as a fireman goes up a hotel escape. To which sources of discomfort was added the knowledge that his face mapped in fair characters the fluctuations of the recent combat. But he forgot all—scars, raiment, unconventional bulk—as soon as he began to talk.

"All ready," he replied to Carter's question. "Buckle has been round the camp some lately. Only this morning I caught him talking to Michigan Red. It's a cinch that he was spotting for the railroad, but as I knew you'd as lief he'd tip us off as not, I didn't bust his head. Jes' allowed I didn't see him."

"Yes, let him talk," Carter replied, relative to the broken contractor. "But"—he addressed the surveyor—"there's no whispering in your outfit?"

"Couldn't be," the young fellow laughed. "Mr. Chester only told *me* an hour ago. The men know nothing—will *know* nothing up to the moment we pull into Prairie."

"Good. Now, you are to leave at dusk, and don't forget to grab the operator before he can rattle a key. But turn him loose as soon as you are through and let him wire in the news. And you, Bender, start in at eight, keep 'em busy as long as you can, then load what's left of you in a flat-car and steam round for Mr. Hart."

"What's left of me?" Bender growled, as he walked with the surveyor down-

street a few minutes later. "Hum! Give me the Cougar and an even hundred of old-style Michigan men, and I'd drive the last of Brass Bowels' tarriers into the Red and beat you out laying the diamond. But, Lordy, what's the use o' talking! The old stock petering out an' the new's jes' rotten with education. They'd sooner work than fight, an' loaf than either, for they ain't exactly what you'd call perticler hell on labor. What's left of me? Well, there'll be some fragments, I guess. While I was hanging round I picked up an odd score of Oregon choppers that blew in here las' week. Brass Bowels' agent tried for 'em, but they'd lumbered with me in British Columbia. Come out an' see 'em. They're beauties."

Perhaps they were, for standards of beauty, morality, of any old thing, are merely relative and depend so much on local color. To Hart, who reviewed the "beauties" in Bender's camp, they seemed the most unmitigated ruffians in his railroad experience; but as they strut on this small section of the world-stage for "Positively one appearance only," let them be judged by their record in the rough work of that night; by the way in which they bore themselves in the roar, surge, and tumble of a losing fight, the echoes of which alarmed the dark city and came with the soup to the general manager's dinner; and let him deliver their valedictory to his guests at table.

Throwing a telegram—which a waiter brought in just after Helen went upstairs—across to Carter, the magnate remarked: "That big foreman of yours has been at it again. He has put two of our heaviest engines into the ditch and ten men into hospital. Not bad, but—he didn't lay the diamond."

"Oh, well," Carter shrugged, "better luck next time."

"Ah, yes—the next time?" Repeating the phrase with dubious inflection, he went on with his dinner, and for an hour thereafter no one heard the rattle of the skeleton behind the feast. He acted the perfect host, easily courteous, pleasant, anxious for the preference of his guests. As he ran on, drawing from the sources of a wide and unusual experience for his dinner chat, it was curious to note the shadings in his manner. Addressing the partners, he seemed to exhale rather than evidence a superiority which, on their part, they countenanced by an equally subtle homage. Integrity and deprecation of his policy and methods were dominated by the orthodox business sense which forced subconscious recognition of his title as king of their business world. With Carter, however, he was frankly free, as though they two had been section-men eating their bite together on a pile of ties, and doubtless the difference in his manner sprang from some such feeling. For whereas the partners were born to their station, he recognized Carter as a product—unfinished, but still a product—of the forces which had produced himself and a dozen other kings and great contractors of the constructive railroad era. Without invidious distinction or neglect of the others, he yet made him the focus of attention.

"We heard all about your sawdust grades," he complimented, with real cordiality. "A mighty clever idea, sir; pity you couldn't patent it—though we are glad you cannot, for we intend to apply it on all our Rainy River muskegs."

Approaching business at the close of the meal, he was equally suave. "You are to be complimented upon your achievement, gentlemen," he said, addressing the partners. "We feel that while supplying a real need of the province, you have convicted us of remissness. But now that we do see our duty, it would be equally criminal for us to leave you the burden of this heavy responsibility. We know how it has taxed your resources"—his gray eye stabbed the senior partner—"and we are fully prepared to relieve you." Pausing, he lit a cigar, puffed a moment, and finished, "We will take the enterprise off your hands, bag and baggage, on terms that will yield you a handsome profit."

A pause followed. No man turns from an easy road to a rocky climb without lingering backward glances, and the partners looked at one another while the general manager leaned back and smoked with the air of one who had faithfully performed a magnanimous duty. Greer spoke first.

"Very kind offer, I am sure."

"Most handsome," Smythe, the laconic, added. "But—" He glanced at Carter, who finished, "We are not on the market."

The manager raised his brows. Expecting a first refusal, he was slightly staggered and irritated by its bluntness, yet masked both emotions. "Not on your own terms?"

"On no terms," Greer emphatically answered; then, flushing, he added: "Our chief motive in going into this enterprise, sir, was to bring sorely needed railroad competition into this province. It would not be subserved by our selling to you."

The manager flicked the ash from his cigar. Then, while smoking, he regarded the old gentleman from under bulging lids very much as a curious collector might note the wriggles of an impaled beetle. "Very laudable intention; does you credit, sir. But you must pardon me if I doubt that you will carry it to the length of financial hari-kari. You have heard of that Japanese custom? A man commits suicide, empties himself upon a cold and unsympathetic world for the benefit of his enemy, who is compelled by custom to go and do likewise. In your case the sacrifice would be foolish because we shouldn't follow suit. Now when I spoke of your resources"—during an ugly pause his glance flickered between the partners—"I did not state our exact knowledge of their extent. You are—practically—broke. In addition, we have bought up all of your paper that we could find floating on the market, and three months from now—we shall be in a position to demand a receiver in bankruptcy. Stop!" Frowning down Greer's attempted interruption, he dropped his suave mask and stood out, the financial

king, brutal, imperious, predatory. "I know what you would say. Three months is a long time. But no one will make you a better offer—any offer—till you can cross our line. You can force a crossing? Yes, but we'll law you, badger you, carry the case from court to court up to the privy council—two years won't make an end. In the meantime—" He had thrown himself at them, bearing down upon them with all the force of his powerful will, of the furiously strong personality that had crushed financial opposition to plans and projects beside which their enterprise was as a grain of sand to the ocean. Now, in a flash, he became again the polished host. "Take your time, gentlemen. *We* are in no hurry. Several days, if you choose. But—be advised."

But big, strong, and masterful as the manager was, every Goliath has his David, and the first stone in the forehead came from the sling of Smythe—Smythe, who had hardly opened his mouth through the meal save for the admittance of food or drink. Banging the table so that the glass rang and a champagne bowl flew from its thin stem, he sprang up, his dark face flushed and defiant. "We'll take neither your advice nor your time! God knows that we are hard shoved, but damn a man who sells his country! And since you have been so outspoken, let me tell you that we'll run trains across your line, and that inside—"

"This hour." In its quiet assurance, Carter's interpolation came with all the force of an accomplished fact. The manager started, and the division superintendent upset his wine. As their backs were to the door, neither saw a waiter take a telegram from a messenger-boy, and sign for its delivery after a glance at the clock, which indicated half-past nine. Nor could either fact have the significance for them that their combination had for Carter.

The manager recovered his poise even as the waiter handed the telegram to his colleague, and, though puzzled, hid the feeling behind a show of confident contempt. "I hardly gather your meaning, but presume you mean—war?"

Missing the superintendent's sudden consternation, he was going on. "Very well. I *had* hoped—" when the former pulled his sleeve. "What's this?"

He stared blankly at the words: "Construction-train, with men and Gatling-guns, across our tracks at Prairie. Number ten, Western Mail, held up with three hundred passengers."

During an astonished silence, the partners watched the manager, who looked at Carter, who lightly drummed on the table. "Your train?" he went on, slowly, with words that evidenced his flashing insight into the situation. "Hum! Sawdust, eh? Came down the spur you laid to the Portage Mills at Prairie; grabbed our operator; then extended the mill-switch across our tracks. Know how to kill two birds with one stone, don't you?"

During a second silence he fenced glances, nervously fingering the telegram, then suddenly asked: "What's the use? You can't hold it?"

"With two Gatlings and five hundred men—five thousand, if I need them?"

"The law's against you."

"As it is against you at the crossing. Possession is said to be nine of its points, anyway, so we have you just nine-tenths to the bad." Slightly smiling, he quoted: "'We'll law you, badger you, carry the case from court to court up to the privy council—two years won't make an end.'"

The manager raised heavy lids. "In three months we'll break you."

Carter shrugged. "Who knows? In the mean time—your traffic will be suspended?"

Through all the superintendent had fidgeted nervously; now he broke in: "Pish, man! We'll build round your old train in six hours."

"Will you?" Without even a glance in his direction, Carter ran on, addressing the manager: "You see, land is that cheap since the boom that we took options on a right of way from Prairie clean up to the north pole and down to the American border. No, you won't go around us, but we shall go round you and come into this burg south of your tracks."

"But you're out of law," the superintendent angrily persisted. "You haven't the shadow of a right—"

"Oh, shut up, Sparks," the manager impatiently interrupted. "What has right to do with it? He's got us in the door and it's no use squealing. Now"—the glance he turned on Carter was evenly compounded of hostility and admiration—"terms? You'll release our train—"

"When you cede our legal crossing, and call off your dogs. We'll hold Prairie till every man Jack of your guards is shipped out of the city."

"Could you have the papers drawn—" He had intended "to-night," but he paused as Greer drew them from an inner pocket and his iron calm dissolved in comical disgust. "Hum! You're not timid about grabbing time by the forelock. But, let me see!"

Once more the arc lights could be heard sputtering. In that tense moment their own fortunes swung in the balance with the welfare of a province, and while the manager read they waited in silence. Trimming the end of a cigar with careful precision, Carter masked all feeling, but the partners could not hide their nervousness—Smythe fidgeted, Greer locked and unlocked clasped fingers. Both held their breath till the manager's pen made a rough scratch on the silence.

A good loser, he said, as Greer rose after buttoning his coat over the precious document: "Don't go, gentlemen—at least till we have drunk the occasion. I see another bottle there in the ice."

And his toast, "To our next merry meeting," formed the premise of the deduction which Carter returned to Greer's relieved exclamation when they stood, at last, alone in the street.

"Thank God! It is over!"

"On the contrary, it is just begun."

Passing under a street lamp, its white light revealed the pale disturbance which banished the senior partner's flushed content. Stopping dead, he agitatedly seized Carter's arm.

"You don't suppose he will go back on his—"

"Signature? No, he won't repeat. He's done with the crossing."

"Then we can weather through," Greer said, and Smythe echoed his sigh of relief.

