Whitaker Herman

The Settler

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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 out-buildings 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 attained 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 horse-flesh. 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 hindered 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 over-ripe 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, turnip-pies, 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 answered. "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 occasional 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.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.