"But—" Carter quoted the bucolic proverb which recites the many ways in which a pig may be killed other than by a surfeit of butter.

"But what *can* he do?" Greer persisted.

"Don't know," Carter slowly answered. "Only a man don't have to look at that bull-dog jaw of his a second time to know that he'll do it, and do it quick."

"I'd give a good deal to know," Smythe frowned, then smoothed his knotted brow as he laughed at Carter's rejoinder.

"I'd give three cents myself."

Not feeling sleepy, Carter walked on after he had dropped the partners at their respective doors, aimlessly threading the dark streets that gave back his hollow foot-fall; and so passing, by chance, under Helen's window, he brought a pause in the anxious meditation which had kept her restlessly tossing, and set her to momentary speculations as to the owner of that firm and heavy tread. She listened, listened till it grew fainter and died as he turned the corner. Keeping on in the cool silence, he presently came to the Red River suspension bridge, where he paused and leaned on the parapet at the very spot from which she loved to watch Indians and chattering squaws float beneath in quaint birch canoes. There was, of course, nothing to warn him of the fact any more than she could have guessed him as owner of the solitary foot-fall. He thought of her, to be sure. Always she stood in the background, ready to claim him whenever press of affairs permitted reflection; and now she thrust in between him and the twinkling lights of the sleeping city. Where was she? And doing—what? How much longer before he could go in search of her? After long musing he swept the weary intervening days away with an impatient gesture, and his longing took form in muttered speech:

"How long? My God! how much longer?"

The thought brought him back to his work and the events of the evening. What would be the manager's next move? He gazed down into the dark river intently, as though he expected its hoarse voice to give answer. But though he canvassed, as he thought, every possibility, the reality—which presented itself a week or so after he resumed operations in the Silver Creek forests—was beyond

the range of his thought.

XXVIII
THE STRIKE

As aforesaid, it was the unexpected that opposed Carter with a visage of stony calm when he came from Winnipeg out to the "Ragged Lands" a week or so later. For whereas he had left the camp convulsed in throes of constructive labor, the whistle of his engine raised piercing echoes; no other sounds disturbed the sleeping forest. In the cut south of the camp he passed the big digger, at rest from the roar, rattle, and clank of chains, hiss of escaping steam. The pile-driver loomed idly on a distant trestle. When engine and caboose stopped opposite the cook-house, he saw that the camp—which ought to have been empty—teemed with men.

He shrugged when Hart, who was with him, exclaimed in wonder: "Can't prove it by me. But we'll soon know. There's Bender—coming from the office."

"Strike," the giant replied to their questioning. "Teamsters, graders, bridge and track men, all went out at noon. What for? God knows; but I allow that Buckle could tell. He wasn't hanging round the Winnipeg camp for nothing. I'm sorry now—" His bunched fists, big as mauls, fully explained his regret, and indicating a group which was arranging its progress so as to make the office door with Carter, he finished: "But if you're hankering for reasons, consult them gentlemen. It's a depytation—by its scowl. An' it's loaded to the muzzle with statistics to fire at you."

Following his finger, Carter noted that Michigan Red was of the deputation, but when it ranged up at the tent door in sheepish yet defiant array, that worthy hung modestly in the rear, permitting a big teamster from the Silver Creek settlements to act as spokesman. Blunt, honest, tenacious as a bull-dog in holding to an idea, the man was an ideal tool for unscrupulous hands; but though he instantly divined the reasons behind his leadership, Carter listened quietly to his tale—the old tale—overwork, poor food, underpay.

His answer was equally quiet. "You are certainly to be pitied, Bill; breaks me all up just to think of your wrongs. I've always admired your thrift, and I sympathize with your desire to raise the mortgage off your farm. Took you five years to put it on, didn't it, Bill? And you are calculating to pay it off in the next

two months. Well, perhaps—but you'll have to screw it out of some one else than me."

Shuffling uneasily, the teamster glanced at his backers, who, equally nonplussed, gazed at one another. For where an angry, or even a plain answer would have merely incited them to dogged opposition, this quiet ridicule sapped conceit in their cause, besides conveying an alarming suggestion of strength in reserve.

"Then you don't allow to fall in with our notions?" The spokesman returned after a whispered conference.

"Meaning—an hour less and a dollar more? You're sure a psychic, Bill; plumb wasted on railroading. Open an office in town and go to fortune-telling and you'd pull that plaster off your homestead inside a month."

Assured that there was no hurry, that he could take a week to consider the matter, he gravely added: "Obliged to you, Bill; but I don't allow to require it. The world, you'll remember, was made in six days, and this isn't near such a big job. No time like the present, and here's my answer—same hours, same grub, same pay. It's fortune-telling or present rates for yours, Bill."

Through all he entirely ignored the delegation, and now he leaned in the door, idly watching as it made its way across the camp and was swallowed in the crowd of strikers about the bunk-house. But his face fell as he stepped inside beyond eye and ear shot. "Serious?" he repeated Hart's question. "Couldn't be worse. Not one of those fellows could make a quarter of the wages or live half as well on the farm, but they'd hog it all if I died in the ditch. But there's more behind this than their spite and greed. You see, we have just about pulled old Murray in for funds to make a clean finish, and if he gets wind of this he'll crawfish like a one-legged crow. I must go back at once. And you, Bender—you, also, Hart—see to it that not even a dog crawls out of this camp until I return."

"To keep these chaps guessing," he added, after a moment's dark reflection, "I'd better slip out after dusk. You go over, Hart, and whisper the engineer to back out and wait for me at the other side of the cut. Mystery is good as aces up in any old game, and we can't fog them too much."

Pulling out at dark, he made the run back to town—fifty miles—in an hour and a quarter, reckless running on unballasted road. Murray *must* be fully committed before the news leaked out. *We must get him, must get him, must, must, must*! The wheels clicked it, the steam hissed it, the fire roared it, the wind shrieked the imperative refrain. But though Bender lived in the strict letter of his instructions so that a mosquito could scarce have escaped from the camp; though a man could not have made the distance in two days on foot, or a wild goose have passed the throbbing engine as it bounded along that raw track, newsboys were yet crying the strike as he came out on Main Street.

Feeling certain that the office would be closed at that hour, he intended to

go straight to Greer's house, but seeing a light in the partners' room as he came opposite the building, he went in and found Smythe there, alone. With lean legs thrust out before him, hands deep in his pockets, shoulders hunched to his ears, his attitude incarnated deep dejection; gloom resided in his nod.

"Greer?" he said. "At home—sick. You see, we were to have closed the deal with Murray this very evening, and the disappointment just knocked the old man out. He's been running altogether on his nerve lately; something had to give. Why *couldn't* this have happened a day later?"

Answering Carter's question, he went on: "We heard it at noon. Papers got out an extra. Presses must have been running it off before you left."

"Noon?" Carter whistled. "Why the men didn't quit till two!" Then as the significance flashed upon him, he exclaimed: "Brass Bowels for a million! It was all cut, dried, and laid away for us, and they served it hot to the minute. Don't—it—beat—hell!"

His comical disgust caused Smythe a wintry grin, but, sobering, he said: "I wouldn't mind so much for myself. I'm young enough to do it again. But the old gentleman—with that nice family! You know he was just about ready to retire; only took up this business from a strong sense of public duty. And now, in his extremity, every rat financier in this city runs to his hole in fear of the cat. The poor old man!"

Carter nodded his sympathy. On the occasions that he visited their house, Greer's wife, a silver-haired old lady, had vied with her two daughters in pleasant attentions. But it did not require that thought to stir him to action.

"Oh, here!" he laughed. "We are not dead yet. To-morrow I'll go the round of the employment offices and—"

Smythe threw up his hands, a gesture eloquent of despair. "Went round myself—this afternoon. Harvest is on and men scarcer than diamonds. Besides, Brass Bowels has left an order with every agency in town to ship every man they can get west to the mountains."

"Um-m!" Carter thought a while. "Then we'll have to play the last card."

"The last card?" Smythe raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, biggest trump in the pack. How long before—"

"Oh, they can't touch us for two months."

"Good! Now listen." Glancing around as though distrustful of the very walls, he whispered in Smythe's ear for a minute that saw the latter's dejection dissolve in new-born hope. "You must go with me," he finished, aloud. "While you pack your grip, I'll drop round and see Greer. He must be here to-morrow to carry out the bluff. And hurry—for we must make it down and back before we

are missed."

XXIX
THE BLUFF

It was the fifth day of the strike, and still no sound of labor disturbed the sleeping forest. Quiet and calm, like that of the Sabbath, brooded over the camp, but not its peace, for, being well rested, the strikers chafed under inaction, moving restlessly among the buildings. Michigan Red, to be sure, was dealing interminable poker on a blanket under a tree, while the younger men skylarked or tried one another out in games, but neither forms of amusement appealed to the older and more thrifty Canadians. Secret disquiet, moreover, underlay even the nonchalance of the gamblers, for Bender's mysterious looks and Carter's continued absence were rapidly disintegrating the strikers' confidence.

"He ain't here," the giant had answered, when the committee had called for another conference, and to further questioning he had returned an irritating grin. "When will he be back? That's for us to know an' you to find out." And so, shorn of its functions, the committee had languished like a moulting peacock. In addition, the cook's ominous visage at meal-times bade the strikers beware that the curse of labor still clung to the fruits of the earth; and the fact that almost a month's back pay rested in Carter's hands, served as a text and lent force to the unpreached sermon. What if he never came back? The history of Western construction abounded with cases of absconding contractors, and the hostility of the monopoly lent substance to the doubt. Most of them would have hailed Carter's advent, just then, with real if secret pleasure, and the general uneasiness manifested itself in a grumbling remark made as Michigan Red raked a fat "jackpot" into his winnings.

"You're the only one that's making anything these days."

"That's right," another grumbler added. "An' what's more, if we're out another five days the raise won't pull us even by freeze-up. Ten days lost at three-fifty is thirty-five dollars. Take the extra dollar seven weeks to make it up—if the frost holds off that long."

Apparently indifferent, Michigan went on with his deal. "You're hell at figures, Chalky. Where'd you learn? Figuring interest on your mortgage? How many cards, Bill?"

But Bill, spokesman of the committee, laid down his hand. "Look here, Red! Chalky's right. If we hadn't struck we'd have had a pay-day yesterday, an' if we're standing to lose that much we can't call it off too soon for me."

"Nor me."

"Nor me." The voices, pitched in altercation, had brought the idlers crowding, and the support came in from all around.

Michigan's teeth gleamed white through his red beard while his bleak eyes took stock of the crowding faces as though calculating just how far envy and avarice would take them. "You don't stand to lose a cent, Bill. They've got to finish the contrac' before freeze-up to reach the tie an' lumber-camps. Otherwise the road 'll be idle all winter, an' what's a few days' pay alongside the freight on a hundred million feet of lumber. He's got to finish it. If he kain't"—pausing, he distributed a significant nod around the circle—"there's others as kin an' will."

"But what if he don't come back?"

To the question which expressed the most pregnant doubt, he returned a second meaning nod. "Same folks 'll make good."

"Back pay?" Bill pressed.

"Back pay."

"On whose say so?"

"Ain't mine good enough?" Ruffling, he turned a stream of fierce profanity upon Carrots Smith, his questioner. "Want Bible and oath for yours, eh? There's some things that kain't be told to idiots—"

"Yes, yes, Red!" Bill soothed. "We know—that's all right, Red. Don't mind him, he's only a suckling kid."

"Sure, Red! You know what you're talking about. Go on!" others chorused, and having gained his point by the show of anger, real or false, the teamster allowed himself to be placated.

"If 'twas necessary," he continued, "we could tie up the road with a laborer's lien. But 'twon't be—I have somebody's word for it. If Carter goes under, we jes' go right on."

"With the raise?"

"With the raise."

"But if he comes back?" Chalky raised another doubt. "What about lost time? Freeze-up is freeze-up, an' we kain't make it up if we're docked for the lay-off."

"That's easy. Who's to blame for it?" He threw it at the circle.

"Him! He wouldn't give the raise."

"Then let him pay for his fun. We've got him coming or going, an' we draw time, at the new rates, for every idle day before we touch a tool. Ain't that right?"

It was not, yet his crooked logic exactly matched their envious cupidity.

Confidence once more returned; the younger men returned to their sports; Bill picked up his hand, and the game proceeded until interrupted, a half-hour later, by a sudden shout and shrill neighing from the horse lines.

"The stallion's loose!"

Shouting, the roustabout tore across the clearing and just escaped the rush of the vicious brute by nimbly climbing the projecting logs at the cook-house corners. At his cry, a youth dropped the shot he had poised for a throw, the gamblers their cards, and, balking in the take-off for a broad jump, Carrots Smith led the rush for cover. A minute saw them all on top of cook or bunk houses, and thus defrauded of his preference, the stallion ran amuck among the horses which were tied at long hay-racks, kicking, rearing, biting. Though built massively of logs, the racks gave way with splintering crashes under the combined pull of a hundred frightened beasts; and bunching, the string tore round the clearing, squealing their fear.

To give the beast ease with his oats, Michigan had removed the iron muzzle according to his custom, and now, a free, wild thing, he bounded along in hot pursuit, curveting, caracoling, satanic in his jet-black beauty. Tossing his wild mane, he would call the mares with stridulous cachinnations, yet for all his exultant passion left them to chase a belated teamster, nose lowered, ears wickedly pricked, thrice around the cook-house. Balked again, he reared, kicked, and was plunging once more after the string when a whistle outshrilled his neigh, and an engine with caboose attached rolled out of the cut south of the camp.

But for the pounding hoofs, the collective whisper, "It's the boss!" would have carried to Carter, who, with Smythe, stood looking out at the door of the caboose; and his first remark, "Regular circus, isn't it?" was eminently applicable to the situation. Upholding the sky's blue roof, black spruce cones formed bulky pillars for the natural amphitheatre in which the horses circled and recircled, a kicking, squealing stream, before the audience on the roofs.

"Where are you going?" Smythe exclaimed, as Carter leaped to the ground.

"To rope that beast before he runs a season's flesh off the teams. There's a riata in the office."

"Better shoot him," Smythe counselled. "Here! come back!" But he was already half-way across the clearing.

Choosing his time, he passed from the smithy to the bunk-house, thence to the cook-house, and so working from building to building under the eyes of his men, he gained the office at last and shot in, barely escaping the mad cavalcade. As he emerged, coiling the riata, Smythe's gaze drew to a second actor in this woodland drama.

When the poker players broke for cover, Michigan Red had paused long enough to pocket the stakes along with his winnings, then picking up the blanket

he walked over to the cook-house, and had watched all from the angle formed by the jutting corner logs. "A bit closer would have suited better," he had grumbled, as Carter's last rush carried him from under the hoofs. Now he commented: "Going to rope him, are you? Not if I know it." Knowledge of his fellows' liability to lapses of hero-worship inhered in his conclusion. "If there's to be gran'stan' plays I'll make 'em myself."

"Fools!" he snarled, as the beat of feet warned him that the strikers on the roof were watching Carter, who had taken position behind the next corner. He heard also the swish of the circling noose, its quickened whir as the horses swooped around on the next lap; then, just as the band passed, he sprang out, uttering a sudden harsh command, directly in the stallion's path.

A desperate play, it drew gambler's luck. A frontier superstition has it that the equine eye magnifies objects, and whether or no the red teamster with his pale-green face loomed in the stallion's sight as some huge and passionate fiend, he reared back on strung haunches, ploughing the sod in a desperate effort to stop; and while he hung in mid-air, Michigan stepped and threw his blanket, matador-fashion, over the ugly head. As the brute settled on all-fours and stood shivering, Michigan turned, grinning, to reap the fruit of his daring.

But his grin quickly faded, for, flashing on to his purpose, Carter had swung and roped the rat-tailed mare, the stallion's mate, as the band flew by. Worse! Michigan choked. Almost every man in camp had a grudge against the mare, some vicious lunge or graze from her snapping teeth, so a dozen strikers had jumped and were helping Carter to choke her down, while the others cheered them on with approving laughter.

Furious, he yelled: "What's the matter with you chaps up there? Taken to roosting like chickens? I'd like a picture of the bunch, it ud pass anywhere for a Methodist convention. An' you fellows quit yanking that mare. 'Tain't tug-o'-war you're playing." But he made small headway against the uproarious tide of yells and laughter, and, remembering his snub, Carrots Smith shouted back, "She's doin' most of the pulling, an' if she wants to hang, why let her."

Worst of all, it was Carter who finally interfered on behalf of the struggling brute, and Michigan chafed at the ready obedience accorded his orders.

"Thought you fellows was on strike?" he growled at Brady, the Irish teamster, as he retied the stallion in the horse lines.

But wrathfully indicating a bloody bruise on his own horse, the Irishman hotly retorted, "Faith, thin, an' that's no sign that we'll be lettin' them murthering brutes av yourn chew the necks av our teams? If they was mine, I'd make wolf-meat av the pair before supper."

Michigan sneered. "Didn't I ketch him myself? An' then you fellows had to go running your legs off to suit him. Keep it up, an' it's you an' your strike

that'll be made into hash for his supper."

While Michigan thus tried to scotch incipient sympathy with rough sarcasm, Carter carried with him to the office the comfortable assurance that fortune had turned down to him this accidental trick in a difficult game. Shrugging deprecation of Hart's admiring comments on his skill with the riata, he returned a reminiscence of his cowpunching days to Smythe's chidings, asserting that the stallion was not a circumstance to a long-horn steer on an open prairie. While talking, he helped to arrange the contents of Smythe's grip on the rough table, piling greenbacks by denominations between flanking columns of silver, an imposing array.

"No hurry," he said, when Hart asked if he should call the men, and, lighting a cigar, he drawled a story which at one time explained his reason and illumined his plan. "I remember a kid who won three sizes out of his class by a little judicious waiting. His dad had set him a spading stint in the back lot, and when this other boy brings-to on the sidewalk and begins to heave belligerencies over the fence, he answers, that calm and deliberate that you'd never think he was burying his heart under every spadeful, 'Jes' you wait till I finish my patch.' And he goes on digging so cheerfully that the other kid is a mite staggered. As I say, he was about three sizes to the good, but as you'll remember, Napoleon's Old Guard could put it all over a young lady's seminary for hysteria if it was kept too long waiting. Watching that slow spade, this lad's imagination went to working so hard that he fought that fight thirteen times in as many minutes, and felt that used up he just ran like a March hare when the other kid stuck his spade in the trench. The wise kid?" He twinkled on Hart. "I was that glad, I played hookey from school an' won a licking from the old man five sizes larger than I'd have got from the boy. But it was worth it. I learned that it always pays to give it time to soak in."

Outside the strikers furnished a vivid illustration of that lesson during the next three hours he kept them waiting. Grouping, they made loud mouths at first, over supposititious wrongs or affected indifference that was belied by uneasy glances officeward. Less loquacious at the end of the first hour, the second left them sullen and silent; the third, eaten by suspense. They started, as at a sudden explosion, when Bender finally came out; stared blankly when he announced that the boss was waiting to pay off the camp.

Affording no time for recovery, Hart called the first name on the pay-roll, and Bender's stentorian bass sent it rolling into the woods. "Anderson! Anderson! Hurry up, Anderson!"

The name chanced to be the property of Bill, the spokesman, but though used as little as his Sunday clothes, there was more than unfamiliarity behind his slowness. More tenacious of idea, as aforesaid, than quick of wit, Bill now

found himself without plan, precedent, or time for counsel in these unexpected premises, nor could he draw inspiration from the blank looks of his fellows.

"Hurry up, Anderson!" Bender crossly repeated; and starting as though touched in some secret spring, Bill lurched forward and in, and so found himself facing Carter, Hart, and Smythe behind an awesome financial array.

Never before had Bill seen so much money at once—even in dreams; it totalled more than the hard earnings of his forty-odd years; would have paid his mortgage ten times over. The substance of modern power, its glitter challenged the loud-mouthed assertions of him and his fellows that, given the same luck, they could have done as well as Carter. By the light of its golden glow, Bill saw himself very weak and small and foolish. At home he seldom saw a dollar; had trouble in scraping up currency enough to pay his taxes, and effected his barterings at the store in truck and trade. With his doubts settled as to the solvency of the firm, Bill was suddenly afflicted with a suspicion that he had made the biggest kind of a fool of himself.

Correctly interpreting his glance at the table, Carter gave him a genial smile. "Yes, Bill; but you don't get it by laying off. Here's your bit. Touch the pen and— Five dollars short? Board and feed for five days, Bill. Man earns his bread by the sweat of his brow, you know. Pass on, and don't forget to remember me to your wife when you gain home."

As with Bill, so the others. Filing in, they testified, one by deeper sullenness, others by attempts at a swagger, to the influences which had wrought on him. Few attained the easy insolence of Michigan Red, who demanded an itemized account of his store bill and insisted on signing the roll with his own hand. Touching the pen, railroad fashion, they passed out, while Hart signed for them, to add their doubtings to the general mystification.

What was forward? Had Carter obtained new crews, or would the company close down work? As the line still fell thirty miles short of the northern settlements, the latter thought filled the minds of the Silver Creek men, who saw themselves left marketless by their own act, with sick misery; brought pause to their envious cupidity, despite Michigan's assurances that it was all a bluff.

"'Tain't," Bill Anderson contradicted him. "I was just over to the cook-house for a drink, an' the cook has orders to serve no meals after breakfast to-morrow morning."

"That so?" a dozen voices questioned.

"Ask for yourselves. He's at the door now calling to supper."

And the cook confirmed the report, adding, moreover, his mite to their discomfiture by malignantly animadverting upon the ménages to which they were about to return. "My cooking don't suit, eh?" demanded the offended artist. "It's pertatoes an' sow-belly for yours after this. In a month you won't be able to tell

your ribs from a rail corral." And truth so flavored his railings that they saw, in fancy, themselves looking back from their prairie farms upon his rude but plentiful fleshpots—at which ripe moment the door opened to admit Carter, Smythe, and Bender.

Pausing at the end of the centre table, Carter glanced over the rows of faces which turned curiously up to him as on the occasion that marked the beginnings of his fight for mastery in the cook-house at the winter camp. Very fittingly, setting and persona for this last act of a long struggle were almost the same as the first. Hines and the Cougar, to be sure, were gone over the Great Divide. Strangers sat in place of Shinn and the handful that returned to their farms after the log-drive. But here were the tables, a-bristle with tinware; dim lanterns, dependent from the low pole-roof; the faces, peering from Rembrandt shadows, fiercely animal, pregnant with possibilities such as have reddened the snows of many a forest camp. Overlooking them now, at the climax of a year-long play, he could not but thrill to the thought that whereas they had opposed him at every turn, those iron *impresarios*, the Fates, had left choice of endings with him, author of the drama. It was his to crush or spare—to crush and gain the cringing respect which they accorded to frost, drought, pestilence, stern henchmen of the illimitable; to spare and attain next place to a fair potato-crop in their esteem; to manage them for their and his own good.

To the latter end he bent his words, addressing them, half jocularly, in their own argot. "Well, boys, we've played our game to a finish, but before we throw away the deck let's count tricks. I don't blame you for striking. You have a right to sell your labor in the dearest market as I have to buy mine in the cheapest. You simply asked more than I felt able to pay, so while you rested I took a jaunt down to the States to see how you stood on the market. What did I find? First let us take a look at your hand.

"What do you hold? Harvest is half over and the wheat farmers from the Portage to Brandon and down to the Pipestone have hired their help at two dollars a day. No betterment there. You can't break prairie in the fall, so there's nothing at home except eating, and the lumber-camps don't open up before the snows. On the other hand, your stake in this line is as big as mine. Unfinished, you are without the markets you have been shouting for these years; finished, it lets in American competition and trebles your values in land." Pausing, he shook his head, and smiling, went on: "Looks as if some one had dealt you a miserable hand, and I wonder if it wouldn't pay you to shuffle, cut, and try another deal? Now before I bring in new crews—"

"New crews? Where kin you get them?"

All through the men had given close attention, and after a single impatient glance at Michigan Red the faces turned back to Carter, who ignored the inter-

ruption. Leaning eagerly forward, they took the words from his mouth as he ran on roughly outlining his own plans, prospecting the coming years. Few of them, perhaps none, were given to looking beyond the present, and the vista to which he turned their dull eyes glimmered like sunshine on the prairies. This was to be no casual job! The province, ay, and the whole Northwest, required branch roads; would be gridironed with them before the finish! So what of construction in summer, logging in winter, they could look for profitable employment the round of the seasons!

"So talk it over among yourselves," he finished, "and those who feel that a fresh deal is in order can call round at the office after supper."

Long before that, nods and approving murmurs had testified to his victory, and as the burr of hot tongues followed them out through the open windows, Bender exclaimed: "Whipped to a finish! But what about them new crews?" Then catching Carter's grin, he burst out in uproarious laughter. "What a bluff!"

"Not a man in Minneapolis," Carter confirmed. "But that wasn't what we went down for. So it didn't matter."

"But will they believe it?" Smythe asked.

"Believe it?" Bender took it upon himself to answer it. "A frightened man will run from his shadow, an' they're that badly scared 'twon't take them five minutes to locate them crews."

He gave them, indeed, too much time, for, as he said, fear destroys perspective and the strikers were almost ready to believe that Carter could conjure men from the trackless forest.

Carrots Smith led the panic with a theory, even as he had headed the run from Michigan's horse. "Said he'd been prospectin' down in the States? Minneapolis, I'll bet you, an' the place jes' rotten with whaleback Swedes."

"Sawyer's gang is through with the N.P.'s Devil's Lake extension," another added. "I read it in the paper Sunday. Old Sawyer ud on'y be too glad for a chance to finish out the fall."

Other theories were not wanting, nor could Michigan Red stem the rout. Just twenty minutes thereafter a sheepish delegation presented itself at the office door and delivered itself through the mouth of Bill of the Anderson ilk.

"We've concluded," said Bill, "as 'twouldn't hardly be right to leave you ditched."

Albeit Carter's eyes returned Hart's twinkle, he replied in kind. "I'm real tickled to think that you won't desert me."

And so, with this bit of diplomatic comedy, ended not only the strike, but also the bitter fight which he, like every village Hampden, had had to wage against the envious ignorance of his fellows. For a while, to be sure, their stiff necks would balk at the homage secret consciousness dictated as his meed. They

would refuse it, indeed, till the world outside sealed his success; whereafter every man of them would proclaim himself as the particular prophet who had discerned greatness in his humble beginnings. But in the mean time they would refrain from further hostilities.

"What about that Red man?" Smythe said, as the delegation made its jubilant way back to its fellows. "You'll surely discharge *him*?"

"Michigan Red?" Carter said. "Not if he wants to stay. His team is worth any two in camp, and his teeth are drawn for good. But he won't stay."

"That's a cinch," Bender echoed. "He's due in Winnipeg to report his failure sometime in the next three days."

XXX
FIRE

Dawn saw the strikers going about their chores with a cheerful alacrity that was as gall to Michigan Red, who chewed the bitter cud of unsuccessful leadership as he sat drumming his heels on a block by the cook-house door. He had come to the end of his rope—rather, dangled there, an object of contemptuous pity in the eyes of his fellows. Had he doubted the fact, it was to be easily read in their studied avoidance; but he knew that he had failed—in what? He could hardly have answered the question himself; for whether or no he had plotted in the monopoly's interest, the strike was merely incidental to the persistent war he had waged against Carter, to the dogged opposition which had root in the turbulent anarchism of his nature. Sufficient that though his weird face held its usual bleak calm, he writhed, mentally, under defeat, while the few who ventured within range of his tongue sensed the lava beneath the crust.

"Not with this crowd. I draw the color line," he rasped, when Anderson inquired if he were not going to work, while Carrots Smith drew a curse along with the information, "It's me for a better job. I'm tired of herding sheep." So now he was left strictly alone, though speculative glances travelled often his way.

"He's waiting for the boss," a teamster remarked to his neighbor. "Say, I'd like to see 'em at grips!"

"Rather him nor me," the other said, expressing general opinion. "The boss is a tough proposition. They say he beat Shinn up so badly that he'll never be more 'n half a man again. Red ain't no slouch, though. Bet you I'd like to see it."

However, as tools had to be reissued and a hundred details despatched, the men were all at work before Carter could come to breakfast, so only Smythe and the cook witnessed that meeting.

It was a beautiful day. Already the heat fulfilled the prediction of a torrid sunrise, and, like an egg in a pan, the camp fried within the encircling spruce which, on their part, seemed to lift over surrounding birch and poplar as though tiptoeing for cooler air. The same errand had brought the cook out from the bowels of his own particular inferno, and as certain phases of the encounter could not be set forth in choicer terms than those in which he delivered himself to an interested audience that evening, now let him speak.

"I was sitting in the doorway, that close to Red I could have pulled his ear, when the boss kem along. Stopping opposite, he looked down on Red with eyes dark and steady as night. They're blue, you know, by rights, but they seemed to darken to pure black, an' I never felt him so tall before.

"'Well, Red?' he says, quiet, like that; but Red's eyes stayed down, though his lip lifted clear of his corner teeth like you've seen a trapped coyote, and so the pair of 'em remained for a full three minutes."

Imagine them—the greenish face of the one reflecting murderous passion, troubled as waves on shaken acid; the other darkly silent, yet, for all his quiet, oppressing both Smythe and the cook with the loom of imminent death. So was fought out the silent duel of personalities—one minute, two; at the third, sweat broke profusely upon the teamster's face, and the cook breathed once more. Burning with Cain's lust, his glance travelled but once above the other's knee, to fall as quickly again.

"What's the matter, Red?" Smythe actually started as Carter's voice broke on the quiet of the camp. "Quitting? What for?"

"No, it isn't *exactly* my business," he cheerfully answered the teamster's growl. "If you will, you will." Turning back after entering, he added: "Heading for Winnipeg, I suppose? Then give my compliments to Friend Buckle and tell him to please hand them higher up."

When he came out Michigan was still there, but Carter passed without a glance, and led Smythe down the right of way into the forest. Even then Michigan sat on. It was, indeed, almost noon before he loafed over to the horse lines, after refusing the cook's invitation to wait for dinner. Without returning a word of thanks for the grub-sack which the latter sent over by a cookee, he hitched to his wagon and drove slowly away.

A week's rest had freshened the blacks so much that, if given their heads, they would have covered half the distance to Winnipeg that day. But he took a vicious pleasure in balking their inclination. Jerking the bits, which hinged on a cruel curb, he pulled them down to a nervous, teetering walk.

For a while the trail paralleled the right of way, then swung on a wide arc around a morass, and for an hour thereafter ran alternately among sloughs, sand-hills, muskegs, through a country indescribably desolate and which teemed with savage life. Myriad frogs set his ears singing with dismal, persistent croaking; a pole-cat scuttled across the trail, poisoning the dank air. From brazen skies a hawk shrieked a malediction upon his head; his horses threw up their heads, snorting, as a lynx screamed a long way off. Here, too, dark woods shut off errant breezes and he fell a prey to a curse of sand-flies that stung and envenomed his flesh. There was no escape. They settled, by hundreds, on the hands that wiped them off his face; stung his face as he slapped his hands.

Coming back, mad with pain and rage, from this détour, his eyes drew to a trestle—longest, highest, most expensive of Carter's works—and, reining in, he allowed his glance to wander lustfully over the stout timbers which his fancy wrapped in flame. A single match—but reason urged that the embers would undoubtedly furnish red lights for his hanging, and he drove on, hotter, madder for the restraint. He was ripe for any mischief that offered a running chance of escape, when, midway of the afternoon, he came on wheel-tracks that swung at right angles from the trail into a chain of sloughs.

"Red River cart," he muttered, noticing the wide gauge; then, furiously slapping his thigh, "Carter's Cree, by G—!"

He meant the Indian who had brought in the venison which formed the tidbit at Dorothy Chester's first meal in camp. All through the summer he had come in with deer-meat twice or thrice a week, but though Michigan and other teamsters had searched for his tepee during the idle days of the strike, no one had penetrated to the woodland lake where his squaw—a young girl, handsome, as Indian women go—was free from rude glances, safe from insult or worse. Now the trail lay, plain as a pike-road, under Michigan's nose; and, leaping down, he tied his team to a tree and followed it along the sloughs.

Through a gully, patch of woodland, the tracks led into a second long slough, and presently debouched on the strand of a small lake, one of the thousands that gem that black wilderness. Bird-haunted in spring, lonesomeness now lay thick upon it. Uttering its weird cry, a loon rose on swift wing, angling in its flight over the tepee, whose bull's hide, raw, smoke-blacked, harmonized with that savage setting.

Just then Michigan was in fettle to exact a vicarious revenge. Early in summer Carter had nipped a disposition on the part of his men to joke and make free with the Indian, giving strict orders that he was to be unmolested, coming or going. This girl who lived in his protecting shadow would have fared ill at Michigan's hands. But the tepee flaps were thrown wide, and though he strained his eyes from a covert of tall reeds, he saw no sign of her, without or within.

Save the lipping of waters, sough of a rising wind, no sound broke the solitude that guarded this, the lair of primitive man. Only those who have experienced its frightful loneliness can know how terrible a northern solitude can be; how awesome, oppressive. Some note of it caused the teamster to speak aloud, heartening himself with sound of his voice.

"They'll be back to-night, sure, for the ashes is banked over the embers."

Gaining back to his team, he drove on a scant quarter-mile, then turned into a slough parallel to those he had just left, and which had its end in a wooded dell. Here high banks would have effectually screened a fire, yet he endured mosquitoes till dusk smothered his smudge. Then tying his team in the thick of its reek, he cut across the intervening bush and followed, as before, along the slough chain till he saw a dim cloud quivering on the blackness ahead.

Beneath this, smoke from the Cree's fire, presently appeared a rich incandescence, and after worming the last yards on the flat of his belly, Michigan peered from thick sedge out at the Cree woman, who sat and suckled her child by the fire that enriched the bronze of her bosom with a blush from its glow. A free, wild thing, her deep eyes now caressed her child, again searched the fire's red mystery, giving back its flame as forest pools reflect a hunter's flare; sombre and silent, eons of savagery flickered in her glance.

From her the watcher's evil face turned to the Cree, who was skinning a deer that hung by the hams from a poplar crotch. The heavy, clammy odor of fresh blood hung thick in the air, filled his nostrils as he lay, like primitive man by the mouth of his enemy's cave, watching the knife slip around the carcass. Savage could not have been more wicked of intent. Again and again his hand gripped his own knife, always to fall again at sight of the rifle that leaned against the Red River cart, close to the Indian's hand. And thus he waited, baleful glance flickering between man and woman, till the deer was dressed and loaded upon the cart.

That modified without changing his purpose. "Going to camp first thing in the morning," he thought, as he crawled away. "Always goes alone."

Back once more with his team, he kicked the wet grass from the smudge, and after eating ravenously of the cook's provision by its flame, he spread his blankets and lay down, head propped on his hand, back to his team. He did not sleep; simply stared into the fire, or listened to the varied voices of the night. Now there would be a sighing, breathing among the trees, creaking of branches, soft rustlings. Then the night would talk loudly on a hush as of death—a loon laughed at the owl's solemn questioning, a fox barked among the sand-hills; the boom of a bittern came in from some dark lake; he heard the lynx scream again, loudly, shrilly, as a tortured child. Then the wind again, or a greater hush in which he heard only the crackling of his fire as he replenished its dying flame.

On these occasions a long trail of sparks would fly upward, and one, a tiny ember, at last wrought a strange thing. Passing over and behind him, it nested in the frazzle of tow at the knot of the stallion's frayed halter; where it smoked and glowed, growing larger, brighter. Lowering his ugly head, the beast sniffed at the strange red flower, then backed away as it burst into a bouquet of flame under his coaxing breath.

"Stan' still!" Michigan growled, without, however, looking around.

The stallion stood—till the end of the burned rope dropped to the ground.

Even then some time elapsed before he realized that he was free; but when he did—he turned white, wicked eyes on the resting man. Was that short worm the fiend that had ruled him? He stepped.

"Stan' still!" Michigan growled again.

The familiar voice gave the stallion pause—a moment. For, out of the tail of his eye, Michigan presently saw and became cognizant of a most curious thing—of a shadow, huge, black, upreared above himself.

Uttering a hoarse cry, he tried to rise—too late.

So, in the midst of his turbulence, passed Michigan Red, but the evil that he had done mightily all the days of his life followed him into death, for the pounding hoofs spread embers of his fire over a leafy carpet, where the night wind found them. Leaping under its breath, small flames writhed tortuously across the glade to the thing that had been a man—touched and tasted its clothing with delicate lickings, then flashed up and sprang from the smouldering cinder into thick scrub, and so ran with incredible swiftness through the forest. Crouched, like a runner, at first, close to the ground, it suddenly straightened and bounded high over a patch of dry poplar burned by a former fire, cowered again, to crawl through thick green spruce, and so stole softly on, as though to catch the Cree in his sleep.

As well try to singe a weasel. Already the Cree was urging his ragged pony, with squaw and papoose, towards Carter's camp, and, balked there, the fire swung with the veering wind into poplar woods, and flamed on, a roaring, ebullient tide, overtopping the tallest trees. Under its effulgence, black lakes and sullen tarns flashed out of thick night with scared deer, belly-deep in the water. Huge owls went flapping through the smoke, leading the ducks, geese, vagrant flocks of the night, leaving hawks and other day birds to circle, shrieking, ere they whizzed down to a fiery death. Gaining strength from its own draught and the freshening wind, it flowed, at an angle, over the railroad and poured down both sides, licking up bridges, trestles, culverts, leaving the hot rails squirming like scorched snakes in empty space; and so, about midnight, roared on to the great

trestle at which Michigan had paused that afternoon, and where Carter had lined up his men.

Roused by the Cree from a dream of Helen to a nightmare of flaming skies, Carter first sent out a gang under command of Hart and Smythe to back-fire around the camp, then loaded the remaining crews on flat-cars and raced the fire down to the trestle. Bender, who was with him in the engine-cab, leaned to his ear as the train pulled out of the cut.

"Michigan Red?"

"Looks it." Nodding, Carter turned to watch the rails which gleamed under the sky-glow, running like scarlet lines on black ribbon between dark, serried ranks of spruce. "Lucky it is coming at an angle," he said, as the engine thundered over the first bridge.

Bender raised his big shoulders. "If the wind don't shift? But it generally does about this time o' night. If she slips to the east—p-s-st! a puff of steam, a crackle, an' we're gone up like flies in a baker's oven."

Carter returned his shrug. "As good a way as any." He added, grimly smiling: "And very fit. Give us a chance to get acclimated. But with luck we ought to be able to wet her down and pull out south. Without it we can lie down in the creek."

"I like mine wet," Bender grinned. "Drowning ain't exactly comfortable, but if there's to be any preference I'll take it." And in the face of danger and disaster, Carter smiled again.

Starting out, it had seemed a toss-up between them and the fire, but the train rolled over the trestle and drew up in a cut on the southerly side, a quarter-hour to the good. The creek ran under the northerly end, with a short approach to the bank, the bulk of the trestle leading over a quarter-mile of morass to firm ground; so Carter, with Bender, Carrots Smith, and other half-dozen, dropped buckets from the bridge to the stream, thirty feet below, and passed them to the men who were strung along the plates. Dipping, drawing, dashing, they worked furiously under the glare of the conflagration. While still half a mile away, its heat set the trestle steaming. At a quarter of a mile, the furious draught rained embers large as a man's hand upon the men, who turned their faces away from the blistering heat. Casting uneasy glances over humped shoulders, they began to increase their distances, edging along the south approach towards the train; but as they still maintained communications, neither Carter nor Bender took notice until they suddenly broke and ran.

"Here! Come back!" Bender's angry roar drowned Carter's shout, and was lost, in turn, in a shrill whistling; for the engineer had seen that which had been hid from them.

"My God!" Carrots Smith cried; and Brady broke out in whimpering prayer

to the saints.

They stood, staring.

As aforesaid, the fire was running south and westerly at an acute angle to—in fact, almost paralleling the railroad, with its extreme point farthest away but already beyond the trestle. And now, veering swiftly southeast, as Bender had feared, it swung at right angles and came broadside on, a fiery tide high over the forest. To the engineer it seemed that the wind lifted a mass of flame and threw it bodily into a tangle of poplar-brake, red willow, tall reeds, and sedge at the trestle's south end. Dry, explosively inflammable from a summer's heat, it touched off like a magazine, whirling skyward, a twisting water-spout of flame, and as he jerked wildly on his whistle he saw, as under the calcium of lurid melodrama, men running like wingless flies along the wet, black trestle. Careening, the column fell across them.

Only the few who were drawing with Carter escaped that first explosive flame, and they gained only time to jump as the main fire came hurdling over the trees. Falling, Carter saw the stream, blood-red; jagged rocks rising swiftly to meet him. A flash blinded his eyes, then—

He rubbed them—that is, he winked, for he was far too weak for such robust exercise. Yes, he winked it. Was—could that be Helen's face bending low over him?

XXXI

WHEREIN THE FATES SUBSTITUTE A CHANGE OF BILL

Carter winked again. The face, however, did not move. On the contrary, it lit up with sudden delight and said smile helped his limping consciousness forward to the idea of a dream. Yes, he was dreaming, undoubtedly dreaming! No! Here memory took hold and gave him back the flaming forest; wet rocks, rising swiftly from red water, carried him back and left him at the precise moment that he had struck a projecting timber. He was falling! Involuntarily he stiffened, expecting the shock ... but—ah! a clew! He was dead—of the fall; and this? Must be heaven, or why Helen? *If* t'other place? 'Twas not so bad as long as she was there! Here his eye, through removal of the face, touched the whitewashed ceiling, then

wandered to blank walls, a stand with medicine, covered glasses and spoons, a linen-press, two chairs—he arrived at truth, a hospital! Then, tired out by these strenuous mental exercises, his eyes closed once more, to the ineffable relief of the anxious watcher, and sleep, natural sleep, replaced the coma that had held him these two days.

For a while Helen listened to his breathing, then, once sure that he was really asleep, she tiptoed out to the corridor and, under urge of relief, ran, fairly flew, with her good news to the head doctor's office. For these had been days of haggard waiting, as, for the matter of that, had the last two weeks—Bender's battles, Carter's triumph, the strike and forest fire had all been packed into ten short days.

Beginning at the morning after she saw Carter at dinner with the general manager, her joyful prayer had gone with the jubilant roar of press and people at the ceding of the crossing, and for several following days her ears drank thirstily of the plaudits which were universal in the hospital, on the street, at her boarding-house. When, indeed, the topic cropped up at her first operation, her fingers trembled so over a bandage that Carruthers excused her, thinking the sight of blood had turned her sick. At Jean Glaves's table she had to veil the eager exultance of her eyes. The merchants who were discussing competition in freight rates on the street would have stared could they have heard the heart-cry of the pretty nurse then passing.

"He did it! Yes, he is very clever—all that you say! But you cannot have him, for he is mine! I'll lend him to you—for a while! But I must have him back! He's mine! mine! mine!"

From breathing the rare atmosphere of these exalted heights, she had been precipitated by the strike into bottom deeps of despair, and while agonizing therein over additional rumors of Greer & Smythe's impending failure, a morning paper came to her breakfast-table with six-inch fire scareheads and a long tale of burns, bruises, breakages that would have been longer but for the softness of the morass. Carter, Bender, Brady, Carrots Smith, all who were on the trestle, had been more or less injured; and six bridges, five trestles, dozens of culverts had gone up in smoke, a maleficent memorial to Michigan Red, before the conflagration back-fired itself out among labyrinthian lakes. But she paused not at the tale. The injured were on the way to the hospital, and with that piece of news clutched to her bosom she ran all the way and broke, at one time, a rule that was as the law of the Medes and Persians and the privacy of the head doctor's study.

It will be easily seen that under such circumstances her hysterical gaspings were not exactly informing, but a man does not attain to headship of a hospital without ability to extract truth from obscure premises—what else is diagnosis?—and when, indicating the heading that told of Carter's injuries, she gasped, "My

husband!" the Head grasped every detail of the situation.

"I must nurse him!" she pleaded. "Must! must!"

A man prodigiously dignified and very solemn behind imposing glasses, the Head offered a stereotyped objection; but it speaks for the feeling beneath his dessicated exterior that he eventually set rules and regulations at defiance, and outraged the discipline and morale maintained by the Scotch head nurse, by appointing her, a novitiate, to a capital case.

"But remember," he said. "Only if you can forget, for the present, that he is your husband?"

He did not believe she could, and had been astonished by her quiet, almost mechanical performance of duty during those two harrowing days. For he did not see her leaning over the inanimate form when alone in the ward; her strained watching, desperate listenings for the first flutter of the returning spirit. Now he did see her flushed delight, and muttered to himself as Carruthers, the under surgeon, hastened with her to Carter's bedside: "I suppose I ought to tell *him*! ... What's the use; he'll hear soon enough."

So her secret was kept, and being uninformed of the matrimonial complications in the case, the surgeon set her delighted flutterings to professional interest and so joined her felicitations. "'Twas touch and go," he whispered. "Few could stand such a crack on the head; must have made an omelet of his brains and his fever was hot enough to fry it. But he'll pull through, Mistress Morrill, and it is good that he will, for he's a gran' character, fine and useful to the province."

To indulge a pleasant conceit, that refreshing sleep may be regarded as an intimation of the fates that comedy was about to be substituted for impending tragedy upon the boards; and the opening of Carter's eyes may very well be considered as the rise of the curtain on the first, and what would also have been the last, act had he been in the enjoyment of his usual health and strength. Lacking these, he could only take things as he found them; chief over all, a demure nurse who administered bitter draughts or took his pulse without sign of recognition, compunction, or emotion.

As her shapely back always hid the pencil when she noted her observations on the chart, he could not see it tremble; and how was he to know that the pulse-taking was a sham? That she could feel only her own heart thudding five thousand thuds to the minute? That she had to guess the pulse by his temperature, which cardinal crime of the nurse's calendar was partly condoned, because if she *had* set down its vibrations at the moments she held his hand, every doctor in the hospital would have come running as to a lost cause.

Ignorant of all this, he could only lie and watch her moving about the ward,

tantalizingly trim and pretty in her nurse's dress; wait till some softening of her coldness would justify the clean confession he ached to make. Always the desire was with him and it waxed with the days. But whether or no she discerned it lurking behind his surreptitious glances, she afforded no opportunity, and what can a man do against a fate that nips every approach to the tender with nasty medicine or chill phrase—"You are not to talk."

"I believe you like to give me that stuff," he growled one day.

"Doctor's orders," she severely replied, and her stony face effectually repressed him while indicating that she was not to be drawn from her vantage-ground by that or a sudden remark—"It seems strange to see you in that uniform."

"Doesn't feel so to me," she coldly answered, adding, with a spice of malice, "If it did I should get used to it, for I expect to wear it for the next three years."

He winced, and he did not see her smile as he gave her his angry back—that or her droopings over his sleep an hour thereafter. Alone in the quiet ward, bent so low that her breath moved the hair on his temples, the occasion vividly recalled the night, long ago, when she had watched the moon etch with line and shadow the promise of the future upon his face. It lay there now, under her soft breath, the fulfilment. For two years stress and struggle had tooled away every roughness and left the accomplished promise, a man wrought by circumstance to a great fineness.

She also had changed—from a well-intentioned if careless girl to a thoughtful woman. Contact with life in the rough had rubbed the scales from her eyes and now she saw clearly—many things, but all centring on one. Outside people were declaiming against the vindictive fate that had joined with the monopoly against this their champion. That morning's papers had it that Greer & Smythe were surely ruined. Yet she was glad, overjoyed. Wealthy and honored, it would have been difficult to the verge of impossibility for her to go back to him. Always she would have felt that he might doubt her motives. But now—

"It's time to take your medicine!" She sprang up as he opened his eyes, wondering if he had felt her light kiss.

Had he, it would have been "curtain" there and then, but as he did not the play went on, and its sequence proves that, however honorable her intentions, she had by no means relinquished her sex's unalienable right to bring things about in its own illogical, tantalizing, perversely charming way. Drooping over his sleep, hoping that he would wake and catch her, she took care that he should not—assumed a statuesque coldness at the first quiver of his eyelids. Undoubtedly, and with her sex's habitual unfairness, she scandalously abused her position, exercising a tyranny that was as sweet to herself as mortifying to him.

"You must not do that—must do this—now go to sleep." She hugged her power in place of him, and when he achieved a successful revolt against her ban of

silence by appealing to the Head for permission to talk with Smythe, she revenged herself by injecting a personal interest into her dealings with Carruthers. It was madness for him to see their heads close together over his chart; the shining eyes she brought back from whispered conferences in the hall. To be sure, it was all about pills and plasters, but how was he to know that? And it was in revenge for this shamelessly injurious conduct that he arranged the scene which opens the second act.

On the morning that he was promoted from spoon-feed to the dignity of a tray, behold him! head bent, elbows square with his ears, knife and fork grabbed at their points, proving his indifference to her opinion by the worst behavior that recent better practice permitted. Alas! he was cast all through for a losing part. Displaying, before his face, the irritating curiosity which a child bestows on a feeding lion, she privately peeped from behind the door-screen, gloated over the old familiar spectacle. She caught him coming and going. Also she turned a delighted ear when he dropped into the homely settler speech; listened for the old locutions; but called his bluff when he overdid the part by running amuck of the grammar in a manner frightful to behold.

"I really don't see why you talk like that," she remarked, patronizingly. "You speak quite well, almost correctly, to Dr. Hammand and Mr. Smythe."

"Yes?" he retorted. "I didn't notice. Mebbe you'll correct me if I side-step it again?"

But the last case of that man was worse than the first. "Thank you," she coldly answered. "I have given up teaching school."

He sniffed sarcastically. "Hum! Shouldn't have known it. I always heard that the spanking habit stuck through life. But don't give up. Remember the copybook line, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.'" But she was going out of the door at the time and took care that he should think she had not heard. "You were speaking?" she inquired, coming back. And, of course, it would not bear repetition.

He fared just as illy when, next morning, Bender hobbled into the ward with the aid of a crutch and cane. Having been visited by the lady protagonist, the giant was fully informed on the situation and so achieved a sly wink behind his chief's sarcastic introductions. "Mr. Bender—Mrs. Morrill."

Also her quiet answer was disconcerting. "We have met before. Have you heard from Jenny lately, Mr. Bender?"

Now Bender had. A letter, small note, simple and direct as Jenny herself, was even then burning his pocket, and, blushing like a school-boy caught in the theft of apples, he produced and read it. If he insisted—was perfectly certain that he couldn't get well without her—Jenny would!

"'Fraid I took a mean advantage," he confessed. "Reg'lar cold-decked her.

You see, a busted ankle ain't much to spread on, so I hinted at complications. She sure thinks I'm dyin,' an' when she comes she'll find me hopping around."

"Oh, well." Carter glanced stealthily at Helen. "She has oceans of time to pay you. With any old luck you are good for eighty-five, and it doesn't take a loving wife that length of time to get even." For which insolence he paid instantly and doubly—first by a nasty dose, secondly by loss of Bender, who was summarily ejected under pretext of its being the patient's hour for sleep.

So the war ran, and it did seem as though circumstance never tired of impressing allies for Helen's cause. Take Dorothy Chester, who called with Hart next day. She, like Carruthers, could only take the situation at face values, and so enthused over his luck in nurses; to all of which—in Helen's absence—Carter subscribed till Dorothy reached her climax.

"And Dr. Carruthers thinks so, too. Wouldn't it be nice if they made a match of it?"

She was astounded by the heat of his reply. "No! A Scotch dromedary, suckled on predestination and damnation of infants? Pretty husband he'd make!" But she solved his vehemence for Hart's benefit on the way home. "He's in love with her himself."

"Between patient and doctor? What a mix-up!" Hart laughed. "Odds are on the doctor if he's up to his job. I'd hate to be Carter on the chance of an overdose." For which flippancy his ears were well pulled.

As he said, things were undoubtedly a little tangled, and if at first glance it would appear that Dorothy had not assisted in the unravelling, closer scrutiny shows that her remark helped at least to bring affairs to a head. For the remainder of the day Carter was very thoughtful, so preoccupied that he forgot to misbehave over his supper-tray while, time and again, Helen caught him surveying herself with a dark uneasiness. Puzzled, she came back to the ward before leaving and stood at the foot of his bed; but as yet his fever was confined to his mind, and he replied that he was feeling quite well to her question.

The "good-night" she wished him was not, however, for him. Always darkness magnifies trouble, and through its black lens he saw suspicions as facts. Tossing restlessly, he heard the city clock chime the quarters, halves, hours, until, at twelve, the night nurse's lantern revealed him wide-eyed, staring, and knowing the efficacy of a change of thought in producing sleep, she stayed for a chat.

Correct enough in theory, the treatment proved about as successful as would the application of a blister upon a sore; for he bent the conversation to his own uses, steering it by a circuitous route through the girl's own experience to Helen.

She was liked in the hospital?

Indeed she was! The night nurse was emphatic on that, and went on to

say that beauty such as Helen's was not generally conducive of popularity. No, it wasn't jealousy! The nurse tossed her head at his question. Simply that pretty girls didn't have to be nice, so usually left amiability to be assumed with a double chin; and being a frank as well as a merry creature, she confessed to an accession of that desirable quality every time she saw her own nose in a glass. But Helen Morrill? She was sweet as she was pretty!

Dr. Carruthers thought so, too?

Well—the nurse would smile! And everybody in the hospital was glad of it. They would make such a perfect couple, an ideal match!

It was as good as settled, then?

Well—not given out yet, but every one knew! Her lantern being on the floor, she could not see his face, and he lay so quiet she thought he had fallen asleep, and was tiptoeing away when he spoke again.

But—*Mrs.* Morrill? She had been married before! Her husband—dead?

If he wasn't he ought to be—the nurse was sure of that. There was only one place for a man who could not live with such a nice girl. And if he were not—divorce was about as good in ridding one of the beast! With which she picked up her lantern and left him in darkness and despair. When she came next on her rounds she thought him asleep, but he resumed his restless tossings as soon as her back was turned. Dawn, however, betrayed him, and sent her flying to the head doctor with his pulse and temperature.

"He was all right last night!" the latter exclaimed. "Bring his chart down to the office." Studying it while he mixed sedatives a little later, he said: "Awake at midnight—hum! Talked, did he? What about? Mrs. Morrill?" He snatched truth out of her as though it had been an appendix. "Spoke of her and Dr. Carruthers?—ah! ha! Well, give him this and send Mrs. Morrill to me when she comes in."

If short, the interview did not lack excitement when, a couple of hours later, Helen opposed the freshness of the morning to the Head's angry glare. Her delicate colors, the eyes cleared by sleep and full of light, were enough to have softened the heart of a Gorgon, but served only to irritate him, who looked upon them as so much material gone to waste.

"What have you done?" he roared after her. "Look at that!" And went on as her distressed eyes came back from the chart: "You have done nothing—that's the trouble. Why did I appoint you to this case? Because of your vast experience? No, because I thought you could administer something outside of medical practice. And now he's dying—of jealousy. You have done it; you must cure him." And taking her by the arm as though she were a medicine-tray, he marched her to Carter's ward, gave her a shake at the door like a bottle that is to be "well shaken before taken," and thrust her in with the parting admonition, "Now, do your duty."

Here was an embarrassing position! Surely never before had nurse such

orders—to administer love, like a dose, that, forsooth, to a patient who had already turned his broad back on her charms. Now did she pay toll of blushes for the perversity that had checked his every overture. How should—how *could* she begin?

Pleating and unpleating her apron, she stood at the foot of his bed, the prettiest picture of perplexity ever vouchsafed to gaunt, unshaven man. A week's stubble did not improve his appearance any more than his unnatural color, fixed, glazed eyes. But soon as a timid glance gave her these—she was on her knees beside him.

"Is that you, Helen?" Before she could speak he burst out in a sudden irruption of speech. "I'm so glad; there's something I want to tell you." Then it came, in a flood that washed away his natural reserve, the confession—his remorse for his obstinacy, the sorrow that had tamed his anger, his yearning through weary months for an overture from her; his ignorance of the settler's persecution, scorn of scandalous rumors; his attempts to communicate with and find her; all, down to his observation of her liking for Carruthers, finishing: "Through all, my every thought has been of you. But now—I see. It was a mistake, our marriage. It was wrong to couple roughness with refinement. So if you wish—" Her face was now buried in her arms, and he gently touched the golden hair. "Last night I made up my mind to bring no more misery into your life. But now ... that I see you ... it is difficult; ... but ... if you wish—"

He got no further, for speech is impossible when a soft hand stoppers one's mouth. And while he was thus effectually gagged, she took a mean advantage: told him just what she thought of him. Such a stupid! A big man, so very strong, but oh, *so* silly! Did he really think that she—any girl—would have waited upon him in such circumstances unless— Here she had to release his mouth to wipe away the streaming tears, and his question came out like an explosion:

"What?"

She told him, or, rather, conveyed the information in the orthodox way with lovers. This takes time, and becoming suddenly alive to the fact that he was sitting up in bed, she resumed her authority to make him lie down. In view of his condition she was certainly justified in using force to compel obedience; but was it right, was it proper for her, a nurse duly accredited to the case, to leave her arms about him? Well, she did, and—scandalous predicament!—her golden head was lying beside his on the pillow when the door opened for the matron, Carruthers, and the Head on their morning rounds.

"Well—I declare! *Fine* goings on!"

Helen's faint cry of dismay was drowned by the matron's horrified exclamation, but Carter rose to the situation. "Miss Craig, doctor—my wife." He could not include Carruthers, who retired precipitously, and was then just outside the

door, swallowing hugely in vain attempts to get what looked like a monstrous pill, but was really his heart, back to its proper place.

"Your what?" Having the general objections to matrimony which come with prim old maidhood, the matron almost screamed: "Good gracious, man! Couldn't you have waited till you were sure you wouldn't need a minister to bury you?" And she tossed a high head at his answer.

"No, ma'am. We were that impatient we got married two years ago."

There she slid one in on him with a sniff of disdain. "Two years! Imph! One would never have thought it. And just look at this ward! Doctors' rounds and ward unswept, bed unmade; I doubt whether you've had your medicine! I'll send up another nurse at once. As for you, Mrs.—Carter"—she paused, flouncing out of the door—"you are—"

She intended "discharged," but the head doctor interposed twinkling glasses between Helen and destruction. "She was merely giving treatment according to orders."

How the matron stared! "Treatment? Orders? Whose orders, pray?"

"Mine."

Her response as she bustled away, "Has every one gone mad!" set them all smiling, and Carter's remark, "A bit too long in the oven," eloquently described her crustiness.

But if long study of people from interior views had left the matron purblind as to outward signs, sympathies, and emotions, she was not so short-sighted but that she came to a full stop at the sight of Carruthers, who stood, hands clinched, like a naughty boy, face to the wall.

"You poor man!" But though her tone was gentle as her touch on his shoulder, he threw her hand fiercely away and strode off uttering an unmistakable "damn."

"Another lunatic!" she tartly commented, and was confirmed in that flattering opinion when, instead of pining in romantic fashion, he fell in love again and married a sweet girl the following summer.

Left thus alone in the case, the head doctor nodded his satisfaction at the patient's decided improvement, while his further instructions were short as pleasant—"Same treatment, continued at intervals."

These orders, be sure, were faithfully observed. Indeed, he had scarcely passed out than—but the next hour is their's, intrusion would be impertinent. Sufficient that its confidences left each possessed of the other's every thought and feeling throughout their separation.

Her eyes dancing, she broke a happy silence to say: "You were dreadfully transparent. Did you really think I couldn't see through your misbehavior?" Then she told of how Dorothy had confided to her his appeal to Hart and efforts at self-

improvement. "But," she added, with a sigh that was almost plaintive, "I wouldn't have cared."

Also she told him of her proud espionage upon him at the general manager's dinner; in return for which she learned how he had waited at the forks of his own trail that winter's night—waited while his ponies shivered in the bitter wind until he picked hers and Elinor Leslie's voices from the groan of passing runners.

She remembered. "Oh, was that you? Why didn't you come in?"

"I would—at least I think I would have," he corrected, "if you'd been alone. By-the-way, I saw her in Minneapolis the other day. She was taking an order from a fat Frenchman in a restaurant where Smythe and I had turned in for dinner. Luckily her back was turned, so we got out without her seeing me. But I caught her profile and she looked dreadfully weak and thin."

"A waitress?" Helen cried. "Oh, the poor thing! Couldn't you have—" Pausing, she confirmed his wisdom. "No, it was better she did not see you."

Silence fell between them, he thinking of the temptation in the warm gloaming, she busy with her own memories. Helen's watch beat like a pulse in the quiet; a house-fly rivalled the full boom of a bee as it battered its head against the window-pane, a futile illustration of Elinor Leslie's folly. Just so had she beaten at the invisible barriers that held her back from free passion. Now she lay, poor soul, bruised and beaten like a dying moth, wings singed by a single touch of the unholy flame.

But sadness could not hold them. Smiling, Helen suddenly relieved herself of the astonishing remark: "I am so glad you are ruined. Yes, I am." She nodded firmly, misreading his comical surprise. "Now we can go back to the farm—just you and I—be ever so happy."

"Why?" He listened with huge enjoyment to her explanation, then said, with mock concern, "It would be fine, and I'm that sorry to disappoint you, but—who said I was ruined?"

"Oh, everybody—the papers said this morning that—what is that funny name? Yes, Mr. Brass Bowels—that he had bought up enough of your liabilities to snow you under."

"They did, did they? Well—they have another guess coming."

"Aren't you ruined?" she asked.

But though he laughed at her naïve distress, he refused to say more, laughingly assuring her that she would not be long in suspense.

Nor had she long to wait. For as she was giving him his medicine the following afternoon, he bobbed up under her hand as though set on wire springs to the

detriment of the snowy quilt, which absorbed the dose.

"Listen!"

A whistle, deep-toned, fully two octaves below the shrill hoot of the monopoly's locomotives, thrilled in the distance. Drawing nearer, its vibrant bass gave the entire city pause—clerks waited, pens poised for a stroke; lawyers dropped their briefs; store-keepers, laborers, mechanics, the very Indians in the camps by the river, stood on gaze; motion ceased as at the voice of the falked siren; a hush fell in the streets, a silence complete as that of some enchanted city.

It carried consternation into the offices of the monopoly, that whistle. Sparks, the division superintendent, dropped his pen and stared at his chief, who was giving last orders for the demolition of Greer & Smythe before he went back East. The latter's iron nerve, however, vouchsafed only a breathing space to surprise, then he continued in the same dry tones: "Previous instructions are hereby cancelled. That's an American whistle, Sparks—Jem Ball for a thousand. They've won out; it's all over but the shouting." And as eager tumult broke loose in the street, he added, "And there it goes."

The shouting? They poured into the streets—doctors, lawyers, clerks, laborers; carpenters jumped from new buildings, plumbers left their braziers burning while they swelled the stream that poured out to see the first train, an engine with Pullman and palace-car, pull in over the new line.

Shout? They did—and more. Your canny Canadian is the deil at celebrating when his backslidings carry him that way, and next morning many a worthy citizen sweated in thinking back to the cause of his headache. Ay, good church-members lugged flasks of old Scotch from blameless-appearing pockets; the carpenter exchanged news and drams with the millionaire. The N.P. had bought the new road! No, only leased it! No! no! they were merely to finance the enterprise, market its bonds in return for reciprocal traffic arrangements! There were other theories, all spun round a germ of truth, but thence to the source.

As the siren sounded the second time, Carter looked at Bender, who sat opposite Helen, having dropped in for a chat, and his remark carries back to the strike. "Now you know why we went to Minneapolis. What does it all mean?" His face lit up as he turned to Helen. "It means cars, locomotives, rolling-stock; the use of N.P. equipment till we can instal our own. That we can rebuild the burned bridges this fall, and shove a temporary line through to Silver Creek and the camps in the Riding Mountains. It means that the Red River Valley will send its wheat south to Duluth this fall. It means—victory for us, competition for the province."

That was his hour, but Helen shared it—even when Greer and Smythe ushered in the American railway-king. Twin to the general manager in massive build and strength of feature, he had come from a softer mould. His eyes, mouth were

gentler, more pleasant. In him the high, sloping forehead—mark of the dreamer—was qualified by the strong jaw, wide-spaced eyes of the man of practical affairs. A glance told that here imagination and constructive power went hand in hand. Fun rippled and ran over innumerable fine facial lines, and he laughed out loud when Helen made to withdraw, assuring her that their conversation would not tax her sex's supposed weakness in the matter of secrets as they were not to talk business.

"We think too much of this man to bother him with details," he said. "These gentlemen have attended to everything, and all we require is his signature to a few papers. Celebrations won't be in order till he's well enough to run down to St. Paul. Then—well, you'd better not let him come alone." So, talking and laughing for a pleasant half-hour, he gave off his superabundant energy until the ward was charged, then went away leaving the patient stimulated to the verge of open mutiny.

"I'm as well as you." He defied the Head to his face that evening. "Send up my clothes."

"In two weeks, if you are good!" the Head calmly answered.

"*Two weeks*? I'll be head over heels in work by then, and there is something I want to do first. I'll be out of here in one." And, albeit a trifle chalky as to complexion and wobbly of knee, he was. On the last day—

But first the record of that week; and as Bender's bulk overshadows all else, behold him, mid-week, hobbling into the ward with Jenny trailing behind like a kitten in the wake of the family house dog.

"Mrs. Bender, if you please," he corrected Carter, chuckling; and for once he permitted some one else to do the blushing. Wherein he showed great taste, as she did it right prettily, exhibiting, moreover, a much superior article.

Next day, Dorothy, becomingly mortified because the good news had come to her through her father out of Smythe. "To hear of it in such a roundabout way!" she declared. "You little traitor! and when I think of your speculations about his wife! Positively I had resolved never to forgive you, but—" Kisses, of course.

Thereafter, Brady, Big Hans, Carrots Smith—all more or less singed and nursing various breakages—ostensibly to see the boss, really to take a look at his pretty wife, whom, they decided, shamed the specifications.

Then, to everybody's astonishment—indeed, the Head shadowed the man along the corridor as though he were an anarchist with a bomb in his pocket—the *General Manager*! brisk, steel-like, yet twinkling. "Trounced us, didn't you?" he laughed. "Well, one never can tell when one has made an end. Competition? Perhaps, for a while; but wait till Jem Ball and I get a bellyful of fighting. However, by that time you'll be well cured of your desires for the public weal and be ready

to listen to reason. Oh yes, you will! We all take 'em like chicken-pox or measles, but they are not fatal—unless you get 'em late in life. I feel so sure of your eventual recovery that I just dropped in to bury the hatchet. Fifty years won't see the finish of our plans, and whenever you feel a yearning for fresh enterprises, just look me up."

Therewith the gray cynic hurried away to plan and scheme, upbuild, tear down, without slack or satiety of enormous constructive appetite; to live in travail greater than the labor of woman, and give birth ceaselessly to innumerable works; to inundate the plains with seas of wheat and carry bread to Europe's teeming millions; to sow towns, villages, cities broadcast over the north, make farms for countless thousands; to join Occident and Orient with gleaming rails, clipper ships, to do evil consciously all his days and work unconscious good, crushing the individual for the weal of the race, and caring nothing for either; to live feared and die respected, leaving the world bigger and better than he found it.

Lastly, the cook, just down from the camp with news of Michigan Red. Flying in front of the fire, the black stallion had come in with the rat-tailed mare to be shot as a murderer after the Cree had tracked down the Thing that had been his master; and so, if there be aught in Cree mythology, the soul of the fierce brute would fight it out once more with the fiercer man in the place of the teamsters.

While beguiling the tedium, these tales and conversations failed to exclude from Carter's ear a distant hammering that attended the building of his station and freight-sheds. Also he could hear the hoarse coughing of locomotives going up and down his line. And as the *materia medica* contains no tonics like happiness and success, small wonder that, as aforesaid, he demanded his clothes at the end of the week.

"Once you get hold of a fellow you are never satisfied till you have gone all through his clock-work," he replied to the Head's objections. "But though I sympathize with your industry, you'll have to wait for another go at mine. They are needed in my business."

First—Helen with him, of course—he directed his steps, or rather the wheels of a hack, to the new station where the ring of saws, hammering, noise and bustle of work, acted upon him like the draught of the elixir of life, bringing color to his cheeks, stiffness to his knees, sparkle to his eyes. Thence they drove for a conference to Greer & Smythe's; whereafter nothing would suit him but a long drive out to the prairies. It was a strenuous beginning, but fresh air and sunshine are ever potent. He gained color and strength under her anxious eyes; seemed fresher when he dropped her at Jean Glaves's house that evening than in the morning.

Throughout the happy day they had lived in the present. But though he

had made no plan for the future, she had trusted, and her face lit up with flashing intuition when he said good-night.

"Mistress Morrill, you are to take the morning train to Lone Tree."

This was the "something he wanted to do."

XXXII
THE TRAIL AGAIN

Skipping that long if happy night, peep with dawn into Helen's bedroom, and see her up and singing small snatches of song that presently brought Jean Glaves, herself the earliest of birds, from bed to assist at the toilet. Should she wear this, that, or the other? There was the usual doubt which beset a young lady who wishes to look her best for occasion; but the result that went forth from big Jean's hug? A vision of healthy beauty that drew tentative smiles from a brace of drummers and attracted the stealthy regard of the entire station when she finally broke, like a burst of sunlight, on the platform. Continuing the figure, the smile, its crowning asset, faded like the afterglow when her anxious eyes refused her the tall familiar figure; and when the train pulled out without him, her disconsolate expression filled the aforesaid drummers with manly longings towards consolation.

Unpunctual? On such an occasion? And how silly she would look at Lone Tree! Slightly offended at first, she then grew alarmed. Perhaps he had suffered a relapse, was ill, dying! Be sure that her terrors compassed the possible and impossible during an hour's journey, and not until she saw a man come dashing across the tracks to the Lone Tree platform did she realize the fulness of his inspiration. He had taken the freight out the night before! If thinner, paler, he was very like the young man who had come to meet her three years ago. There, also, was the lone poplar that had christened the station; the ramshackle town with its clapboard hotels, false-fronted stores, grain-sheds, sitting in the midst of the plains that, flat and infinitely yellow, ran with the tracks over a boundless horizon. Lastly, there was Nels and his bleached grin, holding Death and the Devil, sleek, fat, and sinful as ever.

Carter's whispered greeting helped to keep her in the past. "Is this Miss Morrill?"

"Mr. Carter, I believe?" she had just time for the roguish answer, then their

little comedy had to be laid aside till they were alone on trail. For the doctor came running from his office, the store-keeper plunged madly across tracks, Hooper, the agent, yelled, "Well, I swan!" and jumped to shake hands, while from a grain-shed emerged Jimmy Glaves, who had taken a lift in with Nels.

Wasn't she glad to see them? Yet a deeper happiness enveloped her when, looking back, she again saw Lone Tree, shrunken in the distance, its grain-sheds looking like red Noah's arks on a yellow carpet; when she heard only the pole and harness jigging a merry accompaniment to the beat of quick feet, whirring song of swift wheels.

It was very like that first occasion. Though stiff night frosts were now giving timely notice of winter's chill approach, the clerk of the weather had made special arrangements for a south wind; so it was warm as on that far day. Birds, animals, scenery, too, all helped to bring the happy past forward to the happy present, while Death and the Devil, those wicked ones, fostered the illusion by frequent boltings. Surely she remembered the ridge where her first coyote had caused her to cling to Carter, and earned a kiss by repetition of that shameful performance and faithful mimicry of his accent. "He shore looks hungry." Immediately thereafter they plunged out from among scattered farms into the "Dry Lands," but its yellow miles, generally a penance, flowed unnoticed under the buck-board. They were both astonished when, suddenly as before, they rattled through a bluff and dropped over the edge of the valley upon Father Francis at the mission door.

Nothing would suit but that they must dine with him while Louis, the half-breed stableman, fed and watered the ponies. But if the good priest's twinkle expressed knowledge that another of his day's works was come to fruitage, his quiet converse brought no jarring note into their communings.

Undisturbed, they began again at the ford and continued while the Park Lands rolled in great billows under the wheels. The Cree chimneys, Indian graveyards, other well-remembered objects passed in pleasant procession ere, coming to Flynn's, he looked at her. A shake of the head confirmed his doubt. Another time! So they swept on through vast, sun-washed spaces where cattle wandered freely as the whispering winds under flitting cloud-shadows, and so, about sundown, came to their own place with but a single interruption.

Passing Danvers at their own forks, he grinned his delight as he turned out to let them by and shouted after: "Say! I heard from Leslie! He's doing well on the Rand! Sends regards to both of you!"

While that bit of good news was still ringing in her ears, the house flashed out under the eaves of the forest, warm and bright under the setting sun. All was unchanged—the lake, stained just now a ruby red, the golden stubble fenced in by dark, environing woods. Within all was neat and clean as Nels's racial

passion for soap and water could make it. So while he stabled the tired ponies, she donned one of her old aprons, rolled sleeves above dimpled elbows, and cooked supper; rather a superfluous performance aside from the grave pleasure he took in looking on.

Afterwards they sat on the doorstep, she between his knees, head pillowed against his breast, and looked at the copper moon that hung in the trees across the lake—watched it brighten to silver; listened to the harmonies of the night, the loon's weird alto, the bittern's bass, cry of a pivoting mallard, owl's solemn choral, a wilder, freer movement than was ever chained in a stave. Once a snuffle, soft-lapping, drifted in, and he replied to her start, "Bear-drinking." Otherwise they were silent up to the moment she arose, shivering.

"It is getting colder. I think I'll go in."

He stayed a little longer, stretched luxuriously out on the grass; was still there when, having made their bed, she came to the door. A vivid memory gave her pause. Just so had he looked—that night—dark, still, as the marble effigy of some old Crusader, with the moonlight quivering about him like an emanation.

"Are you coming, dear?" Perhaps the memory tinged her tone. Anyway, he sprang up, arms extended, and as she came running, he lifted her clear of the ground; carried her in and closed the door.

Her shiver had warrant. Within the hour the north wind began to herd luminous clouds across the moon. At midnight the cabin loomed darkly through a bridal veil of white.

THE END

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